

# CULTIVATE

Book I

## INTRODUCTION

God is a gardener. We don't often refer to him as such, but if you spend some time with the words of Jesus, you'll notice a pattern. Whether it's about God being a farmer sowing seeds (Luke 8), God's kingdom being like a small mustard seed (Matthews 13), or Jesus being the vine and us the branches (John 15); Jesus liked to use the earth as a way to imagine our relationship with God.

There's a problem though. It's easy to think that all God does is plant a seed once. We get that seed of initial faith and then it's our job to do all the growing. As if God says to us, "Now that I've saved you by my grace, you better work real hard to make sure you don't screw this up."

I have good news for you! **God is a gardener.** Have you ever gardened? Do you know a gardener? I have never met a gardener who isn't hands on, working constantly to see life and beauty and color grow out of the ground. In Luke 8, the parable of the sower, Jesus refers to us as soil. We are the ground that God plants life in. He plants new life as we step into saving grace, and he cultivates real, beautiful, eternal life in us as we are transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit.

It may seem obvious now, but that's why we're calling this semester's curriculum **Cultivate**. A key part of what it means

to be a Christian is not just to make a decision to believe in Jesus (which is important!) but to also be a disciple. Discipleship is about walking with Jesus, learning from him, becoming like him, ordering our life based on what he's done for us and who we are becoming.

The semester is divided into three “books”:

1. Who God is (Trinity)
2. How we relate to God (Prayer)
3. How we relate to others (Life)

Or if you want to look at this semester with a little Cultivate flair:

1. Roots (Trinity)
2. Stem (Prayer)
3. Fruit (Life)

This semester will be about giving God space to cultivate us. He is the one who plants and waters and cares for us all the way to bearing good fruit **in us and through us**.

*“And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.” Philippians 1:6*

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is divided into weekly sections, with three separate parts within each week. Like this!

1. Week 1
  - a. Weekly Reflection
  - b. Preparation Before Group
  - c. Group Time
2. Week 2
  - a. Weekly Reflection
  - b. Preparation Before Group
  - c. Group Time
3. Week 3
  - a. Weekly Reflection
  - b. Preparation Before Group
  - c. Group Time

Before group time, spend 15-20 minutes in the Weekly Reflection section and pray through what God is doing in your life. We want to grow in our ability to see God in our lives, rather than live life with a sense that he is not active or present. You can do this at any time! Don't feel the need to cram this in before you go to group.

The next part of your week will be preparing for discussion at group. Each week you'll open up a passage from the bible

and dig into it as a group. But before heading to group, work through the Preparation for Group section! It's important for every person in the group to spend time alone with the bible. Not just for the sake of a good discussion, but also because we know that God relates to us through the scriptures. Great groups are made of devoted group members who are committed to spending time in the passage before group time each week. Again, don't feel the need to cram before group time (unless if you have to!) Carve out some time in your schedule to open up this book and work through each week's passage.

Finally, go to group and have a great time learning from Jesus!

# Week 1 | WEEKLY REFLECTION

Read the questions below and pay attention to which one jumps out to you. Pick the question that speaks to you the most and journal about it on the lines below.

1. *What is giving me the most joy these days, and what is bringing me the most grief or challenge?*
2. *What lessons may God be trying to teach me through what is going on in my life right now?*
3. *What is the current state of my soul?*
4. *How have I cooperated with God this week?*
5. *What am I not bringing before God? (anger, fear, etc)*
6. *Is there anything I need to confess? Is there anything I'm tempted to keep secret?*
7. *How did I experience God's call and where am I at with that now?*

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- 3 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms;  
but they did not know that I healed them.
- 4 I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with bands of love.  
I was to them like those  
who lift infants to their cheeks.  
I bent down to them and fed them.
- 5 They shall return to the land of Egypt,  
and Assyria shall be their king,  
because they have refused to return to me.
- 6 The sword rages in their cities,  
it consumes their oracle-priests,  
and devours because of their schemes.
- 7 My people are bent on turning away from me.  
To the Most High they call,  
but he does not raise them up at all.
- 8 How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?  
My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.
- 9 I will not execute my fierce anger;  
I will not again destroy Ephraim;  
for I am God and no mortal,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath.

