

**KYLE IDLEMAN  
MARK E. MOORE**

**INCLUDES VIDEO ACCESS**

**A SIX-SESSION STUDY ON  
ENCOUNTERING THE JESUS  
WE CAN NO LONGER IGNORE**



**THE  
MISSING  
MESSIAH**

**STUDY GUIDE**

# **THE MISSING MESSIAH STUDY GUIDE**



**KYLE IDLEMAN  
MARK E. MOORE**

**WITH VINCE ANTONUCCI**

**A SIX-SESSION STUDY ON  
ENCOUNTERING THE JESUS  
WE CAN NO LONGER IGNORE**



**THE  
MISSING  
MESSIAH  
STUDY GUIDE**

Visit Tyndale online at [tyndale.com](http://tyndale.com).  
Visit Tyndale Christian Resources online at [tyndalechristianresources.com](http://tyndalechristianresources.com).  
Visit the authors online at [kyleidleman.com](http://kyleidleman.com) and [markmoore.org](http://markmoore.org).

*Tyndale*, Tyndale’s quill logo, *Tyndale Elevate*, and the Tyndale Elevate logo are registered and/or common law trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries in the USA and various other jurisdictions around the world. All rights reserved. See [tyndale.com](http://tyndale.com) for a full list of trademarks owned by Tyndale House Ministries. Tyndale Elevate is a nonfiction imprint of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois.

*The Missing Messiah Study Guide: A Six-Session Study on Encountering the Jesus We Can No Longer Ignore*

Copyright © 2026 by Kyle Idleman and Mark E. Moore. All rights reserved.  
Kyle Idleman author photograph copyright © 2023 by Geoffrey Busse. All rights reserved.  
Mark E. Moore author photograph copyright © 2020 by Joanna Polling. All rights reserved.  
Cover design and crown illustration by Libby Dykstra. Copyright © Tyndale House Ministries. All rights reserved.  
Interior design by Brandi Davis

Published in association with Don Gates of the literary agency The Gates Group; [the-gates-group.com](http://the-gates-group.com).

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® *NIV*.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

The URLs in this book were verified prior to publication. The publisher is not responsible for content in the links, links that have expired, or websites that have changed ownership after that time.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at [csresponse@tyndale.com](mailto:csresponse@tyndale.com), or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 979-8-4005-2555-1

Printed in the United States of America

|    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 32 | 31 | 30 | 29 | 28 | 27 | 26 |
| 7  | 6  | 5  | 4  | 3  | 2  | 1  |

# CONTENTS

|                     |                                                               |     |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b> | Welcome to the Study Guide<br>for <i>The Missing Messiah!</i> | 1   |
|                     | Note to Leaders                                               | 5   |
| <b>SESSION 1</b>    | Recovering the Real Messiah                                   | 9   |
| <b>SESSION 2</b>    | The Morphing Messiah                                          | 37  |
| <b>SESSION 3</b>    | Discovering the Messiah                                       | 65  |
| <b>SESSION 4</b>    | The Messiah No One Saw Coming                                 | 93  |
| <b>SESSION 5</b>    | The Comeback That Proved His Messiahship                      | 121 |
| <b>SESSION 6</b>    | Following the Messiah Together                                | 149 |
| <b>A FINAL WORD</b> | Following the Messiah Forward                                 | 177 |
|                     | Notes                                                         | 179 |
|                     | About the Authors                                             | 183 |



## INTRODUCTION

# WELCOME TO THE STUDY GUIDE FOR *THE MISSING MESSIAH*!

This study is designed to help you go deeper into God's Word as you read *The Missing Messiah* and reflect on what it means that Jesus is not only Savior but also Messiah and King. Throughout this journey, you'll discover how we often subconsciously reshape Jesus into someone familiar and comfortable and how life-changing it is to rediscover him as the true, promised King, as revealed in Scripture.

Many people believe in Jesus and admire him, yet they miss what early Christians understood so clearly: that calling Jesus *Messiah* isn't simply a religious label but a declaration of allegiance. This study will help you recover that meaning. You'll explore what Scripture says about the Messiah, how cultural assumptions have reshaped our understanding of Jesus, and how his life, death, and resurrection reveal him as King over every part of life.

