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CRAZY LOVE



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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER REVISED AND UPDATED



OVERWHELMED BY A RELENTLESS GOD

FRANCIS CHAN with danae yankoski

Foreword by Chris Tomlin



OVERWHELMED
BY A RELENTLESS
GOD
FRANCIS CHAN
with danae yankoski



Heavenly Father, thank You for Your grace.
Your forgiveness is SO good that I struggle with believing it at times. Thank You for rescuing me from myself and giving me Your Holy Spirit. Your love is better than life.

To my best friend, Lisa, for being a godly, gorgeous, excellent wife and mother

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The members of Cornerstone Church for passionately pursuing God with me.

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FOREWORD

It is with great excitement and honor that I get the opportunity to introduce you to my friend Francis Chan. Francis is one of those rare people you come across in life who leaves you wanting to be better. You know, a better friend, a better neighbor, a better athlete (well maybe not athlete ... I can take Francis in most things involving competition). But most important, Francis leaves you wanting more of Jesus. If you are around Francis for more than thirty minutes, you soon realize that he is a man with great vision and resolve for the mission of Jesus. Some might say that Francis is a bit of an idealist in thinking that one life can really make a dent in the world. But I would say that Francis is the ultimate realist. Meaning, someone who believes that God is really who He says He is and that the true reality of this life is to follow Him wholeheartedly.

The book you have in your hand, *Crazy Love*, may just be the most challenging book outside of God's Word you will read this year. (And for a few years to come for that matter.) The status quo and norms of the so-called "Christian" life that so many of us are used to experiencing are in for a shock! Isn't it interesting that in Acts 11, at the end of verse 26, it says, "The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." What I find interesting is the simple thought that the Christians didn't name themselves. But rather, they were *called* (or named) "Christians" by those watching their lives. I wonder if it would be the same today. Could someone look at your life or look at my life and name me a Christian? A humbling question for sure.

Crazy Love is the perfect title for this book. When Jesus was asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" he responded with "Love."

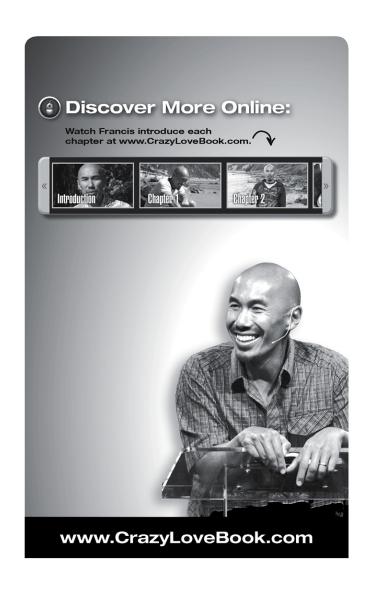
"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matt. 22:37–40)

As Francis so brilliantly illustrates, the life that Jesus calls us to is absolute craziness to the world. Sure, it's fine and politically correct to *believe* in God, but to really *love* Him is a whole different story. Yeah, it's nice and generous to give to the needy at Christmas or after some disaster, but to sacrifice your own comfort and welfare for another may look like madness to a safe and undisturbed world.

I am challenged to the core by the pages you're about to read. I am excited that you are diving into this much-needed book. I encourage you to face up to the convictions of *Crazy Love*. I know your heart and spirit will be stirred again for your First Love.

—Chris Tomlin,

songwriter and worship leader of Passion Conferences



PREFACE TO THE UPDATED EDITION

I write this preface in January of 2013, and as of now *Crazy Love* has sold more than two million copies. To say that the response to the book surprised me is a huge understatement.

When I wrote *Crazy Love*, I assumed I was only appealing to a small segment of the population. I hoped to encourage those who were confused by the church system—those who had been made to feel crazy because of their desire to follow Scripture simply and literally. I had no idea that it would resonate with so many people.

I have seen some positive developments in the American church since 2008. I see a greater awareness of the suffering of those in our hometowns and those around the world. More people now question what it really means to "follow Jesus" and actively evaluate their lifestyles. Some have recognized their need to surrender and have repented of their ways. And in those individuals and churches that are pursuing these things, I see more joy and vitality.

I love the church, and I am encouraged as I travel around the country and around the world and see groups of people living as God intended His church to live. I see the Spirit working—as He always is—and I am encouraged to see a larger group within the American church taking Scripture seriously and following the Spirit's leading.

But this is no reason to settle in. We will always find ourselves in trouble when we get comfortable with things as they are.

As I reflect on what I wrote here five years ago, there are some things that would probably come out a bit differently if I were writing them today.

Some have said that I focused too much on needs overseas and didn't focus enough on the person who is called to the workplace here in America. I didn't emphasize the need to work hard at our jobs to the glory of God. Everything I wrote in *Crazy Love*—seeing God accurately, loving Him passionately, taking the Scriptures at face value, etc.—needs to be applied in every area of our lives.

Crazy Love will never be the only message the church needs to hear, but I am thankful that it continues to speak to people. Five years later, we still need to be reminded that God is bigger than we think. We need to be awed by His unfathomable love for us. We need to be pushed away from the lukewarm equilibrium we keep coming back to. I still need these reminders, and the church does too.

In this edition of *Crazy Love*, I have added an additional chapter to update readers on my ministry and my thought process. God continues to guide and teach me, and I wanted to share some of that. Aside from that additional chapter, the text remains almost identical to the 2008 edition. This means that there is a five-year gap between chapters 1–10 and chapter 11. I decided not to change the references in those original chapters to where I was living, how many children I had, and where and how I was ministering. I wanted to change those chapters as little as possible since people have been connecting with them so well over the years.

As you read this new edition of *Crazy Love*, my prayer for you is the same as it was when I first wrote it. I want you to be challenged by God's greatness and love. I want you to understand that the only sane response to His love is a wholehearted devotion to Jesus. And I want you to see that the crazy people in this world are those who experience God's love and remain complacent, not those who let go of all they have and follow Him completely.

PREFACE

To just read the Bible, attend church, and avoid "big" sins—is this passionate, wholehearted love for God?

—François Fénelon, The Seeking Heart

We all know something's wrong.

At first I thought it was just me. Then I stood before twenty thousand Christian college students and asked, "How many of you have read the New Testament and wondered if we in the church are missing it?" When almost every hand went up, I felt comforted. At least I'm not crazy.

In this book I am going to ask some hard questions. They will resonate with what a lot of us feel but are generally afraid to articulate and explore. Don't worry—this isn't another book written to bash churches. I think it's far too easy to blame the American church without acknowledging that we are each part of the church and therefore responsible. But I think we all feel deeply, even if we haven't voiced it, that the church in many ways is not doing well.

I get nervous when I think of how we've missed who we are supposed to be, and sad when I think about how we're missing out on all that God wants for the people He loved enough to die for.

I haven't always felt this way. I grew up believing in God without having a clue what He is like. I called myself a Christian, was pretty involved in church, and tried to stay away from all of the things that "good Christians" avoid—drinking, drugs, sex, swearing. Christianity was simple: Fight your desires in order to please God. Whenever I failed (which was often), I'd walk around feeling guilty and distant from God.

In hindsight, I don't think my church's teachings were incorrect, just incomplete. My view of God was narrow and small.

Now I am a husband, a father of four, and the pastor of a church in Southern California. Until just a few years ago I was quite happy with how God was working in me and in the church. Then God began changing my heart. This took place largely during the times I spent reading His Word. The conviction I felt through the teachings of Scripture, coupled with several experiences in third-world countries, changed everything. Some serious paradigm shattering happened in my life, and consequently in our church.

The result is that I've never felt more alive, and neither has Cornerstone Church. It's exhilarating to be part of a group of believers who are willing to think biblically rather than conventionally, to be part of a body where radical living is becoming the norm.



This book is written for those who want more Jesus. It is for those who are bored with what American Christianity offers. It is for those who don't want to plateau, those who would rather die before their convictions do.

I hope reading this book will convince you of something: that by surrendering yourself totally to God's purposes, He will bring you the most pleasure in this life and the next. I hope it affirms your desire for "more God"—even if you are surrounded by people who feel they have "enough God." I hope it inspires confidence if you have questioned and doubted the commitment of the American church. I want to affirm your questioning, even while assuring you there is hope.

God put me in Simi Valley, California, to lead a church of comfortable people into lives of risk and adventure. I believe He wants us to love others so much that we go to extremes to help them. I believe He wants us to be known for giving—of our time, our money, and our abilities—and to start a movement of "giving" churches. In so doing, we can alleviate the suffering in the world and change the reputation of His bride in America. Some people, even some at my church, have told me flat-out, "You're crazy." But I can't imagine devoting my life to a greater vision.

We need to stop giving people excuses not to believe in God. You've probably heard the expression "I believe in God, just not organized religion." I don't think people would say that if the church truly lived like we are called to live. The expression would change to "I can't deny what the church does, but I don't believe in their God." At least then they'd address their rejection of God rather than use the church as a scapegoat.

We are going to look at how the Bible calls us to live our lives. It is important that we not measure our spiritual health by the people around us, who are pretty much like us. To begin this journey, we'll first address our inaccurate view of God and, consequently, of ourselves.

But before we look at what is wrong and address it, we need to understand something. The core problem isn't the fact that we're lukewarm, halfhearted, or stagnant Christians. The crux of it all is why we are this way, and it is because we have an inaccurate view of God. We see Him as a benevolent Being who is satisfied when people manage to fit Him into their lives in some small way. We forget that God never had an identity crisis. He knows that He's great and deserves to be the center of our lives. Jesus came humbly as a servant, but He never begs us to give Him some small part of ourselves. He commands everything from His followers.

The first three chapters are absolutely foundational to this book. Though parts of it may not be "new" material to you, allow these sacred truths to move you to worship. I pray that your reading of the next few pages will be interrupted by spontaneous and meaningful praise to God. Allow these words to communicate old truths to your heart in a fresh way.

After the foundation has been laid in the first three chapters, the last seven chapters call us to examine ourselves. We will address life in light of the crux of who God is. We'll discover what is wrong in our churches and, ultimately, in ourselves.

Come with me on this journey. I don't promise it will be painless. Change, as we all know, is uncomfortable. It's up to you to respond to what you read. But you will have a choice: to adjust how you live daily or to stay the same.

♦ CHAPTER ONE

Stop Praying

What if I said, "*Stop praying*"? What if I told you to stop talking *at* God for a while, but instead to take a long, hard look at Him before you speak another word? Solomon warned us not to rush into God's presence with words. That's what fools do. And often, that's what we do.

We are a culture that relies on technology over community, a society in which spoken and written words are cheap, easy to come by, and excessive. Our culture says anything goes; fear of God is almost unheard of. We are slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to become angry.

The wise man comes to God without saying a word and stands in awe of Him. It may seem a hopeless endeavor, to gaze at the invisible God. But Romans 1:20 tells us that through creation, we see His "invisible qualities" and "divine nature."

Let's begin this book by gazing at God in silence. What I want you to do right now is to go online and look at the "Awe Factor" video at www.crazylovebook.com to get a taste of the awe factor of our God. Seriously—go do it.

Speechless? Amazed? Humbled?

When I first saw those images, I *had* to worship. I didn't want to speak to or share it with anyone. I just wanted to sit quietly and admire the Creator.

It's wild to think that most of these galaxies have been discovered only in the past few years, thanks to the Hubble telescope. They've been in the universe for thousands of years without humans even knowing about them. Why would God create more than 350,000,000,000 galaxies (and this is a conservative estimate) that generations of people never saw or even knew existed? Do you think maybe it was to make us say, "Wow, God is unfathomably big"? Or perhaps God wanted us to see these pictures so that our response would be, "Who do I think I am?"

R. C. Sproul writes, "Men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance, until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God." 1

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Switch gears with me for a minute and think about the detailed intricacy of the other side of creation.

Did you know that a caterpillar has 228 separate and distinct muscles in its head? That's quite a few, for a bug. The average elm tree has approximately 6 *million* leaves on it. And your own heart generates enough pressure as it pumps blood throughout your body that it could squirt blood up to 30 feet. (I've never tried this, and I don't recommend it.)

Have you ever thought about how diverse and creative God is? He didn't have to make hundreds of different kinds of bananas, but He did. He didn't have to put 3,000 different species of trees within one square mile in the Amazon jungle, but He did. God didn't have to create so many kinds of laughter. Think about the different sounds of your friends' laughs—wheezes, snorts, silent, loud, obnoxious.

How about the way plants defy gravity by drawing water upward from the ground into their stems and veins? Or did you know that spiders produce three kinds of silk? When they build their webs, they create sixty feet of silk in one hour, simultaneously producing special oil on their feet that prevents them from sticking to their own web. (Most of us hate spiders, but sixty feet an hour deserves some respect!) Coral plants are so sensitive that they can die if the water temperature varies by even one or two degrees.

Did you know that when you get goose bumps, the hair in your follicles is actually helping you stay warmer by trapping body heat? Or what about the simple fact that plants take in carbon dioxide (which is harmful to us) and produce oxygen (which we need to survive)? I'm sure you knew that, but have you ever marveled at it? And these same poison-swallowing, lifegiving plants came from tiny seeds that were placed in the dirt. Some were watered, some weren't; but after a few days they poked through the soil and out into the warm sunlight.

Whatever God's reasons for such diversity, creativity, and sophistication in the universe, on earth, and in our own bodies, the point of it all is His glory. God's art speaks of Himself, reflecting who He is and what He is like.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

—Psalm 19:1-4

This is why we are called to worship Him. His art, His handiwork, and His creation all echo the truth that He is glorious. There is no other like Him. He is the King of Kings, the Beginning and the End, the One who was and is and is to come. I know you've heard this before, but I don't want you to miss it.

I sometimes struggle with how to properly respond to God's magnitude in a world bent on ignoring or merely tolerating Him. But know this: God will not be tolerated. He instructs us to worship and fear Him.

Go back and reread the last two paragraphs. Go to the website www.crazylovebook.com and watch the "Just Stop and Think" fifteenminute video. Close this book if you need to, and meditate on the almighty One who dwells in unapproachable light, the glorious One.



There is an epidemic of spiritual amnesia going around, and none of us is immune. No matter how many fascinating details we learn about God's creation, no matter how many pictures we see of His galaxies, and no matter how many sunsets we watch, we still forget.

Most of us know that we are supposed to love and fear God; that we are supposed to read our Bibles and pray so that we can get to know Him better; that we are supposed to worship Him with our lives. But actually living it out is challenging.

It confuses us when loving God is hard. Shouldn't it be easy to love a God so wonderful? When we love God because we feel we *should* love Him, instead of genuinely loving out of our true selves, we have forgotten who God really is. Our amnesia is flaring up again.

It may sound "un-Christian" to say that on some mornings I don't feel like loving God, or I just forget to. But I do. In our world, where hundreds of things distract us from God, we have to intentionally and consistently remind ourselves of Him.

I recently attended my high school reunion. People kept coming up to me and saying, "She's *your* wife?" They were amazed, I guess, that a woman

so beautiful would marry someone like me. It happened enough times that I took a good look at a photograph of the two of us. I, too, was taken aback. It *is* astonishing that my wife chooses to be with me—and not just because she is beautiful. I was reminded of the fullness of what I have been given in my wife.

We need the same sort of reminders about God's goodness. We are programmed to focus on what we don't have, bombarded multiple times throughout the day with what we need to buy that will make us feel happier or sexier or more at peace. This dissatisfaction transfers over to our thinking about God. We forget that we already have everything we need in Him. Because we don't often think about the reality of who God is, we quickly forget that He is worthy to be worshipped and loved. We are to fear Him.

A. W. Tozer writes,

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.... Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.²

If the "gravest question" before us really is what God Himself is like, how do we learn to know Him?

We have seen how He is the Creator of both the magnitude of the galaxies and the complexity of caterpillars. But what is He like? What are His characteristics? What are His defining attributes? How are we to fear Him? To speak to Him? Don't check out here. We need to be reminded of this stuff. It is both basic and crucial.

God is holy. A lot of people say that whatever you believe about God is fine, so long as you are sincere. But that is comparable to describing your friend in one instance as a three-hundred-pound sumo wrestler and in another as a five-foot-two, ninety-pound gymnast. No matter how sincere you are in your explanations, both descriptions of your friend simply cannot be true.

The preposterous part about our doing this to God is that He already has a name, an identity. We don't get to decide who God is. "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM" (Ex. 3:14). We don't change that.

To say that God is holy is to say that He is set apart, distinct from us. And because of His set apart-ness, there is no way we can ever fathom all of who He is. To the Jews, saying something three times demonstrated its perfection, so to call God "Holy, Holy, Holy" is to say that He is perfectly set apart, with nothing and no one to compare Him to. *That* is what it means to be "holy."

Many Spirit-filled authors have exhausted the thesaurus in order to describe God with the glory He deserves. His perfect holiness, by definition, assures us that our words can't contain Him. Isn't it a comfort to worship a God we cannot exaggerate?

God is eternal. Most of us would probably agree with that statement. But have you ever seriously meditated on what it means? Each of us had a beginning; everything in existence began on a particular day, at a specific time.

Everything, that is, but God. He always has been, since before there was an earth, a universe, or even angels. God exists outside of time, and since we are within time, there is no way we will ever totally grasp that concept.

Not being able to fully understand God is frustrating, but it is ridiculous for us to think we have the right to limit God to something we are capable of comprehending. What a stunted, insignificant god *that* would be! If my mind is the size of a soda can and God is the size of all the oceans, it would be stupid for me to say He is only the small amount of water I can scoop into my little can. God is so much bigger, so far beyond our time-encased, air/food/sleep-dependent lives.

Please stop here, even if just for a moment, and glorify the eternal God: "But you, O Lord, sit enthroned forever; your renown endures through all generations.... But you remain the same, and your years will never end" (Ps. 102:12, 27).

God is all-knowing. Isn't this an intimidating thought?

Each of us, to some degree, fools our friends and family about who we really are. But it's impossible to do that with God. He knows each of us, deeply and specifically. He knows our thoughts before we think them, our actions before we commit them, whether we are lying down or sitting or walking around. He knows who we are and what we are about. We cannot escape Him, not even if we want to. When I grow weary of trying to be faithful to Him and want a break, it doesn't come as a surprise to God.

For David, God's knowledge led him to worship. He viewed it as wonderful and meaningful. He wrote in Psalm 139 that even in the darkness he couldn't hide from God; that while he was in his mother's womb, God was there.

Hebrews 4:13 says, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." It is sobering to realize that this is the same God who is holy and eternal, the Maker of the billions of galaxies and thousands of tree species in the rainforest. This is the God who takes the time to know all the little details about each of us. He does not have to know us so well, but He chooses to.

God is all-powerful. Colossians 1:16 tells us that everything was created *for* God: "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him."

Don't we live instead as though God is created for *us*, to do *our* bidding, to bless *us*, and to take care of *our* loved ones?

Psalm 115:3 reveals, "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him." Yet we keep on questioning Him: "Why did You make me with this body, instead of that one?" "Why are so many people dying of starvation?" "Why are there so many planets with nothing living on them?" "Why is my family so messed up?" "Why don't You make Yourself more obvious to the people who need You?"

The answer to each of these questions is simply this: because He's God. He has more of a right to ask us why so many people are starving. As much as we want God to explain Himself to us, His creation, we are in no place to demand that He give an account to us.

All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"

—Daniel 4:35

Can you worship a God who isn't obligated to explain His actions to you? Could it be your arrogance that makes you think God owes you an explanation?

Do you really believe that compared to God, "all the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing," including you?

God is fair and just. One definition of justice is "reward and/or penalty as deserved." If what we truly deserved were up to us, we would end up

with as many different answers as people who responded. But it isn't up to us, mostly because none of us are good.

God is the only Being who is good, and the standards are set by Him. Because God hates sin, He has to punish those guilty of sin. Maybe that's not an appealing standard. But to put it bluntly, when you get your own universe, you can make your own standards. When we disagree, let's not assume it's His reasoning that needs correction.

It takes a lot for us to comprehend God's total hatred for sin. We make excuses like, "Yes, I am prideful at times, but everyone struggles with pride." However, God says in Proverbs 8:13, "I *hate* pride and arrogance." You and I are not allowed to tell Him how much He can hate it. He can hate and punish it as severely as His justice demands.

God never excuses sin. And He is always consistent with that ethic. Whenever we start to question whether God really hates sin, we have only to think of the cross, where His Son was tortured, mocked, and beaten because of sin. *Our* sin.

No question about it: God hates and must punish sin. And He is totally just and fair in doing so.

Before the Throne

So far we have talked about things we can see with our own eyes, things we know about creation, and some of the attributes of God as revealed in the Bible. But many facets of God expand beyond our comprehension. He cannot be contained in this world, explained by our vocabulary, or grasped by our understanding.

Yet in Revelation 4 and Isaiah 6 we get two distinct glimpses of the heavenly throne room. Let me paint a bit of a word picture for you.

In Revelation, when John recounts his experience of seeing God, it's as though he's scrambling for earthly words to describe the vision he was privileged to see. He describes the One seated on the throne with two gems, "jasper and carnelian," and the area around the throne as a rainbow that looked like an emerald. God, the One on the throne, resembles radiant jewels more than flesh and blood.

This sort of poetic, artistic imagery can be difficult for those of us who don't think that way. So imagine the most stunning sunset you've ever seen. Remember the radiant colors splashed across the sky? The way you stopped to gaze at it in awe? And how the words *wow* and *beautiful* seemed so lacking? That's a small bit of what John is talking about in Revelation 4 as he attempts to articulate his vision of heaven's throne room.

John describes "flashes of lightning" and "rumblings and peals of thunder" coming from God's throne, a throne that must be unlike any other. He writes that before the throne are seven blazing torches and something like a sea of glass that looks like crystal. Using ordinary words, he does his best to describe a heavenly place and a holy God.

Most intriguing to me is how John describes those who surround the throne. First, there are the twenty-four elders dressed in white and wearing golden crowns. Next, John describes four six-winged beings with eyes all over their bodies and wings. One has the face of a lion, one of an ox, one of a man, and one of an eagle.

I try to imagine what it would be like if I actually saw one of these creatures out in the woods or down at the beach. I would probably pass out! It would be terrifying to see a being with the face of a lion and eyes "all around and within."

As if John's description isn't wild and strange enough, he then tells us what the beings are saying. The twenty-four elders cast their gold crowns before the One on the throne, fall on their faces before Him, and say, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for

you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." At the same time, the four creatures never stop (day or night) saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come!" Just imagine being in that room, surrounded by the elders chanting God's worth, and the creatures declaring God's holiness.

The prophet Isaiah also had a vision of God in His throne room, but this time it is a more direct picture: "I saw the Lord seated on a throne."

Wow. Isaiah saw that and lived? The Israelites hid themselves whenever God passed by their camp because they were too afraid to look at Him, even the back of Him as He moved away. They were scared they would die if they saw God.

But Isaiah looked and saw God. He writes that the bottom of God's robe filled the whole temple, and that the seraphim appeared above Him. The seraphim each had six wings, similar to the creatures John describes in Revelation. Isaiah says they called out to one another, saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory!" Then the foundations shook and smoke filled the house, which is similar to John's description of flashes of lightning and peals of thunder.

Isaiah's description is less detailed than John's, but Isaiah shares more of his response to being in the throne room of God. His words reverberate in the wake of the smoky room and shaky foundation: "Woe is me.... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." And then one of the seraphim brings Isaiah a piece of burning coal that had been smoldering on the altar. The creature touches Isaiah's mouth with the hot coal and tells him that his guilt is taken away.

Both of these descriptions serve a purpose. John's helps us imagine what the throne room of God looks like, while Isaiah's reminds us what our only response to such a God should be. May Isaiah's cry become our own. Woe is me ... we are a people of unclean lips!

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Perhaps you need to take a deep breath after thinking about the God who made galaxies and caterpillars, the One who sits enthroned and eternally praised by beings so fascinating that were they photographed, it would make prime-time news for weeks. If you are not staggered, go to Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4 and read the accounts aloud and slowly, doing your best to imagine what the authors describe.

The appropriate way to end this chapter is the same way we began it—by standing in awed silence before a mighty, fearsome God, whose tremendous worth becomes even more apparent as we see our own puny selves in comparison.

Notes

- 1. R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2000), 68.
- 2. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 1.

You could die before you finish reading this chapter. I could die while you're reading it. Today. At any moment.

But it's easy to think about today as just another day. An average day where you go about life concerned with your to-do list, preoccupied by appointments, focused on family, thinking about your desires and needs.

On the average day, we live caught up in ourselves. On the average day, we don't consider God very much. On the average day, we forget that our life truly is a vapor.

But there is nothing normal about today. Just think about everything that must function properly just for you to survive. For example, your kidneys. The only people who really think about their kidneys are people whose kidneys don't work correctly. The majority of us take for granted our kidneys, liver, lungs, and other internal organs that we're dependent upon to continue living.

What about driving down the road at sixty-five miles per hour, only a few feet away from cars going the opposite direction at the same speed? Someone would only have to jerk his or her arm and you would be dead. I don't think that's morbid; I think it's reality.

It's crazy that we think today is just a normal day to do whatever we want with. To those of us who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money," James writes,

"Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (4:13–14).

When you think about it, that's a little disconcerting. But even after reading those verses, do you really believe you could vanish at any minute? That perhaps today you will die? Or do you instead feel somehow invincible?

Frederick Buechner writes, "Intellectually we all know that we will die, but we do not really know it in the sense that the knowledge becomes a part of us. We do not really know it in the sense of living as though it were true. On the contrary, we tend to live as though our lives would go on forever." 1

Justified Stress?

I had never experienced heart problems until a couple of years ago when I began to have heart palpitations. Over time they became more frequent, and this worried me.

I finally told my wife. In case something happened to me, I didn't want it to come as a complete shock. She suggested I go to the doctor, but I resisted because I'm stubborn and that's what I do.

You see, when I was honest I knew what the problem was. I was immersed in and overcome by stress. It was the Christmas season, and I had to take care of and think about a lot of things.

But on Christmas Eve the issue intensified so much that I told my wife I would go to the emergency room after the church service. During the service, however, I surrendered all of my worries and stress to God. My symptoms slowly went away, and I never went to the doctor.

I used to believe that in this world there are two kinds of people: natural worriers and naturally joyful people. I couldn't really help it that I was the

worrying kind. I'm a problem solver, so I have to focus on things that need fixing. God can see that my intensity and anxiety are ministry related. I worry because I take His work seriously.

Right?

But then there's that perplexing command: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4). You'll notice that it doesn't end with "... unless you're doing something extremely important." No, it's a command for all of us, and it follows with the charge, "Do not be anxious about anything" (v. 6).

That came as a pretty staggering realization. But what I realized next was even more staggering.

When I am consumed by my problems—stressed out about *my* life, *my* family, and *my* job—I actually convey the belief that I think the circumstances are more important than God's command to always rejoice. In other words, that I have a "right" to disobey God because of the magnitude of my responsibilities.

Worry implies that we don't quite trust that God is big enough, powerful enough, or loving enough to take care of what's happening in our lives.

Stress says that the things we are involved in are important enough to merit our impatience, our lack of grace toward others, or our tight grip of control.

Basically, these two behaviors communicate that it's okay to sin and not trust God because the stuff in my life is somehow exceptional. Both worry and stress reek of arrogance. They declare our tendency to forget that we've been forgiven, that our lives here are brief, that we are headed to a place where we won't be lonely, afraid, or hurt ever again, and that in the context of God's strength, our problems are small, indeed.

Why are we so quick to forget God? Who do we think we are?

I find myself relearning this lesson often. Even though I glimpse God's holiness, I am still dumb enough to forget that life is all about God and not about me at all.

It goes sort of like this....

Suppose you are an extra in an upcoming movie. You will probably scrutinize that one scene where hundreds of people are milling around, just waiting for that two-fifths of a second when you can see the back of your head. Maybe your mom and your closest friend get excited about that two-fifths of a second with you ... *maybe*. But no one else will realize it is you. Even if you tell them, they won't care.

Let's take it a step further. What if you rent out the theater on opening night and invite all your friends and family to come see the new movie about you? People will say, "You're an idiot! How could you think this movie is about you?"

Many Christians are even more delusional than the person I've been describing. So many of us think and live like the movie of life is all about us.

Now consider the movie of life....

God creates the world. (Were you alive then? Was *God* talking to you when He proclaimed "It is good" about all He had just made?)

Then people rebel against *God* (who, if you haven't realized it yet, is the main character in this movie), and *God* floods the earth to rid it of the mess people made of it.

Several generations later, *God* singles out a ninety-nine-year-old man called Abram and makes him the father of a nation (did you have anything to do with this?).

Later, along come Joseph and Moses and many other ordinary and inadequate people that the movie is also not about. *God* is the one who

picks them and directs them and works miracles through them.

In the next scene, *God* sends judges and prophets to His nation because the people can't seem to give Him the one thing He asks of them (obedience).

And then, the climax: The Son of *God* is born among the people whom *God* still somehow loves. While in this world, the Son teaches His followers what true love looks like. Then the Son of *God* dies and is resurrected and goes back up to be with *God*.

And even though the movie isn't quite finished yet, we know what the last scene holds. It's the scene I already described in chapter 1: the throne room of *God*. Here every being worships *God* who sits on the throne, for He alone is worthy to be praised.

From start to finish, this movie is obviously about God. He is the main character. *How is it possible that we live as though it is about us?* Our scenes in the movie, our brief lives, fall somewhere between the time Jesus ascends into heaven (Acts) and when we will all worship God on His throne in heaven (Revelation).

We have only our two-fifths-of-a-second-long scene to live. I don't know about you, but I want my two-fifths of a second to be about my making much of God. First Corinthians 10:31 says, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." That is what each of our two-fifths of a second is about.

So what does that mean for you?

Frankly, you need to get over yourself. It might sound harsh, but that's seriously what it means.

Maybe life's pretty good for you right now. God has given you this good stuff so that you can show the world a person who enjoys blessings, but who is still totally obsessed with God.

Or maybe life is tough right now, and everything feels like a struggle. God has allowed hard things in your life so you can show the world that your God is great and that knowing Him brings peace and joy, even when life is hard. Like the psalmist who wrote, "I saw the prosperity of the wicked.... Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure.... When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me *till I entered the sanctuary of God*" (Ps. 73:3, 13, 16–17). It is easy to become disillusioned with the circumstances of our lives compared to others'. But in the presence of God, He gives us a deeper peace and joy that transcends it all.

To be brutally honest, it doesn't really matter what place you find yourself in right now. Your part is to bring Him glory—whether eating a sandwich on a lunch break, drinking coffee at 12:04 a.m. so you can stay awake to study, or watching your four-month-old take a nap.

