

A SIX-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

I CAN ONLY
IMAGINE 2

The Story That Inspired
the Motion Picture

EVEN IF

Trusting God Through the Fire



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with ROBERT NOLAND

EVEN IF SIX WEEK BIBLE STUDY

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Introduction

This six-session Bible study is comprised of excerpts from and inspired by the book *Even If: Trusting God Through the Fire*. Each session begins and ends with a quote from the authors, Bart and Shannon Millard, and then moves into a scriptural study from the overarching themes in the book. Corresponding content from the book is threaded throughout the sessions.

This Bible study may be utilized in a small group, one-on-one discipleship setting, or self-study. In any group of two or more, the optimum method would be to go through the study in advance of the meeting, reading through the content and then answering the five application questions at the end of each session. Taking the time to thoughtfully and prayerfully write out your personal answers will allow for deeper and more meaningful discussion in your group. Used as a self-study or personal devotional, writing out your answers will help you process as you would in a journal, as well as apply the teaching. As always, the goal of any discipleship setting is to engage with the Bible and mature in your walk with Christ.

Facing the Fires of Life

“In the aftermath of a tragedy, coming to the place of believing and confessing to Jesus, ‘Lord, even if you don’t heal or rescue or deliver, You are still God,’ is incredibly challenging, no matter how strong your faith.” —Bart

After leaving the most difficult and upsetting appointment we had ever experienced with an endocrinologist in our history of navigating Sam’s type 1 diabetes, I (Bart) went to what was supposed to be just a typical songwriting session. Working on our *Lifer* album, I had planned to write with Tim Timmons, my close friend who has dealt with incurable cancer for many years. As I walked into his home studio, I immediately began venting to him about how the doctor had accused us of making up false numbers from Sam’s blood sugar checks at home. Years of frustration and heartache finally boiled over and spilled out in that moment with Tim. Most of my rant was not very spiritual, but at one point I brought up the Bible story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In Daniel 3, we’re told what happened after King Nebuchadnezzar erected a gold statue of himself. Here’s the set-up:

Then the herald loudly proclaimed, “Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever

does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.” (vv. 4-6)

The punishment for not submitting and worshipping was being cast into a fire. The command was, when the band plays, you drop; stay standing, you burn. No arrest. No attorney. No trial. No jury. End of story. After these impromptu and forced worship services started, word quickly got around that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego weren’t following the rules or the crowd. When the music played, they stood strong. As everyone else fell, it was obvious who refused. Here’s what happened next ...

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?” (vv. 13-15)

Notice that, even though the king was “furious with rage,” he offered the men a second chance. This was likely because, in chapter 2 after Daniel had been given a high position following his correct interpretation of the king’s dream, he asked that his three friends be appointed as administrators and Nebuchadnezzar had agreed. Giving them a death sentence would require him to replace their roles, and he knew how exceptional these men were.

I feel like that at that moment, a lot of folks would have told them, “Hey, just bow down so you can save your lives. The king can’t know your heart to see you aren’t *really* worshipping his gods or his statue. God will understand. Do you think He would want you to die? What’s the big deal about bowing?” But there’s a powerful lesson in the fact that all three literally stood their ground.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand.” (vv. 16-17)

Here’s the really intriguing part they added that I shared with Tim that day:

“But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (3:18)

“But even if He does not.”

Even if our God doesn’t deliver us from the fire, we won’t serve your god (little *g*) or worship your gold.

Even if God doesn’t save us, nothing changes about the One we believe in.

Likely, most would be onboard with the “we believe God can deliver” part, right? But “even if He doesn’t”? Not so much. After struggling for years, Shannon and I finally came to the place of knowing we had to be able to say “even if He doesn’t.” We had been praying for so long that God would heal Sam. Tim and his wife, Hillary, had been praying for years for his cancer to be healed. While God has been faithful to keep Sam and Tim alive, neither have been healed. So, both our families had to decide that even if God never heals, He is still our God. In essence, our expectation of His hand is not going to determine what we believe in our hearts. We choose to agree that He is good—no matter what.

