

Following Me

**What Jesus Wants You to Know
As You Begin the Journey with Him**

13 Lessons

By
Richard A. Borg

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Introduction

Welcome to the Family

At the beginning of Christ's earthly ministry he had a conversation with Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council (John, chapter 3). Jesus described the change God wants everyone to experience by comparing it to birth. Jesus calls this change a "rebirth" of a person's spirit by the Spirit of God. You experienced this rebirth when you placed your faith in Christ. When you received him as your Savior you became a child of God. John said it this way in his first chapter:

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. John 1:12-13

Welcome to the family of God!

From Milk to Solid Food

The Bible uses another comparison to help you understand how to grow up spiritually. Like a newborn infant grows by drinking milk, a "reborn" in God's family first grows by the milk of God's Word—the Bible. The Apostle Peter said it well:

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. I Peter 2:2-3

The New Testament letter to Jewish followers of Christ tells us this milk is "the elementary teachings about Christ" (Hebrews 6:1). It also informs us that "...solid food is for the mature who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14). This letter to the Hebrews encourages you to understand the elementary truths of your rebirth in Christ and then move on to solid food. In other words, don't remain an infant--"Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness" (5:13). Understand your rebirth--that's very important. Never forget! Then mature as a child of God. As you grow and mature, your spiritual appetite for the solid food of God's word will increase as well. Hopefully you will experience a deep hunger for the word of God. This is expected. It is one evidence of your rebirth!

"Following Me" introduces many of the elementary teachings Jesus wants you to understand as you begin your journey of following him. Each lesson title is a quote of Jesus. Listen to His voice. Look into His heart. Discover His promises and purposes. Follow Him with your whole heart!

Lesson 1

“...the Spirit gives birth to spirit...”

Jesus--John 3:6

Another Birthday – Who Would’ve Thought?!

Most people can remember where they were when some event occurred that rocked the world or changed history. The same is true for personal events like births or deaths or graduations or weddings. Fortunately no one remembers their own birth—that would be a painful memory!

Ten of us were sitting around a large table enjoying lunch when the host said, “Tell your story how you became a follower of Jesus.” By the time we finished all ten stories, we were amazed how unique each story was. Every follower of Christ vividly recalled the where, when, why, how and who of their experience of spiritual rebirth by the Spirit of God. Their stories were unique! But all the conclusions had a similar ring. Each person exclaimed some version of: “It changed my life!” “My guilt was gone!” “I felt loved!” “I was set free!” “It gave me hope!” So what is your story and how would you summarize your experience? Why not write it down right now? _____

Another birthday—who would’ve thought?! Well, it was God’s idea. It was his plan! Spiritual rebirth is the major theme of the Bible, and you will enjoy exploring it throughout your journey with Jesus. Christ himself gets you started by using several illustrations, which helped a man named Nicodemus and now you, to begin to understand what it means to be “born again”.

S.O.A.P. 1 – “...unless a man is born again...”

As a member of the Jewish ruling council, Nicodemus is aware that Jesus is gaining a large audience by his miracles and teachings. Pharisees like Nicodemus believed they were fully qualified for the kingdom of God because of their obedience to the Law of Moses and all of the many traditions. Jesus wastes no time in challenging Nicodemus’ self-righteousness in verse 3.

S.cripture – Read John 3:1-8

O.bservations

1. The Greek word translated “again” (vs. 3) can also be rendered, “from above”! Jesus is telling Nicodemus that God’s kingdom requires a spiritual rebirth from above. Does this seem mysterious or miraculous to you? Yes ____ No ____ Not Sure ____
2. Jesus uses the visible effects of the wind to illustrate the reality of the invisible wind. Can you think of other invisible realities in nature that leave a visible effect? Name some:

3. Jesus introduces Nicodemus to the reality of God's power by His Spirit to produce a rebirth of your spirit. What do you think about that? Circle as many as you want:
WOW! I need that I want that Cool I believe it Not sure Really? Why?

A.ppllications

1. As in the case of Nicodemus, describe how self-righteous you felt you were before you were reborn or "born from above".

2. As a newly born child in God's family, describe the various emotions you feel right now.

3. What are some of the outward and inward effects of your "born from above" experience?
Outward:

Inward:

4. What changes in your life do you want God to help you make?

P.rayer - Take a moment to thank and praise God your heavenly Father for the miracle of spiritual rebirth by the power of his Holy Spirit.

S.O.A.P. 2 – "For God so loved the world..."

Jesus reminds Nicodemus of the rebellion of the Israelites against God in the wilderness (Numbers 21: 4-9). God sent venomous snakes as judgment for their sin. But God also demonstrated his love and mercy by instructing Moses to construct a bronze snake on the end of a pole. If anyone who was bitten looked up in faith at the bronze snake, God healed them. By this historical event Jesus predicted his future crucifixion upon a Roman cross for the sins of all mankind.

S.cripture – Read John 3:13-18

O.bservations

1. How were the bronze snake on the pole (vs. 14) and the crucifixion of Jesus upon a cross tests of God's word and promise?
2. Does simply "believing" (vs. 15), or sincere faith and trust, seem too easy to receive eternal life? Yes _____ No _____ Not sure _____
3. On the other hand, does good works and self-righteousness seem to you to be too difficult to earn eternal life? Yes _____ No _____ Not sure _____

A.plications

1. Circle the words you would use to describe God's love according to verse 16:
Incredible Amazing Immeasurable Wonderful
Undeserved Sacrificial Overwhelming
2. Describe how you feel about God's forgiveness of your sin:
3. Describe how you feel about living eternally:
4. An extreme love that gives an extreme gift at extreme cost requires an extreme response. So how would you describe a worthy or appropriate response to God's gift of his Son and eternal life?

P.rayer – Humbly thank God for his outrageous gift of Jesus and commit to thank him every day.

S.O.A.P. 3 - "...light has come into the world..."

Jesus uses the easily understood nature of light and darkness to illustrate man's moral nature and greatest barrier to spiritual rebirth. Rebirth never occurs without the truth of light exposing the darkness of evil within the human heart. The truth and light of Christ leads us to confession of sin and a sorrow that leads to repentance (II Corinthians 7:10). To repent is to change direction of your life away from sin and toward Christ.

S.cripture – Read John 3:19-21

O.bservations

1. Based on verse 21, how would you describe the person who “lives by the truth” and “comes into the light”?
2. Describe what you think are some of the fears of exposure (vs. 20) of someone who lives in the darkness of evil?
3. Why do you think it is so difficult to admit, confess and repent of sin? Explain as best you can.

A.pplications

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how easy or difficult was it for you to admit, confess and repent of your sin? Circle one:
Very Easy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Difficult
2. What specifically held you back or made it difficult to come out of the darkness of evil?
3. What specific truth made it easy to come into the light of Jesus Christ?
4. How would you describe the state of your mind and emotions now that you have come to the light of Christ?

P.rayer – Thank God for the truth and light of Jesus Christ. Tell Jesus of your desire to follow him.

Further Thoughts

Three Often Asked Questions

Like the first disciples, new followers of Jesus ask many questions as well. This is natural and expected! Many of your questions will be answered as you move through these “Following Me” lessons that highlight the teachings of Jesus. For now let’s consider three often-asked questions regarding your spiritual rebirth by the Spirit of God (salvation).

Question One: “What happens when I sin – do I need to be reborn again?”

Good question. Remember and be assured that when you were born again you “became a child of God” (John 1:12) through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ as payment for your sin. But to be spiritually “born again” (John 3:3) does not mean you are suddenly free from temptations and sinful choices. When you sin your relationship as a child of God doesn’t end, just as disobedience to your earthly father or mother didn’t end that relationship. That would be cruel! Right?

So, just as you would seek forgiveness from your earthly parent, so you need to seek your heavenly Father’s forgiveness. John wrote this profound yet simple truth:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sin and purify us from all unrighteousness (I John 1:9).

Confession of sin with sincere repentance, which means “turning around and heading in the right direction”, takes you to God’s forgiveness that removes your guilt and cleanses your conscience.

Question Two: “Is there a special place for confession?”

Another good question! In God’s Word you will discover the many wonderful titles and roles of Jesus Christ. He is not only your Savior from sin, He is also your High Priest who represents you before God the Father (Hebrews 7:26-28). Jesus gives you immediate access to God by prayer anytime and anywhere. How good is that – right?

Furthermore, when you spend time alone with God each day you should include a time of reflection on the condition of your heart and conscience by asking God’s Spirit to expose or help you recall any sin in your life. This will keep your relationship with God the Father open and strong.

We will look deeper into the work of the Holy Spirit in Lesson 4 and the pleasure of spending time with God each day in Lesson 8.

Question Three: “So, if God is so willing to forgive, can I still enjoy my sinful pleasures?”

Now that’s a lousy question and here’s why. While your earthly parents may have been unaware, passive or weak, not so with your heavenly Father. In fact, God’s Word tells you that His Spirit is grieved by your sin (Ephesians 4:30), and furthermore, He disciplines His children (Hebrews 12:10). At the least or most, God allows your sinful choices to take their destructive toll on your life. To illustrate Jesus told the story of a wayward son who demanded his inheritance, left home, wasted his money on sinful pleasures, finally came to his senses, humbly

returned home, and to his surprise, he received his father's forgiveness (Luke 15:11-32). Though one wonders how long he lived with regret. Likewise, your heavenly Father offers you not only forgiveness but many sinless and guiltless pleasures that give you joy and strength.

Lesson 2

“If you have seen me...”

Jesus – John 14:9

Everything Makes Sense Now!

On a memorial slab of granite embedded in the floor of Westminster Abbey in London, England, is the name and a quote of the famous British scholar, C. S. Lewis. Lewis was a certifiable atheist who became a follower of Jesus Christ in his midlife. He would go on to write 22 books about his faith including the well-known and much-loved, “The Chronicles of Narnia”. The quote on the floor of the Abbey sums up well Lewis’ personal experience of spiritual rebirth. It reads,

“I believe in Christianity not because I see it, but by it I see everything.”

At the very heart of Christianity is the person of Jesus Christ. “If you have seen me...” Jesus said, “...you have seen God the Father”. To see and know Christ is to finally make sense of everything. In Christ, God the Father reveals the depth of his personal nature. Christ informs us he did not come to establish another religion but a spiritual kingdom with himself as the centerpiece. To know him is all you need to know. Through the lens of Christ you’ll see that everything makes sense now!

This lesson sets the table for “solid food” (Hebrews 5:13-14). You may not understand all you read, but you’ll return to these scriptures time and time again. Like prime filets they will always satisfy your hunger. They are the lyrics of the best songs you’ll ever sing or hear this side of heaven. Read John 1:1-18 and Colossians 1:15-23 back to back in one reading before you begin the S.O.A.P. exercises.

S.O.A.P. 1 – “...and the Word was God...” (John 1:1)

Both Genesis and John’s gospel start with “In the beginning....” John tells us at the moment of creation Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God, was God. In other words, Jesus Christ predates the beginning of time and matter. Jesus was crucified because of his relentless claim to be one with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. The Bible, written over several thousand years, is held together by the mystery of this divine trinity. “Three persons sharing one essence” is a common description. Each person has unique roles yet always remains interdependent in a holy harmony. Followers of Jesus often refer to the persons of the Trinity interchangeably which is both permissible and appropriate. Let’s observe the Trinity.

S.cripture – Read John 1:1, 2, 14, 17, 18; Colossians 1:15, 18, 19

O.bservations

1. Based on your present knowledge of Jesus, what did he reveal about God’s love and truth (John 1:14, 17, 18)?

Love:

Truth:

2. According to Colossians 1:15, 19, to what percent is Jesus Christ God the Father? Place an “X” on the line. 0% _____ 100%

A.pplications

1. Because Christ has “the supremacy” (Colossians 1:18), having perfectly revealed the Trinity to mankind, in what personal ways does Christ, in the words of C. S. Lewis, help you “see everything”? In other words, how do you see life differently than before?

2. How do you feel now about God’s love and truth in Christ?

Love:

Truth:

3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you measure your desire to know and experience more of God’s love and truth? Circle one:

Some 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Off the Chart

4. What actions could you take to fulfill your desire? Think of as many actions as possible and write them down here:

P.rayer – Thank God for sending Jesus to reveal his love and truth. Ask God for wisdom in choosing the best actions listed above.

