



STUDY GUIDE

THE  
MISSION  
CENTERED  
LIFE

FOLLOWING JESUS INTO THE BROKEN PLACES

BETHANY FERGUSON

# THE MISSION-CENTERED LIFE

*Following Jesus  
into the Broken Places*

Bethany Ferguson

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[WWW.NEWGROWTHPRESS.COM](http://WWW.NEWGROWTHPRESS.COM)

New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404  
www.newgrowthpress.com  
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Cover Design: Faceout Books, faceoutstudio.com  
Interior Typesetting and eBook: lparnellbookservices.com

ISBN 978-1-948130-67-7 (Print)  
ISBN 978-1-948130-68-4 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19      1 2 3 4 5

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# Introduction

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

—Ephesians 3:20–21 (NIV)

Three a.m., no moon, and I'm shuffling up the second tallest mountain in Africa. In the last forty-eight hours, I've been robbed and rained on, and I had a stressful interaction with an alcoholic park guide. I'm dirty, freezing, and feeling the impact of insufficient caffeine consumption. The journey isn't even halfway over yet, and I'm longing for comfort and home.

As my feet fight for traction on the Mount Kenya trail, I watch gravel and loose rock roll back down the mountain, and I pray that I won't fall with those scattering stones. I wonder (not for the first time), *How in the world did I get here?*

It's important for you to know that I am not the most athletic or the most adventurous. One of my earliest childhood memories is of being out on the soccer field, paying attention to the weeds at my feet, completely oblivious to the action around me. I am not the person you would pick to scale mountains, raft rivers, or respond to drunk park guides for whom English is a second language. I am a fan of lattes and pedicures and reliable internet.

I love home and settledness, family and tradition, patterns and rhythms, and things you can count on. But as much as I love home, I'm enamored by the beauty and diversity of our world, and I'm broken-hearted over the injustice and disparity that seem universal.

This love of the world has led me to leave home multiple times. Opportunity, interest, and what I believe to be calling converged, allowing me to spend most of the last fifteen years in East Africa, particularly Uganda, South Sudan, and now Kenya.

In each of those places, I started out a stranger and ended up making a home. I found new patterns and rhythms and things to count on. But I've also been confronted with the fact that our world is more broken than I initially thought, that I myself am fearful, and that I'm not as nice or competent as I used to think. In fact, I'm just as likely to mess things up as to be helpful. To climb a mountain seems hard, but to transform places of poverty and trauma and loss—well, that's pretty much impossible.

But I believe in a God who does impossible things. One who brings water from rocks, makes dead things alive, and is making everything new. A God who always is doing more than we can ask or imagine. A God of resurrection.

This God also loves the poor and the unjustly accused, the fearful and the lonely, the depressed and the angry, the sinner and the stranger, and the saint. He understands our longing for home and has promised to prepare a place for us. For those of us reborn in him, we have a calling to bring God's love into places of poverty, injustice, and isolation. We can begin to bring tastes of home to the wilderness.

Now, I'm not saying you need to move to Uganda or South Sudan (though maybe you should consider doing that). And I'm not saying you have to become a missionary or give away your possessions or start preaching all the time (though I'm not ruling those things out).

What I am saying is this: God's grace reorders our lives so that we move out from ourselves and toward those who need to receive what seems as yet impossible. Paradoxically, as we move out from ourselves, we also gain more for ourselves because God meets us in new ways with the good news of his love for us.

I have a friend who jokingly said, "I was so nervous to become a Christian and to ask for God's calling on my life because I just knew God would call me to leave everything and move to the middle of Africa." I cannot disprove that concern because when God began working in my life, I did leave everything and move to the middle of Africa. I still look around and wonder how I got here. But I also know that finding life in the broken places has been a great gift of God to me.

The gift God has for you will not look the same as mine. But grace and love and mission are woven into all our days, so it is important to pay attention to how God's Spirit is calling you and bringing them into your story.

I would be lying if I said I didn't want you to be a little bit impressed by the image of me scaling a challenging mountain. And part of me also wants you to see that working in areas of injustice and poverty is an exciting adventure, full of accomplishment and mountaintop experiences.

