

CITY ON A HILL

I CAN ONLYTM
IMAGINE



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Your group is filled with wounded people. People who can't imagine a loving father. Who can't imagine being forgiven or forgiving the one who hurt them. Who can't imagine all their pain being redeemed. Who can't imagine going home. Using this guide, you will lead your group through a redemptive journey and reveal the heart of the God who loves them...more than they can imagine.

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A grayscale photograph of a vast, open field with scattered trees and a distant treeline under a bright sky. The text 'Table of Contents' is overlaid in a golden-yellow cursive font at the top of the image.

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AND A VOICE FROM HEAVEN
SAID, "THIS IS MY SON,
WHOM I LOVE; WITH HIM I
AM WELL PLEASED."

– MATTHEW 3:17

How many of us long to hear those words—that we are deeply loved and fully accepted? We hope to hear these words from our friends, our siblings, and especially our fathers. But the need goes deeper.

Whether we are aware of it or not, we all long to hear our heavenly Father say, “You are my child; I love you, and I’m pleased with you!”

But how many of us daily live with the sense of God’s love and acceptance?



Jesus lived with this certainty: The love and acceptance of his eternal Father flooded his life, filled his conversations, and formed the basis for his teaching and ministry. Knowing you are loved by God changes everything!

We may not be like Jesus just yet, but all who believe in him are said to be “children of God” (1 John 3:1). As God’s very own sons and daughters, we can be as certain as Christ of our Father’s love and acceptance!

DISCOVERING THE FATHER’S LOVE

In the film, *I Can Only Imagine*, the life story of MercyMe lead singer Bart Millard is told for the first time. Bart grew up with an abusive father and a distant mother, and in early adulthood, came face to face with his own deep need for acceptance. His lack of love from his earthly father challenged his faith and hope in his heavenly Father.

But our God is in the business of redemption—of working miracles. Bart’s story mirrors so many of our own lives and gives fresh hope to those of us longing to hear the words, “With you, I am well pleased.”

What does it look like to discover God’s love and acceptance first hand?

In this study leader’s guide, we will take a four-week journey



into the Father's heart. And the best way to discover God's heart is through the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus' life demonstrates his eternal connection to the Father and best reveals the heart of God.

By walking with Jesus in the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—we will find the smiling face of God Almighty in the words and actions of his Son.

Imagine a loving Father. Imagine complete forgiveness. Imagine restoration to God and others. Imagine discovering your true home in the Lord.

God is love. Let's walk with Jesus through the Gospels to discover this life-changing reality.

WALKING WITH JESUS THROUGH THE GOSPELS

To help you and your group understand and experience the love of God, we'll be focusing on a short passage of scripture each session. Along with the videos and study journal, the texts from the gospels will give us a depth of insight and open us up to a life-changing encounter with Jesus' grace, love, and power.

Each week in this study, we'll strive to find God in the scriptures as a way of recalling our spiritual heritage. One of the best ways to discover God is to look to the earthly life and work of his own



Son, Jesus Christ.

Use your imagination to recall the past:

What would it have been like to walk with Jesus in the first century—to work with him in Nazareth, to follow him along the dirt roads of Galilee, to sit across the table from him at a dinner in Jerusalem?

We can get some idea of what it would be like to be physically with Jesus by reading the stories of the gospels, which were written by some his closest friends and most loyal followers.

And as we put ourselves within the narratives of the gospels, we find Jesus inviting us into the heart of God.





HOW TO USE THIS LEADER'S GUIDE

 LEADER'S GUIDE

To get the most of this *I Can Only Imagine* experience, we recommend committing to a journey of four weeks. Over four weeks, you and your small group will have time to watch four videos, study Scripture together, and review the *I Can Only Imagine* Journal.

The study journal will enable your group to get the most out of the video series. Designed as a 28-day devotional journey, the journal connects the message of *I Can Only Imagine* to a deep study of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each day provides life-giving devotional content and thoughtful discussion questions and exercises. Your group members will bring more to share and deeper reflections when using the Journal with this Leader's Guide.