S.O.A.P. 2 – “...by him [Christ] all things were created...” Colossians 1:16

Christ was the agent in the creation of the material universe. He also created mankind to reflect the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27)! This is what John meant when he wrote, “...that life [Christ the Word] was the light of men...” (John 1:4). As an image bearer you have amazing skills and capacities beyond your physical body. Your intellectual, emotional, social and communication abilities are proof that your life is not a godless evolutionary accident!

S.cripture – Read John 1:3-5; Colossians 1:16, 17

O.bservations

1. Based on John 1:3-5, name some specific skills and abilities that mankind possesses that reflect the “light of life” or image of God.

2. In your own words, how would you describe the power, intellect and wisdom of Jesus Christ to create “all things” (Colossians 1:16)? This is not a test!

Power:

Intellect:

Wisdom:

3. Based on Colossians 1:17, what “natural” forces are demonstrations of Christ “holding all things together”?

A.pPLICATIONS

1. What are some of your specific skills and abilities that reflect the “light of life” of Jesus the Creator?

2. In other words, list as many differences as you can between you and other forms of life:

3. For you personally, what best describes your origin? Circle one:

Evolutionary Accident Not Sure Yet Created by Jesus Christ

P.rayer – Thank God for the “light of life” that Jesus gave you to enjoy. Ask God to help you to better reflect his image in you.

S.O.A.P. 3 - Through Christ God Reconciled All Things (Colossians 1:20)

Jesus Christ is supreme (Colossians 1:18) because he perfectly revealed the Trinity and created the universe. But his supremacy doesn't end there. Christ's literal "crowning" achievement is the accomplishment of his mission to enter time and space to pay the debt of mankind's sin through death upon a Roman cross. Then he rose from the dead to secure eternal life for all who believe in him! Who else is worthy of your endless worship and undivided devotion? The following scriptures add to what you already observed in Christ's conversation with Nicodemus (John 3) about spiritual rebirth (Lesson 1).

S.cripture – Read Colossians 1:20-23; John 1:12, 13

O.bservations

1. In your own words, based on Colossians 1:20-23, how did God restore your relationship with himself?
2. How do you think this expresses the depth of God's love?
3. Describe how you "received" him (John 1:12) and became a child of God.

A.pPLICATIONS

1. What truth about your spiritual rebirth in these scriptures touches you deeply or was most helpful? Write it down here:
2. Can you recall the words you used in your prayer to "receive" Christ as your Savior? Write them down here as a reminder:
3. How does it feel to be "holy in God's sight" and "free from accusation" (Colossians 1:22)? Circle a number or word that measures your feelings:
Nice 1 2 3 4 Great 7 8 9 10 Overwhelming

P.rayer – Thank and praise Jesus Christ for his amazing accomplishment by his death and resurrection for you. Tell him of your desire to follow him for the rest of your life!

Further Thoughts

“...making peace through his blood, shed on the cross...” Col. 1:20

As you journey with Christ your understanding of his mission to the cross and its many results and effects and meanings will become like a multi-faceted diamond. The scriptures will introduce terms and concepts that broaden, deepen and heighten your gratitude, love and devotion to Christ. More will be sprinkled throughout these lessons. But before you leave this lesson, consider one more thought: the power of the shed blood of Christ (Colossians 1:20).

Two Covenants:

Whether or not you knew it, your sin made you an enemy of God and alienated from him (Colossians 1:23). Why? Because God, who is holy or morally perfect, created man to reflect his likeness and bring him glory. But Adam and Eve disobeyed God and passed on their sinful nature (Genesis 3). Moved by love, God made a covenant with Abraham. Under this covenant God required an offering of an animal blood sacrifice for his forgiveness of sin. Unfortunately, this practice had two major flaws – (1) as the payment for sin, the animal blood sacrifice had to be repeated over and over again; and (2) while the blood of the sacrifice was acceptable to God, the blood did not clear the conscience of the sinner. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews tells us:

This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper.
Hebrews 9:9

So God established a second covenant making the first covenant obsolete. Christ is sent to voluntarily offer himself as the morally perfect sacrifice, to shed his own blood for the forgiveness of sin. This second covenant is superior in at least two ways – (1) Christ’s blood was shed once and for all time – never to be repeated; and (2) Christ’s blood does clear the conscience of the sinner. The letter to the Hebrews continues:

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!
Hebrews 9:14

Can you think of a more profound peace? By the blood of Jesus Christ his followers enjoy peace with God and the peace of God. While your memory of sin may leave you with regret, it should not haunt you. Satan, the father of lies, will use your regret to convince you that God has not forgiven you. Don’t believe his lie. Live in the peace of God because you have peace with God. Your conscience is clear!

Lesson 3

“Follow me...”

Jesus – Matthew 16:24

The Journey of a Life-Time!

A great vacation journey is unforgettable if you leave behind everything familiar to experience the unpredictable. No matter how well the brochure describes it, the unforgettable journey exceeds all expectations. You can't wait to tell your stories. The memories are indelible and last a lifetime! Not every journey goes as planned. The unknown is filled with some risk-taking and even danger—like riding mules down into the Grand Canyon!

When Jesus said, “Follow me”, he invited his first disciples to an unforgettable journey of a literal lifetime. They could never have guessed or imagined what their life would be like or become! In a thousand days and nights each morning undoubtedly was greeted with this thought: “What will Jesus say or do today?” The disciple named John would conclude his journal with:

“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.” John 21:25

They would never look back with regret for their love of Christ. There was no promise of wealth or fame, only success in taking the mission forward to tell others the good news of Christ.

The cost of this journey of a lifetime with Jesus cannot be calculated. But however great the cost may be, it will seem small in comparison to God's love in this life and eternity. In this lesson you will begin to discover the cost and value of following Jesus.

S.O.A.P. 1 – Ordinary Sinners Make the Best Followers

As contemporary followers of Jesus we tend to think of the first followers as exceptional leaders and conclude that we don't fit the model – we're not really qualified. But at least three Biblical facts tell another story: (1) Jesus invited ordinary men out of ordinary lifestyles to join him – they were not the best and the brightest, and (2) there were many other disciples who were just as ordinary who did not travel with Jesus due to gender or responsibility, and (3) there were women as well such as Mary, Martha, Joanna, Magdalene, Susanna and “many more” (Luke 8:3). In other words, if you feel ordinary you qualify! Ordinary sinners make the best followers of Jesus!

S.cripture – Read Luke 5:1-11, 27-32; I Corinthians 1:26-31

O.bservations

1. How would you describe the work and character of commercial fishermen like Peter, James and John?
Their work:

Their character:
2. Why do you think Peter reacted the way he did (Luke 5:8) to the miracle catch of fish?
Think deeply!
3. Why do you think Jesus targeted sinners like Levi and his friends to follow him?
4. Summarize in your own words why and how Paul attacks human pride in I Corinthians 1:26ff?

A.plications

1. What was your heart and life like before you met Jesus?
2. How did you feel when you first encountered Jesus and your sinful heart was exposed to you?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how ordinary (unqualified) do you feel right now to follow Jesus?
Circle one:
Ordinary 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely Ordinary
4. How does Jesus make your life extraordinary regarding the following?
His wisdom?

His righteousness?

His holiness?

His redemption?

P.rayer – Humbly thank Jesus for turning your ordinary life into an extraordinary life for his glory.

S.O.A.P. 2 – Risk and Reward

Jesus was a master teacher always leaving his listeners wanting more. In addition to his authority (Matthew 7:28-29) and “outrageous” claims (John 5:16-18) that amazed the crowds, he could look into the hearts of individuals, read their history and reveal their motives (Matthew 18:18ff; John 4:7ff). He spoke the truth and made promises unlike no other teacher or religious or political leader. The ultimate promise he made was hidden in a paradox of great risk and great reward. His first disciples would experience this paradox after his resurrection. Every devoted follower since can tell you their own unique stories of risk and reward and so will you!

S.cripture – Read Matthew 16:24-28; John 12:23-28

O.bservations

1. Briefly explain what you think Jesus meant when he said the following in Matthew 16:

“deny yourself” –

“take up your cross” –

“lose your life” –

2. In your opinion, how does “gaining the world” result in “losing your soul”?

3. In John 12:23-24, Jesus compares himself and his followers to a kernel of wheat. Explain how that would change your motives or values or choices?

4. According to Jesus (John 12:26), following him includes “serving” that results in the Father’s honor. How does that challenge your motives about serving?

A.plications

1. When Jesus says, “deny”, “cross” and “lose”, he describes total surrender to himself. On a scale of 1 to 10, how ready are you right now? Circle one:

Not Ready 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 All In!

2. Have you “lost” anything by following Jesus? Yes _____ No _____ Not Yet _____
If yes, what is it:

3. In what way or ways have you “found your life” in following Jesus?

4. Is there anything in your life you want to “save” and not “lose” that stands in your way of total surrender? Yes _____ No _____ Not Sure _____
If yes, what is it?

5. List 2 or 3 names of veteran followers of Jesus and ask them: “If you have “denied yourself”, “taken up your cross”, and “lost your life”, how would you describe the reward of following Jesus? Name them here:

P.rayer – As best you can, let go and surrender anything that stands in the way of your full devotion to Jesus Christ.

S.O.A.P. 3 – Indescribable and Immeasurable Love

“Blood is thicker than water” is an old saying describing the value that family ties can’t be broken no matter how loving or dysfunctional the family may be. But Jesus always challenges our values. Jesus tells his disciples that when they follow him they will experience a severe love and devotion to him, so much so, that their love and devotion to family by contrast will appear like hatred and desertion. Why? The cross! Christ’s indescribable and immeasurable love demands an indescribable and immeasurable response. Keep in mind, Jesus does not teach us to hate anyone.

S.cripture – Read Matthew 10:32-39; Luke 12:49-53

O.bservations

1. What is the “baptism” (Luke 12:49-50) Jesus was distressed over?
2. What is it about Jesus that is so powerful it divides families (Luke 12:51-53)?

3. Why do you think Jesus' statements of "acknowledging" and "disowning" him is warranted (Matthew 10:32-33)?

4. Is it possible to follow Christ and love him less than family or anyone else? Yes _____
No _____ Not Sure _____ Explain here:

Applications

1. What does Jesus do for you that your family could never do? List as many as you can think of.

2. In your opinion, why is it impossible to love Jesus enough?

3. Explain as best you can, how does your love for Jesus grow?

4. At the end of your earthly life who will mean the most to you? _____
Explain:

P.rayer – Thank and praise Christ for everything he has done for you and is doing for you – be specific, as many as you can!

Further Thoughts

The Attitude of Christ Jesus

It's enlightening to know that what Jesus requires of us to follow him, he was experiencing himself in that moment and would complete on his own cross later! He "denied" himself, he "took up his cross", and he "lost his life" – all for you! The Apostle Paul was inspired to write this to the Christ-followers in Philippi, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). He then goes on to describe the attitude of Christ. Here are a few excerpts: "...he took the nature of a servant..." and "...he made himself nothing..." and "...became

obedient...to death on a cross...” (verses 7-8). He understood firsthand what it would take to fulfill his mission to the cross. When you follow Jesus now on his mission to expand the Father’s kingdom on earth, it will take a similar surrender on your part. And it will be a journey of a lifetime – a journey without regret! Read the entire passage of Philippians 2:1-11 and you will be inspired to follow him whole-heartedly!

Lesson 4

“I will remain in you...”

Jesus – John 14:4

Looking Like Jesus on the Inside

It’s fun to watch children put on costumes and masks or make-up to change their identity into their favorite hero or heroine. Most adults enjoy costume parties as well. Hiding behind a mask gives a liberating feeling to act differently than otherwise. But wearing a costume on the outside doesn’t change who you are on the inside.

When the Spirit of God gave birth to your spirit (John 3:6), you were born again with a new identity – you became a child of God (John 1:12). But it doesn’t stop there. It is God’s plan and desire for you to grow up and mature into the likeness of Jesus. It is not enough to merely act like Jesus on the outside and remain the same person you have always been on the inside. This is why Jesus promised his first disciples, “Remain in me and I will remain in you” (John 15:4). By the Holy Spirit at work in you, you can be like Jesus on the inside. Jesus is not simply a model for your behavior, but the power to transform your character. This may seem unbelievable to you now. And it doesn’t matter what you were like on the inside or what other people thought of you. You can be changed to reflect the image of God in you and grow to resemble Jesus Christ – your Savior and Lord.

“How does Jesus make this happen?” “Is it automatic or do I need to do something?” “What happens to my personality?” Let’s look into God’s Word for answers and direction.