You may be coming to this study with lots of years of following Jesus in your back pocket, or you may be approaching this topic with your share of questions. Maybe you're hoping to lead a group to go deeper with the true Jesus, or perhaps you accepted a friend's

invitation to explore who Jesus is. Maybe you sense there's more to faith than private belief or spiritual comfort, or maybe you wonder if we've lost something vital in how we talk about Jesus today. No matter where you're coming from, you're invited to approach this journey with openness and curiosity. If you do, you will not only learn more about Jesus—you may begin to see him more clearly than ever before.

Our study will reveal how the story of the Messiah stretches from Genesis to Revelation, how Jesus fulfills our deepest hopes, and why the resurrection is not simply a beautiful ending but the coronation of the King. You'll see how Jesus exceeded expectations, how the church has sometimes reshaped him to fit cultural preferences, and what it truly means to follow him as Rabbi, Lord, and King.

## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This guide is designed for a six-week experience. Each week includes group teaching and discussion, along with daily reflections intended to help you live out what you're learning in real and practical ways. Note that day 5 of each week is intended to be a catch-up day and give you space to reflect on what you've learned over the past few days. While walking through this guide together in community is especially powerful, it can also be used for personal devotion and growth.

This study is designed to work in three integrated ways:

- **The book:** Each week corresponds to specific chapters in *The Missing Messiah*. Read the specified chapters before your group session to lay the foundation for your conversation.
- **The video:** Each session includes a teaching video that introduces the week's theme and sets up the group discussion. Videos can be accessed at [tyndale.life/redeem](http://tyndale.life/redeem) using the unique digital access code provided at the beginning of this book.
- **Personal study:** Each week includes five days of guided personal reflection. After each group session, work through

the reflection questions on your own. These daily studies will help you dig deeper into Scripture, examine your own assumptions about Jesus, and apply what you're learning to everyday life.

You can engage with this study in a group or on your own. If you're going through it independently, read the assigned chapters, watch the teaching video, reflect on the discussion questions, and complete the daily studies at your own pace.

This study is especially impactful in community. If you're going through it in a group, read the assigned chapters before each group meeting and gather weekly to watch the teaching video together, discuss the questions, and encourage one another as you work through the personal reflections during the week.

If you're leading a group, the "Note to Leaders" section provides guidance for facilitating group discussions.

## **FROM INFORMATION TO TRANSFORMATION**

*The Missing Messiah* calls us back to an essential truth about Jesus: that he's not simply a spiritual accessory but the promised King. This study guide is intended to move you from information to transformation. On these pages, you will take the truths explored in the book and bring them into your daily life through reflection, discussion, and application. Whether you engage in this study on your own or with a group, you'll be challenged to examine where you may have unknowingly reshaped Jesus to fit your preferences and invited to rediscover him as he truly is—the Messiah who calls you to wholehearted allegiance.

As you walk through the next six weeks, may your understanding of Jesus grow deeper, your allegiance to him grow stronger, and your love for him grow richer. May you rediscover the Messiah—not a customized version shaped by culture but the true King who calls us

to follow him with our whole lives. And may that rediscovery lead you to a renewed, vibrant, and life-shaping faith.

**If you're working through this study with a group, please read chapters 1–3 of *The Missing Messiah* before your first group session.**

# NOTE TO LEADERS

Thank you for leading this study! Your role is vital in helping participants rediscover Jesus as the true Messiah and King. This guide is designed to make your job easier while creating space for meaningful conversation and personal growth.

## SUGGESTED SESSION STRUCTURE

Note that the suggested group session time is 90 minutes.

- **Welcome and connect (approximately 10 minutes):** Use the “Connect” questions to help participants connect with one another and share insights from the previous week’s personal study. This time builds community and sets the tone for authentic discussion.
- **Watch the video (approximately 25 minutes):** Play the teaching video for the session. Encourage participants to take notes using the space provided.

- **Group discussion (approximately 30–45 minutes):** Work through the “Discuss” questions together. You don’t need to cover every question—select the ones that are most relevant for your group. Listen for how the Spirit is moving and allow the conversation to go deeper rather than rushing to cover everything.
- **Respond (approximately 5 minutes):** Give people a few minutes to answer the “Respond” questions on their own.
- **Closing, prayer, and preview (approximately 5–10 minutes):** Briefly preview the week’s personal study and close in prayer. Encourage participants to read the assigned chapters and complete the daily reflections before the next session.

