

Thornwell's Foster Care Bible Study

For Individuals, Families, and Small Groups

WEEK ONE: Faith and Fear

Living Out God's Call on Our Lives

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What Is God's Dream for Children and Families



WEEK ONE:

Faith and Fear

Living Out God's Call on Our Lives (Motivations to Foster)

Living out God's call on our lives isn't as easy as studying a rule book and then playing by the rules. In fact, the bible is less a rule book and more a love letter. God's purpose unfolds in our daily life – C.S. Lewis writes that discovering God's purpose for us requires “wholehearted surrender and active faith.” But we know what God asks of all of us.

“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important. “Love your neighbor as yourself. The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments – Matthew 22:37-40

How can we love God and love our neighbors? God commands us to protect and care for orphans and widows (**Psalm 82:3**). Communities are only as strong as the weakest and most vulnerable members. We are called to care for all people – especially the marginalized, the vulnerable, the least of these. Who are these people in your neighborhood? Who struggles to access resources due to real or perceived barriers? Who is often unheard or unbelieved? Who is unseen or unnoticed? Who is left out?

Service to the vulnerable always invites us into broken and burdened stories. Foster care- really, any time we advocate for children - is surely an example of this.

It takes faith to step into another person's trauma and pain. It is scary to walk into the mess and carry someone else's burden. Certainly, it is tempting to stay in our safe, warm, comfortable bubble rather than brave the unknown. But it is often in trials and trouble that we find our faith strengthened. It is in relationship with other people that we feel the most connected with God and with people.

This Week's Reflection

Journal, pray, or reflect on your personal thoughts and experiences:

- Who is easiest for me to love? What is the easiest way for me to serve those I love? *List some examples (cooking dinner for my family, encouraging my co-workers, buying thoughtful gifts)*
- Who is hardest for me to love and to serve? Why? (Perhaps if you are a foster parent there are members of your child's team like parents, case workers, judges, therapists, teachers, etc. that you feel have let you and/or the child down).
- What is my greatest fear when opening myself up to someone new? How has God proven faithful despite my fear?

Discuss, pray, and learn as a family:

- What are the things that scare us the most?
- Are there things that used to be scary that aren't any more? What changed?
- What are God's promises to us that we can remember when we do feel afraid?
- How has God made us special? What are our special gifts that we use to help others?
- Who is someone that our family can help? How will we help them?

Share, engage, and consider as a small group:

- Do you view the bible as more of a rule book or a love letter? Does your faith reflect that?
- What do you believe is your purpose or God's calling on your life?
- Has God ever called you to do something that you were scared to do? How was God faithful to you through that circumstance?
- What do you believe are the most important missions for modern day Christians – at home and abroad? How can you be involved? (Set realistic expectations and boundaries for what you can and can't do in this season of life. Dream big for future seasons that may allow more flexibility.)
- Foster care is an all-encompassing mission to serve children and families – vulnerable children and families. It makes foster families vulnerable too – to criticism and critique, to allegations, to secondhand trauma, burnout. How do families in crisis or trauma experience shelter from the storms of life in your small group/church? How do foster families find support and community in your small group/church? What can or should change to better serve these children and families?

Want More?

- [Listen](#) to Fear is a Liar by Zach Williams
- [Watch](#) Jason Johnson talk about Fearing Foster Care on Faith Backstage
- [Read](#) this short blog Fear and Foster Care from Tennessee Kids Belong by Kristin Miller

WEEK TWO:

Beauty and Brokenness

Serving the Least of These (Why it Matters)

Theologian Frederick Buechner tells us that as Christians our life's purpose lies where "our greatest passion meets the world's greatest need." We have the capacity, each of us, to live out our passion and purpose in a way that serves others – ultimately for God's glory. Love for God + Our Unique Gifting leads us to loving and serving "the least of these" (Matthew 25) in meaningful ways. It doesn't mean that it will be easy.

Saying "yes" to serving others – especially service that requires you to go "all in" like foster care does – is often exhausting and isolating. You may be in the trenches asking yourself, "why are we doing this?" or even "is it all worth it?" You are faced daily with the tragic reality that we live in a broken and burdened world. Those burdens may feel like they fall on your shoulders alone.

