

EIGHT SESSIONS

stuck

study.



the places we get stuck &
the God who sets us free

jennie allen

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the **God** who sets us free

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THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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For we know that our old self was crucified with [Christ] so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

romans 6:6–7 NIV

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introduction

Stuck.

This study began for me out of a deep struggle—a stuck place. It would serve better to call it something a tad more dramatic . . . it was a war. The kind of war that happens inside of you, the kind that nobody sees. God versus me and all my junk. It wasn't something I could even put words to at the time. In fact, those close to me were oblivious to the chaos ensuing behind my gathered exterior.

But it was real and raging, and even though I couldn't describe it, I was keenly aware of its presence and was exhausted by it.

I was stuck. I experienced a sense of bondage I could not name and did not know how to escape. The outside of my life was bright and shiny, but inside I was a mess: anxious, lonely, afraid, and looking for significance.

This study exists because I know I am not alone in this. The more I am let into the deep crevasses of people's hearts, the more I am convinced that every one of us is fighting something. Yet we look out from our secret wars and see people who smile peacefully and seem to be all right—and we smile back at them.

I'm done smiling.

God is about doing something on this planet. He is about doing something in me, and as long as I am privately fighting and losing inside, He is not getting a thing done through or in me.

We are going to take an honest look at the war inside, expose it, and deal with it. God will win this fight, but we have to start fighting it His way, on His terms. The cause of our stuckness will vary, but our common humanity assures us we are all inadequate and broken. Thankfully, we don't have to stay that way.

Many of us have known God for a long time—and honestly, we know a lot—but are we living what we believe? For some, this may be your first encounter with Him. Wherever you are, I ask and pray that you be honest. Pretense and pretending have never really been God's thing. Not much tolerance for it. So my prayer is this study will be a safe place to explore God and your own heart. The state of our hearts and what we believe about God are the two most important things about us.

Jennie

instructions and expectations

Get Honest

This is going to get messy, but it will be worth it. We will be dealing with hidden sin. God wants to do something with that. But until we recognize that we are stuck and in need of Him, we will miss what He has for us. If you consider yourself stuck, perhaps you would be willing to consider a way out, even if it is costly. Be honest with yourself and honest with God. He knows all of it already, anyway.

Engage with Your Small Group

Do not attempt to deal with such a large thing as sin without kindred warriors at your side, fighting with you and for you. Pray, speak truth in love, and hold each other's feet to the fire. Be vulnerable, and do not abandon those who are vulnerable with you. Prepare to go to war alongside these women. Keep your group a safe place to wrestle and discover and also a place filled with truth. John describes Christ as being "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). I pray that this is how your small group will be described.

And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

john 8:32 NKJV

Commit to being consistent and present. Every time you gather with your group, you will be building your view of God and His plan for reconciliation in our lives. This study will create a circular understanding of God and His plan, and missing a week will leave a hole in that circle. Every time you are in your small group, you will be processing God in your life. Consistency and presence show respect to God and those around you in this process.

Please be quick to listen and slow to speak. Lean into the Holy Spirit as you process together. Speak as He leads. This kind of vulnerable, Spirit-led communication with your group will help lead to unstuck lives.

Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak.

james 1:19

Ground Rules for Discussion

- :: *Be concise.* Share your answers to the questions while protecting others' time for sharing. Be thoughtful. Don't be afraid to share with the group, but try not to dominate the conversation.
- :: *Keep group members' stories confidential.* Many things your group members share are things they are choosing to share with *you*, not with your husband or other friends. Protect each other by not allowing anything shared in the group to leave the group.
- :: *Rely on Scripture for truth.* We are prone to use conventional, worldly wisdom as truth. While there is value in that, this is not the place. If you feel led to respond, please only respond with God's truth and Word, not "advice."
- :: *No counseling.* Protect the group by not directing all attention on solving one person's problem. This is the place for confessing and discovery and applying truth together as a group. Your group leader will be able to direct you to more help outside the group time if you need it. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

Study Design

In the first meeting, your groups' study guides will be passed out, and you will work through the Getting Started lesson together. After that, each lesson in the study guide is meant to be completed on your own during the week before coming to the group meeting. Each week begins with a short intro before moving into the portion marked "Study." The study portion is followed by four application projects, then closing thoughts from me. The study portion and projects can be completed in one sitting or broken up into smaller parts throughout the week depending on your needs.