## TIPS FOR LEADING WELL

- **Read ahead:** Complete the week’s reading and personal study before the session so you can guide the discussion with confidence.
- **Create a safe space:** Encourage honesty and vulnerability. Not everyone will be in the same place spiritually—and that’s okay.
- **Don’t feel pressure to have all the answers:** Your role is to facilitate, not to be the expert. It’s fine to say, “That’s a great question—let’s explore that together.”
- **Watch the clock but hold it loosely:** Some conversations are worth extending. If you’re running short on time, focus on fewer questions with greater depth.
- **Point people back to Scripture:** This study is rooted in God’s Word. When questions arise, help the group discover answers in the biblical text.
- **Pray for your group:** Ask God to open hearts, challenge assumptions, and draw each person closer to Jesus as King.

**WHAT YOUR GROUP WILL GAIN**

By the end of this study, participants will have a deeper understanding of who Jesus truly is—not the watered-down version created by culture but the promised Messiah and King. They'll be equipped to examine their own beliefs, identify where they've reshaped Jesus, and respond to him with wholehearted allegiance. More than information, this study aims for transformation—a renewed faith that shapes every area of life.





## **SESSION 1**

---

# **RECOVERING THE REAL MESSIAH**



## SESSION 1

# GROUP STUDY



## WELCOME

In 2012, the art world was shocked by the unveiling of a new version of the *Mona Lisa*, which some claimed had been painted by da Vinci himself. The portrait, resembling classical Renaissance style, had been displayed for decades. Experts gathered to determine whether it was the masterpiece some claimed it to be.

At first glance, everything seemed right. But under infrared analysis, experts discovered that the layering, pigmentation, and painting technique didn't match Leonardo da Vinci's. It wasn't a malicious forgery; it was simply a painting that resembled the original enough to be mistaken for it.

It looked like da Vinci. It honored da Vinci. It just *wasn't* da Vinci.<sup>1</sup> Many of us have unknowingly done the same thing with Jesus.

We believe in him. We worship him. We pray in his name. But over time, we've added layers—cultural expectations, political assumptions, personal preferences, therapeutic comfort—and ended up with a Jesus who resembles the original yet misses his true identity.

A Jesus who blesses our lives but doesn't rule them.

A Jesus who comforts but doesn't command.

A Jesus who saves us from sin but not from self-sovereignty.

The real Messiah isn't just a personal Savior; he's a King. And kings don't exist to fit into our lives; they reorder them.

When Peter declared, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16), he wasn't making a statement of affection; he was pledging allegiance. *Messiah* wasn't a spiritual nickname but a royal title meaning "God's chosen King." The early church risked their lives not because Jesus made them feel forgiven but because he claimed the throne.

This week, as we look at who Jesus truly is, consider this question: Have you embraced the real Messiah or just a familiar imitation?

He's far more demanding than the Jesus we often prefer. But he's also far more glorious.

## CONNECT

If any of your group members don't know each other, take a few minutes to introduce yourselves. Then discuss one or both of the following questions:

Why did you decide to join this study? What do you hope to learn?

Think of a time when you met someone in person and they were different from what you expected. What surprised you most?

## **WATCH**

Watch the session 1 video together. *To access this video session, follow the instructions located at the front of this book.*

## **NOTES**

## **DISCUSS**

Discuss what you read this week and what you learned from the video by working through these questions.

1. Invite someone to read Matthew 16:13-17. Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, God's chosen King. What do you think Peter understood about this title that we often miss today? How might understanding this shift how we relate to Jesus?

2. The book describes how we've created a "Build-A-Jesus"—customizing him to fit our preferences rather than surrendering to his lordship. What are some common ways Christians today might unconsciously customize Jesus to avoid his more challenging teachings or demands?
  
3. Jesus said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23, NLT). How does this radical call to discipleship contrast with our comfortable Christianity that asks little of us? What would it look like to "take up your cross daily" in your life?
  
4. Throughout history, people have distorted Jesus to support their agendas—from Crusaders to slave owners to prosperity preachers. What are the warning signs that we're reshaping Jesus in our own image rather than being reshaped by him? How can we guard against this in our own lives?
  
5. If someone asked you why it matters that Jesus is both Savior and Messiah, how would you answer?

**RESPOND**

In this session, we've confronted the difference between a Jesus shaped by our culture and the Messiah revealed in Scripture. Take a few minutes to reflect on how Jesus' kingship might reshape your priorities, decisions, and allegiances.

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.

He existed before anything was created and is supreme over  
all creation,

for through him God created everything  
in the heavenly realms and on earth.

He made the things we can see  
and the things we can't see—

such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen  
world.

Everything was created through him and for him.

He existed before anything else,  
and he holds all creation together.

Christ is also the head of the church,  
which is his body.