S.O.A.P. 1 – A Real Mission-Changer!

In addition to the Holy Spirit’s role in your spiritual rebirth (Lesson 1 – John 3), Jesus explains to his disciples in the upper room just before his crucifixion (John 13-17) that he must leave them so he can send the Holy Spirit – his Spirit to remain in them. Why? Good question – simple answer! By sending his Spirit to remain in them, Jesus removes all his physical limitations yet multiplies his presence in all of his followers. This is a real mission changer! This is both a mystery and a life-transforming reality for you. Let’s look more closely – shall we?

S.cripture – Read John 7:37-44; John 14:15-21

O.bservations

1. In John 7, Jesus quotes Old Testament prophecies (Zechariah 13:1 and Isaiah 24:3) that he will fulfill by sending the Holy Spirit. What do you think Jesus meant by “...streams of living water will flow from within [you]...?” Explain or describe.

2. Is this the first time you have read the words of Jesus recorded in John 14:15-21?

Yes _____ No _____

3. What are you thinking right now about Christ's promise of the Holy Spirit in you?

Circle as many as you want:

Profound Indescribable Unusual Mind Blowing Not Sure
Strange Amazing Incredible Really? Unbelievable

4. In John 14 verses 15 and 21, Jesus ties love and obedience to him with the promise of the Holy Spirit. What do you think that tells us? Explain.

A.plications

1. As a "stream of living water", how could the Holy Spirit in you refresh the people in your life?

2. Is there someone in your life right now who especially needs the refreshment of "living water" from you? Name them: _____

3. Of all the amazing things Jesus describes about the Holy Spirit in John 14:15-21, pick one or two that are especially meaningful to you and why.

(1)

(2)

4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how does this promise of the Holy Spirit make you feel about being a follower of Jesus? Circle one:

Uncertain 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Assuring

P.rayer – Thank God for sending Christ, and thank Christ for sending his Spirit to remain in you.

S.O.A.P. 2 – The Counselor Who Confronts

The Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Christ in you is the Counselor who confronts you to expose the on- going moral condition of your life. This is a vital service to all Christ-followers to keep us from self-destruction or causing harm to others or destroying the image of God in us. In other words, the Counselor works to "separate you from sin and to God" – this is the meaning of the

Biblical term “sanctification”. In addition its quite interesting that Isaiah the prophet foretold that Christ would be called, among other titles, “...Wonderful Counselor...” (Isaiah 9:6)!

S.cripture – Read John 16:5-11; I Thessalonians 5:23-24

O.bservations

1. According to John 16, Jesus outlines the role of the Holy Spirit as Counselor to bring “conviction of guilt” in the following three ways: sin, righteousness and judgment. How would you describe or explain each?

Sin:

Righteousness:

Judgment:

2. In Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians he desires that God would sanctify them “through and through”. How would you describe each of the following?

A blameless spirit:

A blameless soul:

A blameless body:

A.pPLICATIONS

1. Out of your love for Jesus, how willing are you to listen and respond when the Counselor convicts you of guilt for your sinful failures? Circle one:

Not Willing 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Totally Willing

1. Is there a sinful habit right now that you know will be difficult to break? If so, what is it? _____
2. Why is confession and surrender to the Counselor the best beginning for breaking a pattern of sin in your life? Explain:
3. Was there a sinful habit that has been broken since your rebirth as a child of God? What was it? _____

P.rayer – Thank Jesus for sending the Counselor. Ask him to search your life and expose any sinful habits. Surrender your spirit, soul and body to him.

S.O.A.P. 3 – Growing in the Family Likeness

In his earliest recorded teaching, Jesus tells the crowd about the coming Kingdom of God. He shocks them by saying, “Your righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees” (Matthew 5:20). The Pharisees were the Jewish scholars and keepers of the Law of Moses and all its

regulations. While well-intended, the Law could only require your good behavior through willful obedience. But Christ's personal presence in you by the Holy Spirit, he makes possible "the greater righteousness"—not by a new code of ethics, but by his power to transform your character. As a newborn child of God the Father, it stands to reason his will for you is to grow in the inner likeness of the family. Who, but Christ alone, is the standard for that likeness. Let's check it out!

S.cripture – Read John 15:1-8; Galatians 5:13-26

O.bservations

1. In John 15, Jesus uses "a branch in a vine" to describe his follower's relationship to himself. How does this natural relationship describe your supernatural relationship with him? Explain:

2. According to Jesus, what are the contributing factors for bearing the fruit of Christ-likeness? List them.

3. According to Paul in Galatians 5, list the reasons why we can't excuse our sinful behaviors and habits.

A.pPLICATIONS

1. Can you remember any of the excuses you used to justify any sinful behavior or habit before you were born again? If so, write them down here:

2. The fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 are the characteristics of Christ's nature or likeness. Rank them in the order of your felt need from 1. (Greatest need) to 9. (Some need):

(1)	(4)	(7)
(2)	(5)	(8)
(3)	(6)	(9)

3. How does "live by the Spirit", "led by the Spirit" and "keep in step with the Spirit" help you as a follower of Jesus? Describe or explain here:

P.rayer – Tell Jesus you want to be like him in every way, and that you desire to live, be led and keep in step with his Spirit each day.

Further Thoughts

The Apostle Paul Tried It and Failed!

So Jesus is not merely a role model or a great moral teacher who taught a new code of ethics to obey by your own will-power. Rather Jesus came to offer you a spiritual rebirth and a transformation of your inner character. You were reborn to be transformed! Be assured you are a unique creation of God with a unique personality. You won't lose who you are, but who you are will be restored, purified and refined by the character of Jesus. You should expect gradual change but not miracles. Are you ready for this? If not, be warned that you can't live the life Jesus desires you to live in your natural strength or will-power. The Apostle Paul tried it and failed! Listen to his confusion and confession:

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.
Romans 7:18-19

He went on to conclude:

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.
Romans 8:5

Read the entire context of Romans 7:7 to 8:27 for a deeper understanding of your need of the Holy Spirit to transform you.

What Do I Need To Do?

By remaining in Jesus, his Spirit sanctifies or separates you from sin and to himself. Your part is to deliberately and consistently ask Jesus to fill you with his Spirit. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian church, "...be [being] filled with the Spirit..." indicating that this can be your daily experience through prayer (Ephesians 5:18b). By doing this you are fleeing (from) temptations and pursuing (to) Christ. So each day humbly surrender yourself to the Spirit of Christ in you so you can "live", "walk" and "keep in step" with him (Galatians 5). In Lesson 7 you will discover more about prayer, but for now never forget that prayer is first of all, "humble surrender" to Jesus Christ – the One you love and follow!

In 1952, C. S. Lewis compiled three of his short books into one entitled, Mere Christianity. Listen to his take on the subject:

"When Christians say the Christ life is in them, they do not mean simply something mental or moral. When they speak of being 'in Christ' or of Christ being 'in them', this is not simply a way of saying that they are thinking about Christ or copying Him. They mean that Christ is actually operating through them..." Book 2, Chapter 5.

Additional Study - See: *Life In The Vine – Increasing the Likeness of Jesus in You* – An in depth look at the Fruit of the Spirit, by Richard A. Borg.

Lesson 5

“It is written...”

Jesus – Matthew 4:4

The Book You Can't Put Down

A “best seller” book is one you can't put down – that is, till you finish reading it. The plot thickens and surprisingly concludes after many twists and turns. Hot off the press at \$29.95, or found in a box at a garage sale for fifty cents, it gives the reader momentary entertainment only to be given away again. “One and done” and on to the next book.

But the Bible is “strangely” different. It's one-of-a-kind. For the follower of Jesus the Bible is fresh every day and every time it is read or heard. It is ever relevant. The Bible cannot be mastered even by the greatest scholars who love God. Rather, the Bible masters them and it will master you as well.

Why is that? Why or how do printed words on a page have such life and power and influence? The answer is both simple and mysterious; the Bible is God the Father's voice to his children. It is God's voice to all mankind by which he reveals his nature, his purposes and promises. Out of love for his creation God condescends to reveal himself in human language. It's no wonder that many “new-born” followers of Jesus who were formerly non-readers suddenly become avid readers of God's written word, the Bible. Other religions have their “sacred” writings, but only the Bible is God's voice. Let's take a closer look at the uniqueness of the Bible.

S.O.A.P. 1 – The Living Word and the Written Word

God revealed himself most clearly and fully by sending Jesus Christ—the living Word, “...in these last days he [God] spoke to us by his Son [Jesus]...” (Hebrews 1:2). But before Christ came “...God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways...” (Hebrews 1:1), and his word was written down. After Christ returned to heaven, God spoke through the apostles and his word was written down (John 20:30-31). Out of his immeasurable love God stoops low to accommodate himself to our limited and sinful minds. Therefore, the Bible is God's written Word joined together with Christ the living Word.

S.cripture – Read Matthew 4:1-11; Matthew 5:17- 20; Luke 24:13-27

O.bservations

1. Jesus was tempted in the desert by the devil (Matthew 4). In your own words, how did Jesus counter the devil's lies?

S.cripture – Read II Timothy 3:14-17; II Peter 1:19-21

O.bservations

1. How does the phrase “God-breathed” (II Timothy 3) help you understand the idea of “inspired” or inspiration?
2. How does the picture of “carried along by the Holy Spirit” (II Peter 1) help you understand the big idea of inspiration?
3. Peter makes it clear that the Scriptures have no human origin. Explain as best you can what you think is the relationship of Divine revelation and Divine inspiration.

A.pPLICATIONS

1. How would you feel and react to the Bible if it merely had a human origin rather than a Divine origin?
2. If God claims to be all powerful, why couldn't he reveal himself and then speak through his written word?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how trustworthy is the Bible to you if it was Divinely inspired?
Circle one:
Somewhat Trustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Most Trustworthy

P.rayer – Thank God for sending his Spirit to inspire the prophets and apostles to give us the written word concerning his nature, purposes and promises.

S.O.A.P. 3 - Don't Break the Rules!

When your friend says to you, “I don't believe in the Bible—you can make it say anything you want.” Tell them, “It's true, you can make it say anything—if you break all the rules of interpretation.” Just as you would not pick a word or phrase or sentence or paragraph out of any

book and use it to support your own ideas or arrive at a conclusion different from the author's, you would not, with any honesty or integrity, do the same with the Bible. All truthful and reliable communication spoken or written requires adherence to rules of interpretation. While this seems obvious, it is not obvious to those who dishonestly reject the Bible, often without even reading it for themselves!

S.cripture – Read II Timothy 2:15; Acts 17:11-12

O.bservations

1. Paul compares a skilled worker to someone who “correctly handles” God’s “word of truth” (II Timothy 2:15). Describe what you think any worker does to become “skilled”.
2. What do you think “correctly handling the word of truth” means? Explain as best you can:
3. From Luke’s journal (Acts 17), explain what you think the Bereans actually did to examine the scriptures to show they were “more noble [in] character”.
4. How would you describe a “noble character”?

A.pplications

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is it to you to hear and know the truth about anything? Circle one:
Unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely Important
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is it to you to speak the truth? Circle one:
Unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely Important
3. Have you ever been misquoted by someone who took something you said out of context and used it against you to their advantage? Yes _____ No _____ If yes, what’s your story and how did you feel?

4. Have you ever dishonestly exaggerated or diminished the truth of what someone else has said? Yes _____ No _____ If yes, what happened?

5. How does your own family conversations, culture or ethnicity cause communication problems? Explain:

P.rayer – Tell God that you commit yourself to be a follower of Jesus who “correctly handles” God’s written Word of truth.

Further Thoughts

Who Is Qualified to Interpret the Bible?

Good question! First, it is not just the preacher or theologian. The Bible tells us the answer. Listen to the inspired words from the Apostle Paul:

We have . . . received the Spirit who is from God that we may understand what God has freely given us.” I Corinthians 2:12

Read the entire text of I Corinthians 2:1-16 for an in-depth understanding. In other words, those who have experienced rebirth by the Spirit of God are qualified to interpret the Bible—that means you! But you must learn how to “correctly handle the word of truth...” (II Timothy 2:15). It’s normal to feel overwhelmed by the size or length of the Bible, but the more you read, the more familiar it will become to you!

What Are the Rules of Interpretation?

To get you started, the first five rules below are likely the rules you already use when you read most anything. These are not “religious” rules but rather universally accepted rules that come out of Hermeneutics, the science of interpretation. Notice how the rules are applied to the Bible.

