

Life Group Questions

Oct 27th, 2024

The Nature of a Believer's Relationship with Jesus Christ

Pastor Edward Hovsepian – 2 Timothy 1:12

Note from Pastor Jonathan

Hey Life Groups!

I recently became a Canadian citizen. Part of the process of citizenship was learning about Canada. One of the themes I kept hearing was freedom of religion (<https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/rfc-dlc/ccrf-ccdl/check/art2a.html>). It's a blessing to freely worship God here.

But for millions of our brothers and sisters around the world, following Jesus is dangerous. They can be harassed, lose their jobs, disowned by their families, or even killed. Imagine worshipping God while being worried about whether police will come to arrest you (<https://www.persecution.org/2024/07/01/six-lao-christians-arrested-at-prayer-meeting/>) or a mob will burn down the building (<https://www.persecution.org/2024/04/01/christians-worship-in-burned-church-on-good-friday/>).

As we observe the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (<https://idop.ca/>), let's thank God for His grace to worship Him freely here, but also pray for our brothers and sisters who can't.

This week is different because we're focusing on the persecuted church and have a guest speaker. I've written some questions to help us process Pastor Hovsepian's message.

LET'S DIG IN (Pick Any You Like)

1. Do you have a two-way relationship with Jesus?
If so, what makes it a two-way relationship?
2. What might a two-way relationship with Jesus be like for a persecuted Christian?
3. How might living in a historically Christian-identifying nation hinder a two-way relationship with Jesus?
4. How might persecution actually strengthen our relationship with Jesus?
5. How can we develop a personal relationship with Jesus?
6. How does developing a relationship with Jesus strengthen our trust in Him?
7. How can we rely on Jesus to know Him more?
8. How can your Life Group members encourage and help each other know Jesus more?
9. How can we pray for persecuted Christians?

2 Timothy 1:12

¹² which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.

Jeremiah 9:23–24

²³ Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD."

Job 19:25–26

²⁵ For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.

²⁶ And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God,

LET'S DIG IN (Pick Any You Like)

1. Do you have a two-way relationship with Jesus?

If so, what makes it a two-way relationship?

Thankfully the God of the universe wants to have a relationship with us. Pastor Hovsepian defined a Christian as “someone who has personally and wholeheartedly encountered Christ, met Him, and established a direct, living, heartfelt relationship with Him.”

Although we all break God's laws and deserve God's punishment (Romans 3:26), Jesus loves us so much He came to die on the cross and take on our punishment. But He didn't do it so we can be forgiven and left alone. He allowed us to be called God's children (John 1:12). And eternal life isn't like an eternal Disney World. It's having an eternal relationship with Jesus (John 17:3).

We don't have to wait until we die to develop a relationship with Jesus. We can do it now!

In my experience, I've seen two versions of one-way relationships with Jesus.

Listening without talking. Some people will do a lot of study and reading of God's Word. They listen to sermons and read books. They want to hear God speak to them, but they do very little praying. But just like any relationship, we need to share our thoughts and concerns with Jesus. This often results in a very academic and impersonal picture of Jesus. It's like learning about a historical figure. You can read what they did, but you can't talk to them.

I was in this camp for a while. God doesn't need us to tell Him what we're thinking, because He knows everything. But by bringing our pains and worries to Jesus, we learn to depend on Him. We also become more receptive to what He wants to say to us.

Talking without listening. The other extreme is always talking to Jesus, but not listening. I know people who do lots of praying and talking to God, but very little listening. But just like with anyone, those relationships become very one-sided. They usually pray for whatever they want without considering what Jesus wants. They can't examine themselves to see how they need to change. Instead, all they can see is what they want God to change in the world around them.

So, what does a two-way relationship look like?

2. What might a two-way relationship with Jesus be like for a persecuted Christian?

Open Doors estimates more than 365 million Christians “suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination” because they follow Jesus (<https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/>). That's almost NINE times the population of Canada! For those Christians, following Jesus is a dangerous decision to make.

If you've lived in a country with high persecution, share your experience with the group. If you haven't, imagine what it must be like to face death threats but still follow Jesus.

Perhaps you can ponder these questions: Why would someone want to grow their relationship with Jesus, even though it's dangerous? How does their relationship with Jesus help them stand strong under persecution? What does a relationship with Jesus look like to persecutors?

3. How might living in a historically Christian-identifying nation hinder a two-way relationship with Jesus?

Ironically, persecution usually leads to Christianity flourishing while prominence leads to lethargy. The early church exploded under Jewish persecution, but when Christians got comfortable, they got complacent (e.g., Revelation 2:14-22).

Often people in Christian nations choose Christianity because there are perceived societal benefits. Instead of growing closer to Jesus, the church becomes a social club to meet societal bigwigs or a place to make friends or find a mate. "I volunteer at church because it looks good on my university application." "All my friends are Christian, so I should be Christian, too."

Many people who grew up in a Christian society think that they're automatically Christian because that's the world they grew up in (Matthew 3:7-10). "My parents are Christian and I went to church as a kid ... so I guess that means I'm Christian, too." "I still visit church during Easter and Christmas because that's what Christians do." I love the expression "God has no grandchildren."

Societal values get confused with Christian values. For example, Canada prides itself on individual self-actualization. "It doesn't matter what others do. You do you!" "You can be whatever you want to be!" So Canadian (and American) Christianity becomes about individual self-actualization. There's even a term for it, called moralistic therapeutic deism (<https://www.gotquestions.org/Moralistic-Therapeutic-Deism.html>).

4. How might persecution actually strengthen our relationship with Jesus?

We often think of persecution as bad, but it can be good for us (James 1:2-4). As the previous question covered, being too comfortable can be harmful to our relationship with Jesus. Throughout the Old Testament, when God's people had easy living, they strayed from Him so God used hard times to bring them back. How can persecution help us?