Here is a syllabus to guide your personal and group time:



SERIES	THEME	SCRIPTURE	JOURNAL
<u>EPISODE 1</u>	<u>FATHER</u>	<u>MATTHEW 3</u>	<u>WEEK 1</u>
<u>EPISODE 2</u>	<u>FORGIVENESS</u>	<u>LUKE 15</u>	<u>WEEK 2</u>
<u>EPISODE 3</u>	<u>REDEMPTION</u>	<u>LUKE 4</u>	<u>WEEK 3</u>
<u>EPISODE 4</u>	<u>HOME</u>	<u>JOHN 14</u>	<u>WEEK 4</u>

*If you're doing this Study with the *I Can Only Imagine* Series, watch each week's video BEFORE completing the journal. For example, watch Episode 1, then complete Week 1 in the Journal.

Watching the *I Can Only Imagine* movie is not necessary for completing this journal, but seeing Bart's story come to life in film will help you understand some of the illustrations given in the study. We suggest watching the film before you start the study if you choose to do so.

RECALL, REORIENT, REIMAGINE

Each week, we'll follow a pattern: Recall, Reorient, and Reimagine. This pattern can serve as an intentional guide to:

- **Recall** your own past through the stories of Bart Millard and of the scriptures; by recalling the past with vulnerability, we can put the past “in its place”—neither dominating us nor unknown to us.
- **Reorient** to the present moment by finding our identity in Christ; by reorienting in the present with honesty, we can face our daily reality with faith, hope, and courage.



- **Reimagine** a better future; by reimagining a different future, we trust Christ to bring all things under his lordship and to guide us in each new season of life.

LEADING YOUR GROUP

As you prepare to lead your group through this series, it's normal to feel nervous or under-qualified. But remember: the primary qualification for leading this group discussion is simply a desire to more deeply experience Jesus Christ yourself.

Of course, these studies discuss important and heart-level topics: longing for a father, receiving forgiveness, experiencing redemption, and finding our true home.

When someone in your group is sharing a deep hurt, struggles to receive grace, or resists sharing in depth, consider a few quick principles.

1. EXPECT DIFFICULT PEOPLE.

We know that everyone is sinful, but it still surprises us, doesn't it? There will always be difficult people. Remember: difficult people aren't problems to fix, they're people to love.

2. RECOGNIZE STAGES OF MATURITY.

You may have significant diversity in your group—old and young,



married and unmarried, all different personality types and interests. Within a group, you may have five different seasons of life and varying stages of maturity. From the new believer to the struggling Christian to the quick learner, remember to give grace to each where he or she is at.

3. EMBRACE THE COMPLEXITY.

People are anything but straightforward. The same person in your group can be outgoing and silent, generous and critical, fruitful and foolish—all depending on the circumstances. This is not unusual; it's human nature. Don't rush to conclusions if someone is struggling; situations are often more complex than they seem.

4. REMEMBER YOUR ROLE.

If you're a small group leader, there's a good chance you—like me—have a genuine desire to solve others' problems or hold their lives together. But you and I can't change anyone. Our role is to create an environment of grace where God can change people.

5. START WITH GRACE.

Several Christian authors describe the process of how people change:

grace + truth + time (in relationship) = change

We create an environment of grace and expect sinners like us to be present. But even when someone is missing the truth, the first



words out of our mouths should likely be ones of grace. It's a miracle of God every time someone admits sin or lets others into their suffering. We don't exist to judge one another; we exist to point one another to the grace of God. When we have given grace, we can speak God's truth to one another in love (Eph. 4:15). But this takes time and patience. All these are necessary for true spiritual change.

ASKING GREAT QUESTIONS

When you gather with your group, a familiar and structured pattern of discussion should prove fruitful. After a period of fellowship and settling in, each week will follow a rhythm of conversation and instruction that enables self-discovery, personal application, and deep meditation on God's Word.

