

Small Group Guide THE GOSPEL AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

The Church at Brook Hills

David Platt

July 6, 2014

1 Peter 2:13-17

Use this resource as a tool to help Christ-followers move forward in their spiritual growth. To do this well requires that the Small Group Leader is building a relationship with the individuals in the small group and has identified where the people are in their relationship with God. Are they Christ-followers? Are they growing in Christ? If so, in what areas do they need to grow further? As disciple-makers, Small Group Leaders shepherd people to know the truth of Scripture, to understand why it matters, and to apply it to their lives. Small Group Leaders come alongside those whom they disciple to discover how loving God, loving each other, and loving those not yet in the Kingdom should shape how they live. The structure of this resource coincides with moving people from knowledge (Main Truth) to understanding (Why It Matters) to application (Now What Do We Do?). Utilize this Small Group Guide as a flexible teaching tool to inform your time together and not as a rigid task list.

GETTING STARTED

Before Small Group

Weekly Readings for January 1-5
Joshua 9-19 and Psalm 140-150

Where We Are In The Story ~ Old Testament (Joshua)

Background of Joshua: While authorship of this book is unknown, the book's name derives from the name of its main character, Joshua, who was Moses' successor in leading the people of Israel. His name means "Yahweh delivers" or "Yahweh saves," which is an apt title of the book since it describes God's work in defeating the nations of the Promised Land and giving the land to His people. Joshua presents the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give their descendants the land of Canaan, and it describes the military conquests that brought this to pass. Written as a historical book for Israel, Joshua also emphasizes God's sovereignty, omnipotence, and faithfulness to His word, and Joshua 21:43-45 provides a fitting summary of God's character as One who keeps *all* of His promises.

Structure of Joshua:

- Joshua 1-5 describes Israel's preparations before taking the Promised Land.
- Joshua 6-12 depicts the military conquests of the nation.
- Joshua 13-21 explains the distribution of the land among the tribes, highlighting the fulfillment of God's promises to His people.
- Joshua 22-24 records Joshua's final instructions and exhortations to the nation before his death.

This Week in Joshua: Joshua 9 records the Gibeonite deception, and verse fourteen explains the crux of the matter: "So the men took some of their provisions, but did not ask counsel from the LORD." God had given them directions on how to deal with the people in the land and how to respond to other nations (Deut. 20). Based on their own wisdom, the Israelites assumed that the Gibeonites fell into the category of a foreign nation rather than a nation living in the Promised Land. Because of their deception, they were cursed (see Deut. 27-28). Nehemiah 3:7; 7:25 reports that the Gibeonites were among the Jews who returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile and helped rebuild the wall of the city, demonstrating that they had been assimilated into the nation of Israel.

While the Gibeonites deceived the Israelites because of fear, Joshua 10-11 tell of two groups of nations who opposed Israel in battle. The kingdoms mentioned in Joshua 10 were all located in the region between the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, which is also where Gibeon was located, and soon after making the peace treaty with the Gibeonites, the Gibeonites called upon Israel to honor their promise to protect them. God demonstrated His power as He struck the enemy nations with hail and had the sun and moon stand still until the enemy had been defeated. According to David M. Howard in his commentary on Joshua, "A

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midsummer hailstorm would have been a rarity, rendering miraculous assistance in this instance. There are only five to eight days of hail per year in the coastal plain, mostly in midwinter...And even then the hail is not usually of deadly force" (p. 237). Yahweh rightly receives the credit as Israel's warrior in this chapter.

Israel continued to battle against the inhabitants of Canaan and take possession of the land as God had promised. Although not all of the land had been possessed, in Joshua 13 God directs Joshua to divide the land among the tribes of Israel as Moses had directed (Num. 27:18-23; 32:17; 34:17; Deut. 1:38; 3:28; 31:7). Completion of the conquest depended on more than just military success; it also involved the people settling the land God had given to them. Joshua 13-19 explains the inheritance of the tribes and of Caleb and Joshua. It is important to note that Israel does not complete their conquest until the reign of King David (2 Sam. 8:1-14) because it was not until then that they were faithful in defeating the remaining nations.