He is the beginning,  
supreme over all who rise from the dead.

So he is first in everything.

For God in all his fullness  
was pleased to live in Christ,  
and through him God reconciled  
everything to himself.

He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth  
by means of Christ's blood on the cross.

**COLOSSIANS 1:15-20, NLT**

Paul describes Jesus as the Creator, sustainer, and head of the church. Which of these roles most stretches your understanding of who Jesus is? Why?

Paul says Jesus must be “supreme . . . in everything” (verse 18). What is one area of your life where Jesus is currently not supreme? What would change if he were?

## **PRAY**

Close your time together in prayer.

- Thank Jesus not only for saving you but also for reigning over your life as King.
- Ask him to expose any places where you have shaped him into your own image and ask for courage to follow him as the true Messiah.
- Pray that your group would pursue allegiance, not just admiration, in the weeks ahead.

## SESSION 1

# PERSONAL STUDY



As we progress through the book, group discussions, and Bible studies, each week will build on the last, moving from recognizing the true Messiah to reshaping our lives around him.

Throughout this first week, we will explore what it truly means to know Jesus as the Messiah—not a customized version we’ve created but the revolutionary King revealed in Scripture. This week focuses on identity: who Jesus truly is and why getting that answer right changes everything else. Each day will help you think more deeply about how we’ve domesticated Jesus and what it means to follow him on his terms.

As you work through each of these exercises, make sure to write down your responses. (If you’re engaging in this study as part of a group, you’ll have a few minutes to share your insights at the start of the next session.)



## WHEN WE MAKE JESUS IN OUR IMAGE

In the early 2010s, the *Oxford English Dictionary* added a secondary definition to the word *literally*: “used for emphasis while not being literally true.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, *literally* could now officially mean . . . not literally. Why? Because widespread misuse (“I literally died laughing”) became common enough that the dictionary adapted to popular usage rather than strictly adhering to the original meaning.

Language evolves, and sometimes that’s harmless—even helpful. But when this happens with Jesus—when we redefine who he is based on how we prefer to see him—we end up with a version that contradicts the original.

“Jesus is love” becomes code for “Jesus approves of whatever I want to do.”

“Jesus brings peace” becomes “Jesus wants me comfortable and undisturbed.”

“Jesus saves” becomes “Jesus fixes my problems” rather than “Jesus rescues me from rebellion against God.”

The real Jesus hasn’t changed. But our cultural dictionary has redefined him into someone he never claimed to be.

That happens subtly.

Culture applies pressure—through politics, comfort, relationships, and personal desires—and it feels easier to reshape Jesus into a socially acceptable mascot rather than honor him as a sovereign King. We want the Jesus who heals, forgives, and helps us succeed but not the Jesus who overturns tables, confronts sin, rebukes pride, and calls us to die to ourselves.

The real Jesus doesn't come to agree with us—he comes to rule us.

He asserts unmatched authority: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18).

He demands costly allegiance: “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23, NLT).

And he warns that many will settle for a counterfeit: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matthew 15:8).

The question this study raises isn't whether Jesus loves us—he absolutely does. The question is whether we love the real him or merely a custom-built version that fits our preferences.

A Jesus who always agrees with you isn't your Savior—he's your reflection.

The real Messiah is worth following precisely because he confronts us. If he never challenges your values, priorities, or comfort, it may be a sign you've stopped following him and started following *you*.

Today is an invitation to let Jesus define Jesus—and to let him define us.

## READ AND RESPOND

Read Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 9:23-26; Matthew 15:1-9.

1. Before Jesus ascended, he declared that all authority in heaven and on earth belonged to him. He commissioned his followers to make disciples of every nation. How does Jesus' claim of total authority challenge the way people often treat faith as optional or private?
2. In Luke 9:23-26, Jesus describes discipleship not as belief alone but as self-denial, daily surrender, and willingness to lose our lives for his sake. What specific comfort, habit, or priority might Jesus be calling you to surrender to follow him more fully?

3. Write down assumptions you hold about Jesus. Where might they come from (culture? upbringing? personal preference?)? What does the Bible *actually* say about Jesus?

| My Assumption About Jesus | Where It Came From | What Scripture Actually Shows |
|---------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
|                           |                    |                               |
|                           |                    |                               |
|                           |                    |                               |
|                           |                    |                               |
|                           |                    |                               |
|                           |                    |                               |

4. In Matthew 15, Jesus rebukes the religious leaders for honoring God outwardly while resisting him inwardly, for keeping tradition but ignoring obedience. Where do you feel the tension between honoring Jesus publicly and obeying him privately in your own life?
5. What is one specific action you will take this week to follow Jesus as he truly is, not as you prefer him to be?

