

**Going Deeper in
the Way, the Truth, and the Life**

**(14 Weeks, 12 Meetings)
February 21—May 30, 2021**

SMALL GROUP PACKET
Into the Deep Water with Christ

HEALTHY SMALL GROUPS

(Please review the following regularly together as a group)

GUIDELINES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR “DEEP WATER” SMALL GROUPS

- Try to keep your group size from two to six people. The larger the group, the more time it will take at each meeting for everyone to participate and share actively.
- Try to meet together once a week, on average.
- Meet in a place that is conducive to listening and speaking. Loud, crowded restaurants, for example, will probably not work too well.
- Everyone should bring a bible, a pen, and this packet to each of their small group meetings.
- This packet, focusing on the Bible books of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John, has enough material to cover 12 weeks’ worth of meetings. On May 30, 2021, a new packet of materials will become available for the next part of our “deeper water” journey.
- **Buffer weeks:** We are adding two *additional weeks* to this session, so that **you have 14 weeks in which to cover 12 weeks’ worth of materials.** Your group can use these extra two weeks to 1) catch up if your group has to miss a weekly meeting or two, or 2) If your discussions go long on some weeks, you can use the extra time to spread things out and/or backtrack as necessary.
- While it is not a requirement, we recommend that men partner with men, and women partner with women.
- You do not need to designate any particular person in your group to be a facilitator or leader. Just follow the materials together and agree on a time limit to your meetings.
- Allow extended silences to happen during your small group discussions. The bible is a challenging book and the Word can sometimes shake our thoughts up at first before bringing them around towards Christ. Silence allows time for the Spirit to give us speech.
- While you are discussing with your group, always jot down thoughts that the group shares.
- It is likely that you will encounter different Bible translations within your group. If the group feels this is an obstacle to understanding or discussion, discuss the possibility of procuring bibles of the same translation for everyone. The New Revised Standard Version, which St. John’s uses at worship, is an example of a well-balanced, readable and accurate translation. Call Pastor Seth (217.255.2118) or Pastor Patti (614.875.2314) if you need any help or guidance regarding Bible translations.
- On May 30, 2021, we will start a new topic in our Deep Water journey. Every time we begin a new topic (about every two-three months), small groups and partnerships can reconfigure themselves as necessary. As you approach the end of each topic, please talk intentionally about how and whether your group will continue into the next topic together intact, or what changes you need to make based on your personal schedules, etc. While we encourage everyone to plug in to as much of our deep water journey as possible through the next few years, we also understand that some of us will need to drop out and rejoin at various points in the journey.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PRINCIPLE TO FOLLOW IN YOUR SMALL GROUP: CONFIDENTIALITY

Keeping things confidential is vital to establishing trust and open communication with your partner or small group. Be sure to acknowledge this rule clearly with each other at the beginning of your journey together, and regularly over the course of the following weeks. What is said in your small group should stay in your small group!

REMEMBER: PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT MEMBERS OF ST. JOHN'S ARE WELCOME TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS JOURNEY!

We encourage you to invite non-members to participate. Think of a friend with whom you'd like to take this journey, and invite them to jump in.

IF YOU LOSE YOUR PACKET, OR NEED MORE PACKETS

Hard copies are available in the church office, in the display in the Link (breezeway) at church, or from one of the pastors. You can download a packet from our St. John's website:

<https://www.stjohnsgc.org> If you have a printer, you can request an electronic copy of the packet by email: SJersild@stjohnsgc.org Just remember, the packets can be over 40 pages long!

IF YOUR SMALL GROUP IS STRUGGLING OR DISSOLVES

Call Pastor Seth at 217.255.2118 if you need help or have special concerns.

SMALL GROUP INFORMATION

(Names, phone, email etc.)

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)
- 6)

Going Deeper in the Way, the Truth, and the Life

WEEK #1 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: February 21-27, 2021

1. Confirm as a group what your time limit is going to be. Over time, each group will develop a natural feel for what kind of pace they need to maintain in order to fit everyone's schedules.
2. Please review the material under the heading "Healthy Small Groups" together, above.
3. Emphasize together the crucial importance of keeping what you share in this group confidential. Also, make sure you have each others' phone numbers, email addresses, and etc. for communication purposes.
4. Please note our practice of adding **buffer weeks** for each topic (from the "Healthy Small Groups" section, above). Remember, you will have 14 weeks in which to cover twelve weeks' worth of meetings.

5. OPENING PRAYER

- Designate someone to pray the prayer in italics, below. Always feel free to improvise as the Spirit moves you. You can use the written prayer loosely, as a model. Special intercessions can be added.

Loving Father, thank you for this opportunity to come together and learn more about Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life. Remind us each day that in Jesus, you have made us your children, and that nothing can separate us from your love. Open our hearts and minds to hear your Word, and make us agents of your love and support in each others' lives. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

6. Spend about 5 minutes having everyone share high points and low points from the last several days.

7. Have someone in your group read the following aloud:

In these twelve meetings, we'll be studying passages from 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John together. These books speak powerfully to trends in our current culture and help us, as believers, to stand up for Jesus in a world that often seeks to marginalize him and make him "one of many" ways to truth and life. Specifically, we will talk about:

- *How tolerance of different views is a necessary part of living peacefully in a broken world.*
- *How "tolerance" can become confused with "acceptance" of all views.*
- *How to better understand the finality of Jesus as the one-and-only Savior in today's world.*
- *How knowledge can "puff up," while love "builds up."*
- *The role of knowledge in Christian faith.*
- *The centrality of the Incarnation (Jesus being 100% human) in Christian faith.*
- *Loving our neighbors and reflecting God's light for the sake of the world.*

8. As a way of “priming the pump” for talking about 1, 2, and 3 John with your small group in the next weeks, please have someone read **John 14:1-6** (from the *gospel* of John) out loud and discuss the following items together. Pay attention to time so that you can cover as much of the material as possible.

- a) In this passage (which is often read at funerals), Jesus is reassuring the disciples that he will remain connected with them after he leaves them (he is about to go into death). What deep human reality do you think lies behind Thomas’ question “Lord, we do not know where you are going...how can we know the way?”
- b) Where do we, as Christians, get the notion that God is our “Father”—that we have such an intimate, close, personal and loving relationship with him?
- c) Where do we, as Christians, get the idea that God—the creator of this universe—is *good*? For perspective: do all religions understand their gods as *good*, or as *love*?
- d) *Without* God’s self-revelation in Jesus, what different kinds of conclusions could human beings come to on their own regarding God (if they wanted to believe in God), life, and the universe?
- e) To fine-tune question “d” above: Picture a little girl in a war-torn region of the world who has just seen her parents killed by thugs, and who has no means to support herself, and no adults to help her out. Without knowing the Bible or Jesus or anything we’ve been given as Christians, what kinds of ideas would you expect that little girl to form about human existence, just by her observation of it?
- f) Picture a boy who has wealthy parents, who’s had everything given to him in abundance throughout his childhood, whose parents do everything they can to shield him from any trials and who also “bail him out” whenever he does anything wrong, who is on track to get into the best university through his parents’ connections, and who will have a high-paying job in his parents’ company waiting for him when he gets out. What kinds of ideas might that boy be forming about human existence, just by his observation of it?
- g) Thomas, when he asks his question in this passage, clearly assumes at first that he will need to *find his way* to Jesus once Jesus leaves them. So, Thomas is picturing Jesus as a kind of *guide* who is leading them somewhere. How does Jesus’ response, “I AM the way...” completely changes the picture. How would you describe the shift that takes place between Thomas’ question, and Jesus’ answer?
- h) Many people today say things like “my truth is mine—your truth is yours.” Or, “there are many paths to God...Jesus is just one of many.” How do you understand Jesus’ clear claim of FINALITY for himself when it comes God’s self-revelation, in light of so many other competing claims for “truth” in today’s world?
- i) In 1 Corinthians 8:1, Paul says “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” How do you understand this?