Now, here’s the other amazing part of this story: Everyone, including us today, would look at a blazing furnace and say, “If you get thrown in there, it’s over. If God doesn’t intervene *before* the fire, you’re incinerated.” Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were committed to not bowing down to any god and were also surrendered to their fate in the fire as the consequence. But, as is so often the case, God had other plans.

As for me, on that really bad day after the appointment as I was venting to Tim, I had no idea that my broken heart, coupled with my spiritual desire, would become the catalyst for MercyMe’s second biggest song of all time, with “I Can Only Imagine” still being number one. The last thing on my mind that day was writing a song. In fact, I was so upset that I ended up leaving Tim’s house a short time later.

If you don’t know what happened to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, I invite you to look up Daniel 3 to find out. If you remember the story but are fuzzy on the details, take a fresh look. What God did was so powerful, taking a turn no one saw coming—not even Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and especially not the king and the folks who wanted to get rid of the three men of God.

The complete story of how “Even If” came to be written can be found in our book.

“Even If” represents God’s faithfulness to me, which has been both a gift and a blessing over the years, all while my humanity has pled with God to intervene.

There’s been such a wrestling with that reality, especially as I have read Jesus’ miracles where He healed the blind, the crippled, and the diseased.” —Shannon

Discussion/Application Questions

Why do you suppose most people decide if God is good based solely on what happens in their own lives at any given time? _____

How might deciding on God's goodness based merely on circumstances be problematic for someone's faith in Him? _____

What do you suppose God's response might be to someone who says, "Hey, just bow down so you can save your life. He'll understand. What's the big deal?" _____

How does Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's answer to the king encourage your own faith? _____

What is the "even if" struggle going on in your life right now? What fire are you facing or asking God to deliver you from? _____

A Part-time Job

“As I started to consider a second movie and book, I joked with several of my friends that the title should be ‘Part-Time Job, not job like work, but Job, the man in the Old Testament’. While I’m no Job, I can relate to his story today more than I ever thought I would.” —Bart

Job is one of the most incredible yet disturbing books in the Bible. Why? Because he got caught up in a challenge between God and Satan. While, in the end, God and Job have a conversation of resolve, we don’t know if Job ever actually knew *why* his life had taken such a horribly tragic turn. Just like our horrendous year of 2004 with family deaths and the diagnosis of Sam’s type 1 diabetes at almost three years old, we were living the *whats*, but not understanding the *whys*.

So often, when bad things happen to us, we immediately suspect God is punishing us for our sin. We decide that whatever difficulty He has allowed in our lives must be a consequence for a bad choice. But Job’s life shows us that, while this can be the case, it is not always so.

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East. (1:1-3)

The first thing we are told about Job is that he was “blameless and upright.” In the Bible, these words mentioned together typically meant the person was viewed as blameless before God and upright in the eyes of people. We see this type of phrase also used to describe Noah in the Old Testament and Simeon in the New Testament. God held nothing against Job, and the people in the community respected him. His offense was to revere and respect God, while his defense was to stay clear of evil. Job had not only vast blessings but also a strong reputation. But, suddenly, there was a plot twist that turned from the physical realm to the spiritual. One day, Satan showed up in a gathering of angels and a conversation began between him and God.

Then the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.” (v. 8)

Notice here that God’s words were the exact language the author used to describe Job in the beginning of the book. The author got his words from God Himself. Revelation 12:10 calls Satan the Accuser. Consider that title as you read his response.

“Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan replied. “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.” (vv. 9-11)

Here we see exactly what we talked about in the first session: Satan introduced the human dynamic that when good happens to us, we believe God is good, but when bad happens, we decide God is not good. He stated that would be exactly what Job would do when God turned off the blessings. But when that line in the sand was drawn, God set the ground rules.

The LORD said to Satan, “Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.” (v. 12)

Essentially, God told Satan he could touch everything around Job, but not Job. That’s when Satan went to work doing exactly what Jesus told us in John 10:10: *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.”*

Here’s what happened next: Between enemy attacks and natural elements occurring, like fire and wind, all Job’s adult children and their families, as well as his servants and livestock, were

wiped out. A succession of messengers showed up one after another to deliver this devastating news to Job. In a modern-day setting, this would be like getting calls from several people within a few hours to tell you everyone in your family, all your property and your businesses, were gone. So, what did Job do? Who did he prove to be right? Satan or God?