The point of your life is to point to Him. Whatever you are doing, God wants to be glorified, because this whole thing is His. It is His movie, His world, His gift.

Thank God We Are Weak

So even though *God* has given us this life—this brief scene in His movie—we still forget we're not in control.

I was reminded of life's fragility by the birth of my fourth child and only son. All of a sudden our little girls wanted to carry their new baby brother around. My wife and I constantly told them to be careful because he's fragile. It got me wondering when he would no longer be fragile. When he's two? Eight? In junior high? College? Married? Once he has kids?

Isn't life always fragile? It is never under control. Even as I sat holding my son, I realized that I couldn't control whether he would love God.

Ultimately, I have just as little control over my own life and what will happen to me. Isn't the easiest thing at this point to start living in a guarded, safe, controlled way? To stop taking risks and to be ruled by our fears of what could happen?

Turning inward is one way to respond; the other is to acknowledge our lack of control and reach out for God's help.

If life were stable, I'd never need God's help. Since it's not, I reach out for Him regularly. I am thankful for the unknowns and that I don't have control, because it makes me run to God.

Just to put into perspective the brevity of our lives:

Throughout time, somewhere between forty-five billion and one hundred twenty-five billion people have lived on this earth. That's 125,000,000,000. In about fifty years (give or take a couple of decades), no one will remember you. Everyone you know will be dead. Certainly no one will care what job you had, what car you drove, what school you attended, or what clothes you wore. This can be terrifying or reassuring, or maybe a mix of both.

Are You Ready?

As a pastor, I'm often called upon when life "vanishes like a mist." One of the most powerful examples I've seen of this was Stan Gerlach, a successful businessman who was well known in the community. Stan was giving a eulogy at a memorial service when he decided to share the gospel. At the end of his message, Stan told the mourners, "You never know when God is going to take your life. At that moment, there's nothing you can do about it. Are you ready?" Then Stan sat down, fell over, and died. His wife and sons tried to resuscitate him, but there was nothing they could do—just as Stan had said a few minutes earlier.

I'll never forget receiving that phone call and heading over to the Gerlach house. Stan's wife, Suzy, was just arriving home. She hugged me and cried. One of her sons, John, stepped out of the car weeping. He asked me, "Did you hear the story? Did you hear? I'm so proud of him. My dad died doing what he loved doing most. He was telling people about Jesus."

I was asked to share a word with everyone gathered. There were children, grandchildren, neighbors, and friends. I opened my Bible to Matthew 10:32–33: "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven."

I asked everyone to imagine what it must have felt like for Stan. One moment, he was at a memorial service saying to a crowd, "This is who Jesus is!" The next, he was before God hearing Jesus say, "This is who Stan Gerlach is!" One second he was confessing Jesus; a second later, Jesus was confessing him!

It happens that quickly. And it could happen to any of us. In the words of Stan Gerlach, "Are you ready?"



Brooke Bronkowski was a beautiful fourteen-year-old girl who was in love with Jesus. When she was in junior high, she started a Bible study on her campus. She spent her babysitting money on Bibles so she could give them out to her unsaved friends. Youth pastors who heard about this brought her boxes of Bibles to give away.

Brooke wrote the following essay when she was about twelve; it will give you an idea of the kind of girl she was.

"SINCE I HAVE MY LIFE BEFORE ME"

By Brooke Bronkowski

I'll live my life to the fullest. I'll be happy. I'll brighten up. I will be more joyful than I have ever been. I will be kind to others. I will loosen up. I will tell others about Christ. I will go on adventures and change the world. I will be bold and not change who I really am. I will have no troubles but instead help others with their troubles.

You see, I'll be one of those people who live to be history makers at a young age. Oh, I'll have moments, good and bad, but I will wipe away the bad and only remember the good. In fact that's all I remember, just good moments, nothing in between, just living my life to the fullest. I'll be one of those people who go somewhere with a mission, an awesome plan, a world-changing plan, and nothing will hold me back. I'll set an example for others, I will pray for direction.

I have my life before me. I will give others the joy I have and God will give me more joy. I will do everything God tells me to do. I will follow the footsteps of God. I will do my best!!!

During her freshman year in high school, Brooke was in a car accident while driving to the movies. Her life on earth ended when she was just fourteen, but her impact didn't. Nearly fifteen hundred people attended Brooke's memorial service. People from her public high school read poems she had written about her love for God. Everyone spoke of her example and her joy.

I shared the gospel and invited those who wanted to know Jesus to come up and give their lives to Him. There must have been at least two hundred students on their knees at the front of the church praying for salvation. Ushers gave a Bible to each of them. They were Bibles that Brooke had kept in her garage, hoping to give out to all of her unsaved friends. In one day, Brooke led more people to the Lord than most ever will.

In her brief fourteen years on earth, Brooke was faithful to Christ. Her short life was not wasted. The words from her essay seem prophetic: "You see, I'll be one of those people who live to be history makers at a young age."

We've all been shocked to hear about or watch someone we know pass on from this life. Even as you read this, faces and names are probably coming to mind. It's good to think about those people in your life, and also to think about death. As the author of Ecclesiastes wrote, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart" (7:2). Stories of people who died after living godly lives are stories with happy endings.

Sadly, many people die while living selfishly. Their funerals are filled by individuals who stretch the truth in order to create a semblance of a meaningful life. Nobody would dare say an unkind word at the funeral; there is an unspoken obligation to come up with something nice to say about the person who died. But sometimes we secretly think the same thing: *He really wasn't that great of a person*.

The truth is, some people waste their lives. This isn't meant to bash those who are gone, but rather to warn those who are alive.

I can pretty much guarantee you that your funeral will be nice. They all are. The fact is, at that point, you won't care. A. W. Tozer once said, "A man by his sin may waste himself, which is to waste that which on earth is most like God. This is man's greatest tragedy and God's heaviest grief."

When we face the holy God, "nice" isn't what we will be concerned with, and it definitely isn't what He will be thinking about. Any compliments you received on earth will be gone; all that will be left for you is truth. The

church in Sardis had a great reputation, but it didn't matter. Jesus said to them, "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Rev. 3:1). All that matters is the reality of who we are before God.

His work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

—1 Corinthians 3:13–15

Perhaps that sounds harsh, but harsh words and the loving truth often go hand in hand.

I think it's easy to hear a story like Brooke's and just move on, without acknowledging that it could just as easily be you or me or my wife or your brother whose life ends suddenly. You could be the next person in your family to die. I could be the next person at my church to die.

We have to *realize* it. We have to believe it enough that it changes how we live.

A friend of mine has a particularly wise perspective on this subject. He was asked if he weren't spending too much of his time serving and giving too much away. His gentle but honest response was, "I wonder if you'll say that after we're dead."

Friends, we need to stop living selfish lives, forgetful of our God. Our lives here are short, often unexpectedly so, and we can all stand to be reminded of it from time to time. That's why I wrote this chapter, to help us remember that in the movie of life, nothing matters except our King and God.

Don't let yourself forget. Soak it in and keep remembering that it is true. He is everything.

Notes

- <u>1</u>. Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark* (New York: HarperOne, 1985), 72.
- 2. Wikipedia, s.v. "world population," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/world_population.

♦ CHAPTER THREE

crazy love

I was taught the song "Jesus Loves Me" as a young child: "Jesus loves me, this I know …" Even if you didn't grow up in a church, you probably know how it ends: "… for the Bible tells me so."

If you've spent any time in church, you've heard expressed, in some form or another, the idea that God loves us. I believed this for years because, as the song puts it, "the Bible tells me so." The only problem is that it was a concept I was taught, not something I implicitly knew to be true. For years I "got" God's love in my head, checked the right answer on the "what God is like" test, but didn't fully understand it with my heart.

I don't think I'm the only person who has misunderstood God's love. Most of us, to some degree, have a difficult time understanding, believing, or accepting God's absolute and unlimited love for us. The reasons we don't receive, trust, or see His love vary from one person to the next, but we all miss out because of it.

For me, it had much to do with my relationship with my own father.

dad and DAD

The concept of being wanted by a father was foreign to me. Growing up, I felt unwanted by my dad. My mother died giving birth to me, so maybe he saw me as the cause of her death; I'm not sure.

I never carried on a meaningful conversation with my dad. In fact, the only affection I remember came when I was nine years old: He put his arm around me for about thirty seconds while we were on our way to my stepmother's funeral. Besides that, the only other physical touch I experienced were the beatings I received when I disobeyed or bothered him.

My goal in our relationship was not to annoy my father. I would walk around the house trying not to upset him.

He died when I was twelve. I cried but also felt relief.

The impact of this relationship affected me for years, and I think a lot of those emotions transferred to my relationship with God. For example, I tried hard not to annoy God with my sin or upset Him with my little problems. I had no aspiration of being wanted by God; I was just happy not to be hated or hurt by Him.

Don't get me wrong. Not everything about my dad was bad. I really do thank God for him, because he taught me discipline, respect, fear, and obedience. I also think he loved me. But I can't sugarcoat how my relationship with him negatively affected my view of God for many years.

Thankfully, my relationship with God took a major turn when I became a father myself. After my oldest daughter was born, I began to see how wrong I was in my thinking about God. For the first time I got a taste of what I believe God feels toward us. I thought about my daughter often. I prayed for her while she slept at night. I showed her picture to anyone who would look. I wanted to give her the world.

Sometimes when I come home from work, my little girl greets me by running out to the driveway and jumping into my arms before I can even get out of the car. As you can imagine, arriving home has become one of my favorite moments of the day.

My own love and desire for my kids' love is so strong that it opened my eyes to how much God desires and loves us. My daughter's expression of love for me and her desire to be with me is the most amazing thing. Nothing compares to being truly, exuberantly wanted by your children.

Through this experience, I came to understand that my desire for my children is only a faint echo of God's great love for me and for every person He made. I am just an earthly, sinful father, and I love my kids so much it hurts. How could I not trust a heavenly, perfect Father who loves me infinitely more than I will ever love my kids?

If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

—Matthew 7:11

God is more worthy of trust than anyone else, yet for so long I questioned His love and doubted His care and provision for me.

In Love with the One I Fear

If I could pick one word to describe my feelings about God in those first years of being a Christian, it would be *fear*. Basically, any verses that describe His overwhelming greatness or His wrath were easy for me to relate to because I feared my own father. I totally connected with passages like this one:

He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in

the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

—Isaiah 40:22–24

Most Christians have been taught in church or by their parents to set aside a daily time for prayer and Scripture reading. It's what we are supposed to do, and so for a long time it's what I valiantly attempted. When I didn't, I felt guilty.

Over time I realized that when we love God, we naturally run to Him—frequently and zealously. Jesus didn't command that we have a regular time with Him each day. Rather, He tells us to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." He called this the "first and greatest commandment" (Matt. 22:37–38). The results are intimate prayer and study of His Word. Our motivation changes from guilt to love.

This is how God longs for us to respond to His extravagant, unending love: not with a cursory "quiet time" plagued by guilt, but with true love expressed through our lives. Like my little girl running out to the driveway to hug me each night because she loves me.

Fear is no longer the word I use to describe how I feel about God. Now I use words like *reverent intimacy*. I still fear God, and I pray that I always will. The Bible emphasizes the importance of fearing God. As we talked about in chapter 1, our culture severely lacks the fear of God, and many of us are plagued with amnesia. But for a long time, I narrowly focused on His fearsomeness to the exclusion of His great and abounding love.

Wanted

Recently, out of a desire to grow in my love for God, I decided to spend a few days alone with Him in the woods.

Before I left, a friend prayed, "God, I know how You've wanted this time with Francis...." Though I didn't say anything at the time, I secretly thought it was a heretical way to pray and that he was wrong to phrase it that way. I was going to the woods because I wanted more of God. But He's *God*; He certainly wouldn't want more of me! It seemed demeaning to think that God could long for a human being.

The more I searched the Scriptures, however, the more I realized my friend's prayer was right on, and that my reaction to his prayer indicated how much I still doubted God's love. My belief in God's love was still theoretical, not a reality I lived out or experienced.

I ended up spending four days in the woods without speaking to another human being. I had no plan or agenda; I just opened my Bible. I don't think it was coincidence that on the first day it fell open to Jeremiah 1.

After reading that passage, I meditated on it for the next four days. It spoke of God's intimate knowledge of me. I had always acknowledged His complete sovereignty over me, but verses 4 and 5 took it to another level: "The word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.'"

In other words, God knew me before He made me.

Please don't skim over this truth just because you've heard it before. Take some time to really think about it. I'll say it again: *God knew you and me before we existed*.

When I first digested this, all of my other relationships seemed trivial by comparison. God has been with me from the start—in fact, from well *before* the start.

My next thought, alone in the woods, was that He determined what Jeremiah would do before he was even born. I questioned whether that was also true of me. Maybe all of this pertained only to Jeremiah's life?

Then I remembered Ephesians 2:10, which tells us that we were created "to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." That verse is meant for me and all others who have been "saved by grace through faith." My existence was not random, nor was it an accident. God knew who He was creating, and He designed me for a specific work.

God's next words to Jeremiah assured me that I need not fear failure:

"Ah, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child."

But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord. Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

—Jeremiah 1:6–10

When Jeremiah voices his hesitation and fear, God—the God of the galaxies—reaches out and touches his mouth. It's a gentle and affectionate gesture, something a loving parent would do. Through this illustration I realized that I don't have to worry about not meeting His expectations. God will ensure my success in accordance with His plan, not mine.

This is the God we serve, the God who knew us before He made us. The God who promises to remain with us and rescue us. The God who loves us and longs for us to love Him back.

So *why*, when we constantly offend Him and are so unlovable and unloving, does God persist in loving us?

In my childhood, doing something offensive resulted in punishment, not love. Whether we admit it or not, every one of us has offended God at some point. Jesus affirmed this when He said, "No one is good—except God alone" (Luke 18:19).

So why does God still love us, despite us? I do not have an answer to this question. But I do know that if God's mercy didn't exist, there would be no hope. No matter how good we tried to be, we would be punished because of our sins.

Many people look at their lives and weigh their sins against their good deeds. But Isaiah 64:6 says, "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags." Our good deeds can never outweigh our sins.

The literal interpretation of "filthy rags" in this verse is "menstrual garments" (think used tampons ... and if you're disgusted by that idea, you get Isaiah's point). It's hard to imagine something more disgusting that we could brag about or put on display. But compared to God's perfect holiness, that's how our good deeds appear.

God's mercy is a *free*, yet costly, *gift*. It cannot be earned. Our righteous acts, just like menstrual garments, certainly don't help us deserve it. The wages of sin will always be death. But because of God's mercy, sin is paid for through the death of Jesus Christ, instead of the death of you and me.

A Strange Inheritance

The very fact that a holy, eternal, all-knowing, all-powerful, merciful, fair, and just God loves you and me is nothing short of astonishing.

The wildest part is that Jesus doesn't *have* to love us. His being is utterly complete and perfect, apart from humanity. He doesn't need me or you. Yet

He wants us, chooses us, even considers us His inheritance (Eph. 1:18). The greatest knowledge we can ever have is knowing God treasures us.

That really is amazing beyond description. The holy Creator sees you as His "glorious inheritance."

The irony is that while God doesn't need us but still wants us, we desperately need God but don't really want Him most of the time. He treasures us and anticipates our departure from this earth to be with Him—and we wonder, indifferently, how much we have to do for Him to get by.

Do I Have a Choice?

While I was speaking to some college students recently, an interesting twist on the contrast between our unresponsiveness and God's great desire for us came up. One student asked, "Why would a loving God force me to love Him?"

It seemed like a weird question. When I asked the student to clarify what he meant, he responded that God "threatens me with hell and punishment if I don't begin a relationship with Him."

The easy retort to that statement is that God doesn't force us to love Him; it's our choice. But there was a deeper issue going on, and I wasn't sure how to answer it in the moment.

Now that I've had time to think about it, I would tell that student that if God is *truly* the greatest good on this earth, would He be loving us if He didn't draw us toward what is best for us (even if that happens to be Himself)? Doesn't His courting, luring, pushing, calling, and even "threatening" demonstrate His love? If He didn't do all of that, wouldn't we accuse Him of being unloving in the end, when all things are revealed?

If someone asked you what the greatest good on this earth is, what would you say? An epic surf session? Financial security? Health? Meaningful, trusting friendships? Intimacy with your spouse? Knowing that you belong? *The greatest good on this earth is God.* Period. God's one goal for us is Himself.

The Good News—the best news in the world, in fact—is that you can have God Himself. Do you believe that God is the greatest thing you can experience in the whole world? Do you believe that the Good News is not merely the forgiveness of your sins, the guarantee that you won't go to hell, or the promise of life in heaven?

The best things in life are gifts from the One who steadfastly loves us. But an important question to ask ourselves is this: Are we in love with God or just His stuff?

Imagine how awful it would feel to have your child say to you, "I don't really love you or want your love, but I *would* like my allowance, please." Conversely, what a beautiful gift it is to have the one you love look you in the eye and say, "I love you. Not your beauty, your money, your family, or your car. Just *you*."

Can you say that to God?

Our love for Him always comes out of His love for us. Do you love this God who is everything, or do you just love everything He gives you? Do you really know and believe that God loves you, individually and personally and intimately? Do you see and know Him as Abba, Father?

Watch the online videos again at www.crazylovebook.com. It will remind you who you are and of the crazy, totally undeserved love of God.

profile of the lukewarm

It is not scientific doubt, not atheism, not pantheism, not agnosticism, that in our day and in this land is likely to quench the light of the gospel.

It is a proud, sensuous, selfish, luxurious, church-going,

hollow-hearted prosperity. $\frac{1}{2}$

So there is an incalculable, faultless, eternal God who loves the frail beings He made with a crazy kind of love. Even though we could die at any moment and generally think our puny lives are pretty sweet compared to loving Him, He persists in loving us with unending, outrageous love.

The only way I know to respond is like the man in one of Christ's parables:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

—Matthew 13:44

In this account, the man joyfully sold all that he had so that he could obtain the only thing that mattered. He knew that what he had stumbled upon—the kingdom of heaven—was more valuable than anything he had, so he went for it with everything in him.

This kind of enthusiastic response to God's love is entirely appropriate. Yet what a contrast to our typical response at discovering the same treasure!

In the United States, numbers impress us. We gauge the success of an event by how many people attend or come forward. We measure churches by how many members they boast. We are wowed by big crowds.

Jesus questioned the authenticity of this kind of record keeping. According to the account in Luke chapter 8, when a crowd started following Him, Jesus began speaking in parables—"so that" those who weren't genuinely listening wouldn't get it.

When crowds gather today, speakers are extraconscious of communicating in a way that is accessible to everyone. Speakers don't use Jesus's tactic to eliminate people who are not sincere seekers.

The fact is, He just wasn't interested in those who fake it.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus explained that the seed is the truth (the Word of God). When the seed is flung onto the path, it is heard but quickly stolen away. When the seed is tossed onto the rocks, no roots take hold; there is an appearance of depth and growth because of the good soil, but it is only surface level. When the seed is spread among the thorns, it is received but soon suffocated by life's worries, riches, and pleasures. But when the seed is sown in good soil, it grows, takes root, and produces fruit.

My caution to you is this: *Do not assume you are good soil.*

I think most American churchgoers are the soil that chokes the seed because of all the thorns. Thorns are anything that distracts us from God. When we want God and a bunch of other stuff, then that means we have thorns in our soil. A relationship with God simply cannot grow when money, sins, activities, favorite sports teams, addictions, or commitments are piled on top of it.

Most of us have too much in our lives. As David Goetz writes, "Too much of the good life ends up being toxic, deforming us spiritually." A lot of things are good by themselves, but all of it together keeps us from living healthy, fruitful lives for God.

I will say it again: Do not assume you are good soil.

Has your relationship with God actually changed the way you live? Do you see evidence of God's kingdom in your life? Or are you choking it out slowly by spending too much time, energy, money, and thought on the things of this world?

Are you satisfied being "godly enough" to get yourself to heaven, or to look good in comparison to others? Or can you say with Paul that you "want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3:10)?

For a long time this verse had just too much Jesus for me. In my opinion, the verse should have ended after the word *resurrection*, so I could have an appealing, popular Jesus who didn't suffer. The feedback I received from other Christians reassured me that this was a fine perspective, and it gave me little reason to strive to know Christ more deeply. I was told I was good enough, "godly enough."

But this went against everything I was reading in the Bible, so I eventually rejected what the majority said and began to compare all aspects of my life to Scripture. I quickly found that the American church is a difficult place to fit in if you want to live out New Testament Christianity. The goals of American Christianity are often a nice marriage, children who don't swear, and good church attendance. Taking the words of Christ literally and seriously is rarely considered. That's for the "radicals" who are "unbalanced" and who go "overboard." Most of us want a balanced life that we can control, that is safe, and that does not involve suffering.

Would you describe yourself as totally in love with Jesus Christ? Or do the words *halfhearted*, *lukewarm*, and *partially committed* fit better?

The Bible says to test ourselves, so in the next few pages, I am going to offer you a description of what halfhearted, distracted, partially committed, lukewarm people can look like. As you read these examples, I encourage you to take a searching, honest look at your life. Not who you want to be one of these days, but who you are now and how you are living today.

LUKEWARM PEOPLE attend church fairly regularly. It is what is expected of them, what they believe "good Christians" do, so they go.

"The Lord says: 'These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men'" (Isa. 29:13).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE give money to charity and to the church ... as long as it doesn't impinge on their standard of living. If they have a little extra and it is easy and safe to give, they do so. After all, God loves a cheerful giver, right?

"King David replied to Araunah, 'No, I insist on paying the full price. I will not take for the Lord what is yours, or sacrifice a burnt offering that costs me nothing" (1 Chron. 21:24).

"As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. 'I tell you the truth,' he said, 'this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out

of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on" (Luke 21:1–4).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE tend to choose what is popular over what is right when they are in conflict. They desire to fit in both at church and outside of church; they care more about what people think of their actions (like church attendance and giving) than what God thinks of their hearts and lives.

"Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets" (Luke 6:26).

"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Rev. 3:1).

"Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi'" (Matt. 23:5–7).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE don't really want to be saved from their sin; they want only to be saved from the penalty of their sin. They don't genuinely hate sin and aren't truly sorry for it; they're merely sorry because God is going to punish them. Lukewarm people don't really believe that this new life Jesus offers is better than the old sinful one.

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Rom. 6:1–2).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE are moved by stories about people who do radical things for Christ, yet they do not act. They assume such action is for "extreme" Christians, not average ones. Lukewarm people call "radical" what Jesus expected of all His followers.

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22).

"Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins" (James 4:17).

"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted? 'The first,' they answered" (Matt. 21:28–31).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE rarely share their faith with their neighbors, coworkers, or friends. They do not want to be rejected, nor do they want to make people uncomfortable by talking about private issues like religion.

"Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever

disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (Matt. 10:32–33).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE gauge their morality or "goodness" by comparing themselves to the secular world. They feel satisfied that while they aren't as hard-core for Jesus as so-and-so, they are nowhere as horrible as the guy down the street.

"The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get'" (Luke 18:11–12).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE say they love Jesus, and He is, indeed, a part of their lives. But only a part. They give Him a section of their time, their money, and their thoughts, but He isn't allowed to control their lives.

"As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' Jesus replied, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.' He said to another man, 'Follow me.' But the man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-by to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9:57–62).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE love God, but they do not love Him with all their heart, soul, and strength. They would be quick to assure you that they try to love God that much, but that sort of total devotion isn't really possible for the average person; it's only for pastors and missionaries and radicals.

"Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment" (Matt. 22:37–38).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE love others but do not seek to love others as much as they love themselves. Their love of others is typically focused on those who love them in return, like family, friends, and other people they know and connect with. There is little love left over for those who cannot love them back, much less for those who intentionally slight them, whose kids are better athletes than theirs, or with whom conversations are awkward or uncomfortable. Their love is highly conditional and very selective, and generally comes with strings attached.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" (Matt. 5:43–47).

"Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:12–14).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE will serve God and others, but there are limits to how far they will go or how much time, money, and energy they are willing to give.

"'All these [commandments] I have kept since I was a boy,' he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God'" (Luke 18:21–25).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE think about life on earth much more often than eternity in heaven. Daily life is mostly focused on today's to-do list, this week's schedule, and next month's vacation. Rarely, if ever, do they intently consider the life to come. Regarding this, C. S. Lewis writes, "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely

ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this."

"For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:18–20).

"Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Col. 3:2).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE are thankful for their luxuries and comforts, and rarely consider trying to give as much as possible to the poor. They are quick to point out, "Jesus never said money is the root of all evil, only that the *love* of money is." Untold numbers of lukewarm people feel "called" to minister to the rich; very few feel "called" to minister to the poor.

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.... I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:34, 40).

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (Isa. 58:6–7).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE do whatever is necessary to keep themselves from feeling too guilty. They want to do the bare minimum, to be "good enough" without it requiring too much of them.

They ask, "How far can I go before it's considered a sin?" instead of "How can I keep myself pure as a temple of the Holy Spirit?"

They ask, "How much do I have to give?" instead of "How much can I give?"

They ask, "How much time should I spend praying and reading my Bible?" instead of "I wish I didn't have to go to work, so I could sit here and read longer!"

"But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand" (1 Chron. 29:14).

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it" (Matt. 13:44–46).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE are continually concerned with playing it safe; they are slaves to the god of control. This focus on safe living keeps them from sacrificing and risking for God.

"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share" (1 Tim. 6:17–18).

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE feel secure because they attend church, made a profession of faith at age twelve, were baptized, come from a Christian family, vote Republican, or live in America. Just as the prophets in the Old Testament warned Israel that they were not safe just because they lived in the land of Israel, so we are not safe just because we wear the label *Christian* or because some people persist in calling us a "Christian nation."

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

"Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria, you notable men of the foremost nation" (Amos 6:1).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE do not live by faith; their lives are structured so they never have to. They don't have to trust God if something unexpected happens—they have their savings account. They don't need God to help them—they have their retirement plan in place. They don't genuinely seek out what life God would have them live —they have life figured and mapped out. They don't depend on God on a daily basis—their refrigerators are full and, for the most part, they are in good health. The truth is, their lives wouldn't look much different if they suddenly stopped believing in God.

"And he told them this parable: The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:16–21; see also Hebrews 11).

LUKEWARM PEOPLE probably drink and swear less than average, but besides that, they really aren't very different from your typical unbeliever. They equate their partially sanitized lives with holiness, but they couldn't be more wrong.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside

of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness" (Matt. 23:25–28).

This profile of the lukewarm is not an all-inclusive definition of what it means to be a Christian, nor is it intended to be used as ammunition to judge your fellow believers' salvation. Instead, as 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, it is a call to "examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves."

We are *all* messed-up human beings, and no one is totally immune to the behaviors described in the previous examples. However, there is a difference between a life that is characterized by these sorts of mentalities and habits and a life that is in the process of being radically transformed. We'll get to the transformation later, but now is the time to take a serious self-inventory.

When I was in high school, I seriously considered joining the Marines; this was when they first came out with commercials for "the few, the proud, the Marines." What turned me off was that in those advertisements, everyone was always running. Always. And I *hate* running.

But you know what? I didn't bother to ask if they would modify the rules for me so I could run less, and maybe also do fewer push-ups. That would've been pointless and stupid, and I knew it. Everyone knows that if you sign up for the Marines, you have to do whatever they tell you. They own you.

Somehow this realization does not cross over to our thinking about the Christian life. Jesus didn't say that if you wanted to follow Him you could do it in a lukewarm manner. He said, "Take up your cross and follow Me." He also said,

Suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up *everything* he has cannot be my disciple.

—Luke 14:31–33

Jesus asks for everything. But we try to give Him less. Jesus said,

Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out.

—Luke 14:34–35

Jesus isn't just making a cute little analogy here. He is addressing those who aren't willing to give everything, who won't follow Him all the way. He is saying that lukewarm, halfhearted following is useless, that it sickens our souls. He is saying that this kind of salt is not even fit "for the manure pile."

Wow. How would you like to hear the Son of God say, "You would ruin manure"?

When salt is salty, it helps manure become good fertilizer ... but lukewarm and uncommitted faith is completely useless. It can't even benefit manure.

Notes

- <u>1</u>. Frederic D. Huntington, *Forum* magazine, 1890.
- 2. David Goetz, *Death by Suburb* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 9.

serving leftovers to a holy God

Of all the chapters in this book, this one was the hardest for me to write. I do not wish for my words to come across as controversial or difficult to swallow. But I had to write this chapter, because I believe what I'm about to talk about is important. And true.

In the last chapter we discussed various inappropriate responses to God's love. Now we are going to look at scriptural examples of poor responses to God's gift of love. Before you discount or ignore what I am about to say, read these passages objectively, without preconceived opinions staunchly in place.

My examination of lukewarm Christians in chapter 4 was by no means exhaustive. However, it did serve as a call to examine your heart in light of the points I listed. As I see it, a lukewarm Christian is an oxymoron; there's no such thing. To put it plainly, churchgoers who are "lukewarm" are not Christians. We will not see them in heaven.

In Revelation 3:15–18, Jesus says,

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire,

so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

This passage is where our modern understanding of *lukewarm* comes from. Jesus is saying to the church that because they are lukewarm, He is going to spit them out of His mouth.

There is no gentle rendering of the word *spit* in Greek. This is the only time it is used in the New Testament, and it connotes gagging, hurling, retching. Many people read this passage and assume Jesus is speaking to saved people. Why?

When you read this passage, do you naturally conclude that to be "spit" out of Jesus's mouth means you're a part of His kingdom? When you read the words "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked," do you think that He's describing saints? When He counsels them to "buy white clothes to wear" in order to cover their "shameful nakedness," does it sound like advice for those already saved?

I thought people who were saved were already made white and clothed by Christ's blood.

In an earlier draft of this chapter, I quoted several commentators who agreed with my point of view. But we all know that you can find quotes to support any view you want to take. You can even tweak word studies to help you in your effort. I'm not against scholarship, but I do believe there are times when we come to more accurate conclusions through simple reading.

And so I've spent the past few days reading the Gospels. Rather than examining a verse and dissecting it, I chose to peruse one gospel in each sitting. Furthermore, I attempted to do so from the perspective of a twelve-year-old who knew nothing about Jesus. I wanted to rediscover what

reasonable conclusions a person would come to while objectively reading the Gospels for the first time. In other words, I read the Bible as if I'd never read it before.

