GARDEN

Relational Evangelism Study

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

Week 5 - When the Pressure Is Off
Reflect, Research, and Build a Responsible Response

BIG IDEA

The space between conversations is one of our greatest advantages. We can use it to understand an objection fairly, study carefully, build a clear Christian response, and return better prepared.

How to Use This Study

Read the material aloud together, switching readers at each section break. When you reach a **DISCUSS** section, pause and discuss the questions as a group. When you reach a **REFLECT** or **MY STAGE THREE PROJECT** section, take a few minutes to write individually before continuing. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture passages should also be read aloud together.

> **No one needs to teach the lesson. Work through it together.**

Scripture First

As you read **Acts 17:10-12**, pay attention to the relationship between **openness, examination, and Scripture**. Then read **Proverbs 18:13, 15, and 17** and listen for what wisdom requires before reaching a conclusion.

Acts 17:10-12 and Proverbs 18:13, 15, 17

DISCUSS

1. What do the Bereans do with what Paul teaches them?

2. Why is eagerness alone not enough? Why is examination alone not enough?

3. What warnings do the Proverbs give about answering too quickly or hearing only one side?

4. How might these passages shape the way Christians research an objection to Christianity?

5. What would it look like to be both confident in Christianity and willing to examine arguments carefully?

The Conversation Is Over - Now What?

Last week you practiced asking better questions. Those questions can reveal what a person actually means, why they believe it, and where the real disagreement may be.

Then the conversation ends.

This is where many Christians stop thinking about it.

GARDEN asks us to do the opposite.

> **When the pressure is off, the preparation can begin.**

Nobody is standing in front of you waiting for an answer. You can slow down. Read. Listen. Compare. Think. Pray. Take notes. Change your mind about a weak argument. Find a better explanation.

Then, when appropriate, you can return.

This is the **R** in GARDEN: **Reflect & Research.**

Reflection Comes Before Research

Before opening a book, searching the web, watching a video, or asking AI, first reconstruct the conversation.

Ask yourself:

> **What exactly did the person say?**
> **What did I ask?**

What did they mean?
What reasons did they give?
What seemed important to them?
Where did I become uncertain?
What do I need to learn?

This prevents a common mistake: researching a broad topic instead of the actual issue.

Your friend may say, *"I don't believe in God because of science."* That could lead you into hundreds of hours of material.

But perhaps your questions revealed that what they really mean is:

"Evolution makes belief in a Creator unnecessary."

Now the research problem is much narrower.

Good questions make better research possible.

Step One - Steelman the Objection

To **steelman** an argument means to understand and state its strongest reasonable form rather than attacking a weak version of it.

The opposite is a **straw man**: simplifying or distorting someone's view so that it is easier to defeat.

Suppose someone says:

"If God created everything, who created God?"

A dismissive response might be:

"That is a stupid question. God is eternal."

But careful research asks what concern may be underneath the question.

Perhaps the person is really asking:

"If Christians explain the universe by appealing to God, why doesn't God require the same kind of explanation?"

That is a more serious question.

Before answering, you should be able to state the concern in a way the other person could say:

"Yes. That is what I mean."

That is a useful test of understanding.

REFLECT

Could the person in your Stage Three Project hear your description of their concern and say, "Yes, that is a fair statement of my view"?

Step Two - Identify the Christian Claim

Once you understand the objection, ask what Christianity actually commits you to.

This is important because Christians sometimes defend claims Christianity does not require.

For example, a discussion about science and faith may become tangled with a particular interpretation of Genesis. A discussion about suffering may become tangled with an explanation for one specific tragedy that Scripture never gives us.

Ask:

> **What does Scripture clearly teach?**
> **What is central Christian doctrine?**
> **Where do faithful Christians disagree?**
> **What am I personally adding that I do not need to defend?**

This helps keep the response focused.

> **Defend Christianity, not every opinion a Christian has ever held.**

Step Three - Find the Best Reasons and Evidence

Now investigate the issue itself.