But remember – in service to God and to others we do not only experience stories of brokenness. We get to see glimpses of the incredible power of God's love in action. A child learning love and trust. A family restored. A family made. We see miracles in our own lives as well, our own hearts being transformed.

God is close to you as you advocate for children. Lives dedicated to the service of "the least of these" does not make an easy life. There will be times of good fruit and times of barrenness. It is said that "if a man's castle is his home, a foster home is a hospital."

God brings beauty out of brokenness, in fact beauty from ashes (Isaiah 61:3). And He asks you to partner with him in that incredible miracle. That's why this matters. Families are worth it! That's why you do this hard and holy work. But thankfully He never asks you to do it alone.

Beauty and brokenness in your own life, in foster care, in the world may never feel like it balances itself out. It doesn't feel fair. It feels unjust. And it is. In service to God's beloved children, as advocates for families, as ambassadors of God's love, we are fighting against injustice. We will experience the weariness of the world, and we will experience the beauty of God's redemption. We must strive to see the hope for healing in our own hearts first, in our homes, and in the world. Hopefully we have others that will remind us of the hope that is in Jesus when we lose sight of His promises.

This Week's Reflection

Journal, pray, or reflect on your personal thoughts and experiences:

- What parts of your daily life feel exhausting? Isolating?
- Where do you see God working in your own heart right now?
- Do you see more beauty today? Or more brokenness?

Discuss, pray, and learn as a family:

- What do we love to do together as a family?
- How do we serve God together as a family? How do we serve others as a family?
- What do you think a miracle is? Have you ever seen God do a miracle for our family?
- What are the things that you have to do that are really hard for you? (Kids may say math, sharing, or chores. Grown-ups can share things that are hard for them too like “keeping my voice calm when I’m upset” to show that it is okay to be honest and vulnerable with people you love.)
- What does it mean to have hope? What are some things that you hope God does in the world?

Share, engage, and consider as a small group:

- When have you most felt that you were living out God’s true calling for your life?
- What does justice mean to you? What is injustice?
- Is there a situation in your own life where you have seen God make beauty from ashes?
- Why do you think that service, missions, and ministry – even parenting - can feel so exhausting and isolating? How can we support each other in persisting with hope?
- How is God speaking to you today about the brokenness in your own life and in the world? Is he calling you to something?

Want More?

- [Listen](#) to “Break Every Chain” by Tasha Cobbs Leonard performed by Justin Aaron
- [Watch](#) Jamie Finn talk about Embracing the Brokenness of Foster Care on Focus on the Family
- [Read](#) The Beauty and Brokenness of Foster Care blog post by Jason Johnson

WEEK THREE:

Sinners and Saints

Finding Our Identity in God Alone (Grace for the Whole Team)

Our worth comes from being created by God – just like every person on the planet. Loved. Chosen. Forgiven. Redeemed. We must hold fast to our core identity as beloved children of God. We live in a world that calls for our attention. We are bombarded with messages about who we should be, what we should do, and what we should have. These aren't always bad or sinful messages, but they can be distracting.

We love our families deeply and fiercely. We want to be the best child, partner, parent, and friend we can be. And we can internalize messages about how this should look – often from others' highlight reels on social media. We get overwhelmed with our own expectations of being able to excel in all these relationships plus balance the demands of real life. Sometimes the way we see ourselves thriving (or not thriving) and how we think others see us becomes our primary obsession – are we the “sinner” or the “saint” in their eyes? Sometimes the way we see others managing life and relationships well (or not) becomes our primary measuring stick for their worth – not their createdness by God.

In foster care, we live in a reality where people make mistakes - sometimes with traumatic consequences. Parents have not protected their children the way they needed to. Overburdened case managers have not had the attention to serve a child's needs in the way we want them to. Judges have made decisions that ultimately end in pain. Foster parents make mistakes too – big and small - every day just like any other parent. We are quick to judge others' choices. And we feel judged ourselves - making us feel defeated, vulnerable.