My conclusion? Jesus's call to commitment is clear: He wants all or nothing. The thought of a person calling himself a "Christian" without being a devoted follower of Christ is absurd.

But please don't take my word for it. Read it yourself.

For years I struggled with the parable of the soils. I wanted to know if the person representing the rocky soil is saved, even though he has no root. I then wondered about the thorny soil: Is this person saved since he does have root?

I doubt if people even considered these questions back in Jesus's day! Is this idea of the non-fruit-bearing Christian something that we have concocted in order to make Christianity "easier"? So we can follow our own course while still calling ourselves followers of Christ? So we can join the Marines, so to speak, without having to do all the work?

Jesus's intention in this parable was to compare the only good soil to the ones that were not legitimate alternatives. To Him, there was one option for a true believer.

Let's face it. We're willing to make changes in our lives only if we think it affects our salvation. This is why I have so many people ask me questions like, Can I divorce my wife and still go to heaven? Do I have to be baptized to be saved? Am I a Christian even though I'm having sex with my girlfriend? If I commit suicide, can I still go to heaven? If I'm ashamed to talk about Christ, is He really going to deny knowing me?

To me, these questions are tragic because they reveal much about the state of our hearts. They demonstrate that our concern is more about going to heaven than loving the King. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey

what I command" (John 14:15). And our question quickly becomes even more unthinkable: *Can I go to heaven without truly and faithfully loving Jesus?*

I don't see anywhere in Scripture how the answer to that question could be yes.

James 2:19 says, "You believe there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." God doesn't just want us to have good theology; He wants us to know and love Him. First John 2:3–4 tells us, "We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him."

Call me crazy, but I think those verses mean that the person who claims to know God but doesn't obey His commands is a liar and that the truth really isn't in him.

In Matthew 16:24–25, Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." And in Luke 14:33, He says, "Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple."

Some people claim that we can be Christians without necessarily becoming disciples. I wonder, then, why the last thing Jesus told us was to go into the world, making *disciples* of all nations, teaching them to *obey all* that He commanded? You'll notice that He *didn't* add, "But hey, if that's too much to ask, tell them to just become Christians—you know, the people who get to go to heaven without having to commit to anything."

Pray. Then read the Gospels for yourself. Put this book down and pick up your Bible. My prayer for you is that you'll understand the Scriptures not as I see them, but as God intends them.

I do not want true believers to doubt their salvation as they read this book. In the midst of our failed attempts at loving Jesus, His *grace* covers us.

Each of us has lukewarm elements and practices in our life; therein lies the senseless, extravagant grace of it all. The Scriptures demonstrate clearly that there is room for our failure and sin in our pursuit of God. His mercies *are* new every morning (Lamentations 3). His grace *is* sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9). I'm *not* saying that when you mess up, it means you were never really a genuine Christian in the first place. If that were true, no one could follow Christ.

The distinction is perfection (which none will attain on this earth) and a posture of obedience and surrender, where a person perpetually moves toward Christ. To call someone a Christian simply because he does some Christian-y things is giving false comfort to the unsaved. But to declare anyone who sins "unsaved" is to deny the reality and truth of God's grace.

From other references in Scripture (Colossians 2:1; 4:13, 15–16), the church at Laodicea appears to have been a healthy and legitimate church. But something happened. By the time Revelation was written, about twenty-five years after the letter to the Colossians, the Laodiceans' hearts apparently didn't belong to God—despite the fact that they were still active as a church. Their church was prospering, and they didn't seem to be experiencing any persecution.

They were comfortable and proud. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Poor Rich People

Ronnie, a blind boy who lives in eastern Uganda, is unique not because of his circumstances or the fact that he is blind, but because of his love for Jesus. If you were to meet Ronnie, one of the first things you would hear him say is, "I love Jesus so much, and I sing praises to Him every day!"

One of Ronnie's closest friends is a girl who is deaf. What stands out about these two isn't that they are handicapped or very poor, but that they are totally content and obviously in love with Jesus. They possess very little of what "counts" in our society, yet they have what matters most. They came to God in their great need, and they have found true joy.

Because we don't usually have to depend on God for food, money to buy our next meal, or shelter, we don't feel needy. In fact, we generally think of ourselves as fairly independent and capable. Even if we aren't rich, we are "doing just fine."

If one hundred people represented the world's population, fifty-three of those would live on less than \$2 a day. Do you realize that if you make \$4,000 a month, you automatically make *one hundred times* more than the average person on this planet? Simply by purchasing this book, you spent what a majority of people in the world will make in a week's time.

Which is more messed up—that we have so much compared to everyone else, or that we don't think we're rich? That on any given day we might flippantly call ourselves "broke" or "poor"? We are neither of those things. We are rich. Filthy rich.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne was a Scottish pastor who died at the age of twenty-nine. Although he lived in the early part of the nineteenth century, his words are astoundingly appropriate for today:

I am concerned for the poor but more for you. I know not what Christ will say to you in the great day.... I fear there are many hearing me who may know well that they are not Christians because they do not love to give. To give largely and liberally, not grudgingly at all, requires a new heart; an old heart would rather

part with its life-blood than its money. Oh my friends! Enjoy your money; make the most of it; give none away; enjoy it quickly for I can tell you, you will be beggars throughout eternity. 1

The reality is that, whether we acknowledge our wealth or not, being rich is a serious disadvantage spiritually. As William Wilberforce once said, "Prosperity hardens the heart."

When talking to a wealthy person who wanted to go to heaven (and doesn't that describe most of us?), Jesus said, "Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' When he [the rich man] heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!'" (Luke 18:22–24). He says it's as hard as a camel to go through the eye of a needle—in other words, impossible. But then Jesus offers hopeful words: "What is impossible with man is possible with God" (v. 27).

In the very next chapter, as Jesus enters Jericho, we see exactly how the impossible becomes possible with God. There, the wealthy tax collector Zacchaeus gives half of his money to the poor and pays everyone back four times what he has defrauded them. And Jesus declares, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9).

The impossible happened that day—a rich man received salvation!

Offering Leftovers

God wants our best, deserves our best, and demands our best. From the beginning of time, He has been clear that some offerings are acceptable to Him and others are not. Just ask Cain, upon whose offering God "did not look with favor" (Gen. 4:5).

For years I gave God leftovers and felt no shame. I simply took my eyes off Scripture and instead compared myself to others. The bones I threw at God had more meat on them than the bones others threw, so I figured I was doing fine.

It's easy to fill ourselves up with other things and then give God whatever is left. Hosea 13:6 says, "When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me." God gets a scrap or two only because we feel guilty for giving Him nothing. A mumbled three-minute prayer at the end of the day, when we are already half asleep. Two crumpled-up dollar bills thrown as an afterthought into the church's fund for the poor. Fetch, God!

"But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?" says the Lord.

—Malachi 1:8 NASB

The priests of Malachi's day thought their sacrifices were sufficient. They had spotless animals but chose to keep those for themselves and give their less desirable animals to God. They assumed God was pleased because they had sacrificed *something*.

God described this practice as *evil*.

Leftovers are not merely inadequate; from God's point of view (and lest we forget, His is the only one who matters), they're *evil*. Let's stop calling it "a busy schedule" or "bills" or "forgetfulness." It's called *evil*.

God is holy. In heaven exists a Being who decides whether or not I take another breath. This holy God deserves excellence, the very best I have. "But something is better than nothing!" some protest. Really, is it? Does

anyone enjoy token praise? I sure don't. I'd rather you not say anything than compliment me out of obligation or guilt. Why would we think God is any different?

Two verses further on in Malachi, God says, "Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar! I am not pleased with you, … nor will I accept an offering from you" (NASB). God wanted the temple gates shut. The weak sacrifices of the laid-back priests were an insult to Him. He was saying that no worship is better than apathetic worship. I wonder how many church doors God wants to shut today.

Jesus's instruction to the people of the church at Laodicea was to buy from Him the things that really matter, the things they didn't even realize they needed. They were wealthy, but Jesus asks them to exchange their wealth for His gold that is refined through fire; they had clothing, but Jesus counsels them to buy clothes that were truly white and would cover their nakedness; they did not desire anything, but Jesus says they needed salve for their eyes that would cure their blindness. He asks them to give up what they thought was so necessary and valuable, in exchange for what really matters.

Mark Buchanan writes, "Physical sickness we usually defy. Soul sickness we often resign ourselves to." The people in Laodicea did not realize or acknowledge that their souls were sick, that they were desperately in need of what Christ offered. As Tim Kizziar said, "Our greatest fear as individuals and as a church should not be of failure but of succeeding at things in life that don't really matter."

Recently I saw a bag of potato chips with a bold declaration splashed across the front: "Zero grams of trans fat." I was glad to know that I wouldn't be consuming any trans fat, which research has shown is

detrimental to my health. But then I flipped the bag over and read the ingredients list, which included things like "yellow #6" and other artificial colors, and partially hydrogenated oil (which is trans fat, just a small enough amount that they can legally call it "0 grams"). I thought it was incredibly ironic that these chips were being advertised in a way that makes me think they are not harmful yet were really full of empty calories, weird chemicals, and, ironically, trans fat.

It struck me that many Christians flash around their "no trans fat" label, trying to convince everyone they are healthy and good. Yet they have no substantive or healthful elements to their faith. It's like the Laodiceans, who thought they had everything until Christ told them they were poor and wretched. They were all about declaring, "Look, we have no trans fat. We are wealthy, or we have good families, or we go to church every week." Obviously, it's not what you advertise that counts; it's what you are really made of.

God's definition of what matters is pretty straightforward. He measures our lives by how we love. In our culture, even if a pastor doesn't actually love people, he can still be considered successful as long as he is a gifted speaker, makes his congregation laugh, or prays for "all those poor, suffering people in the world" every Sunday.

But Paul writes that even if "I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2–3 ESV). Wow. Those are strong and unmistakable words. According to God, we are here to love. Not much else really matters.

So God assesses our lives based on how we love. But the word *love* is so overused and worn out. What does God mean by love? He tells us,

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.... faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

—1 Corinthians 13:4–8, 13 ESV

But even those words have grown tired and overly familiar, haven't they? I was challenged to do a little exercise with these verses, one that was profoundly convicting. Take the phrase *Love is patient* and substitute your name for the word *love*. (For me, "Francis is patient....") Do it for every phrase in the passage.

By the end, don't you feel like a liar? If I am meant to represent what love is, then I often fail to love people well.

Following Christ isn't something that can be done halfheartedly or on the side. It is not a label we can display when it is useful. It must be central to everything we do and are.

If life is a river, then pursuing Christ requires swimming upstream. When we stop swimming, or actively following Him, we automatically begin to be swept downstream.

Or, to use another metaphor more familiar to city people, we are on a never-ending downward escalator. In order to grow, we have to turn around and sprint up the escalator, putting up with perturbed looks from everyone else who is gradually moving downward.

I believe that much of the American churchgoing population, while not specifically swimming downstream, is slowly floating away from Christ. It isn't a conscious choice, but it is nonetheless happening because little in their lives propels them toward Christ.

Perhaps it sounds as though I believe you have to work your way to Jesus. I don't. I fully believe that we are saved by grace, through faith, by the gift of God, and that true faith manifests itself through our actions. As James writes, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (2:17). The lives of many people who call themselves "Christians" in America lack manifestations of a vital and active faith.

And this, to be perfectly honest, frightens me. It keeps me up at night. It causes me to pray desperately and fervently for my congregation, for the groups of people I speak to, and for the church as a whole.

Henri Nouwen writes about this in his book *With Open Hands*: "It is hard to bear with people who stand still along the way, lose heart, and seek their happiness in little pleasures which they cling to.... You feel sad about all that self-indulgence and self-satisfaction, for you know with an indestructible certainty that something greater is coming." Or, as Luke 9:25 says, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"

How many of us would really leave our families, our jobs, our education, our friends, our connections, our familiar surroundings, and our homes if Jesus asked us to? If He just showed up and said, "Follow Me"? No explanation. No directions.

You could follow Him straight up a hill to be crucified. Maybe He would lead you to another country, and you would never see your family again. Or perhaps you would stay put, but He would ask you to spend your time helping people who will never love you back and never show gratitude for what you gave up.

Consider this carefully—have you ever done so? Or was your decision to follow Christ flippant, based solely on feelings and emotion, made without counting the cost?

What scares me most are the people who are lukewarm and just don't care. I think that if I did a poll of the readers of this book, many of you would say, "Yeah, I am definitely lukewarm at times, but I'm not really at a place to give more to God." Many of us believe we have as much of God as we want right now, a reasonable portion of God among all the other things in our lives. Most of our thoughts are centered on the money we want to make, the school we want to attend, the body we aspire to have, the spouse we want to marry, the kind of person we want to become.... But the fact is that *nothing* should concern us more than our relationship with God; it's about eternity, and nothing compares with that. God is not someone who can be tacked on to our lives.

Remember the visions from John and Isaiah of the throne room of God? Remember the pictures of the galaxies and how tiny we are in comparison? Remember the diversity of God, seen in the thousands of species of trees in the rainforest? We say to the Creator of all this magnitude and majesty, "Well, I'm not sure You are worth it.... You see, I really like my car, or my little sin habit, or my money, and I'm really not sure I want to give them up, even if it means I get You."

When we put it plainly like this—as a direct choice between God and our stuff—most of us hope we would choose God. But we need to realize that how we spend our time, what our money goes toward, and where we will invest our energy is equivalent to choosing God or rejecting Him. How could we think for even a second that something on this puny little earth compares to the Creator and Sustainer and Savior of it all?

We disgust God when we weigh and compare Him against the things of this world. It makes Him sick when we actually decide those things are better for us than God Himself. We believe we don't need anything Jesus offers, but we fail to realize that slowly, almost imperceptibly, we are drifting downstream. And in the process we are becoming blind, being stripped naked, and turning into impoverished wretches.

No wonder Jesus says He will spit lukewarm people out of His mouth!

Hear me clearly in this, because it is vital—in fact, there is nothing more important or eternal: Are you willing to say to God that He can have whatever He wants? Do you believe that wholehearted commitment to Him is more important than any other thing or person in your life? Do you know that nothing you do in this life will ever matter, unless it is about loving God and loving the people He has made?

If the answer to those questions is yes, then let your bet match your talk. True faith means holding nothing back; it bets everything on the hope of eternity.

I know that this whole swimming-upstream, pursuing-Christ, taking-up-your-cross, counting-the-cost thing isn't easy. It's so hard, in fact, that Jesus said the road is narrow and few will actually find it ... and fewer still among those who are rich. Like the parable of the sower, don't assume you are the good soil; don't assume you are one of the few on the narrow way.

Notes

- 1. Robert Murray M'Cheyne, as quoted in John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 105.
- 2. Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2007), 158.
- 3. Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2006), 65.

↑ CHAPTER SIX When you've in love

O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. I am painfully conscious of my need for further grace. I am ashamed of my lack of desire. O God, the Triune God, I want to want Thee; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be made more thirsty still. Show me Thy glory, I pray Thee, so that I may know Thee indeed. Begin in mercy a new work of love within me. Say to my soul, "Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away." Then give me grace to rise and follow Thee up

from this misty lowland where I have wandered so long. 1

Have you ever met someone who was utterly and desperately in love with Jesus? I have. My wife's grandma Clara.

I spoke recently at Grandma Clara's funeral, and I could honestly tell the mourners gathered that I had never known anyone more excited to see Jesus. Every morning Clara would kneel by her bed and spend precious hours with her Savior and Lover; later in the day, just the sight of that corner of her bed would bring joy-filled tears and a deep anticipation of the next morning spent kneeling in His presence.

Grandma Clara acted toward God the way we act toward people we're madly in love with.

When you are truly in love, you go to great lengths to be with the one you love. You'll drive for hours to be together, even if it's only for a short while. You don't mind staying up late to talk. Walking in the rain is romantic, not

annoying. You'll willingly spend a small fortune on the one you're crazy about. When you are apart from each other, it's painful, even miserable. He or she is all you think about; you jump at any chance to be together.

In his book *God Is the Gospel*, John Piper essentially asks whether we are in love with God:

The critical question for our generation—and for every generation—is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ was not there?

How many of you will read those words and say, "You know, I just might be okay with that"? If you are as deeply in love with God as Grandma Clara was, you know you could never be satisfied in a heaven without Christ.

Don't Try So Hard

My fear in writing the previous chapter is that it only evokes in you fear and guilt. Personal experience has taught me that actions driven by fear and guilt are not an antidote to lukewarm, selfish, comfortable living. I hope you realize instead that the answer is *love*.

Grandma Clara used to say, "I love love." Don't we all? Don't we crave it? And isn't that what God wants of us—to crave this relationship with Him as we crave all genuine love relationships? Isn't that what brings Him glory—when believers *desire* Him and are not merely slaves who serve Him out of obligation?

You, my brothers, were *called to be free*. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

—Galatians 5:13–14

Do you understand what this passage is saying? When we love, we're free! We don't have to worry about a burdensome load of commands, because when we are loving, we can't sin. Do you feel free in your Christian life?

In the same chapter, Paul writes, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (v. 6). Is loving God—and, by extension, loving people—what you are about? Is it what being a Christian means to you? Do you live as though faith, demonstrated through love, really is the only thing that counts?

For a long time, I sure didn't. And most of the people I knew were the same way.

There is so often a great disparity between how we feel about faith and how we are meant to feel. Why do so few people genuinely find joy and pleasure in their relationship with God? Why do most people feel they have to either pay God back for all He's done (buy His love) or somehow keep making up for all their inadequacies and failures (prove their love)? Why are the words of Psalm 63:1–5 not an honest reflection of our lives on most days?

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will

glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

Lukewarm living and claiming Christ's name simultaneously is utterly disgusting to God. And when we are honest, we have to admit that it isn't very fulfilling or joyful to us, either.

But the solution isn't to try harder, fail, and then make bigger promises, only to fail again. It does no good to muster up more love for God, to will yourself to love Him more. When loving Him becomes obligation, one of many things we have to do, we end up focusing even more on ourselves. No wonder so few people want to hear from us about what we ourselves feel is a boring, guilt-ridden chore!

As I wrote in the last chapter, we are called to surrender everything for Christ—a concept most churchgoers are not particularly thrilled by. So what is missing? What's wrong with this picture? Are we just fooling ourselves that we really can be in love with God and that it is more satisfying than anything else? I don't believe so.

Help! I Don't Love You

God wants to change us; He died so that we could change.

The answer lies in *letting* Him change you. Remember His counsel to the lukewarm church in Laodicea? "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20). His counsel wasn't to "try harder," but rather to let Him in. As James wrote, "Come near to God and he will come near to you" (4:8).

Jesus Christ didn't die only to save us from hell; He also died to save us from our bondage to sin. In John 10:10, Jesus says, "I have come that they

may have life, and have it to the full." He wasn't talking about the future. He meant now, in this lifetime.

The fact is, I need God to help me love God. And if I need His help to love Him, a perfect being, I definitely need His help to love other, fault-filled humans. Something mysterious, even supernatural must happen in order for genuine love for God to grow in our hearts. The Holy Spirit has to move in our lives.

It is a remarkable cycle: Our prayers for more love result in love, which naturally causes us to pray more, which results in more love....

Imagine going for a run while eating a box of Twinkies. Besides being self-defeating and sideache-inducing, it would also be near impossible—you would have to stop running in order to eat the Twinkies.

In the same way, you have to stop loving and pursuing Christ in order to sin. When you are pursuing love, running toward Christ, you do not have opportunity to wonder, *Am I doing this right?* or *Did I serve enough this week?* When you are running toward Christ, you are freed up to serve, love, and give thanks without guilt, worry, or fear. As long as you are running, you are safe.

But running is exhausting—if, that is, we are running from sin or guilt, out of fear. (Or if we haven't run in a while.) However, if we train ourselves to run toward our Refuge, toward Love, we are free—just as we are called to be.

As we begin to focus more on Christ, loving Him and others becomes more natural. As long as we are pursuing Him, we are satisfied in Him. It is when we stop actively loving Him that we find ourselves restless and gravitating toward other means of fulfillment.

When I read the Psalms, I witness an extreme intimacy that at times seems unattainable. I have to remind myself constantly that the Psalms were written by people just like me. They enjoyed closeness with God that you and I can experience. We should be communicating these words to Him:

Like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me. (Ps. 131:2)

You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound. I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety. (Ps. 4:7–8)

You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand. (Ps. 16:11)

The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song. (Ps. 28:7)

Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. (Ps. 90:14)

Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart. (Ps. 119:111)

I don't want to make it sound deceptively easy; the Psalms are also filled with cries of pain:

Hear my prayer, O LORD, listen to my cry for help; be not deaf to my weeping. (Ps. 39:12)

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. (Ps. 130:1–2)

Jesus said, "In this world *you will have trouble*. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Life isn't perfect when you follow Christ wholeheartedly; you will have trouble, Jesus says—it is pretty much guaranteed.

But He has overcome the world. So take heart, keep on, fight the good fight, pray continuously, and do not grow weary. There is nothing better than giving up everything and stepping into a passionate love relationship with God, the God of the universe who made galaxies, leaves, laughter, and me and you.



So what if I do believe that He has overcome the world? Until His kingdom comes, what about the sin I can't seem to escape? What about my messed-up family? What about my past? What about my grandma's cancer? What about the car accident that killed my friend? What about the divorce?

We each have a list that goes on and on.

The promise that our troubles are "achieving for us an eternal glory" seems hard to believe in the midst of the mess. It sounds trite to say that our struggles on this earth are "light and momentary," as Paul wrote, doesn't it? Mine don't feel that way. At times they threaten to engulf the rest of my life.

Yet God tells us that we are getting the better end of the deal, that we really will be rewarded in a manner that far outweighs our current frustrations and hardships. And even that we are blessed "when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven" (Luke 6:22–23).

They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

—Acts 5:40–42

Wow. I hope that if I'm ever in a similar situation, I'll rejoice like the apostles did. But I sometimes think I would more likely lament my situation and get upset at God.

When I look at my relationship with God as a chore, a sacrifice, then *I* am getting the glory—not God. I keep saying, "Look what I have sacrificed for God…" or "Listen to what I do for God. It's hard, exhausting really…"

Instead, when we sacrifice, give, and even suffer, we can rejoice because we know that God rewards us. We are always the recipients of His great and manifold gifts. Not the givers. Never the givers. David Livingston, a missionary to Africa during the 1800s, once said during a speech to students at Cambridge University, "People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa.... I never made a sacrifice. We ought not to talk of 'sacrifice' when we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father's throne on high to give Himself for us." 3

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

The Bible says that when we obey God's commands, we benefit. I think we naturally assume that if we look out for our own interests and concerns, we will be happy. But people who sacrifice for others will tell you that seasons of giving are the most rewarding of their lives.

It turns out that the Bible is right—"It is better to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). People generally do find greater joy in giving freely to others than they do in rampant self-indulgence. Regarding this, the playwright George Bernard Shaw writes, "This is true joy in life, the being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

God is the only true Giver, and He needs nothing from us. But still He wants us. He gave us life so that we might seek and know Him.

Jesus: Servant, Not Beggar

In Malachi 1:11 (NASB), God says, "From the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering that is pure; for My name will be great among the nations."

God tells the priests that if they don't want to give Him excellence, others will. God says His name will be great among the nations. Right now a hundred million angels are praising God's name; He certainly doesn't need to beg or plead with us. We should be the ones begging to worship in His presence.

Later in Malachi, we get an incredible promise from God: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,' says the LORD of hosts, 'if I will not open for you the

windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows'" (Mal. 3:10 NASB).

This is the only place in the Bible where God invites His people to test Him, to try to out-give Him. He knows it is impossible, that no one can out-give the One from whom all things come. God knows people will realize that "we have given you only what comes from your hand" (1 Chron. 29:14). Nothing has strengthened my faith more than seeing God bless what I give back to Him, what I surrender at His feet.

If you really want to experience God's supernatural provision, then do as He says. Test Him. Give more than you can manage, and see how He responds.

When we are focused on loving Christ, it doesn't mean we do less. I used to do many of the same things I do now, but I was motivated by guilt or fear of consequences. When we work for Christ out of obligation, it *feels* like work. But when we truly love Christ, our work is a manifestation of that love, and it feels like love.

In reality, not one of us will ever be worthy. It *is* useless to attempt earning it; you will never feel ready. It is unknown and uncomfortable. But there really is a God who forgives everything and loves endlessly.

SomeOne I Can Be Real With

If you merely pretend that you enjoy God or love Him, He knows. You can't fool Him; don't even try.

Instead, tell Him how you feel. Tell Him that He isn't the most important thing in this life to you, and that you're sorry for that. Tell Him that you've been lukewarm, that you've chosen ______ over Him time and again. Tell Him that you want Him to change you, that you long to genuinely enjoy Him. Tell Him how you want to experience true

satisfaction and pleasure and joy in your relationship with Him. Tell Him you want to love Him more than anything on this earth. Tell Him you want to treasure the kingdom of heaven so much that you'd willingly sell everything in order to get it. Tell Him what you like about Him, what you appreciate, and what brings you joy.

Jesus, I need to give myself up. I am not strong enough to love You and walk with You on my own. I can't do it, and I need You. I need You deeply and desperately. I believe You are worth it, that You are better than anything else I could have in this life or the next. I want You. And when I don't, I want to want You. Be all in me. Take all of me. Have Your way with me.

Notes

- 1. A. W. Tozer, The *Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, PA: WingSpread, 2007).
- 2. John Piper, *God Is the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 15.
- <u>3</u>. David Livingston (speech, Cambridge University, Cambridge, England, December 4, 1857).

of CHAPTER SEVEN your best life... later

By now you've probably realized that you have a distinct choice to make: Just let life happen, which is tantamount to serving God your leftovers, or actively run toward Christ.

Do you recognize the foolishness of seeking fulfillment outside of Him? Do you understand that it's impossible to please God in any way other than wholehearted surrender? Do you grasp the beauty and deep joy of walking in genuine intimacy with God, our holy Father and Friend? Do you want to see God more than you desire security?

Maybe you answered yes to these questions but still wonder what that equates to, what the alternatives are to floating downstream or riding down the escalator. What does running toward Christ and pursuing Love look like in daily life?

The best place I know to look is in Scripture; here we gather wisdom and study the examples of those who followed God wholeheartedly. The best passage is probably Hebrews 11, a chapter often called the "hall of faith." It is tempting to assume that the people listed there were superhuman, or supersaints, and that you and I could never do the kinds of things they did.

But did you know that Abraham was afraid for his safety, so he lied about his wife, Sarah, and said that she was his sister ... twice? Consider Jacob, who stole his brother Esau's birthright, tricked his father into blessing him, and then fled in fear from Esau.

Or did you know that Moses was a murderer and so scared of speaking up that God had to send his brother, Aaron, to be Moses' mouthpiece? Also in Hebrews 11 we see Rahab, who was a Gentile and a woman (in that time, a serious disadvantage), not to mention a prostitute! Then there's Samson, who had so many issues I don't even know where to begin. And of course, David, a "man after God's own heart" who was an adulterer and a murderer, whose children were evil and out of control.

These people were far from perfect, yet they had faith in a God who was able to come through in seemingly dire situations. For example, Noah, who "by faith ... when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" (Heb. 11:7). Noah spent 120 years building an ark and warning others of the impending judgment. Suppose the flood had never come—Noah would have been the biggest laughingstock on earth. Having faith often means doing what others see as crazy. Something is wrong when our lives make sense to unbelievers.

And then there's Abraham. Hebrews 11:17–19 says,

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

Abraham's hope lay in God's ability to raise the dead. What if God hadn't stopped Abraham? Imagine standing over your dead son after killing him. What would run through your mind as you buried your child? Could you go on living as everyone called you an insane murderer? These would have

been the consequences of Abraham's actions if God did not come through. But He did.

Finally, think about the martyrs. Hebrews 11:35–38 says,

[They] were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

If eternity doesn't come and God does not exist, then, as Paul says, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Cor. 15:19). If there is no God, then Paul and all the martyrs throughout history lived short lives full of needless suffering (2 Cor. 6:4–10).

But since God *is* real, Paul and the martyrs should be envied more than all people; their suffering was worth it. If we allow ourselves to live recklessly for Him, then we, too, will see His glory. We will see Him do the impossible.

Christians today like to play it safe. We want to put ourselves in situations where we are safe "even if there is no God." But if we truly desire to please God, we cannot live that way. We have to do things that cost us during our life on earth but will be more than worth it in eternity.

As chronicled in Hebrews 11, the God that the people of faith served is the very One we serve. As James 5:17 says, "Elijah was a man just like us." When you pray, your prayers are heard by the same God who answered Moses' prayer for water in the desert, the God who gave Abraham and his barren wife a son, and the God who made the slave Joseph second in power only to Pharaoh.

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The ultimate example of sacrifice and surrender is, of course, Jesus Christ. He had everything and still chose to surrender it out of love for His Father. Your attitude should be the same as His....

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

—Philippians 2:6–11

John clearly tells us that "whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6). Are you ready and willing to make yourself nothing? To take the very nature of a servant? To be obedient unto death? If your honest answer to those questions is yes, how are those intentions manifested in your life?

In Matthew 25 we get a frightening picture of the coming judgment. In this passage, Christ condemns people to eternal punishment because they did not care for Him during their lives on earth. "I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a

stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me" (vv. 42–43).

The condemned protest, saying they never saw Christ in any of these positions of need, and Jesus responds, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (v. 45).

Ouch. To me that is like a stinging, unexpected slap in the face. Like many of you, I've heard that passage taught on numerous occasions. I've left convicted, but haven't taken it literally. We see it as a fresh perspective on poverty rather than a literal picture of impending judgment.

How would my life change if I actually thought of each person I came into contact with as Christ—the person driving painfully slow in front of me, the checker at the grocery store who seems more interested in chatting than ringing up my items, the member of my own family with whom I can't seem to have a conversation and not get annoyed?

If we believe that, as Jesus said, the two greatest commands are to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind" and to "love your neighbor as yourself," then this passage has a lot to teach us. Basically, Christ is connecting the command to "love God" with the command to "love your neighbor." By loving "the least of these," we are loving God Himself.

In this same chapter of Matthew, Jesus blesses some people for what they have done. Confused, they ask, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" (vv. 37–39).

His answer is staggering: "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for

me" (v. 40). Jesus is saying that we show tangible love for God in how we care for the poor and those who are suffering. He expects us to treat the poor and the desperate as if they were Christ Himself.

Ask yourself this: If you actually saw Jesus starving, what would you do for Him?

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us.

—1 John 3:16–20

In this passage, we see that John questions whether it is possible to truly have God's love in you if you have no compassion for the poor. He uses as his example Christ's love manifesting itself through the sacrifice of His very life.