Depending on the topic, useful material may include:

Scripture and biblical scholarship
philosophical arguments
historical evidence
scientific evidence and interpretation
theology
primary sources
scholarly work
careful popular-level explanations

Not every topic requires all of these.

Your task is to identify the material that actually bears on the question.

And remember Proverbs 18:17: the first case can sound persuasive until another side is heard.

> **Do not merely search for "Christian answer to _____." Learn enough to understand why thoughtful people disagree.**

How to Evaluate a Source

A polished video or confident speaker is not automatically reliable.

Ask several questions:

Expertise: Does this person know the field they are discussing?
Evidence: Do they give reasons and sources, or mostly assertions?
Fairness: Do they represent opposing views accurately?
Scope: Are they speaking inside their area of competence?
Agreement: Is the claim widely established, seriously disputed, or highly fringe?

Accountability: Can the claims be checked?

A useful communicator can still be wrong. A credentialed scholar can still argue badly. A source should be evaluated by more than a name or title.

> **Trusted voices are starting points, not substitutes for discernment.**

Step Four - Build the Answer in Your Own Words

Research is not finished when you have collected links.

You need to be able to explain what you learned.

A useful test is to prepare two versions:

The Short Version

Can you explain the core response in roughly one or two minutes using ordinary language?

The Deeper Version

If the person is interested, can you explain the reasoning, evidence, qualifications, and major objections in greater depth?

If you can only repeat a scholar's vocabulary, you may recognize the argument without really understanding it.

> **If you cannot explain it simply, keep working until you can.**

Simple does not mean simplistic. It means clear.

Step Five - Anticipate the Next Question

A prepared answer often produces another question.

If you explain one response to the problem of evil, someone may ask about animal suffering. If you discuss manuscript evidence, someone may ask about textual variants. If you argue that the universe had a beginning, someone may ask why God does not need a cause.

You do not need to anticipate everything.

But ask:

> **If I gave this answer, what would a thoughtful skeptic probably ask next?**

Then prepare for the most important follow-ups.

This is part of moving toward Stage Three readiness: **RESPOND**.

Step Six - Choose a Resource for the Person

The **D** in GARDEN is **Direct to Helpful Resources.**

Your research may uncover a strong article, video, podcast, book, debate, or other resource.

But the best resource academically is not always the best resource relationally.

Ask:

Is this appropriate for this person?
Is it too long?
Is it too technical?
Is the tone respectful?
Does it answer the question they actually raised?
Would I feel comfortable discussing it with them afterward?

Sometimes your own two-minute explanation is enough.

Sometimes a five-minute video is better.

Sometimes the person wants a book.

> **Resource selection is part of knowing the person, not merely knowing the topic.**

Using AI Without Outsourcing Your Thinking

AI can be extremely useful during the research process if we use it in the right role.

It can help you:

clarify terminology
identify the major versions of an argument
steelman an objection
compare competing explanations
generate questions to investigate
locate areas where you need stronger sources
practice possible follow-up questions

But AI can also be confidently wrong, oversimplify scholarly disagreements, invent details, or give an answer that sounds stronger than the evidence supports.

> **Use AI as an assistant, not an authority.**

For important claims, verify the underlying information through Scripture, primary sources, qualified scholarship, and other credible resources.

One useful AI prompt is:

> **"Give me the strongest version of this objection. Do not answer it yet. Explain the assumptions, evidence, and reasoning someone might use to defend it, and identify what I would need to research before responding."**

That approach makes AI help you think rather than merely handing you a comeback.

Conversation in Practice

Suppose your friend says:

> **"The resurrection stories contradict each other, so they cannot be historically reliable."**

After the conversation, you could search for a quick list of alleged contradictions and memorize rebuttals.

Or you could work more carefully:

UNDERSTAND

What specific differences does your friend have in mind? What standard are they using for contradiction?

STEELMAN

What are the strongest examples critics raise?