1. A writing should have unity and consistency not contradiction, so internally let scripture interpret scripture.
2. A reader must not force a writing to support his own idea (deduction), so let the Bible speak for itself (induction). These lessons in Following Me are inductive.
3. By common definition and usage of words, let the Bible be interpreted literally.
4. Every word, phrase, sentence, paragraph and book within the Bible has a larger context that clarifies and deepens its meaning.
5. The meaning of clear and simple statements are always preferred over unclear and complex statements in the Bible.

Credible scholars, preachers and teachers who “rightly handle” the Bible use the following rules to uncover any deeper meanings or clarify any texts of scripture that are complex to the reader.

6. The original languages of Hebrew and Greek add depth and/or clarity to our understanding of scripture.
7. The background of the authors and recipients add practical reasons and intent behind the writings of scripture.
8. The historical context gives a broader understanding of the worldview held at the time of the writing.
9. The cultural context of the recipients adds depth to the accurate meaning of a text of scripture as well.
10. The religious context of both Judaism and paganism also add depth and clarity to the meaning of scriptural texts.

Men and women who have devoted their lives as scholars, preachers and teachers to correctly handle the scripture play a very important role in the purity of our faith. They must be recognized as such for their faithfulness to the scriptures and their humble accountability to its authority.

Why Are the Rules Important?

Because the Bible is so unique, having been written by many “authors-writers” over many generations so long ago, it requires an even greater adherence to the rules of interpretation to be “correctly handled”.

Furthermore, the rules of interpretation equip us to evaluate those who teach or preach the Bible. The rules confirm those who correctly handle the Bible and expose those who are false teachers. You will look at false teachers in Lesson 12, “If they hated me...”

In Lesson 8, “When the Spirit of truth comes...” you will consider once more the written Word of God and its power to transform your life and mature you spiritually as you follow Jesus the living Word.

Lesson 6

“the secrets of the kingdom of heaven...”

Jesus – Matthew 13:11

Everyone Enjoys A Great Mystery!

If you enjoy mystery novels and movies, you know how they unfold. The best ones first uncover all the evidence of what happened. Then a list of suspects emerges – who might have had a motive or opportunity. But solving the mystery requires the discovery of why and how. As hard as you try to solve the mystery, you are left to the mercy of the author to reveal it. Who doesn't enjoy a great mystery?

Well, not everyone – especially those who reject the mysteries of God! But the truth is, if you could unravel every mystery of God, that is, completely solve them by human intellect and reason and then explain them in human language, you would be God's equal. You, as well, would have little need of him or interest in him. C. S. Lewis captures the divine mystery this way in his book, *Mere Christianity*:

“...One of the reasons I believe in Christianity... [is that] it is a religion you could not have guessed. If it offered us just the kind of universe we had always expected, I should feel we were making it up. But, in fact, it is not the sort of thing anyone would have made up.”

Early in the scriptures Moses declared to the people of Israel,

“The LORD our God has secrets known to no one. We are not accountable for them, but we and our children are accountable forever for all that he has revealed to us, so that we may obey all the terms of these instructions.” Deuteronomy 29:29

You see, your faith and spiritual rebirth does not rest on what is unknown about God, but rather what can be known. The mysteries of God he has revealed are overwhelming enough!

Let's look into God's Word to discover what makes him so mysterious!

S.O.A.P. 1 – The Greatest Mystery of God

The greatest mystery revealed came to mankind in the sending of Christ whose name means “the sent one”. He took on human flesh to pay the debt of sin by his death on the cross and rose from the dead to secure eternal salvation for all who believe and are “born again” (John 3). Because you have been born again you personally entered this greatest mystery of all. The Apostle Paul said it this way, “...Christ in you the hope of glory” (Colossians 1).

S.cripture – Read Colossians 1:24-29; Romans 16:25-27

O.bservations

1. Why do you think Paul describes the great mystery of Christ as “the word of God in its fullness” (Colossians 1)?
2. As best as you know now, how did God use Israel to reveal the greatest mystery of Christ?
3. Why do you think God was “wise” (Romans 16:27) to use “prophetic writings” to reveal the mystery?

A.pplications

1. How did you feel when the mystery of Christ was first “disclosed” to you? Describe your feelings.
2. How would you personally describe “the glorious riches” of the “mystery, which is Christ in you”?
3. What changes have occurred in your life because of “Christ in you”?
4. “Christ in you” is not finished—what else would you like Christ to do to “perfect” you?

P.rayer – Praise and thank God for disclosing to you the great mystery of Christ. Tell Jesus you desire to grow and mature as you follow him.

S.O.A.P. 2 – The Guiding Mystery of God

Every page of the inspired written word of God is the record of the guiding mystery of God. That mystery is God’s sovereignty. The ancient prophets referred to God as “Sovereign Lord”.

God's sovereignty means, *he rules over all of his creation by his immeasurable power, knowledge, wisdom and freedom; freedom to fulfill his purposes and promises how, when, and where he chooses, governed by his love and holiness.* Notice what God says about his sovereignty!

S.cripture – Read Isaiah 55:8-11; Romans 8:28-39

O.bservations

1. In your own words describe the superiority of God's "thoughts" (thinking) and "ways" (activity) (Isaiah 55).

Thinking:

Activity:

2. Write down as many statements as you can find in Romans 8:28-39 that fit in the description above of God's sovereign rule.

3. Describe how you think God makes "all things" work together for good?

A.pplications

1. Since God's thoughts and ways are higher than yours, on a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you in your own thinking and actions? Circle one:

No Confidence 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Confident

2. How do you think or feel your confidence can improve?

3. How does God's power (Isaiah 55) and love (Romans 8) touch your emotions?

4. Have you had yet something that was "not good" to you, turn out to be good by God's power and love? Tell your story here:

P.rayer – Surrender your spirit, soul and body to the sovereign God who loves you immeasurably and works powerfully for you and in you.

S.O.A.P. 3 – Living in the Mysteries of God’s Sovereignty

Just as in your spiritual rebirth you entered the greatest mystery of “Christ in you” (Colossians 1:27), you also live in the guiding mystery of God’s sovereignty. God has plans and promises that are uniquely yours! It is common for Christ-followers to share their stories of God’s goodness to explain unimaginable events of life. They agree—there are no coincidences, no luck and no fatalism when they live with awareness of God’s sovereignty.

S.cripture – Read Ephesians 3:14-21; Luke 1:28-37, 2:25-32

O.bservations

1. Write down as many statements as you can find in Ephesians 3 that fit the description of God’s sovereignty (S.O.A.P. 2 Introduction).

2. Both Mary and Elizabeth in Luke 1, along with Simeon in Luke 2, all lived in the mystery of God’s sovereignty. Write down the statements that fit the description of God’s sovereign rule in each life.

Mary:

Elizabeth:

Simeon:

A.pPLICATIONS

1. How excited are you about living your life in the mystery of God’s sovereignty? Circle one:

Not Sure 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Excited

2. Apart from your spiritual rebirth, can you recall something that God did that was “immeasurably more”? What happened and how did you feel?

3. Is there something in your life that seems impossible to you?

4. Is there something you have tried to change that you ought to surrender to God's sovereign rule? If so, what is it?

P.rayer – Surrender to God what you can't do or control. Ask him to help you by his Word and his Spirit to heighten your awareness of his sovereignty. Tell him you want to live in the mystery of his rule over you!

Further Thoughts

The Effect of God's Sovereignty

Because you love and trust God, you actually live in the real-time, real-life guiding mystery of his sovereign rule. Your life is a chapter in God's story. Most likely you will only recognize small parts of what God does in you and for you and through you throughout your life. His promises and plans have far-reaching effects that you cannot imagine or be aware of. But God is a good and loving Father who is at work, shaping and guiding you when you intentionally and humbly surrender to his rule over you.

The Pleasures of God's Rule

What will your life be like if you live with a daily conscious awareness of God's sovereign rule over you? Here are a few spiritual pleasures (Psalm 16) you may expect to enjoy.

1. Worship, whether private or in church, is meaningful and enriching.
2. Prayers of gratitude and surrender to God's Lordship over you. Prayers for others as they come to mind.
3. Security as you walk with Jesus Christ into the unknown future.
4. Peace in your heart and mind in times of trouble and confusion.
5. Emotional strength to wait patiently for God's good best to arrive at the right time.
6. Faithfulness to resist the temptations of the world, the flesh and Satan to sin against God.
7. Hope in Christ that stands in contrast to the fear and anger in this present world.
8. Passion to follow Jesus Christ more closely so as not to miss the opportunities to serve him and others—so as not to miss your cue and part in God's real-life, real-time mystery.
9. The gifts from God of identity, family, worth and fulfillment are reinforced in his sovereign rule.

Your faith and trust in God finds a resting place! Living in the mystery of God's sovereignty is also the safest place to be!

Lesson 7

“...ask me anything in my name and I will do it”

Jesus – John 14:14

God Is Not Your Helicopter Parent

You, and the rest of us, were born self-centered. True – as helpless infants we needed near-constant care and attention. But eventually we needed parents to inform us that the world does not revolve around “me, myself and I”. We needed to be retrained to care for ourselves and others. No doubt you have met narcissistic people whose “helicopter” parents failed to inform and retrain them. Helicopter parents raise self-absorbed, unlikeable children!

Jesus comes along with every resource of heaven and earth, plus the power to give us everything we could ever want, and says, “...ask anything in my name and I will do it...” (John 14:14). Such a statement could lead you to believe that God the Father is your helicopter parent, ready to gratify every request. But this seemingly open-ended promise has a sobering qualifier – “...in my name...” In other words, Jesus invites you to join him by prayer for his purposes in and through you that bring him praise and honor. Disappointing? No, because his purposes will give you far greater and lasting joy than any selfish wish you could ask for yourself!

Why is prayer so vital in your journey with Jesus? Let’s find out!

S.O.A.P. 1 – “Lord, teach us to pray”

For a 1000 days and nights the twelve disciples were amazed by all that Jesus said and did. While dumb-founded much of the time, they connected the dots between his passion for prayer and his wisdom, authority and power. So much so that, according to the four gospel records, the only request they made of Jesus to teach them anything was, “Lord teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). That was not a coincidence. Jesus intended that the prayers of his followers would be their spiritual life-blood and life-line. Prayer is your access to the heart of God the Father just as it was for Jesus.

S.cripture – Read Matthew 6:9-15; Matthew 26:36-42

O.bservations

1. What do you think Jesus means in his model of prayer to God the Father, “...your will be done on earth as it is in heaven...” (Matthew 6:10)?

2. In addition to the Father’s forgiveness (Matthew 6:14-15), why do you think Jesus highlights your need to be forgiving of others?

3. Three times in Matthew 26 Jesus refers to his crucifixion as a deadly “cup to drink”. How would you describe his emotional state in his prayer?

A.ppllications

1. Do you think we need an apology before we can grant forgiveness to others? Yes _____
No _____ Why or why not? Explain.
2. How do you feel, on a scale of 1 to 10, about trusting the will of the Father “in heaven”?
Not Sure 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Excited
3. What impresses you the most from these two teachings about prayer? Explain.

P.rayer – Pray the request of the disciples, “Lord, teach me how to pray”. Thank God for providing prayer as a wonderful access to himself and all he is.

S.O.A.P. 2 – A Secret Prayer Life

In his first major teaching, Jesus makes three observations about the religious life of Israel. He noticed three God-ordained practices that were being done with self-centered and self-serving motives. They were trashing what God meant to be sacred. They gave their offerings, they prayed and they fasted publicly to demonstrate to others how spiritual and “holy” they were. Because of their pride, Jesus warned them that their full reward would only be the admiration of others. In other words, God turned a “deaf ear” to them. Now, discover the best way to begin a life of prayer.

S.cripture – Read Matthew 6:1-18; I Peter 5:5-7

O.bservations

1. Describe what you think happens in your mind and heart when you pray alone in a “secret” place (Matthew 6).
2. What else might Jesus have in mind when he insisted that prayer should be private?