God didn't just give a little for us; He gave His best. He gave Himself. John is saying that it is no different for us: True love requires sacrifice. And our love is shown by how we live our lives: "Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

One of the clearest ways we love "with actions and in truth" is through giving to others. By giving, I don't mean just money, although that is certainly an element of it.

Another important element of giving is with our time. Most of us are so busy that the thought of adding one more thing to our weekly schedule is stressful. Instead of adding in another thing to our lives, perhaps God wants us to give Him all of our time and let Him direct it as He sees fit. One of the most memorized verses in the whole Bible says, "For God so loved the world that he gave" (John 3:16). Right there we see the connection between loving and giving evidently established.

Giving that is not motivated by love is worth nothing. Paul says from this kind of giving we "gain nothing"; however, when we give out of love, we gain much. Giving results not only in heavenly compensation, but also gives us great joy in our lives here and now. As we love more genuinely and deeply, giving becomes the obvious and natural response. Taking and keeping for ourselves becomes unattractive and imprudent.

Remember the story where Jesus fed thousands of people with one boy's small lunch? In that story, according to Matthew, Jesus gave the loaves to His disciples and then the disciples passed them out to the crowd. Imagine if the disciples had simply held onto the food Jesus gave them, continually thanking Him for providing lunch for them. That would've been stupid when there was enough food to feed the thousands who were gathered and hungry.

But that is exactly what we do when we fail to give freely and joyfully. We are loaded down with too many good things, more than we could ever need, while others are desperate for a small loaf. The good things we cling to are more than money; we hoard our resources, our gifts, our time, our families, our friends. As we begin to practice regular giving, we see how ludicrous it is to hold on to the abundance God has given us and merely repeat the words *thank you*.

The apostle Paul addresses this issue of giving in light of the inequalities among the early believers:

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

—2 Corinthians 8:13–15

Paul was asking the Corinthian believers to give to the impoverished saints in Jerusalem, the goal being that no one would have too much or too little. This idea is pretty far-fetched in modern-day culture, where we are taught to look out for ourselves and are thus rewarded.

The gap is so extreme in our world that we have to take lightly passages such as Luke 12:33: "Sell your possessions and give to the poor." How else can I walk out of a mud shack and back into my two-thousand-square-foot house without doing anything? The concept of downsizing so that others might upgrade is biblical, beautiful ... and nearly unheard of. We either close the gap or don't take the words of the Bible literally.

Dare to imagine what it would mean for you to take the words of Jesus seriously. Dare to think about your own children living in poverty, without enough to eat. Dare to believe that those really are your brothers and sisters in need.

Jesus said, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt. 12:50). Do you believe that? Do you live like you believe it?

After hearing this truth preached, a guy at my church donated his house to the church and moved in with his parents. He told me that he will have a better house in heaven, and that it doesn't really matter where he lives during this lifetime. He is living like he believes.

Dream a little about what that might look like for you. Perhaps you start a movement called Aspiring to the Median, where people commit to living at or below the median U.S. income (\$46,000 in 2006) and giving the rest away. Is it intimidating to think about giving radically and liberally?

I want to share a story with you. Anyone who has ever taken God at His word when He says, "Test me in this ... and see if I will not ... pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it" (Mal. 3:10) probably has a similar tale.

A friend was faithfully giving 20 percent of his income to God, and suddenly his income dropped drastically. He knew he had to decide whether he should continue to give in a way that proved he trusted God. It wouldn't have been wrong to lower his giving to 10 percent. But my friend chose *instead* to increase his giving to 30 percent, despite the income reduction.

You can probably guess how the story ends. God blessed his faith and gave him more than enough, more than he needed. My friend got to experience God's provision firsthand.

When it's hard and you are doubtful, give more. Or, as Deuteronomy says, "Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake" (15:10 NRSV).

Maybe you have already made sacrifices. If so, you have seen that in some ways it gets easier, doesn't it? You have witnessed the benefits of giving and are blessed because of it. But it gets harder, too. The temptation to level off increases with each passing year. Pride tells you that you've sacrificed more than others. Fear tells you it's time to worry about the future. Friends say you've given enough, that it's someone else's turn now.

But Jesus says to keep on and you will see more of God. Do we really believe that "it ought to be the business of every day to prepare for our final

day"?1

When Jesus sent out His twelve disciples (Luke 9:3), He told them to "take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic." Why do you suppose He said this? Why not let them run home and grab a few supplies? Why not allow them to bring some money along just in case?

Jesus was forcing His disciples to trust Him. God would have to come through for them because they had nothing else to fall back on.

This place of trust isn't a comfortable place to be; in fact, it flies in the face of everything we've been taught about proper planning. We like finding refuge in what we already have rather than in what we hope God will provide. But when Christ says to count the cost of following Him, it means we must surrender everything. It means being willing to go without an extra tunic or a place to sleep at night, and sometimes without knowing where we are going.

God wants us to trust Him with abandon. He wants to show us how He works and cares for us. He wants to be our refuge.



Walking in genuine intimacy and full surrender to God requires great faith. Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

Back when I was in Bible college, a professor asked our class, "What are you doing right now that requires faith?" That question affected me deeply because at the time I could think of nothing in my life that required faith. I probably wouldn't be living very differently if I didn't believe in God; my

life was neither ordered nor affected by my faith like I had assumed it was. Furthermore, when I looked around, I realized I was surrounded by people who lived the same way I did.

Life is comfortable when you separate yourself from people who are different from you. That epitomizes what my life was like: characterized by comfort.

But God doesn't call us to be comfortable. He calls us to trust Him so completely that we are unafraid to put ourselves in situations where we will be in trouble if He doesn't come through.

Even though chapter 58 of Isaiah was written thousands of years ago, it speaks powerfully to the present day. I know it's long, but it is well worth the read, I promise.

"For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'

"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob." The mouth of the LORD has spoken.

In verse 10, the phrase "if you spend yourselves" stands out to me even more than the amazing promises that follow. It reminds me of the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, wherein the servants are rewarded according to what they did with what they were given. It didn't seem to matter that one was given five talents and the other two. Both servants were faithful with what their master entrusted to them, and as a result both were rewarded liberally.

Similarly, we are each given different gifts and talents by our Master. The thing that matters most is how we use what we have been given, not how much we make or do compared to someone else. What matters is that we spend ourselves.

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.

—1 John 2:28 RSV

Note

1. Attributed to Matthew Henry.

of the obsessed

Obsessed: To have the mind excessively preoccupied with a single emotion or topic. $\frac{1}{2}$

The idea of holding back certainly didn't come from Scripture. The Bible teaches us to be consumed with Christ and to faithfully live out His words. The Holy Spirit stirs in us a joy and peace when we are fixated on Jesus, living by faith, and focused on the life to come.

Lovers

I think sometimes we assume that if we are nice, people will know that we are Christians and want to know more about Jesus. But it really doesn't work that way. I know a lot of people who don't know Christ and are really nice people—nicer and more fun to be with, in fact, than a lot of Christians I know.

There has to be more to our faith than friendliness, politeness, and even kindness. Jesus teaches in Luke's gospel:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even "sinners" love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even "sinners" do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even "sinners" lend to "sinners," expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to

them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

—Luke 6:32–36

True faith is loving a person after he has hurt you. True love makes you stand out.

In October 2006, near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a man stormed an Amish school and killed several girls. The day after the shootings, many Amish people visited the shooter's family to say they had forgiven him. That sort of forgiveness is incomprehensible to the world; because of it, people have even accused the families of being bad parents, of not dealing properly with their anger, of living in denial.

It is just this sort of love that is crazy to the world: true love, a kind found nowhere but through Christ.

We are commanded to love our enemies and do good to them. Who are your enemies? Or, in terms we connect with better, who are the people you avoid or who avoid you? Who are the people who have hurt you or hurt your friends or hurt your kids? Are you willing to do good to those people? To reach out to them?

Oftentimes, my first response when someone does something to me—or worse, to my wife or to one of my kids—is retaliation. I don't *want* to bless those who hurt me or people I love dearly. I wouldn't *want* to forgive someone who walked into my daughter's school and shot her and her friends.

But that is exactly what Christ asks us to do. He commands that we give without expecting anything in return.

Later in Luke, Jesus says,

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

—Luke 14:12–14

Have you ever actually done anything like that? Do you give to those who cannot repay you? To those who would do you harm, if they could? To those who have already done you harm? This is Christ's love. He gave us something for which we can *never* repay Him, and then He asks us to keep giving like He gives.

Frederick Buechner writes in *The Magnificent Defeat*,

The love for equals is a human thing—of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles. The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing—the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world. The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing—to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world is always bewildered by its saints. And then there is the love for the enemy—love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer. This is God's love. It conquers the world.

People who are **obsessed** with Jesus give freely and openly, without censure. Obsessed people love those who hate them and who can never love them back.

Risk Takers

Haven't we all prayed the following prayer? *Lord, we pray for safety as we travel.* We ask that no one gets hurt on this trip. Please keep everyone safe until we return, and bring us back safely. In Jesus's name we pray, amen. The exact wording may vary a bit, but that is the standard prayer we recite before leaving on mission trips, retreats, vacations, and business trips.

We are consumed by safety. Obsessed with it, actually. Now, I'm not saying it is wrong to pray for God's protection, but I am questioning how we've made safety our highest priority. We've elevated safety to the neglect of whatever God's best is, whatever would bring God the most glory, or whatever would accomplish His purposes in our lives and in the world.

Would you be willing to pray this prayer? *God, bring me closer to You during this trip, whatever it takes....*

People who are **obsessed** with Jesus aren't consumed with their personal safety and comfort above all else.

Obsessed people care more about God's kingdom coming to this earth than their own lives being shielded from pain or distress.

Friends of All

Awhile back I had a free evening, so I decided to go to the store and buy some items to give away to those who needed them more than I do. It was a

good idea, something I want my life to be characterized by more and more. But it was embarrassing.

I realized that everyone I knew had enough, that I didn't know many people who were truly in need, and that I needed to change that. I needed to go and intentionally meet people who don't live like I do or think like I do, people who could never repay me. For their sake, but for my own as well.

First Timothy reaffirms that we are not to be controlled by money or to pursue it:

Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

—1 Timothy 6:6–13

People who are **obsessed** with Jesus live lives that connect them with the poor in some way or another. Obsessed people believe that Jesus talked about money and the poor so often because it was really important to Him (1 John 2:4–6; Matt. 16:24–26).

Crazy Ones

Sometimes I feel like when I make decisions that are remotely biblical, people who call themselves Christians are the first to criticize and say I'm crazy, that I'm taking the Bible too literally, or that I'm not thinking about my family's well-being.

For example, when I returned from my first trip to Africa, I felt very strongly that we were to sell our house and move into something smaller, in order to give more away. The feedback I got was along the lines of "It's not fair to your kids," "It's not a prudent financial choice," and "You are doing it just for show." I do not remember a single person who encouraged me to explore it or supported the decision at the time.

We ended up moving into a house half the size of our previous home, and we haven't regretted it. My response to the cynics, in the context of eternity, was, am I the crazy one for selling my house? Or are *you* for not giving more, serving more, being with your Creator more?

If one person "wastes" away his day by spending hours connecting with God, and the other person believes he is too busy or has better things to do than worship the Creator and Sustainer, who is the crazy one? If one person invests her or his resources in the poor—which, according to Matthew 25, is giving to Jesus Himself—and the other extravagantly remodels a temporary dwelling that will not last beyond his few years left on this earth, who is the crazy one?

When people gladly sacrifice their time or comfort or home, it is obvious that they trust in the promises of God. Why is it that the story of someone who has actually done what Jesus commands resonates deeply with us, but we then assume we could never do anything so radical or intense? Or why do we call it radical when, to Jesus, it is simply the way it is? The way it should be?

Obsessed people are more concerned with obeying God than doing what is expected or fulfilling the status quo. A person who is obsessed with Jesus will do things that don't always make sense in terms of success or wealth on this earth. As Martin Luther put it, "There are two days on my calendar: this day and that day" (Luke 14:25–35; Matt. 7:13–23; 8:18–22; Rev. 3:1–6).

The Humble

The church in America loves to turn saints into celebrities, to make known the stories of humble people who have faithfully served Christ in some way. And there is much good that comes of that. In fact, in the next chapter we'll look closely at some examples.

But there can be a tragic consequence to it: Too many of these people fall for the praise and start to believe that they really are something special.

I spoke at a summer camp several years ago. Afterward, a number of students told me I was their "favorite speaker." It felt good to hear them talk about how funny and convicting my messages were. I loved it. I got back to my room and thanked God for helping me speak so well.

About three minutes into my prayer, I stopped. It hit me that the students were talking about *me*, not God. I was standing before a holy God and robbing Him of the glory that was rightfully His.

That's a terrifying position to find yourself in. God says, "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols" (Isa. 42:8). I realized immediately that any attention I received belonged to God.

It's pride, plain and simple, that keeps me from giving God all the glory and keeping some of it for myself. It is a battle we all fight, in some form or another, some of us daily or even hourly.

One of the ways I know to fight against pride is through focused prayer. What I mean is that before you say one word to God, take a minute and imagine what it would be like to stand before His throne as you pray. Remember the visions of John, in Revelation, and Isaiah; remember the many accounts of people coming into God's presence and how it always caused the people to fall on their faces in terror. And then start to pray.

A person who is **obsessed** with Jesus knows that the sin of pride is always a battle. Obsessed people know that you can never be "humble enough," and so they seek to make themselves less known and Christ more known (Matt. 5:16).

Servers

As I shared in previous chapters, I used to be driven by my fear of God. I also used to work hard to prove that I was committed to God. Now I have tremendous fear and awe of God, but that doesn't motivate me. Now I work hard to serve God, but it isn't to prove my devotion.

Now I think I'm actually in love. Maybe that sounds corny to you, but I can't think of a more appropriate way to say it.

If a guy were dating my daughter but didn't want to spend the gas money to come pick her up or refused to buy her dinner because it cost too much, I would question whether he were really in love with her. In the same way, I question whether many American churchgoers are really in love with God because they are so hesitant to do anything for Him.

People who are **obsessed** with Jesus do not consider service a burden. Obsessed people take joy in loving God by loving His people (Matt. 13:44; John 15:8).

Givers

Tears come to my eyes when I think about some of God's people I have had the privilege to meet in the past few years. These are people with families, with dreams, people who are made in God's image as much as you and I are. And these people are suffering.

Many of them are sick, some even dying, as they live out their lives in dwellings that we would not consider good enough for our household pets. I am not exaggerating. Much of their daily hardship and suffering could be relieved with access to food, clean water, clothing, adequate shelter, or basic medical attention.

I believe that God wants His people, His church, to meet these needs. The Scriptures are filled with commands and references about caring for the poor and for those who cannot help themselves. The crazy part about God's heart is that He doesn't *just* ask us to give; He desires that we love those in need *as much as we love ourselves*. That is the core of the second greatest command, to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39).

He is asking you to love as you would want to be loved if it were your child who was blind from drinking contaminated water; to love the way you would want to be loved if you were the homeless woman sitting outside the café; to love as though it were your family living in the shack slapped together from cardboard and scrap metal.

Non-churchgoers tend to see Christians as takers rather than givers. When Christians sacrifice and give wildly to the poor, that is truly a light that glimmers. The Bible teaches that the church is to be that light, that sign of hope, in an increasingly dark and hopeless world. Matthew 5:16 says, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

People who are **obsessed** with God are known as givers, not takers. Obsessed people genuinely think that others matter as much as they do, and they are particularly aware of those who are poor around the world (James 2:14–26).

Sojourners

Most Americans, and even more so those of us in Southern California, think about life on earth way too much. Much of our time, energy, and money are channeled toward that which is temporary. Paul writes,

For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

As I said before, my wife's grandma Clara offered a real-life example of a person consumed with Jesus. I once attended a play with my wife and some of her relatives, including Grandma Clara. During intermission, I leaned over and asked what she thought of the play. She said, "Oh, honey, I really don't want to be here right now." When I asked why, she replied, "I just don't know if this is where I want to be when Christ returns. I'd rather be helping someone or on my knees praying. I don't want Him to return and find me sitting in a theater."

I was shocked by her answer. Yes, we are called to "keep watch" (Matt. 24:42), but it's strange to see someone who takes that command, and so many others, seriously. In fact, it's more than strange—it's convicting.

A person who is **obsessed** thinks about heaven frequently. Obsessed people orient their lives around eternity; they are not fixed only on what is here in front of them.

The Engrossed

Jesus didn't just pull the greatest command out of nowhere. He hearkened all the way back to the days of Moses, when God says to His people,

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on

your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

—Deuteronomy 6:4–9

In Moses' time, the heart was understood to be the seat of a person's emotions, the very center of his being, the place where decisions are made. The soul was considered the basis for a person's traits and qualities, or his personality. Strength refers to physical, mental, *and* spiritual strength.

So within this command to love God with "all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength," every fiber of humanity is addressed. Our goal as people who follow Christ should be no less than becoming people who are madly in love with God.

A person who is **obsessed** is characterized by committed, settled, passionate love for God, above and before every other thing and every other being.

Unguarded Ones

Before my wife and I got married I knew that I had to tell her everything about me, all the ways I'd messed up, all the things I'd done. She had to know what she was getting before she agreed to marry me. That conversation was not easy, but at the end of it, we still chose to be with each other, to commit our lives to one another.

I find myself acting differently with God. Often, when I pray, I will phrase my sentences in a way that makes me sound better. I will try to soften my sins, or touch up my true feelings before laying them before God. How foolish it is for me to be completely honest with my wife about my shortcomings, but try to fool God!

God wants us to be open with Him. He definitely doesn't want us to "season our wretchedness" as we would raw meat. He knows what we are, that we are disgusting, that all we are doing is trying to make ourselves feel better.

God desires true intimacy with each of us, and that comes only when we trust Him enough to be fully transparent and vulnerable.

People who are **obsessed** are raw with God; they do not attempt to mask the ugliness of their sins or their failures. Obsessed people don't put it on for God; He is their safe place, where they can be at peace.

The Rooted

The average Christian in the United States spends ten minutes per day with God; meanwhile, the average American spends over four hours a day watching television. 2

Perhaps TV is not your thing—maybe you don't even own one. But how about your time and your resources? How much of your money is spent on yourself, and how much is directed toward God's kingdom? How much of your time is dedicated to pursuing your life and your goals, and how much is focused on God's work and purposes?

God doesn't want religious duty. He doesn't want a distracted, halfhearted "Fine, I'll read a chapter ... now are You happy?" attitude. God wants His Word to be a delight to us, so much so that we meditate on it day and night.

In Psalm 1, He promises that those who do so are "like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers" (v. 3).

People who are **obsessed** with God have an intimate relationship with Him. They are nourished by God's Word throughout the day because they know that forty minutes on Sunday is not enough to sustain them for a whole week, especially when they will encounter so many distractions and alternative messages.

The Dedicated

Have you been in really good physical shape at some point in your life? If you aren't at that same level of fitness today, you probably know that it didn't "just happen"; you didn't lose your six-pack or your ability to run eight miles overnight. You stopped running regularly, or you quit lifting weights three times a week, or you started adding a couple of extra scoops of ice cream to your bowl. There are reasons that we are where we are and who we are, and they aren't random.

It is the same way with joy in our lives. We tend to think of joy as something that ebbs and flows depending on life's circumstances. But we don't just lose joy, as though one day we have it and the next it's gone, oh darn. Joy is something that we have to choose and then work for. Like the ability to run for an hour, it doesn't come automatically. It needs cultivation.

When life gets painful or doesn't go as we hoped, it's okay if a little of our joy seeps away. The Bible teaches that true joy is formed in the midst of the difficult seasons of life.

A person who is **obsessed** with Jesus is more concerned with his or her character than comfort.

Obsessed people know that true joy doesn't depend on circumstances or environment; it is a gift that must be

chosen and cultivated, a gift that ultimately comes from God (James 1:2–4).

Sacrificers

We cannot start believing that we are indispensable to God. According to the psalmist,

I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it.... Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High.

—Psalm 50:9–12, 14

There is no way we can contribute or add to God. He has everything and is complete. When we are in God's presence, all we can do is praise Him. Romans 11:35–36 says, "'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."

A person who is **obsessed** with Jesus knows that the best thing he can do is be faithful to his Savior in every aspect of his life, continually saying "Thank You!" to God. An obsessed person knows there can never be intimacy if he is always trying to pay God back or work hard enough to be worthy. He revels in his role as child and friend of God.

While these descriptions combined don't necessarily answer the question of what it looks like to be wholly surrendered to God, they represent important pieces of the puzzle. Hopefully you are beginning to imagine and pray about what this looks like in your own life.

Notes

- <u>1</u>. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), s.v. "obsessed."
- 2. See <u>www.familyresource.com</u>.

Who really lives that way?

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

—1 Corinthians 11:1

The stories that follow are true. They tell of people who sought to live their lives fully surrendered to God. Some are still alive; others have finished their race. Their examples differ vastly from one another, but each bears the mark of a person distinctly transformed by the beauty and reality of God's love and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In His letter to the church in Sardis, Jesus said, "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die.... Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy" (Rev. 3:1–2, 4–5).

Jesus commended the few who were faithful. Likewise, there are a few in every generation who offer examples worth following.

Will your name be among the few that follow?

Nathan Barlow

A medical doctor who chose to utilize his skills in Ethiopia for more than sixty years, Nathan dedicated his life to helping people with mossy foot. Mossy foot is a debilitating condition primarily found in rural districts, on people who work in soil of volcanic origin. It causes swelling and ulcers in

the feet and lower legs. The subsequent deformity, swelling, repeated ulcerations, and secondary infections make people with mossy foot social outcasts equivalent to lepers. 1

I met Nathan shortly before he died. His daughter, Sharon Daly, attends my church and brought him to her home from Ethiopia when his health started to fail. After only a few weeks, he couldn't handle being in the States. The people he loved were still in Ethiopia, so his daughter flew him back home so he could spend his last days there.

Once, Nathan got a toothache, the pain of which was so intense that he had to fly away from the mission field to get medical attention. Nathan told the dentist that he didn't ever want to leave the mission field for the sake of his teeth again, so he had the dentist pull out *all* of his teeth and give him false ones so he wouldn't slow God's work in Ethiopia.

This amazing man was the first to help these outcasts, and he spent his life doing it. Yet he died quietly, without a lot of attention; no one really knew about him.

It surprised me that such a man of God would faithfully serve for so many years, despite minimal recognition. It is a beautiful thing to witness. The work Nathan started continues through his website, www.mossyfoot.com.

Simpson Rebbavarapu

Simpson was given his English name when he arrived at a missionary-run orphanage around the age of four. His parents had not yet named him, which happens often among the younger children of poverty-stricken, lower-caste families in India.

Simpson's mother was married as a child bride around the age of thirteen, a practice still common in Indian villages. Simpson was her sixth child, and the women in the village gave her herbs to end her pregnancy so that she wouldn't have to stop working *and* have another mouth to feed. But the herbs didn't work.

Other villagers suggested that she try the "English medicine." But when she went to the doctor to have him abort her baby, he did not come to work that day. So Simpson was born, and eventually his parents took him to the orphanage because they knew he would have a better life there, including an opportunity to be educated.

Simpson believes that God has always had His hand on his life, because if it had been up to his mother, he would never have been born. Currently, Simpson splits his time between an orphanage that he started and an evangelism ministry that brings God's Word to illiterate villagers through audio Bibles.

When asked how he lives and where he gets a salary, he answered in the most simple and humble manner, "I live by faith.... I don't have a family or a wife, so what do I need a salary for?" He would rather have that money go to supporting another program to help people or to expose more people to the Word of God.

Simpson says that by living this way, he has to trust that God has His hand on his life and will keep taking care of him. He also says his dependence keeps him in prayer and close to God. To learn more about what Simpson does, check out www.beumin.org.

Jamie Lang

When Jamie was twenty-three years old, she flew from the United States to Tanzania with \$2,000 from her savings account. She planned to stay until she ran out of money, at which point she would come home.

Jamie was overwhelmed by all of the need that she encountered, so she started praying that God would allow her to make a radical difference in one person's life. After about six months, she met an eight-year-old girl at church who was carrying a baby on her back. Jamie learned that the baby's mother was dying from AIDS and that she was too weak to care for him. Jamie began to buy formula for the little boy, Junio, to provide him with the nutrition he desperately needed. At the time, he was half the size of a healthy baby.

Jamie fell in love with baby Junio. She wondered if she was being foolish —a barely twenty-four-year-old, single, white American entertaining thoughts of adopting a baby. Besides, she didn't even know if Tanzania allowed international adoptions. Eventually, she discovered that the country *didn't* allow international adoptions; however, because she had lived there for over six months, she could establish residency.

Before Junio's mom died from AIDS, she came to Jamie and said, "I have heard how you are taking care of my son, and I have never known such a love. I want to be saved." Just before she died, she said, "I know that my son is taken care of, and I will see him in heaven someday."

Jamie spent six months going through the adoption process and then five more months working with the American embassy to get Junio a visa. When she finally came home, she had been gone for a year and a half.

Junio is now five years old, totally healthy, and HIV negative. When Junio's mom was pregnant with him, she took a "morning-after pill" late in her pregnancy in order to abort him. But instead it induced premature labor, and because Junio was so small, no bleeding occurred during his birth. Thus, he did not contract HIV from his mother. What was intended to end his life, God used to save it.

Since adopting Junio, Jamie has gotten married, had a little girl, and is moving back to Tanzania with her family to work with Wycliffe to translate the Bible for a group that has never heard it before.

Marva J. Dawn

Marva was born in Ohio in 1948. She is a lifelong scholar, having earned four masters degrees and a PhD. She is also a teaching fellow at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, and is involved with the organization Christians Equipped for Ministry. Marva has written many books, is a gifted musician, and speaks to clergy and at conferences all over the world.

One of her books, *Unfettered Hope: A Call to Faithful Living in an Affluent Society*, specifically addresses what a faithful response looks like in our culture. Her life is a reflection of her belief that seemingly small acts of faithfulness can have a profound and significant impact on the world. All of the profits of her books go to support charities like Stand With Africa: A Campaign of Hope, which "supports African churches and communities as they withstand AIDS, banish hunger, and build peace."

Marva and her husband live off his teacher's salary, which is not much. Despite Marva's many medical problems, she still refuses to take more money for herself. She cannot imagine spending to make her life more comfortable when so many people are desperate and dying throughout our world. She says that her 1980 Volkswagen Bug with its broken heater helps her focus more on prayer and to better identify with those in need.

Rich Mullins

Rich was born in 1955 in Richmond, Indiana, the third of six children. He began to study music at a young age and wrote his first song on the piano

when he was just four years old.

Rich attended a Quaker church growing up, which later influenced his songwriting. He got his start writing songs for big-name recording artists, but in 1985 he recorded his debut album. For the next twelve years he made music, toured, and ministered to thousands of people through his simple yet weighty lyrics. His two most well-known songs are "Awesome God" and "Step by Step." His songs have been covered by artists and bands like John Tesh, Rebecca St. James, Michael W. Smith, Amy Grant, Third Day, Caedmon's Call, and Jars of Clay.

Despite his success in the music industry, Rich often ruffled the feathers of Christian music culture. He didn't consider music to be his primary purpose in life; to him, it simply enabled him to pursue the higher calling of loving people: children, his neighbors, enemies, and non-Christians. Sometimes he showed up to his concerts unshaven and barefoot. To keep others from putting him on a pedestal, he often confessed his sins and failures in public.

In 1995, Rich moved to a Navajo reservation in Arizona to teach music to the children who lived there. Rich never knew how successfully his albums sold because the profits from his concerts and albums went directly to his church. They paid him a small salary and gave the rest of the money away.

In September of 1997, Rich and a friend were driving to a benefit concert in Wichita, Kansas, when their Jeep flipped. Both men were thrown from the car; Rich was killed when a passing semi swerved to miss the Jeep and accidentally hit him. He was forty-one years old.

Rings

I don't know how old exactly Rings is, but he's definitely what you would call an old man. I also don't know where he was born or what his real name

is; he simply goes by Rings. His home is the cab of his pickup, which he parks near downtown Ocean Beach, California. He is a chain smoker, an exconvict, ex-addict, and ex-alcoholic.

Rings likes to say that if Jesus saved him, then Jesus is able to save anyone and everyone. So instead of using his monthly check to buy alcohol or a hotel room for himself, he spends all of it on food at the local supermarket. He transfers the food he buys to coolers in the back of his truck, then he drives to the beach and makes meals for his fellow homeless.

While preparing the food, Rings tells the gathering crowd about the freedom that Jesus brought into his life. He tells them that God is the One who told him to feed others with his money, and that it's because God loves each of them. This man gives everything he has to others—literally everything—because he knows he has nothing that wasn't given to him by God.

Rachel Saint

Rachel was born in 1914 in Pennsylvania, the only daughter among eight children. Her father was a stained-glass artist and their family often had very little food growing up.

When Rachel was eighteen, a kind, wealthy, elderly woman took Rachel on a trip to Europe and offered to make Rachel her heiress if she would be her companion for the rest of her life. While Rachel contemplated it, she knew she couldn't accept the offer of a comfortable life spent sipping tea and conversing.

After twelve years working at a halfway house for alcoholics, Rachel enrolled in linguistics school and became a missionary with Wycliffe Bible Translators in South America. She spent several years working with the Shapra Indians of Peru, but ultimately knew she was called to work with the

Waorani Indians of Ecuador, who were notorious for spearing to death any outsiders immediately upon contact.

Eventually, Rachel was introduced to a Waorani woman, Dayuma, who agreed to teach Rachel the language of her people. For years Rachel studied the language and witnessed to Dayuma about Jesus Christ as she waited patiently for an opportunity to go to the Waorani without being killed. Rachel's own brother, Nate, a pilot for Mission Aviation Fellowship, had been killed by the Waorani people when they attacked him and four other missionaries. This only sharpened Rachel's desire to tell these people about the love of Christ.

After many years, Rachel finally went to meet and live with the Waorani people. She lived with them for twenty years. Over time, their culture of revenge and murder was transformed by hearing what they called "God's carvings" (the words of the Bible). The Waorani people became her family. They gave Rachel the Waorani name Nimu, which means "star."

Rachel eventually translated the New Testament into their language, and today she is buried with her people in Ecuador. At her funeral, a Waorani friend said, "She called us her brothers. She told us how to believe. Now she is in heaven.... God is building a house for all of us, and that's where we'll see Nimu again."