Where We Are In The Story ~ Old Testament (Psalms)

Background & Structure of Psalms: God used many different writers to write Psalms: David, Moses, the sons of Korah, Asaph, etc. The book is arranged in five parts, and this arrangement occurred after the people of Israel returned to the land after the Babylonian exile. A doxology concludes each book or arrangement of psalms (Psalm 41:13 for Book 1, Psalm 72:18-19 for Book 2, Psalm 89:52 for Book 3, Psalm 106:48 for Book 4, and Psalm 150:6 for Book 5), and the entire book of Psalms climactically ends with a grand doxology of several psalms (Ps. 146-150).

- Book 1: Psalms 1-41
- Book 2: Psalms 42-72
- Book 3: Psalms 73-89
- Book 4: Psalms 90-106
- Book 5: Psalms 107-150

This Week in Psalms:

- **Psalm 140** divides into four parts. In section one (vv. 1-3), the psalmist petitions God for deliverance from violent men. In section two (vv. 4-5), he asks for God to guard him from the traps of the wicked. Section three (vv. 6-8) contains a declaration of trust in God along with a petition to thwart the plot of the psalmist's enemies, and section four (vv. 9-13) continues with more petitions and concludes with confidence in God's justice and righteousness.
- In **Psalm 141**, the psalmist asks God to sanctify him and to cultivate righteousness in him, and the psalmist requests that God preserve him and keep him from evil.
- **Psalms 142-143** both include petitions for God's deliverance from enemies and expressions of trust in the God who has preserved the psalmist thus far. The psalms stem from a believer who desires to faithfully follow God in times of adversity.
- **Psalm 144** contains a praise report for God's faithfulness in battle (vv. 1-2) and boldly petitions God to demonstrate His might in defeating the psalmist's current enemies and to bless His people.
- **Psalm 145** is an alphabetical psalm, except that the Hebrew letter nun (נ) is left out of the acrostic. This psalm serves as a hymn that celebrates God's character and mighty deeds.
- **Psalms 146-150** serve as the doxology of the entire book, ending the book with a crescendo of praise to God for His character and calling all of creation to join in praising Him.

During Small Group

Welcome – Incorporate time for greeting one another, enjoying any refreshments, and making announcements. If guests are visiting, make introductions and help them feel welcomed. Ask for their contact information, so you can follow up with them.

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Looking Back – Provide an opportunity for small group members to share what God is teaching them, how they are applying what they are learning, and how He has given them opportunities to share the gospel with others. This can be done as a whole group or in smaller groups. Do the people know each other well enough to share more than surface level information? How can time together be used to foster deeper relationships among those in the small group? Also, what are the struggles and needs of the people in the small group? How can the people in the small group sacrificially serve each other?

Looking Up – Hold prayer as fundamental to small group time rather than supplemental to it. Give adoration and thanksgiving to God in prayer. Submit yourself to Him, confessing sin. Petition God for personal needs and other requests. Pray for the disciple-making efforts of those in the group and for the salvation of the lost in each other's families, spheres of influence, and in the world. The Weekly Prayer Focus below can also be incorporated in the group's prayer time.

Weekly Prayer Focus (from Our Worship Guide)

- *Pray for Our Lives:* Praise God for setting us free from the slavery of sin. Thank God for His gift of freedom to practice our faith. Pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters who do not have this freedom in their countries to remain bold and faithful. Ask God to direct us in how we can support the persecuted church. Pray for God to grant us discernment in submission to our government as well as obedience to His will. Pray we will practice our religion with love and humility, seeking the ultimate goal of others knowing God and glorifying Him.
- *Pray for Our City:* This week we are praying for the ministries of Mission Alabama and Covenant Community Fellowship Church, both of which are led by Frank Woodson. Covenant Community Fellowship Church is an SBC, predominantly African American congregation being planted in the historical Central Park Baptist Church in the Five Points West Community beginning today (7/6/14). Mission Alabama is a Brook Hills partner that seeks to develop collaborative community transformation strategies to alleviate spiritual and material poverty in Birmingham through partnerships that empower and restore families and communities.
- *Pray for Our World:* This week we are praying for Brook Hills field partners serving in Nepal. There is a new project that we are participating in for the development of Bible stories translated into the different languages represented in Nepal. This is a large undertaking and one that will have significant and strategic impact in reaching the unreached people groups of Nepal. Join us this week as we pray for the Bible story project and our partners who are working for the gospel to spread throughout Nepal. This week we are also praying for our Short-Term teams serving in India and Uganda.