These lessons may feel very different from studies you have done in the past. They are very interactive. The beginning of each lesson will involve you, your Bible, and a pen. Work through the scripture, and listen to God's voice. Hear from Him. Each lesson will conclude with four projects that will allow God to further change your heart and life, and a final word from me. Don't feel that each lesson has to be finished in one sitting; take a few blocks of time throughout the week if you need to.

The goal of this study is to dig deep into Scripture and uncover how it applies to your life, *to deeply engage the mind and the heart*. Projects, stories, and Bible study all play a role in it. You may be drawing or journaling or interacting with the homeless. At each group meeting you will discuss your experience in working through that week's lesson.

What *Stuck* Is Not

We all are products of messed-up environments. Even with the best parents, spouses, and friends, we still have wounds from relationships. The hurt from these relationships takes work to process, and there are many great resources your group leader can suggest that take you deeper into the wounds from your past. I believe in the wisdom of Christian counseling, and there is a time and place for it. Christian counseling is a process I went through earlier in my life, and it truly brought so much freedom.

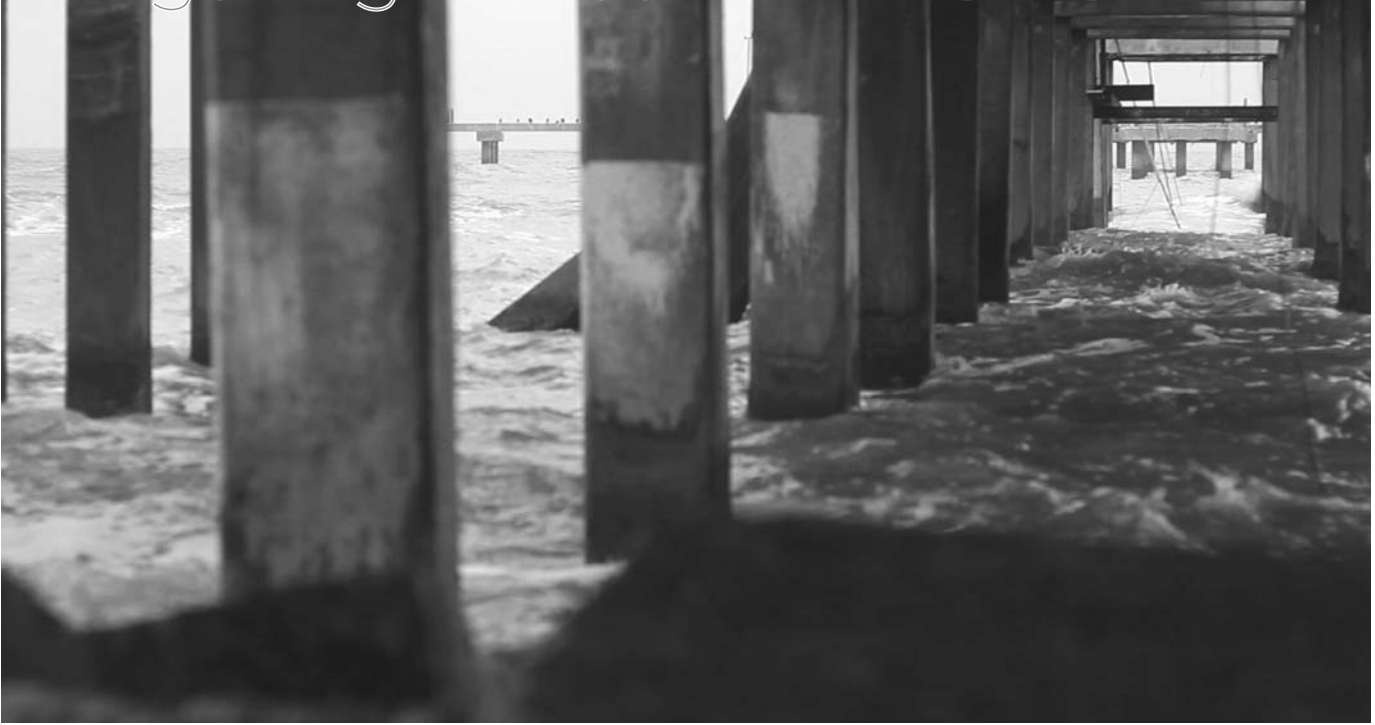
However, in *Stuck* the focus is intended to remain on God and His plan for us in eternity, and is not intended to be counseling. I believe growing in our perspective of who He is and what He has for us changes the way we view our past hurts and current struggles.