## Some Thoughts

When I'm asked, "why is the God of the Old Testament so much different than the passage of the New Testament?" I often respond by pointing to this passage. This passage sums up well the story of the Old Testament: God is faithful, forgiving, and compassionate to his often unfaithful people. Despite God's goodness and grace towards them, Israel (also called Ephraim in this passage) continues turning their backs on their God. While it's true God is portrayed, too, as judge or even punisher (in both Testaments), God's judgements and punishments are always directed towards good and loving ends.

Although this passage is God speaking to his people, Israel, it is easy to see ourselves in Israel's shoes. Like Israel, we are quick to turn to other gods. Most likely, no one in your group is sacrificing to Baals (if so, that's a different conversation...), but we still are quick to worship people, or things, that aren't God. We are too often "bent on turning away from" God, but yet—God is merciful and compassionate. Like a good Father, his heart is "warm and tender" towards us.

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## Luke 15:11-32

<sup>11</sup> Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons.

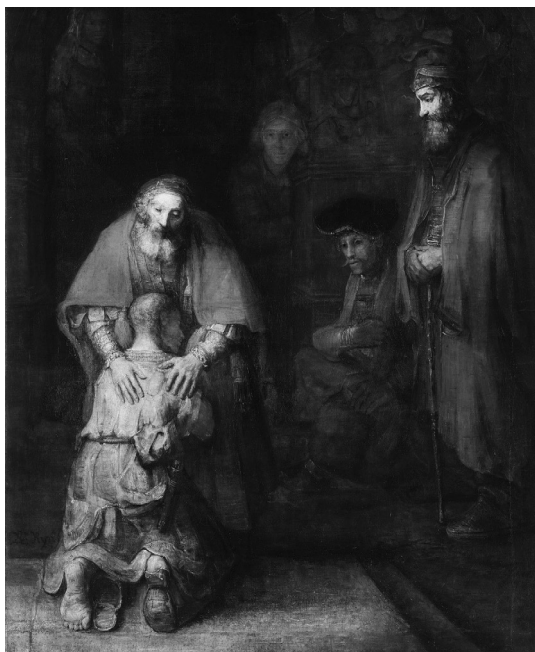
<sup>12</sup> The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the

share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup> When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup> He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” ’ <sup>20</sup> So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup> He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’

<sup>28</sup> Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup> Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

<sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”



## Some Thoughts

Few stories sing the song of the Father's heart more than Jesus's story of the Prodigal Son. The parable has long been so-called because of the lavishness of the Son. "Prodigal" just means "having or giving something on a lavish scale." The Son, after all, takes his Father's inheritance and lives in obscene abundance. Pastor Tim Keller, however, points out that the "prodigal" in the story is not the Son, but the Father. The Father is the true prodigal because he is giving something on a lavish scale: namely, his love, mercy, and forgiveness towards the Son.

The prodigal son is a story about God's lavish grace, but it is also a story about a status shift. In the v. 25, notice what the Father says: the Son who left was dead but is alive again. The implication is clear enough: when we are away from the Father, we are as good as dead. The Son was chasing what he thought was "the high life"—chasing what feels good now. But this wasn't life-giving, it was life-draining. Living apart from the Father, he lived apart from the source of goodness and life. Only when we are with the Father are we truly alive. Not only that, but the Father does what he can to keep us with himself. In the story, the Father doesn't just welcome him back, but meets his immediate, physical needs (like hunger and clothing). He invites us back, yes—but he also invites us to stay.

**A Tale of Two Fathers**

As an exercise before the group this week, jot out some thoughts about the following questions.

- How has your experience with your own father affected your experience with God?

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- How does God’s fatherhood towards us manifest itself in these passages?

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## GROUP TIME | WEEK 1

Open with prayer together before diving straight into conversation. Welcome the Holy Spirit and ask him to guide your mind and mouth as you open up the scriptures together. If you'd like, you can pray Psalm 19:14 together aloud.

### Psalm 19:14

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in your sight,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

### Discussion

Have someone in your group read the passage aloud and then discuss.

- Our relationships with our biological or adoptive fathers on earth can impact how we think of God as father, but God nonetheless is identified as father. To what extent can our earthly fathers be good guides to God's relationship with us? To what extent are fathers, even good fathers, poor guides to God's relationship with us?
- What is the role of wrath and punishment in the Father's love?