George Mueller

George was born in Prussia in 1805 and was attending the University of Halle when he became a Christian. Up until then he had been infamous for his gambling debts, drunken stories, and escapades. But his life was transformed when he came to know Christ.

He finished school and left for England to be a preacher. He and his British wife eventually settled in Bristol, England, where they saw many orphans roaming the streets—uncared for, unfed, often sick, and virtually guaranteed death at a young age. At this time, writers like Charles Dickens and William Blake had not yet brought attention to the plight of these children, and nothing was being done to help them.

George and his wife decided to start an orphanage that would be entirely free of charge, and for which they would never ask any money or support. When they had needs, they would go to God alone, trusting that He would give them everything they needed.

Many people were incredulous, and so the Muellers' purpose in starting the orphanage became twofold: The first was obviously to help the orphans; the second was to show people what it looked like to trust God for *everything*.

When the first orphan house opened, George and his wife, Mary, prayed for everything they needed. According to George's meticulous records, God provided all that they asked for. By the time George died, in 1898, over ten thousand orphans had been housed and cared for in the five orphan houses they built.

During his lifetime, a million and a half pounds went through George's hands in the form of donations. He directed every cent toward those in need. After his death, a British paper wrote of George that he "robbed the cruel streets of thousands of victims, the jails of thousands of felons, and the poorhouses of thousands of helpless waifs." Another newspaper noted that it had all been accomplished by prayer alone.

Brother Yun

Yun was born in 1958 in the southern part of the Henan Province in China. When he was sixteen years old, with his father dying from stomach and lung cancer and his family nearly starving, Yun met Jesus Christ.

Over the years Yun grew and began to preach the gospel all over the country. The police were constantly tracking him and arrested him more than thirty times. Usually he was able to escape or elude long-term prison stays, but not always. Yun was imprisoned for three lengthy terms, including a four-year term during which he fasted from water and food for a period of seventy-four days. Although it is considered medically impossible for someone to survive that long without water, God sustained him. During those four years he underwent intense torture, including repeated beatings with a whip and multiple shocks from an electric baton.

Later on, Yun was held in a maximum-security prison in Zhengzhou. To ensure that he would never escape their prison, the guards beat Yun's legs until he was crippled. Despite this, Brother Yun walked out of the prison six weeks later. Gates and barriers that were always closed and barred were miraculously opened. No guard tried to stop him; it was as though he were invisible to them. It wasn't until he was outside and safe that Brother Yun realized he was walking on his "broken" legs!

Brother Yun and his family came to Germany in September 2001 after escaping China, where Yun is still wanted by the police. They now encourage believers around the world by sharing what God has done and is doing in China and many other places.

They are deeply involved with Back to Jerusalem, a movement aiming "to preach the gospel and establish fellowships of believers in all the countries, cities, towns, and ethnic groups between China and Jerusalem. This vision is no small task, for within those nations lay the three largest spiritual strongholds in the world today that have yet to be conquered by the gospel: the giants of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism."

Shane Claiborne

Shane is in his late twenties and lives in The Simple Way community house in one of the worst neighborhoods in Philadelphia.

Shane and the other residents at The Simple Way work to expose structures that foster poverty and to imagine alternative ways to live. They take Christ's words in Matthew 25:40 literally when He said, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Their lives are about loving the very poor and broken in one of America's hardest cities. They do this in their own community as they feed hungry people, spend time with neighborhood children, run a community store, and reclaim decrepit blocks by planting community gardens.

Shane is a speaker at many conferences, churches, and events around the country. In keeping with the hospitality that characterized the early church, Shane stays with families when he agrees to speak. He doesn't ask for a specific honorarium, only that attendees give what they can to help support the ministries at The Simple Way.

When he travels, Shane asks those who hire him to lessen the ecological impact of his travel by biking to work, carpooling, or donating money to a worthy organization. All proceeds from Shane's book, *The Irresistible Revolution*, are given away.

In 2003, Shane went to Baghdad with the Iraq Peace Team (a project of Voices in the Wilderness and Christian Peacemaker Teams) for three weeks. Shane watched the U.S. invasion of Baghdad. While there, he visited the sites of the daily bombings, hospitals where the injured were taken, and families that had been devastated. He also attended worship services with Iraqi believers. To learn more about The Simple Way, visit www.thesimpleway.org.

The Robynson Family

This family of five, with three kids under the age of ten, chooses to celebrate the birth of Christ in a unique way. On Christmas mornings, instead of focusing on the presents under the tree, they make pancakes, brew an urn of coffee, and head downtown. Once there, they load the coffee and food into the back of a red wagon. Then, with the eager help of their three-year-old, they pull the wagon around the mostly empty streets in search of homeless folks to offer a warm and filling breakfast on Christmas morning.

All three of the Robynson kids look forward to this time of giving a little bit of tangible love to people who otherwise would have been cold and probably without breakfast. Can you think of a better way to start the holiday that celebrates the God who is Love?

Susan Diego

Now in her late forties, Susan grew up in a home where God was sought, and she has tried to obey Him her whole life. She has served Him in many ways, including working with high school students in her church youth group and at the public high school; teaching young mothers to be loving parents; raising four children of her own; starting a school; and opening her home as a place of rest for people of all ages and places in life.

When Susan was young, she told God that she would do anything He asked her to, but that she hated speaking in front of people and would prefer it not be that. However, recently Susan felt like God was moving her heart to speak and that she needed to say yes if an opportunity came up.

It did.

During spring break this year, Susan, her husband, and their two youngest children went to Uganda; there, Susan was in charge of leading a conference for the women. This meant speaking to hundreds of women at least ten different times, on numerous topics.

At first the thought of this terrified Susan. In fact, tears still come to her eyes when she talks about it. But she has submitted. She has said yes to God, to the one thing she hoped *never* to do.

Lucy

If you met Lucy at church, you would probably think she was somebody's innocent, dear grandmother. She is the kind of woman who will come and give you a huge hug and then introduce herself.

You would never guess that Lucy is an ex-prostitute. When she was in her teens and early twenties, drugs and prostitution dominated her life. Through an older Christian woman who reached out to the prostitutes, Lucy met Jesus and her life was completely transformed.

To this day, almost forty years later, Lucy lives near the same streets where she once worked as a prostitute and consistently opens her home to other young women who are caught in prostitution. It is common knowledge on the streets that if you need anything, you can come to Lucy's house. She doesn't have a lot, but her home is always open. Prostitutes, pimps, drug users, dealers, and anyone else who most people avoid—Lucy invites them in. This is her way of loving people who are in desperate need of the hope and love that Lucy found forty years ago.

Cornerstone Community Church

We started Cornerstone a little over thirteen years ago. The first few years, we gave about 4 percent of our budget away. As the years went by, we gave more and more money away.

This year we committed to giving away 50 percent of our budget. This is because we believe that when Jesus said to "love your neighbor as yourself," He wasn't kidding. If we really want to love our neighbors as ourselves, then it makes sense that we spend at least as much on them as we do on ourselves.

Another manifestation of our desire to love others is our new building plan. Initially, we had a beautiful plan for a new sanctuary that would have cost many millions of dollars. Now, however, we are in the process of getting permits to build an outdoor amphitheater that will seat plenty of people and save us about \$20 million.

I'm sure there will be days when it's uncomfortable outside, but there will also be joy in knowing that we're sitting in the cold so that someone else can have a blanket.

Footnote about the Cornerstone Building Project

When I wrote the first edition of *Crazy Love*, the Cornerstone building project was moving forward. We were all inspired by the idea, and we had every intention of worshipping outdoors. But as it turns out, the project never came to fruition. This was largely due to opposition from city officials in the name of zoning laws.

But during the process, one of the elders asked me some questions that have stuck with me since: "Francis, would you really be content if we filled up the amphitheater a couple of times a weekend and had ten thousand people at the church? Would you be happy with that at the end of your life? Knowing you, I don't think you'd be content. Wouldn't it be better if you could help create a more reproducible model of church that wasn't so dependent on your speaking gift and limited to the size of a building?" It was very insightful, and it has caused us to head down this new path.

So we increased our focus on all of us living together as the church, rather than simply meeting together at the church. We wanted to take the focus off of a service and place it on church members meeting together throughout the week, meeting one another's needs, and serving and reaching their community. It wasn't easy, but the church became healthier through this process, and we decided that larger facilities weren't the pressing concern we thought they were.

I don't regret having gone through this process with Cornerstone—both the shift in philosophy and the struggle to make the new facilities happen were healthy for all of us—and the whole thing is a good reminder to hold our plans with an open hand. It's not about our strategies; it's about how the Spirit wants to lead and use us.



I hope these life stories have done more than encourage you; I hope they have eliminated every excuse for not living a radical, love-motivated life. I hope they have challenged the multitudes who "feel called to the rich" and ignore the poor. If biblical examples seem unattainable, hopefully these average, everyday people give you hope that you, too, can live a life worth writing about.

Notes

- 1. See <u>www.mossyfoot.com</u>.
- <u>2</u>. See <u>www.standwithafrica.org</u>.
- 3. Janet Benge, *George Mueller: Guardian of Bristol's Orphans* (Seattle: YWAM, 1999), 196.

<u>4</u>. See <u>www.backtojerusalem.com</u>.

the crux of the matter

By now you're probably wondering, *What in the world does this mean for me?*

After the apostle Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, people "were cut to the heart and said ... 'Brothers, what shall we *do*?'" (Acts 2:37). The first church responded with immediate action: repentance, baptism, selling possessions, sharing the gospel.

We respond with words like *Amen, Convicting sermon, Great book* ... and then are paralyzed as we try to decipher what God wants of our lives. I concur with Annie Dillard, who once said, "How we live our days is ... how we live our lives." We each need to discover for ourselves how to live *this day* in faithful surrender to God as we "continue to work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12).

Should you put your house on the market today and downsize? Maybe. Should you quit your job? Maybe. Or perhaps God wants you to work harder at your job and be His witness there. Does He want you to move to another city or another country? Maybe. Perhaps He wants you to stay put and open your eyes to the needs of your neighbors. Honestly, it's hard enough for me to discern how to live my own life!

My suggestion as you think, make decisions, and discern how God would have you live is to ask yourself, "Is this the most loving way to do life? Am I loving my neighbor and my God by living where I live, by driving what I drive, by talking how I talk?" I urge you to consider and actually live as though each person you come into contact with is Christ.

Asking and reflecting on these sorts of questions points us in the right direction, but we have to get beyond asking the right questions. We often have "aha!" moments but don't act; in fact, we're famous for it in the church. Remember those retreat highs followed by the inevitable lull? Or the excitement you felt on your first mission trip but forgot shortly after returning home? Memories are wonderful, but do you live differently because of them?

The stories in chapter 9 are brief snapshots of how a few people have lived out true Christianity in America and around the world. Their lives are a challenge of the status quo and examples of a different way to live.

The point is that there *is* another path, an alternative to the individualism, selfishness, and materialism of the American Dream (even the so-called Christian version). I hope their stories reminded you that God works in a vast number of ways, that He has more in store for you than you can really imagine right now.

A Nike commercial ran years ago, featuring the first-draft pick into the NBA, Harold Miner. In the commercial, he said something like, "Some people ask if I'm going to be the next Magic Johnson, the next Larry Bird, or the next Michael Jordan. I tell them, I'm going to be the first Harold Miner." He ended up having a miserable career in the NBA, but it was still a cool commercial. And his point—to be yourself—was valid.

Oswald Chambers writes, "Never make a principle out of your experience; let God be as original with other people as He is with you." $\frac{1}{2}$ To that I would add, "Be careful not to turn others' lives into the mold for your own." Allow God to be as creative with you as He is with each of us.

Have you ever said, "I was made for this moment"? Do you believe you were crafted for specific good works, things that God knew before you even existed? Or do you compare your life to others and lament what you have been given?

We have a God who is a Creator, not a duplicator. He's never made a Francis Chan before. Paul tells us,

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

—1 Corinthians 12:4–7

Imagine if you opened up a drawer in your kitchen and found twenty cheese graters but no other utensils. Not very helpful when you're looking for something to eat your soup with. Just as there are different utensils in the kitchen that serve diverse functions, God has created unique people to accomplish a variety of purposes throughout the world.

That is why I cannot say in this book, "Everyone is supposed to be a missionary" or "You need to sell your car and start taking public transportation." What I *can* say is that you must learn to listen to and obey God, especially in a society where it's easy and expected to do what is most comfortable.

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I wrote this book because much of our talk doesn't match our lives. We say things like, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," and "Trust in the Lord with all your heart." Then we live and plan like we don't believe God even exists. We try to set our lives up so everything will be fine even if God doesn't come through. But true faith means holding nothing back. It means putting every hope in God's fidelity to His promises.

A friend of mine once said that Christians are like manure: Spread them out and they help everything grow better, but keep them in one big pile and they stink horribly. Which are you? The kind that reeks, around which people walk a wide swath? Or the kind that trusts God enough to let Him spread you out—whether that means going outside your normal group of Christian friends, increasing your material giving, or using your time to serve others?

I was convicted by my lack of faith in college. I realized that my choices had situated me in a pile of stinking manure, and this motivated me to put myself in uncomfortable situations. I began going into downtown Los Angeles to share my faith. I didn't "hear God calling me" to drive downtown; I just chose to go. I obeyed.

Most of us use "I'm waiting for God to reveal His calling on my life" as a means of avoiding action. Did you hear God calling you to sit in front of the television yesterday? Or to go on your last vacation? Or exercise this morning? Probably not, but you still did it. The point isn't that vacations or exercise are wrong, but that we are quick to rationalize our entertainment and priorities yet are slow to commit to serving God.

A friend of mine was speaking recently. Afterward a guy came up and told him, "I would go serve God as a missionary overseas, but, honestly, if I went right now it would only be out of obedience." My friend's response was "Yes, and ...?"

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). Jesus did not say, "If you love me you will obey me when you feel

called or good about doing so...." If we love, then we obey. Period. This sort of matter-of-fact obedience is part of what it means to live a life of faith.

The greatest blessing I received during those trips to the inner city was seeing God work in situations where He has to. As a result, I've made it a commitment to consistently put myself in situations that scare me and require God to come through. When I survey my life, I realize that *those* times have been the most meaningful and satisfying of my life. They were the times when I truly experienced life and God.

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For so much of my life I didn't understand the desirability of God or trust in His love enough to submit my hopes and dreams. I lived in a constant state of trying to be "devoted enough" to Him, yet I never quite made it.

I knew God wanted all of me, yet I feared what complete surrender to Him would mean. Trying harder doesn't work for me. Slowly I've learned to pray for God's help, and He has become my greatest love and desire.

Despite this huge shift in focus and tone in my relationship with God, I still struggle to stay focused on Jesus every day. But a couple of things help me keep going.

First, I remember that if I stop pursuing Christ, I am letting our relationship deteriorate. We never grow closer to God when we just live life; it takes deliberate pursuit and attentiveness. When I pray, I sometimes ask God to make it the most intimate time of prayer I've *ever* had. Many times when I speak, whether at my church or another venue, I remind myself that I could die right after I finish, so what would I want my last words to be?

Second, I remember that we are not alone. Even now there are thousands of beings in heaven watching what is going on down here—a "great cloud of witnesses," the Scripture says. It reminds me that there is so much more to our existence than what we can see. What we do reverberates through the heavens and into eternity.

Try for a whole day to be conscious of heaven. Realize that so much is going on outside of this dimension and our existence. God and His angels are watching, even now.

What really keeps me going is the gift and power we have been given in the Holy Spirit. Before Christ left this earth, He told His disciples,

I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.... When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.

—John 16:7–8, 13

The disciples must have been shocked by the idea that it was for their good that Jesus was leaving. What could possibly be better than having Jesus by your side? Wouldn't you rather have Jesus physically walking next to you all day than have the seemingly elusive Holy Spirit living in you?

Our view of the Holy Spirit is too small. The Holy Spirit is the One who changes the church, but we have to remember that the Holy Spirit lives in us. It is individual people living Spirit-filled lives that will change the church.

Ephesians 5:18 says, "Be filled with the Spirit." If you look at the Greek, it is written as both a present imperative (a continual command) and in the passive voice. The imperative part means that being filled with the Spirit

isn't something we do once; rather, it is something we do always and repeatedly. And the passive element communicates God's necessary action in the process of filling.

I have never been more excited about the church. I think there is tremendous reason to expect good things. At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned how Annie Dillard wrote that the way we live out our days is the way we will live our lives. It's similar with the body of Christ: How we believers live out our lives is a microcosm of the life of the church.

My hope and prayer is that you finish this book with hope, believing that part of your responsibility in the body of Christ is to help set the pace for the church by listening and obeying and *living* Christ. Knowing that God has called us each to live faithful and devoted lives before Him, by the power of His Spirit. You do not need to preach to your pastor or congregation; you simply need to live out in your daily life the love and obedience that God has asked of you.

I was recently told about a man who heard me preach on 1 Corinthians 15:19–20, where Paul writes, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead." This man was convicted that since Christ is indeed alive, he needed to live like it. So he quit his well-paying job and became a pastor—something he had felt called to do for a while.

When people make changes in their lives like this, it carries greater impact than when they merely make impassioned declarations. The world needs Christians who don't tolerate the complacency of their own lives.

Is This What I Want to Be Doing When Christ Comes Back?

And so we are at the end of this book. I don't think it's coincidence that God has encouraged my heart so much over this past week with the story of the three believers who were martyred in Turkey.

I'm writing this in April 2007, and the news about the three martyrs—Tilman, Necati, and Ugur—is still fresh. I can't get them out of my mind. They were tortured for three hours in ways that I didn't know were humanly possible. I'll spare you the details, but it was repulsive and horrific. I think of how they must have looked at each other while being tortured with stares that said, "Just hold on a little longer. Don't deny Him! It'll all be worth it."

It's been about a week and a half since their deaths. How thrilled they must be right now—I cannot imagine the joy they felt just five seconds after their deaths. I know that when I meet them, they'll say it was so worth it. A hundred or thousand or million years from now, they'll still say it was so incredibly worth it. Stories about faithful saints like our brothers killed in Turkey are what we will talk about in heaven.

The Bible is clear that each of us will stand before God and account for our lives:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Cor. 5:10 ESV)

O great and mighty God, whose name is the LORD of hosts ... rewarding each one according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds. (Jer. 32:18–19 ESV)

For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. (Rom. 14:10–12 ESV)

What will people say about your life in heaven? Will people speak of God's work and glory through you? And even more important, how will you answer the King when He says, "What did you do with what I gave you?"

Daniel Webster once said, "The greatest thought that has ever entered my mind is that one day I will have to stand before a holy God and give an account of my life." He was right.

Now close this book. Get on your knees before our holy, loving God. And then live the life with your friends, your family, parents, spouse, children, neighbors, enemies, and strangers that He has created and empowered you through the Holy Spirit to live.

May you be able to say at the end of your life, along with Paul,

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

—2 Timothy 4:7–8 ESV

Note

<u>1</u>. Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, June 13 entry.

a lot should change in five years

Change is not only good; it is critical. If you do the same things today that you did five years ago, you need to closely examine your heart. To repent means to change. You discover areas of your life that are not under God's control, and you repent, you change. I have been so blessed by hearing stories of people who read *Crazy Love* and changed. I love this because there are too many people saying they are "convicted" or "broken" after hearing a sermon or reading a book, yet they don't actually do anything. We even celebrate walking out of church feeling guilty, as though that were the goal. Biblically, that is failure.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. (James 1:22 ESV)

Satan, the great deceiver, loves it when we read Christian books and listen to sermons as ends in themselves. If we don't actually change, we *deceive ourselves*. We are doing Satan's work for him—he doesn't need to deceive us if we're doing it to ourselves. It's repentance that makes hell furious. Repentance is the sign of true belief. So let's keep changing.

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. (2 Cor. 7:10).

Repent. Change. That's not to say that everyone should move or switch jobs, but it does mean that you should be radically different than you were

five years ago. No one who is yielded to the Holy Spirit can remain the same (unless you're Jesus, who was perfect to begin with).

Where I've Been

I'm still alive, and I don't take that for granted. God decided to keep me on earth for another five years since writing *Crazy Love*. Life has changed drastically, and rightly so. Pursuing the biblical truths in this book led me on an unexpected adventure that I wouldn't trade for the world. I pray for the grace to stay on this path and not be enticed by the wide and easy road, which could never lead to this kind of fulfillment.

When I wrote *Crazy Love*, I lived in Simi Valley, where I was the pastor of Cornerstone Church for thirteen years. After another three years at the church, Lisa and I believed our time in Simi Valley was done and the Lord was calling us somewhere new. Our decision to move on was confusing for people because things were going well. Usually, people move because of problems, not because of a lack of them. We loved the church, our friends, our home. There was no scandal or moral failure. There was nothing we were running from, and we weren't sure what we were running to. Ultimately, we believed there were other places where we could be more effective for the gospel, and we both believed that the Lord asked us to leave. There were good elders, pastors, and churches in our city. We sensed the Lord calling us somewhere else, most likely a place with fewer resources.

Pregnant with our fifth child, we sold our house with no idea where the Lord would lead. Believing our new ministry might be in Asia, we traveled through different cities. Everywhere we went, we asked God if He wanted us to stay or move on. It was an unforgettable time. I can't describe how good it feels to walk through the slums of India with your family, hold

hands in prayer, and ask God if He wants you to stay and serve Him there. You would think that being homeless and uncertain would be stressful, but this was one of the most peaceful times of my life.

After traveling through Thailand and China, living in Hong Kong made the most sense to me. So we looked around for possible living situations and even started researching schools for our kids to attend.

Then I believe the Lord spoke to me. I can't explain it. I didn't hear an audible voice. I just had a strong sense that He put certain thoughts into my mind. This doesn't happen often, and I am very careful at these times. You never want to flippantly assume you received a message from the Lord. When this happens, I first examine the Scriptures to make sure these thoughts are consistent with biblical commands and principles. Then I examine my heart to make sure that I'm not just taking my own selfish desires and telling myself they're coming from God. After prayer and examination, I believed it was the Spirit of God leading me.

I sensed that the Lord wanted me to return to the United States. I won't get into the specific tasks He had for me, but I will say that it was overwhelming. However, there's a part of me that enjoys being given tasks that require supernatural help.

So we moved back to the United States, and I am now serving with my wife and kids in the inner city of San Francisco. We spend many of our days knocking on doors or ministering to people on the streets who are homeless and defeated. Most of my time is spent making disciples rather than speaking to crowds. I am working in partnership with other pastors who want to awaken believers to their responsibility to be His witnesses and make disciples. It has been a wonderful season of life. I have overcome some of the fears I had about sharing my faith, and I have watched my family grow spiritually like never before.

I don't want to make it sound like everything has been wonderful in my life. After the unexpected success of *Crazy Love*, I found myself battling pride and discouragement. With the rise of social media, millions are now able to voice their opinions for the world to hear. As book sales increased, so did flattery and criticism. Neither produced great results in me. The flattery led to pride. The criticism led to hurt and anger. The constant barrage of voices made it difficult for me to hear the voice of God. It was only by the grace of God that I was able to fight through and maintain some measure of humility and courage.

I share about my life not because I think everyone should do what I did, but to beg you to step into whatever adventure God has for you, whatever the cost. He leads us down different paths, but none of us is led down the path we would have chosen for ourselves. For some, living by faith means remaining where you are. Leaving could actually be an effort on your part to run from God's calling. For others, remaining could be an unwillingness to go wherever He wants. We all must search the Scriptures and examine our hearts. I just want to be one more voice begging you to truly let go. Trust whatever He has for you. It will be far better than anything you can plan for yourself.

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. (Matt. 16:25)

What I've Learned

God has taught me so much over the past few years. These are some of the most meaningful lessons I learned, in no particular order.

We Are the Weird Ones

During my time in India, the commitment level of the believers there shocked me. I visited thousands of Christians who had been beaten or watched relatives murdered for their faith. At one point, I said to one of the leaders, "Every believer seems so serious about his or her commitment to Christ. Aren't there people who just profess Christ but don't really follow Him?" He answered by explaining that nominal Christianity doesn't make sense in India. Calling yourself a Christian means you lose everything. Your family and friends reject you, and you lose your home, status, and job. So why would anyone choose that unless he or she is serious about Jesus?

I witnessed that same passion during my time in mainland China. The highlight was attending a meeting with underground church members training to become missionaries. The way they prayed and gave testimony about being persecuted was convicting and encouraging. The most surprising part of our time together was when they asked me about church in America. They laughed hysterically when I told them that church for Americans tends to focus on buildings and that people will sometimes switch churches based on music, child care, preaching, or disagreements with other believers. I honestly was not trying to be funny. They laughed in disbelief at our church experiences, thinking it was ridiculous that we would call this Christianity.

Keep in mind that the population of China is over 1.3 billion, and in India it's over 1.2 billion. Meanwhile, there are around 300 million people in the United States. This means that we are a small minority. Our views of "Christianity" are peculiar to the vast majority of the world. I used to think of those "radical believers" overseas as the strange ones. Some simple math revealed to me that in actuality we are the weird ones. The majority of believers on this earth find it laughable that we could reduce the call to follow Jesus and make disciples to an invitation to sit in church service.

If You Want to Experience God, Share Your Faith

I used to think that in order to feel close to Jesus, you had to get away from people and focus on Him through prayer. I still believe that is good and important, but I've learned that there is another way to experience Him. We experience Him by stepping out in faith. As I have conquered some of my fear and embarrassment in sharing the gospel, I have seen God answer prayer like in no other period of my life. I have found that intimacy with God comes from being alone with Him, but also from clinging to Him through difficult times of ministry.

On Sundays, I gather with a hundred people. We worship for ten minutes, listen to teaching for ten minutes, pray, and then go share our faith for a couple of hours. Then we come back together to talk about what God did. It has been a rich time, and people are experiencing God like never before. This shouldn't be surprising. After all, it was in the context of going out and making disciples that Jesus promised, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20 ESV). And He promised that the Spirit would be given to us so that we could have power to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8). It only makes sense that if we want to experience the Spirit, we must be His witnesses. When people tell me they don't feel close to God, I ask them how often they share their faith. God empowers us for His mission. If you are not living missionally, it's doubtful you will experience His power.

Courage and Humility Must Coexist

After a couple of months in Asia, I was confident that God wanted me back in the States. He gave me clarity on what He wanted me to do, but the family and I feared the move back to America. We were close to God and

had so much peace during our time outside of the States. Lisa and I had a great conversation with our two oldest kids while at the airport. We each shared our fears about going back to a land of luxury and sinking back into a comfortable lifestyle. As we discussed how we could keep from becoming complacent, my wife made the most important statement: "We can't let people talk us out of things. Sometimes God convicts, but then we let people talk us out of it. We need to stick to our convictions."

This isn't to say that we don't consider what people say. Other people can help us see that what we call faith is actually being done out of pride, greed, or laziness. God promises to oppose the proud and is not a fan of laziness. Only fools refuse to listen to counsel (Prov. 12:15), but we must consider the source. Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." In other words, look at how this person turned out. Is he living a life of faith that resembles what you read about in Scripture? If not, don't be so quick to listen to him. The Bible warns repeatedly against false teachers. And false teachers don't identify themselves as false teachers. They look like sheep, but they're actually wolves; they look like angels of light, but they're actually messengers of Satan.

To my wife's point, there is no shortage of people living in laziness and luxury, trying to talk you out of living by faith. There is a time to resist counsel and to refute in love. I've made the mistake of equating quietness (even weakness) with humility. I would give in to the ideas of others, assuming this was a more humble posture. Only recently did it occur to me that Jesus was the most humble person on earth, and everything He did was humble. This means that when "Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple," and "overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons" (Matt. 21:12

ESV), it was a humble act! It was a strong act, but He had the people's best interests and the glory of the Father in mind. It is possible to be loud and humble. And there will be times when it is wrong for us to sit quietly.

The Book of Acts Is More Than History

For years I did not have peace when I read the book of Acts. The level of unity, commitment, and power that the early church displayed was so different from my Christian experience. People tried to explain why this could not take place today. Yet the more I studied the Scriptures, the more I became convinced that it must take place today. I'm grateful that I did not back down because I am finally experiencing it. I'm sharing the gospel alongside some radical followers of Christ, and it reminds me of what I read about in Scripture. The unity we share looks like what I read about in Acts. And we have experienced God's power, leaving us with a feeling of awe similar to that which accompanied the believers in Acts (2:42–47).

Most of us have experienced the unity that takes place during mission trips. You show up as strangers and end up feeling like a family. How does that happen? When you explore, serve, and even suffer together, a bond develops. Paul loved the Philippians deeply because there was a "partnership in the gospel" (Phil. 1:5). There is something that happens when we actually partner in spreading the gospel. It's much different from "attending church" together or going on a retreat. And it is possible to experience this on a daily basis and for life to feel like an unending mission trip. Second Timothy 2:4 tells us that "no soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits" (ESV). Too many people spend their days entangled in civilian affairs, occasionally visiting the battlefield to relieve their guilt. It's time we stop visiting the battle and start fighting relentlessly.

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved —and that by God. (Phil. 1:27–28)

That describes the army God wants. He challenges us to be fearlessly united for the advancement of the gospel. Yet churches are filled with fear and strife. Most of us don't enjoy the rejection that often comes with sharing the gospel. It's terrifying. We know that it makes no sense to be quiet when people we love are going to hell, but our fear keeps us silent. This is one reason we need each other. We rarely "feel" like telling people about Jesus, so we gather in order to "stir up one another to love and good works" (Heb. 10:24 ESV). We need to voice our fears so others can pray for our courage and stir us up. When was the last time you had a group of believers lay hands on you and pray for your courage? You might be surprised at the results.

Paul had to remind Timothy that he needed God's power in order to be bold and suffer for the spread of the gospel (2 Tim. 1:7–8). Peter and John prayed with other believers because they wanted greater courage (Acts 4:29). Even Paul asked the Ephesians to pray for his courage (Eph. 6:19–20). It is foolish for us not to voice our fears and confess the resulting lack of peace. It has been life changing to have others pray for my courage on a regular basis. My life is making more and more sense in light of what I believe.

Finally, Trust Jesus

If there's one thought I'd like to leave you with, it's this: Trust the promises of God. I know it sounds obvious and maybe even a bit cheesy. Of course we should trust Jesus! We all assume we are doing this fairly well. But the Lord has recently shown me some of the doubt in my life. Like many of you, I have trust issues. I have been lied to so often, and I also recognize the deceit that has come out of my own mouth. It makes it difficult to trust.

Being slow to trust is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, Jesus was not quick to trust everyone: "But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men" (John 2:24). But it gets dangerous when our pattern of distrust spills over into our relationship with God. This is one area where I saw sin creep into my life.

