

## WEEK 1: EXERCISE #1

### Let's start with Jesus.

In Colossians 1:15–23, Paul introduces us to our majestically cosmic yet intimately personal redeemer, Jesus. This is a stunning and compelling description of Christ. Read this passage aloud, as if you were introducing Jesus to an audience:

*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.*

Now take a pen or highlighter and highlight words or phrases that stand out. Better yet, mark it up in your Bible and not just here in this book. Square it or underline it or highlight any way you can to make it jump off the page. This is a text you will want to return to frequently and perhaps even commit to memory.

Now repeat this process with Hebrews 1:1–4. Read it silently from your Bible. Now read it aloud. Highlight, underline, and circle words and phrases that stand out for you.

Repeat the process once more with John 14:6–9.

What do these texts have in common?

How would you summarize the central idea they hold in common?

## **Encounter**

Write this phrase on a pocket-sized card you can carry with you: “He is the image of the invisible God.”

On the back write this: “He is the exact representation of His being.”

Now spend time whispering these words to yourself. Do this throughout the day. Meditate on these lines as you invite the Spirit of God to “sow” them into your heart.

## WEEK 1: EXERCISE #2

If we want to see God, we must start with Jesus. When we begin with a vague notion of what God is like we tend to project our own experiences, for better or worse, in formulating this image. (“Because my father was absent, God must be distant.” “Because my childhood pastor stole from the church, God can’t be trusted.”) If we extrapolate our vision of Jesus from our faulty understanding of God, we don’t wind up seeing the real Jesus. Sure, we might see *a* Jesus, but we will miss *the* Jesus. And let’s face it: there are some very flawed images of Jesus out there.

In fact, to one degree or another we all have a distorted sense of God’s image. It comes primarily from three sources: our parents, the church, and traumatic experiences. Obviously, not every influence is negative, but a little here and a little there and before we know it, we have missed a biblical understanding of God.

The aim of this study is to help us get a better, more biblical image of *the* Jesus we claim to follow. The way we understand God (in Jesus) largely determines the way we see ourselves. The way we see ourselves determines the way we treat others. Follow the logic? Our ability to accurately reflect the image of God depends on our vision of who God is and what God is like.

Take five minutes to read and reflect on the text below:

*Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

—Ephesians 5:1-2

## Encounter

Take a few minutes to sketch out in your journal examples of how your image of God has been shaped by parents, the church, or experience. If you can't come up with personal examples, make some observations of how you have seen this at play in others.

The secret to understanding who God is and consequently who we really are is to start with Jesus. The problem is that there are a lot of versions of Jesus out there. The only trustworthy way to understand Jesus is to study His Word with others *in the power of the Holy Spirit*. We must have a trustworthy, authoritative source. That source is the Bible, the inspired Word of God.

## WEEK 1: EXERCISE #3

If we are created in the image of the invisible God and yet that image has been ruined by sin, we have a problem. God is invisible. How are we to see that which we are to become?

If Jesus is the visible representation of the invisible God we have a solution: our quest is to encounter this Jesus as revealed by Word and Spirit.

### Read 2 Corinthians 3:12–4:6.

Make some observations about what you learn from this text.

What does Paul teach us here about encountering Jesus?

Make a note of any questions this text raises for you.

According to this text, what is the role of the Holy Spirit in leading us to encounter Jesus?

### Encounter

Using a journal to record your thoughts and a highlighter to mark your Bible, read slowly through Isaiah 42:1–7. Mark any words or phrases you believe point to the coming Messiah. Meditate on those words you've highlighted. How do you encounter Jesus in this Old Testament passage? How does Isaiah describe the character of God's chosen One? Make a list of attributes.

Now, repeat this same exercise using Isaiah 53. How do you encounter Jesus in this passage? What do you learn about the character of God's Messiah?

In your journal, write a prayer of praise to Jesus that reflects what you've learned about Him in this encounter.

## WEEK 1: EXERCISE #4

In our quest to encounter Jesus, we may gain the largest perspective by beginning with the end. This week's video teaching comes from Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus talks here about His second coming and the end of the age. Let's look together at some of the texts we'll encounter in the teaching session.

In Matthew 24:4–14, Jesus explains to His followers about the end of the age. Some call it “the end times,” when Jesus will return to reign supreme. In this scene, it is two days before the Passover and Jesus has been teaching in the temple in Jerusalem. As He leaves the temple, He comments to His disciples that not one stone will be left on another and that “every one will be thrown down.” They travel up to the Mount of Olives, about a mile from Jerusalem, and look out over the city. The disciples begin to ask Jesus specifically what will happen at the end of the age when He comes again.