- Where in your life are you, like the Son, living a prodigal life? Where are you living in excess?
- Where in your life are you, like the Son, living away from the Father's house? Are there actions or practices which draw you further from the Father's house, even if they aren't explicitly sinful?
- These passages especially highlight the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of the Father's love. What other characteristics are a part of the Father's love?
- The Son returns, but then is invited to remain with the Father. What does remaining in the Father's house look like for us? Be specific.

### **Application & Practice**

The boldness of calling God “father” is often missed. It really is bold! But we are invited into it by Jesus—God’s only begotten Son—himself. Although referred to as “The Lord’s Prayer,” it is really our prayer given to us by the Lord. Jesus invites us to pray like this:

“Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.

10      Your kingdom come.  
          Your will be done,  
                  on earth as it is in heaven.  
11      Give us this day our daily bread.  
12      And forgive us our debts,  
                  as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
13      And do not bring us to the time of trial,  
                  but rescue us from the evil one.”

Since then, Christians have repeated this prayer. To be sure, Jesus gives us more than words, but a way, or kind, of prayer. Still, the words themselves have remained central to the prayer lives of millions of Christians for almost 2,000 years.

Here’s the “extra credit” for the week: repeat this prayer three times a day. You might already have it memorized—if so, great! Just set a reminder on your phone for times throughout the day or say it three times when you wake up or go to bed. If you don’t have it memorized, get it on your phone and refer back to it when you pray.

The goal is not merely memorization, but for this prayer to sink deeply into your heart, mind, and soul.

# Week 2

| WEEKLY REFLECTION

Read the questions below and pay attention to which one jumps out to you. Pick the question that speaks to you the most and journal about it on the lines below.

1. *What is giving me the most joy these days, and what is bringing me the most grief or challenge?*
2. *What lessons may God be trying to teach me through what is going on in my life right now?*
3. *What is the current state of my soul?*
4. *How have I cooperated with God this week?*
5. *What am I not bringing before God? (anger, fear, etc)*
6. *Is there anything I need to confess? Is there anything I'm tempted to keep secret?*
7. *How did I experience God's call and where am I at with that now?*

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## PREPARATION FOR GROUP | WEEK 2

### Introduction

Our passage this week comes from Acts, the story of the beginning of the church. It's Pentecost. The spirit has fallen on the gathered disciples and they start speaking in multiple languages. Crazy! However, some are a little confused and skeptical. They look at the linguistic pandemonium and say, "They have had too much wine." Peter, full of the Holy Spirit, not wine, stands up and delivers the first sermon of this new group called Christians.

Read this passage a *few times*. Certain details and words will jump out to you the more you go through it. Underline parts that are interesting or raise questions, that way you'll come to group with things to share. Finally, listen for yourself to what God has for you in this passage. This is a portion of God's word, and just as he spoke through Peter to the crowd, he can speak through Peter in these words to *you*. We pick up where Peter begins to tell the story of Jesus.

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### Acts 2:22-36

<sup>22</sup> "People of Israel, listen! God publicly endorsed Jesus the Nazarene by doing powerful miracles, wonders, and signs

through him, as you well know. <sup>23</sup> But God knew what would happen, and his prearranged plan was carried out when Jesus was betrayed. With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to a cross and killed him. <sup>24</sup> But God released him from the horrors of death and raised him back to life, for death could not keep him in its grip. <sup>25</sup> King David said this about him:

‘I see that the Lord is always with me.

I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.

<sup>26</sup> No wonder my heart is glad,  
and my tongue shouts his praises!  
My body rests in hope.

<sup>27</sup> For you will not leave my soul among the dead  
or allow your Holy One to rot in the grave.

<sup>28</sup> You have shown me the way of life,  
and you will fill me with the joy of your presence.’

<sup>29</sup> “Dear brothers, think about this! You can be sure that the patriarch David wasn’t referring to himself, for he died and was buried, and his tomb is still here among us. <sup>30</sup> But he was a prophet, and he knew God had promised with an oath that one of David’s own descendants would sit on his throne.

<sup>31</sup> David was looking into the future and speaking of the Messiah’s resurrection. He was saying that God would not leave him among the dead or allow his body to rot in the grave.

