Trace the Themes

A Guide to Unpacking the Bible's Major Motifs



A FREE 6-WEEK BIBLE STUDY WITH SPENCE SHELTON

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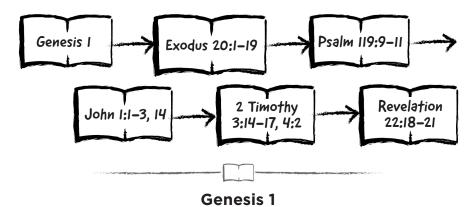
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Theme 1: The Word of God

Visit **TraceTheThemes.com** for a video introduction

The Word of God is a theme that develops from the first page of Scripture to the last. These selected passages will help you see how the Word of God develops in its importance for knowing God and knowing how to live in our world.

Discover and Connect

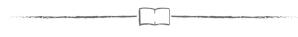


DISCOVER What do you see and learn about the word of God in this passage? Identify key words, repeated words and ideas, imagery, and anything else that reveals something about the theme.

- Every time God creates, Genesis 1 records that "God said," and then that whatever he said came into existence. So, his words have creative power. Out of all the ways he could create, he chooses to create through words (3-4).
- The repetition means "God said" is being emphasized. His words are important.
- In verse 28, "God said" moves from creating to commanding and blessing. God commands the people to be fruitful and multiply, and he blesses them with plants and animals to rule over. His word is creative but also carries authority to command and bless his creation.
- What God created with his words was very good (31).

CONNECT How does the passage develop the theme of God's word? With the first passage, identify things you consider significant about the theme. In looking at subsequent passages you will be building off this starting point.

- God's word is creative, powerful, and the final authority over humans.
- God's word is good.



Exodus 20:1-19

DISCOVER What do you see and learn about the word of God in this passage?

CONNECT How does this passage build on the theme of God's word from Genesis 1?

	Psalm 119:9-11
DISCOVER	What do you see and learn about the word of God in this passage?
CONNECT	How does this passage build on and add to the theme of God's word as the collected law in Exodus 20?
	John 1:1-3, 14
DISCOVER	What do you see and learn about the word of God in this passage?
CONNECT	Now transitioning to the New Testament, how does this passage develop the theme of God's word from what you saw in the Old Testament?
	2 Timothy 3:14-17, 4:2
DISCOVER	What do you see and learn about the word of God in this passage? Look at it function and purpose here in Paul's letter to young pastor Timothy.
CONNECT	How do Paul's words here build on and add to the theme of God's word?

CONNECT How does this passage build on and complete the theme of the word of God?

DISCOVER What do you see and learn about the word of God in this passage? Consider especially its importance, holiness, and power.

Revelation 22:18-21

Apply

Tracing the themes of Scripture is more than just an exercise in knowledge or discovery. It is an opportunity for believers to grow more into the people God has called them to be. This last section helps you take the theme off the pages and begin putting it into practice in your life. Try answering these three questions to help guide you in applying what you've learned.

- In one sentence, explain the importance of this theme in the story of Scripture.

 Example: The word of God that created the world became the man who redeemed the world and remains in my Bible as the perfect truth where I can meet God himself.
- In one sentence, explain the implication of this theme for your life.
- What is the one step you could take this week to start living out this implication?

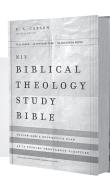
Pray

Before leaving your time in God's Word, take a moment to talk with him. Part of the joy of reading God's Word is that you are encountering a living and active God who doesn't want you to just know about him, but to know him personally. Prayer is one way you can express a desire to know God and walk with him. Here are a couple of prayer points to get you started:

- Thank him: "God, thank you for giving us your Word. Now that I see more about how powerful your word is, thank you for giving it to me so I can know you better."
- Ask for help: "God, I want my life to be changed for the better by your Word. But I know I don't always live up to it. Help me live like your Word says I should. I'm going to take the following step this week and I need your help: ______."

The NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible was built to help you trace the themes of Scripture as they develop from Genesis to Revelation.

Visit www.NIVBiblicalTheologyStudyBible.com to learn more.

