

this is LOVE

week two

Instructions for the group:

(Anyone in the group can read these instructions to the group. Note: The group should run no longer than 90 minutes and it is not imperative to answer all of the provided questions each week.)

- 1) Welcome everyone in the group and invite everyone in the group to share how their week has been going. What was the hardest thing and what was the easiest thing? (15-20 min)
- 2) Going around the group, have each person share a funny or embarrassing story from when they were a kid. (An example within the chapter was that of James on the high dive. Was there an experience you've had that allows you to relate?) (10 min)
- 3) Starting with one person in the group and going in a circle, have each person read a few sentences from the excerpt provided from Chapter One of *This is Love* (see the back of this page). (5 min)
- 4) After reading the excerpt answer these questions: (20-30 min)
(Everyone in the group should have a chance to answer the question if they choose. Note: be comfortable with quiet moments to allow people to process or think.)
 - In what ways did the chapter remind you of your own journey of faith?
 - How has the 'damn lie' that God doesn't love you crept into your head in your life?
 - Why do you think it is so easy for us to forget that God loves us so much?
 - Describe a meaningful time when you heard the song Hallelujah and why it was special.
 - Do you have a similar experience to Leonard that gives you a different view of love?
 - How has your take and understanding of love changed over the years?
 - What role does confidence play in allowing ourselves to be fully loved and to love fully?
 - What is your response to this quote: "confidence is the best proof of love."
 - What is the significance of God's name Yahweh to you? ("Yahweh" translates "I AM")
 - Has there ever been a time when you have been afraid of God or hiding from God?
 - How does the name Jacob (usurper) or Israel (one who wrestles w/God) describe you?
- 5) As you look at your upcoming week ahead, how might these discussions about love change the way that you live your life? What way might God be calling you to step out in a new way? (15 min)
- 6) Go around the group and ask if anyone would like prayer for anything specific in their life. Ask one person in the group to briefly lift up the prayer concerns of the group in a short time of prayer.
- 5) Revist the schedule for the coming weeks. Have someone sign up to bring a treat (cookies or cake) to the next meeting.

Chapter I *(excerpt)*

- Confidence is everything. It is one of the most necessary ingredients for love to flourish. The other side of this truth is that if you lose confidence in someone else, then you also lose trust. If you have no confidence in another person, then you really lose almost all hope of continuing a loving relationship with them.

God is totally and utterly confident. God has no uncertainty. The reason for God's confidence is God's perfection. Perfect love has always constantly flowed from God to all humanity since the beginning of time. God has always spoken the words "it is very, very, very, very, very good" to every person that ever lived to remind us of how this all began.

Our response is to hide. We hide from God, because a damn lie has crept into our brains telling us that God doesn't love us. God does love us. God loves us so much that God will not allow us to retreat or to runaway from the truth of our pain and our brokenness. Instead, God draws us into a relationship with God. We are invited into a perpetual wrestling match with God.

The Bible is so helpful because it provides a literal mountain of evidence of God's reliability. God does what God says God will do. God is faithful and always follows through. God is ultimately the only one in whom we can have confidence.

What we also learn from life and from the Bible is that people are not great at maintaining confidence. People are fallible and frail. They fall apart and fail to stand up to the tests of life. There is nothing quite as unreliable as other people. If you're looking for one certainty in life, you can be assured of the fact that people lack true integrity.

- Leonard was searching for integrity as he sat in his underwear on the floor of his hotel room in New York City. He was looking for love. Not the kind of cartoonish love that sells Hallmark Cards on Valentines Day. It was the kind of love that reminds us we are created from dirt, that we will ultimately become dirt and that in-between, we are basically walking dirt bags. Leonard was looking to express the truth about love. It is by that truth that we are broken and by some mystery of the universe that we are loved.

Leonard was not from New York City; he was from Canada. But New York is where he searched for his identity. He wanted to make a name for himself. He was striving to stand out in the community of artists and musicians. Unfortunately, things were just not working out in the Pollyanna way he had imagined. Life was not a storybook. His life was more like a book of the Bible: a series of mixed-up, messed-up experiences. And, looking upward from the floor to the ceiling, he finally uttered the words that he'd struggled to express for so long:

"Baby, I've been here before,
I've seen this room and I've walked this floor;
I used to live alone before I knew ya,
And, I've seen your flag on the marble arch,
Love is not a victory march,
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah."

The song that Leonard Cohen wrote that night would go on to be one of the greatest hymns ever written. It would captivate the minds and hearts of countless people worldwide and it would set in their minds a new statement about love. It was a song that spoke of love in terms of both beauty and pain. It was honest and it was real. For that reason, people wanted to hear the words to Hallelujah over and over and over and over again.

From the dirt, Leonard created something beautiful. From the raw soil of his existence, Leonard somehow formed a thing of beauty that was a powerful expression of his inner soul. And for years to come he would hear the world say the words, "It is very, very, very, very good!"

- God wants us to stand before God in all of our truth. God wants us to be confident and to speak the love that we have experienced. God wants our trust.

Admittedly, it is intimidating to encounter the great I AM. It is difficult to see how vulnerable and exposed we are before our Creator. And, there is an evil and horrible narrative that would claim that a relationship with God would deprive us of our true potential. We are destined to stand before I AM and say—albeit in all of our frailty—the words, "I am."

The absolute most confident people that I have ever met are people who are totally convinced that God loves them and that God has their best interests in mind. These same people are the ones who are also keenly aware of their dustiness and brokenness. They are not afraid to admit that they have turned their backs on God and most likely will continue to do so despite their greatest hope at remaining faithful.

What makes these people so confident is not their own abilities. Their confidence is a direct extension of their faith. It is a direct reflection of a God in whom their confidence is well-placed.