3. Why and how does God love the humble (I Peter 5:5-7)?

Why (reasons):

How (actions):

A.ppllications

1. Do you think that humility is a choice of your will or a feeling of your emotions? Explain.

2. In private we train our hearts to pray humbly to God our Father. Do you feel it's possible to pray humbly in public with other Christ-followers? Yes _____ No _____ Not Sure _____

3. Do you feel that mature followers of Jesus can help you learn to pray? Yes _____ No _____ Not Sure _____ If yes, how?

4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is it to you to learn more about prayer and how to pray? Circle one:

Somewhat Important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely Important

P.rayer – Again, ask God by his Spirit to teach you how to pray. Tell Jesus you want to know more about praying “in his name”.

S.O.A.P. 3 - Waiting for God's Answer to Prayer

Life is filled with changes, challenges and choices. With regularity we find ourselves in the cross-hairs or at the cross-roads of life with no place to hide or “...which way should I go?” So in prayer we cry out to God. And like David, in his soulful prayers in the Psalms, we too can cry out for a long time, waiting for God to make something good happen. Remember, from Lesson 6, God's sovereignty means that he rules over all creation, including you, with all power, all wisdom and all knowledge, with absolute freedom to achieve his purposes and promises – how, when and where he so chooses, governed by his love and holiness. The emotional strength to wait patiently comes through trust in God's sovereignty.

S.cripture – Read Galatians 4:4-7; John 2:1-11

O.bservations

1. While Paul doesn't use the word “sovereign” in Galatians 4, he declares a result of it in the birth of Jesus Christ. Describe in your own words the meaning of “fullness of time”.

2. How do the words of the master or host of the banquet, "...you have saved the best till last" (John 2) illustrate the sovereignty of God?

3. What do you learn from the words of Mary in John 2) that may be helpful to your prayer life?

A.plications

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you generally measure your own ability to wait patiently? Circle one:
 Very Poor 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Good

2. Describe how trusting in God's sovereignty would help you to wait patiently for God's answer to your prayers.

3. State one reason each why trusting and waiting for God's sovereignty is better than your own desire, plan or decision.
 Your desire:

 Your plan:

 Your decision:

P.rayer – Thank God for his sovereign rule over you, and ask God's Spirit to remind you of it in your times of confusion and impatience.

Further Thoughts

What Biblical Prayer Is and Is Not

Since followers of Jesus Christ are on a life-long journey with him, prayer is the conversation that sustains the relationship. Therefore, prayer is a huge theme in the Bible. You will learn much about prayer as you mature spiritually. But just to get you started, here are two quick lists of what Biblical prayer is and is not.

What Biblical Prayer Is:

- Knowing God's will from the scriptures, asking "in the name" of Jesus, and surrendering to God's sovereignty.
- Heart-felt conversation in which there is freedom to cry out, laugh and even question the Father.
- Claiming God's promises and waiting patiently with trust in his sovereign rule.
- Asking for God's wisdom for direction and decisions that will honor him.
- Worship, confession, devotion and fellowship.
- Appeals for the needs of others and the advancement of God's kingdom on earth.

What Biblical Prayer Is Not

- Magical, ritual or repetitious words with wheels or beads or medals or statues or candles, bodily positions or gestures in "religious" places.
- Advising God, reminding him or manipulating him.
- For the attention or praise of others and never offered to anyone, or in the name of anyone other than God himself.

If Words Have Meaning

People say, "prayer changes things" or "the power of prayer". But if words have meaning, it is best to say that it is God alone who has the power to change us or our circumstances for his good and his glory. God merely invites us to join him through prayer in what he is doing or is about to do. God always gives grace (unmerited favor) and love to all who come humbly to him.

Come Near

James, the half-brother of Jesus, was inspired to write, "Come near to God and he will come near to you" (James 4:8). In prayer and by prayer your awareness of God grows. On the other hand, a prayer-less life results in a lonely unawareness of God. Without daily conversation with Jesus, you will follow him at a distance and miss what he is doing. You'll regret it--especially in the time of your own crisis. Come near to God daily—he will never disappoint you!

Lesson 8

“...the Spirit of truth...will guide you...”

Jesus – John 16:13

Guided Tours Are the Best!

If you have ever taken a tour without a guide, chances are you stared blankly at unfamiliar buildings, art and objects. By contrast, tour guides have knowledge of the unfamiliar such as how it was built or painted and why. They bring to light the historical significance that gives you a sense of awe or appreciation. To opt out of having a tour guide is to forfeit the voice of truth and understanding (see Lesson 4).

As you follow Jesus on the journey of your life, he provides a tour guide – his very Spirit within you. But you must choose to listen to his voice of truth and understanding. Everywhere anytime the Spirit of Truth will counsel and guide you when you acknowledge his presence, trust him and obey his leading.

In Lesson 5, “It is written...” you considered the Bible as the written record of the voice of God, making it a one-of-a-kind book. God revealed himself and by his Spirit inspired many writers over many years to record his thoughts, will and purposes. But furthermore you could call the Bible your personal guide book. Unfortunately, many try to follow Christ without his guide book and tour guide. To do so is to forfeit God’s voice of truth and understanding. But God’s desire for you is to feed your soul and guide you by his Spirit each day as you face new challenges.

This lesson will introduce you to the Spirit of Truth your guide for the journey ahead.

S.O.A.P. 1 – Spiritual Heartburn

Deeply committed followers of Jesus are known to carve out time each day to spend with God in prayer and reading his word. Some refer to it as “devotions” or “meditation” or “quiet time”. Just as you would spend time in conversation with people you love, so those who follow Jesus desire the same with him. Attending church once a week is no substitute when you have immediate access to God. Daily prayer and the written Word maintains your conversation with God and your relationship with Christ. The Spirit of Truth will guide you into the truth of Christ.

S.cripture – Read John 16:12-15; Luke 24:13-35

O.bservations

1. What is the most amazing thing to you in John 16:12-15 that Jesus says about himself and the Spirit of God? Write it down here:

2. How would you describe what distracted the disciples from recognizing Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24)?

3. What do you think the disciples meant in Luke 24:22?

A.plications

1. What are the things that easily distract you from spending time with Jesus each day?
2. Describe why it's important to see Christ in the scriptures each day?
3. What could you do to carve out time with God each day?
4. How do you feel about having the Spirit of Truth to guide you into the truth of Christ?
Circle one:
Encouraging 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely Encouraging

P.rayer – Tell God that you desire more of Christ each day and ask His Spirit and His Word to guide you.

S.O.A.P. 2 – The Father Who Keeps Promises

The Spirit of Truth will also guide you into the heart of God the Father who makes enormous promises to increase your faith and give you comfort. The Bible is a record of the Father's promise-keeping. Every prophecy fulfilled is a promise kept. The difference between man's promise-keeping and God's promise-keeping is God's sovereign rule. Remember from Lesson 6: *“God rules with absolute power, knowledge, wisdom and freedom to achieve his purposes and promises how, when and where he chooses, governed by his love and holiness.”* Again, in your time alone with God each day, you can best claim his promises when you surrender to his sovereignty!

S.cripture – Read Numbers 23:16-20; II Corinthians 1:20; 7:1

O.bservations

1. Can you think of any prophecy or promise in God's Word that proves God does not lie (Numbers 23)? Name two or three:

2. How satisfied would you be if God was not sovereign and could not keep a promise?
Satisfied 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Disgusted

3. What do you think Christ has to do with all the promises God has made (II Corinthians)?

A.plications

1. What un-kept promises by others have you experienced in your life might hinder your trust in God to keep his?

2. How do you feel about God's freedom to keep his promises how, when and where he chooses?

3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you measure your confidence in knowing and loving a God who is completely trustworthy? Circle one:

Not Sure 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Confident

4. Which is your greatest challenge to accepting God's sovereignty? Circle one:

Patience to Wait or: Loss of Control

Describe why?

P.rayer – Tell God that you surrender to his sovereign rule over you. Ask his Spirit to increase your patience or willingness to let go of control and trust in Jesus.

S.O.A.P. 3 – The Mirror of God's Word

The Spirit of truth also guides you into what is true about yourself. In Lesson 4 you discovered the Spirit of Truth is your Counselor (John 16:5-11). Likewise the written Word of God has the power to expose sin and transform your character. God's Word is like looking into a mirror (James 1:25). In it you will see the condition of your own soul and how to become more like Jesus. The Spirit of Truth will increase your transparency, honesty and self-awareness!

S.cripture – Read James 1:19-25; Hebrews 4:12-13

O.bservations

1. What are some of the excuses people give to justify the evil in their life (James 1:21)?
2. Describe how or why obeying the truth gives freedom (James 1:25).
3. Based on Hebrews 4:12-13, how would you measure the power of God's Word to expose the condition of your soul on a scale of 1 to 10?
Somewhat Powerful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely Powerful

A.plications

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you usually feel when the truth about yourself is exposed to you or others?
Self-Defensive 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Humble Acceptance
2. What do you think are some of the blessings that come when you look into the "perfect law" ((God's Word) and do it?
3. How do your emotions get in the way of your obedience?
4. Is there any evil in your life right now that you are hiding? Yes _____ No _____ If so, what is it?

P.rayer – Confess to God that you know he knows everything about you and in you. Tell God that you humble yourself before him because you love him and want to be free from evil.

Further Thoughts

Time Alone With God

By spending time with God each day, your knowledge of him will grow and your trust in him will deepen. Your time alone with God is meant to be a pleasure—a conversation with the One who loves you unconditionally. It is not a duty or a work or a discipline. The following are some "don'ts" and "do's" to make your time with God a pleasure! They will compliment the "further thoughts" in Lesson 7 on prayer.

Don'ts

1. Don't set goals for reading a certain number of chapters per day or reading the whole Bible in one year. Do that at another time.
2. Don't make a list of every person in your life that needs prayer. Do pray for them at a different time.

Do's

1. Treat your time with God as an exclusive relationship for fellowship and worship and conversation.
2. Make honest confession, re-surrender and the filling of God's Spirit regular topics of prayer.
3. Read God's Word as his voice to you personally. You may want to use the S.O.A.P. exercise format along with journaling.
4. Read till your "heart burns". When you sense that a word or phrase or verse is meant for you personally. Stop there and pray the thoughts that come to your mind.

Fleeing and Pursuing

Sinful habits are sometimes hard to break. As much as we try, our willpower is too weak. At the risk of over-simplifying, there is a real spiritual key you should employ. Twice in Paul's letters to Timothy, the Apostle mentions the principle of "fleeing and pursuing" (I Timothy 6:11; II Timothy 2:22). By merely "fleeing" sinful habits, the sinful habit remains the focus of your attention. But in "pursuing" God, God himself becomes your focus. Your time alone with God each day refreshes and maintains your pursuit of him! Eventually, the pleasure of God himself will grow to weaken the temptation and pleasure of sin.

The Spirit of Truth is a wonderful guide in your journey with Jesus Christ!

Lesson 9

“Where your treasure is...”

Jesus – Matthew 6:21

Wanna Get Rich?

“Get-Rich-Quick” schemes have been used effectively since the beginning of time. The allure of wealth and everything that comes with it is universal. The rich and famous have always been envied. Their stories are fascinating! We view the financially independent as carefree. Free from want. Free to spend and accumulate. Free to travel. We see their power to control and influence. Our envy is endless. Like moths to the flame, everyone is attracted to the power of money and the status of wealth.

Jesus steps into history and delivers a deep insight into the human heart and soul regarding money. Jesus said: *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”* (Matthew 6:21). Your heart dictates and dominates what you value and how you live life. Jesus states his insight as a choice you must make in your heart. It is no wonder that Jesus made money and wealth a prominent theme in his teaching. Throughout his ministry Jesus challenges both the poor and the wealthy regarding this choice. In this lesson you’ll discover who the truly wealthy are according to Jesus and how you can be numbered among them. In fact, the financially wealthy may very well envy you!

S.O.A.P. 1 – Jesus Knows Your Heart

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus could look into the spiritual hearts of people he encountered. Christ understood the working of the human heart. In his first recorded teaching Jesus made it clear that the power of love for money cannot co-exist with a love for God in the human heart. He said,

“No one can serve two masters, you will either love one and hate the other....” (Matthew 6:24)

Keep in mind the issue is not money, but the love of it. Why? It is the love of it that brings “destructions of many kinds” (I Timothy 6:10).

Let’s listen in on a conversation Jesus had with a very successful and wealthy young man and then a parable he told his disciples.

S.cripture – Read Matthew 19:16-22; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

O.bservations

1. Do you think Jesus’ directive to “sell everything and give it to the poor” (Matthew 13) was cruel or was the young man’s heart so corrupted by the love of money? Circle one:

Cruel Corrupted Both

2. How do you think religious good works (Mathew 13) can justify a love of money? Explain.
3. Why do you think the third seed of the message of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 13:22) failed to grow due to worries and the deceit of wealth?
Why worries?