But in more than a decade of international work, I've learned that this life is also marked by seasons of valleys, seasons of deserts, seasons of doubt, and sometimes seasons of death. And it is often in these unglamorous, unexciting, and grief-filled places that God shows us new parts of his redemptive work.

A year after the Mount Kenya climb, I found myself in a valley of sorts. Much of the work I did in South Sudan seemed to be crumbling: cities I had worked in had destabilized, and people I cared about had fled from their homes. Some of them had died.



I returned from Kenya for a season in the United States. There I reconnected with friends who, while I was fumbling through life in East Africa, had built beautiful homes and families. In what felt to me like a sharp contrast, I was able to fit all my earthly belongings into two footlockers.

I was frustrated by the complexities of working in areas of poverty and injustice, and I wondered if it was all worth it. I looked at the racial sins and injustices in my passport country and read articles about how people trying to help in Africa were actually hurting things, and I wondered how we kept getting it so wrong. I wondered if I had chased the mountaintop experiences but missed the reality that things weren't actually getting better.

I was longing for home, but I had no idea how to find it.

God gave me grace in that valley of homesickness by allowing me to write this book. It is a reminder of the grace that followed me up the mountain and also met me in the valley. This grace is wider and more beautiful than I imagined. It meets me—meets us—in the confidence and in the questions, in the adventure and in the mundane, in our living rooms and at the ends of the earth, on the mountaintops and in the valleys.

Maybe you are wondering how God's grace redirects your life, and you are looking for what it means to live missionally right where you are. Perhaps you are considering stepping into areas of poverty or injustice, whether in a place across town or across the globe. Maybe you have been working in these areas for a while and are wondering how you got here or what will sustain you. Maybe you're wondering if it is all worth it.

As I have reflected on these same questions, a pattern has emerged: as we experience God's grace in our lives, it frees us to move out into the world. But that movement into a needy world brings new struggles.

It causes us to grow still closer to God and receive more of his love in fresh ways. This in turn moves us out still farther into places that are desperate to know the grace we've received, and the pattern repeats.

This book is about rhythms of missional living. It is about how God meets us, moves us forward, gives us reasons to celebrate, and draws us deeper into himself. It is about finding possibilities within the impossible and being transformed as we discover grace in the broken places.

Three a.m., climbing Mount Kenya, wondering how I got there, I happened to look up.

Like never before, I experienced my own neediness and the world's unfairness on this journey up the mountain. But for some reason, in that moment, I was overcome with joy. Perhaps my thinking was clouded due to less oxygen at such an altitude. But I believe the joy came then because we often experience God's richest grace in the midst of the hardest struggles.

As I looked up, I saw my small band of friends who agreed to join me in this craziness even though none of us had any idea what we were actually signing up for. I knew that together we were fighting for breath, rest, encouragement, and laughter. Looking higher, I couldn't see the top of mountain because it was still so dark. But because I saw a glimpse of it through the clouds the day before, I knew that somewhere high above was the end of this particular climb, and rumor had it we'd see the miracle of equatorial snow. Tilting my head farther, I saw the brilliance of constellations and planets, so close I felt I could almost touch them. In the midst of night's deepest darkness, my path was paved with unexpected brightness seen only because the lights I usually depended on were absent. With friends, surrounded by stars and anticipating the dawn, I reached for a deep breath and gratefully took the next step in the darkness, knowing that I was finding my way home.

# How to Use This Study

*The Mission-Centered Life* is organized into ten lessons designed for people who want to explore their role in building Christ's kingdom. Like the other small group resources in the *Gospel-Centered Life* series, this study has a gospel focus. That means you will not merely study missions but will do so in a way that keeps your eyes on Jesus and the good news of his love and power to save. You will consider how this gospel propels you to go out and love your neighbors, including people who might be far away or very different from you.

*The Mission-Centered Life* will help you consider this in a group study. Studying with others lets you benefit from what God is also teaching them, and it gives you encouragement as you apply what you learn.