Then he fell to the ground in worship and said:

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
and naked I will depart.

The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
may the name of the LORD be praised.”

In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing. (vv. 20-22)

In chapter 2, which takes place on a different day, we are told the exact same occurrence and conversation about Job happened again. But this time God added, “And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason” (v. 3). Essentially, Satan responded by saying that a man will do anything to save his own life, so if God were to strike Job, he would surely curse Him. God responded by allowing Satan to do anything but take Job’s life. The result was Job’s being afflicted with painful sores from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head. With only his wife left, she gave up and encouraged him to do the same: “Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!” (v. 9)

Surely, this was Job’s breaking point, right? Incredibly, no.

He replied, “ ... Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”

In all this, Job did not sin in what he said. (v. 10)

In 2004, right after all the success of the song “I Can Only Imagine,” Shannon and I experienced five tragedies or crises within our family and extended families. (The entire story is in our book.) When we read about the messengers showing up to give Job more bad news, we know that feeling all too well from the phone calls or doctor visits informing us of another traumatic event. We know how it feels to have the thoughts and questions, *Really, God?! Something else?! Why?!* We also understand the next part of Job’s story. While we had incredibly supportive family and friends around us, we also knew what it meant to have people offer well-meaning but misguided help and advice, especially other Christians.

In the book of Job from chapter 3 to 37, we are given detailed conversations between Job and his friends. In the dialogue, there is much advice and counsel given, along with questions, accusations, and defenses. Clearly, Job’s friends were looking at his condition and working hard

to either blame him or fix him. This is where we find self-centered human nature hard at work. Our tendency is to see tragedy and problems and then decide we want to provide the answers and explanations. But, especially in light of when God is at work, we are going to badly miss the mark in providing real hope and healing.

Many times over the years, we had people offer their take on how we could find answers and receive healing for Sam's diabetes. The problem that became so frustrating most of the time was that these people had no real relationship or context with our family and our circumstances. Many times we could sense that the goal was to receive some kind of glory or praise for being the one to pray and see healing. We soon learned to tell the difference between those who truly loved us and those who just wanted to fix us, like Job's friends. That's also where we can relate to being "part-time Jobs" and know what it feels like for "friends" to show up.

In chapters 38 through 41, God begins to speak and does the majority of the talking, not to the friends but to Job. God's monologue is fascinating and provides a unique perspective to what He thinks and feels. The most powerful exchange is found in chapter 42, not between God and Satan, or Job and his friends, but Job's response to God:

"I know that you can do all things;
no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?'
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know.

You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.'
My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you." (vv. 1-5)

In the end, we see Solomon's words from Ecclesiastes 7:8 lived out, "The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride." God let the friends know that He was not pleased with how they treated His servant, how they had lied about God's character and not spoken the truth to Job. Then God healed Job and restored him with even more blessings than before.

While the Millard family did not suffer like Job did, we do understand what ongoing suffering means, as well as asking difficult questions and struggle in our faith. But we also better understand Job's response and, together, echo his words: "Our ears had heard of you but now our

eyes have seen you.” To reach deeper levels of maturity in our faith, oftentimes, tragedy and crises are the only way we will grow. We can’t fully appreciate the mountaintop moments with God without experiencing death to our own will and agenda in the valleys.

“God in His sovereignty will most certainly allow us to experience more than we can handle. He will bring us to the end of ourselves so we can see what He is capable of and what we aren’t.” —Shannon

Discussion/Application Questions

What are your feelings about the conversation between God and Satan regarding Job? _____

Why do you suppose God would want Job’s story included in His Word? What might He want us to understand? _____

How does Job’s response to suffering challenge you in your own life and faith?

What can we learn from Job’s friends about what to avoid when we try to help others?

