Study Guide
Part 1 – Look Up

Synopsis
Modern Americans live at a unique time in history. Our culture, more than any that’s ever existed, compels us to answer questions like this for ourselves: Who am I? Who do I want to be? Do I like who I am and who I’m becoming? Am I expressing the real me, my authentic self? These are questions of identity. Had you lived 200 years ago, or if you lived today in a different part of the world, your family and community would hand you answers to these questions. Life would not afford you the freedom, mobility, and prosperity to create the person you want to be. But many modern Americans now have the opportunity, and the burden, to construct the kind of life they want to live.

Most of us create and recreate ourselves using a mixture of these ingredients: achievement, relationships, experience, and stuff. We called these “horizontal” elements because they’re all “out there” on the same plane of existence as we are. Most of us look out onto the horizon and see goals we want to accomplish, people we want to be with, experiences we want to have, and the image we want to cultivate. And we try to mix the ingredients in a way that feels most “authentically me.” This quest is often a fun adventure. But it can also leave us restless, unsure of ourselves, feeling like we constantly need to be tweaking, updating, and reinventing ourselves.

With this in mind, we look at the start of humanity in Genesis 1-2 and notice a pattern: God has created all of these horizontal dimensions and calls them “good.” But the essence of humanity is not defined by any of them. Rather, it is defined like this: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Then in Genesis 2, God tells the man not to try to make distinctions between good and evil on his own, apart from God’s word, lest he die. The implication: We were created to live vertically and get our identity from God. Perhaps we won’t find a stable, reliable sense of identity from accomplishment, relationship, experience, and stuff (even though it’s all good).

Genesis 3 shows us how we get confused. The man and woman tried to seize the knowledge of good and evil on their own, apart from God. The first result: their vertical relationship was broken, as they felt ashamed and tried to hide. The rest of the fallout: all of our horizontal elements are now tinged with pain, frustration and death. When our work is difficult, our accomplishments don’t fulfill us, our relationships break down, experiences don’t quite live up to billing, and we taste death it’s meant to point to a deeper problem: The vertical God-and-humanity relationship is broken.

From this, we learned our basic need, which is Step 1 for starting or restarting: Look up and recognize our need to know God. To get started, we must come wanting to know God. To get restarted, we often have to come back to this very simple issue: life is about knowing God.
Questions for Reflection

What horizontal elements are you most attracted to when trying to create yourself? These would include:

- **Achievement** – Where did you go to school? How well did you do in school? What career path are you pursuing? How are you advancing?
- **Relationships** – Who are your friends? Who are you dating? How satisfying is your marriage? Are your relationships helping you become the person you want to be?
- **Experience** – Where have you traveled? Where have you lived? What have you checked off your bucket list? What are your hobbies?
- **Stuff** – What do the clothes you wear, your preferred mode of transportation, your decorating style say about you? What image and lifestyle does it all you to cultivate?

Have you ever experienced confusion, lack of fulfillment, or anxiety in trying to create your “ideal self?” What was this like? Did you change anything or try anything new in order to fill the void?

What is the difference between enjoying the good things God gives us vs. looking to them for a sense of fulfillment, meaning and identity?

What have you perceived Christianity and the gospel to be about? What is the main point? Now read John 1:1-18 and 1 Peter 3:18. How do these passages give us clarity?

If Christianity is fundamentally about knowing God, what are some ways we can start or restart with this basic reality and relationship? Is there anything you tend to add or worry about that makes it more complicated?

Activity

Jesus’ basic claim is that he makes God known to us and, in fact, brings us to God. When we receive this, we can begin to live out the reality of knowing God in daily life. So how do we do that? One of the best ways is to regularly hear from God in his word and talk to God in prayer.

The book of Psalms models for us how to that. Most of the Psalms are prayers, and Jesus used the Psalms as his own prayer book. We too can learn to relate to God by reading, meditating on, and praying the Psalms.

Instructions

For 5 days, read and pray through one psalm each day. Try using the following 5 psalms, one each day: Psalm 23, 25, 32, 42, 63. For each Psalm, meditate on these questions:

- What situation does the Psalm address?
- How does the write assume God will respond to his prayers? What is God implicitly promising to do?
- What does the Psalm tell us about God’s attitude toward us as his children? What does he desire for us?
- How does the work of Jesus fulfill or complete what the Psalm depicts?
• What from this Psalm do I need to pray to God?

After thinking through these questions, read the Psalm (aloud, if possible) to God as a prayer. As you read, feel free to stop along the way and make the prayer personal, inserting your own specific situation or circumstances.

Suggestion: Keep a journal of what you pray for. Periodically review it and see how God is answering those prayers.

Additional Resources
The following are recommended if you want to read or study more on topics from the sermon. All of the books listed can be purchased from Amazon.com

*The Vertical Self* by Mark Sayers
An exploration of how modern life teaches us to find our identity – our sense of self and self-worth. Sayers shows how relationship with God can ground our identity and free us from anxiety. Applying our teaching: this will be helpful for people who find their identity “horizontally” in experiences and stuff.

*Counterfeit Gods* by Tim Keller
Can the things we look to for security and happiness actually provide what they promise? Writing from hyper-competitive New York, Keller shows how things like money, sex and power can tend to function like God in our lives, offering the blessings that He wants to give us. Applying our teaching: this will be helpful for people who find their identity “horizontally” in achievement and relationships.

*With Christ in the School of Prayer* by Andrew Murray & *A Praying Life* by Paul Miller
If you need to spend a season getting to know God, it’s essential to learn how to hear from him and talk to him in daily life. Both of these books are practical guides to spending time with God. Andrew Murray’s *With Christ in the School of Prayer* is broken into 31 short lessons from Scripture on how to pray. It’s meant to be read as a daily guide over the course of a month. Paul Miller’s *A Praying Life* demystifies the daily habit of praying and listening to God, with practical advice on how to.