The group will be a place to share not only successes but also sins and worries and weaknesses, so expect differences in how people participate. It's okay if some in the group are cheery while others are weary, or if some are eager to share while others take it slowly. But because you'll be studying the Bible and praying together, also expect God's Spirit to work and change people—starting with you!

Each participant should have one of these study guides in order to join in reading and follow the discussion questions. Several questions require looking at lists or charts in the study guide.

The leader should read through each lesson before it begins, but participants do not need to complete any preparation or homework. Each

lesson includes optional material for further study on your own, but you will be able to participate fully in each group session even if you don't do the on-your-own studies.

*The Mission-Centered Life* is a topical study. Each lesson examines a key aspect of missional life. You might notice that this study also loosely follows the gospel of John, returning often to that book in the Bible to draw on the story of Jesus's own mission to the world.

Each lesson will take about an hour to complete, and includes these elements:

**BIG IDEA.** This is a summary of the main teaching of the lesson.

**BIBLE CONVERSATION.** You will read a passage or passages from the Bible and discuss what you have read. As the heading suggests, the Bible conversation questions are intended to spark a conversation rather than generate correct answers. In most cases, the questions will have several possible good answers. Answers are not provided in the book, but are left for your group to discover as you examine the Bible text and consider how it applies.

**ARTICLE.** This is the main teaching section of the lesson, written by the book's author. It includes observations from her own life on mission. Some names have been changed in the articles and essays to protect the privacy of others.

**DISCUSSION.** The discussion questions following the article will help you apply the teaching to your life. Again, there will be several good ways to answer each question.

**PRAYER.** Prayer is a critical part of the lesson because your spiritual growth will happen through God's work in you, not by your self-effort. You will be asking him to do that good work. If your group is large, it may help to split up to pray so that everyone has a better chance to participate.

**ESSAY.** The essay contains further teaching and reflections from the book's author for you to read on your own if you want to do further study. Additional Bible readings are also included in some lessons.

**REFLECTION.** Questions for reflection follow each essay. Most people find it helpful to write down their responses, perhaps in a journal. Journaling can help you clarify your thoughts and remember them, and it can serve as a starting point for personal prayer.

The mission-centered life is about Jesus, who proclaimed, "I came that they may have life" (John 10:10). In this study, you will see his love for the world he made and all its people. And you will hear his call for you as well to come nearer to him and to join in his life-giving mission.

*Lesson*

# 1

## Going

### BIG IDEA

**Mission begins when we encounter a God who rescues us from our own brokenness and invites us to be instruments of healing in a broken world.**

Everywhere we look, we are confronted by the paradox of a world that is both beautiful and broken. We are people made in the image of God, but we are also people who have disobeyed God and struggle daily to live as he designed. Before you can begin thinking about living a mission-centered life, you must first see that the goal of mission is the redemption and renewal of all things, in Christ. And that change starts with broken, sinful people who encounter Jesus and are redeemed and made new. In other words, it starts with you.

### BIBLE CONVERSATION

The Bible tells us that when God first created all things, including us, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). But not everything is very good anymore, so let’s consider what we’ve become and where we are headed. Read the passages and discuss the questions below.

1. Read **Genesis 3:1–6**. The outward sin of eating some fruit might not seem so bad, but what deeper attitudes toward their Creator are behind the man and woman's disobedience? List several attitudes, especially any you can relate to.
2. Continue by reading **Genesis 3:7–13**. In what ways are the woman and man no longer very good but are now broken? How can you tell that they've become entrenched in sin and selfishness?
3. Go further by reading **Genesis 3:14–19**. List some sufferings and hostilities in the world today that are part of these curses. Which of them have you experienced most deeply?

At the end of the Bible, Revelation 21:4 gives a vision of a new heaven and a new earth where God lives with his people and “he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, not crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

4. Now read **Revelation 22:1–5**. What do you find most appealing about this vision of the future earth and the people who live there? Explain why you like it.
5. How does this ending to Christ's work motivate you to join in his mission to spread his kingdom throughout the world? Think of several ways.

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Now read the following article together and discuss the questions at the end. Read the article aloud, taking turns at the paragraph breaks.