- j) 1 John 3:18 states: “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” How do you understand the love to which John is calling us here?

9. In turn, without going into too much depth about each situation, share one or two specific issues that you would like your partner(s) to pray about for you this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.

10. Remind each other that there’s homework to do (below) before each group meeting. The homework material provides the substance for each group meeting. Confirm the time and place of your next gathering. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.

11. Close with prayer. Today, have one person volunteer to pray for the group. Try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer. Include a prayer for the power of the Holy Spirit to guide your group and fill you with confidence and determination as you get started on this journey together.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (2nd) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer *aloud*; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.

Almighty God, I thank you for sending Jesus into this world and into my life, so that I can know you and love you, through him, as my Heavenly Father. Speak to me now as I study your holy Word. Give me courage and faith to go deeper in my discipleship for you, that I may glorify you in all that I do. Use me as an instrument of your Holy Spirit to draw the people around me into your loving presence. Amen.

2. Please read the following, from Max Lucado, and then respond to the items which follow:

Tolerance. It’s a prized virtue today. The ability to be understanding of those with whom you differ is a sign of sophistication.

Jesus was a champion of tolerance. He was tolerant of the disciples when they doubted. He was tolerant of the crowds when they misunderstood. He is tolerant of us when we fail.

But there is one area where Jesus was intolerant. There was one area where he was un-indulgent and dogmatic. Were he to share his opinion today, he would be accused of being one-sided, even bigoted.

But as far as he was concerned, when it comes to salvation, there aren’t several roads...there is only one road. There aren’t several ways...there is only one way. There aren’t several paths...there is only one path. And that path is Jesus himself.

That is why it is hard for people to believe in Jesus. It’s much easier to consider him one of several options rather than the option. But such a philosophy is no option. Jesus positioned

himself as the peerless Savior of the world. In defining who he is, Jesus is bold and unapologetic.

His disciple John was equally firm. We first met John when he was a young man in the shadow of John the Baptist. We saw him as he stood in the shadow of the cross. From his writings in the Bible, we know he later wrote as the elder statesman of the church.

John writes his first letter to dispel doubts about Jesus. False teachers have entered the church, denying the incarnation of Christ. John steps up to the bench and makes his defense of Jesus. John knew him, walked with him, lived with him. He saw him heal. He heard his words. John had been to the empty tomb, and he knew...

Jesus is not one of many options. He is the only option or nothing at all.

There are times to be tolerant. And there are times to take a stand for the truth. In this letter [1 John], John takes a stand.

a) Below, write down your response to the above. What stands out for you, and why?

3. Please read **1 John 1:1—2:2**, and then respond in writing to the following, referring back to passage.

a) How does John establish his authority to write about Christ and his gospel message?

b) Why does it matter that John heard and saw and touched Jesus?

c) What does John mean by the term *fellowship*?

d) How would you explain the symbolism of *light* and *darkness* in this passage?

e) What does John say about those who claim to be without sin?

f) What help and resources do believers in Christ have when they sin?

4. Read **John 3:16-17** (printed below), and then respond to the items that follow.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

g) What promise does the Bible give that you can have fellowship with God?

h) The word “whoever” in the above verses (“...*whoever* believes in him...”) is a big word that includes the possibility that *anyone and everyone* can believe in Jesus is Lord and Savior. How do you react to the idea that God says “whoever believes” when it comes to salvation?

j) Why is it important that Jesus lived as a human being on this earth (100% *human* as well as 100% God)?

k) What does the fact that Jesus came into this world as a human tell you about God’s desire to have fellowship with you?

l) How would you explain *eternal life* to a person who did not go up in church?

5. In the space below, list some practical things you think you could do to strengthen your fellowship with God, and with other believers.

6. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns from your first group meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John’s as we follow Jesus’ call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective “fishers of people.”

Going Deeper in the Way, the Truth, and the Life
WEEK #2 SMALL GROUP MEETING
Target Week: February 28—March 6, 2021

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.

2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):
Heavenly Father, we thank you for bringing us together today to study your Word and to support each other in our walk of faith. Help us to listen to each other with open hearts and minds. We thank you for the new life and forgiveness you have given us in Christ, and we pray that you will remove all fear from our hearts as we follow your call to let go of our old lives, that we may live for you alone. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

3. Please go back to the homework you all did for this session, starting on **page 6**. Discuss **items 2-5** as a group. After you finish, return here and continue with item #4, below.

4. In turn, without going into too much depth about each situation, share one or two specific issues that you would like your partner(s) to pray about for you this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, have one person volunteer to pray for the group. Try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer. Include a prayer for the power of the Holy Spirit to guide your group and fill you with confidence and determination as you continue this journey together.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (3rd) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer *aloud*; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free spirit. Make me an agent of your love towards all. In Jesus’ name. Amen.
2. Please read **1 John 2:3-17**, and then respond to the items which follow, referring back to the passage.
 - a) John writes that no one can obey God perfectly (see 1:8 and 2:4). Given this, how can you be sure your faith is genuine?
 - b) What does John say is the evidence that a person is truly following Christ?
 - c) What does it mean, in practical terms, to “live as Jesus did” (verse 6)?
 - d) Given John’s message in verses 9-11, how would you help a fellow Christian who held bitterness and resentment against another person?
 - e) Which of the promises in verses 12-14 are most encouraging to you personally? Why?
 - f) How can you know when you are guilty of “loving the world” too much, as in putting too much stock in things that cannot really feed you or give you life?

3. Please read the following account of an English village struck by the Black Plague, and then respond to the items that follow.

It took three hundred years, but the Black Plague finally reached the quaint village of Eyam, England. George Viccars, a tailor, unpacked a parcel of special cloth shipped from London. But as he opened and shook it, he released plague-infected fleas. Within four days he was dead, and the village was doomed.

The town quarantined itself, seeking to protect the region. Other villages deposited food in an open field and left the people of Eyam to die alone. But to everyone's amazement, many townspeople survived. A year later, when outsiders again visited the town, they found half the residents had resisted the disease. How so? They had touched it. Breathed it. One surviving mother had lost all her children and her husband in one week. The gravedigger had handled hundreds of diseased corpses yet hadn't died. Why not? How did they survive?

Lineage. Through DNA studies of descendants who had survived the plague, scientists found proof of a disease-blocking gene. The gene garrisoned the white blood cells, preventing the plague bacteria from gaining a foothold in those fortunate people's bodies. The plague, in other words, could touch people with this gene but not kill them. Hence a sub-populace swam in a sea of infection but emerged untouched. All because they had the right genetic lineage. What was the secret for surviving the Black Plague? Pick the right ancestry.

Of course, they could not. But in a deep sense, as believers, our "spiritual lineage" has been changed through Jesus Christ. Through his death and resurrection—and through our baptism into him—we have been completely rescued (body and soul) from a destiny of death, which we had no power to change on our own. He has truly substituted his life for ours, making us, indeed, his own body and blood. We can only grasp this awesome miracle by faith. But through faith, we can trust that we come from a new starting point in life. Now we are connected to our true Father in heaven...our true origin and our only end. Through Jesus, our family tree has changed, from that of Adam to God. And now that our lineage has changed, we know that the Holy Spirit is with us each day...he has moved into our lives. Jesus himself becomes our resistance against the powers of death and evil. He becomes our shield. Sin may entice us, but will never enslave us. Sin may, and will, touch us, discourage us, and distract us, but it cannot destroy us. Christ is in us, and we are in him, and "there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

- g) The secret as to how the Eyam villagers were able to survive death from the Plague was lineage. In your own words, express how this can be a good analogy for believers in Jesus when it comes to the effects of sin and evil?