I have become guarded. When people make promises, I assume they will not follow through. This way I can't be let down. It's much better than getting my hopes up and then being disappointed. This is a pattern in my life: Expect the worst so I can't be hurt. Many live this way. I'm not sure this is entirely wrong. But I am sure that it's wrong when this distrust is applied to God. We read His promises, but we don't want to get our hopes up. Not only is this wrong, but it robs us from the joy He wants for us. Romans 12:12 tells us to "rejoice in hope" (ESV). There is no reason to be guarded in our rejoicing. God can be trusted. He is not like everyone else.

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. (Deut. 7:9)

God will never break a promise. It is not possible because faithful is what He is. The dishonesty in all of our lives keeps us from trusting other people and even ourselves. But dishonesty does not apply to God.

If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself. (2 Tim. 2:13 ESV)

God wants you to celebrate His promises without any insecurity or inhibition. His promise of forgiveness is rooted in His faithfulness. Enjoy your righteousness in Him!

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

Finally, rest in His promise of your future. As you read this passage, let your guard down. Don't allow Satan to plant any doubt in your mind. Celebrate and even scream in worship. Your faith in His faithfulness will give you the strength to endure whatever is necessary. Celebrate our future together:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Rev. 21:1–5)

A CONVERSATION WITH FRANCIS CHAN

Q: Tell us about the title *Crazy Love*.

A: The idea of *Crazy Love* has to do with our relationship with God. All my life I've heard people say, "God loves you." It's probably the most insane statement you could make to say that *the eternal Creator of this universe is in love with me*. There is a response that ought to take place in believers, a crazy reaction to that love. Do you really understand what God has done for you? If so, how can your response possibly be lukewarm?

Q: Many today are dissatisfied with Christianity as they have experienced it in the past. Some want to hold on to some form of spirituality but don't want anything to do with the church. How is your critique different?

A: Over the years, I've heard a lot of talk about what is wrong with the church. The church has issues, and what I wrote in *Crazy Love* calls us as the church to change many of the bad habits we have developed over the years. But I don't ever want to come across as a person who does not love the church. I don't want to do away with the church; my goal is to look back to the church in the New Testament and ask how we can renew and

purify our churches so they look more like God's intention for His church. I'm not trying to reinvent the church or the Christian life. I'm not saying anything new. I just want to see the church get back to where God wants it to be. My purpose in writing these things is not to bash the church, but to lovingly serve the church.

Q: Why do you think so many Christians blame the church for their failures?

A: We all try to justify our actions. The easiest thing to do when we're not living the way God wants us to is to blame someone or something else. It's not unique to the church. You see it everywhere: people blaming their parents, their education, the government, their medical problems, whatever, rather than looking to themselves and pursuing change through the Holy Spirit. The same thing happens in the church. All of us who have the Holy Spirit have the potential to live a "crazy love" type of life, but it's easier to not live it and blame someone for that.

Q: You talk about people in the church not having a clue of what God is like. How is this possible?

A: Because we're taught so little about God, most people just want to know what God can do for them rather than desiring to know Him. When we present the gospel, we try to answer one question: How do I keep from

going to hell? After that question is answered, we stop asking questions about God. With the American church being so concerned about converts, we don't take the time to present the God-centered universe to people. We don't try to dig deep into the truth of God. Our belief in God needs to involve an accurate understanding of who He is and the implications of that for our lives.

Q: Talk about the church and giving. Why do you think it's important for the American church to focus on giving?

A: I have seen God come through so many times in my personal life when I'm giving. I would give beyond what made sense to give, and God would just continue to bless. But as a pastor, I began to see that our church finances weren't characterized by the same focus on giving. It was like we didn't trust God to come through for the church if we were overly generous with the money He gave us. So we decided to apply Jesus's command to love your neighbor as yourself to the church's finances and began to give away 55 percent of the money that came in. This was a huge step of faith for our church, but I truly believe that this made our church healthier than it had ever been.

We also made a commitment to give Children's Hunger Fund \$250,000 every three months. Over the summer, things got pretty lean financially, and I had no idea where that money was going to come from. As our last Sunday approached, I decided not to make a plea for people to give or even to mention that we had to raise the money in order to keep our commitment. That Sunday, we had an offering of \$251,000. It was an immediate

affirmation of God telling us, "This is exactly what I want you to do." It changes the mentality of a church to see God come through in impossible situations. A giving church is going to see His provision more than a stingy church.

Q: There is urgency in your message. Where does this come from?

A: For one thing, I've done a lot of funerals. For years I was doing at least one funeral just about every week. Many of these are for people younger than I am, and many of them are unexpected. Seeing the shock of their loved ones and realizing that God can take a person's life at any time gives me a sense of urgency.

My childhood also played into my urgency. My mom died giving birth to me, my stepmom died when I was nine, my dad died when I was twelve. I learned from an early age that tomorrow may never come. Every time I preach I want to make it the best message I've ever given in case I'm not here to give another one.

If you think about it, this type of urgency comes from the message itself. We don't need an excuse for urgency. Healing and redemption are available because of God's insane love and self-sacrifice on our behalf. Jesus sends us into the world to beg people to heed that message (2 Cor. 5:20). If that doesn't make us passionate, what will?

Q: You make a bold statement that "churchgoers who are 'lukewarm' are not Christians. We will not see them in heaven." How do you explain this? How does grace play into this statement?

A: I'm just trying to look at Revelation 3 objectively. God says that the lukewarm will be spit out of His mouth, which is drastically different from God embracing you and welcoming you into heaven. The lukewarm still need to be saved. Does it make any sense to say that a person whom God will spit out of His mouth like so much tepid water is going to be saved?

We have to be clear that salvation is not based on performance. But when we are saved we are given the Holy Spirit, and the fruits of His saving works in our lives are going to show up in the way we live. All through the New Testament a person's faith is shown through his actions. New Testament teachings are clear that someone who loves God and doesn't obey God is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

It's not popular to question someone's actions and salvation, and Scripture tells us to test ourselves and see if we're really in the faith. I believe 100 percent in grace. I believe that I did nothing; that I'm completely saved because of what Jesus did through the cross. By the grace of God we believe and are saved. But the Spirit does not lead people to live lukewarm lives.

Q: Talk about living "your best life later."

A: It's all about eternity. Hebrews 11 is all about martyrs who never got to see or experience the fulfillment of the promises. Scripture tells us that life does not end at death. We're supposed to be storing treasures in heaven. Why would we store up things on earth? It's an issue of faith. We say we believe in an eternal reward, but our actions show that we don't. If our hope is in God and an eternity spent with Him, then our best life comes later, and

we live now in the faithful expectation of the fulfillment of that promise. It's that simple.

Q: In one chapter you state, "Dare to imagine what it would mean for you to take the words of Jesus seriously." Give an honest answer: Do you think many Christians will take you up on this?

A: Unfortunately, we've conditioned ourselves to hear messages without responding. Sermons have become Christian entertainment. We go to church to hear a well-developed sermon and a convicting thought. We've trained ourselves to believe that if we're convicted, our job is done. If you're just hearing the Word and not actually doing something with it, you're deceiving yourself.

I remember preaching on Luke 6, and I brought up the passage that says, "Do good to those who hate you." I told the congregation to think of someone who hated them, and I asked, "Are you willing to go do something good for them? Will you do that? Yes or no?" I said, "Tell God right now, 'No, I will not do that." We're not willing to make that statement because we don't want to say that to God, but we're doing that every day. Passive disobedience is not as different from active disobedience as we sometimes think.

I'm sure that many people will read over those words and not respond because we've developed a habit of listening to the Word of God and not obeying it. But I also know that there are people out there who are convicted by the Spirit and want nothing more than to please God in everything.

Q: What do you tell people who say that you are taking the Bible too literally?

A: If someone told me that I took the Bible too literally, I would just ask them to examine their heart in asking that. I would ask them if they really believed that we're not supposed to take it that literally, or if they're just following the influence of other people who say we're not supposed to. I like to get people to think for themselves and not just go with the flow. I really believe that *Crazy Love* appeals to thoughts that all Christians have had when they're alone with God, and they realize that they are supposed to take Scripture literally. The other Christians in our lives should be pushing us to take the Bible more seriously, but unfortunately, they are often the very people who are encouraging us to relax and take it with a grain of salt.

Q: How does the American dream play into a lukewarm faith?

A: In Luke 12, Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool. This guy is successful and has an abundance of crops. He builds bigger barns so that he can store it up. He says, "[I] have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry" (v. 19). Basically, he'll retire and enjoy himself: the American dream. God says, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you" (v. 20).

We shouldn't worry about our lives, what we'll eat, buy, or wear. God says the American dream is absolute foolishness. Yet this bankrupt dream is being passionately pursued and defended by so many Christians! God could take your life at any time. Don't conform to the patterns of this world.

Q: Are you really advocating that we all live like religious fanatics?

A: The kind of life that I've described in *Crazy Love* shouldn't seem crazy to us. It should be the only thing that makes sense. Giving up everything and sacrificing everything we can for the afterlife is logical. "Crazy" is living a safe life and storing up things while trying to enjoy your time on earth, knowing that any millisecond God could take your life. To me, that is crazy. The crazy ones are the ones who live life like there is no God. To me that is insanity.

ABOUT THE COAUTHOR

Danae Yankoski graduated from Westmont College, where she studied English Literature and met her best friend, now husband, Mike. She published her first book at age sixteen, and has since been part of several writing projects. Some of Danae's favorite aspects of life include steaming mugs of tea; hiking, running, and being outside; thought-provoking conversations; interacting with different cultures; and playing with her new black Lab puppy, Elliott. She and Mike recently spent several months living in African and South American communities affected by a lack of clean water. Their heart is to write about these experiences in a way that moves readers beyond statistics, to truly loving their neighbors as themselves.

What people are saying about ...

Crazy Love

"Chan writes with infectious exuberance, challenging Christians to take the Bible seriously. He describes at length the sorry state of 'lukewarm' Christians who strive for a life characterized by control, safety, and an absence of suffering. In stark contrast, the book offers real-life accounts of believers who have given all—time, money, health, even their lives—in obedience to Christ's call. Chan also recounts his own attempts to live 'crazy' by significantly downsizing his home and giving away his resources to the poor. Earnest Christians will find valuable take-home lessons from Chan's excellent book."

Publishers Weekly

"In Francis Chan's unique style, and with an urgency that seeks to awaken a sleeping church mired in the comfort of middle ground, *Crazy Love* quickly gets to the heart of the matter and leaves you wanting more ... more of the matchless Jesus who offers radical life for all right now."

Louie Giglio, visionary architect, director of Passion Conferences, and author of *I Am Not*, *but I Know I AM*

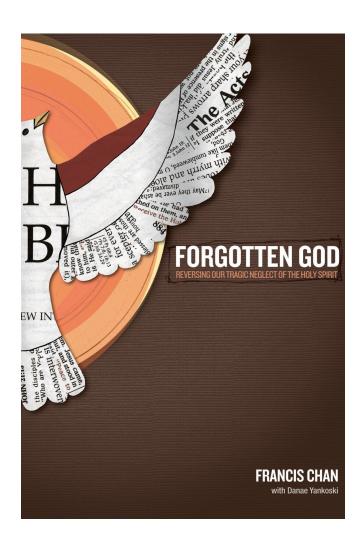
"Francis's life reflects authentic leadership tempered by a deep compassion for the lost, the last, the littlest, and the least. It's all because this man, my friend, is an ardent and devoted disciple of his Savior. In his fresh new book, *Crazy Love*, Francis peels back what we *think* the Christian life is,

and guides us down the path toward an uncommon intimacy with Jesus—an intimacy which can't help but change the world around us!"

Joni Eareckson Tada, best-selling author and speaker

"In an age of religious phonies, spiritual apathy, and disheartening books suggesting that God is a delusion, *Crazy Love* shines like a glorious beacon of hope and light. If you're stuck in a religious rut, read this refreshing book. I found it eye-opening and soul-thrilling. Whether in the pulpit or on the page, Francis Chan effuses love for Jesus Christ and demonstrates practical ways to throw off lukewarm Christianity and embrace full-on, passionate love for God."

Kirk Cameron, actor and author of *Still Growing*





FRANCIS CHAN with Danae Yankoski



To Rachel,

My daughter and friend:

You have no idea how happy I am to see the Spirit alive in you. Let's follow Him together, forever.

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INTRODUCTION

You might think that calling the Holy Spirit the "forgotten God" is a bit extreme. Maybe you agree that the church has focused too much attention elsewhere but feel it is an exaggeration to say we have *forgotten* about the Spirit. I don't think so.

From my perspective, the Holy Spirit is tragically neglected and, for all practical purposes, forgotten. While no evangelical would deny His existence, I'm willing to bet there are millions of churchgoers across America who cannot confidently say they have experienced His presence or action in their lives over the past year. And many of them do not believe they can.

The benchmark of success in church services has become more about attendance than the movement of the Holy Spirit. The "entertainment" model of church was largely adopted in the 1980s and '90s, and while it alleviated some of our boredom for a couple of hours a week, it filled our churches with self-focused consumers rather than self-sacrificing servants attuned to the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps we're too familiar and comfortable with the current state of the church to feel the weight of the problem. But what if you grew up on a desert island with nothing but the Bible to read? Imagine being rescued after twenty years and then attending a typical evangelical church. Chances are you'd be shocked (for a whole lot of reasons, but that is another story). Having read the Scriptures outside the context of contemporary church culture, you would be convinced that the Holy Spirit is as essential to a believer's existence as air is to staying alive. You would know that the Spirit led the first Christians to do unexplainable things, to live lives that

didn't make sense to the culture around them, and ultimately to spread the story of God's grace around the world.

There is a big gap between what we read in Scripture about the Holy Spirit and how most believers and churches operate today. In many modern churches, you would be stunned by the apparent absence of the Spirit in any manifest way. And this, I believe, is the crux of the problem.

If I were Satan and my ultimate goal was to thwart God's kingdom and purposes, one of my main strategies would be to get churchgoers to ignore the Holy Spirit. The degree to which this has happened (and I would argue that it is a prolific disease in the body of Christ) is directly connected to the dissatisfaction most of us feel with and in the church. We understand something very important is missing. The feeling is so strong that some have run away from the church and God's Word completely.

I believe that this missing *something* is actually a missing *Someone*—namely, the Holy Spirit. Without Him, people operate in their own strength and only accomplish human-size results. The world is not moved by love or actions that are of human creation. And the church is not empowered to live differently from any other gathering of people without the Holy Spirit. But when believers live in the power of the Spirit, the evidence in their lives is supernatural. The church cannot help but be different, and the world cannot help but notice.

As I wrote this book, the question that kept burning in my mind was how can any human being write well on the sacred topic of the Holy Spirit of God? No subject intimidates me more, yet I can't think of anything more essential for God's church everywhere, and especially in the western hemisphere where it seems that the Holy Spirit is all but missing from most

of our churches. I am most definitely writing from a western context, and I know that the body of Christ is vibrant and growing and the Holy Spirit active on continents like Africa, South America, and Asia. I also know that God works uniquely in various places and times, and I do think this explains part of the difference between here and there. However, I also believe that the Spirit is more obviously active in places where people are desperate for Him, humbled before Him, and not distracted by their pursuit of wealth or comforts (like we are).

The light of the American church is flickering and nearly extinguished, having largely sold out to the kingdoms and values of this world. While most people see that there is a problem, few do anything about it, and most of those who do, run toward the wrong solutions. Instead of speaking meaningfully and insightfully into the culture, we have capitulated and in many cases look no different from the world. I'm not sure if it is a calling or a sense of pure urgency that leads me to write this. Maybe both. The fact is, I don't have the "right" to write this book, but I believe it is a book that needs to be written, so I have written it, trusting that God will use it for His glory.

The Holy Spirit is absolutely vital to our situation today. Of course, He is always vital; but perhaps especially now. After all, if the Holy Spirit moves, nothing can stop Him. If He doesn't move, we will not produce genuine fruit—no matter how much effort or money we expend. The church becomes irrelevant when it becomes purely a human creation. We are not all we were made to be when everything in our lives and churches can be explained apart from the work and presence of the Spirit of God.

Perhaps it's not theology we're missing, but rather theological *integrity*. Many have the knowledge but lack the courage to admit the discrepancy between what we know and how we live. Hundreds of scholarly theological books have been written on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of the Trinity, et cetera. This book is not one of those. *Obvious*, *neglected*, and *crucial* are the adjectives I would use to describe the truths I will present.

In the following chapters, I will explore the fundamental knowledge most of us have about the Holy Spirit. We will delve into some key Scriptures about the Holy Spirit and look at our own abuses, misconceptions, and even fears of Him. By journeying honestly, I hope we can go beyond our current understanding of the Holy Spirit and begin to commune openly ... that our experience with Him would be day by day, even moment by moment. That by keeping in step with the Spirit, we might regularly fellowship over what He's *doing* rather than what He *did* months or years ago. We'll be reminded of the strength and wisdom available to us in the Spirit and earnestly pray for more. As we trust in the promises of the Spirit, we will be led away from discouragement and into lives marked by confidence, power in the midst of our weakness, and the fruit of the Spirit.

My prayer is that your changed life would produce this kind of astonishment: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were *astonished*. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

Reading this book probably won't be easy. No matter what religious tradition you come from, you likely carry baggage and harbor stereotypes when it comes to the Holy Spirit. It's going to require laying aside your

baggage and stereotypes so you can be open to what God wants to teach you. Are you willing to do that?

Some of you hear the term *Holy Spirit* and automatically worry that I am going to get wildly charismatic on you. Others think of extreme conservatives who never acknowledge the Holy Spirit in word or deed and hope I'm not going there. There are a lot of stereotypes (some of which are true) and a lot of abuses, and they don't come from just one side of this issue.

Some people talk a lot about—even boast of—the Spirit, but their lives do not bear His fruit. Others speak of the Holy Spirit in theoretical or scholarly terms, yet do not experience Him at work. Still others ignore Him for all practical purposes and, as you might expect, rarely experience relationship or intimacy with the Spirit. And then there is that rare person who *doesn't* talk frequently about the Spirit, yet whose life is a powerful display of His presence and activity.

Some of you would like it if I said we were going to find a healthy balance between unhealthy extremes. That's not what we're going to do. When we are referring to God, balance is a huge mistake. God is not just one thing we add to the mix called life. He wants an invitation from us to permeate everything and every part of us. In the same way, seeking a "healthy balance" of the Holy Spirit assumes that there are some who have too much Holy Spirit and others who have too little. I have yet to meet *anyone* with too much Holy Spirit. Granted, I've met many who talk about Him too much, but none who are actually overfilled with His presence.

Is it possible to get enough or even too much God? Is there a point when a person can be satisfied with the amount of intimacy, knowledge, and power of God he or she experiences? I don't see how there can be, because doesn't every encounter with God only cause us to thirst for Him more?

Let me be clear. This is not a call to misinformed extremism, but an acknowledgment that as believers we can never be "done" with God. He is infinite and we are finite; there will always be more of His character to discover, more of His love to experience, and more of His power to use for His purposes.

I can't say exactly what will happen when you admit that you can never fully know or experience enough of the Holy Spirit yet choose to seek Him regardless. I know only that when you surrender fully to the Spirit, Christ will be magnified, not you (John 16:14).

And perhaps the core issue is really about our holding back from giving ourselves to God, rather than our getting "too much" of Him. Perhaps when a person says, "I'd just like a little God, thank you very much," she or he is really saying, "I'd rather not give the parts of my life that I really care about over to God, so I'll just hold on to this, that, oh, and that, too…."

It doesn't work that way. When I read Scripture, I see the truth and necessity of a life wholly surrendered to and dependent upon the Holy Spirit.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that his words were not "wise and persuasive" but rather a "demonstration of the Spirit's power" in order that their faith "might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Cor. 2:4–5 NIV). Later in the same letter he reiterates that "the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power" (4:20 NIV).

In most churches today I hear a lot of talk and the facade of human wisdom, but I don't see much of God's presence and power. Do you?

I am tired of merely talking about God. I want to see God move through me, through Cornerstone Church, and through the worldwide body of Christ. I know there's more. We all know there's more. That's why I wrote this book—to explore with you how God has called us to more, through the presence and strength of the Holy Spirit.

I refuse to live the remainder of my life where I am right now, stagnating at this point. Don't get me wrong: God has already done so much in my life, and I am grateful for it. I'm just convinced there's more. There's more of the Spirit and more of God than any of us is experiencing. I want to go there —not just intellectually, but in life, with everything that I am.

As we begin this book, may our desire to experience more of the Holy Spirit be our starting point. And may we open our hearts and lives to His presence and action more fully than we have ever done before. By the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, may we be different people when we finish from when we started.

ABOUT THE COVER

My friend Jim, who serves as one of the worship pastors at Cornerstone Church, designed the cover of this book after a message I gave about the difference between *exegesis* and *eisegesis*. It was one of the first lessons I learned in seminary.

Exegesis: an attempt to discover the meaning of the text objectively, starting with the text and moving out from there.

Eisegesis: to import a subjective, preconceived meaning into the text.

I was taught to interpret the Scriptures through exegesis alone. Start with God's Word; pray that the Spirit gives you clarity; then study to see what the text actually says. The Holy Spirit inspired the writing of the Bible, so who better to help us as we seek to understand it? Scripture tells us that the Spirit not only inspired the Bible, but also illumines it for us today (1 Cor. 2:12–16 and 2 Tim. 3:16).

The word *exegesis* comes from a Greek word meaning "to lead out." As I have said, you start with the text and draw out its meaning. Eisegesis, on the other hand, is when you start with an idea or conviction, then search for verses in the Bible to prove your point. I was warned against eisegesis, and rightly so. The danger in this is that we can take verses out of context to support just about any point of view. For years people have used this style of interpretation in order to justify greed, lust, divorce, and countless other sins. Cults also use eisegesis to justify their beliefs. After realizing this, we at Cornerstone began to question whether there were any areas in our lives where we did essentially the same thing.

The bottom line is that we can easily pursue just about any lifestyle we desire, then find Scriptures to show everyone it's all right to live that way.

But what would it look like to live *exegetically?* If we were to start with Scripture and allow it to dictate our actions, how would we live?

I believe many people have an eisegetically formed concept of the Holy Spirit. In essence, we have cut and pasted whatever verses and ideas work for us; this forms our understanding of the Holy Spirit. The last thing I want to do is cut and paste a little more by giving you *my* "version" of the Holy Spirit. In this book, I endeavor to present the core truths that have been revealed to believers about the Holy Spirit—the things a Spirit-filled believer would conclude if he or she started with the Scriptures and proceeded from there.



I've Got Jesus. Why Do I Need the Spirit?

We may as well face it: the whole level of spirituality among us is low. We have measured ourselves by ourselves until the incentive to seek higher plateaus in the things of the Spirit is all but gone.... [We] have imitated the world, sought popular favor, manufactured delights to substitute for the joy of the Lord and produced a cheap and synthetic power to substitute for the power of the Holy Ghost.

-A. W. Tozer-

I am convinced there is a desperate need in the church for the Holy Spirit of God to be given room to have His way. I think we can agree that there is a problem in our churches, that something is wrong. But I don't think we can reach an agreement on what to do about it. Most people do not connect what is missing or wrong with a particular need for the Holy Spirit.

A while back, our lack of openness to examining ourselves—especially in the area of the Holy Spirit—really hit me. Two Jehovah's Witnesses knocked on my door and initiated conversation. I had a lot to do, so I prepared to send them on their way. But as they began their spiel, I decided to take a few minutes and engage them. I gently told them that I found their teachings about Jesus offensive because they taught that Jesus was the same person as Michael the archangel. I told them that I believe He is much more

than one among many angels; that I believe He is God. My visitors replied, "No, Jesus/Michael is the *only* archangel. There are no other archangels." So I asked them to open their Bibles to Daniel 10:13, which reads, "But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, *one of* the chief princes, came to help me" (NIV). I pointed out that this passage is clear: Michael is only "one of" the chief princes (or archangels).

This caught them off guard. They told me they'd never heard or read this before. Now that I had their attention, I said, "There's no way you can look me in the eyes and tell me that you sat down one day seeking to find God, read the Bible, and came to the conclusion that Jesus is the same person as Michael the archangel. No one could come to that conclusion. You only believe it because that's what you were told, and I don't want to stand here and spoon-feed you something else." With that, I challenged them to read the Bible for themselves, rather than simply accept what they've been told about it. They went away that day and said they would consider doing that.

I left that conversation feeling a bit proud of myself because I stumped them and got them to question their beliefs. Yet I couldn't help but wonder whether I was fair to them. Had *I* ever sat down with the Bible and sought after its self-evident truth? Or had I passively ingested what I heard from other people, much like my front-door visitors?

It was then that I began reading the Scriptures as though I had never read them before. I asked the Spirit to make them "living and active" to me, though I'd been reading them for years. I asked God to "penetrate" the wrong and ill-conceived notions I'd collected along the way (Heb. 4:12 NIV). It's a great exercise for those of us who have been immersed in church culture for years.

There are, of course, dangers in this, since the Bible is meant to be interpreted within the context and accountability of faithful community. Yet even with that qualification, there is still a need for those of us nestled deep within the Christian bubble to look beyond the status quo and critically assess the degree to which we are really living biblically.

Most of us assume that what we believe is right (of course we do—it is why we believe what we believe) but have never really studied for ourselves. We were simply told, "This is the way it is," and didn't question. The problem is much of what we believe is often based more on comfort or our culture's tradition than on the Bible.

I believe we need to reexamine our faith just as much as the Jehovah's Witnesses who came to my door need to reconsider theirs. Remember, the Bereans were lifted up as good examples because they questioned the things they were taught. They made sure that even the apostles' teachings were in line with what was written: "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 NIV).

One of the areas we desperately need to examine is how we think about and relate to the Holy Spirit. As I said previously, if you or I had never been to a church and had read only the Old and New Testaments, we would have significant expectations of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Think about it. Upon foretelling His death, Jesus comforts the disciples by telling them that "another Counselor" is coming (John 14:16 NIV). In John 16:7 He goes so far as to say it is to their *advantage* that He leave so the Counselor can come. And in Acts 1:4–5, after His death and

resurrection, He tells His disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. (The disciples obey because that's what people do when someone rises from the dead and gives instructions.) Jesus' disciples had no idea what or whom they were waiting for, or what it would be like. But they were expectant and trusting because Jesus had instructed them to wait for this good gift.

Then in Acts 2, we see the fulfillment of this promise in a way that must have shocked the disciples. The Holy Spirit's power is unleashed like no one had ever seen or experienced before, and Peter shares the amazing promise that this Holy Spirit is available to anyone who believes. The Epistles tell us of the Holy Spirit's amazing power at work in us, our Spiritenabled ability to put our sin to death through Him, and the supernatural gifts He gives us.

If we read and believed these accounts, we would expect a great deal of the Holy Spirit. He would not be a mostly forgotten member of the Godhead whom we occasionally give a nod of recognition to, which is what He has become in most American churches. We would expect our new life with the Holy Spirit to look radically different from our old life without Him.

Yet this is not the way it is for most people. We don't live this way. For some reason, we don't think we need the Holy Spirit. We don't expect the Holy Spirit to act. Or if we do, our expectations are often misguided or self-serving. Given our talent set, experience, and education, many of us are fairly capable of living rather successfully (according to the world's standards) without any strength from the Holy Spirit.

Even our church growth can happen without Him. Let's be honest: If you combine a charismatic speaker, a talented worship band, and some hip,

creative events, people will attend your church. Yet this does not mean that the Holy Spirit of God is actively working and moving in the lives of the people who are coming. It simply means that you have created a space that is appealing enough to draw people in for an hour or two on Sunday.

It certainly does not mean that people walk out the doors moved to worship and in awe of God. People are more likely to describe the quality of the music or the appeal of the sermon than the One who is the reason people gather for "church" in the first place.

.....

I think the worst part is when you get outside the church's walls and interact with believers and nonbelievers in the same sphere. Can you really tell a difference? If you didn't recognize their faces from church, would you know from their actions and lifestyle that they were followers of Jesus? Honestly, sometimes I am embarrassed by some of my "Christian" neighbors because my unbelieving neighbors seem *more* joyful, welcoming, and at peace. Why does this happen? And how is it even possible?

Romans 8:9 says, "You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you." According to this verse, if I am a believer, the Spirit of God dwells in me. Paul reiterates that truth in 1 Corinthians 6:19–20: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price" (NIV). Our bodies are the Spirit's temple. Later we will delve more into what that means for us; but essentially, it's that the Holy Spirit makes His home in our bodies. We are His place of dwelling.

And this is the question I just can't get around: If it's true that the Spirit of God dwells in us and that our bodies are the Holy Spirit's temple, then

shouldn't there be a huge difference between the person who has the Spirit of God living inside of him or her and the person who does not?

This may be a silly illustration, but if I told you I had an encounter with God where He entered my body and gave me a supernatural ability to play basketball, wouldn't you expect to see an amazing improvement in my jump shot, my defense, and my speed on the court? After all, this is God we're talking about. And if you saw no change in my athleticism, wouldn't you question the validity of my "encounter"?

Churchgoers all across the nation say the Holy Spirit has entered them. They claim that God has given them a supernatural ability to follow Christ, put their sin to death, and serve the church. *Christians* talk about being *born again* and say that they were *dead* but now have come *to life*. We have become hardened to those words, but they are powerful words that have significant meaning. Yet when those outside the church see no difference in our lives, they begin to question our integrity, our sanity, or even worse, our God. And can you blame them?

It reminds me of James's frustration when he writes about freshwater springs producing saltwater. You can almost hear his incredulity as he writes, "Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?" (James 3:11). What he's saying is that so-called Christians were doing something that should've been impossible—and this kind of doing the impossible is not a good thing!

He laments, "My brothers, these things ought to not be so" (James 3:10). I echo James's exhortation to those of us in the church today: My brothers and sisters who have received the Holy Spirit, we often lack love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc., even while many of our unbelieving friends exhibit these traits—brothers and sisters, these things ought not to be so!

Just as I advised my Jehovah's Witnesses visitors, we need to begin afresh by reexamining our preconceived ideas about the Holy Spirit and what it means to be a temple of the Spirit. There is much more to God and following in the Way of Jesus than getting a bunch of talented people together to hold a church service.