<sup>32</sup> “God raised Jesus from the dead, and we are all witnesses of this. <sup>33</sup> Now he is exalted to the place of highest honor in heaven, at God’s right hand. And the Father, as he had prom-

ised, gave him the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us, just as you see and hear today. <sup>34</sup> For David himself never ascended into heaven, yet he said,

‘The Lord said to my Lord,  
“Sit in the place of honor at my right hand  
<sup>35</sup> until I humble your enemies,  
making them a footstool under your feet.”’

<sup>36</sup> “So let everyone in Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!”

### **Some Thoughts**

“Lord” is a loaded word in the bible. The typical name for God in the Old Testament is The Lord, because Yahweh (“I Am”) was not allowed to be spoken, it was too holy. Odds are if you flip to a page in the Old Testament, you’ll find someone referring to God as “The Lord.” However, the early Christians started making a bold claim: “Jesus is Lord.” For Jews, they would have heard this and thought this was blasphemy! How could the God of Israel, the Creator, The Lord, be a human person? A lowly day laborer from Nazareth? No way. For Roman citizens, they would have heard it and thought how utterly ridiculous it was, because everyone knew that Caesar is Lord. Not some country boy from the sticks of Israel.

But the early Christians stuck to their bold claim. Jesus is the Lord of all things, above the government, above the culture, above humanity, above creation, above...you get the point.

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**Peter’s Pentecost Sermon**

As an exercise before the group this week, jot out some thoughts about the following questions.

- Imagine hearing this message from Peter as an Israelite, a people who awaited the Messiah for hundreds of years, how would you have reacted to this? Would anything be especially controversial or surprising?

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- David was the greatest king in the story of the Old Testament, yet Peter says that King David called the coming Messiah “Lord.” What does this say about Jesus’ Lordship over our lives and world today?

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- In verse 36 Peter proclaims that God has made Jesus both “Lord and Messiah.” How does this statement capture the message of the gospel?

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## GROUP TIME | WEEK 2

Open with prayer together before diving straight into conversation. Welcome the Holy Spirit and ask him to guide your mind and mouth as you open up the scriptures together. If you'd like, you can pray Psalm 19:14 together aloud.

### Psalm 19:14

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in your sight,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

### Discussion

Have someone in your group read the passage aloud and then discuss.

- How did you answer the questions from the previous section?
- This passage begins with Peter identifying “Jesus of Nazareth” and ends by identifying him as “Lord and Messiah.” Is this contrast important? What does this say about the kind of Lord that Jesus is?
- The cross is the shame of the crowd (they crucified their Messiah!) and yet according to Peter, it is their hope for

forgiveness. How would you have felt as an Israelite, standing there, hearing these words from Peter? How do you feel now, knowing that Jesus carried away your sin?

- Why is Jesus' resurrection central to his identity as Lord? Why isn't the crucifixion enough to prove that he is Lord? (Not that the crucifixion is unimportant, it's crucial!)
- When you think of typical stories of lords or kings coming to power, what usually happens? How does Jesus' story differ from them?
- How do the references to King David help you see the Old and New Testament as a unified story?
- Do you believe that you will not be abandoned to death by Jesus? How does that change the way you process things like COVID?

### **Application & Practice**

A few times this week take 15 minutes and read/pray through Psalm 16. It may seem familiar, that's because Peter references it in his Pentecost sermon that we just read! Place your worries and anxieties into this Psalm, "come to God for refuge." Give him your gratitude by proclaiming, "every good thing I have comes from you." Really pray this psalm for yourself.

## Psalm 16

### A psalm of David.

- <sup>1</sup> Keep me safe, O God,  
for I have come to you for refuge.
- <sup>2</sup> I said to the Lord, "You are my Master!  
Every good thing I have comes from you."
- <sup>3</sup> The godly people in the land  
are my true heroes!  
I take pleasure in them!
- <sup>4</sup> Troubles multiply for those who chase after other gods.  
I will not take part in their sacrifices of blood  
or even speak the names of their gods.
- <sup>5</sup> Lord, you alone are my inheritance, my cup of blessing.  
You guard all that is mine.
- <sup>6</sup> The land you have given me is a pleasant land.  
What a wonderful inheritance!
- <sup>7</sup> I will bless the Lord who guides me;  
even at night my heart instructs me.
- <sup>8</sup> I know the Lord is always with me.  
I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.
- <sup>9</sup> No wonder my heart is glad, and I rejoice.  
My body rests in safety.
- <sup>10</sup> For you will not leave my soul among the dead  
or allow your holy one to rot in the grave.
- <sup>11</sup> You will show me the way of life,  
granting me the joy of your presence  
and the pleasures of living with you forever.