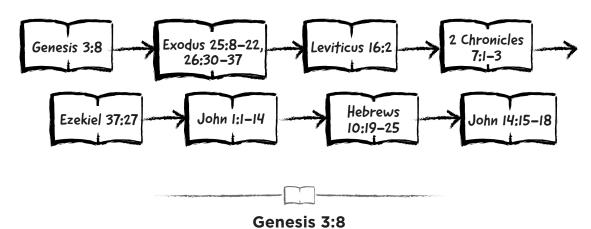


Theme 2: The Presence of God

Visit **TraceTheThemes.com** for a video introduction

The point of Christianity has always been to be in the presence of God himself. While many religions will focus on rules to follow and doctrines to adhere to, Christianity focuses on a relationship with God himself. From the first page of Scripture to the last, God reveals a desire to be present with his people. His presence, more than any blessing he could give, is what will most satisfy the desires of our souls. In this session you will trace the theme of the presence of God throughout Scripture.

Discover and Connect



DISCOVER What do you see and learn about the presence of God in this passage? Identify key words, repeated words and ideas, imagery, and anything else that reveals something about the theme.

CONNECT How does the passage develop the theme of God's presence? With the first passage, identify things you consider significant about the theme. In looking at subsequent passages you will be building off this starting point.



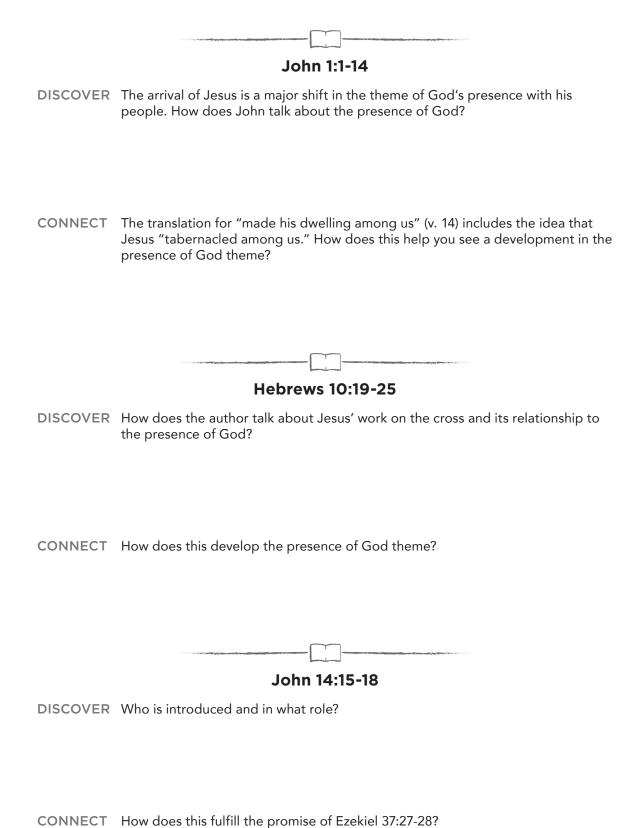
DISCOVER What does this passage say about the holiness of God and its implications for him dwelling with his people?

CONNECT Why is it important to understand God's holiness in understanding his presence with his people now?

Study Note: The ark of the covenant represented the very presence of God. The Israelites stored three things inside the ark: bread/manna (representing God's provision), Aaron's rod (representing God's miraculous power), and the Ten Commandments (representing God's law).



the way we can look for God's presence in the rest of Scripture?



Apply

Tracing the themes of Scripture is more than just an exercise in knowledge or discovery. It is an opportunity for believers to grow more into the people God has called them to be. This last section helps you take the theme off the pages and begin putting it into practice in your life. Try answering these three questions to help guide you in applying what you've learned.

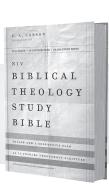
- In one sentence, explain the importance of this theme in the story of Scripture.
- In one sentence, explain the implication of this theme for your life.
- What is the one step you could take this week to start living out this implication?

Pray

Before leaving your time in God's Word, take a moment to talk with him. Part of the joy of reading God's Word is that you are encountering a living and active God who doesn't want you to just know about him, but to know him personally. Prayer is one way you can express a desire to know God and walk with him. Here are a couple of prayer points to get you started:

- **Thank him:** "God, thank you that through Christ you've given us your very presence. I see now your desire to always be with your people. Thank you that you never leave and that even when I feel alone or lost, you are still here."
- Ask for help: "God, I want my life to be changed for the better by your presence with me. But I often live like I forget you are here. Help me live with the confidence that comes from your presence. I'm going to take the following step this week and I need your help: ______."