We label ourselves based on how we think we are measuring up each day. But God rewards our faithfulness, not our success. He says, **“well done, my good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23)** not “my good and successful servant.” As Jamie Finn says in Foster the Family, “He does not ask us to produce anything, change anything, or heal anything, and it's not our job to save...We are not saviors” (pg. 119).

We will always strive to be our best selves and to love people well – this is honoring to God. But when we focus on our worth as beloved children of God, we can cling to His promises that He is the author and perfecter (Hebrews 12:2) of our story, not us. And when others make mistakes, we can offer grace upon grace (John 1:16) because we see them as the beloved, worthy, created-in-God’s-image child that they are.

This Week's Reflection

Journal, pray, or reflect on your personal thoughts and experiences:

- If you are being honest with yourself, what are the identities that are most important to you?
- What identities (images of yourself) are you holding on to that may be harmful or unhelpful?
- What images of others (children, parents, case managers, etc.) are you holding on to that are preventing you from seeing them as beloved children of God?

Discuss, pray, and learn as a family:

- What is your favorite thing about yourself?
- How does it feel when someone says something about you that is untrue?
- What do you think God says about you?
- Who is easy for you to love?
- Is there someone that is sometimes hard to love? What is something you can do to show them love?

Share, engage, and consider as a small group:

- What are the messages that you grew up believing about yourself? How have you embraced or deconstructed these messages over time?
- Do you find yourself easily judging others? What are the things that you are quickest to judge?
- Has there ever been a circumstance where you received grace and mercy when you didn't deserve it? How did that make you feel?
- Do you feel tempted to play the role of savior in your children's lives - trying to fix things that are beyond your control and ultimately are only in God's hands? What is at the root of this temptation? And how can you surrender control to God?
- What role does social media play in all this? Has it helped or hurt us in authentically connecting with other people – seeing them as God's beloved?

Want More?

- [Listen](#) to “You Say” by Lauren Daigle
- [Watch](#) Paul David Tripp on Feeling Judged As a Foster Parent on The Connecting Podcast
- [Read](#) the classic book Life of the Beloved by Henri Nouwen or this short blog post Your Identity is in Christ and Not in Your Mistakes, Daily She Pursues

WEEK FOUR:

Grief and Gift

Persisting with Hope Despite Pain (Reminders When Foster Care is Hard)

“One of the biggest things I have been transformed by is realizing I don’t get hope unless I’ve fully grieved. Hope is admitting that things are not all as they should be, as you want them to be, or as you long for them to be. That requires grieving well and giving yourself permission to grieve well, to fully feel it.” – Christian Author, Sarah Bessey

God does not promise us a life without pain – often when we follow Him, He invites us deeper into the brokenness of the world.

“The Lord is my shepherd. I have all I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to His name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.” Psalm 23:1-4

Our lives will not always be green meadows and peaceful streams. We will walk through dark valleys. As we keep moving through the changing landscapes of our lives – especially when we live lives in service to others - we are led to a place where God will be closer to us than ever before. The green meadows, peaceful waters, and dark valleys co-exist. In days (or moments) where we are experiencing the peace and rest of God’s love, we still live in the reality of sin and pain. And on the days where we feel acutely the grief and burden of life, God still invites us to rest in His goodness.

Foster care means choosing hard and uncomfortable things for our family. There will be dark days full of grief. We will grieve and mourn for ourselves, the children, their parents, and the system. We will experience defeat and despair. We choose to experience heartbreak so that a child can know the love, safety, and comfort of a family – we do it as a sacrificial gift. And it is so often a gift to us in return – knowing the love of a child we did not birth.

Jesus invites us to walk with Him into the darkness as bringers of light. But a constant battle against the darkness wears us down and we can walk no longer. Jesus also invites us to rest and let Him renew us. God is present with us in the goodness and the grief. He is what sustains us in the valley. We will grow weary and that is our humanity. A shepherd who is not well fed will end up eating their sheep. Take moments to pause, feed yourself, and reflect. Embrace opportunities to refuel and be renewed. There may be seasons where your mission field looks different than you expect it to; that's okay. Walk closely with the Lord and He will direct your path.