The basic flow of these questions mirrors the work of grace in our hearts. The approach is gentle, meeting us where we really are—so we will begin with a soft opening question and prayer. Then we must learn the biblical truths—we'll seek to learn the scriptures through a scripture reading, the teaching video, and basic questions covering content and meaning.

Understanding truth is essential, but God's Word is meant to then be experienced and practiced. In the section "Meditation and Application," the goal is transformation through deep reflection and personal application. This provides space for the Holy Spirit to root the truth of scripture deep in our hearts. Lastly, focusing on application recognizes that we must put a



new reality into practice right away. We'll finish in prayer, committing the discussion and all its discoveries to God.

OPENING QUESTION

You may choose to alter the opening question to fit your group's dynamics. But keep it simple and light-hearted. Starting with "What's your darkest sin?" or "Who can describe the basic themes of the book of John?" can be off-putting. Start instead with a question that's easy to answer. For a new or shy person in the group, speaking the first time is the hardest. But speaking up early on a simple question enables them to share more deeply later. If you create your own opening question, choose a simple, open-ended question that connects to the week's theme without getting too far ahead.

SCRIPTURE READING

Prior to starting the video, take a few minutes to read the assigned passage—a portion from one of the four gospel narratives. Don't worry about explaining too much at this point. The goal is to have the biblical themes of forgiveness and redemption in the background as you watch the video, then you'll dive in later.

OPENING PRAYER

Prior to starting the video, say a short prayer to commit the time to the Lord. Consider having this prayer—or any other portions—led by another group member to help share the leadership load.



VIDEO

Before each group gathering, test the appropriate video and familiarize yourself with it. The videos are short, practical, and should foster immediate reflection and discussion.



STUDY JOURNAL

Prior to wrapping up the gathering, encourage group members to read ahead for next week in the Journal. As you journey through the Journal together as a group, you will better understand and apply God's grace and your relationships will grow deeper.



PRAYER

Take a few minutes to allow several members to pray aloud. Members can pray words of gratitude for deep truths, pray for pressing situations, and pray for one another.

EXPERIENCING CHRIST YOURSELF

One last reminder: As you lead your group through this study, don't forget to experience grace yourself!

As we read above, these studies discuss deep topics: longing for



a father, receiving forgiveness, experiencing redemption, and finding our true home.

Don't be surprised, then, if God disrupts a few things within your soul to allow his grace and love to truly take root. Don't be surprised if your group members open up about new struggles through tears and describe raw pains below the surface. This is Jesus at work!

Often, we really learn something when we have the responsibility of organizing and teaching it. Think of this not as a burden, but an opportunity. Go as deeply into the life of Jesus as you can, and surely others will benefit as well.

Remember that the message of this study speaks directly to you as a leader. You don't have to be a perfect leader. You don't have to pull it together and get it right. You won't be a failure in God's eyes. Simply bring an expectant heart before the Lord and your group, and watch grace do the heavy lifting.

When you feel yourself discouraged by silence, overwhelmed with others' struggles, or disappointed by an "off night" in your group, remember: Grace always has the final word. Trust the Lord and enjoy the process. ■



1





IMAGINE

a loving father



WEEK 1

This week, we are starting a new curriculum set called *I Can Only Imagine*. Each week, we'll watch and discuss a short video, read through a passage of Scripture from one of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John), and discuss how God reveals himself to us through the life of Jesus.

Before we begin with the Scripture and video, let's start with an easy question.

OPENING QUESTION

> **WHAT WERE YOU TAUGHT ABOUT GOD GROWING UP?**
WAS YOUR FAMILY RELIGIOUS WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG?

READING

Each week, we'll read an account of Jesus' life from the gospels and then engage with the video teaching. The four gospels give

us a powerful look into the earthly life and ministry of Jesus Christ. As we look at the life of Christ in the gospels, we discover much about the heart of God and the essence of Christianity.

We'll read this passage twice. As you read or hear it aloud, just simply try to understand what the story is about. You may want to jot down a few notes in a notebook.

> WOULD SOMEONE VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 3:13-17?