To continue tracing the theme of God's presence through the Bible, read the article entitled "Temple" on page 2340 in the NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible.



Theme 3: The People of God

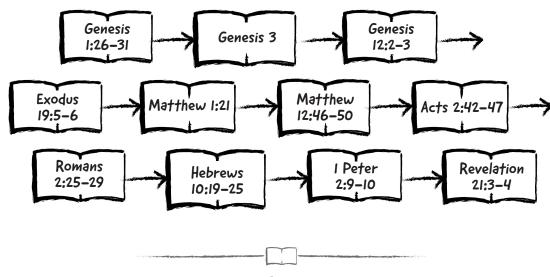
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God values people above all the rest of his creation. God loves people. He created us to know him, walk with him, and represent him in how we relate to others and the world around us. The storyline of Scripture is God on a mission to rescue people from their sin and reconcile them to himself.

The theme of the people of God in Scripture is foundational to understanding the Bible and also one of the most comprehensive themes in scope. From the first page to the last, the Bible is telling the story of God and his people. As you trace this theme, remember the four movements of the biblical story:

In this study you will be tracing the people of God along these four movements. By the end of the Discover and Connect section you will see many promises from God to his people and stories of his faithfulness to those promises. Once you move into the Application section you will be challenged to take hold of these promises and consider their implications for your life.

Discover and Connect



Genesis 1:26-31

DISCOVER What does the creation account say about the human race and its purpose?

CONNECT How would you describe God's relationship with Adam and Eve at this point?

	Genesis 3		
DISCOVER	Summarize what happens in this story.		
CONNECT	What were the consequences of Adam and Eve's actions for humankind's		
	relationship with God?		
	Genesis 12:2-3		
DISCOVER	The story focuses specifically on one family. What is the promise here?		
CONNECT	How does this impact the development of the people of God theme you are tracing?		
	Exodus 19:5-6		
DISCOVER	God seems to give his people a role and himself a role in the covenant. What are		
DISCOVER	these roles?		
CONNECT	Among other connections, consider what Israel's role is now that they are leaving Egypt.		
Matthew 1:21			
DISCOVER	Who shows up and what does he do?		
CONNECT	The "people" have a new head over them. How does this verse announce an important shift in the development of this theme?		
	important sint in the development of this theme:		



Matthew 12:46-50

DISCOVER This may be one of the most important passages to help us in understanding this theme. What is so important about Jesus' words here?

CONNECT How does this help give identity to the people of God here and now?



Acts 2:42-47

DISCOVER What actions and attitudes characterized the early church?

CONNECT What can we take from this and apply to how we function as the church today?



Romans 2:25-29

DISCOVER This one is a little more abstract, but what is the author's main idea here?

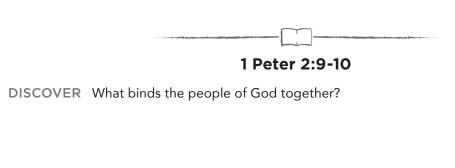
CONNECT Who is now included as part of the people of God?



Hebrews 10:19-25

DISCOVER What is the "new and living way" into the people of God?

CONNECT How does this "new and living way" into the people of God impact relationships?



CONNECT What is the purpose of God's people as reflected in verse 9?



DISCOVER What will the end of days look like for God's people?

CONNECT How does the end of days give hope to God's people in the present day?

Apply

Tracing the themes of Scripture is more than just an exercise in knowledge or discovery. It is an opportunity for believers to grow more into the people God has called them to be. This last section helps you take the theme off the pages and begin putting it into practice in your life. Try answering these three questions to help guide you in applying what you've learned.

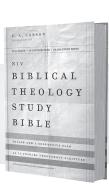
- In one sentence, explain the importance of this theme in the story of Scripture.
- In one sentence, explain the implication of this theme for your life.
- What is the one step you could take this week to start living more in line with God's will for your life in this area?