Lesson

# 1

ARTICLE

## Beauty and Brokenness

The Bible opens with this familiar cadence: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). Genesis goes on to describe, in more specificity, the creation of the world we inhabit and the goodness of this world. Haven’t you experienced this goodness? In the lingering glow of a summer sunset as you sip iced tea and watch fireflies. In the crisp fall air, as leaves change and scarves become the perfect thing. In the quiet of a clean layer of freshly fallen snow. In the hopeful unfurling of new life with the greenness of spring. Every season offers the magical rhythms of a glorious world that, in spite of itself, points to the goodness of creation. In blueberries, beaches, hummingbirds, rainstorms, shooting stars, and growing gardens: “Earth’s crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God.”<sup>1</sup>

And yet, if we’re honest, it doesn’t all always seem so very good. Sometimes the gardens don’t grow. There are thorns and pests and tsunamis and predators. There is sickness and injury and hunger. And every day, plants and animals and people are dying. It can feel challenging to find the goodness when you honestly look at all that is going on

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1. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Aurora Leigh,” in *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, ed. D. H. S. Nicholson and A. H. E. Lee (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1917), Bartleby.com, [www.bartleby.com/236/86.html](http://www.bartleby.com/236/86.html).



around you. This does not seem like a perfect garden anymore. How did we get from all of that goodness to this world of death?

Into the creation story of gardens and beauty, temptation came, and a lie, and then the first shattering of harmony. Adam and Eve together broke the rule given for their good, and through that, they opened themselves up to a world that is now disordered and dangerous and is no longer whole and harmonious. By setting themselves up as gods, they paved the path of destruction and death.

The results of this first broken trust are far-reaching. The land is no longer in harmony with people but instead resists producing fruit. Bringing life from the earth now requires sweat, battling thorns, and pain. Death and decay began destroying the goodness of this newly created world. Adam and Eve were taken out of their garden home and became wanderers on the now broken earth.

It is still hard to reconcile how one seemingly small choice—the choice to believe a lie, to covet something forbidden, to steal something not given—could usher in so much pain. How could a bite of fruit result in death and grief and loss?

But the thing is, each of us daily replays the choices made by Adam and Eve. Of course, none of us thinks we would choose death. But we always think we should choose to be in charge. We make ourselves into gods and cyclically repeat the pattern started in that garden. We rebel against the good order established by our Creator, and all of creation follows that resistance. In seeking to become gods, we instead become bearers of destruction.

So what hope do we have for creation? Should we just take the destruction around us as part of the natural course of things? Is there any way for things to be made new?

At the very end of the Bible, there is a picture of the return of the resurrected Jesus. And we hear, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Revelation 21:3). And the one seated on the throne says, “Behold, I am making all things new” (v. 5). God has promised that he will, once again, make his dwelling with us. The former things of death and decay and sadness and pain will pass away. Death itself will die. We believe that, in Jesus, God is making everything new.

So where does that newness begin? I’m all for no more tears and pain and no more death and mourning. But how does it start? The story we read in Scripture, which plays out in the world, seems to indicate that it starts with God’s work in people. Just as brokenness in the world began with individuals who refused to worship God, transformation comes through people who return to God. Before God changes creation, he changes individual hearts.

The Lamb who will sit on the throne in the heavenly city is the Savior “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (Revelation 1:5–6). Notice how far our newness stretches: our hideous rebellion—our desire to seize the place of God—has been paid for by God himself who took our place on the cross. He has also made us a community that is learning to listen and trust and give and love. And he has granted us the honor of priesthood—a royal mission.

This call to mission is part of our reorientation to God. It is a shift in purpose, a new way of living. Jesus is restoring us to a right relationship with himself, and through us, he calls still more people. He gives us a mission of restoration that will lead, when he returns, to the whole world made new. This mission is at the center of every Christian’s life.

## DISCUSSION

1. How have you experienced both beauty and brokenness in the world? How does the world's beauty or its brokenness make you want to be part of Christ's mission?
2. The article mentions the past, present, and future work of Jesus:
  - what he *has done* for you by his death and resurrection
  - what he *is doing* to grow your faith and holiness and to advance his kingdom in the world, and
  - what he *will do* one day to complete his work in you and in the world.