This Week's Reflection

Journal, pray, or reflect on your personal thoughts and experiences:

- Are you weary? What might God be calling you to today?
- What is the greatest grief that you have experienced in service to God? How was He faithful to you through that grief?
- What is the greatest gift that you have received in service to God? How has that surprised you?

Discuss, pray, and learn as a family:

- What are the things that make you sad?
- What are the things that make you happy?
- How can we ask God to help us when we are sad? How can we thank God when we are happy?
- What does our family look like, sound like, feel like when we are at our best?
- What are things that you'd like to do as a family to feel closer to each other and closer to God?

Share, engage, and consider as a small group:

- When is a time that you were truly grieving? How did you experience God in that time?
- What does it look like for you to hope in the Lord despite the pain of the world?
- Where can you make more space in your life to experience rest and renewal? What is keeping you from making these changes?
- How do you make healthy decisions for yourself and your family? Have you ever had to make hard decisions to close some doors for the benefit of your family's wellbeing?
- Do you feel God calling (or maybe whispering) you towards a particular mission field as a family? Is this scary for you?

Want More?

- [Listen](#) to Zach Williams and Dolly Parton's There Was Jesus
- [Watch](#) 4KIDSUS Coping with The Grief of Foster Care Transitions and this reel on [Reunification Feelings as a Foster Parent](#) from @foster.parenting
- **Read** Chapter 13 "Self-Care Isn't Selfish" in Foster the Family book by Jamie Finn

WEEK FIVE:

Hope and Healing

What is God's Dream for Children and Families (Rethinking Foster Care)

God cares deeply about children. That's why He places them in families. To be cared for. In Jesus' life we see His abundant love and welcome to children.

“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” - Mark 10:13

The Bible tells us about God's dream for family – a family that is unified with each other and connected to Him. The gospel is His love letter to us – proving what the Father is willing to sacrifice for a relationship with his children – everything (John 3:16). And He invites all of us to be a part of His dream - part of His big, diverse, beloved family.

Pope Francis describes family as “God's dream for His beloved creation” entrusted with carrying out the mission of God's redemptive plan. But we live in an imperfect world – a world where vulnerable children experience abuse, neglect, exploitation, and abandonment – sometimes within the family created to protect them. Families are broken apart – by choice or by circumstance.

It becomes the responsibility of Christians, co-laborers with Christ (1 Corinthians 3:9), to come alongside the vulnerable, the marginalized, the suffering to bring peace, to work towards restoration. God appoints us to care for children and for families. He also empowers us – even in our own weakness – to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly (Micah 6:8).

We know that systems will inevitably fail because they are imperfect, designed and run by imperfect people. But God will not fail – even in the enormity of the challenges children and families face today. He is the way maker, miracle worker. We, His people, will act with the hope of His word, for the hope of His dream. We all have a role to play in ushering in healing for the hurting.

This Week's Reflection

Journal, pray, or reflect on your personal thoughts and experiences:

- How have your view of God, yourself, and the world, changed through foster care service?
- In what areas of your own life do you see great hope?
- In what areas of your own life do you long to see healing?

Discuss, pray, and learn as a couple or family:

- Why did God create people to live in families?
- What is something that children do better than grown-ups?
- What is something that all grown-ups should do to keep children safe?
- Does it make you sad to know that not all children are able to live with their parents?
- How can our family be a part of making God's dream for children and families happen on earth?

Share, engage, and consider as a small group:

- What are your greatest hopes for yourself and your family as you serve God and serve others?
- What is God's dream for children and families?
- What is your role in serving children and families? Do you think you are fully living out this calling? (Everyone's calling is different. You may be called to serve in your home, your job, your church, or community. You may be called to raise biological, foster, and/or adoptive children, or no children at all.)
- What is the Church's responsibility in caring for vulnerable children and families? Is your church effectively living out this call to serve? If not, what would need to change?
- What do you wish was different about the way we see the needs of the most vulnerable being met in our community?

Want More?

- [Listen](#) to Darlene Zschech and William McDowell "Way Maker"
- [Watch](#) Katy Nichole "In Jesus Name (God Of Possible)"
- [Read](#) Talking to Kids About Suffering: Five Steps for Creating Understanding, Empathy, and Action by Amanda DeWitt, Unto: A Cru Ministry