



Bible Studies on Belonging

Growing a community among those with disabilities

by Deb Abbs

The following Bible studies are intended for people with disabilities and their friends who want to learn more about God and connect with other people in a loving community. The goals of these studies are:

- To show God's heart and love for study participants.
- To help participants see that God has a plan and purpose for their lives and works through them and their disabilities.
- To be a group where members can be real, talk about how they feel and deal with those on campus who might have pre-conceived notions about them.

Explore what the Bible has to say about belonging:

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| 1. Belonging to God in Christ | Luke 7:36-50 |
| 2. Belonging to God's Community | Ephesians 2:17-22 |
| 3. Belonging to God with or without Healing | Luke 5:17-26 |
| 4. Belonging to Christ Gives Us Purpose | Luke 5:1-11 |
| 5. Belonging to Christ and Extending Forgiveness | Luke 23:32-43 |
| 6. Belonging to Each Other in Christ | Ephesians 4:32, 3:14-21 |



Belonging to God in Christ

Luke 7:36-50

We all long for a place to be, a place where we can relax, be our true selves, and be loved unconditionally. We all need a community where we belong. For those of us affected by disability, it is sometimes hard to find that comfortable and comforting place. For everyone, a place of belonging starts with our relationship to God.

Talking It Over

- If you could ask God one question, what would it be?
- How would you describe your relationship with God right now? What do you want from him? What are you thankful for?

Hearing the Word

The Bible shows us where our true belonging is found. One story of belonging is told by Luke in his gospel story about Jesus. Read [Luke 7:36-50](#) and discuss these questions:

- 1) What do we learn about the main characters in this passage?
- 2) What did the woman do? What emotions do you think she was experiencing? Why was she weeping?
- 3) In light of Simon's position as a Pharisee*, describe Simon's perspective on this woman and her actions.

**Note: Pharisees were members of a Jewish sect who interpreted the Law of Moses so strictly that they usually missed the heart and meaning behind the law and felt self-righteous or religiously superior to others.*

- 4) How does Jesus respond to Simon, his host?
- 5) In this story, Jesus talked to only two people: Simon and the woman. In verses 44-47, Jesus addresses what Simon needed to understand. How did Simon fail as a host? According to Jesus, what was the key (verse 47)?

**Note: Simon made several errors by not washing Jesus' feet, not anointing his head with oil, and not greeting him with a kiss. The sinful woman did all this and more. Love is the response to forgiveness. Only as we realize the hugeness of our own sin will we truly appreciate God's forgiveness (paraphrased from [Life Application Study Bible, NIV](#)).*

- 6) In contrast to Simon, what does Jesus say to the woman in verse 48?

- 7) Has there been a time in your life when you have come to Jesus, like the woman, to seek forgiveness for your sins? If you feel comfortable, share with your group about such a time.

- 8) In verse 50, what is the connection between "faith" and "peace?" What do you think hearing these words meant to the woman at the time?

Responding to the Word

Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." When we enter into friendship with Jesus through faith, he says the same thing to us, and we respond to God's love and forgiveness with extravagant joy.

If you haven't yet begun a relationship with Jesus, we encourage you to take this life-changing step. If you have put your trust in Jesus, then keep following the Lord and live in his peace.

Even if our life circumstances are not peaceful, the best and most peaceful place to be is with Jesus in quiet time. And, as sisters and brothers in Christ, we are family, a family that gives us a place to belong with one another.

The next Bible study will explore what it means to belong to God's family.

Pray

Thank the Lord for his generous forgiveness and for providing a place where we belong.



Belonging to God's Community

Ephesians 2:17-22

In the previous Bible study, we saw that our true belonging is in Jesus Christ. He forgives us and welcomes us into a loving relationship where we can be ourselves and find freedom to know and love God.

In this study, we learn more about what it means to be the people of God. As sisters and brothers in Christ, we are family. We belong together, but sometimes, as people affected by disability, we find it difficult to be included in various groups.

My youngest son has autism and is non-verbal. For my family, [Joni and Friends Family Retreat](#) is a spot where we belong, fit in, and are loved, warts and all. When we are there, I know that if my son is having a hard time, I don't need to worry. Why? Because he fits right in!

Talking It Over

When and where have you experienced belonging? What qualities did these people or groups have that gave you a sense of belonging?

Hearing the Word

Read [Ephesians 2:17-22](#) (NIV).

- 1) How and why do we have access to the Father?
- 2) When have you felt like a "foreigner" or "alien?" What characteristics or circumstances might you have in common?
- 3) What benefits do God's people receive? What is special about these privileges?
- 4) Contemplate the shades of meaning in the phrases "fellow citizens" and "members of God's household." One is more public and one is more intimate. What is implied by these phrases, both separately and together?
- 5) Who makes up the "community" in this passage?

- 6) What is the significance of the referral to Jesus as the “chief cornerstone?” How is the temple in this passage different than other religious temples?