- h) What are some ways you can remind yourself today that you are not "fatally afflicted," as you confess your sins to God?

- i) How does the truth of "Christ in you" encourage you as you seek to live a life of

obedience?

j) What are some ways God's light has grown brighter in you, in recent months?

k) What are some attitudes you have that you would consider "worldly?"

l) How are you seeking to change those attitudes? What progress are you making?

m) In what ways is *darkness* a good metaphor for a life of disobedience?

4. Even though John (in his gospel and in his letters) often speaks in stark, black-and-white terms when it comes to whether we are "of God" or "of the world," he also, more than any of the other gospel writers, loves to relate stories of people who come to faith in Jesus through a *process* of growth (e.g., Nicodemus, or the woman at the well in John 4). In short, John sees subtle "shades of gray" very clearly when it comes to where people are in their spiritual lives.

In your own words, express your understanding of how we continue to grow in our Christian faith throughout our lives, even though we know very well that our *salvation* does not depend on our personal growth. Another way of putting it: how would you say a believer's growth process in Christ differs from a person's growth process without that relationship in their lives?

5. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns from your first group meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John's as we follow Jesus' call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective "fishers of people."

GOING DEEPER IN THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

WEEK #3 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: March 7-13, 2021

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.

2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):

Lord God, we give you thanks for all the gifts you have given us in this life: our family, friendships, and the beauty of your creation. Most of all, we thank you for sending Jesus into the world to save us from the powers that seek to enslave us. Lift us up, Lord God,

and set us free by the blood of Christ to live our lives in joy and confidence as your sons and daughters. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen

3. Go back to your homework for last week, beginning on **page 9**. As a group, please discuss your responses to **items 2-4**. When you are finished, return here and continue with item number 4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week, for you. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, pray a “popcorn” prayer. Go around the room, and have everyone offer a brief word of thanks and/or praise to God. As is possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (4th) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer *aloud*; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.
Heavenly Father, I thank you for you for the gifts, talents and abilities that you have given me, and I pray for a spirit of discernment, that I might continue to find ways that I can best serve you and build up your holy Church on earth. Bless the work of your people throughout the world, and make us strong in our witness to you, so that people may be drawn to Christ and find eternal life in him. In Jesus' name. Amen.
2. Please read **1 John 2:18-29**. Then read the following commentary on these verses, responding to questions and directions as indicated.

John, of course, didn't know the actual date of final judgment any better than Jesus did (see Matthew 24:36), but when he says “it is the last hour!” he expresses a basic Christian hope and expectation. Jesus has opened up the future to believers; in our baptism he made our everlasting future with God possible. Instead of being afraid of the future, we welcome it. We have a sense of anticipation when we look at life, knowing that a better world and a joyful, full union with God is just beyond the horizon. We always have a sense that in Jesus, we are *ready* for the future, and we look forward to what God will be doing in our lives every day.

- Identify a time in your life when you found great reassurance in Jesus as you faced a lot of unknowns. Describe the situation and how you experienced the power of God as you were facing it.

In these verses, John refers to Jesus' warnings that as God's future approaches, the enemies of God will increase their attacks on God's people (e.g. Matthew 24:9-14). Things will get worse before the end, because the powers of the world will become desperate, knowing that their time is short. John is identifying all opponents of the church, regardless of their origin, as "antichrist," using the term in a very general way.

- Where do you personally see the power of evil using fear and confusion in today's world most clearly, isolating believers and seeking to drive them underground?

John is reassuring the believers that their faith in Jesus Christ is enough. Indeed, they *have been anointed by the Holy One*, and **all** of them *have knowledge*. The "anointing" here refers to the anointing of the Holy Spirit, like we do at a person's baptism. John is assuring them that they are not somehow lacking in spirituality or divine knowledge, as the opponents would have them believe. John is not writing the believers out of anxiety that they are missing something, but rather to encourage them to trust God's promises and to take comfort in the fullness of gift he has given them in Christ.

- Have you ever felt like someone was giving you the message, "your faith is sub-par?" What was the situation? By what standard do you think they were judging you?
- We live in a time in which being "open" is viewed as one of the highest virtues and it is considered wrong to ever call into question the beliefs of another person. When do you think it might be foolish—and even dangerous—to be tolerant of certain beliefs?
- What factors in life and society do you think drive people to insist that no-one be convinced of any *particular* truths? How is not believing in any particular truths itself a kind of religious orthodoxy?
- What "evidence" does John provide that believers are living in "the last hour" (verse 18)?
- What is your understanding of John's use of the term "antichrists" (plural) in verse 18?
- According to John, what constitutes being an enemy of Christ?
- What resources does John say God gave you to keep you from being led astray?

- What is the message for those who say they love God but can't accept that God would become fully human in one person in history (and conversely not accept that Jesus is anything more than a good man and great teacher)?
- Read John 15:4-8. What is the importance of abiding in Christ?
- Have you ever heard false teachings come from a person who identified themselves as Christian? If so, describe the situation and what was being said.
- How can you tell that a teaching is of God?
- If applicable, describe a situation in which a person said "all the right things" on the surface, but you sensed that they were speaking from a place of hostility and/or fear.
- How can being in fellowship with other believers help you when it comes to determining whether a teaching is true or false?

3. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns from your first group meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John's as we follow Jesus' call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective "fishers of people."

GOING DEEPER IN THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

WEEK #4 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: March 14-20, 2021

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):
Holy Spirit, direct us in all we do towards our Savior, Jesus Christ. Keep us deeply rooted and grounded in him, that we will serve him faithfully and give our lives generously to the work of his Church. Help us to love each other as the Father loves us, and guide us to new insights today as we study your Word together. In Jesus' name. Amen.

3. Go back to your homework for last week, beginning on **page 12**. As a group, please discuss your responses under **item 2**. When you are finished, return here and continue with item number 4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week, for you. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, pray a “popcorn” prayer. If possible, hold hands. Go around the room, and everyone offer a brief word of thanks and/or praise to God. As is possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (5TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Say the following prayer *aloud*; always feel free to add any petitions or thanks as you wish.
Lord God, lift me up, heal me, and renew me. Help me to give my life completely into your hands and to trust in your will for me. Be with (my small group partner[s]), help them to know your constant love for them. I thank you for all that we have been able to share in our meetings. Help us to continue to lovingly uphold and support each other in this journey, and make us faithful to you in all that we do. In Jesus' name. Amen.
2. Please read **1 John 3:1-24**, and then respond to the items below, referring back to the bible passage.
 - a) How does John say God lavished his love on believers in Christ?
 - b) What are some advantages of being a child of God?
 - c) What does John say your life should look like if you are abiding in Christ?
 - d) John indicates that not everyone is a child of God (see verse 10). How do you understand this, along with the biblical teaching that God is the creator of all, and that he loves everything he has made?
 - e) What is “the devil’s work” (verse 8), and how has Christ destroyed it?