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

psalm 147:3 NKJV

Nothing is more powerful than God getting bigger in our lives. He has the power to heal with a word. My goal as you walk through *Stuck* is that God would get bigger for you and as He does, you would see a new way to do life, led by His Spirit.

getting started :: stuck



My third child, Caroline, resembles a Norman Rockwell-esque little girl, with her sweet, blue eyes and bob of blonde hair tied in a white bow. She is usually shy and quiet and joyful. One summer weekend we were out at the lake with another family, and obedient Caroline calmly observed the other children as they played wildly all day. She sat and ate her lunch quietly and sweetly, smiling up at us when we asked her if she was having fun.

Later in the day, some geese came over to where she was playing. They were loud and intruding on her little space. So she turned around in front of the family that had admired her sweet disposition all day and screamed at the top of her lungs, “SHUT UP, YOU DUMB GEESE!”

We all have our issues. Most of us just wear a cute bob or smile to cover them up. We’re never as sweet as we appear.

I’ve found it almost impossible to smooch what I know and believe about God into the invisible dark spaces in my soul. For instance, I know I must forgive. But when my husband misunderstands me or my kids frustrate me and I find myself spinning with anger, how do I apply forgiveness in that moment? As you begin this study, I pray that you will find in God’s Word what I found: a chance for God to change me as I see more of Him.

There is a tension that we feel. Most of us know we are stuck and imperfect, broken. But focusing on the reality of our brokenness usually brings about one of two disconcerting responses: we either run to the dark place of rebellion or to the seemingly safe place of covering it up. Shame follows us to both places.

But to admit our stuck places, our sin, propels us out of shame and toward our need for Christ. Both rebellion and self-righteousness are simply attempts to cover reality. We don't measure up. We are a mess. We are imperfect. But to freely state the facts:

I feel jealous. I feel insecure. I feel prideful and judgmental. I don't live like I need God. I feel rage when my kids wake me up in the middle of the night or when my husband comes home late from work. I worry all the time.

To be known and accepted are the two most fundamental needs a human has. But we often sacrifice truly being known for covering the stuff that makes us seem weak or unlovable.

How can we be sure we will survive something so vulnerable as freely revealing our sin?

He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

proverbs 28:13 NIV

There is another place to turn with our sin; a place that is mysterious and invisible. In this place is the One who offers the mercy we need. It fights against our nature to turn to this place, because it pains us to be dependent.

This place is Christ. Christ saved me from my sin eternally . . . but could He daily save me from it, too?

The plan was that He would die. The Son of God would die, paying for the sins of the world. And then in the greatest miracle in history, Christ would be resurrected to life forever, defeating death and giving us the most beautiful hope. Anyone who put their faith in Him would be forgiven. Their sin would be paid for and thrown as far as the east is from the west. It would be a final act making us forever right with our perfect God.

And for those who have put their hope in Christ, that is our reality. However, sin has not left me. I believe in Christ and know that my sin has been forgiven, but I also stand here holding arms full of it. I know I have been made right for eternity. But what about today? What about my short time left on this planet?

How can the gospel bleed into my struggle with fear, with jealousy, with anger?

To paraphrase my favorite quote from pastor and author A. W. Tozer, “As God is exalted to the right place in our lives, a thousand problems are solved all at once.”

This is not really a study about our struggles . . . this is a study about God. As we understand Him and His plans and His heaven and His Son’s love for us and His grace and on and on . . . a thousand problems are solved all at once. The day after you finish this study, you will still see sin in your life. We will fight sin until we’re in

heaven, but my hope is your perspective will radically shift, and as God is lifted in your life, a thousand problems will get smaller.

Let me warn you: I will sound ridiculously redundant because I have no other answers for you but God the Father, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and heaven. May They creatively weave Their way into every answer for every problem you face.

