

A STUDY GUIDE FOR THE BOOK

A HOLY AMBITION

by JOHN PIPER

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Explanation of This Study Guide

This twelve-lesson study guide exists to encourage deeper engagement with and discussion about John Piper’s book *A Holy Ambition*. It was developed primarily for use in small groups, but it works individually.

Each lesson involves reading a chapter of the book, meditating upon what you’ve read, and answering questions. Each lesson’s study is divided into main two sections:

1. **Reading and Reflection:** This section contains seven core study questions designed to stimulate interaction with the content in the book.
2. **Digging Deeper:** This section is for those who want to pursue the subject matter of the lesson further. It contains three additional questions, almost all of them based on an additional resource by John Piper. These additional resources can be found by searching for their titles on the Desiring God website (www.desiringgod.org).

FOR LEADERS

As the group facilitator, it is important that you are familiar with the layout of this study guide. Read the “Explanation of the Study Guide” above, as well as the rest of this section *before the first meeting*. It may also be helpful to skim each lesson in order to better understand when key themes will be introduced and developed.

Prior to each group meeting, we recommend that you review the chapter and all of the questions in the lesson, including those in the “Digging Deeper” section.

In addition, make sure that you are regularly praying at every stage of your preparation and during the group meetings. As the leader, it is up to you to communicate that life change will only happen by the grace of God, and that one of the fundamental ways that we receive God’s grace is through earnest and heartfelt prayer.

Finally, you should seek to develop a basic plan for each group meeting. A suggested plan for a one-hour meeting is given below. You should, of course, feel free to adapt this resource to your group’s needs and limitations.

- **Introduction (10 minutes)**

Open with prayer. During the first lesson, if you are providing copies of *A*

Holy Ambition and this study guide for the members of your group, distribute them at this time. If the members of your group do not know one another, this may be an appropriate time for them to introduce themselves and share why they decided to participate in this group study. Depending on the size of your group, this portion of the meeting may take longer than 10 minutes. In subsequent lessons, this portion of the meeting may be shortened to allow more time for discussion.

- **Discussion (40 minutes)**

First Lesson: If the group members have not had a chance to work through the first lesson prior to the meeting, you can just go through it together. The simplest way to do this is probably to work through the questions one at a time, reading the relevant sections in the book and discussing and answering as you go.

Subsequent Lessons: We encourage you to be creative in your use of this study guide. You may find it helpful to work through the questions one at a time, discussing the answers as you go. On the other hand, it may be better to ask the members of your group which questions were most helpful for them. Encourage the group members to interact with one another and pursue a deeper understanding of the material. As the group leader, you should feel free to bring in additional passages of Scripture that help illumine the topic under discussion. We also encourage you to try pressing home the practical relevance of what you're studying.

- **Prayer (10 minutes)**

We encourage you to close each week in prayer. Pray that God would solidify the teaching that you've heard in your hearts and minds. Ask him to create in each member a heart that not only *knows* the truth, but *loves* the truth. Pray for opportunities to share what you've learned with others.

The Appendix in this study guide contains further reflection on how to lead and facilitate group discussions. This material is adapted from curriculum created by BCS Press, the publishing division of Bethlehem College and Seminary. For more information about BCS Press, visit their website at bcspress.org.

4. Piper says that holy ambitions exist to meet needs in the world. What would you say are the three most important “needs” that people have? Are there any other needs in the world that you are especially aware of right now?

5. Why is preaching the gospel to the whole world so important?

Now complete the chapter.

6. Piper describes the apostle Paul as a frontier (or pioneer) missionary. If Paul were ministering today, which regions or countries do you suppose he would go to?

7. What is the difference between a missionary and an evangelist?

DIGGING DEEPER

In the chapter subsection titled “The Nations Have No Excuse,” Piper says, based on Romans 2:12, “everybody will perish who does not hear the gospel.”

1. How would you answer a person who claims that God is unjust for sending people to hell who never had a chance to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ?

(For an extended, scriptural treatment of this issue, see Piper’s article “Is Jesus Christ Man’s Only Hope for Salvation?” at desiringGod.org.)

Listen to the resource “How can we cultivate a heart for the unreached?” at desiringGod.org.

2. What things does John Piper suggest you can do, apart from reading the Bible, to cultivate a heart for missions?

Read, watch, or listen to the resource “Why is differentiating between evangelism and missions important?” at desiringGod.org.

3. Why does Piper think it is so important to keep the distinction between missions and evangelism?

CHAPTER 2

“Missions: The Worship of Jesus and the Joy of All Peoples”

OBJECTIVES

It is our prayer that after you have finished this chapter you will...