- f) Why should you not be surprised if “the world hates you” (verse 13)?
- g) How do you react when you ponder the reality that God has adopted you as his child?
- h) Christians sin daily (and John clearly acknowledges this throughout his letter). How do we reconcile this with the statement that God’s children “cannot go on sinning” (verse 9)?
- i) John clearly implies that we “represent” or “reflect” what we worship. For example, if we worship worldly wealth, we will seek to amass it, we will try to hold onto it, and we will fear losing it. Our spiritual health will be enslaved to the ups and downs of our financial fortune. We will tend to be greedy, suspicious of others, and ungenerous. It’s not that money is bad—it’s that loving it and trusting our lives to it (worshiping it) is soul-killing. We reflect whatever we worship, in everything we do. With this in mind, as your faith is in Jesus, what are some ways (small or large) you have begun to resemble your Father in heaven?
- j) What does it mean that you “have been born of God” (verse 9)? How do you relate this to Paul’s idea that we have been “baptized and buried into the death of Jesus....if we have been joined with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”
- k) What are some actions you can take today, to more closely resemble your heavenly Father?

3. The opponents in 1st John were essentially *Gnostics*. Many gnostic groups, in the early days of Christianity, appropriated Jesus into their own belief systems. But they understood him in a completely different way than the apostolic (scriptural) witness presents him.

Gnostic beliefs were/are contrary to apostolic Christianity. These Gnostic religious ideas had been around long before Jesus came (and gnostic attitudes are still very much with us today). We can reasonably assume that the opponents in 1 John held the following NON-BIBLICAL beliefs:

- The “spiritual” Christ couldn’t have been fully human.
- The “real” (spiritual) Christ did not substitute his life for ours on the cross.
- The historical Jesus was a teacher who helps us gain mysterious spiritual knowledge that helps us grow closer to God. Since we have that mysterious spiritual knowledge now, we don’t need the historical Jesus (whom we meet in scripture) any more.
- We save ourselves by our religious wisdom, and our knowledge of God.

- Our historical existence in this world—including our bodies, our money, our relationships with other people, etc.—is not as “real” or important as our spiritual existence.
- Since we are enlightened now in our spiritual knowledge, we are no longer subject to sin. So, we don’t have to admit any sin. (See 1 John chapter 1 where John speaks against this: “If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us...”).
- Since we are now “sinless” in principle, we can do pretty much whatever we want with our bodies, our money, our relationships and other “worldly” things because those “worldly” things are not as important as our spiritual state, anyway.

With this list of false beliefs in mind, we can see how the opponents tried, for one thing, to spiritualize everything about Jesus. For them, the tension in life was all about a conflict between “spiritual” (good) versus “physical” (bad). They thought that by gaining special, mysterious spiritual knowledge, they could rise above physical restraints and literally be “finished.” Obviously, they saw human beings as being at the center of everything: we are the ones who save ourselves, by learning those divine mysteries. And, not surprisingly, once a person thinks they’re “complete,” and no longer bound by any restraints, they will tend to become arrogant and selfish. John saw right through that. Whereas the opponents were arrogantly looking down on the believers, John emphasized that believers will humbly *love* each other with a costly, Christ-inspired love.

Believers in Jesus know that they are not “complete.” Indeed, Jesus has set us free from ever trying to be final, in ourselves. **He** himself is our finality. He sets us free from our fears, from our bondage to sin and death and evil. Now we are free to be what we were created to be: completely dependent upon God every day. In faith, we take life thankfully from him as he gives it. Jesus is our completeness, and he is with us now. We are still on a journey, but the One who completes us is walking with us.

Whereas the Gnostic opponents thought they had completely risen above any tension between “spiritual” and “physical,” and that they were “done,” we believers know that we still live in the tension between two worlds—the old dying world of law, and the new world that has been given to us in Jesus. We are still assaulted by the powers of sin and evil. But in this tension, we walk by *faith* in our Savior, who walks with us and who has promised us a future with him. The opponents, on the other hand, didn’t think there was any need for faith.

a) With this description of the difference between the opponents and the believers in mind, why do you think John constantly hammers home the truth that *self-emptying, costly, Christ-like love for each other* is true and reliable “evidence” of salvation?

b) Why do the opponents’ beliefs and attitudes lend themselves to hypocrisy (e.g. saying beautiful religious words but not acting with costly love towards their neighbors)?

c) Since the opponents believe that our ability to *know divine mysteries* is the way to salvation, what does this mean for a typical society of human beings, where some people are always going to have more time and resources to learn divine mysteries than others?

d) Matthew 18:2-3 says: “[Jesus] called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Obviously Jesus is not saying here that children lack knowledge, and that we should therefore try to empty our heads and become gullible as Christians. Indeed, Jesus knows full well that children are, if anything, more curious and full of questions than adults! The difference between children and adults, rather, tends to be that while adults devote most of their energy in life towards being self-sufficient, children fully embrace the fact that they are completely dependent upon their parents, all the time. If anything, the fact that children live with this basic sense of “being taken care of” frees them from concerns about self-sufficiency so that they can learn, grow, question, enjoy and experience life much more intensely than most adults.

- With this in mind, how can we understand faith in Jesus as laying the foundation for a life of real learning and growing in potentially *all* fields of knowledge?
- With what Jesus says about “being a child” in mind, how can we understand Christian faith being accessible to *everyone* in the world, no matter how much time we have each day to delve into the bible, or how big our brains are?
- If Christianity was about learning divine mysteries and having “special knowledge,” how do you imagine the Church throughout the world would look different than it does right now?

e) Do you see “Gnostic” dynamics at work in the world today, among some groups or organizations? If so, describe them below.

4. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other prayers, ask for God’s continued guidance and blessing on your small group and on our congregation as we continue into deeper water with Christ. May the Holy Spirit fill us with life and power so that we can become more confident and effective “fishers of people.”

GOING DEEPER IN THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE
WEEK #5 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: March 21-27, 2021

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Have someone in your group say the following prayer out loud (feel free to add petitions as you wish):

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for all your gifts to us. Help us each day to grow more fully into the image of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. When we stumble and make mistakes, lift us up and fill us with a sense of your forgiveness. When our hearts are cold and we are filled with frustrations, give us your peace. Keep us focused on you in all that we do. In Jesus' name. Amen.
3. Go back to your homework for last week, starting on **page 15**. As a group, review the material and discuss your responses to **items 2-3**. When you are finished, return here and continue with item number 4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week, for you. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, pray a “popcorn” prayer. Go around the room, and everyone offer a brief word of thanks and/or praise to God. As is possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (6TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Say the following prayer aloud; add any petitions or thanks as you wish.

Lord, please give me your wisdom now as I approach your word. Help me to discern your will for me, and open my heart to hear your voice speaking to me through the scriptures. Help me not rely on my own understanding. Thank you God for the clarity, encouragement and hope your Word brings. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.
2. Please read **1 John 4:1-6**, and then respond to the following items, referring back to the bible passage.
 - A. What do you think it means to “test the spirits” (verse 1)?
 - B. What are the standards given by John for determining the validity of spiritual claims?
 - C. How can believers in Christ know they will overcome any spirits that come against them?

- D. Why is it crucial to have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us? How do you understand the Spirit's power and presence?
- E. John writes that "whoever knows God listens to us" (verse 6). How does knowing what the historical Jesus and his witnesses say and do (scripture) help you to discern what is and what isn't from God?
- F. What are some ways you are actively seeking to listen to God's truth?

3. Many of us might be familiar with the story of Helen Keller. Born in 1880, she contracted an illness when she was two that left her blind, deaf, and mute. When Helen was seven years old, Anne Sullivan, a young, partially blind teacher, came to the Keller home to serve as Helen's teacher.