Why deceit of wealth?

A.plications

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you honestly measure your present love of God versus your love of money? Circle one:
Love of Money 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Love of God
2. Can you think of any way or ways how the deceitfulness of wealth has choked the word of God in your own life?

Which one, or more, of the four soils could describe the condition of your own heart and why?

What do you feel you could or should do to refresh the soil of your heart for a greater harvest?

P.rayer – Ask God to search your heart and expose any love you have for money or material possessions. Tell God you choose to love him exclusively.

S.O.A.P. 2 – A Content Prisoner

Because the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection posed a threat to Jews, pagan religions and Roman authorities, the Apostle Paul faced persecutions and imprisonments. He never whined about the injustice he endured for the sake of Christ. But from a Roman prison he wrote a letter to the church at Philippi in which he described his contentment. He refused to covet what he didn’t have and was satisfied with the little he did have. Listen to this content prisoner on the topic of contentment followed by the words of Jesus.

S.cripture – Read Philippians 4:10-13; Matthew 6:25-30

O.bservations

1. Do you think it is harder to be content “in plenty” or “in want” (Philippians 4:12)? Think carefully!
2. Based on Philippians 4:10-13, what do you think was the source of Paul’s contentment?
3. Jesus describes contentment in Matthew 6:25-30. In your own words, on what basis does Jesus tell us not to worry?

A.pplications

1. How would you measure your present financial/material contentment on a scale of 1 to 10? Circle one and explain or describe:
Discontent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Content
Explain:
2. Do you feel contentment is a “mind over matter” or a “spiritual reality”? Explain.
3. How would you describe the difference between discontentment over your needs and discontentment over your wants?
4. What role would faith and trust in God play in your contentment?

P.rayer – Tell God that you trust him to meet your needs in his way in his time.

S.O.A.P. 3 – The Father’s Generous Heart

The longer and more closely you follow Jesus, the greater your experience and understanding of God the Father’s generosity. The ultimate expression of God’s generous heart remains--Jesus himself! Jesus said it best, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son...”

(John 3:16). No other gift comes close to the magnitude of your Savior. So it stands to reason that your real needs are met by the same heart that gave you Jesus. Therein lays your contentment! Let's take a closer look at the Father's generous heart.

S.cripture – Read Matthew 6:31-34; Matthew 7:7-11

O.bservations

1. In Matthew 6:32, Jesus says the Father is acutely aware of your needs, but he adds, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness...” What do you think Jesus meant by this?

2. In Matthew 7, Jesus likens us to children who should ask the Father to meet our need even though he already knows it (Matthew 6). Then why does Jesus instruct us to ask?

A.pPLICATIONS

1. How comforting does it make you feel to know that God is fully aware of your every need? Circle one:
Not Sure 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Comforting
Why?

2. What are you actually doing to seek the Father's kingdom and his righteousness?

3. How often do you talk to your heavenly Father?

4. What are some of the good gifts the Father has given to you? List as many as you recall.

P.rayer – Thank the Father for his generous care and tell him you will trust him as you seek his righteousness and kingdom every day.

Further Thoughts

Everything We Have Belongs to God

Since God created the heavens and the earth and everything in it including you (I Chronicles 29:14), he owns it all! As owner, God has given mankind the responsibility of managing his wealth. So you are a steward of all God will entrust to your care and oversight throughout your lifetime. This is quite exciting! God's ownership and your stewardship is the foundational

reality for every matter regarding your money and material possessions. Get this right and you are off to the best start!

The Great Gain

Your successful stewardship depends a great deal on your contentment. The Apostle Paul instructs Pastor Timothy in an inspired letter, “But godliness with [financial] contentment is great gain” (I Timothy 6:7). Part of the “great gain” is that contentment liberates your soul in three significant ways. First, contentment neutralizes any love in your heart for money to free you to love God exclusively. Second, contentment frees you to steward with excellence what God has given you. Another way to put it, the content person is not the one who has the most, but rather the one who needs the least. And finally, contentment frees you to be compassionate, and generous like your Heavenly Father, toward others in their need.

More Blessed to Give than Receive?

The inspired written word of God covers all the money topics of earning, managing, spending, saving and investing. But giving is the greatest financial practice because giving alone reflects the generous heart of God the Father. In fact, it was Jesus who said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Really? Yes, really—and modern research proves it. In their book, “*Well Being: The Five Essential Elements*”, Tom Rath and Jim Harter of Gallup, Inc., disclose the results of the research on financial wellbeing. Here’s one profound quote:

“...donating money results in a greater return for our wellbeing than buying material goods for ourselves. Neuroscientists have discovered that the regions of the brain that are activated when we receive money (based on MRI brain scans) glow even brighter when we give money.”

When you give, motivated by love, you are most like your generous heavenly Father. When you reflect God’s nature, giving becomes a pleasure rather than a duty. So much so that you will give over and over again!

Lesson 10

“I will build my church...”

Jesus – Matthew 16:18

Yes, the Church is Full of Hypocrites!

In fact, the church only invites hypocrites to attend! What?! Yes, you and everyone in church is a hypocrite and that’s why you attend. “So what is a hypocrite”, you ask?

Jesus said in his first recorded teaching, “Your righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees” (Matthew 5:20). Jesus raises the bar on righteousness to include a righteousness of the heart and mind that compliments or completes behavioral righteousness. To put it another way – **none of us perfectly lives up to what we say we believe.** That is a loose description of hypocrisy. We can be smug and arrogant claiming self-righteousness in one part of our life only to be unrighteous in another area. We can claim to be righteous in our behavior but have hearts and minds filled with evil (I John 1:5-10). This is why we need to be in church under the authority of Christ and the Word of God. In this community of God’s children we receive training “to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:14) and “teaching about righteousness” (Hebrews 5:13). We attend church, in part, to expose our hypocrisy and take on the righteousness of Jesus Christ to continue our transformation. But church is about much more. Take a deeper look at why the church is so important to your life and journey with Jesus.

S.O.A.P. 1 – The Gathered Family of God

The church is not a building but the gathering of God’s family. In fact, Jesus told his followers that he and the Father would make their “home” in us (John 14:13). When the Spirit gave birth to your spirit (John 3) you were also transformed into a worshipper giving glory and praise and gratitude to God. While it’s possible, of course, to worship God in your daily time alone with him, Jesus said, “Where two or three gather in my name, I am there with them” (Matthew 18:19-20). So Jesus intends for all his followers to have a corporate experience of his presence in worship. The effect of worship is that it brings our hearts together and unites us no matter how different we might be.

S.cripture – Read John 4:21-26; Hebrews 10:23-25

O.bservations

1. How do the words of Jesus, “...in spirit and in truth” (John 4) compare to the visual and behavioral traits of man-made religious worship?

“in spirit”:

“in truth”:

2. According to Hebrews 10:19-25, what are the reasons for faithfully attending church for worship? List as many as you can find.

A.plications

1. Given the description of worship by Jesus in John 4, how important are the visual and behavioral aspects of worship to you? Circle one:

Very Important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Unimportant

Why?

2. In your opinion, why is truth more important to worship than a place or a building?

3. What are the thoughts and emotions that make worship of God authentic for you? List as many as you like:

Thoughts

Emotions

4. What else excites you about attending church in addition to worship?

P.rayer – Thank Christ for his love and wisdom in building his church as the gathering of God’s children.

S.O.A.P. 2 – Fellowship to Belong and Be Known

As the gathering of God’s children in a family relationship, He desires that you live in community, not isolation. While some churches can be dysfunctional when led by spiritually and emotionally immature leaders, Christ-centered, Christ-honoring churches will meet your deep need to belong and be known. The early followers of Jesus in Jerusalem met together to encourage and care for one another (Acts 4). Remember, without each other separation and loneliness sets in quickly and no one will know you to encourage or care for you especially in a time of trouble! The New Testament calls this, fellowship.

S.cripture – Read Acts 3:42-47; Acts 4:32-35

O.bservations

1. In your own words, according to Acts 3, describe the emerging culture in the followers of Jesus of “belonging” and “being known”.
2. How would you measure or evaluate the expressions of fellowship recorded in Acts 4?
Circle one:
Nice 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Amazing
Why?

A.pPLICATIONS

1. How does “belonging” and “being known” make you feel as a young follower of Jesus?
2. What could you do to help others feel that they “belong” and “are known”? Think of as many as you can:
3. How willing are you “to share everything” you possess with other Christ-followers in need? Circle one:
It All Depends 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Willing
4. What part does love and trust play in your willingness to share with others? Explain.

P.rayer – Ask Jesus to help you see the needs of others that you can help meet and make others feel they belong and are known.

S.O.A.P. 3 – The Servant’s Heart

Not only is Christ building his church that worships and fellowships, but also expresses his servant heart. He said, “I have not come to be served, but to serve...” (Matthew 20:28). In describing Christ’s humility, the Apostle Paul told the Philippian church, “...he made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...he humbled himself and became obedient to death...on a cross!” (Philippians 2:7-8). Because Jesus wants you to have and express his servant’s heart, he has given to every follower, by the Holy Spirit, an ability to serve others. The scriptures call these abilities, “gifts of the Spirit”.

S.cripture – Read Matthew 20:20-28; Romans 12:1-16

O.bservations

1. In your own words how does Jesus redefine greatness in Matthew 20?
2. How does Paul’s “urge” in Romans 12:1-2 prepare you to serve others?
3. How does Paul’s instruction in Romans 12:3-6a change your thinking about greatness?

A.pPLICATIONS

1. In your opinion describe the emotional impact of serving on the “served” as well as the “server”.
The served:

The server:
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, honestly measure how you generally think about yourself. Circle one:
“More highly” 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 “Sober Judgment”
What number would a close friend circle for you? _____
3. What gets in your way of “sober judgment” about yourself?

Besides Jesus, who else in your life would help you with “sober judgment”?

Name them: _____

4. From the list of gifts or abilities in Romans 12:6b-16, does one grab your attention? If so, what is it? _____

P.rayer – Ask Jesus to help you to evaluate your life with sober judgment. Ask him to help you discover your spiritual gift to serve others with humility.

Further Thoughts

Pastors and Teachers

Two abilities or gifts of the Spirit given to the church are pastor and teacher. These gifts require careful study and preparation to present the truth of God's written Word accurately and persuasively to help followers of Jesus to mature. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian church, *"It was he [Christ] who gave some to be...pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."* Ephesians 4:11-13

In addition to maturity in "the knowledge of the Son of God", pastors and teachers also have the task of preparing Christ-followers for service. How? By helping them discover their gift of the Spirit, provide training and offering opportunity to serve. In other words, it is not enough to attend church and merely "sit and soak" the blessings of others who serve you. Serving others will also help you to grow spiritually!

The Last Word on Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy comes in several flavors. There's the religious hypocrite who claims to be holier than others. Then there's the non-religious hypocrite who claims to be sinless. Then you have the atheist hypocrite who claims there's no such thing as sin--that is, till someone sins against them!

Through worship "in spirit and in truth", honest and sincere fellowship and humble service to others, you will grow authentically to reduce the gap of hypocrisy between what you believe and your real inner character. In this regard every follower of Jesus is a work-in-progress. Why? Because each day your character is challenged. And some days you win and some days you lose. But one thing remains, when Christ-followers humbly confess their sinful failure, they experience the Father's loving mercy and forgiveness. When Jesus was accused by self-righteous religious leaders of being "a friend of sinners" (Matthew 9:9-13) he responded, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance". So, when your friend rejects the church because of "all the hypocrites", tell him or her, "I know, I'm a hypocrite too. That's why I go to church. I've discovered it's the best place I know to grow out of my hypocrisy and become the person God wants me to be."

Lesson 11

“You will be my witnesses...”

Jesus – Acts 1:8

Don't Abandon Your Friends

“Are you one of those born-againers?”

Even a close friend might poke fun at you to arouse some light-hearted embarrassment or serious shame. Both are powerful emotions to deal with. They can knock the wind of your joy right out of the sail of your soul. These emotions might even leave you in doubt. If this has happened to you you're not alone – read on.

“So what is a witness and how do I do it effectively?” First, a witness is someone who tells the story of what they observed or experienced – a testimony of something important. It is neither a debate nor a sermon. During the earthly ministry of Jesus we find people witnessing to family or friends, telling them what Jesus had done for them. Here are some examples:

Philip said to his brother, “We have found the one Moses wrote about...” (John 1:45).