Why does mission work require such a big vision of Christ's work in the world and in you? Why would a smaller vision not do?

3. Take a few minutes to consider how you would complete the sentences below. Then share and explain your responses with the group.

One thing Jesus *has done* for me by his death and resurrection that makes me want to join his mission is \_\_\_\_\_. Why?

One thing Jesus *is doing* in my life today that makes me want to join his mission is \_\_\_\_\_. Why?

One thing Jesus *will do* when he returns that makes me want to join his mission is \_\_\_\_\_. Why?

## PRAYER

Conclude your time praying together for God's Spirit to open your eyes to both the beauty and the brokenness in the world. Pray that he will continue his transformative work in you, and that through this study you will see both your own need and God's abundant grace and power. Pray that the intersection of your need and God's

goodness will move you forward in the mission of bringing his kingdom into broken places in the world.

Praise God that, in Jesus, he is making everything new and that one day there will be no more tears and no more death.

## ON YOUR OWN

If you would like to study more, read the following essay and reflect on the questions at the end.

*Lesson*

# 1

ESSAY

## Beginnings in Bundibugyo

Twenty-three years old, I stood wide-eyed at the foot of the Rwenzori Mountains in Bundibugyo, Uganda, celebrating Christmas far from home.

Having landed in Africa for the first time only a few weeks earlier, I still felt as new as could be and everything—sights, smells, sounds—seemed utterly foreign. I kept seeking something familiar to land on. But the wildness of rain forest greenery, the sweetness of sun-ripened mangoes, and the rhythms of drumming and dancing surprised my senses with their newness.

Life where I grew up in the Northern Hemisphere means Christmas-time is often literally dark because it falls just a few days after the winter solstice, the darkest night of the year. But when you live at the equator, there is always the same amount of daylight and always the same amount of darkness.

Since electric lines had yet to crisscross Bundibugyo's horizon, there was little to no light pollution, and somehow those twelve hours of daily darkness seemed darker there than any place I'd lived before.

Christmas morning itself was overshadowed by a different kind of darkness. In the midst of a celebratory church service and sweet gifts exchanged with friends and a call home to my parents, I also attended the funeral of a newborn baby.

My friend Ernest was prouder of his firstborn daughter than anyone I'd ever met. And though I didn't know the details, I knew that Ernest and his wife had lost other children, but she was pregnant again, and he was over the moon with happiness. After months of waiting, there was suddenly the excitement of hope and birth and life and the joy of a new baby. And then, just as suddenly, the baby was gone—a victim of sickness and poverty, lacking access to resources.

The juxtaposition of burying a baby in the ground while we remembered the birth of Jesus has stayed with me ever since. In my more honest moments, I've wondered: If Jesus's coming to the world two thousand years ago really changed everything, why are babies still dying? Why is there such disparity in the world? And how could Bundibugyo be filled with such beauty and adventure and joy while also being filled with death and darkness and injustice? What is happening in the world?

I came to Bundibugyo with the naive idea that I could and should help people, thinking that perhaps God needed me to somehow fix what was wrong in Bundibugyo. But what Bundibugyo taught me and continues to teach me is that Bundibugyo didn't need me. God didn't need me. But I needed to witness the work of God in Bundibugyo. And to do that, I needed to be confronted by the brokenness of a world of death and loss. I needed to start by asking hard questions about suffering in the world and about a Christian's role in a world broken by sin. And only by allowing Jesus to transform my assumptions about myself, the world, and ultimately about God could I become someone who actually participates in God's mission in the world.

God's mission *begins* with you. You will have to ask hard questions as God changes you. But be encouraged because God's mission *ends* with a new world. God is inviting you into a life of freedom, grace, and transformation. As you seek to understand a life centered on mission, may you always find yourself rooted and established in the God who, by his Spirit and through his people, is making everything new.

## REFLECTION

Reflect on the questions below. Pick one of them, and journal about it.