Helen's brother James tried to convince Annie to quit. The teacher wouldn't consider it. She was resolved to help Helen function in a world of sight and sound. Helen was as stubborn as her teacher. Locked in a frightening, lonely world, she misinterpreted Annie's attempts to get through to her. The result was a battle of wills. Over and over Annie pressed sign language into Helen's palm. Helen pushed back. Annie persisted. Helen resisted.

Finally, a breakthrough. During a fevered exchange near the water pump, Annie placed one of Helen's hands under the spout of flowing water. Into Helen's palm, she spelled out w-a-t-e-r. Over and over, w-a-t-e-r. Helen pulled back. Annie kept signing. W-a-t-e-r.

All of a sudden Helen stopped. She placed her hand on her teacher's and repeated the letters w-a-t-e-r. Annie beamed. She lifted Helen's hand onto her own cheek and nodded excitedly, "yes! Yes! W-a-t-e-r." Helen spelled it again: w-a-t-e-r. Helen pulled Annie around the yard, spelling out the words. G-r-o-u-n-d. P-o-r-c-h. P-u-m-p. It was a victory parade.

Jesus' arrival on our earth celebrates a similar moment for us—God breaking through to our world. In a feeding stall, of all places. He will not leave us in the dark. He pursues us. He won't sit back while we miss out. So he entered our world. He sense signals and messages: H-o-p-e. L-i-f-e. He cracks the shell of our world and invites us to peek into his.

- G. How was Anne Sullivan able to break through into Helen's world? How is this similar to the way God breaks through into our lives?
- H. What are some of the "signals and messages" that Jesus brings into our world?
- I. What are some things you are doing to be "better attuned" to the daily messages God is sending you?

- J. When John says to “test the spirits,” he means to discern the origin of the power behind various ideas. Sometimes the best-sounding words and ideas come from an unwholesome—even hateful—spiritual place. What are some popular contemporary ideas that you regard as dangerous/unwholesome, and why?
- K. Which do you think wields the greatest influence in our culture right now, in terms of shaping public perception and attitudes: the educational system, the entertainment industry, the news media, or the church? Why?
- L. What are some areas in your life right now where you think you could use greater spiritual discernment?

4. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other prayers, ask for God’s continued guidance and blessing on your small group and on our congregation as we continue into deeper water with Christ. May the Holy Spirit fill us with life and power so that we can become more confident and effective “fishers of people.”

GOING DEEPER IN THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

WEEK #6 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: March 28—April 3, 2021

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):
We gather together to learn, to grow and to change. Help us to move into a deeper understanding of your truth. We lay our lives down before you and ask that you would move among us. May we all feel safe with each other. Safe to think and question. Safe to ask for help. And safe to share our lives with you, our loving heavenly Father. In Jesus’ name. Amen.
3. Go back to your homework for last week, starting on **page 19**. As a group, discuss your responses to **items 2-3**. When you are finished, return here and continue with item number 4, below.

4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week, for you. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, do a “popcorn prayer.” Hold hands and go around the group. Each person says a brief prayer. Then, everyone join in the Lord’s Prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (7TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Say the following prayer; add any petitions or thanks as you wish.
Loving Father, I will lean in, retreat from the pressures I face, and move closer and deeper into your love. I will breathe out, refrain from the distractions I seek, and become open and receptive to your grace. Help me, Lord, to be honest and real in your presence. Help me to listen, and to be fed with your life-giving Word. In Jesus’ name. Amen.
2. Please read **1 John 4:7-21**. In the space below, identify the verses from this passage that particularly stand out for you right now, and why you think they do.
3. Please read the following commentary on the passage, and then respond to the items which follow.
 - A. In 4:7-21, John repeats the direct connection between our new birth in Christ and **loving one another**.
 Our ability to start hearing the Word of God in the first place comes along with the reality of someone loving us. One could say, the power of love opens our hearts so that the Word of God can get in. Love prepares the soil so that the seed can grow. This divine love started with the historical Jesus himself loving his disciples. The resurrected, victorious Lord’s love continues to touch people’s lives today through the love of God’s people, the Church. It is through our Christ-like love for people that people’s hearts are opened to the Word we proclaim. As Paul says, “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” [1 Corinthians 13:1-3]. Again, we are not speaking of love here as merely a feeling or attitude, but as **“action and truth”** (3:18). The costly love of Jesus will always get people’s attention...it will stand out as strange, unique, wonderful, different, in a broken world where self-preservation is the rule.
 - In your experience, how has the love “in action and truth” of other people been important (and to what extent) in opening your heart to the good news of Jesus?

- Who are some specific “stand-out” people who have loved you with the love of Jesus, and who helped you grow in your faith in Christ as a result?

B. In two unforgettable verses (9-10), John powerfully affirms that everything he is talking about (Jesus, faith, being able to listen to God and hear his voice, love for our neighbors etc.) was both **initiated and finished** by God. The moment we try to take any part of salvation out of God’s hands and into our own (like the opponents), we’ve missed the mark entirely. In Christ, God reclaims his role as complete Lord of our lives through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. When Jesus becomes Lord over our daily lives, we are able to return without fear to our proper state of grateful, total dependence upon him. We can’t even hear God without God doing something to open our ears first.

- Why is it significant, in your own words, that God is the one who initiated his special relationship with you in Jesus?
- If you can, give examples that you’ve seen of people latching onto created things (people/ideas/worldly knowledge/politics/religions) in a search for truth/security. What are some outcomes have you observed when human beings seek to make themselves their own saviors in this way, on their own terms?
- Have you ever felt “pursued” by God? Describe the situation(s).

C. The opponents John is speaking about in this letter cannot accept the jaw-dropping idea that God was torn apart, and died—that he completely substituted his own life for ours—on the tree. They don’t believe that the Second Person of the Trinity became *fully, 100% human*. They want to keep the “spiritual” separate from the physical because it enables them to keep thinking *they have control over part of their salvation*.

- In what ways might you be tempted to keep God out of certain aspects of your life? For example, we might say “God has a lot to say about my emotional state, but I don’t think he has anything to say about how I spend my money.” What are your unique struggles in this regard, as an individual?

D. Again, John presents love here as the visible “proof” that we are living in God. **Love** is where the invisible Kingdom of God becomes visible on earth, in the lives of believers. Our faith in the invisible God who loved us so much that the Son became incarnate in the historical Jesus...this invisible God’s love is now incarnate in our self-giving love towards others. Again, none of this is possible or real without the power of the Spirit working in us through the Word.

- 1) According to the bible passage, what is the connection between God and love?

- 2) What is love—an emotion, an action, a commitment, or something else? Explain.
- 3) How does John say that God has demonstrated his love?
- 4) Can a person truly receive love without somehow passing it on? Why or why not?
- 5) How does a Christian demonstrate love for God?

E. Faith in Jesus, who takes our sin upon himself and destroys it completely, gives us **boldness** as we move towards our promised future. No longer do we live a self-protective life, trying to dig a hole for ourselves where we will be safe from the unknowns and threats the future brings; rather, we live “in the light” where we pour ourselves out in love towards our neighbors. The love of God in Jesus continually *casts out fear*. We look to him each day, remembering and trusting his promise to us. No longer are we trying to hide our guilt and shame because we see nothing but punishment in our future. When we try to hide our guilt, it only accumulates. As forgiven sinners, we boldly welcome the future and live an expansive, fearless life of love and service.

- In what ways does *fear of the future* sometimes rule our lives? Give personal examples.
- How do you relate our faith in Jesus to our view of the future? How is this true for **you**, and what struggles have you faced in this regard? How does faith shape our attitudes and actions in light of the future on a daily basis?