MAIN TRUTH

Biblical Truth...

- We are submissive citizens of a government.
 - Government is given by God for the restraint of evil.
 - Government is given by God for the promotion of good.
- We are free servants of God.
 - We use our freedom in Christ to model good lives.
 - We use our freedom in Christ to show God's love.
 - We honor everyone, especially our leaders.
 - We care for the church.

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- We fear God.

Cultural Application...

- We believe religious liberty is not primarily a political issue; it is a gospel issue.
 - Freedom of religion is ultimately given by God, not just granted by government.
 - Faith, in its essence, cannot be forced.
 - Religion is a matter of voluntary choice, not involuntary coercion.
- We work for religious liberty for all.
 - Religion exists to explore the questions of life and apply our conclusions to life.
 - Government exists to protect this fundamental human privilege.
 - Government does not exist for the establishment of religion.
 - Government does not exist for the elimination of religion.
 - Government exists for the free exercise of religion.
 - Not just in episodic gatherings, but in everyday life.
 - Those who gather for worship in private settings scatter to live out their beliefs in the public square.
- We obey our government unless it requires us to disobey God.
 - Four options...
 - God alone is our authority.
 - The government alone is our authority.
 - God and government are authorities with government in the dominant position.
 - God and government are authorities with God in the dominant position.
 - One conclusion...
 - We must obey God rather than men.
- We speak and serve on behalf of the persecuted church around the world.
 - We speak...
 - To God on their behalf.
 - To our government and other governments on their behalf.
 - We serve...
 - We give and go to our persecuted brothers and sisters.
 - We identify with our persecuted brothers and sisters.
 - By following Christ no matter what it costs.
 - By proclaiming the gospel to people around us and people around the world.

Message Summary

Peter instructs his audience to submit to and respect their governing authorities, despite the horrid conditions they were experiencing. He stated that God has ordained governments to restrain evil in the world and to promote good, and believers are to live in a way that is above reproach to those who might want to disparage believers. However, as citizens primarily of God's kingdom, Christians are to obey God above all other rulers, at any cost.

In the culture of the U.S., religious liberty is at stake in many matters today. Religious freedom begins with God, as He gives all people the freedom to choose whether or not to follow Him. Government does not exist to promote or eliminate religion but to protect the free exercise of it, meaning that government cannot compartmentalize religion to a simple personal closet of one's home. Christians are to obey their governments unless it requires disobedience to God. Although we recognize both as authorities, God is the dominant authority, and we seek to honor Him in all ways, whether privately or publicly. Therefore, we must use our liberty for His mission of making disciples in all nations.

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WHY IT MATTERS

Digging Deeper

As the leader, there are at least three directions the small group can take in light of the current Bible reading plan. Knowing the people in the group, prayerfully consider what would be the best route to help those in your group grow. The group's meetings could also vary with each week, so if one week's sermon prompts a lot of thought and discussion, option one could be what the group does that week while the next week could be different. As the leader, feel the freedom to take all or just some of the content in this guide and do what is best for your group.

- *Using the discussion questions below, the small group time can focus on discussing the sermon and how to apply it.*
- *The group can discuss the Bible readings from the past week. If choosing this route, ensure that the group does not simply discuss information but also focuses on how to apply what they have learned from the Bible readings. The information in the "Where We Are in the Story" section can assist the leader in knowing the background and context for the readings.*
- *Using the REAP (read, examine, apply, pray) outline for studying Scripture, the group can take one or both passages from that day's readings and discuss them. So if the group meets on Monday, then you could pick one or both of the passages for Monday. This also helps those who are new to studying the Bible or who struggle with reading it learn how to do so. To assist the group with REAP questions, download the Guide to Personal Worship from brookhills.org.*

In light of both Independence Day and the Supreme Court's decision this past week regarding the Hobby Lobby case, this week's sermon and Small Group Guide are breaking from the Bible Reading Plan to focus on the Bible and religious liberty. Next week's sermon and Small Group Guide will pick back up with Joshua, Psalms, and Acts in the Bible Reading Plan.