Pray

Before leaving your time in God's Word, take a moment to talk with him. Part of the joy of reading God's Word is that you are encountering a living and active God who doesn't want you to just know about him, but to know him personally. Prayer is one way you can express a desire to know God and walk with him. Here are a couple of prayer points to get you started:

- **Thank him:** "God, thank you that you love us so much. Thank you for never leaving us, but instead remaining faithful to your promises even when we are not faithful to you. Thank you for giving me a community of people who encourage me and remind me of your great love for me."
- Ask for help: "God, I want to know more of you and I know growing closer to your people will help me. So help me serve and invest in your people. I'm going to take the following step this week and I need your help: ______."

To continue tracing this theme, read the article entitled "People of God" on page 2360 in the *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*.



Theme 4: Redemption

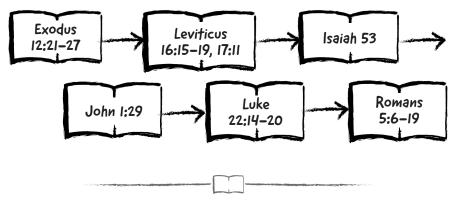
Visit **TraceTheThemes.com** for a video introduction

Every Christian carries with him or her a story of redemption. Redemption from sin and reconciliation with God is at the heart of the Bible. In this session you will trace the theme of redemption by studying the first Passover in Exodus, our need for a sacrificial substitute in Leviticus, the foreshadowing of a suffering Servant bringing redemption for all people, and the pinnacle of this story in the cross and resurrection. You'll also look at the implications of this redemption story for us as it is revealed in the New Testament letters.

While the number of texts you will study will be limited here, the goal is to help sharpen your vision to see this theme as it appears throughout all of Scripture. Once you begin to see this beautiful theme, you will discover it almost every day as you open God's Word. Indeed, all Scripture points to or reflects on the redemption given to us in the cross of Jesus Christ.

In this session you will be studying six passages that provide an overview of the redemption theme as it develops through the story of Scripture. Take time to consider how each passage develops the redemption theme differently, demonstrating unique aspects of the story for readers.

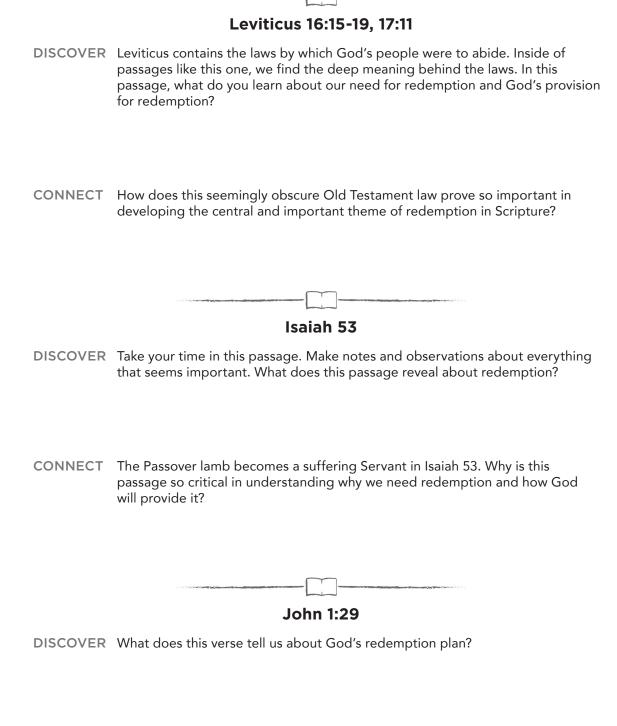
Discover and Connect



Exodus 12:21-27

DISCOVER What does this passage reveal about the need for sin to be paid for and the desire of God to have mercy on his people? What else do you see about God and his relationship with his people?

CONNECT The Passover is a critical moment in the Bible's storyline. In narrative passages like this we can learn about God by observing how God works in each passage and connecting it to how he works in other passages. How do God's actions here seem similar and/or different than in other places in Scripture? In short, what does the Passover story tell us about God's plan to redeem his people?



CONNECT Why is John the Baptist's declaration about Jesus so important?