As Jesus gazes out over the Holy City, His mission to fulfill His Father's purpose looms large. Jesus doesn't just see a city down below. When Jesus gazes down, He “sees” with God's perspective. He sees beyond the walls of the city and into the hearts of the people who live there. His perspective comes from the heart of the Father who sent Him on a mission to reach all nations. The end game? That *all* may come to encounter Him as Lord and Savior.

The disciples' perspective, on the other hand, is much different. They are all about the “when” and “how” of Jesus' second coming, not so much the impact of His message in the “here and now.” They are more interested in knowing the facts than in living a Kingdom life.

**Read Matthew 24:4–5.**

The Greek word for “watch” in this passage is *blepo*. That word means to look at, to become aware of, observe and discern or perceive. In contrast, to “deceive” means to make a person believe that which is not true, to mislead them or lead them astray.

What do you think the disciples’ perception was of the city of Jerusalem as they looked down from the Mount of Olives?

What does Jesus warn His disciples to watch out for?

**Read Matthew 24:6–10.**

Jesus tells His disciples not to be alarmed or troubled in verse 6. The Greek word here is *threo*. It means to wail or be frightened. In verse 8, “birth pains” in the Greek is *odino*, which means that all the suffering, death, and destruction is only the beginning of pain and anguish.

After Jesus paints such a bleak picture of the future, how do you think the disciples felt?

What do you think ultimately kept the disciples from being alarmed and what kept them faithful to Jesus?

**Read Matthew 24:11–14.**

In verse 13, we read Jesus’ instruction to stand firm to the end. “Standing firm” means to endure; to bear trials and have fortitude; to persevere and remain steadfast; to be faithful to the end.

How will the disciples stand firm during this impending time of wickedness and protect their hearts from growing cold?

What does Jesus tell the disciples will be the reward for standing firm?

What will be the ultimate result of their faithfulness?

## Encounter

In the traditional liturgy of the Eucharist, we proclaim the mystery of the faith: “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” We may not understand the universal impact of these words (they are a mystery, after all!), yet they are our hope. Christ has come, and Christ *will* come again!

Say these words aloud to yourself. “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” Write them as a heading in your journal, then reflect on what they mean for you. What emotions do they evoke?

Meditate on the picture of the second coming of the Messiah as it is painted for us by John in Revelation 19:11–16. What new images of Jesus do you discover in this passage? How does this picture of Jesus compare with the images you found in Isaiah?

In your journal, write a prayer of praise to Jesus inspired by what you learn about Him in Revelation 19.

## WEEK 1: EXERCISE #5

Jesus wants His disciples to begin to see things as He sees them. He wants them to have the bigger picture, to have eyes to see and ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the world.

It is the same for us. Jesus wants all who follow Him to see things from His perspective. That means not just getting facts, but having an authentic encounter with Jesus, the Christ. By studying His words, understanding His compassion for people, and grasping His eternal perspective, we can carry on the Kingdom business God entrusted to His Son.

Jesus' words in Matthew 24 are powerful and direct. He wants us to know Him in the deepest, most personal way. He wants us to watch out, be aware, and perceive those who would mislead us. He wants us to have the spiritual courage to remain faithful even when it is hard. When we trust His promise of deliverance and keep our perspective and priorities focused on Him, we will encounter the authentic Jesus.

### **Read Romans 10:12–15.**

According to this passage, how is salvation achieved?

How would you put this passage in chart form—beginning with the gospel message and ending with the one who shares it?

How is *the* Jesus asking you to share the good news in your life?

## Encounter

If there is one thing we've learned in life, it is that we human beings have an almost infinite capacity to deceive ourselves. It's why we desperately need the Word of God and the community of the church.

How do you recognize deception? Where in your life are you most likely to be led astray?

Have you had a saving encounter with Jesus Christ? Have you trusted Christ as your Savior? Are you ready to make that decision, or do you need more time to learn and consider it all?

What is your spiritual story? Write it down in a few paragraphs. Would you be willing to consider sharing that with your group?

In what ways do you think you reflect the image of Jesus Christ? In what ways do you think you *deflect* His image?

Do you really believe that Jesus Christ is coming again to judge the living and the dead? What questions do you have? What doubts?

Does Jesus' return evoke fear in you or hope or some mixture of the two? Describe that.

In tough times, what helps you to stay faithful? What practices keep you spiritually centered? What habits help to keep your heart "warm"?

What personal commitments will you make as a result of this study?