F. In a memorable way, John connects the visible (incarnate) love we have for our brothers and sisters with the love and faith we have towards our invisible God. Jesus taught that the two relationships (with God and with other human beings) are inextricable (Matthew 22:36-40). It follows from this that we cannot separate life into “sacred” and “secular” realms; our faith in the Lord Jesus transforms every aspect of our worldly lives.

- In your own experience, can you give examples of a person (including perhaps yourself) *separating* love of God from love of neighbor? (Obviously, this is something that only religious people will likely do). What does this look like?

How do understand how the Lordship of Christ influences our words/deeds/attitudes/beliefs in the following areas of life:

-Financial Stewardship

-Basic Political attitudes and principles

-Career/Vocation

-Marriage and Family

4. *Going Deeper Challenge*: List seven people with whom you interact regularly. Next to each name, write a specific way how you can and *will* demonstrate God's love to that person during the upcoming week.

5. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other prayers, ask for God's continued guidance and blessing on your small group and on our congregation as we continue into deeper water with Christ. May the Holy Spirit fill us with life and power so that we can become more confident and effective "fishers of people."

GOING DEEPER IN THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE WEEK #7 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: April 4-10, 2021

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, holy is your word. Perfect are your ways. Bless us as we meditate on your Word today. Help us to hand all our anxieties, worries, fears and frustrations over to you, and fill us with the peace of Christ, which passes all understanding. Bless our congregation and make us faithful in our witness to Jesus. Be with all those who need your healing power. In Jesus' name. Amen.
3. Go back to your homework for last week, starting on **page 22**. As a group, discuss your responses to all the questions in the homework. When you are finished, return here and continue with item number **4**, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week, for you. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.

5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, in your prayers, have each person share one thing for which they are especially thankful to God right now. Then close with the Lord’s Prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (8TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer aloud; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.

Holy Spirit, lift me up from the pit of my sin and selfishness and fill me with your life-giving power. Unite me with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and guide me in the way of truth as I seek your will for my life. Lord God, make me your faithful representative, and help me to pour myself out joyfully in service to your Kingdom. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen

2. Please read **1 John 5:1-5**. In the space below, write down the verses, words, and/or phrases from this passage that particularly stand out for you right now. Why do you think they resonate with you?

3. Please read the following commentary on this passage, and respond to the items which follow each section.

A. In 5:1, John is again affirming the full humanity of the historical Jesus. He’s speaking against the opponents who deny that Jesus was both fully human, as well as fully divine. They are basically denying the completeness of the connection between Jesus and human beings. If Jesus is not 100% human, he only partially saves us. But if he is indeed fully human, my connection with him is complete and in him I have been 100% born of God. In Jesus, the origin/end of my whole historical existence (body, mind, spirit) has completely switched from death to life (God). The new life and the relationship which sustains it is all-encompassing, and completely dependent upon the historical Jesus who has been raised from the dead. The opponents, at best, are adopting a 50-50 theology which always ends up putting human beings in the center of the equation.

The statement, “everyone who loves the parent loves the child” is another way of saying there is no true knowledge of God, or true father/child relationship with him, that is not built on the child—the historical Jesus.

Many people today think of “God” as something beyond all words, and that different religions are merely different ways of approaching the same God. For Christians, on the contrary, we don’t really know “God” without knowing his Son first. Jesus is not only our Savior, but also God’s fullest revelation of himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We understand that without the historical Jesus whose life and deeds are recorded in scripture, human beings will make the word “God” mean whatever they want it to mean. We call the belief that everyone has their own way to God “universalism.”

- What has been your experience with universalism in today's world? What do you think of it? Why do you think that human beings have always tended to present universalism as a "sophisticated" way of looking at things (e.g. saying that Jesus is only one way among many to God).

B. In verses 2-3, John follows a statement about faith in God rooted in the historical Jesus (verse 1) immediately with a statement about love and obedience towards our neighbors. Just as the transcendent Father's love is fully incarnate in the earthly Jesus, his divine love is now embodied in us. The entire letter moves towards incarnation and all-encompassing salvation (resurrection of the body included). Christian faith is not just "knowing" something in an intellectual sense, but again, is a complete transformation of a person and his/her relationships.

- How would you describe the difference between a Christianity that is reduced to just "knowing things intellectually," and a Christianity that is centered in a *relationship* with a *living person*?
- Obviously, knowledge is part of faith and we grow in our knowledge of God's word throughout our lives, just as curious children are always growing in their knowledge of life and the world while being completely dependent upon the care of their parents. With this in mind, what would you say Paul is talking about when he says "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up the neighbor"? What can happen with our knowledge and wisdom about life when we are separated from our Heavenly Parent, the source of our lives?
- Without sharing names and resisting the temptation to become "puffed up☺": Do you think there are pretenders in churches—people with insincere faith? Why, or why not?
- Write down some experiences you might have had with people who are arrogant in their Christianity. What do you think is their deal? Why do they seem "puffed up" to you? How are they *using* religion? How are "arrogance" and "faith" mutually exclusive terms?

C. In verses 4-5, the thought of *obeying commandments* always carries at least a hint of potential suffering when we hear it, but John reminds us that in the big picture, the commandment to love our neighbors is not burdensome, since we are assured of the outcome of our faith: total victory. Jesus himself expresses the same truth when he says: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:29-30).

When we imitate the historical Jesus (take on his yoke) and engage in costly love towards our neighbors, we will experience suffering, since the world is broken and dying. True love (obedience to God's command), in this world, will involve pain and loss at some point. But the burden is light, because the faith in Jesus which led us to love others in the first place is also the faith that has assured us from the outset of our ultimate triumph. Another way of saying it: We love others because we've already won the war.

- How do you understand John's statement that "God's commands are not burdensome" (verse 3)? Why can this be challenging for us?
- Believers often talk about living "a victorious Christian life." What does that actually mean?
- Even today, Christians suffer persecution at the hands of others. Given this, how can John claim that being a child of God gives you victory over the world?
- How can you know that Jesus will give you the victorious life that he promises?
- How would you describe the difference between "victory in Christ" and "victory in the world?"
- In what way is obedience tied to victorious living?
- What are some spiritual world-conquering victories that you have experienced?
- What are the great obstacles facing you now that you need to overcome? In the context of his complete love and salvation for you in Jesus, what are some steps you feel God is calling you to actively take in your life right now?
- If you imagine yourself in the place of the ENEMY, what vulnerabilities would you exploit in your life? What does this tell you about where you need to fortify your spiritual defenses right now?

4. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns from your first group meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John's as we follow Jesus' call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective "fishers of people."

GOING DEEPER IN THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE
WEEK #8 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: April 11-17, 2021

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).
Lord, you have called us to serve you. Grant that we may walk in your presence: your love in our hearts, your truth in our minds, your strength in our wills; until, at the end of our journey, we know the joy of our homecoming and the welcome of your embrace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
3. Go back to the homework you did for this week, starting on **page 26**. With your small group, discuss your responses to all the questions in the homework. After you finish your discussion, come back here and continue with item #4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, and be sure to pray for them! Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, have each person pray for the person on their right. As much as is possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayers.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (9TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer aloud; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.
Heavenly Father, make me an instrument of your will. Forgive me of my sins and rid me of every fear that keeps me from serving you. Take away my selfishness, my tendency to dwell on past hurts and slights, my anger and frustrations. Help me to let go of the past and to move on to what you would have me do this day, to glorify you and serve the people around me. Give me joy in my work and give me confidence in your love for me. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.
2. Please read **1 John 5:6-13**, and then go through the items which follow, responding where indicated.
 - A. Some of the false teachers in John's day were saying that the Holy Spirit was united with Jesus at his baptism, but then departed at his bloody death. This is a way they tried to separate God's saving spiritual power from Jesus' physicality and his uniqueness as a historical person. It's also a way they were trying to make Christianity about knowing

mysteries (being “puffed up”), rather than being in a relationship with a Lord who had completely substituted his life for theirs. When I know that Jesus has completely died and substituted his life for mine, I also understand that MY WHOLE LIFE needs to be set aside daily, to make room for his. I must bow down to what the historical Jesus said and did for me. When I deny that I have to die the death of faith completely, I’ll always regard my life and my future as something that’s in my hands, which I have to keep building up.