- understand Jesus’s meaning of and motive for missions.
- become more aware of the current status of world missions.
- recognize and own the role of suffering in missions.

READING AND REFLECTION

Read until you get to the section titled “Disciple Is a Verb.”

1. What makes missions so important to God?

2. What does “go” in the Great Commission mean?

Now read “Disciple Is a Verb” and “Jesus’ Example.”

3. What does it mean to “make disciples”?

Read until you finish “Go-and-Disciple.”

4. When in history did God become concerned about missions?

5. What is Jesus's role in God's plan to bless all nations?

Now complete the chapter.

6. What danger is there in using the term "missional"?
7. How does suffering serve the cause of missions?

DIGGING DEEPER

Read John Piper's sermon "Go and Make Disciples, Baptizing Them..." at desiringGod.org.

1. According to Piper, what does it mean to become a disciple of Jesus?
2. How does baptism relate to discipleship?
3. In addition to baptizing, what does Piper say is essential to being a disciple-maker? How about being a disciple?

CHAPTER 3

“The Story of His Glory”

OBJECTIVES

It is our prayer that after you have finished this chapter you will...

- better understand why God loves his glory first and foremost.
- have a better idea of what it means to be created in the image of God.
- see how God’s sovereignty and passion for his name is good news.

READING AND REFLECTION

Read until you finish the section “God Is a Crown of Glory.”

1. What is the basis of God’s heart for missions, and why should we care to know it?

2. What can make it difficult for people to accept the basis of God’s heart for missions?

Now read until you finish “Salvation Evidence of God’s Wrath.”

3. What makes a person a good bearer of God’s image?

4. What determines whether God will save a person or not?

Read until you finish “Gospel Before the Gospel.”

5. How is God's concern for his name gospel-like?

Now complete the chapter.

6. Why did God have to kill his Son in order to save you?

7. How can God's heart for his own glory be good news for people?

DIGGING DEEPER

Read John Piper's article "How Is God's Passion for His Own Glory Not Selfishness?" at desiringGod.org.

1. How does Piper define God's love?
2. How is Jesus's love for Mary and Martha and Lazarus demonstrated in John 11?
3. What does the way in which God loves us mean for how we ought to love others?

CHAPTER 4

“Those Who Have Faith Are the Sons of Abraham”

OBJECTIVES

It is our prayer that after you have finished this chapter you will...

- understand what is (and isn't) required in order to be a son of Abraham.
- better grasp the blessing of justification.
- know the significance of having the Spirit of God.

READING AND REFLECTION

Read the first two sections, “Can You Be a Child of Abraham?” and “Not Dependent on Physical Descent.”

1. Who can become a son of Abraham, and how?

Now read the next section, “Was Paul’s View Biblical?”

2. Why did God choose Abram?

Read the section, “Must Be Like Abraham.”

3. What is the difference between being a Jew and being a son of Abraham?

Now read “Heirs of the Blessing of Abraham.”

4. What is so astonishing about Greeks being among Abraham's offspring (Galatians 3:28)?

Read the section "The Promise of Justification."

5. How does justification take away our fear of meeting an infinitely holy God?

Now read "The Promise of the Spirit."

6. How does the gift of the Spirit take away our fear of death?

Finish reading the chapter.

7. How is saving faith not like a ticket to Orchestra Hall?

DIGGING DEEPER

Read or listen to John Piper's sermon "God's Covenant with Abraham" at desiringGod.org.

1. In the section titled "Those Who Are Truly Abraham's Descendants" how does Piper describe Abraham-like faith?

CHAPTER 5

“If You Are Christ’s, You Are Heirs of the Promise”

OBJECTIVES

It is our prayer that after you have finished this chapter you will...

- realize what the role of the law was under the old covenant.
- comprehend how Christ has changed our relationship to law.
- better understand how to live by faith and the Spirit.

READING AND REFLECTION

Read the first section, “Confined Under Law.”

1. How was the law like a custodian to Israel?

2. How does faith change the way one perceives law?

Now read the next section, “Faith Has Come.”

3. What does the phrase “faith has come” mean?

4. What must happen in order for a person to have faith in God?

Read the next section, “United to Christ.”

5. Why can Christ not refuse those who entrust themselves to him?

6. How does being admitted by Christ by faith alone remove all ground for boasting?

Finish reading the chapter.

7. What does it mean that we are no longer under the law?

DIGGING DEEPER

Read John Piper's sermon "Why Then the Law?" at desiringGod.org.