The blind man who Jesus healed said, “I was blind, but now I can see...” (John 9:25).

The adulterous woman said, “He told me everything I ever did.” (John 4:39).

Their witness was simple – “He changed my life!”

How you witness is of utmost importance. Remember, the gospel of Christ is a radical message that often results in radical change. So whatever you do, don't abandon your friends or frighten your family. Look more deeply now at Christ's calling on your life to be his witness – it's quite exciting!

S.O.A.P. 1 – The Friend of Sinners

When the Pharisees, the self-righteous and loveless religious leaders, caught Jesus hanging out with some really bad people, they labeled him, “the friend of sinners” (Matthew 11:18-19). To the Pharisees, this was an accusation that was sure to discredit him. But no doubt, Jesus must have enjoyed the title for it captured the very purpose of his mission—“For God so loved the world...” that he sent Jesus Christ (John 3:16). As a follower of Jesus, you also must love who the Father loves and Christ died for. Your friends are the friends of Jesus! They just don't know it yet. Let's take a better look.

S.cripture – Read Luke 5:27-32; Luke 7:36-50

O.bservations

1. As a tax collector, Levi was considered a spiritual and social outcast. According to Luke 5, Jesus not only invited Levi to become his disciple, but Jesus also accepted Levi's invitation to a party that honored Jesus. What does this tell you about the love of Jesus and the power of invitations?

Love of Jesus:

Power of Invitations:

2. While Jesus was despised by the Pharisees, he not only accepted the invitation in Luke 7, but then allowed an outcast woman to touch his feet. What does this tell you about the heart of Jesus?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you measure the friendship of Jesus for sinners? Circle one:
Nice 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Off the Charts

A.ppllications

1. You were once a “spiritual outcast” till someone loved you and invited you to follow Jesus. Who was that person? Name: _____
2. Who are the people in your life right now that you feel and consider to be “spiritual outcasts”? List them here:
3. What could you do to change your feelings to become their “friend of sinners”?

P.rayer – Ask Jesus to help you to see others through his eyes and become the friend of sinners, just like him.

S.O.A.P. 2 – Don’t Scare Your Family and Friends

When the “Spirit gives birth to spirit”, it often results in an irrepressible sense of joy and peace. One of many reasons for this is that the blood of Christ both cleanses and clears the conscience of sin and guilt (Hebrews 9:14). This radical gospel achieves this radical change. The emotions that follow can turn a “newborn” into an over-joyful, aggressive type who can make their friends nervous and defensive: “So now you think you’re holier than me!” Jesus, who was holy, only frightened the self-righteous and the demons of hell. While you can’t do miracles (Luke 5) or have infinite knowledge (John 4), notice how Jesus built bridges of friendship in the following scriptures.

S.cripture – Read Luke 5:1-11; John 4:1-42

O.bservations

1. What didn't Jesus say that would have offended Peter in Luke 5 and the Samaritan woman in John 4?

Peter:

Samaritan Woman:

2. What did Jesus say and do to express his love and acceptance of Peter and the Samaritan woman?

Peter:

Samaritan Woman:

3. How did Peter and the Samaritan woman impact their “world”?

Peter:

Samaritan Woman:

A.pPLICATIONS

1. What are your thoughts or emotions that could get in your way of becoming a friend to sinners?
2. Do you feel that to love and accept sinners is a spiritual compromise or Christ-like compassion?
Circle one: Spiritual Compromise or Christ-like Compassion
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how excited are you that your unbelieving friends have a “world” of unbelieving family and friends who also need to know the good news of Christ?
Never Thought of It 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Excited Now!

P.rayer – Ask Jesus to fill your heart with his compassion and wisdom to speak lovingly and listen carefully to unbelievers.

S.O.A.P. 3 – The Power of God’s Love

The pre-Christian world of the first century was very religious. In addition to Judaism, the Romans and Greeks worshipped many gods. But the message of the cross and the resurrection of Christ was compelling, revealing the power of God’s love for mankind. There was nothing

like it then, and two thousand years later nothing compares to it now! Jesus Christ himself is the great equalizer and unifier of everyone who is “born again by the Spirit” (John 3). Our identity in Christ supersedes all other identities. Paul describes it this way,

*“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,
for you are all one in Christ Jesus”.* Galatians 3:28

Notice the immediate impact of God’s powerful love in the earliest followers of Jesus.

S.cripture – Read John 17:20-23; Acts 2:42-47

O.bservations

1. Based on John 17, how did the love of God in Christ unite his first disciples?
2. In your own words, what were the amazing results of God’s powerful love in Acts 2?
3. In your opinion how does love for Christ change our identity (Galatians 3:28)?

A.pplications

1. How did you identify or describe yourself before you became a follower of Christ (Galatians 3:28)?
2. Name some of the identities people cling to that divide, other than the ones Paul mentions in Galatians 3:38.
3. Now describe the ways that God’s love in Christ is changing your identity.

P.ray – Ask God for opportunities to express his powerful love toward everyone— both followers of Christ and those who are yet to be!

Further Thoughts

Don't Burn Your Bridges

So what is the big take-away from the scriptures you have read? Answer: **Maintain and build bridges of friendship for the gospel of Christ to naturally walk over.** Don't burn your bridges to the people you love and who love you the most. Pray for yourself and for your family and friends that you will be a witness who imitates the gentle and loving nature of Jesus. What's next?

Always Be Prepared

Your spiritual rebirth has added a love, joy, peace and hope to your life that you didn't have before. But it must be expressed to unbelievers in a contagious manner rather than an offensive one. The Apostle Peter wrote a letter to Jewish Christ-followers who were living outside of Israel in Gentile countries,

“But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” I Peter 3:15

A “reason for your hope” in Christ should begin with your personal experience. Your testimony can be shared in a way that is not offensive but heart-warming. The following is a simple exercise to help you tell your story. Since you are not a theologian or preacher, don't attempt to answer every question nor be intimidated by the responses of others.

Take out pen and paper, pray and ask God to help you answer the following questions as if you were telling your story to a friend or relative.

- 1. What was my life like before I received Christ as my Savior and Lord?** (This could include direction of life, relationships, problems, habits, doubts, failures, successes, and emotions.)
- 2. How did I come to faith in Christ?** (This could include events, circumstances, and the witness of other followers of Jesus.)
- 3. What has changed in my life since I gave my heart to Christ as Savior and Lord?** (This could include desires, values, habits, lifestyle, and world-view emotions.)

You may have written short or long answers to the questions. Now lengthen or shorten your answers to make your story memorable for both you and the people you tell it to. Ask God for his help whenever you have opportunity to share “the reason for your hope”. Be sure you do it with love, “gentleness and respect” as Peter instructs. Unfortunately, not all your opportunities will have the storybook ending of “happily ever after”. While we all fear embarrassment or shame, when this happens, leave the final result with God. C. S. Lewis wrote,

“The very man who has argued you down will sometimes be found, years later, to have been influenced by what you said.” From: Reflections on the Psalms

On the other hand, also keep in mind that not everyone Jesus loved and reached out to became a follower. All who follow Jesus choose to do so. It's not about you—it's about the people you tell your story to and Jesus.

Lesson 12

“If the world hates you...”

Jesus – John 15:18

Not Everyone Will Like You!

Your natural desire to be liked runs as deep as your fear of rejection. While Jesus said, “Fear not” many times, he also cautioned his followers, “*If the world hates you, remember the world hated me first*” (John 15:18). No paranoia here but a warning that not everyone will like you because of Him. You will be threatened to one degree or another.

Over the past 2000 years to the present, followers of Jesus have endured either martyrdom, or ridicule, or deception. All are expressions of hatred. But Jesus said, “*I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it*” (Matthew 16:18). In other words, “the evil one” (John 17:15) will orchestrate this hate-filled opposition, but it will fail!

As a new follower of Jesus you might be asking, “Why?” “Why is there so much hatred for Jesus Christ?” “And what have I done to deserve such hatred from those who don’t or won’t believe in Jesus?” “Why don’t they just leave me alone?” Jesus answers the question of “Why?”

S.O.A.P. 1 – The Blood of the Martyrs

The most extreme expression of hatred toward Christ and his followers is summed up in the words of Tertullian, an early church leader, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” The message of Jesus Christ is powerful and must be accepted or rejected. Throughout church history, Christ-followers have been silenced by death. Ironically the message always grows louder and more believable. In the story you are about to read in Acts 6:8 to 9:6, a further irony emerges in Stephen’s martyrdom. Saul, the Jewish leader of the martyrdom becomes a Christ-follower! His name was changed to Paul (Acts 13:9) and he carried the message of Christ to the Gentile world! The blood is the seed!

S.cripture – Read John 15:18-25; Acts 7:51 - 8:3

O.bservations

1. In John 15, twice Jesus answers the question, why they will hate him and persecute his followers. Find his answer and write it down.

2. How would you describe Stephen’s courage and conviction to declare the message of Christ to the Jewish religious leaders?

A.plications

1. Stephen must have been aware of the danger he was in, so should he have (check one):

kept his mouth shut
 pleaded ignorance
 renounced Christ
 trusted God with the outcome

Explain why:

2. Based on the Acts account, how would you describe or measure the presence of God Stephen must have experienced? Circle one number:

Not Sure 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Unimaginable

3. Circle any of the following words that capture the feelings you experienced when you first heard you were “guilty of sin” (John 15:22, 24).

Angry Relieved Offended Convicted
Defensive Tearful Humbled Excited
Sorrowful Hopeful Doubted Confused Other: _____

4. How long did it take, from the time you first heard you were “guilty of sin”, to receiving Christ as your Savior and becoming a child of God (John 1:12)?

P.rayer – Tell God that you promise to be faithful to Christ if you ever feel threatened. Tell Jesus that you expect to experience his presence to help you face any danger for following him.

S.O.A.P. 2 – Mild Ridicule to Abandonment

A more common expression of hatred for Christ and his followers runs the gamut from mild ridicule to abandonment. No doubt most of your friends and family will be kind or curious when you lovingly witness with “gentleness and respect” (I Peter 3:15-16 Lesson 11). The people in your life who remain open and receptive to your witness could very well be potential “seekers”.

On the other hand, those who argue and ridicule your faith in Christ may be among those described by Paul as “God-haters” having “darkened hearts”, “sinful desires”, “shameful lusts” and “depraved minds” (Romans 1:21-32). They are not beyond the reach of God’s love, but in their present condition they may strike out at Christ-followers because their “guilt of sin” is exposed by Christ (John 15:22, 24). They may abandon you!

S.cripture – Read I Peter 3:13-17; I Peter 4:12-16

O.bservations

1. In your opinion how would, "...in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord..." and "...keeping a clear conscience..." from sin (I Peter 3:15-16) help you stand against the threats of those who hate Christ?
2. List as many blessings for suffering as a Christ-follower that you can find in I Peter 4:12-16.

A.pplications

1. Are there people in your life now that fit Paul's description in Romans chapter 1 (See S.O.A.P. 2 Introduction) of evil people? If so, write down their first names:
2. Have you ever suffered for "doing good" or "what is right"? Yes _____ No _____ If so, briefly describe your experience.
3. Have you ever been ridiculed or abandoned for being a follower of Jesus? Briefly write your story here:
4. Who are the potential "seekers" in your life who remain open and receptive to you as a follower of Jesus? Name them here:

P.rayer – Set Christ as Lord. Confess your sin and keep your conscience clear. Ask God to help you reach out in love to those who are "seekers" and be gentle and respectful to all.

S.O.A.P. 3 – Watch Out

The most subtle expression of hatred toward Christ and his followers is that of the false teachers who attempt to deceive both "seekers" and new Christ-followers. Jesus warned his followers, "*Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name claiming, 'I am the Christ', and will deceive many*" (Matthew 24:4-5). The name, Christ, means "sent one". So in every generation since Jesus' warning, imposters have claimed to receive special hidden

knowledge as a “sent one”. The historical list of sects and cults is endless. The New Testament scriptures clearly reveal the nature and mission of Christ. They also describe the false teachers. Let’s look at several examples.

S.cripture – Read II Peter 2:1-3 and 10-19; II Timothy 4:2-5

O.bservations

1. Peter’s description of false teachers (II Peter 2:1-3, 10-19) is quite detailed and graphic. Find and list their inner motivations and outward behaviors.