- In your own experience, what are some of the effects of taking one’s life and future into one’s own hands, in the sense of thinking that life is all about “saving” or “protecting” ourselves?
- How does bondage to self-preservation (or “self-salvation”) make it very difficult to do what John is calling us to do throughout 1 John: LOVE?

B. Last session, we talked in general about *universalism*. Below, write down a few thoughts about what you could actually **say** to a person who argues that there are many ways to God, many paths to eternal life, and that all religions are basically saying the same thing using different terminology? (Keep in mind that just telling a person that “the bible says such and such” won’t make them listen. The key might be to think in terms of going on offense rather than playing defense).

C. John offered his own “human testimony” of the death and resurrection of Jesus. So what do you think he means when he says “God’s testimony is greater” (verse 9)? What does he mean by this? (It might help to think in terms of the Holy Trinity and what Jesus says in the gospel of John: John 5:31-40).

D. What is God’s testimony in regard to the *ultimate destination* of his children (verse 11)?

E. Why does the free and unconditional nature of the gospel so often make people (including ourselves) uncomfortable?

F. Read Romans 6:23. What is the difference between “wages” and a “free gift?”

G. By what “metrics” do you know that you have eternal life? What is the basis of our certainty? Do we always *feel* certain of it?

H. John writes that “*whoever* has the Son has life” (verse 12). What does this say about the way God invites you to follow him in spite of your past?

3. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John’s as we follow Jesus’ call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective “fishers of people.”

GOING DEEPER IN THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE
WEEK #9 SMALL GROUP MEETING
Target Week: April 18-24, 2021

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).
Come Holy Spirit, make God’s Word known to us. Make us desire the truth in all that we do and always bring us home to the source of all truth, our Savior Jesus Christ. Open our hearts and minds to your guidance today as we discuss the sacred scriptures and share this time together. Give us joy in our fellowship, and set us free from our fears, that we may welcome others into the peace of your presence with the graciousness with which you have welcomed us into eternal life with you. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.
3. Go back to the homework you did for this week, starting on **page 29**. With your small group, discuss your responses to all the questions in the homework. After you finish your discussion, come back here and continue with item #4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, and be sure to pray for them! Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, have each person pray briefly for the person on their right. If possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMework FOR YOUR NEXT (10TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate, with few distractions. Say the following prayer; add any petitions or thanks as you wish:

I praise you, God, for the grace you have shown me: for the gift of life itself, for my family, my friendships, and all the things that I too often take for granted. Most of all, I thank you for sending your Son Jesus into this world and into my life, that I may know you and worship you as my Heavenly Father. Set me free from all the false gods that I am tempted to worship because they offer me easy shortcuts around the cross of Jesus, and lift me up by the Holy Spirit to serve you alone with joy and confidence. In Jesus' name. Amen.

2. Please read **1 John 5:14-21**, and then respond to the following items.

- a) How can you be sure that God will hear and answer your prayers?
- b) What does it mean to ask things from God “according to his will” (v.1)? How does this shape the way we pray?
- c) Read **Ephesians 3:12** and **Hebrews 4:16**. How do these verses agree with what John is instructing believers regarding prayer in this passage?
- d) What does living in fellowship with God and others require of you when you observe that a fellow Christian is behaving in a destructive way?
- e) How do we reconcile the statement that “the evil one cannot harm” God’s children (verse 18) with the reality that Christians everywhere still struggle with sin?
- f) Why do you think John closes with a warning about idolatry (verse 21)?

3. Please read the following, and then respond to the items that follow.

God wants to be as close to us as a branch is to a vine. One is an extension of the other. It's impossible to tell where one starts and the other ends. The branch isn't connected only when the vine is bearing fruit. The gardener doesn't keep the branches in a box and then, on the day he wants grapes, glue them to the vine. No, the branch constantly draws nutrition from the vine, or it dies.

God also uses the temple to depict the intimacy he desires. “Do you not know,” Paul writes, “that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received” (1 Cor. 6:19). Think with me about the temple for a moment. Was God a visitor or a resident in

Solomon's temple? Would you describe his presence as occasional or permanent? God did not come and go, appear and disappear. He was a permanent presence, always available.

What incredibly good news for us! We are never away from God! He is never away from us—not even for a moment! God doesn't come to us on Sunday mornings and then exit on the afternoons. He remains within us, continually present in our lives.

The biblical analogy of marriage is the third picture of this encouraging truth. Aren't we the bride of Christ (Rev. 21:1)? Aren't we united with him (Romans 6:5)? Hasn't he made promises to us?....

One last analogy from the Bible: How about the sheep with the shepherd? Many times Scripture calls us the flock of God. "We are his people, the sheep of his pasture" (Ps. 100:3). We needn't know much about sheep to know that the shepherd never leaves the flock. If we see a flock coming down the path, we know a shepherd is nearby. If we see a Christian, we can know the same. The Good Shepherd never leaves his sheep. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me (Ps. 23:4)."

God is as near to you as the vine is to the branch, as present within you as God was in his temple, as intimate with you as a husband with a wife, and as devoted to you as a shepherd to his sheep. [Max Lucado]

- a) How much stock should believers put in feelings—as in *feeling* close to God or *sensing* his presence? Why?
- b) How can you know your prayers for others are significant?
- c) Is it difficult to pray with confidence? If so, why do you think that is the case?
- d) What are some surefire prayer requests you could or should be making—things you already know God wants?
- e) When are some times you have sensed the Lord keeping you safe from sin?
- f) An *idol* can represent anything that comes in your life to take the place of God. What people or things or activities threaten to rival God in your life?
- g) What are some specific things that you need to pray about with confidence today?

4. Look back at your partners' prayer concerns from your last meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John's as we follow Jesus' call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective "fishers of people."

**GOING DEEPER IN THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE
WEEK #10 SMALL GROUP MEETING**

Target Week: April 25—May 1, 2021

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).
Loving Father, lift our eyes to seek you first today and always. Forgive us for getting bogged down in the cares and worries of this world. Renew us through the power of the Holy Spirit to live confidently as your sons and daughters. Give us strength to build up your Church on earth, to witness to Christ, and to serve the people around us with humility and joy. We pray this in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.
3. Please go back to the homework you did for this week, starting on **page 32**. With your partners, discuss your responses to all the homework, and then return here to item #4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, and be sure to pray for them! Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, have each person pray briefly for the person on their right. If possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (11TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate, with few distractions. Say the following prayer; add any petitions or thanks as you wish:
Heavenly Father, I thank you for you for the gifts, talents and abilities that you have given me, and I pray for a spirit of discernment, that I might continue to find ways that I can best serve you and build up your holy Church on earth. Bless the work of your people throughout the world, and make us strong in our witness to you, so that people may be drawn to Christ and find eternal life in him. In Jesus’ name. Amen.
2. Please read **2 John 1-13**, and then respond to the following items.
 - a) Why is it significant that John uses the word *truth* five times in the first four verses?
 - b) How would you answer those who claim, “Your truth is your truth; and my truth is my truth?”