The context of 1 Peter includes the spread of Christians to numerous countries and increasing persecution of those who followed Christ. Considering this frame of reference, Peter's words may have seemed odd to those who were not experiencing governments who were acting according to God's design to restrain evil and promote good. In fact, they were acting contradictory to God's design. Nevertheless, Peter instructed his readers to submit themselves to the authority of the government. In the preceding verses (vv. 9-12), however, Peter clearly states that the believers are God's chosen people. How do these dual citizenships play out in the life of believers as they "fear God" and "honor the emperor"? The word translated as "fear" is the same root word that we get "phobia." It literally means to be afraid, to respect, and to worship. The original word translated as "honor" means to regard, value, and acknowledge the status of-particularly in regard to the honor given by God to someone. Accordingly, who are we to fear disobeying? What is the worst man can do to the one who obeys God over government? What is the worst that can happen to someone who chooses man over God? Considering the meanings of these words, how do we differentiate between fearing God and honoring our government leaders?

We see what it looks like in the life of the persecuted church to live in a place where their fear of God places them in opposition of the government they are to honor. When our allegiances are contradicting one another, why is it important that we understand God's Word and hold it as our primary authority? In a country in which religious persecution is not a major part of believer's lives, the conflict between fearing God and honoring the government may not be as easily seen and may not "cost" much to uphold. What does it look like in our culture to fear God and honor those who He has set up to promote good and restrain evil?

Because Peter wrote this epistle to a persecuted group of believers, it should inform how we pray for persecuted brothers and sisters around the world. Take time as a small group to pray for the persecuted church. To learn more about ways to pray, visit either The Voice of the Martyrs (persecution.com) or Open Doors (opendoorsusa.org/pray/).

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NOW WHAT DO WE DO?

Group Discussion & Application

Use the following questions to help review the application of God's Word to our Head (What does God want me to know?), to our Heart (What does God want me to desire/value?), and to our Hands (What does God want me to do?).

- Why were Peter's instructions concerning Christians' submission to the government so surprising considering the scattered and persecuted circumstances of his audience?
- What was God's purpose in ordaining governments? How can governments help carry out God's plans for His people and His moral commands, particularly God's desire for humankind to seek His truth, to share His gospel, and to enter into a relationship with Him?
- What does the existence of a government indicate about the fallen nature of our world and God's provision to protect and care for His creation?
- Government is full of sinners like the people they govern, and we often see leaders acting in a contradictory manner to God's design. How can we work to promote a government that exists to restrain evil and promote good as believers?
- How does acknowledging that government leaders were created in the image of God and, therefore, deserve dignity and respect change our attitudes toward praying for them? How does it affect the way we talk about them? How does it affect the way we communicate about them on social media?
- As believers, God has given us the freedom to believe in and follow Him fully. How is this freedom not an excuse to be a poor citizen of our current country? According to Peter what does it look like to be a submissive and obedient citizen of our government?
- What roles do privileges like voting, educating, or running for office have in the realm of pursuing religious liberty and making changes toward a government that reflects God's design?
- God gives the choice to reject Him or follow Him, but His expectations for those who choose to follow Him are to obey Him fully. How does this come into play as we plan to be involved with His mission to other nations as well as to exercise our religious beliefs in our everyday lives?
- To follow Christ means that our entire lives are to be under the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Why then does following Christ leave no room for the separation of religious beliefs and religious conduct/lives? Are there any parts of our lives that should not reflect our religious beliefs?
- Why is our conduct toward others, particularly other believers a great testimony to our identity as God's children? What dangers exist today in a world of electronic communication to show the world a picture of disunity, argumentative attitudes, and arrogance toward fellow believers and unbelievers?
- Loving others is a subset of our love for God based on the great commandments that Jesus stated, summed up by "love God and love people" (Matt. 22:37-39). Does loving others and honoring God's command for holiness always result in acquiescence to cultural demands? How do we navigate those situations with grace and unwavering boldness? Why is biblical community in the midst of these situations so important?
- How can we use our freedom to support the persecuted church and to live in a way that does not take for granted the freedom they desire?
- What does it look like to live a life that wastes liberty and freedom? Why must we decide now to follow Christ despite all costs and to use our liberty for His mission?