In the first session, we asked about your “even if” struggle. What “part-time Job” connections can you make to your own situation? _____

Denial and Destiny, Betrayal and Belief

*“Our humanity wants to think we can control things.
At least, I know that’s what I like to try to do. All the
tragedies of 2004 ... created a crisis of belief for me. I was
battling the enemy’s lies and my own struggle of what I
was going to choose to live and believe.” —Shannon*

If Jesus is who He said He is—“the way and the truth and the Life”—and if it’s true that “No one comes to the Father except through me,” as He told us in John 14:6, then the biggest decision in our lives is whether to place our faith in Him. Yet, once we give our lives to Christ, a completely different set of choices begins to arise.

As we walked through so much tragedy and trauma, all sorts of spiritual questions, doubts, and struggles started to create roadblocks to our faith and maturity. All the pent-up emotions and feelings brought about depression and a constant sense of hopelessness. Once we come to know Christ, these kinds of challenges in life will definitely test our faith, just like we talked about in the last session.

But what makes the difference in someone who endures a trial and someone who doesn’t? We all know people who went through a difficult season in life and appeared to only grow stronger in their faith when they came out the other side. But we also likely know someone who decided God had failed them and walked away from Him.

At some point through all the pain and suffering we endured, I (Shannon) made the decision to get up off the floor and fight to get my life back on track. In the book, I told the full story of how crucial Christ-centered counseling was in our healing. Yet, the entire time, I never felt like I was stronger than someone who eventually gave in to their doubts.

In the Bible, two of the best cases for comparison between choosing whether to believe Jesus over their own struggles would be Peter and Judas. Both men:

- Answered Jesus' personal invitation to follow Him
- Became one of His twelve disciples
- Witnessed all His miracles firsthand
- Witnessed Him cast out demons
- Ended up with a personal basket of fish and bread after Jesus multiplied food for thousands
- Listened to Jesus refute and challenge the religious leaders who came against Him
- Heard all of Jesus' teaching for three years
- Sat around many campfires talking personally with Jesus
- Ended up betraying and abandoning Jesus at His worst possible time

The bottom line is both these men had more eye-to-eye, face-to-face experiences with Jesus than anyone in history. That's what makes the trajectory of their lives so fascinating and also confusing at times. While we look at Judas's betrayal of Jesus by leading the Roman soldiers to arrest Him in exchange for just thirty pieces of silver, we can't forget about Peter's choices on that same night. At the end of the Last Supper, after Peter had boldly proclaimed that even if all the others fell away, he never would, Jesus told him, "Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." Peter didn't back down and responded, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." (Matthew 26:34–35)

Later that night, going to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, as He often did, Jesus took Peter, James, and John farther than the others and told them to keep watch. But He was soon disappointed after returning to find the three asleep, targeting Peter with His question.

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." (vv. 40–41)

Jesus went back and forth two more times to pray and then check on Peter, James, and John. Each time, they were asleep. At the moment of His arrest, Peter, now wide awake, decided to defend Jesus, drew a sword, and took a swing at the high priest's servant's head, cutting off his right ear. Adding injury to insult, Jesus had to rebuke Peter again.

Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (John 18:11)

Following the arrest, Peter went to the courtyard of the house where Jesus was taken. The first denial came when—not a Roman soldier or a religious leader but—a servant girl spoke to him:

"You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said.

But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. (Matt. 26:69–70)

Denial #1—Peter simply pleaded ignorance to the girl.

Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth."

He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!" (vv. 71–72)

Denial #2—With a more public accusation, Peter got stronger and swore his disconnection to Jesus with an oath in front of a crowd.

After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away."

Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" (vv. 73–74)

Denial #3—A crowd of people suspicious of Peter began to ask questions, not believing him. Likely, out of fear of being arrested too, Peter added cursing to his denial of knowing Jesus.

Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly. (vv. 74–75)

In Matthew 26, we read about Judas's betrayal of Jesus. Matthew 27 begins:

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood."

"What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility."

So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. (1:1-5)

From these Bible passages, we see that both Peter and Judas abandoned, denied, and betrayed Jesus. But afterward, the story quickly splits into two very different directions. Judas decided to continue taking matters into his own hands, choosing to not accept what He had learned from Jesus and not seek forgiveness. Distraught, Judas committed suicide.

Peter chose to humble himself, rejoin the other disciples, and ban together with them in their sense of isolation and confusion after the crucifixion. Later, in Luke 24 and John 20, Peter is one of the disciples who went to the tomb. In fact, on hearing the news, he ran and literally walked in to see the folded grave clothes.