DISCOVER Jesus celebrates Passover with his disciples. How does this interaction give us insight into God's redemption plan for all of humanity?

CONNECT How does Jesus connect what he is doing with God's redemption plan throughout history up to this point? How does he give new meaning to the concepts behind Passover and what does this mean for us?



DISCOVER While the other passages have described, this one explains. What truths and promises are in this passage? What do you learn about redemption from Paul's words here?

CONNECT This passage looks back over everything that happened from Adam to Jesus and talks about what it means for us in full. What does this passage teach us about our need for redemption? Where does that redemption come from?

Apply

Tracing the themes of Scripture is more than just an exercise in knowledge or discovery. It is an opportunity for believers to grow more into the people God has called them to be. This last section helps you take the theme off the pages and begin putting it into practice in your life. Try answering these questions to help guide you in applying what you've learned.

- In one sentence, try to explain the theme of redemption based on your study in this session.
- Do you believe Jesus' gift of salvation is the only way you can be redeemed from your sin?

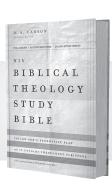
- Based on what we've read about God's love for people in this study, what should the life of a redeemed person look like when he or she is interacting with others?
- How can you begin to live in the freedom that Christ offers now that he has redeemed you from your sin?

Pray

Before leaving your time in God's Word, take a moment to talk with him. Part of the joy of reading God's Word is that you are encountering a living and active God who doesn't want you to just know *about* him, but to know him personally. Prayer is one way you can express a desire to know God and walk with him. Depending on where you are with God, here are a couple of ways you can pray in response to this session:

- If you've never received **God's gift of salvation**, you can do that now.
- If you are already a believer, **thank God** for redeeming you from your sin and ask him to help you live in the freedom that his redemption offers you.
- **Pray for someone** close to you who does not know this redemption in Christ. Pray they would receive the redemption offered to them by Christ.
- Ask for help: "God, I want to know more of you and your plan to redeem your people. I want to live out the power of your redemption in my own life in a practical way. I'm going to take the following step this week and I need your help:

To continue tracing this theme, read the article entitled "The Gospel" on page 2372 in the NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible.



Theme 5: Holiness

Visit **TraceTheThemes.com** for a video introduction

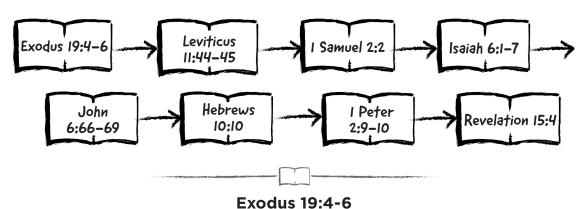
Perhaps one of the more intimidating themes in Scripture is the theme of holiness. Whether the word evokes fear or mystery or awe, no other word captures God's character like the word "holy" does.

When God gives John the vision of heaven recorded in the Book of Revelation, the creatures surrounding the throne have one word to describe God: they call him "holy." They repeat, "holy, holy" without ceasing because this is what God is. He is holy. And he calls those of us who have accepted his salvation to live holy lives that reflect his character to the rest of the world.

In this session, you will trace the theme of holiness. Dr. Andrew David Naselli says, "The story of the Bible is, from one perspective, about how God is working to restore to an even greater degree the holiness that our first parents forfeited." In this study, pay special attention to the ways God gives us his holiness and empowers us to live holy lives for his glory in our world.

In this session you will be studying eight passages that will help you trace the theme of holiness as it develops in Scripture. Take time to consider how each passage articulates the theme on its own, and how each builds upon the others to create a larger theme.

Discover and Connect



DISCOVER What makes God's people holy? What else do you understand about the holiness of God from this passage?

CONNECT What do you see in this passage that, at this early point, you think you will see come up again as you trace holiness through Scripture?



DISCOVER What level of holiness is required of God's people?

CONNECT Why is this passage so important to the grand story of redemption in Scripture?