1. Why is it important for us to understand why God gave the law to Israel?

2. In what ways did the law that came through Moses increase Israel's sin?

3. What lessons are there for us in the story of God's giving of the law to Israel?

CHAPTER 6

“Other Sheep That Are Not of This Fold”

OBJECTIVES

It is our prayer that after you have finished this chapter you will...

- recognize the strong doctrinal roots of recent missions history.
- understand Jesus’s missionary promise in John 10.
- increase in your confidence to do missions because of Jesus’s words.

READING AND REFLECTION

Read up to the beginning of the section titled “Six Observations from Christ’s Missionary Promise.”

1. What doctrines have been influential in fueling modern missions movements?

Read observations 1–4 under “Six Observations from Christ’s Missionary Promise.”

2. What determines whether or not a person will come to Jesus?

Now read observations 5 and 6.

3. Why will Jesus’s sheep never perish?
4. What danger can arise from the doctrine of God’s sovereignty over our salvation?

Read reasons 1 and 2 under “Four Reasons We Should Do Missions Confidently.”

5. How does the doctrine of election (predestination) make missions possible rather than pointless?

Now finish the chapter.

6. How does Jesus gather his sheep today?
7. How does the truth of God’s sovereignty in salvation help us when we are suffering or discouraged in ministry?

DIGGING DEEPER

Read or listen to John Piper’s sermon “I Have Authority to Lay It Down and I Have Authority to Take It Up Again” at desiringGod.org.

1. How is Jesus not like a hired hand?
2. What are the three wolves that threaten Jesus’s sheep?
3. What about Jesus makes him more than just a good shepherd who has given his life for the sheep of his fold?

CHAPTER 7

“The Unfathomable Riches of Christ, for All Peoples, Above All Powers, Through the Church”

OBJECTIVES

It is our prayer that after you have finished this chapter you will...

- develop a better sense of how you should be involved in missions.
- see the wisdom of God in how he is saving the church.
- understand more of what is in “the unsearchable riches of Christ.”

READING AND REFLECTION

Read the first section, “Four Steps.”

1. What is John Piper aiming for in this chapter/sermon?

Read the next section, “A Picture of These Four Steps.”

2. Why does Piper feel it’s right to imagine the display of God’s wisdom as a huge painting?

Now read the next section, “1. The Display of God’s Manifold Wisdom.”

3. What is the ultimate purpose of the universe and all history?
4. Who is the intended audience of God’s universe-sized painting?

Read “2. The Gathering of God’s Global Church.”

5. What is the “mystery” in Ephesians 3?

Read “3. The Preaching of Christ’s Unsearchable Riches.”

6. What are some of the things included in “the unsearchable riches of Christ”?

Finish the chapter.

7. Why does Paul mention that he is “the very least of all the saints”?

DIGGING DEEPER

Read or listen to John Piper’s sermon “The Cosmic Church” at desiringGod.org.

1. What reasons does Piper give for saying that the church of Jesus Christ is the most important institution in the world?
2. What do we know from the book of Ephesians about who “the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” are?
3. How does the church of Jesus Christ make known the wisdom of God to “the principalities and powers in the heavenly places”?

CHAPTER 8

“The Aroma of Christ Among the Nations”

OBJECTIVES

It is our prayer that after you have finished this chapter you will ...

- know what it means to be led by Christ “in triumphal procession.”
- understand how Christ can be an aroma of both life and death.
- see where the sufficiency to be a missionary comes from.

READING AND REFLECTION

Read the first section, “The Apostle Paul: Frontier Missionary.”

1. What does it mean to be a “frontier missionary”?

2. What are at least three reasons for going into missions?

Read until you finish the section “Paul Was Conquered in Christ.”

3. What does it mean that God “in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession” (2 Corinthians 2:14)?

Now read the section titled “A Picture Accomplishing Two Purposes.”

4. Why did Paul use the triumphal procession imagery to describe his ministry?

Read “A Second Picture.”

5. What is the second image Paul uses to describe his ministry?

Now read “The Heart-Rejoicing Side of Missions.”

6. How does the smell of Christ’s death become, for some, the fragrance of life?

Finish the chapter.

7. How would you know it if God was calling you to be a missionary?

DIGGING DEEPER

Read John Piper’s article “Is God Calling You to Give Your Life for His Sake and the Gospel in Missions?” at desiringGod.org.