Following Jesus' resurrection, Peter returned to his fishing boat early one morning. When a man on the shore called out to ask about their catch and they told him they had caught nothing, the man yelled back, telling them to put the net on the other side of the boat. That moment was an repeat of how Peter first met Jesus. But this time, instead of pulling up the net, Peter dived into the water to swim to shore. There he experienced a private moment with Jesus, where the risen Lord fully restored and reconciled Peter to Himself and gave the disciple his calling. By Acts 2, Peter delivered the first sermon where thousands came to faith in Christ.

So, what made the difference in how Peter's life turned out versus Judas's? The answer lies in the choices made after sin was committed. The difference in those who press in versus those who walk away, who push past the doubts to hold onto belief, who hang onto hope in the middle of struggle, is simply obeying Jesus and surrendering to His will.

The moral of this story is, when we find ourselves hitting bottom, when we have exhausted all our own answers and strength, when we have no idea what to do or where to turn, we look to Jesus. We fix our eyes on Him, whether for the first time or the last time.

“Through it all, Shannon and I arrived at the same destination as Peter. ‘Lord, to whom would we go?... We believe, and we know you are the Holy One of God.’” (John 6:68 NLT) —Bart

Discussion/Application Questions

Have you ever witnessed someone go through a difficult trial and then walk away from their faith in Christ? Why do you think the person made that choice?

Have you witnessed someone go through a trial and end up stronger in their faith in Christ? Why do you think the person made that choice?

Why do you think we tend to think of Judas’s betrayal of Jesus as more serious than Peter’s?

What can you learn from both Peter’s and Judas’s stories?

In your “even if” struggle, what are some practical steps you could take now to have Peter’s experience with Jesus?

Peace Amid Trouble

“Because of [my depressed] state, my goal was to do any- and everything I could to try to escape the debilitating pain I was experiencing.... My job requires me to be away, which, in that season, allowed my overwhelming reality at home to be ‘out of sight, out of mind.’ Life on tour ... [made] it easy to pretend all the trauma back at the house didn’t exist.” —Bart

“I didn’t have anything left to give anyone because of my own toxic feelings, which just manifested differently than Bart’s. On the surface, I put on an act of being upbeat to keep life in the Millard household going, but inside, I was absolutely hollow. My smile wasn’t real, just a mask hiding the intense pain.” —Shannon

One of the odd lies in Christianity that has perpetuated over the years is that choosing to live for Jesus creates some sort of guarantee that life will be blessed all the time and trouble won’t come. In John 16:33, Jesus was clear about what we will experience in this life:

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

In Jesus, there is peace. In this world, there is trouble. So, to live in Christ inside this world, we can have access to His peace while dealing with trouble. We often misunderstand by thinking God's peace must mean there's no problems. But His peace is not about the absence of trouble; rather, His presence with us in it.

Up until the past several years, it seemed like if you admitted to dealing with depression, anxiety, or any sort of emotional struggles, then you weren't a "good Christian." Confessing mental and emotional challenges were generally discouraged in the church for years. The interesting thing about that dynamic is that God's Word does not reflect that attitude at all. In fact, time after time we see blunt honesty and transparency being encouraged. There is no better example than King David. Let's look at Psalm 13, which he wrote as a song to be sung by the congregation. As you read, try to imagine for a moment these words being put up on the screen at your church for everyone to sing this next Sunday:

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, LORD my God.
Give light to my eyes ...

But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the LORD's praise,
for he has been good to me. (vv. 1-3, 5-6)

The last two verses would not be that different from modern worship songs, but the first two verses? Not so much. In fact, how many people would complain to the pastor or even get up and walk out of the service? Even though the words are in the Bible, many wouldn't approve of singing or declaring such things today. But David offered us an amazing example of what it means to have an honest relationship with God, much like a best friend or spouse.

As we struggled with the deaths in our family and Sam's type 1 diabetes diagnosis, we were both working to reconcile our questions and doubts about our faith. Taking a cue from David's psalms, in that season, I wrote "Bring the Rain," essentially saying, "God, this is so hard, but if, for some reason, this is what I have to go through, if this makes me closer to You, then bring the

rain.” Before we move away from the Psalms, let’s look at one more. As you read, ask yourself if you have ever been this honest or bold with God.

Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.
Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am faint;
heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.
My soul is in deep anguish.
How long, LORD, how long?
Turn, LORD, and deliver me;
save me because of your unfailing love.
Among the dead no one proclaims your name.
Who praises you from the grave?
I am worn out from my groaning.
All night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears. (6:1–6)

As the lead singer, front man, and songwriter for a Christian band, I can’t help but notice what is printed before the actual psalm: “For the director of music. With stringed instruments.... A psalm of David.” Once again, these words were written to be sung, accompanied by a band. But the lyrics sound more like a blues tune than a worship song!

For another example of how much God wants us to be open and honest with Him, we can always look to Jesus. In Mark 14, we get a different angle on what happened in the garden of Gethsemane, the story we talked about in the previous session.

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch.”

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. “Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (vv. 32–36)

Taking all the Gospels into consideration, we know that three times Jesus asked God if there was another way other than the cross. He knew full well the suffering, torture, and separation

that awaited Him. Jesus also understood He was about to take the full weight of all of mankind's sin on His soul for the purpose of paying our debt.

For both Shannon and me, individually and together, to survive in our marriage and parenting, as well as in our faith, we had to get really honest with all our questions and doubts with ourselves and God. We had to get help from others and also a solid Christian counselor. Ignoring grief and depression in our hearts was like trying to deny a gunshot wound. It might work for while, but not for long.

For those who follow Christ, we have to learn from the ones who have gone before us, like David and Jesus. Even Paul, who told us in 2 Corinthians 12 that he asked three times for God to remove what he called his "thorn in my flesh" (v. 7), God told him no and explained, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9). From 2004 to 2011, we realized God might not have saved us *from* the fire but He was with us *in* the fire. He might not stop our anguish or save us from a fire or take away our thorn, but His grace will be enough. He will show us His goodness amidst the evil of the world.

"Taking a deep-dive personal inventory, I admitted to myself,... I want to be healthy mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Nothing's going to hold me back and keep me down any longer. Exhausted from trying to keep Band-Aids on shrapnel wounds, I knew it was time for me to find some real answers." —Shannon

Discussion/Application Questions

In light of the Scriptures you read today, why do you suppose the church went through such a long season of denying or discouraging people to be open about depression, anxiety, and other mental health struggles?

In John 16:33, what do you think the purpose would be for Jesus to promise His peace but not remove our troubles?

What are your thoughts about the honesty and raw emotion in Psalms 6 and 13?

Why do you think we wouldn't consider singing certain phrases from those psalms in our churches today?

Being Present and Perceptive

"[For Bart and me,] figuring out our identity in Christ gave us a newfound freedom that brought us back to a place of joy and peace.... Our priorities were made right and put in the right hands. I realized if I'm trying to please people, then I may not please Jesus, which is who I care most about. My obedience to Him can't be filtered through others." —Shannon

Whenever Jesus encountered anyone, He already knew everything about them, even when they had no idea who He was. That's an impossible concept for us to understand or comprehend. One of the most fascinating examples of this dynamic is found only in the Gospel of John. There is so much for us to learn from this story where Jesus offers a master class in how to approach, converse with, and minister to someone.

Jesus and His disciples had left Judea and were walking back to Galilee. He had decided their route would be through Samaria, a region Jews typically avoided. That decision probably made Peter, James, John, and the others a little nervous. At that point, they likely hadn't become accustomed to Jesus ignoring the cultural and social barriers. As they were approaching a town called Sychar and what was known as Jacob's well, located a short walk from the town, the disciples suggested they go into town to buy food. Jesus told them to go on, as He would stay by Himself and meet them later at the water well. They had no idea that a larger plan was about to unfold that would impact the entire town.

Arriving alone at the well around midday, Jesus sat down to rest. That's when His divine appointment showed up. A woman came alone with a jar to get her daily ration of water. She was accustomed to being ignored, but Jesus surprised her with a very simple request, "Will you give me a drink?" Her response is quick and also bold.