**Note: The passage is specific—the temple is made up of many believers joined together. This idea is repeated more than once. This is not a message about many individual temples but, rather, one temple made up of many individuals.*

Responding to the Word

- 7) What makes “community” for you? How does this compare with the biblical description of community in these verses?
- 8) If you are a follower of Jesus, how do you respond to being joined together with all believers past and present?

Pray

Ask the Lord to continue to build your group more and more into the community he wants you to be.



Belonging to God with or without Healing

Luke 5:17-26

Tait Berge was born with cerebral palsy and he believes that the Lord ordained his disability. Berge has written three books and is the church relations director for [Mephibosheth Ministry](#). He said,

“Jesus’ healings did even more than show his divinity; he often freed people from their disabilities.... Miracles today, more often than not, don’t involve a person with disability experiencing complete healing, such as rising from a wheelchair to walk (although God can certainly do this as he chooses). More often, from my perspective, the miracle involves a person using a wheelchair telling others of God’s love for them.”

Talking It Over

What do you think of Tait’s opinion? What does it mean to have faith in God, even if God doesn’t choose to heal you physically?

Hearing the Word

In this story, Jesus encounters a paralyzed man who needs more than physical healing. Jesus looks beyond his physical disability to examine a more critical need. Read [Luke 5:17-26](#).

- 1) Describe the scene in verses 17-19. What happened when Jesus was teaching?
- 2) How do you think the paralyzed man felt about needing his friends to bring him to Jesus? When have you invited or needed friends to help you? What did this feel like?

Notes: The paralyzed man had some great friends! When Jesus saw “their” faith, he then told the man his sins are forgiven. Not only do we see the friends doing whatever it took to get their friend to Jesus, the paralyzed man also had a lot of faith. It took guts to allow his friends to lower him down from the roof on his mat.

- 3) If the paralyzed man expected Jesus to heal him physically, how do you think he felt when Jesus forgave his sins instead?

Responding to the Word

4) What has been your experience of asking God to heal your disability?

Note: All human beings have "internal" disabilities that are typically not visible. People are afflicted with all sorts of emotional, mental, social or spiritual conditions that disable them in a variety of ways. What has been your experience with Jesus healing you internally?

Just as we saw in the first study when Jesus forgave the sinful woman, we see in this story that the paralyzed man's biggest need was forgiveness and a relationship with him.

5) Pretend you are a reporter for the town blog or newspaper. How would you report the scene in verses 20-26?

6) Who objected to what Jesus was doing? What did they take issue with?

7) In this instance, Jesus said he healed the man to show his authority over sin. What might be God's reason for *not* healing a disability?

8) When have you seen God glorified through someone with a disability? In what ways were people brought closer to Christ through what happened?

In verse 26 we see that everyone was amazed and praised God when they saw the man get up and walk. It may be easy to praise God when he answers prayers the way we want. However, we don't always respond well when he says, "No" or "Not yet." Often we may feel impatient, frustrated or unhappy.

9) How do you respond when you feel God isn't answering your prayers? How has God helped you deal with these feelings?

For me, I don't know why my son Luke has autism and lost his speech. What I do know is that God uses even that hardship for his glory. He sees the whole picture even though I only see one small speck. I also know that God's word says we are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). This is true for each and every one of us.

I pray that the Lord helps you trust more and more in his love and in the knowledge that he has a good plan for your life. May you know deep in your heart that God made you wonderfully!

Pray

In your small group, talk about ways it has been difficult for you to seek God's glory or believe he is being glorified through you. What limits your ability to believe that you are "fearfully and wonderfully made?"

Share specific ways that you would like to see God's glory shine through you in the midst of your disability.

Pray for each other.



Belonging to Christ Gives Us Purpose

Luke 5:1-11

In the last study, Jesus interacted with a paralyzed man and saw that his greatest need for healing was spiritual—he needed his sins forgiven more than he needed physical healing. But Jesus did both.

Sometimes Jesus chooses to heal our physical, intellectual, or mental disabilities, but other times he wants to work in and through them. Tim Nagel, a student who plays wheelchair basketball at University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, said, “I’ve gone through times of being mad and frustrated with God, but if I was walking I don’t think I would be as close to him. My whole life has been a process of trusting God more and more.”

The Lord is using Tim to reach out with Jesus’ love to his teammates on UIUC’s wheelchair basketball team. Tim was also involved in [InterVarsity Christian Fellowship](#) where his friendship with Jesus grew deeper and he found a greater purpose in life.

Talking It Over

Tim said that if he was able to walk, he doesn’t think he’d be as close to Jesus. How do you respond to this statement?

Hearing the Word

Read [Luke 5:1-11](#).

- 1) Put your feet in Simon Peter’s sandals. Explain what happened at the lake.
- 2) Think of a time Jesus asked you to take a leap of faith and you were skeptical, like Peter. How did your attitude change? How did you experience Jesus demonstrating his power?
- 3) How does Simon Peter see Jesus differently through this fishing experience? How does he see himself differently? What is the connection?
- 4) What did Jesus say at the end of verse 10 to reassure and encourage Simon and his companions? What is their new purpose in life?