Inner Motivations

Outward Behaviors

2. According to Paul (II Timothy 4:2-4), write down what weak followers of Jesus want or do or neglect that make them vulnerable to false teaching.

A.pplications

1. Be honest, could any of the weaknesses you listed in #2 above describe you? Yes _____
No _____ If yes, write it down here: _____
2. Do you know anyone in your life whose religious or spiritual “beliefs” make you feel uncomfortable? Yes _____ No _____ If yes, name them and explain your discomfort here:
3. Do you have spiritually mature and trusted Christ-followers in your life you can turn to with your questions and concerns regarding any teaching you hear? Yes _____ No _____
If yes, write their names here: _____ If no, find some!
4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you measure your personal commitment to Christ-centered sound doctrine revealed by God alone?
Somewhat Committed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Totally Committed

P.rayer – Thank God for the clarity of his written word. Tell Christ of your desire to grow in your faith and devotion to him and God’s Word.

Further Thoughts

Characteristics of False Teachers & Cults

False teachings crept into the early churches just as Jesus predicted (Matthew 24:4). The Apostle Peter describes the Devil as one who “...*prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*” (I Peter 5:8). Take this warning seriously. Jesus (John 8:42-47), Peter (II Peter 3:14-18) and Paul (II Timothy 3:1-9) describe the false teachers in greater detail. The following ten characteristics of false teachers and their teachings will give you wisdom to spot them. Not all of the characteristics need to be present, but all of them are contrary to the inspired written Word of God.

1. **Extra Biblical Authority.** They deny the full and final authority of God’s inspired written Word. They may respect the Bible, but believe their own teachings are superior.
2. **Salvation By Works.** They hold to a system of practices and obedience, but deny that faith in Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross alone is sufficient for eternal life.
3. **No Assurance of Salvation.** They create a system of stages or steps of obligations that lead to spiritual bondage rather than freedom. Salvation is never settled.
4. **Infallible Teachers/Leaders.** They claim to have a special divine appointment with authority that can’t be questioned, nor their own immoral and unethical practices.
5. **Deceptive Doctrines.** They gain favor with followers by using deceptive claims to hide their true beliefs in secrecy.
6. **Exclusive Claims.** They promote their doctrines and organization as being the only “true” one and denounce all others to entrap their followers with fear.
7. **Erroneous Doctrines of Man.** They deny the nature of man as created in the image of God in need of a Savior and destined for a final judgment to heaven or hell.
8. **Deductive Use of the Bible.** They support their false teachings with proof-texts rather than inductive interpretations of the Bible. See Lesson 5, “It is written...”
9. **Entangling Organization.** They create complicated structures to hide deception and control their followers resulting in irrational devotion.
10. **Financial Exploitation.** They promise that money contributed by followers will earn gifts or abilities or powers or “salvation” as determined by their teachings.

These characteristics of false teaching can be read in greater detail at www.rapidnet.com/jbeard

Lesson 13

“Yes, I am coming soon”

Jesus – Revelation 22:20

Don’t Miss this Family Reunion!

Family reunions run the gamut of euphoric to dreadful. Many families are filled with unresolved conflict or unmet needs or unrealistic expectations or irresponsible sponges. For these families, reunions, holidays, weddings, births and funerals are emotionally charged.

But Jesus has planned a family reunion you won’t want to miss. It is literally an endless reunion for all of God’s children who have ever lived who have put their faith in Christ. The destiny God has planned for you and all Christ-followers is far beyond our imagination. In a word it’s called heaven and your Savior’s personal presence will make it a glorious and endless delight.

John, one of the twelve disciples who followed Jesus throughout his ministry, was imprisoned for his faith and exiled to the Island of Patmos where he died. While there, John received the Revelation—a detailed account of what will happen shortly before and shortly after Christ’s return. In the last chapter of Revelation Jesus declares three times, “I am coming soon” (Revelation 22:7, 12 and 20). Can’t wait for the reunion of God’s family! This is a big topic in God’s written word, but what should you know now as you begin your life journey with Jesus? Let’s take a brief look!

S.O.A.P. 1 – The Promise of Heaven

Before you gave your heart to Jesus and became a follower, you lived with fear and the dread of death. But the Apostle Paul wrote: “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord” (Romans 14:7-9). So your physical death is but a doorway through which you pass from this life into eternal life. All Christ-followers have this same hope and can say with Paul:

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?...thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (I Corinthians 15:55-57)

So the promise of heaven has been fulfilled and made certain by Christ’s own resurrection from the dead.

S.cripture – Read John 14:1-7; I Thessalonians 4:13-18

O.bservations

1. Just before his crucifixion (John 14), Jesus makes an awesome promise and an awesome claim. In your own words write them down.

The Promise:

The Claim:

2. Does the death and resurrection of Jesus support his promise and claim in John 14?
Yes _____ No _____ As best you can, explain how:

3. Paul wrote "...encourage each other with these words..." (I Thessalonians 4:18). So which words encourage you the most in verses 13-17? Write them down and explain why?

A.plications

1. How are the promise and the claim of Jesus inter-related and complimentary? Can you have one without the other? Explain.

2. In light of the resurrection of Jesus, could any other religion lead to eternal life with God?
Yes _____ No _____ Not Sure _____ If yes, explain how:

3. Based on the promise and claim of Jesus, how would you measure your level of comfort regarding your own physical death and resurrection? Circle one:
Hopeless 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely Hopeful

4. How is it possible to both grieve and have hope at the same time?

P.rayer – Thank Jesus for his death and resurrection as well as his outrageous promise and claim.
Tell Him you believe with your whole heart.

S.O.A.P. 2 – Till Heaven How Should You Live?

Since Christ died to pay the debt of your sin and you now live with his promise of heaven, it makes no sense at all to think you have the freedom to enjoy the pleasures of sin. Sin is not freedom, but rebellion, unfaithfulness and ultimately a prison of self-destruction. By following Christ closely you have access to the pleasures of faithfulness to Christ and a life lived for his glory and goodness. In your journey with Jesus, he lives his life in you and through you by his Spirit to experience what he calls "...the abundant life" (John 10:10). Both Peter and Paul in their Spirit-inspired letters answer in great detail the question: Till heaven, how should you live?

S.cripture – Read II Peter 3:8-18; I Thessalonians 5:1-11

O.bservations

1. Write down all the words and phrases that Peter uses (II Peter 3) to describe “...what kind of people...” followers of Christ should be till he returns.

2. What words or phrases does Paul use (I Thessalonians 5) to describe how Christ-followers should live?

A.pPLICATIONS

1. What words or phrases above do you feel the need to grow or improve in your faithfulness to Christ? Write them down here:

2. How would you measure your joy and peace in “looking forward” to the return of Jesus Christ? Circle One:
Somewhat 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extreme

3. What might be in your life right now that could distract you from “looking forward” to Christ’s return?

4. Both Peter and Paul use the “thief in the night” to describe the sudden return of Christ. What are the things you could do to remain or maintain your own readiness for Christ’s return?

P.rayer –Confess the things that distract you. Tell him you always want to look forward to his return. Tell Christ that you desire to be faithful to him because he died and rose again for you.

S.O.A.P. 3 – Till Heaven What Should You Do?

In your journey with Jesus, you are first called to personal faithfulness to him. Second, Jesus calls you, as he did his earliest followers, to be witnesses (Lesson 12) to people in your own circle of influence. Furthermore, Jesus commissions you to the greater opportunity to join him in making disciples world-wide. Jesus stated his enormous vision this way:

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” Matthew 24:14

When you embrace and engage in His vision, you bring the day of Christ’s return closer! Could anything be bigger or more important or more exciting or more fulfilling? Now, consider your commission that helps complete the vision of Christ.

S.cripture – Read Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:1-11

O.bservations

1. In Matthew 28, Jesus said in essence, “Wherever you go in life make disciples or followers of me.” In addition to spiritual rebirth, according to Jesus how are disciples made?

2. According to Acts 1, the commission of Jesus includes Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the end of the earth. So, how would you describe the following:
Your hometown (Jerusalem):
Your country (Judea):
Your neighboring country (Samaria):
The end of your world:

A.pplications

1. How do you feel about your calling to make disciples of Jesus world-wide and why?
Circle One:
Not Sure 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Overwhelmed
Why?

2. While you may not personally travel far from your hometown, what part could you play to fulfill your commission to make disciples world-wide? Circle as many as you think or feel you could do:
Missionary Teacher Medical Bible Translation
Prayer Give Financially Short-term Missions

3. According to Matthew 28 and Acts 1, what does Jesus promise to do to make you effective in your role in his vision? Write them down here.

P.rayer – Tell Jesus that you desire to embrace his vision and engage in its completion. Tell him how excited you are for his soon return!

Further Thoughts

“I’m just one person. What difference could I make in fulfilling the world-wide vision of Christ?”

If this sounds like you feel, you are in good company. “Really?” Yes, really! In light of the magnitude of Christ’s vision, every devoted follower should feel small, insignificant, inadequate or all of the above. In fact, Christ expects you to feel like that! But here are two realities and two actions you should take that will reshape your thinking and feeling and future.

First Reality - The Church

The vision of Christ is fulfilled when his followers unite together. Christ said he is building his church—the gathered children of God. Christ is fulfilling his vision through the building of his church world-wide in every nation among every people-group. Christ has proven that he achieves the vision through the united efforts of his followers. It takes every committed church and every gift of the Spirit to seize every opportunity to advance the message of Christ. **First action** – be sure you commit yourself to a local church that both embraces and engages in the vision of Christ (Matthew 24:14).

Second Reality – The Sovereignty of God

Remember the description of God’s sovereignty you learned in Lesson 6:

“He rules over all of his creation by his immeasurable power, knowledge, wisdom and freedom; freedom to fulfill his purposes and promises when, where and how he chooses, governed by his love and holiness”.

You might be asking, “What does God’s sovereignty have to do with Christ’s vision?” Everything! When you surrender to the sovereignty of God, Christ will give you gifts/abilities and opportunities to advance his vision. The potential of every ordinary follower of Christ cannot be measured or imagined (Ephesians 3:20) when fully surrendered to do God’s will.

If you feel insignificant or inadequate to make a difference in advancing Christ’s vision world-wide, notice the examples of people like you that God used powerfully. From ordinary shepherds (David), to former prostitutes (Rahab), to fishermen (Peter) and saleswomen (Lydia)—Christ is totally impartial. In fact, Christ prefers to demonstrate his greatest powers through his smallest and weakest followers. **Second action** – humbly surrender to the

sovereignty of God and you will ultimately find a place of fruitful service in the mission of Christ's vision. Your greatest potential won't happen overnight. But start now in small ways. You will never regret it!

The revelation given to John describes the amazing result of the completed vision of Christ, who is called the Lamb:

“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’ Revelation 7:9-10

Christ's vision and mission is not an option for those who follow him since this is what he is doing in the world today. Don't miss or ignore the opportunities Christ wants you to engage in—that you will regret.

A Final Thought

Keep Your Heart Noble

If you arrived at this Final Thought having completed all 13 lessons and observed and applied about 78 scripture references, you most likely possess a noble heart. “Noble” is not the kind of word used or heard in contemporary conversation. So, what is a noble heart? Let’s take a brief look!

Both in Luke’s gospel and his inspired journal of the early church in Acts, the word “noble” describes the heart of the authentic follower of Jesus Christ. In both instances, the noble heart relates to the Word of God. The true follower of Jesus has an undeniable passion for God’s Word.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul and Silas proclaimed the good news of Christ to the people in Berea. The apostles were delighted to discover that these Bereans had two compatible qualities of a noble character that every follower of Christ would do well to imitate. The Bereans were both eager to receive the Word of God and investigate its truthfulness without bias.

“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” Acts 17:11

In the parable of the sower in Luke 8:1-15, Jesus gives his disciples the meaning of the seed and the soils. The seed is the Word of God and the soils represent four possible conditions of the heart on which the seed is scattered. The fourth soil is the only heart that receives the Word of God and produces fruit. Jesus calls this heart “noble and good”.

“But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.” Luke 8:15

Here, “noble and good” means undivided, having a “singleness of purpose” to receive the Word, obey it, and wait patiently for growth and the abundant harvest that follows.

May the soil of your heart always be “noble and good”, having a passion for the Word of God that results in a life-long harvest of fruitfulness. May Christ himself always occupy the throne of your heart for his glory and your good pleasure.

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