## DAY 2

# THE MESSIAH WHO CONFRONTS OUR ALLEGIANCES

While most of the world barely noticed, something remarkable happened in the Kingdom of Tonga: Some fifteen thousand Tongans traveled from across the globe in 2015, sacrificing time and expense to witness the coronation of King Tupou VI. As the newly crowned monarch proceeded through the streets of Nuku'alofa from church to palace, hundreds of schoolchildren sat for hours in the heat, dressed in traditional attire and seated on woven mats, creating a guard of honor for their sovereign. The celebration, rooted in rituals a thousand years old, lasted eleven days.<sup>3</sup>

They weren't celebrating a political figure; they were submitting to a king.

Westerners often struggle to identify with this concept because we relate to leadership through preference: We vote people into office, criticize them on social media, replace them when disappointed, and "follow" them only as long as it benefits us. Allegiance is conditional.

When Jesus arrives announcing, "The Kingdom of God is near," we tend to interpret him only as someone who is bringing something to help us, not as someone who is coming to reign over us.

But Scripture consistently presents Jesus not as a personal life coach but as the promised King who was foretold for centuries: “A child is born to us. . . . The government will rest on his shoulders” (Isaiah 9:6, NLT).

Jesus doesn’t merely save us from sin—he calls us into his Kingdom, where his authority reshapes reality: “He has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son” (Colossians 1:13, NLT).

That’s why the early church was persecuted—not for worshiping Jesus privately but for publicly declaring, “Jesus is Lord.” In Rome, that phrase wasn’t a religious catchphrase; it was treason. To claim Jesus as King was to say Caesar wasn’t.

Today we don’t face emperors, but we do face competing allegiances—career, family expectations, ideology, nationalism, self-autonomy. The question is no longer “Who is Caesar?” but “Who or what gets the final say in your life?”

Calling Jesus *Messiah* forces a choice: Will we worship the King who confronts us or the version of Jesus who agrees with us?

The real King doesn’t fit into our priorities—he defines them. And that’s not limiting; it’s freeing. Because whatever sits on the throne of your life rules you, regardless. Better a King who loves you than a kingdom you must sustain.

READ AND RESPOND

Read Isaiah 9:6-7; Colossians 1:13-14; Philippians 2:9-11.

- 1. Isaiah prophesies about a coming King whose rule is eternal and whose government rests on his shoulders, not ours. How do these verses expand your view of what Jesus came to do beyond forgiving sins?
- 2. In Colossians 1, Paul describes salvation as a transfer of kingdoms—out of darkness and into the reign of Christ. How does thinking in terms of “kingdom transfer” change how you understand discipleship and obedience?
- 3. Which earthly loyalties most compete with Jesus’ reign in your life (success, safety, approval, political identity, comfort, control)? Rank the top three and reflect briefly on the implications.

| Competing Allegiance | How It Competes | What Surrender Might Look Like |
|----------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| 1.                   |                 |                                |
| 2.                   |                 |                                |
| 3.                   |                 |                                |



### DAY 3

## THE LONGING FOR THE REAL MESSIAH

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis observed something profound: Every natural desire corresponds to something real. We feel hunger because food exists, fatigue because sleep exists, thirst because water exists. But there is another hunger: a longing for meaning, wholeness, justice, and transcendence that nothing in this world can fill. Lewis concluded that this desire points beyond the world itself: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”<sup>4</sup>

Centuries earlier, Augustine reached a similar conclusion in *Confessions*, writing that human beings were created for God and therefore remain restless until they find their rest in him.<sup>5</sup> The human ache for fulfillment is not merely psychological—it’s theological. We were designed to belong to the King.

We are drawn to stories of redemption, sacrifice, and rescue because they echo the story we were made for. This is why political movements promise hope, relationships promise completion, careers

promise identity, and possessions promise security: All are counterfeit kings attempting to satisfy a messianic longing woven into our souls.

Yet every substitute eventually fails.

The people of Israel experienced this cycle repeatedly. They longed for a king who would rescue, rule, and restore them—and ended up disappointed whenever they trusted human rulers. Only when Jesus arrived did those ancient longings find their fulfillment: “I, the LORD, will rule from Jerusalem as their king forever” (Micah 4:7, NLT).

