

## **Week One: BEYOND Means More**

Key Passage: Ephesians 3:14-21 (NASB)

<sup>14</sup>For this reason I bend my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup>from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, <sup>16</sup>that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner self, <sup>17</sup>so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, <sup>18</sup>may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup>and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to all the fullness of God.

<sup>20</sup>Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, <sup>21</sup>to Him *be* the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:14-21 (NASB)

Where is your most enjoyable place to have a conversation? Maybe it is at a local coffee shop, or sitting around a table while enjoying a meal, or walking alongside one another outside, or holding the phone while sitting in your favorite chair. Conversations are richer and more meaningful when we are at ease, ready to listen and to respond.

Throughout the Bible, prayer is an integral act connecting people with God. It is a holy conversation where we discover God's passion for creation and plan for our communities. God's people often neglect this conversation. And as we read along, we too are convicted of our own negligence.

Our key passage for this week is the closing of a significant biblical prayer. Paul is praying for both the early church and for our church. What does Paul tell God? He praises God for going above and beyond. God is more than able because we worship a risen Savior able to bring forth life out of death; hope from despair.

Also, God is more than we can imagine. Paul understands that Jesus makes a way when no way seems possible at all. The Gospels reveal how the hungry are filled, the lost are found, and the imprisoned are set free.

We discover in Paul's prayer God calling us to go above and beyond. We are more capable than we give ourselves credit because the power of the Holy Spirit dwells within us. God's might is alive in our church. What we do is not dependent on our own might.

And we are more than just the present. Paul's prayer reminds us to focus on preparing the way for future generations so that the mercy, grace, justice, and love of God may be realized here on earth.

As we embark on this journey beyond our norm, place yourself in a position to listen to God's voice so that you may ultimately respond.

## Group Discussion

1. Share what you are most thankful for and excited about when it comes to our church and community. Share what you believe is the greatest need for our church and community. Allow these to guide your opening prayer.
  2. What helps us to focus on the abundant life Jesus offers?
  3. When do we limit God in our own lives and in the church? Why?
  4. How have you been empowered? How can we empower others?
  5. What is God's vision for the future of our church and community?
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## Personal Reflection

1. Go above and beyond in your prayer time. Each day this week, pray for something you have never prayed for before.
2. Where do you see hope in the world?
3. When was the last time you felt the power of the Holy Spirit?
4. What is your desired legacy?

## Getting Ready for the Week

1. Monday: Ask God to fill you with more patience and kindness.
2. Tuesday: Were you successful yesterday moving beyond frustration and resentment?
3. Wednesday: Celebrate a moment God used you this week.
4. Thursday: Pray for your pastor and church leaders to be inspired by God.
5. Friday: Pray for your church to move BEYOND the norm.

## Week Two: BEYOND Our Current Reality

Key Passage: 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 (NASB)

<sup>1</sup>Now, brothers *and sisters*, we make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, <sup>2</sup>that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. <sup>3</sup>For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, *they gave* voluntarily,<sup>4</sup> begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, <sup>5</sup>and *this*, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

2 Corinthians 8:1-5 (NASB)

Scrolling through social media, you enter into a world of fantasy instead of reality. Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, and Twitter distort reality by sharing just a portion of a story. Social media is the modern-day equivalent to “Reality Television.” Within a few episodes, it was evident these series were just as scripted as sitcoms. Much is the same with the world we consume online today.

A temptation in life is to become enamored with a fantasy. We dream about the perfect relationship, job, or vacation. Instead of finding peace, we are left with a dissatisfied soul, always longing for something more.

Even though Paul’s letter to the church of Corinth was written 2,000 years ago, the world has not changed as much as we might think. Paul is addressing a community that is extremely wealthy. Corinth’s ports have provided the city with abundant resources and allowed the people to live a lavish lifestyle. But the people were still chasing after a fantasy.

On the other hand, Macedonia was a predominately impoverished region. The people experienced hardships and challenges. But Paul reveals how they were grounded in God’s reality because their churches were filled with the grace of Jesus Christ. What the world offered paled in comparison to the generosity of God.