THEN JESUS CAME FROM GALILEE TO THE JORDAN TO BE BAPTIZED BY JOHN. BUT JOHN TRIED TO DETER HIM, SAYING, "I NEED TO BE BAPTIZED BY YOU, AND DO YOU COME TO ME?" JESUS REPLIED, "LET IT BE SO NOW; IT IS PROPER FOR US TO DO THIS TO FULFILL ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS." THEN JOHN CONSENTED.

AS SOON AS JESUS WAS BAPTIZED, HE WENT UP OUT OF THE WATER. AT THAT MOMENT HEAVEN WAS OPENED, AND HE SAW THE SPIRIT OF GOD DESCENDING LIKE A DOVE AND ALIGHTING ON HIM. AND A VOICE FROM HEAVEN SAID, "THIS IS MY SON, WHOM I LOVE; WITH HIM I AM WELL PLEASED."

- MATTHEW 3:13-17

OPENING PRAYER

Let's take a moment to pray together that this time of study and discussion would be helpful.

SAMPLE PRAYER:

Father, thank you for this opportunity to gather during a busy week. Thank you for everyone here and for how you're working in each of our lives, in many unseen ways. Please give us insight into your Word as we gather. Teach us so that we would not only understand your grace, but truly experience and practice it in our lives.

Amen.

VIDEO

This week's video is about 12 minutes, and then we'll discuss.



PLAY EPISODE 1: IMAGINE A LOVING FATHER

RECALL

Let's start with a few questions about the video, and then add some questions from the passage.



Bart remembers feeling “Incredibly alone. And it was devastating.”

> DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR EARTHLY FATHER. WHAT WAS HE LIKE GROWING UP? FEEL FREE TO INCLUDE POSITIVE AND/OR NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTES THAT AFFECT YOUR LIFE NOW.

Bart says, “Most of my life was living in fear. When [his anger] is so sporadic, you don’t know what’s going to set him off.”

> WHAT WAYS DID YOU TRY TO EARN YOUR FATHER'S LOVE GROWING UP? IS THERE A CONNECTION BETWEEN THIS AND TRYING TO EARN GOD'S LOVE AND SALVATION?

> ACCORDING TO MATTHEW 3, HOW DOES GOD THE FATHER THINK AND FEEL ABOUT HIS SON, JESUS CHRIST?

> HOW DOES THIS PASSAGE REFLECT THE TRUTHS THAT “GOD IS LOVE”?

REORIENT

Matthew 3 describes God’s fatherly presence in two ways:

GOD IS PRESENT. / GOD MAKES HIS PRESENCE FELT.



> **GOD AFFIRMS, ACCEPTS, AND LOVES YOU. WHICH OF THESE REALITIES RESONATES WITH YOU MOST? WHICH DO YOU FIND HARD TO BELIEVE?**

> **DESCRIBE A TIME WHEN YOU'VE LONGED FOR A HEAVENLY FATHER?**

> **IS THERE ANYTHING LACKING IN YOUR EARTHLY FATHER THAT YOU FIND YOURSELF HOPING GOD WOULD FULFILL?**

REIMAGINE

> **HOW HAVE YOU SEEN GOD'S FATHERLY PRESENCE IN YOUR OWN STORY OF FAITH?**

> **BART SAYS HE WAS "DESPERATE" TO EXPERIENCE THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT JESUS AFTER SUCH A DIFFICULT CHILDHOOD. WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS DESPERATE TO KNOW GOD?**



STUDY JOURNAL

You each have received a journal to accompany this series. Before we meet next week, I encourage you to do the seven days of devotional readings and questions. The seventh day is a "call to action" and also allows you to get caught up if needed. Over the next week, let's each do Week One of the journal (Days 1-7) and come ready to discuss next time.



PRAYER

SAMPLE PRAYER:

Father, thank you for this message of your fatherly presence. We pray now that your Holy Spirit would remind us of these great truths throughout the week. May we experience you as our true heavenly Father. We pray that this study would open our eyes to who you truly are, Lord. We love you and trust you.

Amen.