1. What experience do you have with suffering, and how does suffering make you feel about God? What questions about suffering do you have for God? How does Jesus's promise to dwell with his people, wipe away their tears, and destroy death forever affect your faith?
2. The author had to learn that God didn't need her to fix the world. Do you tend to have the same kind of pride, feeling pressure to fix things and people? Or do you shirk away from problems in the world, failing to move toward others in love? Describe how you might need to repent of one of these attitudes.
3. Can broken, struggling, or naive people make good missionaries? Describe what you think it takes to be a useful worker for Christ's kingdom.

Lesson

# 2

## Identifying

### BIG IDEA

**To be on mission *for* Jesus you must first know who you are *in* Jesus: a child of your loving Father, equipped by the Holy Spirit.**

Because life on mission is a mixture of glorious adventures and mundane rhythms and always includes many failures and frustrations, we must learn that we are not defined by our performance. The Bible urges us to look at Jesus instead, and at his surprising, undeserved, perfect love for us. Since we tend to forget this, we must relearn it every day. It is the gospel of grace, which feeds our souls so we can keep sharing it with others. Only as we truly know who we are in Jesus will we find power to love the world.

### BIBLE CONVERSATION

The apostle Paul's life was all about missions, but first he had to deal with his identity. Prior to his encounter with Christ, Paul already had extensive religious credentials and experience. As Jesus transformed his heart and life, he became a key leader in the church whose life was focused on the mission of sharing Christ with others. Have someone read aloud what Paul wrote about this in **Philippians 3:4–12**. Then discuss the following questions.



1. Why do you think Paul uses such strong words to describe the difference between his old identity and his new identity found in Christ? What would be the harm of acknowledging that some of those other achievements might also be a valuable part of who he is? Think of several ways this is dangerous.
2. How does Paul's list of religious accomplishments compare with those of believers today? Are you tempted to see your value in any religious accomplishments? Explain.

Paul didn't put aside just his religious accomplishments, but he also had to disregard his past sins. In 1 Timothy 1:13, he wrote, "Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy."

3. Are you more likely to think of yourself arrogantly because of your virtues or gloomily because of your faults? Explain why, or give an example if you can.
4. What can you do to stop defining yourself by either your accomplishments or your faults, but instead press on to make your identity in Jesus your own (as Paul says in Philippians 3:12)?

\*\*\*

Now take turns reading the following article aloud, and then discuss the questions at the end of the article.

*Lesson*

# 2

ARTICLE

## Who Are You Really?

Here are some ways I like to think of myself: world traveler, counselor, teacher, friend, writer, researcher, adventurer. I also have to acknowledge that I am often self-conscious, fearful, ashamed, critical, anxious, unkind, or angry.

But faith says that because of God's work in Jesus, this is how I am most clearly defined: loved, known, rescued, forgiven, pursued, redeemed, called, valued. We are defined primarily by the work of Christ on our behalf.

So much of how we experience the world is connected to what we're longing for and who we hope to be. One privilege of living cross-culturally is that it shakes up all of your assumptions about your identity. I was very articulate until I tried to speak another language. I was a pretty good cook until I had to use a charcoal oven and ingredients from a market that sold grasshoppers, cow brains, and absolutely no Kraft macaroni and cheese. I believed that if you worked hard enough, then things generally got better—until I lived in a place where hard workers' lives didn't really seem to be getting better.

The frustrations of living cross-culturally also forced me to face my sin. I was easy to get along with until I had to work alongside teammates in a stressful place. I cared for others until I had to give myself

to people who took advantage of me, lied to me, or misunderstood the intentions of the work I was doing. Death and destruction are not just in the world; these evils are in people who seek to be first, who steal, and who shoot at one another. And ultimately, death and destruction are in me.

I respond with anger and judgment toward the very people I want to serve, which reveals anew my own struggles with sin. As Romans 3:23 says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” I echo Paul who said, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1 Timothy 1:15, NIV). Life on mission is a reminder that Christ came into the world for me because of my sins, which make me the chief of sinners. Only by maintaining the right perspective on my own sin will I be able to offer the world the hope of Jesus coming to save us from sin.