Jesus doesn’t simply answer spiritual questions; he satisfies spiritual hunger. He is not one option among many; he’s the one every other hope imitates but can’t match. He satisfies us not only by comforting us but by reorienting our deepest desires. The Messiah doesn’t just fill our hunger; he reshapes what we hunger for.

This explains why following Jesus often feels like surrender rather than self-fulfillment. The path to satisfaction is not self-expression—it’s allegiance.

Our souls were not designed to thrive under autonomy but under a good King.

The question is not whether you worship something; it’s whether what you worship can bear the weight of your soul.

Only the real Messiah can.

## READ AND RESPOND

Read Micah 4:6-8; Psalm 42:1-2; John 6:35-40.

1. In Micah's prophecy, God promises a future Kingdom where he himself reigns over his people. How does this vision of God as King speak to the deep longings people carry—longings for justice, security, and belonging?
2. In Psalm 42, David describes his soul longing for God like a deer thirsting for water. When have you felt a deep spiritual longing? What were you seeking at the time, and did you recognize it as hunger for God?
3. Where do you find yourself seeking ultimate satisfaction? Put an *X* in the spot that best represents your current reality.

● ————— ●

Worldly Solutions Jesus as Messiah

What might help you shift more toward "Jesus as Messiah"?



## REPRESENTING THE REAL MESSIAH TO THE WORLD

A 2020 survey of more than three thousand people in the United Kingdom found that 71 percent edit their selfies before posting them on social media. Only 29 percent would post an unedited photo. The changes are usually subtle—adjusting lighting, smoothing skin, whitening teeth, slimming a face. Apps like Facetune, downloaded tens of millions of times, make professional-level retouching available to anyone with a smartphone.<sup>6</sup> A 2021 study found that the vast majority of young women reported using filters or editing tools to even out skin tone, reshape facial features, or adjust body proportions before posting.<sup>7</sup>

The motivation is understandable. When most people assume others are posting edited images, the pressure to keep up is real. People are presenting their most carefully curated selves.

Over time, this cycle of editing reshapes what we believe is normal, achievable, and true. When everyone presents a filtered version of themselves, reality itself becomes distorted.

Many Christians do something similar . . . with Jesus.

We present a filtered version of Christ to the world. We emphasize his love but edit out his lordship. We highlight his comfort while downplaying his commands. We showcase his acceptance and minimize his call to repentance. Slowly, we adjust his image until it feels safe, familiar, and culturally acceptable.

The result? We become ambassadors of a Jesus who looks right—but isn't fully real.

A Jesus who affirms without transforming.

A Jesus who comforts without confronting.

A Jesus who fits neatly into culture rather than challenging it.

Paul reminds us that we are Christ's ambassadors (see 2 Corinthians 5:20). Ambassadors don't edit the message to make it palatable. They represent their King faithfully, even when the unfiltered truth is uncomfortable.

The danger isn't just that we misunderstand Jesus ourselves—it's that we misrepresent him to a watching world. A filtered Christ may be easier to accept, but he lacks the power to transform.

The real Messiah doesn't need our filters. He calls us to represent him as he truly is—because only the unedited Jesus can truly change lives.

## READ AND RESPOND

Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; 1 Peter 2:9-12; Matthew 5:13-16.

1. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul says followers of Jesus are new creations and ambassadors of reconciliation. What does representing Jesus as an ambassador require beyond simply believing in him?
2. Paul calls us ambassadors, which means we deliver the message of the one we represent, not our own. If you were to honestly assess yourself, are you more tempted to add things to Jesus' message or to subtract difficult parts? What are you tempted to add or subtract? Why do you think that is?
3. Peter describes believers as a "royal priesthood" meant to declare God's goodness to the world (1 Peter 2:9). According to this passage, how does our holy living play a role in how others see Jesus?

4. How would others describe Jesus from watching your life?

Based on my words:

Based on my actions:

Based on my priorities:

What needs to change to give a clearer picture?

5. In Matthew 5, Jesus calls his followers salt and light—visible and distinct in the world. What is one environment where you will intentionally represent the real Jesus this week? What will you do differently to represent him more accurately?

## **DAY 5**

# **WRAP-UP**

Use this time to go back and complete any of the study and reflection questions from previous days that you were unable to finish. Make a note of any revelations you've had and reflect on any growth or personal insights you've gained.

**Read chapters 4–5 in *The Missing Messiah* before the next group session.** Use the space provided to make note of anything in those chapters that stands out to you or encourages you.