	1 Samuel 2:2			
DISCOVER	God's holiness is hard to define because it is so tightly woven into who he is. How does the comparison language in this verse help you understand his holiness?			
CONNECT	How does the exclusivity of God's perfect holiness inspire you to be more like him?			
	Isaiah 6:1-7			
DISCOVER	How does God's holiness inform the way Isaiah approaches God?			
CONNECT	How does Isaiah foreshadow the way humankind will one day be able to approach God again?			
John 6:66-69				
DISCOVER	What makes this passage so important to understanding who Jesus is?			
CONNECT	Why does it matter that Jesus is holy?			
Hebrews 10:10				
DISCOVER	How can we be made holy?			

CONNECT How does this verse develop the idea of receiving holiness instead of earning it?



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CONNECT In the time of the church (after Jesus' resurrection and before his return—the time we're in now), how is God's holiness to be shown to the world?



DISCOVER How would you describe the scene in this passage? What does it say about God's holiness?

CONNECT How does this provide a sense of eternality to the holiness of God? What does that mean for how you think of, and approach, God?

Apply

Holiness is more than an idea. Holiness is our present standing in Christ, our calling in life, and our future standing with God in heaven. This last section is intended to help you take the theme of holiness off the page here and begin putting it into practice in your life. Try answering these questions to help guide you in applying what you've learned.

- In what area of your life do you sense the Lord calling you to holy living?
- In your own words, how will Christ's gift of holiness to you give you power to live out the holiness toward which God is calling you?

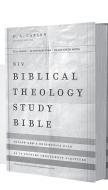
- How can the gospel keep you from shame and guilt as you seek to live a holy life?
- What is the first step toward holiness that you sense God is calling you to take right now?

Pray

Before leaving your time in God's Word, take a moment to talk with him. Part of the joy of reading God's Word is that you are encountering a living and active God who doesn't want you to just know about him, but to know him personally. Prayer is one way you can express a desire to know God and walk with him. Depending on where you are with God, here are a couple of ways you can pray in response to this session:

- **Pray for God to give you the joy** that comes from being obedient to his Word. He promises that holy living is also joyful living (John 15:10-11).
- **Pray specifically for courage** to trust God in areas in which you need help living out the holiness you have in Christ.
- **Thank God** that your holiness is not based on your actions, but rather on Christ's actions for you on the cross.
- Ask for help: "God, teach me to understand what reflecting your holiness means for me in a practical way in my life. I'm going to take the following step this week and I need your help: ______."

To continue tracing this theme, read the article entitled "Holiness" on page 2364 in the *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*.



Theme 6: Mission

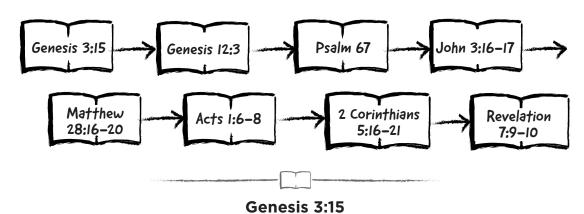
Visit **TraceTheThemes.com** for a video introduction

In this final session in the Trace the Themes study, you will be tracing the mission of God as it develops through the Bible. The mission of God is so central to the Bible that the Bible itself could easily be titled, "The Story of God's Mission to Redeem Sinners." God gives his mission to a people, a Savior, a church; and in the end, he wins an ultimate victory. Through all of Scripture and up through today, God seeks and saves sinners.

The famous preacher Charles Spurgeon described God as the "hound of heaven" because God relentlessly pursued him until Spurgeon finally surrendered to him. As you explore the mission of God, remember that you were once a part of the mission field. As the old hymn "Amazing Grace" says, "I once was lost, but now am found." Those of us who have been "found" by God now have the privilege and joy of being a part of God's loving, relentless pursuit of saving others.

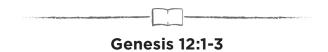
In this session you will be studying eight passages that will help you trace the theme of mission as it develops in Scripture. Take time to consider how each passage articulates the theme on its own, and how each builds upon the others to create a larger theme.