CHRISTIAN CLAIM

What does Christianity require us to affirm about the resurrection accounts? Does reliability require identical wording and selection of details?

EVIDENCE

What do careful New Testament scholars say about the relevant passages and ancient historical reporting?

EXPLAIN

Can you state the response in ordinary language rather than merely listing harmonizations?

RESPOND

What are the strongest follow-up objections?

RESOURCE

What source would actually help this particular friend?

DISCUSS

How is this process different from searching for a quick rebuttal?

Why should we investigate the strongest examples rather than the easiest ones?

What parts of this process require knowledge of the person as well as knowledge of the topic?

At what point would you feel prepared enough to return to the conversation?

MY STAGE THREE PROJECT

Week 5 - Build Your Response

This is the major research week of your Stage Three Project. Use the issue you have been developing since Week 2.

My person: _____

My issue:

1. UNDERSTAND - State the strongest version of the concern as fairly as you can.

2. CHRISTIAN CLAIM - What does Christianity actually teach that is relevant to this issue?

3. REASONS / EVIDENCE - What are the 2-4 most important points supporting the Christian response?

4. SHORT EXPLANATION - Explain the response in your own words as if you had about two minutes.

5. MAJOR FOLLOW-UPS - What are 2-3 likely objections or questions that could come next?

6. RESOURCE - Identify one resource appropriate for this person and explain why you chose it.

7. SOURCES I USED - Record the strongest sources you consulted so you can return to them.

> **Your goal is not to collect the most information. Your goal is to understand enough to explain the issue accurately, clearly, and fairly.**

Research Library and Trusted Voices

GARDEN's Research Library is designed to help you begin this process. Use the topic categories and resource types to locate material relevant to your question.

Do not feel obligated to consume everything.

> **Start with one strong overview. Then go deeper where the issue requires it.**

As you research, keep a simple record of what you used, what you learned, and what still seems unresolved.

If two thoughtful Christian sources disagree, do not panic. Identify what they agree about, where they differ, and whether the disagreement is central to the response you actually need to give.

DISCUSSION

1. Why is steelmanning an objection important for both truth and relationships?

2. What are the dangers of researching only Christian sources? What are the dangers of treating hostile sources as automatically more objective?

3. How do we distinguish a central Christian claim from a secondary position we do not actually need to defend?

4. What makes an apologetics resource trustworthy?

5. Why is explaining an answer in your own words a better test than recognizing it when someone else explains it?

6. How much research is enough before returning to a conversation?

7. What role should AI play in Christian research, and where should its role end?

8. How can research itself become a form of avoidance - always studying but never returning to the person?

This Week in the GARDEN

This week, use the space between conversations deliberately.

RECONSTRUCT

Write down the actual claim or concern your person has expressed. Separate their words from your interpretation.

STEELMAN

Learn the strongest reasonable version of the objection. Be able to state it fairly.

RESEARCH

Use Scripture and trustworthy resources to understand the Christian response, reasons, evidence, and major follow-ups.

EXPLAIN

Write and practice a short explanation in your own words. Say it aloud. Notice where you become vague or dependent on jargon.

RESOURCE

Choose one resource that fits the actual person - not merely the resource you found most impressive.

PRAY

Ask God for intellectual honesty, discernment, perseverance, humility, and wisdom about when and how to return to the conversation.

Pray Together

Pray for one another's research and for the people behind the questions.

Ask God to help you **love truth more than winning, understand before criticizing, prepare without becoming proud, and return to people rather than hiding in research.**

Before Week 6

Bring your Stage Three research and short explanation next week.

You should now be developing all five parts of Stage Three readiness:

UNDERSTAND -> QUESTION -> EXPLAIN -> RESPOND -> RESOURCE

Next week we will ask a different question:

Even if my answer is good, is it right for this person?

Week 6 will focus on knowing the person, not just the objection - their experiences, assumptions, temperament, history, and reasons - so that a true answer can also become a wise and personal response.