Responding to the Word

Jesus gave Simon Peter a new vocation, from fisherman to fishing for people. He called Tim Nagel to fish for people from his wheelchair. God makes us each unique and special, giving us spiritual gifts and talents. He places us in different settings—specific spheres of influence to cast our nets and bring people to God.

- 5) What are some of your gifts and talents? Where in particular has God placed you? How do you think God might want to use you in your unique circumstances?
- 6) Who are some of the non-believing family and friends in your life that you can pray for?
- 7) Are there sins you need to confess, like Peter, in order to be wholly dedicated to God and his purposes for your life? Talk and pray with one other person about the burdens on your heart.
- 8) Simon, James, and John left everything and followed Jesus (v. 11). They knew they belonged with Jesus. What do you need to “leave behind” to begin your journey with Jesus? What will help you grow closer to Christ as you live out your life in him?

Pray

Ask the Lord to increase your faith in Him and help you live out his purposes for your life.



Belonging to Christ and Extending Forgiveness

Luke 23:32-43

[Kathlyn "Kat" Walker](#) is a senior at Rider University in New Jersey and a student leader in InterVarsity. Kat has a disability called TAR (thrombocytopenia absent radius) Syndrome. She enjoys reading and going on fun adventures with her friends. But how she is treated in some her classes is *not* fun.

"A few teachers hated my accommodations for school work. Others assumed I needed help and gave me slack when they should not have," Kat said. "These behaviors made me feel less of a student; they made me feel less capable."

Kat is affected by "ableism." Ableism, according to the Urban Dictionary, is discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities.

For Kat and for each of us in the Christian family, God calls us to forgive others as he forgives us. This can be especially challenging for those in the disability community. Kat expresses it this way, "I have been realizing that many people don't have any interactions with people with disabilities. Accepting their ignorance and understanding how I can teach them has changed my thoughts on how I should forgive them."

Talking It Over

How has ableism or people's lack of understanding affected you or your friends?

Hearing the Word

Before Jesus was nailed to the cross, he had already endured torture and terrible pain. Read [Luke 23:32-43](#).

- 1) If you were a bystander at the crucifixion, what suffering would you see Jesus experience on the cross?
- 2) How does Jesus respond to the people responsible for putting him to death?
- 3) How do the two criminals interact differently with Jesus? How are you affected by Jesus' response to the one who repented?

Responding to the Word

It is astounding that Jesus asks his Father to forgive his own murderers! Even more amazing is Jesus' welcoming reply to the faith of one of the dying criminals. Jesus responds to us as sinners the same way. When we ask, he forgives us and he gives us new life through his Son.

- 4) If you knew your death was imminent, what would you say to God?
- 5) When has it been difficult for you to forgive someone who has hurt or misjudged you due to having a disability?
- 6) How does Jesus' example of forgiving the crowd and the thief at the cross motivate you to forgive others?

Pray

Thank the Lord for his suffering and agony on the cross for you. Thank him for his unconditional love and forgiveness.

Pray for each other and commit to the Lord people you need to forgive.



Belonging to Each Other in Christ Ephesians 4:32 and 3:14-21

In the previous study, we saw how Jesus forgave his tormentors. For us, forgiveness is a process that can take time, especially if the hurt comes from our Christian sisters and brothers. Forgiveness is not a loss of memory. It is acknowledging the offense and pain but choosing to never use it against the one you have forgiven.

We are God's family. Forgiveness is a huge part of being in that family and we need each other.

Talking It Over

- What hinders you from forgiving others?
- What has helped you to forgive?

Hearing the Word

Read [Ephesians 4:32](#).

- 1) How are followers of Jesus instructed to behave toward one other? Why?

Read [Ephesians 3:14-21](#). This is a rich passage about Christ's love and power in the life of a believer. Paul prays for the church of Ephesus and the surrounding churches.

- 2) What are some of the things Paul prays for? What jumps out at you in these verses?
- 3) In verse 15, who does Paul say he is praying for?

Responding to the Word

We belong to the whole family of God! Since this is God's word to each of us, his children, we are included, *together with all the Lord's holy people* (v. 18).

Matthew Kennedy, the pastor at Dillman Church in Indiana, pointed this out when he spoke to us at [Joni and Friends Family Retreat](#).

Matt said, "The idea is that we need each other to know the length, width, height and depth of God's love in all its fullness." I laughed out loud when he added, "You may not like me, but you need me." Without all of the body of Christ represented, we miss out big time.

- 4) What does verse 20 say about God? What does it say about us? How does that make you feel?

Pray

Use the words below from the text of Ephesians 3:14-21 (NIV) to pray this prayer together out loud. Note that "I" is changed to "we" and "his" to "you" when referring to God.

For this reason, we kneel before the Father, from who every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. We pray that out of your glorious riches you may strengthen us with power through your spirit in our inner beings, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. And we pray that we, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is your love, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that we may be filled to the measure of all of your fullness, Lord. Now to you who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to your power that is at work within us, to you be glory in the church and in you, Jesus, throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.