It's very unlikely we'll ever be killed for following Jesus here in Canada, but we're facing growing hostility for believing in holy sexuality (<https://www.youtube.com/@christopheryuan>). People may accuse us of bigotry or close-mindedness for not affirming that all religions are valid. Christianity is losing popularity fast (How can that be a good thing?)

Persecution can remind us of why we follow Jesus. People suffering high persecution know *exactly* why they have a relationship with Jesus. They're not distracted by riches or social status. They know He died on the cross to save them from their sins and offer eternal life. They've counted the cost and chosen Jesus. When following Jesus feels like a liability, it'll cause us to consider whether Jesus is worth it.

Persecution encourages us to spend more time with Jesus (Acts 4:23-35). We'll learn to trust Jesus during hard times, look to Him for joy, and seek His strength. We'll be put into situations where we can only turn to Him.

Persecution allows us to love others with the same love Jesus showed us (John 13:34). Even though we were enemies of God, Jesus died on the cross (Romans 5:8-9). We can tell them why we believe in Jesus 1 Peter 3:15-17). I love Paul's mindset when he speaks to Agrippa (Acts 26:24-29). Even on trial, Paul's trying to bring people to Jesus.

5. How can we develop a personal relationship with Jesus?

Is there an attitude or mindset you need to develop? If you've always felt Jesus was a distant figure, I hope you see Him as someone who wants to know You.

Do you need to switch your picture of Jesus from a genie who grants wishes to a Savior who loves you?

Can you develop a routine to be with Jesus? A majority of Christians don't think spending time with Jesus is important (check page 23, <https://biblesociety.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Still-Christian-Report.pdf>). But you can't build a relationship without spending time together. What can you do to spend time with Him? Do you need to prioritize talking to Him when you wake up checking social media? Do you need to sacrifice time spent doing other things to spend with Jesus?

6. How does developing a relationship with Jesus strengthen our trust in Him?

Paul trusted Jesus because he experienced Jesus firsthand. He survived many dangerous encounters, including shipwrecks and murderous mobs (2 Corinthians 11:23-26). Through it all, Paul knew Jesus was protecting him and guiding every step. Whenever Paul faced new challenges, he looked back at what Jesus had already done.

If you're a believer, you trust Jesus, too. But sometimes it's hard. As we spend time with Jesus, He will shape us to be more like Himself. He'll change the way we behave (Galatians 5:22-23). He'll change the way we think (Romans 12:1-2). He'll give us a new life (2 Corinthians 2:17).

When we face challenges when we may doubt Jesus, we can look back at the evidence that He's at work in our lives. We'll remember that He's real and loves us.

7. How can we rely on Jesus to know Him more?

Paul's relationship with Jesus was because God revealed Himself to Paul. God had to open up Paul's mind to understand who Jesus is and what He came to do. Our relationship to Jesus isn't based on our own ability to know Him.

God's always at work around us, but we naturally get distracted by our daily lives or don't notice it. We need His help to see what He's doing in our lives. Ask God to show you any sins you need to confess to Jesus. Ask Him to empower you to seek Him, even when you don't feel like it. Ask Him to empower you to love the people around you. Praise and thank Him for what He's done and what He's doing in your life.

8. How can your Life Group members encourage and help each other know Jesus more?

Here are a few suggestions.

Share Experience. We easily talk about what's important to us. We share what's going on at work or school, how our kids or spouses are doing, our team's performance during last night's game, and more. How about our relationship with Jesus? That's the main interest everyone in your group should share.

Those who have known Jesus for a while can let new Christians know about the ups and downs, so they'll be prepared. Those struggling can tell the group to receive support. Those thriving can share the good news so others can celebrate together. Non-believers can see that Jesus isn't some myth or ancient wise man, but someone alive and at work today.

Study God's Word Together. Whether you're learning more about Jesus when you meet together or sharing the same Bible reading plan, experience Jesus together. A distinction of Mennonite Brethren is something called Community Hermeneutic. It's a fancy term for studying the Bible as a group and seeing how it applies to our lives. I spend more time than most looking at each week's passage and crafting questions and notes. But I love hearing others discuss the Bible passage because God often speaks through others in ways I had never thought of. It's a blessing for me.

Pray Together. It reminds everyone that they're all part of Jesus' family. Our relationship with Jesus is personal, but not private. All believers are sons and daughters of the same Heavenly Father, saved by the same Son, and filled with the same Holy Spirit. We come to Him as one body.

It encourages us when we're down. We've all had moments of feeling down or just plain tired. Or we're (to be honest) frustrated or disappointed with what we feel God's doing or not doing. We're not in the mood to pray. But when we hear others pray, we're reminded of His goodness and encouraged to talk to Him.

It teaches us more about prayer. Inexperienced people can listen and learn from others' prayers. They don't need to copy others, but they can expand their concept of prayer. By listening to others praying, I've discovered different concerns to pray about, considered my own attitude toward prayer, and been emboldened to pray more. I've also learned from inexperienced people, too. I've been struck by the humility and earnestness of new Christians who speak from the heart without any canned phrases.

It's an opportunity to practice praying. Some of us may be hesitant to pray because we don't know if we're praying the right way or we forget. Being in a group allows others to encourage us to pray more and help us know how to pray.

Praying in a group equips us to pray alone so we can grow our relationship with Jesus every day of the week.

9. How can we pray for persecuted Christians?

We know hundreds of millions of Christians are facing persecution. They live under constant threat of violence. They live in poverty because they're ostracized. Christian parents struggle to protect their children. They have no hope in the world.

All they have is Jesus. How can we pray for their relationship with Jesus to be stronger than anything their enemies may bring against them? How can we pray that their persecutors will have a relationship with Jesus?