# Week 3 | WEEKLY REFLECTION

Read the questions below and pay attention to which one jumps out to you. Pick the question that speaks to you the most and journal about it on the lines below.

- 1. *What is giving me the most joy these days, and what is bringing me the most grief or challenge?*
- 2. *What lessons may God be trying to teach me through what is going on in my life right now?*
- 3. *What is the current state of my soul?*
- 4. *How have I cooperated with God this week?*
- 5. *What am I not bringing before God? (anger, fear, etc)*
- 6. *Is there anything I need to confess? Is there anything I'm tempted to keep secret?*
- 7. *How did I experience God's call and where am I at with that now?*

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## PREPARATION FOR GROUP | WEEK 3

### Introduction

This week's passage comes from the Book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet who was exiled from his homeland when the Babylonian Empire captured Jerusalem. His book of prophecy takes place at the same time as the events of 2 Kings 23-25. It's located in your Bible later in the Old Testament because it's lumped together with the other books in the genre of prophecy.

Ezekiel spent the first five years of his ministry prophesying that God would destroy Jerusalem because God's people had abandoned Him. Ezekiel 16 paints a heartbreaking picture of this. But the people of God didn't listen. In 587 B.C. the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, as seen in Ezekiel 33, 2 Kings 25, and 2 Chronicles 36. Following this Ezekiel was tasked with bringing a message of hope to Israel.

Ezekiel 37 is one of the most famous passages in the Old Testament for Christians. In so many ways it points to the gospel, especially as it pertains to the Holy Spirit. In this week of curriculum we'll explore our relationship with the Holy Spirit as "The Giver of Life," a powerful image played out in Ezekiel 37. We'll talk about who the Holy Spirit is, and what he does as we enter into a relationship with him.

## Ezekiel 37:1-14

<sup>1</sup> The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup> He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. <sup>3</sup> He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

I said, “Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”

<sup>4</sup> Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! <sup>5</sup> This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath[a] enter you, and you will come to life. <sup>6</sup> I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.’”

<sup>7</sup> So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. <sup>8</sup> I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

<sup>9</sup> Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” <sup>10</sup> So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

<sup>11</sup> Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' <sup>12</sup> Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. <sup>13</sup> Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. <sup>14</sup> I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.'"



Abraham Rattner, *In the Valley of the Dry Bones (study for "Ezekiel")*, chinese ink, 1981.

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**The Giver of Life**

As an exercise before the group this week, jot out some thoughts about the following questions.

- What was the first thing that struck you about this passage?

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- What do you think this passage meant for the people of God, and what do you think it means for you?

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- In your relationship with God, who is the Holy Spirit?  
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## GROUP TIME | WEEK 3

Open with prayer together before diving straight into conversation. Welcome the Holy Spirit and ask him to guide your mind and mouth as you open up the scriptures together. If you'd like, you can pray Psalm 19:14 together aloud.

### Psalm 19:14

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in your sight,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

### Discussion

Have someone in your group read the passage aloud and then discuss.

- What does this passage tell you about God? What does this passage tell you about you?
- What does this passage tell you about the Holy Spirit? Who is he and what does he do?
- What is your relationship with the Holy Spirit like?

## Application & Practice

This week's extra credit fits in great with the Examen. Part of the Holy Spirit's job is to convict you, but another part of his job is to comfort you and remind you of God's love. He brings peace and life. Spend ONE HOUR at some point this week praying and making space for the Holy Spirit to speak. You can report back on this during the Examen next week. Here are some questions you can ask him in this time:

- Where is my soul still dry?
- Where am I not aware of the work you've been doing in my life?
- What would you like to speak to me or over me right now?
- Make yourself known and felt in my life. Bring me peace.