BEYOND is an opportunity for grace to be made known to us, to our church, and to our community. Just as Paul confronted the Corinthians, we are blessed with the gift to explore what drives us. Will we continue pursuing the things in this lifetime that will fade away? Will we strive to live a fantasy, or will we embrace a generous spirit? Will we live in God’s reality?

Transformation took place in the church at Corinth. New creation emerged, and the old passed away. Why did this happen? Because the congregation embraced the opportunity before them.

## Group Discussion

1. What distractions are separating us from God?
2. Why do you think the people of Macedonia were more willing to respond to the Good News initially than the Corinthians?
3. Where have you experienced, or witnessed, unexpected blessings coming from afflictions and hardships?
4. The churches of Macedonia focused on what they had to offer; not on what they did not have. Why does generosity begin with gratitude?
5. The first step to living in God's reality is giving ourselves to the Lord. As Christ's Church, how can we help people make that leap?

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## Personal Reflection

1. Be intentional this week of being grateful for God's grace. Make a list of your many blessings.
2. Are you overflowing with joy?
3. What is Jesus calling you to give? Think about what you have to offer, not what you do not have to share.
4. Do you relate more with the Macedonians or Corinthians?
5. How might you live the Lord's prayer – *thy will be done* – this week?

## Getting Ready for the Week

1. Monday: Limit your social media scrolling. Use that time to read scripture.
2. Tuesday: See the potential for good to come from every situation.
3. Wednesday: Have you been successful so far this week of spending less time in fantasy and more time in God's reality?
4. Thursday: Pray for your pastor and church leaders to make grace known.
5. Friday: Pray for your church to move BEYOND the norm.

## Week Three: BEYOND Expectations

Key Passages: Ruth 1:8; 11-18 (NRSV)

<sup>8</sup> But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.”

<sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup> Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, <sup>13</sup> would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.” <sup>14</sup> Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. <sup>15</sup> So she said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

<sup>16</sup> But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” <sup>18</sup> When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Ruth 1:8, 11-18 (NRSV)

The Bible is full of surprises — unlikely births, miraculous feats, unanticipated turn of events, and improbable outcomes. When we engage scripture, our expectations of the present and of what is to come are transformed. How we see ourselves, our church, and our world takes on a fresh perspective. The angel in the Gospel of Luke sums it up best when declaring, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37, NRSV). We see the amazing possibility of what can be.

Our key passage for this week is one of those surprising stories. Ruth does what is not expected of her. She goes above and beyond.

Naomi believes she has nothing left to offer her daughters-in-law. She is hopeless, the future appears bleak, and the only thing Naomi is expecting is more heartbreak. Therefore, Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to their childhood homes where they would be safe and secure.

Surprisingly, Ruth refuses. She would rather venture into the unknown instead of returning to the familiar. The reason why Ruth makes this monumental decision is not because of her faith in Naomi. Ruth decides to journey to Bethlehem because of her newfound faith in the God of Israel.

When Ruth married into the family, she was given more than just a husband. She was introduced to the Creator of the heavens and the earth. What Ruth discovered was that her future was not confined to her earthly family. She was now a member

of God's family. Everything had changed, including her expectations of the present and future.

The monumental decision Ruth made transformed her life, but it also changed the course of history. At the end of the book, we learn Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David. In Jesus' genealogy found in the Gospel of Matthew, Ruth is also included. Because of her decision, our lives have been positively impacted.

BEYOND Commitment Sunday is a special opportunity for us to make an important, lasting decision. Sometimes in life, our expectation is to keep returning to what is safe and secure. But God invites us to go above and beyond those expectations for our own lives and our church.

### **Group Discussion**

1. What can we learn from Naomi's response to Ruth?
2. Even though Ruth declared her intent in the moment, her explanation revealed that she had been thinking about what it means to worship the God of Israel. As a church, how can we cultivate an environment of spiritual reflection?
3. What does following Jesus entail for believers and for the church?
4. Ruth's faithful decision left a lasting imprint upon the world. What decisions can we make that will change the world?