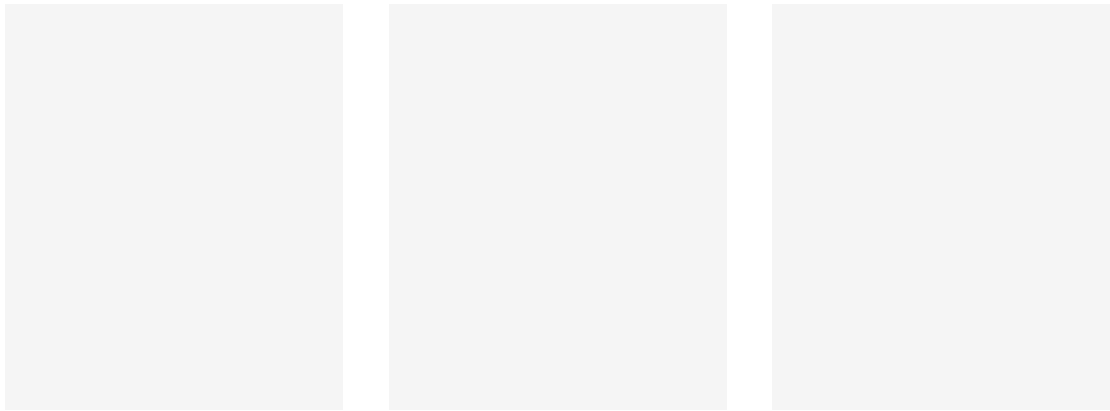
It begins with admitting we need Him. We're broken. The story of the entire Bible is our loving, just God calling a sinful mess of a people to need Him. From Adam and Eve to Israel to the church, the message is the same: *You are broken. Come back to Me.* In our brokenness we find our God.

So we begin here in the most vulnerable but freeing spot . . .

We are broken.

single • angry • jealous • insecure • lonely • unavailable • responsible • exhausted • body image • sex • work • house • kids • school • distant • facebook • blogs • adoption • discontent • sad • confused • searching • overwhelmed • the past • grief • shopping • food • money • bitter •

Let's begin by identifying three places that you feel most stuck. List them here:

Three empty rectangular boxes arranged horizontally, intended for the user to list three places where they feel most stuck.

addiction • friendships • family • numb • disappointed • bored • withdrawn • anxious • prideful • afraid • indifferent • worried • partying • selfish • unmotivated • impatient • broken relationship • hurt • waiting • distracted • conflict • depressed • toddlers • busy • apathetic • denial • unsure

This is a starting place, a chance to put words to some of the places you may be feeling stuck. God has a plan for these spaces, but that plan begins with us recognizing that we need Him, that we need help.

broken :: 1



Universe Problems

I looked around my living room into the eyes of twelve young women. Twelve successful, beautiful women who previously had not felt very safe or comfortable in church or Bible study. They were the kind of sinners who were looked down upon by the “good sinners” (sinners who had better-hidden or more socially acceptable sin) and they knew it or felt it enough to stay away. They lived fast, and yet here they were, hungry for God—hungrier than most “good sinners” I knew. They desperately wanted God, and His offer of unconditional love and forgiveness felt dangerously comforting. For the past few weeks we had studied together, they had been just relaxing into that . . . relaxing into grace. As time passed they were feeling a little convicted about sleeping around and partying. Not much about their visible lives was changing, though all of their invisible lives were.

The last thing I wanted to do was get legalistic with these girls, so I prayed, “God, how do I address sin without taking away from Your grace?”

He led me to Romans 8.

This chapter describes two ways to live. One way is to know God, to be His, to be filled with His Spirit and to enjoy life and peace. The other way is to be enslaved to our flesh, constantly pleasing it, and ultimately feeling sin and death in it all . . . the waste. As I read these verses, I knew these girls in my living room weren’t the only ones who needed help. I needed to be broken over my sin, perhaps more than they did. Their eyes drank in every word, and as I watched

them long for God, I found myself more worried about my hidden sins than their blatant ones.

See, they knew they needed God. Did I?

We categorize our sin in a grand gesture to feel better about ourselves, better about our lives, when God couldn't care less what particular sin we love. He wants us to see we sin. He wants us to see we are all helpless without Him. And He wants us to sit with hungry eyes, drinking in His grace. But most of us think that we have enough God. We've heard it already . . . heaven and Jesus and forever. We spend more time scrutinizing truth than living it. We get numb and bored. We forget that it is all real. It is all real.

See, when we step into faith with Him, God shatters everything, not just our Saturday night plans. He changes every relationship, how we spend our time, our motives, our passions, how we live and how we die. He strips us of performing and pretending and lays us bare, fully aware of our need for Him. While it is costly and even threatening, it is what we were designed for.

study ::

read romans 8:1-17

The struggle between the Spirit of God and evil has been warring since before God spun the planets. This is the universal problem: the Spirit of life and peace versus the law of sin and death.

Romans 8:8 says, “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” It is impossible to please God without the Spirit of God Himself being present in us and without the blood of Christ erasing our sin.