1. What sets the Bible apart as a means for discerning God’s calling on your life?
2. Do you believe it is necessary for a person to have “a burden” for a certain people group or need before committing to missions? Why or why not?
3. God called Saul and Barnabas into missions in the context of corporate worship. Why do you think corporate worship is an important factor in discerning God’s calling on your life?

CHAPTER 9

“Gospel to the Nations, Generosity to the Poor”

OBJECTIVES

It is our prayer that after you have finished this chapter you will...

- know what united the early church in their understanding of the gospel.
- see how a concern for the poor flows from the heart of the gospel.
- discern the link between ministry to the poor and frontier missions.

READING AND REFLECTION

Read the first section, “Paul’s Gospel Is from Christ, Not Man.”

1. What is Paul defending in Galatians 2:1-10?

Now read the next four sections until you get to the section titled “Poor.”

2. How were the “false brothers” mentioned in Galatians 2:3-5 threatening the gospel?
3. What was so significant about Paul and Barnabas receiving the “right hand of fellowship” from the other apostles (Galatians 2:6-9)?

Read “Poor.”

4. In what ways is caring for the poor connected to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Now read the section titled “Gospel.”

5. What might tempt a missionary to alter the gospel message? And what are some things that could be done to prevent this?

Now finish the chapter.

6. What does Paul say in Romans 10 is required in order for a person to “call on the name of the Lord”?
7. What is the connection between poverty and frontier missions?

DIGGING DEEPER

Read or listen to John Piper’s sermon “Good News to the Poor” at desiringGod.org.

1. What was the reason for emphasizing the word “spread” in the new mission statement for Bethlehem Baptist Church?
2. Why should remembering the poor have an essential place in Christian ministry?
3. What implications does the first Christmas have for how we ought to minister to the poor?

CHAPTER 10

“Doing Missions When Dying Is Gain”

OBJECTIVES

It is our prayer that after you have finished this chapter you will...

- know the certainty of God’s plan to make disciples in every nation.
- understand how God uses suffering in the lives of his saints.
- see how faith in future grace enables saints to rejoice in this suffering.

READING AND REFLECTION

Read the section, “The Promise Is Sure.”

1. How can we know that God won’t go back on his Son’s ransom payment to save sinners from every people group?
2. What are four reasons for why we can be certain that the gospel will be believed within every people group on earth?

Read the next section, “The Price Is Suffering.”

3. What is dangerous about the way we typically prioritize safety in our lives?
4. Why is it important to know that the price of missions is suffering?

Now read “Suffering Is Also the Means.”

5. How is suffering the means of missions?
6. According to Piper, how should we view—and not view—retirement?

Finish the chapter.

7. Where does the strength to suffer in the cause of missions come from?

DIGGING DEEPER

Read or listen to John Piper’s biographical message on Adoniram Judson, titled “How Few There Are Who Die So Hard!” at desiringGod.org.

1. Why do you think God makes suffering the *strategy* or the *means* for his mission to make disciples of every nation when he could just as well do it another way?
2. What is it about the state of global missions today that cries out for “tremendous missionary effort and great missionary sacrifice”?
3. What about Adoniram Judson’s story is most instructive and/or inspiring for you?

CHAPTER 11

“I Am Sending You Out As Sheep in the Midst of Wolves”

OBJECTIVES

It is our prayer that after you have finished this chapter you will...

- understand the costs of doing frontier missions.
- know the blessings of doing frontier missions.
- see how the blessings far outweigh the costs.

READING AND REFLECTION

Read until you finish the section titled “Who Will Go?”

1. How do we know that Jesus is commanding modern-day believers to “make disciples of all nations”?

2. Who should consider the call to missions?

Read the next section, “The Coming of the Son of Man to Judge Israel.”

3. What does the “coming of the Son of Man” in Matthew 10:23 refer to?

Now read until you finish the section “Six Costs of Frontier Missions.”

4. What implications does Matthew 10:22 have for when and where we share the gospel?

5. Which of these six costs of frontier missions are you most fearful of, and why?

Now read “Ten Blessings of Frontier Missions.”

6. Which of these ten blessings is the most encouraging to you, and why?

Finish the chapter.

7. What are some ways that people can naively romanticize missions?

DIGGING DEEPER

Read or listen to John Piper’s conference message “How the Supremacy of Christ Creates Radical Christian Sacrifice” at desiringGod.org.

1. What does Piper think it means when Jesus calls us to be “salt” and “light” in Matthew 5?
2. What creates a heart to do “radical, risk-taking, sacrificial acts of love” in Christians?
3. What aspect of the glory of Christ will be what Christians see and savor most in eternity?