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) (John 4:9)

Every day, this woman had to face cultural, social, and ethnic prejudices and boundaries. That's why she was so curious in her answer to Jesus. So, making the most of the opportunity, He wasted no time and cut to the chase about His real purpose for talking to her.

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." (v. 10)

Next, she tied His original request for a drink to His seemingly strange response. Since we now know that a Jewish man would never speak to a Samaritan woman, that makes her come-backs to Jesus even more fascinating.

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." (vv. 11–15)

Jesus definitely had the woman's full attention. Now she asked Him to give what He was offering to her. From there, He got personal, proving He was never after water but the woman's heart. A very honest conversation continued about the woman's past and current relationships with men. Then an interesting twist came as she talked about where to worship. As their exchange turned completely to the spiritual, Jesus decided to reveal His true identity to the woman.

The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” (vv. 25–26)

Suddenly realizing Jesus was the Messiah, she dropped her jar and ran back into town to tell everyone—a very visible and vocal act that she would have never done before because of her public reputation that Jesus had revealed He knew. The woman’s testimony, along with the obvious evidence that she had a very unusual experience that had radically changed her, caused many in the town to also believe in Jesus. Because of the response, He and the disciples stayed there two more days where more came to know Him.

This simple story that only takes thirty-four verses to tell offers us amazing insight as to how we can engage and interact with anyone for the sake of the gospel, even those who may be very different from us. Jesus kept His focus on the woman and her needs. He moved the conversation from the physical to the spiritual, then from the personal to the providential. When we have the opportunity and privilege to speak with anyone who is hurting for any reason, we can follow Jesus’ example clearly displayed here. The moment is not about us and what we might gain but about the person and what God wants to give.

For Shannon and me, our years of battling the many fires of life brought about an empathy that affects how we respond to anyone’s crisis, tragedy, or heartbreak today. And then there are the times when we only needed someone to offer the ministry of presence—to simply be there in the middle of our pain— not to give advice or Scriptures or promises but to sit alone in the silence as a support.

In John 11, when Jesus first encountered Martha and Mary in their deep grief, even when He knew He was about to raise their brother from the dead, verse 33 states, “He was deeply moved and troubled.” Then verse 35 only has two words: “Jesus wept.” Every single Bible translation and paraphrase has either “wept” or “cried.” There is no mistaking that Jesus joined the sisters in their sorrow and pain. Yet another example for us to follow as we help others in His name.

“My newfound understanding of God’s grace and the freedom that had come from accepting that my identity is found only in Jesus gave me the desire to be real and transparent with nothing fake or contrived.” —Bart

Discussion/Application Questions

Seeing how Jesus started His conversation with a simple question, what might that teach us about meeting people?

What can we learn from the way Jesus turned the conversation to the spiritual without losing the woman's attention?

Since Jesus would have known that the woman would not only believe in Him but go tell her entire town He was the Messiah, what does that say about the kind of person He entrusts with His message?

What might we learn from Jesus' compassion toward Martha and Mary after Lazarus's death?

Considering your own "even if" struggle, how can understanding the ministry of presence free you to help and support others?

We Will Serve the Lord

“The toughest part of [performing] ‘Even If’ [every night] was singing the lyrics in the bridge, the words that declare God’s faithfulness and goodness when He has chosen not to heal, even though I believe He can. I understand why that’s the part of the Christian life and faith so many people struggle to reconcile.... The looming question from a lost world becomes, ‘So let me get this straight—you believe in a God who can save and heal, but He hasn’t and doesn’t appear like He will, and yet you still choose to follow and trust Him?’” —Bart

In the Old Testament, chapter 24 in the book of Joshua gives the account of Israel’s leader assembling all the tribes at Shechem, along with the elders, leaders, judges, and officials. He called everyone together to stand before God. Over the past several decades, there are parts of one verse that has been emblazoned and embroidered on countless Christian products and pictures. Walk through a Hobby Lobby any time of the year and you’ll likely see this verse several times on a number of items. It’s become one of the most quoted and recognized declarations from the Bible. As with so many of these types of verses, such as John 3:16, Proverbs 3:5, and Philippians 4:7 to name a few, they can become so familiar to us that we lose their intended power and meaning. We may know the verses and believe them, but do we truly apply their truth?