Two drums are beating. We are each born with the drum of our flesh that beats steadily and selfishly, begging for us to meet its every desire. The sound of this drum beats, telling me to get what I need, build my comfortable life, make a name for myself. It is a drum that beats until we die, unless we are given a different drum, a new drum giving life and peace. The new drum has a purpose and overcomes the selfish drum of our flesh. It beats with God’s heart. The new drum can overcome the old one, but the old drum must die.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on [Christ] the iniquity of us all.

isaiah 53:6

study

I was designed to come to the end of myself again and again and again and again, to slip down the rungs of my ladder, until maybe, after years of reaching the end of me, I would consider that I had a problem . . . that I might need something . . . that I might be stuck.

I might need help.

I might need God.


This feeling is not a Christian problem or a pagan problem, a young or an old problem, a rich or a poor problem, or a married or a single problem. It is a human problem. People feel stuck.

Measuring Sticks

God in His goodness supplied our universal need for a Savior. Before time began He knew people would rebel and run from Him, and He made a way to get them back in Christ. In Christ's death I found grace. Grace to be a sinner. Grace to not measure up. Grace for people around me to disappoint me. Grace for my kids and my husband to be human.

It is important we understand the reason why we can be imperfect. We don't have to try to measure up or pretend because God rescued us from that impossible pursuit through the blood of Christ.

Those of us who have been rescued by God have nothing to prove. We can call sin what it is because our sin has been paid for, cared for. We rest in who we are and what God has accomplished for us.



We can even boast in our weakness, because our weakness shows our need for God even more. Grace frees me from having to measure up to the impossible standard, while at the same time, grace motivates me to run from sin and obey God.

Not long ago I gave a talk in which I shared about some struggles I was having with fear and disobedience. A woman approached me afterward and said, “It must be difficult to share all of this.” I thought for a moment and shook my head and said, “I am so aware I am no good apart from my God that it actually comes out pretty painlessly. I am forgiven. I don’t feel ashamed of the places I need God.”

Shame has paralyzed us. We are afraid to come out of hiding and admit we are flawed. It is ridiculous because we are all flawed. God knows it and we know it. Why are we pretending?

If we trust in Christ, we are forgiven.

The space in which we are stuck, lacking, sinful, broken, and in need, is the space in us that longs for God, longs for forgiveness. When we soberly view ourselves and our sin, we see our need and call out for God.

study

Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor.

proverbs 3:34

Once we have tasted that grace, we are compelled to give our lives away because of it. Because God was that good to love us despite our sin. He was that merciful to give everything to make us right with Him. Knowing that kind of grace changes everything. And we long to follow a God like that. A God who is offering life and peace to those who obey Him, to those who follow Him. He is even offering the means to obey and live a life for Him, through the Holy Spirit.

Obedience turns into a response to the love of our God rather than a duty to perform for Him.

We move from focusing on our need to fixing our eyes on the face of God. He changes everything. Andrew Murray, a great pastor and missionary in the nineteenth century, talks about this in his book *Humility*. He defines *humility* as being “fully occupied with God.” We must move our eyes from our sin to God or we will stay stuck in our sin. His grace is why we can confess our sin and find freedom. We live in His grace and then we give His grace to everyone we encounter.

“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

luke 7:47

The more we experience forgiveness, the more we forgive.

To keep me from becoming conceited . . . there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 corinthians 12:7-10 NIV

who are you, Lord?
&
what do you want from me?

Read about the apostle Paul's stuck places. As you read, think about the two questions above and journal your thoughts.

discover

Where do you go to find life, to find God?

What are the things that steal joy from you?

Identify some of the sources of life and peace and the sources of sin and death for you:

	sources of life and peace	sources of sin and death
In your relationships:	_____	_____
In your home:	_____	_____
In your mind:	_____	_____
In your schedule:	_____	_____
In your daily decisions:	_____	_____

I see another law at work . . . waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within.

romans 7:23 NIV

measure

In the space below, color in the percentage of your life that you live confidently and perhaps independently of God. Then list the areas in which you feel successful and capable, and the areas you feel insecure or weak.

0%	100%
----	------

areas I feel successful

areas I am insecure

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

As we admit our weak places, our hurts, our sin, God can freely move into those spaces. We depend on Him more and on ourselves less as we soberly view ourselves as broken.