CHAPTER 12

“Declaring His Glory Among the Nations”

OBJECTIVES

It is our prayer that after you have finished this chapter you will ...

- know why, if you’ve believed in Jesus, God has left you on earth.
- see the glory of making the gospel known to every tribe on earth.
- understand the importance of singing in the Christian life.

READING AND REFLECTION

Read up through the section “Striking the Nations Note.”

1. What does John Piper imply is God’s purpose for keeping you on earth after you have come to know his salvation?

Read until you finish “2. Summon the Nations to Join In.”

2. Why is it not enough simply to convey the facts of the gospel?

Read until you get to the heading “Made to Sing of Glory.”

3. Why would it be a mistake to neglect preaching the gospel to every last tribe on earth?

Now read “Made to Sing of Glory.”

4. Why should we feel exhilarated about God’s plan to save people from every last tribe on earth?

Complete the next section, “The Largest Cause of All.”

5. Is it your experience that God’s purpose in missions is the “consummation of your significance in life”? Why or why not?

Now read until you finish “Striking the Singing Note.”

6. Why is it important that Christians be singers, and that we sing “new songs” to the Lord?

Finish the chapter.

7. Why should Jesus be the center of our singing?

DIGGING DEEPER

Read or listen to John Piper’s sermon “Missions: the Battle Cry of Christian Hedonism” at desiringGod.org.

1. How are the doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace incentives to do mission, rather than hindrances?
2. Why should we not view missionaries too heroically?
3. How is it “hedonistic” to be a missionary?

Review and Conclusion

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED?

Write a few paragraphs summarizing what you've learned through studying *A Holy Ambition*. For help, you may wish to review your answers to previous questions in this study guide. Also, write down any remaining questions you have related to the content of the book or study guide.

If you're going through this study guide with others, be prepared to share your summary and any remaining questions you have with the group.

Appendix: Leading Productive Group Discussions

Note: This material has been adapted from curricula produced by BCS Press, a ministry of Bethlehem Baptist Church. It is used by permission.

It is our conviction that the best group leaders foster an environment in their group that engages the participants. People of all ages learn by solving problems or by working through things that provoke curiosity or concern. Therefore, we discourage you from ever “lecturing” for the entire lesson. Although group leaders need to direct the conversation, clarifying and correcting as needed, they should not talk for the majority of the lesson. This study guide is meant to facilitate an investigation into biblical truth—an investigation that is shared by the group leader and the participants. Therefore, we encourage you to adopt the posture of a “fellow-learner” who invites participation from everyone in the group.

It might surprise you how eager people can be to share what they have learned in preparing for each lesson. Therefore, you should invite participation by asking your group participants to share their discoveries. Here are some of our “tips” on facilitating discussion that is engaging and helpful:

1. Don't be uncomfortable with silence initially. Once the first participant shares his or her response, others are likely to join in. But, if you cut the silence short by prompting them, then they are more likely to wait for you to prompt them every time.
2. Affirm every answer, if possible, and draw out the participants by asking for clarification. Your aim is to make them feel comfortable sharing their ideas and learning, so be extremely hesitant to “shut down” a participant's contribution or “trump” it with your own. This does not mean, however, that you shouldn't correct false ideas—just do it in a spirit of gentleness and love.
3. Don't allow a single participant, or group of participants, to dominate the discussion. Involve everyone, if possible, and intentionally invite participation from those who are more reserved or hesitant.
4. Labor to show the significance of each person's study. Emphasize the things that the participants could not have learned without doing the homework.

5. Avoid talking too much. The group leader should not monopolize the discussion, but rather guide and shape it. If the group leader does the majority of the talking, the participants will be less likely to interact and engage; and therefore they will not learn as much. Avoid constantly adding the “definitive last word.”
6. The group leader should feel the freedom to linger on a topic or question if the group demonstrates interest. The group leader *should* also pursue digressions that are helpful and relevant. There is a balance to this, however: the group leader should attempt to cover the material. So avoid the extreme of constantly wandering off topic, but also avoid the extreme of limiting the conversation in a way that squelches curiosity or learning.
7. The group leader’s passion, or lack of it, is infectious. If you demonstrate little enthusiasm for the material, it is almost inevitable that your participants will likewise be bored. But if you have a genuine excitement for what you are studying, and if you truly think Bible study is worthwhile, then your group will be impacted positively. Therefore it is our recommendation that, before you come to the group, you spend enough time working through the homework yourself and praying over it, so that you can overflow with genuine enthusiasm for the Bible and for God. This point cannot be stressed enough. Delight yourself in God and his Word!