Discover and Connect



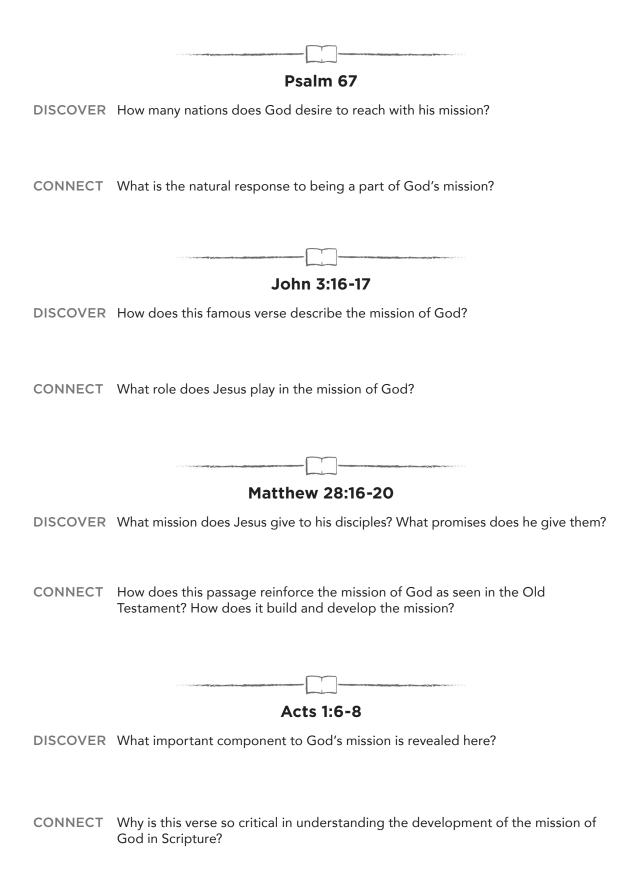
DISCOVER Why is this verse important to the mission of God?

CONNECT How does this exchange between God and the serpent set the mission in motion?



DISCOVER How is God's promise to Abraham a development in the mission of God?

CONNECT How is the promise made to Abraham a promise for you today?





DISCOVER How does this verse tie the theme of redemption to the theme of mission? What else do you see in this verse about the mission of God?

CONNECT How does this verse develop and clarify the mission of God?

Revelation 7:9-10

DISCOVER What does this passage say about the mission of God?

CONNECT How does this passage give hope to the mission?

Apply

God has called every Christian into his mission in one way or another. To learn about and accept his mission without stepping out and enacting one's part in that mission would be hypocritical. The following questions are designed to help you put what you've learned into action. Take time to reflect on each, then consider sharing your answers with someone so they can help encourage you as you move toward what you believe God is calling you to do.

• God makes his mission personal to each of us. Think of someone you know who is far from God. How can you approach this person with the truth and comfort of the good news of the gospel?

- God also calls us to global mission. What nation or people group is your church (or another Christian organization you're involved with) seeking to reach with the gospel? How could you take a step in this effort?
- What one step do you believe God is calling you to take in response to this study?

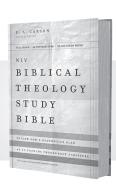
Pray

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- **Pray for those you know**, by name, who have not yet received Christ's gift of salvation.
- **Pray for a people group** your church or organization is seeking to reach with the gospel message. Pray that God would use you and others in your group to advance the mission there.
- **Read Joshua 1:9**. Pray for God to give you courage and strength as you step out into his mission.
- **Ask for help:** "God, I want to pursue the mission you have for me. Help me to discern what that is through the insight and wisdom of your Holy Spirit. I'm going to take the following step this week and I need your help: ______."

Ready to Trace More Themes?

Twenty-five themes of the Bible are traced in the *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*. Visit **www.NIVBiblicalTheologyStudyBible.com** to learn more.





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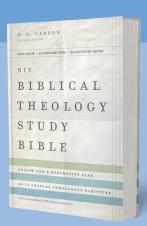
SPENCE SHELTON is the Lead Pastor of Mercy Church in Charlotte, NC. Spence believes God has called Mercy Church to be a part of seeing a gospel awakening in Charlotte that gets carried to the ends of the earth. Spence has authored numerous small group studies including co-authoring *The Meaning of Marriage* small group study with Tim & Kathy Keller.

Prior to planting Mercy Church in 2015, Spence served as a pastor at the Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, NC.

The NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible was built to help you trace 25 themes of Scripture as they unfold from Genesis to Revelation.

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- Comprehensive book introductions
- Over 60 trusted contributors led by D. A. Carson
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