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

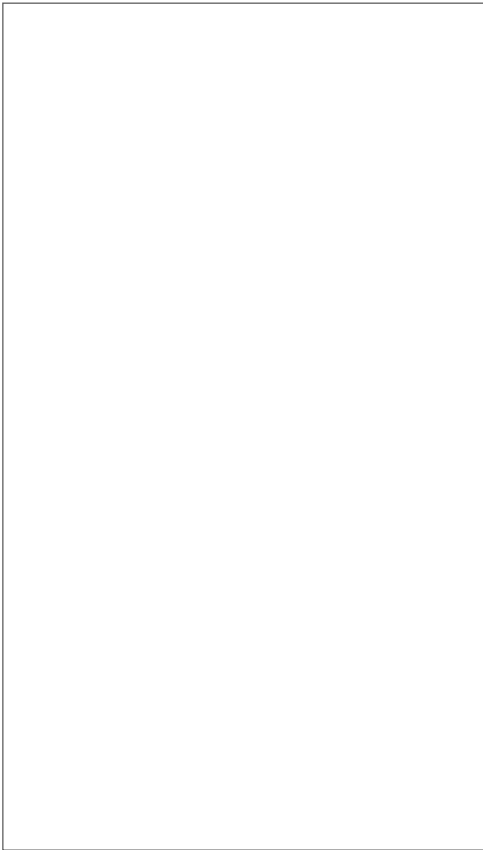
2 corinthians 12:10

How could this verse transform your view of your weaknesses?

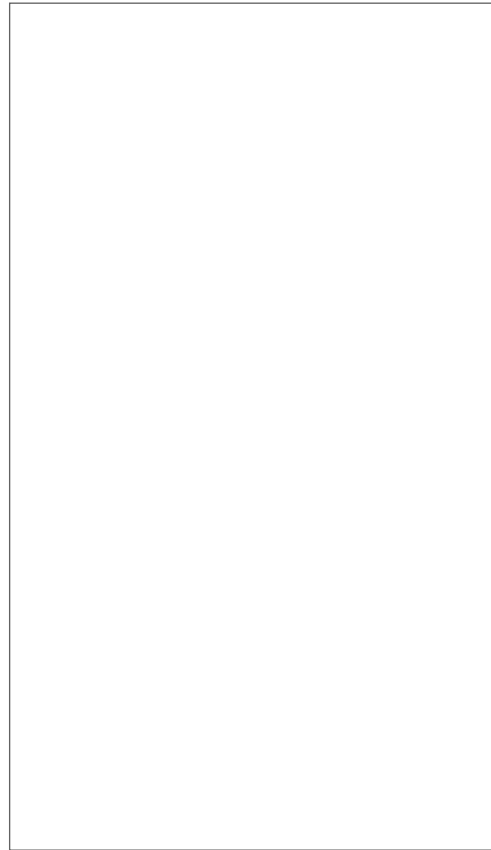
imagine

Romans 8 describes the bondage of the flesh and the freedom and life found in the Spirit. As you consider the ways you live without God, either through inner or outward struggles, draw a picture of yourself stuck and a picture of yourself free because of the Spirit. You can use symbols that represent those two conditions, or stick figures.

me stuck



God in me



respond

God lives in me true or false?

Defend your answer in fewer than one hundred words. Wrestle this out—do not move forward unless the answer to this is clear to you. The implications of this answer are eternal and life altering. God inside of you changes everything. Is He there?

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

philippians 2:12–13 NIV

The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.”

isaiah 29:13 NIV

Faith Questions

Unapologetically I want you to question your faith. Be sure that what you say you believe, you actually believe. I fear we find ourselves in a world of pretending. People are saying they believe, but if they are really honest, God is not in them. They are not even sure He is real.

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

*a. w. tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy**

Rarely has anyone questioned my salvation. But I think questioning my salvation is the most powerful and loving thing someone can do for me.

Do you understand that no act on your part will achieve salvation for you?

Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God and that He is God?

Do you believe that He took your place in His death on a cross to pay for your sin?

Do you believe that He has risen from death and now sits at the right hand of God the Father?

Have you placed your life in the hands of this God for salvation and hope?

Honestly, all of that sounds a little crazy, but it is pretty simple. I don't think it is a stretch to say we should scrutinize our faith. This is not a box we check on our voting registration . . . this is eternity. We should be 100 percent sure our hope is in Him alone.

I really like our God. He is so different from any human or god I would ever construct. Despite His power and fame, He loved me in my sin and saved me from it. Now I am free—completely, undeservingly free, forever. I would have been happy being a slave for a God, but He adopted me and made me His kid. So many of us have taken God's love for granted. May His love shatter our sin and drive our lives.