- c) Read **Matthew 22:36-40**. Why is love so fundamental in the life of a believer?
- d) John notes “many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” (v.7). Why is the truth of the *full humanity* of Christ so important?
- e) To what is John referring when he warns his readers not to “lose those things we worked for” (v.8)?
- f) “Walk in love” (v.6). What does this mean, exactly, and how might obedience to this command vary from one Christian to the next when it comes to the particular “walk” one is taking? For example, think of different career paths people take, jobs we do, family roles in which we find ourselves, etc.

3. Please read the following, and then respond to the items which follow.

As believers, we know that *God is love* (remember 1 John 4:7-8). When we are connected with the Holy Trinity through Jesus, like branches connected with a vine (John 15), we can be sure that God’s love will grow out of us naturally as a “fruit.” We don’t have to believe Christian life is about sweating and striving and struggling to produce the fruits of love that God wants to see in us. Rather, the image of the vine/branches helps us remember that the fruit that comes out of us, as branches, is *not really produced by us*, but by God himself. In Christ, we can trust that we have become “conduits” of God’s life, power, and love in the world. We don’t really have any active role to play in producing the fruit.

The point is: our focus is not so much on trying to *produce* the fruit of love (since that is the Holy Spirit’s work), but rather to remain connected to the vine (Jesus) by faith. The fact that Jesus commended Mary for *listening to him* while Martha worked (Luke 10:38-42) helps us keep our priorities straight. As long as we are connected to God in faith, confidently keeping our hearts and minds on Jesus and his total sacrifice for us, we can be sure that God’s love will naturally flow through us and produce God’s fruit in the world.

- a) In your own words, what is your role as a “branch” that is connected to the “Vine?”
- b) Love is a fruit of the Spirit of God. What does this say about any efforts to “earn” God’s love? What does it say about your ability to show love apart from Christ?
- c) Do you think that others look at you and describe you as “fruitful?” Why or why not?

- d) How are you seeking to daily abide “in the teaching of Christ” (2 John:9)?
- e) Many people see truth and love as being in opposition, as if truth is harsh and unyielding, while love is warm and accepting. Do you see these qualities as being in opposition?
- f) What are some ways people in your life have spoken the truth to you when you needed it?
- g) Especially in today’s culture, when people seemed primed to “cancel” each other quickly at the slightest disturbance, it can be difficult to “speak the truth in love” when we see others going down dead-end paths, away from Jesus. In the space below, express some of your thoughts on how we as believers can best share the truth and love of Jesus in today’s world.

4. Look back at your partners’ prayer concerns from your last meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John’s as we follow Jesus’ call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective “fishers of people.”

GOING DEEPER IN THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE
WEEK #11 SMALL GROUP MEETING
Target Week: May 2-8, 2021

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).
Loving Father, lift our eyes to seek you first today and always. Forgive us for getting bogged down in the cares and worries of this world. Renew us through the power of the Holy Spirit to live confidently as your sons and daughters. Give us strength to build up your Church on earth, to witness to Christ, and to serve the people around us with humility and joy. We pray this in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.
3. Please go back to the homework you did for this week, starting on **page 34**. With your partners, discuss your responses to all the homework, and then return here to item #4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, and be sure to pray for them! Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.

5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, have each person pray briefly for the person on their right. If possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (12TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate, with few distractions. Say the following prayer; add any petitions or thanks as you wish:

Holy Spirit, renew me, give me a new heart, and fill me with your power. Unite me with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and make me an instrument of your love towards all with whom I come into contact this week: at work, at home, and in all that I do. Give me a generous heart. In Jesus' name. Amen.

2. Please read **3 John 1-14**, and then respond to the items which follow.

- a) If a group of Christians reported on your life—as some apparently did on Gaius’s life—what do you think they would say? Why?
- b) What does John say was his greatest joy?
- c) How would you define *hospitality*?
- d) Why is hospitality such an important quality for Christians to possess?
- e) Have you known a Diotrephes? Do you agree with John’s approach to dealing with him?
- f) Why do you think we often insist on doing things our own way rather than God’s way—even when we know God’s way is ultimately better for us?

3. Below are three different translations of Paul’s words from *2 Corinthians 3:18*. Please read them all, and then respond to the items which follow.

New Revised Standard Version

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Living Bible Translation

But we Christians have no veil over our faces; we can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him.

Passion Translation

We can all draw close to him with the veil removed from our faces. And with no veil we all become like mirrors who brightly reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus. We are being transfigured into his very image as we move from one brighter level of glory to another. And this glorious transfiguration comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

- As you can see, the top translation (NRSV) says we see the glory of the Lord “as though reflected in a mirror.” In the other two translations, we ourselves are the mirrors reflecting the glory of the Lord on whom we are focused. In any case, all the translations convey the Spirit’s message that as we see God’s glory in Jesus Christ, we are changed (transformed) into his image. We mirror and *become like* the person (Jesus) on whom we are focused.
- a) In everyday life as a believer, how do you understand the connection Paul makes between *beholding* God’s glory in Jesus and *reflecting* it? In what down-to-earth ways do you see yourself both focusing on Jesus and reflecting him?
 - b) Why is it so tempting to live for ourselves instead of reflecting God’s glory?
 - c) In what tangible ways can we open our church and our homes (exercising true hospitality) towards world-weary people right now?
 - d) How does John say he is going to approach Diotrephes when he comes to visit?
 - e) What is the best way to handle someone like Diotrephes in your life?
 - f) What does John mean when he calls the believers to “not imitate what is evil but what is good” (verse 11)? How does this verse apply to your life right now?
 - g) What are five simple and practical ways that you could practice greater hospitality this week?

4. Please think and pray about your next step *going into the deeper water with Christ*. By this time, you will know what our next “Going Deeper” focus will be, starting **May 30**. At your

upcoming small group meeting, you will be discussing with your partner(s) whether you will continue as a group or reconfigure.

5. Please consider writing a blurb about your experience so far with going deeper with Christ for our church newsletter (the Eagle) and/or our website.

6. Look back at your partners' prayer concerns from your last meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John's as we follow Jesus' call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective "fishers of people."

GOING DEEPER IN THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE
WEEK #12 SMALL GROUP MEETING
Target Week: May 9-15, 2021

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.

2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).

Loving God, thank you so much for the opportunity we've had to come together these past several weeks to praise you for your grace and generosity, and to grow in Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life. Free us from all fear and give us a spirit of boldness, that we will live our lives in joyful obedience to your will and bring glory to your name in all that we do. We pray in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

3. Please go back to the homework you did for this week, starting on **page 37**. With your partners, discuss your responses to all the homework, and then return here to item #4, below.

4. Talk together about your plans for the next chapter of *going deeper with Christ*. Will you be staying together as a group? Reconfiguring? Disbanding for the time being? Be sensitive to each other's needs and commitments. If you are continuing to the next topic and need to find a new group, please act now! Pastor Seth (217.255.2118) or Pastor Patti (614.875.2314) can help you as needed.

5. The next unit of our Going Deeper journey will begin on May 30, 2021. We hope you will participate in the next part of our *Going Deeper* journey!

7. Could any of you (or all of you) write a blurb about your experience for the newsletter and/or website and/or Facebook regarding your journey so far?

8. For your final prayer, have *everyone* pray in turn. Thank God for your partner(s). Thank our Lord for this opportunity we've been given to share our faith, and to build each other up in the love of Christ. Ask for God's blessings and guidance for our congregation as we continue together on this journey into the deep water with Christ.