Like his predecessor Moses, Joshua began to speak for God, using first-person language. In chapter 24, from verses 2 through 13, he gave the people God's message. In verse 14, he began speaking for himself again, leading and challenging the Israelites:

“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD . But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you ... ”

Next came the well known quote I talked about above:

“ ... then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” (v. 15)

Most often, the middle sequence is removed to create a current version that can be quoted anywhere:

Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

After much counseling and healing, our family had to make some tough decisions. Talking in-depth with our counselor about healthy next steps, we decided to leave Greenville, Texas, where we both grew up and also where our extended families live, to make a fresh start outside of Nashville, Tennessee. (The complete story is in our book.) By the fall of 2013, all in MercyMe but Robby, our drummer, ended up relocating to Music City, so the majority of the band moved there within a two-year period.

The reset and refresh for us and our five kids was very hard for awhile but ended up being the best decision we ever made, mainly because we went from always living among a large tribe of family and friends to only having each other. We had to pull together as a family, creating a sink-or-swim experience for ourselves. By the grace of God, we all ended up surviving *and* swimming.

One of the ways any of us can relate to the stories about the nation of Israel is by applying situations to our own families. We can glean truths and principles out of what God did for them. For example, we may remember a time when His movement was so strong in our lives that we understand the pillar of cloud by day and the fire by night where God displayed His presence with them. We may take the miraculous story of God parting the Red Sea to rescue Israel from

Pharaoh's army and connect to a time when He did something just as amazing for us, such as providing the way out of a bad situation or protecting us from some threat. We can relate the story of God providing daily manna in the wilderness to a lean season when He gave us what we needed just at the right time.

Later in chapter 24, the people agreed they would no longer rebel but turn from their sin and not worship false gods. They also declared they would join Joshua's family to serve and obey only God. Verses 25–26 state:

On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws. And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the LORD.

There are times in our lives and in the life of our families when we must renew our commitment to our part of the relationship (covenant) and reaffirm our commitment to the Lord to obey His ways and will (decrees and law). We have to submit to repentance, receive His grace and mercy, and allow His healing. Around the time "Even If" was written, Shannon and I finally arrived at the place of agreeing with Joshua's confession. We had to declare in a fresh and new way: "But as for the Millard house, we will serve the LORD." That confession was deeply personal, as we were able to say, "We're still here. We're still married. Our kids are here and healthy. We are alive and together." As a family, we were able to declare together, "God is indeed good."

Psalm 139 has always been a very important and personal Bible chapter for Bart and me. David's beautiful words speak of a deep intimacy with God. In those difficult years, struggling through such devastating grief, I was especially drawn to Psalm 139:16: "Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." Today, healthier and happier than I have ever been, I can know that whatever the number of my days I have left, I will focus on what the Lord desires for me to accomplish.

"The Bible is all or nothing. It's not a menu we choose from, but the meal we are served. In fact, a lot of people today tend to separate out only what they want to believe to attempt to keep their lives nice and comfortable. But that's not what following Christ is about. In Luke 9:23, when Jesus told the crowd, 'If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me' (NLT),

that's not a safe, soft, feel-good invitation. There's going to be some suffering and dying to our own will." —Shannon

Discussion/Application Questions

Why do you suppose God chose to speak through men like Moses and Joshua, as well as the Old Testament prophets, to communicate to His people?

Does Joshua 24:15 have any personal or specific meaning to you or your family? Explain.

Do you have your own cloud/fire, Red Sea, or manna moment to share? Explain.

Have you ever been led to a reset/refresh moment with God? Explain.

In your own "even if" struggle, how might a renewed understanding or commitment to Joshua 24:15 help you?



After the breakout success of “I Can Only Imagine,” MercyMe’s Bart Millard’s began his successful career. Yet away from the spotlight, Bart’s unresolved past began to threaten his family. Based on the heartfelt true story behind the hit single “Even If,” this book is an inspiring story of faith, family, and finding God in the fire.

Feature film *I Can Only Imagine 2* releases February 20, 2026.

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