When the ways I defined myself became dislodged, I had to go back to the roots of what makes me who I am. And there I found a story of God’s pursuing love revealed in the person of Jesus. The rest of that line from Romans says that although we fall short of God’s glory, we “are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Romans 3:24–25).

It’s important for a missionary to have talent and training, but abilities are not identity. What matters is not that I am capable or incapable, having been good or having been evil, but that I have received God’s gift and was swept into his family. I have a new home.

A friend and I once had the opportunity to visit a rehabilitation home for children who had been rescued from a guerrilla group that recruited child soldiers in northern Uganda. In some ways, the center seemed like a typical Ugandan boarding school. Kids ran around, kicked soccer balls, and laughed. But at lunch, I was struck by one boy huddled over his plate of food. He refused to make eye contact with

others and defensively pulled away to be by himself. When I asked our host about him, I was told that this young man had just come back to the center. He didn't yet feel safe. He didn't realize that with his rescue, everything had changed.

This boy was at home, but he lived like he was still homeless. He was safe and protected, but he lived like he still had to defend himself. He had food and shelter and love, but he lived like he was alone and couldn't trust anyone. It would be a slow and painful process for him to come to live out of the freedom that was actually already his, because for so long what was now true had seemed like an impossibility.

Most child soldiers have had to be physically rescued by government soldiers who were fighting against them and were technically their enemies. But the government soldiers went after them to bring them home. Child soldiers are complex because they are both victims and perpetrators of violence. They witness atrocities, and they commit atrocities. They are plagued with guilt, shame, fear, and confusion. And yet, at their core, they are children longing for family, stability, laughter, enough food, and a warm bed. What they need is what we all need.

We are all like former child soldiers. We have both suffered and contributed to the suffering of others, but "while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10). We have been rescued by the warrior King who is also our older brother, who pursued in the violent wilderness, and who saved us so we can be restored to our true family. Believing this is a slow process. It requires staying close to our brother Jesus, laying aside who we were without him, and returning daily to the truth of who he has made us.

Hear that list again. Let it sink in. In Jesus, you are loved. Known. Rescued. Forgiven. Pursued. Redeemed. Called. Valued.

In the rehabilitation home, each rescued child soldier entered by burning his military uniform and taking on new clothes. It was a picture of how he was new. He was no longer defined by what he wore when he first came home.

## DISCUSSION

1. When you think of being fit for mission, what interests, capabilities, struggles, moral goodness, or troublesome sins do you use to define yourself? How does this affect the way you approach mission?
2. What worldly identity are you wearing that you need to “burn” so you will be defined instead by who you are in Jesus? How would that change the way you live out your mission?
3. Listed below are four pieces of the identity you have as a believer in Jesus. Read through them and think about them. Consider which you would like to understand and treasure better. How might doing so help you serve God and others? When you finish, share some of your thoughts with the group.

- **In Jesus, I am declared not guilty.** I am not anxious about having to perform for God to avoid his wrath or concerned about keeping righteous appearances or accused by feelings of condemnation. I know I am already forgiven and counted righteous in Christ, free to obey God from the heart. “Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Romans 8:34).

- **In Jesus, I am a child of God.** I have his love and know that I will never be alone or forgotten. I have his ear and know that I may ask him for all good things. I have his constant care and know that regardless of what happens to me, I will inherit all he has promised. I have his fatherly

discipline and know that he works all things for my growth and salvation. “To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

- **In Jesus, I am holy.** I am no longer defined by my sin but am confident of the power of God in me to fight sin and put it to death. God is with me, strengthening me and refining me, so that Jesus is not just a way to be forgiven but a person whose glory I am learning to imitate and starting to share. “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

- **In Jesus, I am destined for eternal glory.** The treasures, honors, comforts, and securities of the world lose their appeal to me. And the losses, shames, troubles, and dangers of the world lose their threatening control over me. I have a home with God that awaits me, and it is far better than this world. “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18).

## PRAYER

Conclude your time together by praying that God would work in you to grow your confidence in who you are in Jesus. You might wish to pray for each other according to Ephesians 3:18–19, that you “may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

## ON YOUR OWN

If you would like to study more on your own, read the following essay and reflect on the questions at the end.