When Jesus was preparing to leave this earth, He comforted His disciples, telling them not to worry but instead to trust in Him (John 14:1). Hadn't He proven Himself faithful the past years that they had journeyed together? First, He comforted them by telling them that the separation would be only temporary and that He was going to "prepare a place" for them (14:2–3 NIV). Second, He told them that He was going to be with God the Father, and that even from there He could hear their prayers (14:12–14). Finally, Jesus gave the disciples the ultimate reassurance: Another Comforter would come. Jesus said that the Father would give the disciples "another Counselor to be with [them] forever" (14:16 NIV). In this case, the Greek word *another* means another that is just like the first (as opposed to another that is of a different sort or kind). So Jesus was saying that the One who would come would be just like Him!

Have you ever thought about the significance of having "another" Counselor who is "just like" Christ? Right now, imagine what it would be like to have Christ standing beside you in the flesh, functioning as your personal Counselor. Imagine the peace that would come from knowing you would always receive perfect truth and flawless direction from Him. That sounds amazing, and none of us could deny the benefit of having Jesus here physically, guiding and enabling us every step of the way.

Yet why do we assume that this would be any better than the literal presence of the Holy Spirit? Those of us who believe in Jesus would never

deny the truth that we have the Spirit of the living God, the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead, living inside of us. I'm just not convinced we've internalized this truth and enjoyed His blessings as He intends. It seems like this is mostly head knowledge to us, and that we have not owned it. It has not really made much of a difference in our lives, to the degree that if we woke up tomorrow and discovered that it is not true the Holy Spirit lives inside of us, most likely our lives wouldn't look much different.

Jesus Himself said to His disciples, "It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7 NIV). So Jesus is basically telling His disciples, "Yes, I was with you for three and a half years, but it is better that I leave you and the Holy Spirit comes to you."

When the disciples heard that two thousand years ago, I'm sure it was hard for them to grasp. How could it be better to trade a human Jesus—a man they could talk and eat and laugh with—for a Spirit they couldn't physically see? Thousands of years later, I think most of us would also choose a physical Jesus over an invisible Spirit. But what do we do with the fact that Jesus says it is better for His followers to have the Holy Spirit? Do we believe Him? If so, do our lives reflect that belief?

My hunch is that most of you reading this book have basic knowledge *about* the Holy Spirit; but when it comes to experiencing the Spirit in your life, it's a different story. Take a moment and ask yourself this question: When was the last time I undeniably saw the Spirit at work in or around me? If it was recently, consider taking a few minutes to reflect on what the Spirit of God did and how you saw Him at work. Thank God for His active

presence in your life, and praise Him for the way He is leading you even now.

If you are having trouble recounting a time when the Spirit was at work in or around you, perhaps that is because you have been ignoring the Spirit. Perhaps it is because you have a lot of head knowledge about the Spirit, but not much of a relationship with Him.

The reality is that the early church knew less about the Holy Spirit than most of us in the church today, at least in the intellectual sense. But they came to know the Spirit intimately and powerfully as He worked in and through their lives. All throughout the New Testament, we read of the apostles whose lives were led by the Spirit and lived out by His power.

The goal of this book is not to completely explain the Spirit or to go back to the apostolic age. The goal is to learn to live faithfully today. First of all, it is impossible for us as finite humans to completely understand an infinite God. Second, many of us don't need more knowledge about the Spirit from a cerebral vantage point—what we need is experiential knowledge of His presence. And third, we can never "go back," only forward, seeking what it means to live faithfully in the time and culture where God has placed us.

So while hopefully you will learn something new about the Holy Spirit in this book, my prayer is that it will draw you into deeper communion with the Spirit and greater experience of His power and presence in your life.

Years ago, when a random thought came into my head, I decided to share it with my wife. "Have you ever wondered what caterpillars think about?" I asked.

Not surprisingly, she said, "No."

I then proceeded to tell her about the confusion I imagined a caterpillar must experience. For all its caterpillar life, it crawls around a small patch of dirt and up and down a few plants. Then one day it takes a nap. A long nap. And then, what in the world must go through its head when it wakes up to discover it can *fly?* What happened to its dirty, plump little worm body? What does it think when it sees its tiny new body and gorgeous wings?

As believers, we ought to experience this same kind of astonishment when the Holy Spirit enters our bodies. We should be stunned in disbelief over becoming a "new creation" with the Spirit living in us. As the caterpillar finds its new ability to fly, we should be thrilled over our Spirit-empowered ability to live differently and faithfully. Isn't this what the Scriptures speak of? Isn't this what we've all been longing for?

It really is an astounding truth that the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you. He lives in me. I do not know what the Spirit will do or where He'll lead me each time I invite Him to guide me. But I am tired of living in a way that looks exactly like people who do not have the Holy Spirit of God living in them. I want to consistently live with an awareness of His strength. I want to be different today from what I was yesterday as the fruit of the Spirit becomes more manifest in me.

I want to live so that I am truly submitted to the Spirit's leading on a daily basis. Christ said it is better for us that the Spirit came, and I want to live like I know that is true. I don't want to keep crawling when I have the ability to fly.

Recently I was asked, "Who is the most Spirit-filled person you know?" My response: Joni Eareckson Tada.

A 1967 diving accident left then-seventeen-year-old Joni a quadriplegic. Lying in a hospital bed, she was filled with an overwhelming desire to end her life. The thought of spending the rest of her years paralyzed from the neck down and relying on others to care for her basic needs was staggering.

But Joni did not end her life that day. Instead, she chose to surrender it to God. Little did she know that the Spirit of God would transform her into one of the godliest women ever to grace this earth. God gave her a humility and a love that enables her to look beyond her own pain and to see others' hurts. She is a person who consistently "in humility count[s] others more significant" than herself (an embodiment of Philippians 2:3).

I don't even know where to begin with all that she has done. While undergoing two years of rehabilitation after the accident, she spent many hours learning to paint with a brush held between her teeth. Her detailed paintings and prints are now highly sought after. Her international best-selling autobiography, *Joni*, was later made into a full-length feature film. She founded Joni and Friends in 1979 to increase Christian ministry to the disabled community throughout the world. The organization led to the establishment in 2007 of the Joni and Friends International Disability Center, which currently impacts thousands of families around the globe.

Over the course of each week, more than a million people listen to her daily five-minute radio program, *Joni and Friends*. The organization she started serves hundreds of special-needs families through family retreats

across the nation. Through Wheels for the World, wheelchairs are collected nationwide, refurbished by inmates in several correctional facilities, and then shipped and donated to developing nations where, whenever possible, physical therapists fit each chair to a disabled child or adult who is in need. As of 2008, Wheels for the World had cumulatively distributed 52,342 wheelchairs to 102 countries and trained hundreds of ministry and community leaders, including people with disabilities.

In 2005, Joni Eareckson Tada was appointed to the Disability Advisory Committee of the U.S. State Department. She has worked with Dr. Condoleezza Rice on programs affecting disabled persons in the State Department and around the world. Joni has appeared twice on *Larry King Live*, sharing not only her Christian testimony but a biblical perspective on right-to-life issues that affect our nation's disabled population. And on top of all that, Joni has written more than thirty-five books.

Yet it is not because of these accomplishments that I consider her the most Spirit-filled person I know. Actually, it has nothing to do with all she's accomplished. It has to do with the fact that you can't spend ten minutes with Joni before she breaks out in song, quotes Scripture, or shares a touching and timely word of encouragement. I have never seen the fruit of the Spirit more obviously displayed in a person's life as when I am with Joni. I can't seem to have a conversation with Joni without shedding tears. It's because Joni is a person whose life, at every level, gives evidence of the Spirit's work in and through her. 1



What Are You Afraid Of?

The Lord challenges us to suffer persecutions and to confess him. He wants those who belong to him to be brave and fearless. He himself shows how weakness of the flesh is overcome by courage of the Spirit. This is the testimony of the apostles and in particular of the representative, administrating Spirit. A Christian is fearless.

-Tertullian-

Fear of rejection has paralyzed me more than once. God has answered my prayers for greater boldness, but I would be dishonest if I did not admit there are still times when I worry about how others view me. Even as I write this book, I wonder how friends will respond and how I will be labeled or even misunderstood.

Maybe caring too much about what other people think is not something you deal with personally; if so, then I am glad for it, but there is probably something else you fear. For many people, however, caring too much about what others think can be a serious, even a driving, fear.

Whole denominations have been built around specific beliefs about the Holy Spirit. I know people who have lost jobs at churches and Christian colleges because of their beliefs about the Holy Spirit. I even had a girl break up with me while I was in seminary because we believed differently about Him! It is not one of those issues that is easy to float over. This is especially true if you belong to a particular "camp" with a specific belief or

bent; it is certainly natural to fear rejection from those in your camp if you change your views.

Though this fear is natural, it's not right. We are called to pattern our lives after the Way described in the Bible. We are not called to fear what following the Way of Jesus may require of us, but that doesn't mean those fears won't crop up. A life of following Christ requires relinquishing those fears when they do come. It means refusing to let your fears of what others think, your fears of rejection, keep you from pursuing the truth about the Holy Spirit and whatever else God is teaching you and calling you to.

Are you willing to pursue truth in your journey to know and be known by the Holy Spirit? Do you have enough humility to be open to the possibility that you have been wrong in your understanding of the Spirit? It's easy to get into "defensive mode," where you quickly disagree and turn to proof texts and learned arguments to defend what you've always believed. Rather than guarding your perspective, consider taking a fresh look at familiar passages to make sure you haven't missed something. You may end up with the same theology you've always had, but maybe you won't. Don't let your views be determined by a particular denomination or by what you've always been told. Within the context of relationship with other believers, seek out what God has said about His Spirit. Open up your mind and your life to the leading of the Spirit, regardless of what others may think or assume about you.

Fear has a way of channeling our thought process. Fear of stepping outside of a certain theological framework causes us to be biased in our interpretations. We work diligently to "prove" that our presuppositions were correct (another example of eisegesis) rather than simply and honestly pursuing truth.

What If God Doesn't Come Through?

Before we delve further into this conversation about the Spirit, I believe some other fears need to be identified and dealt with. One concern I've often heard (and felt) is, what if I pray for the Holy Spirit and nothing happens? What if I ask for more of the Spirit's fruit in my life and don't see any apparent "results"? It's scary to pray boldly for change or freedom from sin, because if nothing happens, then doesn't that mean God failed? Doesn't that mean His Spirit isn't all we've been told He is?

I think the fear of God failing us leads us to "cover for God." This means we ask for less, expect less, and are satisfied with less because we are afraid to ask for or expect more. We even convince ourselves that we don't *want* more—that we have all the "God" we need or could want. I can't imagine how much it pains God to see His children hold back from relationship with the Holy Spirit out of fear that He won't come through. How much it grieves Him to watch His children ignore the promises He's made throughout Scripture due to fear that those promises won't be kept! Empowering His children with the strength of the Holy Spirit is something the Father wants to do. It's not something we have to talk Him into. He genuinely wants to see us walk in His strength.

When Jesus was on earth, He said to His disciples, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13). God is a good Father who *wants* to give good gifts to His children. Sometimes I forget this truth and beg as though He needs convincing. It's as ridiculous as if my kids thought they needed to beg me to hug them. It delights my heart to hug them.

Do you believe that God in heaven gives His Spirit to those who ask? Do you *really* believe it? This truth and what it means is so incredible that no one who actually believes it could then fail to ask for the Holy Spirit.

In Acts, after Jesus has been resurrected and ascended to heaven, Peter addressed a crowd and declared, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2:38). We've already seen that God promises to give His Spirit to those who ask. Here we see that we receive the Holy Spirit when we begin to follow Christ.

All this leads to a question we cannot escape: Does God really give the Holy Spirit to those who ask, or was Jesus lying when He said that? I have found that it comes down to faith: Do you believe God keeps His promises or not? Do your prayers and actions give evidence of your belief?

So God has promised to give us His Spirit if we ask, if we repent and are baptized, and it comes down to whether we believe Him and act upon that promise. I realize that some of you reading this book have asked the Holy Spirit to do something and have not experienced the results you anticipated. Now you fear asking again because it would weaken your faith if God "fails to act" again. I've heard many people question God for not responding when they prayed in faith. I don't doubt that these people prayed in faith, but the question is whether they prayed for things God has promised. Often, it's the un-promised requests that God answers with a no.

There is a huge difference between believing what God has promised and praying for things you'd like to be true. I encourage you to pray confidently for what God has promised. Don't put your hope in what others promise or what you've been told you'll "get" if you are a "good Christian" (e.g., a good job, financial success, the perfect spouse, healthy children, a big

house, etc.). And ultimately, you need to stake your faith in God alone, not in the gifts (good as they may be) that He gives. It really comes down to trust. Do you trust God that when He says no or "not in this way" to you, you still believe He is good and doing what is best?

Do I Even Want This?

The flip side of fearing that God won't show up is fearing that He *will*. What if God does show up but then asks you to go somewhere or do something that's uncomfortable? For many people, fearing that God will ask them to go in a difficult, undesirable direction outweighs the fear that God will ignore them.

A few years ago, I asked one of my friends if he genuinely wanted to know God's will—no matter what God desired to do through him. His answer was honest: "No, that would freak me out." He then admitted that he would rather not know everything God wants him to do. That way in the end he could say, "I had no idea You wanted me to do all of those things." I appreciate my friend's willingness to say what many secretly think and feel about total surrender to God. It's honest, more honest than most people are willing to be.

If you can relate to my friend, then at least you take God at His Word and believe the Spirit is meant to dwell in and guide our lives. When it comes down to it, many of us do not really want to be led by the Holy Spirit. Or, more fundamentally, many of us don't want to be led by anyone other than ourselves. The whole idea of giving up control (or the delusion of it) is terrifying, isn't it? Do you thrive on controlling the big and small in your life? Does the thought of letting go and listening to the Spirit's guidance scare you and only make you cling tighter to what you think you have?

The truth is that the Spirit of the living God is guaranteed to ask you to go somewhere or do something you wouldn't normally want or choose to do. The Spirit will lead you to the way of the cross, as He led Jesus to the cross, and that is definitely not a safe or pretty or comfortable place to be. The Holy Spirit of God will mold you into the person you were made to be. This often incredibly painful process strips you of selfishness, pride, and fear. For a powerful example of this, read in C. S. Lewis's book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* about the boy, Eustace, who becomes a dragon. In order to become a little boy again, he must undergo a tremendous amount of pain as the dragon skin is peeled away and torn from him. Only after he endures this painful process is he truly transformed from a dragon back into a boy.

Sometimes the sin we take on becomes such a part of us that it requires this same kind of ripping and tearing to free us. The Holy Spirit does not seek to hurt us, but He does seek to make us Christlike, and this can be painful.

So, if you say you want the Holy Spirit, you must first honestly ask yourself if you want to do His will. Because if you do not genuinely want to know and do His will, why should you ask for His presence at all? But if you decide you do want to know His will, there will be moments when you have to let go of the fear of what that might mean—when you have to release your grip of control on your life and decide to be led, come what may.

Is My Reputation in the Way?

I live in Southern California, where people care more about appearances than most of the rest of the United States combined. If you've lived in or even visited SoCal, you know exactly what I mean. Southern California is

the land of tanning beds, plastic surgeons, designer boutiques, three-hundred-dollar jeans, nail salons, expensive real estate, excessive shopping, and hot cars. I could keep going, but I won't. It is obvious that Southern Californians care a lot about their appearances.

While this preoccupation with appearance has been taken to extremes in SoCal, it is an issue that almost every American deals with. We care a lot about what other people think of us. Maybe in Texas or Oklahoma it's about what kind of football fan you are. In Colorado, it might be how outdoorsy you seem. And maybe in New England it is which college your children attend. Obviously, these are just silly stereotypes, but the point is that we Americans tend to care about what others think of us—to an unhealthy degree. And believers certainly are not exempt from this trend.

In much the same way, many believers care too much about appearances. Even those who move past the superficial and materialistic are often very concerned with their reputation in "spiritual matters." For example, if a friend sees you reading this book about the Holy Spirit, do you worry he or she will think you too "charismatic" or "radical"? If you share about the Holy Spirit's movement in your life, do you wonder what others will think about you? Are you afraid of getting "too much" of the Holy Spirit and the possible ramifications of that? (Heaven forbid you gain a reputation for being weird or immoderate!)

Or maybe you come from a background that would consider this book too conservative. Maybe some of the biblical boundaries I've outlined are ones that people in your church label "restrictive" for a Spirit-led person.

Regardless of your background, are you willing to set it aside and just respond to biblical truth? One question I've had to ask myself repeatedly is am I even *open* to the possibility that I could be wrong in my beliefs? If so,

would I have the courage to change my actions if I were shown that my interpretation of Scripture was faulty? At this point, we're all tempted to quickly respond with an "of course!" We want to believe that we are people who desire TRUTH even over relationship and acceptance. But the chances are that you care about people's opinions more than you're willing to admit.

Personally, I was raised in a very conservative church that almost totally ignored the Spirit's activity and presence in daily life. I was warned that I wouldn't feel a thing when the Holy Spirit came into me, and a hesitancy toward "taking things too far" in anything relating to the Spirit was deeply instilled in my thoughts and attitudes. After all, I didn't want to become like "them"—those people down the street who were hyped on emotions and ignored the Scriptures. I have met a lot of people with backgrounds like mine, and I've seen much damage done by choices made out of fear rather than truth. In short, we've kept the Spirit from breaking into our lives because of the fear of resembling "them."

And then there is the other side, where individuals are sometimes unwilling to listen to the warnings or checks of those "stiff and lifeless" conservatives. Perhaps you're so afraid people will think you are stifling the Holy Spirit that you won't consider examining your way of doing things—even when the Bible gives clear instructions to the contrary. Maybe you think that most conservatives are afraid of the Holy Spirit, and you fear becoming like "them."

Wherever we are at in this continuum, the point is that we need to base our understanding of and experience with the Holy Spirit on biblical truth and not on fear.

As disciples of Jesus, being in relationship with Him must be our focus. When we allow others' perceptions of us (or even our perceptions of their

perceptions!) to control how we live, we are enslaved. We become entrenched in the ways of this world and do not live as citizens of heaven, which is another kind of kingdom altogether. Though there is a sense in which this kingdom of God is still future (Zech. 14:9; Acts 1:6–7), there is also a sense in which it is here now (Matt. 6:10; 12:28). As citizens of this kingdom, we are called to live in a way that reflects the reality of the kingdom of God. When we become overly concerned about our appearance, our spiritual reputation, our coolness, and our acceptance, we are living as citizens of this world rather than as ambassadors.

This is not something that just goes away. It is an ever-present struggle to maintain your true allegiance. And that is really what it comes down to: Where does your allegiance lie? Do you care about what people think when they see you, or do you care about seeking the truth concerning the Spirit of God and then living in light of the truth, holding to those promises, and enjoying that relationship?

Good Fear (or At Least Legitimate Concerns)

Having said all this, I actually think there is a legitimate kind of fear. Maybe *fear* is not the best word to describe what I am talking about. Perhaps it would be better to call it an area that we need to check ourselves in.

I am talking about quenching the Holy Spirit. As I said earlier, I think that quite often we worry a lot more about how people will respond to us than we do about how the Holy Spirit of God will respond. We think about making our friends mad or not being accepted or being thought of as different or strange. But rarely (if ever) do we consider whether our actions

or lifestyle are grievous to the Spirit of the living God. When we put it that way, it seems more than a little ludicrous!

You're probably familiar with God's command in 1 Thessalonians 5:19, "Do not quench the Spirit." Are you concerned about breaking this command? Do you know what it means to quench the Spirit? For years I never gave it much thought. I didn't take the time to explore what this meant and how I could be guilty of this sin. Like most people, I just assumed I wasn't quenching the Spirit, and I moved on.

I look back now and realize I not only quenched the Spirit, but I also violated the next verse: "Do not treat prophecies with contempt" (1 Thess. 5:20 NIV). I had contempt toward anyone who claimed to have "a word from the Lord." I felt it was a righteous contempt because I'd seen people use the phrase "I have a word from the Lord" to manipulate others for personal gain. Cult leaders use the phrase to secure followers and increase their own authority. How can you disagree or even have a discussion with someone who claims they heard directly from God?

So I was against all of it. I was disturbed by any claim of prophetic speech. Looking back, I believe my concerns were valid but my actions were not. The biblical response would have been to "test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thess. 5:21–22 NIV). Rather than rejecting the possibility of God supernaturally speaking through people, I should have tested what I was hearing in the context of faithful community.

Another valid test for prophecy is the standard of edification. The purpose of prophecy is to encourage and build up the body of Christ. Like every other gift, if it is not done out of love, it is meaningless (1 Cor. 13:2, 8; 14:3, 31). This is a good antidote to my previous inclination to ignore all

prophetic speech. In doing that I was hindering the work of the Spirit, and I do not want to do so again.

On the flip side, if churches that practice prophetic utterances were quicker to reject the false prophets and prophecies by calling them out on their biblical inconsistencies ("avoiding evil"), then maybe the conservative world would be less skeptical about prophecy. If there was in place a healthy system of communal accountability and a commitment to biblical integrity, then maybe we would be slower to quench the Spirit in this regard. We would be quicker to "hold on to the good" instead of throwing out the good and the bad in one fell swoop.

Another important check is going too far with all this. No, I am not contradicting what I wrote previously. I don't mean "going too far" in the sense of getting too radical or passionate about the Holy Spirit. I mean "going too far" in the sense of stepping outside the bounds of biblical orthodoxy. I mean "going too far" in the sense of adding to the Scriptures or listening to distortions of the truth, supposedly from the Holy Spirit, and applying those to your life. This is why orthodox (as in "committed to exegetical living") and radical (as in "willing to do whatever and go wherever the Spirit leads, even if it doesn't make sense") community is vital to living lives that comply with the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Some conservatives may quench the Spirit by ignoring His working, but surely putting unbiblical words into the mouth of God is a form of quenching the Spirit as well. We need the Spirit in order to live faithfully. But we also need one another as we work out our faith.

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Take some time to consider what fears you have about the Holy Spirit. It may take a while to pinpoint exactly what your attitudes and responses

toward the Holy Spirit have been. Don't hide your fears. Admit them, first to yourself, and then to God (who knows all of them already yet desires to have us share our fears with Him). As you come to Him, be honest about how you fear disappointing people more than quenching His Spirit, or how you don't really trust Him to come through on His promises, or whatever else you may be feeling toward Him.

Finally, share this with people you trust, people you can have these sorts of conversations with. Allow the Spirit to continue His work of freeing you from unnecessary fear and inhibition or from unrestricted license. Surrender yourself and invite Him truly to dwell within you, whatever that may mean and wherever it may take you.

I know that by writing a book about the Holy Spirit, I will be labeled. The irony is that I don't even know how to label myself. I was saved in a Baptist church, attended a charismatic Bible study, went to a conservative seminary while working at seeker-driven churches, partnered with Pentecostal movements, and have spoken at a wide variety of denominational conferences.

I'm not even sure how to label my current church. All I know is that we definitely believe in the Holy Spirit and hope to experience more of Him every minute. When you get down to it, is there anything else we really need to know? Do we need to label one another "conservative" or "charismatic" or "radical"? What's the point in that? Let's focus on believing the promises given to us by God, on submitting to Him the fears that we have, and on surrendering ourselves fully to the work and will of God, the Holy Spirit.



He's a mechanic. She's a hairdresser. They have been foster parents to thirty-two children and have adopted sixteen. Domingo and Irene are in their late fifties and currently have eleven children living with them, and they tell me they would take more if they could. Anyone who has children knows they could be doing this only by the Spirit's power. Imagine the amount of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control it would take to pull this off.

Domingo and Irene take the command in James 1:27 (caring for orphans) more seriously than any other Americans I know. While other people their age are figuring out how to live most comfortably, they can't stop thinking of the 500,000 kids in America who need parents. And while they see these kids as a huge blessing, they are also very open about the hardships they face daily. Perseverance has been key, especially years ago when one of their adopted sons hung himself in their closet. While their days are filled with joy, there have also been many times when they persevered by sheer obedience.

God has provided for them over and over again. One time they needed to build an addition onto their house so that they could take in more children. They didn't have the money, so Irene prayed fervently. When she looked up from praying, the first thing she saw was a sign for a contractor. She immediately asked God, "Is he the answer to my prayer?" Days later, one of the leaders in their church heard about their need and offered to build the addition for free. And you guessed it—he was the same contractor whose name Irene had seen on the sign.

One of the wonderful blessings they have enjoyed is watching their biological children follow in their footsteps. One of their sons has two biological and two adopted kids. Another son has three biological and three adopted kids. They live such extraordinary lives that CBS news ran a story on them. Even the secular world notices the unusual and supernatural love these two have shown to those in need.

For those who may think that Domingo and Irene have always been as gracious as they are today, let me share some insight from their past (I have permission). Irene has shared publicly about the early days in their marriage and the hatred she felt toward Domingo. He was abusive, and she prayed regularly that he would die. She even daydreamed about him driving off a cliff because of the pain he inflicted on her. Now she calls him the godliest man she knows.

For anyone who thinks their own life or marriage is hopeless, remember Domingo and Irene. God loves to take people in the worst of situations and transform them by His Spirit.



Theology of the Holy Spirit 101

What does the Spirit do? His works are ineffable in majesty, and innumerable in quantity. How can we even ponder what extends beyond the ages? What did He do before creation began? How great are the graces He showered on creation? What power will He wield in the age to come? He existed; He pre-existed; He co-existed with the Father and the Son before the ages. Even if you can imagine anything beyond the ages, you will discover that the Spirit is even further beyond.

-St. Basil the Great-

Perhaps you wonder why I am talking about the theology of the Holy Spirit in this chapter. Aren't the most important aspects of life what you *do* and how you *live?* Does it really matter what you *think* about something?

These are legitimate questions.

What you do and how you live are absolutely vital. Without action and fruit, all the theology in the world has little meaning. But theology is still important—what you believe absolutely determines how you act. So while good theology at its best can lead us to live godly lives, bad theology will always point us in the wrong direction. When we study the Holy Spirit, bad theology can lead to ineffective lives or, worse yet, lives spent striving after what the Spirit of God opposes. So in this chapter we will ground our

understanding of the Holy Spirit by looking at some basic biblical statements about who He is and what He does.

When I was in seminary, I discovered a lot of scholars far more intelligent than I, many of whom spent years studying particular aspects of theology. I frequently read articles by brilliant individuals who expressed opposing views on various issues, and it was hard to decide what I really believed was right. Each side would have convincing arguments and well-made points (as I said, they were brilliant). When I would finish my study of one of these issues, I typically came away with a general bent toward a particular side but could rarely say I was sure beyond the shadow of a doubt. And I never made peace with the statement one professor made: "If you're fifty-one percent sure, preach it like you're one hundred percent." How is that not deception? If I'm only 90 percent sure, why not just say so?

While some of the debates and conversations that take place are peripheral and don't have to be definitively resolved in order for us to live a faithful life, many theological issues are not this way. Some theological issues are absolutely vital to our faith. These are the ones where what we believe determines how we act.

When it comes to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, I don't want to get caught up in abstract and nebulous distinctions. I want to focus on the theological issues that shape our faith and behavior.

As I thought about this chapter, I realized how ludicrous it would be for *anyone* to say they were going to explain the Holy Spirit. The Bible says we cannot fully understand God, and I am certainly not the exception to that rule. There are things about God that are mysterious and secret, things we

will never know about Him. But there also are things revealed, and those belong to us (Deut. 29:29).

In this chapter I am going to talk about some of the things that have been revealed about the Holy Spirit. I will talk about what He does in our lives and in the world and about what He is like. Keep in mind this is not an exhaustive study of the Holy Spirit. I will not cover every verse in the Bible that references the Holy Spirit because even if I did, the Spirit is infinite and cannot be known fully by humans.

Know that even as you seek to understand the Spirit more, He is so much more and bigger than you will ever be able to grasp. This is not an excuse to stop seeking to know Him, but don't limit Him to what you can learn about Him. The point is not to completely understand God but to worship Him. Let the very fact that you *cannot* know Him fully lead you to praise Him for His infiniteness and grandeur.

As we approach this conversation, let us not forget that we tread on holy ground. The Holy Spirit brought creation to life and continues to sustain it. As we read in the book of Job, "The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (33:4 NIV). I can keep writing only because He allows me to. You can keep reading only because He empowers and sustains you.

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I have heard the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit described like the three parts of an egg: the shell, the white stuff, and the yolk. I have also heard people say that God is like a three-leaf clover: three "arms," yet all are a part of the one clover stalk. Another popular comparison is to the three forms of H₂O (water, ice, and steam).

While these serve as cute metaphors for an unexplainable mystery, the fact is that God is not *like* an egg, a three-leaf clover, or the three forms of water. God is not *like* anything. He is incomprehensible, incomparable, and unlike any other being. He is outside our realm of existence and, thus, outside our ability to categorize Him. While analogies may be helpful in understanding certain aspects of Him, let's be careful not to think that our analogies in any way encapsulate His nature.

I love the verse in Isaiah that is typically seen as a Christmastime verse. It reads, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6). Right there in that oft-quoted verse we see the Son referred to as the "Counselor" and the "Father"! This passage (and many others) keeps us from oversimplifying a divine mystery. It is not easily broken down into three main points that just make sense, but it works. And it is beautiful. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are One.

As we begin studying basic truths of the Holy Spirit, we could begin as far back as Genesis, where we see that the Spirit was present and active in creation, and then trace His actions through the whole of the Old Testament. But we will start our overview in the book of Acts, when the Spirit descended and began to indwell the disciples. The first two verses in chapter 2 say that "they were all together in one place," and that all of a sudden, a sound came from heaven that was like "a mighty rushing wind." The text says it "filled the entire house where they were sitting."

Imagine this scene with me. Jesus Christ, the one you have spent the last three years following, the one you have dedicated your life to, just ascended to heaven. You saw it with your own eyes. You and the people who have become as close as your own family are all gathered in Jerusalem in someone's house, waiting. You know that something is coming because Jesus told you about it. He said to wait, but you don't know exactly what (or in this case, who) you are waiting for. Maybe you are getting tired of wondering how many more days before something (what, you have no idea) happens.

Suddenly, a sound fills the whole house. And then tongues of fire appear and come to rest on each person present. And then it happens. Verse four reads, "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit."

Now these are the same disciples who were dedicated to following Jesus no matter what, but who scattered as soon as Jesus was arrested. And here they were gathered together, no doubt confused about how they should proceed now that Jesus had ascended. Yet when the Holy Spirit descended and indwelt them, a radical change occurred. From that point on, none of these disciples was ever the same. The book of Acts is a testament to this fact. We read of Stephen, the first martyr. We see Peter, a changed, courageous man. We see Paul (formerly Saul) go from killing Christ followers to becoming one and showing many others how to do so too. They were no longer timid or confused; they were bold and inspired and began to declare and live the gospel of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. Think about what a huge moment this was in the lives of the disciples.