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### **Personal Reflection**

1. Have you ever been tempted to live a life without Christ? In other words, have you placed the fantasies of our temporal world over the eternal priorities God has given us? If so, how?
2. Where are you willing to go to be with Jesus?
3. Write down the ways God has helped you make your most important decisions.
4. Do you allow Jesus to set your expectations for the present and future?

### **Getting Ready for the Week**

1. Monday: List the expectations for following Jesus.
2. Tuesday: Celebrate the ways you represented Christ so far this week.
3. Wednesday: Remind yourself that the spiritual journey begins and ends with daily decisions.
4. Thursday: Pray for your pastor and church leaders to be bold decision makers.
5. Friday: Pray for your church to move BEYOND the norm.

## Week Four: BEYOND Sunday

Key Passage: Acts 2:42-47 (NRSV)

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2:42-47 (NRSV)

Tim McGraw's famous song, *Live Like You Were Dying*, poses the age-old question, "What will I do with my life?"

According to the rabbis, King Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes near the end of his life. It is a quite fascinating and well-beloved book of the Bible because he invites the reader to reflect on the rhythms and meaning of life. Since we took our first breath, humanity has been intrigued with life's mysteries. In Ancient Israel, King Solomon wrestled with these questions. Centuries later, Jesus continued this tradition by inviting his followers to lose their lives so that they might ultimately gain life – abundant and everlasting life.

Craig Wiseman, James Nichols and Tim Nichols, the songwriters of *Live Like You Were Dying*, continued down this well-traveled path of introspection, as they wrote, "Someday I hope you get the chance to live like you were dying; like tomorrow was a gift and you've got eternity to think about what you'd do with it."

What are we going to do with the time we have here on earth? How will we fill our remaining days, weeks, months, and years?

Arguably, we live in the busiest era of history. Our devices keep us continually connected. Electricity extends our days. Starbucks gives us that extra boost. Technology moves us quickly from one place to the next. By the time we pull out of the church parking lot, our minds are trained to move onto the next moment.

Reading the Acts of the Apostles, many scholars have questioned why the early church was so radically different than the modern church. Our key passage answers not only that question but also the one posed by King Solomon and the songwriters of *Live Like You Were Dying*. The early church viewed each moment as a precious gift from God. So, they were focused on bringing heaven here to earth by loving God and loving their neighbor. They cared for people; they gave freely; they worshiped God wholeheartedly; and they treasured studying the scriptures. Through it all, they found their purpose and caught a glimpse of eternity.

The early church embodied God's nature and characteristic of being generous. What you focus on shapes who you become. By turning their hearts, souls, and minds toward Jesus, they reflected the compassionate servant he is.

Through BEYOND, we are invited to heed Jesus' invitation to be the church God created us to be. What will you do with your life?

### **Group Discussion**

1. What are the gifts the church can offer to a busy and stressed-out world?
  2. Is it possible for the modern church to reclaim the spirit of the early church? Why or why not?
  3. Who is the most generous person you know? How does it feel to be in their presence?
  4. What is the most meaningful part of worship and church for you?
  5. How many people might God add to your church?
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### **Personal Reflection**

1. What is the most valuable time of the day for you? Why?
2. How can you become a better manager of your days, weeks, months, and years?
3. When do you experience being in the presence of Christ Jesus?
4. What is holding you back from giving like the early church?
5. Are you ready to go above and beyond in your commitment?

### **Getting Ready for the Week**

1. Monday: Schedule on your calendar an extended time each day this week to spend with Jesus.
2. Tuesday: Memorize Deuteronomy 6:4-5.
3. Wednesday: Reflect, dream, and pray for one new ministry/mission to be born in your church through BEYOND.
4. Thursday: Pray for your pastor and church leaders to continue embodying God's generous nature.
5. Friday: Pray for your church to move BEYOND the norm.