A multitude of people had gathered. Peter preached a powerful sermon, and when they heard his words, they were "cut to the heart" and asked how they should respond. Peter answered, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for

your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:38–39). The text says that on that day around three thousand people became part of God's kingdom and accepted the gift of the Holy Spirit.

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I think it's needless for us to debate about when the Holy Spirit becomes a part of someone's life. In my own life, was it when I first prayed as a little kid and believed I was speaking to Someone? Was it in junior high, when I raised my hand after hearing an evangelist who literally scared the hell out of me? Was it when I got baptized? Was it in high school, when I actually had a personal relationship with Jesus? Could it have been in college, when I came forward at a charismatic Bible study to "receive the Spirit"? Or was it later in life, when I chose to surrender my life fully to Jesus?

We can easily fall into the trap of fixating on these questions and miss the crux of Peter's message. When I was preaching through this passage at my church, my seven-year-old daughter, Mercy, understood. She came to me afterward and said, "Dad, I want to repent of my sins and be baptized and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." I loved the simplicity and greatness of her faith. She didn't need to debate the finer points of how and when, exactly, the Holy Spirit would come. She just wanted to obey the passage to the best of her ability. I realize Mercy doesn't have the biblical knowledge many of us do, but I wonder how many of us have the faith she has.

Is that your response to the Word? Is it clear to you that you're supposed to repent, be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit? If so, have you done it? If not, what keeps you from doing it today?

Why do we sometimes feel that we need to debate this endlessly, running through every possible hypothetical situation and answering every theological question first? When will we simply respond to the truth we have heard and then work through our questions from there?

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Now that we have a context for how the Spirit came to the first disciples and what we are told to do in response, we will shift the focus to some practical truths about who the Spirit is and what He does in our lives.

First, **the Holy Spirit is a Person.** He is not an indistinct "power" or "thing." I often hear people refer to the Spirit as an "it," as if the Spirit is a thing or force that we can control or use. This distinction may seem subtle or trivial, but it is actually a very serious misunderstanding of the Spirit and His role in our lives. In John 14:17, we read that the Spirit "dwells with you and will be in you." This calls us to relationship with the Spirit, instead of allowing us to think we can treat the Spirit as a power to be harnessed in order to accomplish our own purposes. The Holy Spirit is a Person who has personal relationships with not only believers, as we have seen, but also with the Father and the Son. We see the Spirit working in conjunction with the Father and the Son multiple times throughout the Scriptures (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14).

Second, **the Holy Spirit is God**. He is not a lesser or different kind of Being than God the Father or God the Son. The Spirit is God. The words *Spirit* and *God* are used interchangeably in the New Testament. In Acts we read of Peter's challenge to Ananias: "How is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ... What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God" (5:3–4 TNIV). In these verses we see that Peter explicitly refers to the Holy Spirit as

God. This is vital to remember. When we forget about the Spirit, we really are forgetting God.

Third, **the Holy Spirit is eternal and holy.** We read in the gospel of John about Jesus' promise to His disciples that the Spirit will be with them forever (14:16). And in Hebrews we read that it was through "the eternal Spirit" that Jesus "offered himself unblemished to God" (9:14 NIV). The Spirit is not just a flighty, whimsical spirit who comes and goes like the wind. He is an eternal being. The Spirit is also holy. Obviously, we commonly call Him the "Holy Spirit," and this is reinforced throughout the New Testament (Romans 1:4 and 5:5 are two examples). But consider this truly amazing fact: Because the Spirit is holy and dwells in us, our bodies are holy sanctuaries from God's vantage point. Too often we disdain our bodies as the source of sin and our fallenness; yet they are precisely where God the Spirit chooses to dwell!

Fourth, **the Holy Spirit has His own mind, and He prays for us.** Romans 8:27 says, "He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." I don't know about you, but I find the thought of the Spirit of God praying for me according to the will of God extremely comforting.

So many times in life I haven't known what to pray, either for myself or for others. Other times I pray for stupid things.

For example, a while back I was out golfing with some friends and decided I really wanted to shoot in the 70s (I generally am in the 90s). So in a moment of shallowness, I prayed that God would empower me to play my best round ever. I guess the Holy Spirit was praying too, because that day I shot 115 (possibly my worst score ever). The Spirit knew I needed to work on my anger and humility, instead of adding to my pride.

In any given situation, we may not know exactly how we should pray or what we should do. But we can take confidence in the fact that the Holy Spirit knows our hearts and the will of God, and He is always interceding on our behalf.

Fifth, **the Spirit has emotions**. For a long time, whenever I read that we are not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Isa. 63:10; Eph. 4:30), I thought that was a bit of an exaggeration. It almost seems sacrilegious to say that I could grieve God. Who am I to have such power over the Spirit? That doesn't seem right. In fact, it even seemed wrong to say that God has feelings; for some reason I felt it belittled Him.

I struggled with these thoughts for a while until I finally realized where they were coming from. In our culture, having feelings or emotions is equated with weakness. This is a lie that is deeply ingrained in many of us.

God created feelings. Sure, like anything else, they can be misused and abused. But the intent and purpose of feelings came from God. Since He created emotions, why is it difficult to believe that He Himself has emotions? The Spirit is grieved when there is a breach in relationship, whether it be relationship with God or relationship with other people. When we are disunified, unloving, hateful, jealous, gossipy, etc., that is when we grieve the Spirit of God. And since He is the creator of emotions, I believe that the Spirit grieves more deeply than we can even understand.

How do you respond when you hear this? Does it bother you? When was the last time you were saddened because your sin pained the Holy Spirit?

A while back, two women from my church grew increasingly angry at each other. The three of us sat in my office, and I listened to them passionately express the reasons for their frustration. I lacked the wisdom to determine who was "more in the wrong." I just wept as they spoke. I told

them I was deeply saddened because I knew how much our Father hated this. While it is rare that I'm brought to tears, there have been numerous times when I am burdened by the grief that members of Cornerstone Church have heaped upon the Holy Spirit through stubbornness and lack of forgiveness.

I believe that if we truly cared about the Holy Spirit's grief, there would be fewer fights, divorces, and splits in our churches. Maybe it's not due to a lack of belief but rather a lack of concern. I pray for the day when believers care more about the Spirit's grief than their own. In fact, I pray that some of you readers would be broken over the grief you've placed on the Holy Spirit. So broken that you actually put down this book and work to resolve any conflicts you have with other believers.

"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Rom. 12:18).

Sixth, **the Holy Spirit has His own desires and will**. In 1 Corinthians we read that the gifts of the Spirit are "empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills" (12:11). This is an important reminder of *who* is in control. Just as we don't get to choose which gifts we are given, so also we don't get to choose what God intends for us or for the church. The Spirit has a plan for our lives, for each of us. And He has a plan for the church, including your individual church body and the worldwide body of Christ.

If you are like me, you probably have a plan for your own life, for your church, and maybe even for the larger body of Christ. That's why we all desperately need to pray, as Christ did, "Not my will, but yours be done."

Seventh, **the Holy Spirit is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient.** These are theological words that essentially mean that the Spirit is all-

powerful (e.g., Zech. 4:6), present everywhere (e.g., Ps. 139:7–8), and all-knowing (e.g., 1 Cor. 2:10b), respectively. These are some of His attributes that we will never fully grasp as finite human beings. In Isaiah we read, "Who can fathom the Spirit of the LORD, or instruct the LORD as his counselor?" (40:13 TNIV). Though we will never be able to perfectly articulate or completely understand these attributes, may these aspects of the Spirit lead us to praise, even with imperfect words and incomplete understanding!

If the Holy Spirit dwells within you, a number of things should be a part of your life. I am going to explore several, but don't allow yourself just to read through these items like a grocery-store list. If you merely skim this list, you'll miss out on my favorite part of this book. I have benefited so much from taking each of these promises literally, meditating on them, and asking for them. Take time to dwell on each one. Consider how each one is manifest in your life; and if it isn't, spend some time asking God for that specific thing.

- The Spirit helps us speak when we are in precarious situations and need to bear witness (Mark 13:11; Luke 12:12).
- The Counselor teaches and reminds us of what we need to know and remember. He is our comforter, our advisor, our encourager, and our strength. He guides us in the way we should go (Ps. 143:10; John 14–16; Acts 9:31; 13:2; 15:28; 1 Cor. 2:9–10; 1 John 5:6–8).

- From the Spirit we receive power to be God's witnesses to the ends of the earth. It is the Spirit who draws people to the gospel, the Spirit who equips us with the strength we need to accomplish God's purposes. The Holy Spirit not only initially draws people to God, He also draws believers closer to Jesus (Acts 1:8; Rom. 8:26; Eph. 3:16–19).
- By the power of the Spirit we put to death the misdeeds of the body. The Spirit sets us free from the sins we cannot get rid of on our own. This is a lifelong process we entered into, in partnership with the Spirit, when we first believed (e.g., Rom. 8:2).
- Through the Spirit we have received a spirit of adoption as children, which leads us into intimacy with the Father, instead of a relationship based on fear and slavery. The Spirit bears witness to us that we are His children (Rom. 8:15–16).
- The Holy Spirit convicts people of sin. He does this both before we initially enter into right relationship with God and as we journey through this life as believers (John 16:7–11; 1 Thess. 1:5).
- The Spirit brings us life and freedom. Where the Spirit is, there is freedom, not bondage or slavery. In our world that is plagued with death, this is a profound truth that points to real hope (Rom. 8:10–11; 2 Cor. 3:17).
- By the power of the Holy Spirit we abound with hope because our God is a God of hope, who fills His children with all joy and peace (Rom. 15:13).

- As members of God's kingdom community, each of us is given a manifestation of the Spirit in our lives for the purpose of the common good. We all have something to offer because of what the Spirit gives to us (1 Cor. 12:7).
- The fruit of being led by the Spirit of God includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These attitudes and actions will characterize our lives as we allow ourselves to be grown and molded by the Spirit. The Spirit is our sanctifier (2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 5:22–23).

My hope is that reading these truths about the Holy Spirit will lead you into a deeper relationship with and a greater reverence for the Spirit—that good theology would lead you to right action, genuine love, and true worship.

Perhaps you read these verses and wonder why these things are not a part of your life. Don't be discouraged. Ask God to make you more loving or to help you put to death the deeds of the flesh or to use you to bless His children. Remember that we cannot do these things on our own, and that these are the very things the Holy Spirit does in our lives. The Father tells us to ask Him. And we can ask confidently because we are asking for things God promises us in the Bible. May we grow in relationship with the Spirit more and more, and belittle and ignore Him less and less.



Francis Schaeffer was an American who was born in 1912 and died in 1984. During the course of his life he had a profound effect on Christian thought and culture. Some have even said that other than C. S. Lewis, no one helped shaped popular Christian thinking in the twentieth century more than Schaeffer did.

A onetime agnostic, Schaeffer eventually became a Presbyterian minister and an effective apologist and theologian for the faith. He recognized that Christianity and the Bible spoke to the big questions raised by philosophy, but that very little dialogue was happening between theologians and philosophers. So he began initiating such dialogue.

Francis and his wife, Edith, moved to Switzerland after World War II ended. Once there, they followed God's leading and in faith opened their home as a place where people with questions could come seeking answers. The stories of the ways they trusted God, both financially and practically, are absolutely inspiring. When they had a need, they would simply pray earnestly, often in prayer rotations through the night, until God provided.

The Schaeffers believed that Christianity speaks to every aspect of life, and this meant that honest questions were always welcome. Inasmuch as they sought God with their minds, the Schaeffers sought to live out their faith in community in a daily way. God's hand was distinctively guiding them to establish what would come to be called *L'Abri*, the French word for "shelter." It was so named by the Schaeffers because many people came there to ask honest questions about God and life's meaning in a safe place.

It is still active at its original location in Switzerland, and there are several other centers around the world.

In conversations with the thousands of students and travelers who came to L'Abri (some staying a night, some months, and some years) from all kinds of backgrounds and religions, Francis always communicated that through the Bible humans can know the "true truth" about God and themselves. In addition to engaging those who came to L'Abri, Francis also wrote numerous books, lectured at universities, and spoke in several countries.

He truly loved God with all his heart and with all his mind, and thousands of lives have been (and continue to be) touched because of it. This is what happens when a person submits to the Spirit and allows Him to have *His* way in life. $\stackrel{2}{=}$



Why Do You Want Him?

The Christian's life in all its aspects—intellectual and ethical, devotional and relational, upsurging in worship and outgoing in witness—is supernatural; only the Spirit can initiate and sustain it. So apart from him, not only will there be no lively believers and no lively congregations, there will be no believers and no congregations at all.

-J. I. Packer-

My guess is that you would love to be filled with supernatural power from the Holy Spirit. You probably wouldn't be reading this book if you didn't. The question I want to ask is why?

Recently, a man dying of cancer asked the church elders to anoint him with oil and pray for his healing. Before we prayed, however, I asked the man a question I don't normally ask: "Why do you want to be healed? Why do you want to stay on this earth?" The man, as well as everyone else around, seemed a bit surprised that I would ask such a blunt question.

The reason I probed like this is because in the epistle of James, we are reminded that we often don't receive the answers to our prayers because we ask for the wrong reasons: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (James 4:3). Our desire to live should be for the sake and glory of the God who put us on this earth in the first place.

So, really, why do you desire the Holy Spirit's activity in your life? Do you want to experience more of the Holy Spirit merely for your own benefit? When the answer is yes, then we are no different from Simon the magician, who tried to buy the Holy Spirit's power from the apostles. Peter's response to Simon in that situation was strong; he said, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!" (Acts 8:20).

The Holy Spirit is not a commodity to be bought or traded according to our individual wants, whims, or even our felt needs. We absolutely cannot have this discussion about the Holy Spirit without calling our motives into question.

Right now I want you to take a break from reading and spend some time asking yourself *why* you want the Holy Spirit. Is it for power? Is it for your own betterment and purposes? Or is it because you want to experience all that God has for you? Is it because you love the church and desire to be a better servant to your sisters and brothers?

The Right Reason

While we may have our own purposes for desiring the Spirit's presence and power in our lives, so does God! First Corinthians 12 tells us that each follower of Christ is given a "manifestation of the Spirit for the *common good*" (v. 7). As we've seen, these manifestations, or gifts, are "empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills" (v. 11).

So these reflections of the Spirit's presence and activity in us have nothing to do with our natural abilities, and we have not received them because we have earned or somehow deserve them. Since these gifts come according to God's will and not ours, it should be clear that they should not be used for our own boasting or entertainment.

The Spirit is intentional as He apportions these spiritual gifts to each person, according to His will and purposes. The most obvious and stated purpose of these manifestations is for the good and edification of the church. The Spirit desires to use us when our hearts are aligned with this vision, when we are filled with genuine love for the church, and when we desire to see the church grow in love for God and others.

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On a scale of one to ten, how much do you love the church? As you look around at your brothers and sisters, do you think to yourself, *I love these people so much. I pray God empowers me in some way to encourage these people toward a deeper walk with Him?*

How much do you care? The Holy Spirit has given you a supernatural ability to serve the people God has placed around you. If God cares enough about His church to give you this Spirit-empowered ability, shouldn't you care enough about the church to use that gift for the same purpose?

The apostle Paul wanted desperately to go to heaven, but he was torn because he loved the church so much. His love for the church was the only thing that kept him tied to life on earth. He wrote, "I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith" (Phil. 1:23–25).

Do you resonate with Paul's purpose in life and love for the church? There are far too many people who seek the Spirit for the wrong reasons.

Attention

The Holy Spirit works to glorify Christ (John 16:14), yet so many who emphasize the Holy Spirit seem to draw attention to themselves. The Corinthian church was notorious for this. The church became chaotic because individuals were not concerned with the betterment of the church. They were trying to use manifestations of the Spirit for their own glory. They weren't interested in what God was doing in others; they just wanted to show off what God was doing in them. As they all fought for attention, it resulted in mass confusion as everyone tried to speak at the same time (1 Cor. 14:23–33).

A sure sign of the Holy Spirit's working is that Christ is magnified, not people. Self-glorification is something many of us struggle with. While my pride is still a struggle, God has been teaching me to see things from His perspective.

As a younger man, much of me craved God's power in my life because I wanted the attention. Now I want God's power because I don't want the attention. Jesus says in Matthew 5:16, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." It is possible for us to be doing incredible things for the kingdom yet have people give glory to God rather than to us. Has this ever happened to you? Or do people praise you for your good works?

When the Holy Spirit truly moves, God is the one praised. Jesus is the one lifted up. When the Spirit moved at Pentecost, people knew there was a power present that came from God. That's why they didn't leave saying, "John is amazing! He learned a new language in a matter of seconds!" They knew it had to be God. Let's pray that God would empower us so radically

that we would get no glory. That people would see our works and glorify God.

"So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church" (1 Cor. 14:12).

Miracle Hunting

It is truly awesome (I try not to overuse that term, but believe it fits here) when a miracle takes place—when you experience something that couldn't happen by natural means. I have yet to meet someone who wouldn't want to see a miracle. My concern is that I've met many people whose pursuit of miracles is greater than their pursuit of God.

A lot of people want to talk about supernatural things like miracles, healing, or prophecy. But focusing inordinately on these things quickly becomes misguided. God calls us to pursue Him, not what He might do for us or even in our midst. Scripture emphasizes that we should desire fruit, that we should concern ourselves with becoming more like His Son. God wants us to seek to listen to His Spirit and to obey. The point of it all was never the miracles in and of themselves. Those came when they were unexpected, when people were faithful and focused on serving and loving others.

God wants us to trust Him to provide miracles when He sees fit. He doesn't just dole them out mechanically, as if we can put in a quarter, pray the right prayer, and out comes a miracle. Miracles are never an end in themselves; they are always a means to point to and accomplish something greater.

I'd love to witness more miracles. But when we make miracles the focus of our energy and pursuit, we ignore the priorities God tells us to pursue and we impose our own desires upon God. Sometimes we even resemble Satan, who told Jesus to jump off of the temple and perform a miracle. Of course God the Father could have saved Jesus from harm had He jumped, but Jesus refused to test His Father (Matt. 4:7) by "making" Him perform a miracle.

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God does miracles when He sees fit and for His own purposes. We need to run from the temptation to conjure up miracles that God never promised to give. Instead, we are called to focus on the priorities He has outlined for us in Scripture and ask the Holy Spirit to empower us *as He sees fit*. Ask Him to supernaturally enable you to love Him and others. And let's trust Him to display miracles for His glory, in His time, and in His way.

We also need to look for His action in the midst of our daily lives. For example, perhaps today if you live in Southern California it really is supernatural not to be materialistic.

It used to be that if I had a great worship experience, I asked God to duplicate it the next time I came to worship. Like the kid impressed by a silly magic trick, I would pray, "Do it again!" One thing I've learned about God over the years, however, is that He rarely "does it again." He's the Creator, which means that He is (among other things) creative. If we expect God to perform certain miracles or to give us a particular experience, it will be tempting to manipulate or even fake experiences of the supernatural. The point in all this is simply calling us to pursue Christ and grow in our obedience to Him, rather than pursuing the supernatural for its own sake.

Followers or Leaders?

There have been many times when I've tried to lead the Holy Spirit. I've wanted to direct Him and tell Him what to do and when to do it. The irony is that the Holy Spirit was given to direct us. Desiring the Holy Spirit means we allow the Holy Spirit to guide us. By definition, it's ridiculous to desire the Holy Spirit for our own purposes.

The Spirit is not a passive power that we can wield as we choose. The Spirit is God, a Being who requires that we submit ourselves to be led by Him. Do you really want to be led? Even people who are natural leaders don't get to lead the Spirit. Everyone is called to be led by Him.

I honestly believe that most of us—while we might *say* we want to be led by the Spirit—are actually scared of this reality. I know I am. What would it mean? What if He asks you to give up something you're not ready to give up? What if He leads you where you don't want to go? What if he tells you to change jobs? To move? Are you willing to surrender to Him, no matter where He wants to take you? Am I?

The fact is that God is calling. The Spirit is beckoning. The real question is will you follow? Will you listen? I know I prefer a multiple-choice option for what God is asking me to do. That way, if I don't like A or B, there are always options C and D. Sometimes, of course, this is exactly how the Spirit leads us. There can be two equally good choices that God lets us choose between.

Many times, though, this is not how He works. In these cases, He calls us to do something, a particular thing, and we have the choice to obey or not. The truly startling thought is that by not submitting and totally trusting the Holy Spirit, I am not submitting to or trusting God. This is no small matter.

We all have to answer the question: *Do I want to lead or be led by the Spirit?*

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Did God lead you to where you are? A lot of people in my church and in my travels tell me, "I believe that God has called me to Simi Valley." Or Wichita. Or New York. Or Greenville. Or wherever. That very well may be the case. But it could also be a cop-out because you like where you live. You have a good job. The school district is safe and has high ratings. Your family lives close by (or perhaps far away, depending on your relationship with them). It makes sense that you are "called" to be there, right?

And maybe you *are* called to where you live. But if you say you are called to be in the place you are, a few questions need to be considered. For example, how would you be missed if you left this place? What would change? Basically, what difference does your presence here make? Or, as my youth pastor once asked me, what would your church (and the worldwide church) look like if everyone was as committed as you are? If everyone gave and served and prayed exactly like you, would the church be healthy and empowered? Or would it be weak and listless?

My purpose in posing these questions is not to convince you to "go into the ministry." I'm not about recruiting pastors or missionaries. My purpose in these questions is to get you to take 1 Corinthians 12 seriously, to believe that *you* have been given a manifestation of the Spirit and that your church, the worldwide body of Christ, and the world are crippled without your involvement. I write this because I love the church and want you to trust that you are more than just a helpful addition. You need to believe you are a vital member. As real estate brokers, salesclerks, restaurant servers, baristas, teachers, dietitians, therapists, students, parents, farmers, school board members, and city council officials, you are vital members of the body of Christ. Ask yourself, *Do I believe the church needs me like a body needs a mouth?*

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As part of the Spirit's work through us for the "common good," He empowers us to be His witnesses. If you are a teacher, have you thought about how you impact the students in your classes? If you are a coach, what sort of influence do you have on your team? What about other coaches you interact with? If you are a businessperson, how do you conduct yourself toward your customers and coworkers? Do they see a person who lives according to the Way of Jesus or someone who does business according to capitalistic and self-centered standards, just like everyone else? If you are a stay-at-home mom, how are you forming your children into lovers of Jesus? How are you reaching out and ministering to the neighbors God has placed around you?

It is true that God may have called you to be exactly where you are. But it's absolutely vital to grasp that He didn't call you there so you could settle in and live out your life in comfort and superficial peace. His purposes are not random or arbitrary. If you are still alive on this planet, it's because He has something for you to do. He placed us on this earth for purposes that He orchestrated long before we were born (Eph. 2:8–10). Do you believe you exist not for your own pleasure but to help people know the love of Jesus and to come fully alive in Him? If so, then that will shape how you live your life in the place where you are.

When the Spirit Leads

When we submit to the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit, He helps us become more holy—more like Jesus. It is a lifelong journey of putting our flesh to death, or as Paul puts it in Galatians 5, of walking by the Spirit and not gratifying the desires of the flesh. We cannot live submitted to the Spirit and at the same time gratify the flesh because these two "are opposed to

each other" (Gal. 5:17). The works of the flesh are things like strife, fits of anger, dissensions, and idolatry. The works of the Spirit are things like love, self-control, joy, and faithfulness. Obviously, these are very different from each other. In making this distinction, Paul goes so far as to say that those who belong to Christ "have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (5:24).

The phrase *crucifying the flesh* is not exactly a friendly, appealing group of words. I think this is because God wants us to be clear on what we are getting into. He wants us to know that His gift of the Holy Spirit is really not for our own pleasure or purposes. The Spirit is meant to lead us toward holiness. The Spirit is here with us to accomplish God's purposes, not ours.

When you decide to put to death—to crucify—your flesh, you are by default choosing the way of the Spirit. You are leaving one path and joining another. The new path of walking with the Spirit will undoubtedly have its share of twists and turns. At forks in the trail, you will, at times, choose to follow the desires of your flesh, even though you left that path long ago.

The way of the Spirit is not a gentle downhill grade. Often, walking with the Spirit is an uphill trudge through all sorts of distractions and difficulties. But while the path is winding and difficult, you are constantly moving in a particular direction, and that direction is set by the leading of the Spirit. At some point along the way, you agreed with God that you were not meant to be ruled by your fleshly desires and passions (like anger, self-indulgence, immorality, etc.), and you removed the central role that these things once had in your life.

Perhaps you have not yet made this decision. Understand that it is a decision everyone must make. It cannot be done mindlessly, not when we are talking about something as intense as crucifying. Each of us has to

decide whether we are going to crucify the flesh, whether we will truly walk with the Spirit. It is a choice. And it is crucial.

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In addition to becoming like Christ in His holiness, being led by the Spirit will result in becoming like Christ in His love. After Paul addresses the manifestations or gifts that the Spirit gives, he writes, "I will show you a still more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31). It's as if he is saying, "Sure, these gifts from the Spirit are important. But let me tell you what is really important. Let me tell you about what will change the world." And in chapter 13 of that letter, he writes his famous "love chapter." In it he reminds us that without love, nothing else matters.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (13:1–3)

This passage is so powerful because Paul redirects the focus from supernatural gifts to love. He specifically says that without love, speaking "in the tongues of men and of angels" and "prophetic powers" and understanding "all mysteries and all knowledge" mean nothing.

The Holy Spirit is the one who fills believers with God's love and the one who enables us to love one another. Paul describes this beautifully in his prayer to the Ephesians:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power *through his Spirit* in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being *rooted and established in love*, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (3:16–19 NIV)

May we know this love that surpasses knowledge—the mystery of this great love—by the strengthening power of the Spirit.

Let us not become distracted from what is most important. Jesus told His disciples, "Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:19–20). Our true rejoicing comes because of the grace that's been given to us.

And like our Savior, who poured out His life and blood so we have reason to rejoice, we were made to lay down our lives and give until it hurts. We are most alive when we are loving and actively giving of ourselves because we were made to do these things. It is when we live like this that the Spirit of God moves and acts in and through us in ways that on our own we are not capable of. This is our purpose for living. This is our hope. "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5).



Esther Ahn Kim's biography is among the most powerful testimonies I have ever read. It was during WWII, and the Japanese occupation of Korea, that Esther's journey of faith really began. She refused to bow down at the shrines set up in every corner of her country and was eventually imprisoned for six years, from 1939 until 1945.

Knowing she was destined for prison for refusing to bow to idols, Esther spent time training herself both physically and spiritually. Each day she would find and eat food that was decaying, knowing that was what she would be served in prison. The discipline she demonstrated is humbling; how many of us would *choose* to eat rotten foods?

While preparing for prison, she memorized more than one hundred chapters of the Bible and many hymns because she knew she would not be allowed to keep her Bible. She spent countless hours seeking God through fasting and prayer. These times when she read the Scriptures led to greater clarity, and she was able to surrender her fear of being tortured.

Reading her story left me wanting more. More intimacy with Christ. More love for people. More of God in my life. And to be honest, more discipline. She was a well-disciplined believer, but there was nothing self-righteous about her. Her obedience to Christ only increased her ability to hear the voice of the Spirit, and consequently filled her with overwhelming love for the people she came in contact with.

When she eventually was taken to prison, God used her in countless way. One night a young Chinese woman convicted of killing her husband was brought in. She moaned incessantly and beat on the doors until the guards tied her hands behind her back. It was this woman that God called Esther to love and reach out to. Esther held the woman's feet at night to warm them, even though the woman was covered in her own excrement. Though food rations were small, Esther gave up her portions for three days to this woman.

Over time, the Chinese woman began to respond, carrying on conversation and eventually accepting the good news of the gospel. The woman was later executed for her crime, but she went to her death alive in Christ.

This is one of many people God used Esther to minister to. Murderers and swindlers who were utter outcasts were changed before all who watched as the love of Christ, through Esther, healed their hearts and gave them hope. Even the jailers and government officials noticed how Esther shone in that dark place. She could have just endured her suffering like a good Christian, and we would have applauded her for it. But she was not content to merely endure. She was ready every day and every moment, asking God, "Who do You want me to love for You today?"



A Real Relationship

When we are at our wits' end for an answer, then the Holy Spirit can give us an answer. But how can He give us an answer when we are still well supplied with all sorts of answers of our own?

-Karl Barth-

There's nothing worse than insecurity. So many people live in fear because they are uncertain about what comes next and their standing before God, if they even believe in God. On the flip side, there's nothing better than being absolutely sure that the most powerful Being in the universe adores you as His own child. This is precisely the confidence the Holy Spirit offers us.

Serving God and living faithfully can become a constant guilt trip of "trying harder" and "doing better next time." Maybe you can relate. I have spent much of my Christian life battling insecurity, never quite feeling sure of my salvation, living out of fear and a desperate determination to earn acceptance.

I was raised in a home where performance was everything. Unconditional love may have existed, but I never saw it. Failure was met with severe consequences. Dad was my authority; that was all there was to it. I'm not one to blame my lack of faith on circumstances, but our upbringings definitely create challenges for us. Some of you have wounds so deep that you wonder if you'll ever be able to trust. Perhaps you've subconsciously taken the failures from sinful human relationships and imposed those

shortcomings onto a perfect God. Now uncertainty creeps into even your relationship with God.

It is the Holy Spirit who keeps us from this path and gives us confidence so we can enjoy intimacy with our Creator. Though I do not believe God gives us His Spirit solely for our personal benefit, it is undeniable that one of the greatest aspects of being in relationship with the Holy Spirit is the intimacy, security, and encouragement He brings us. It is then we can serve God as a beloved child rather than a stressed-out, guilt-ridden slave.

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A study through Galatians helped me discover and destroy the strongholds of earning and insecurity. And it was while preaching the book of Galatians that I learned to enjoy being "known" by God.

But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? (Gal. 4:9)

Have you ever thought about what it means to be "known"? Though I'd been telling people for years that I "knew" God, only recently have I explored the concept of being "known" by Him. It's breathtaking to picture almighty God saying, "I know Francis Chan. He's my son. I love him!" Are you confident this is what God would say if I asked Him about you? Do you know God or just know about Him? Are you acquaintances or intimate friends?

In Galatians 4, Paul explains the difference between a slave and a child. His desire was to ensure that the Galatians were enjoying the rightful privileges Christ earned for them on the cross. Many of us would say that

we are children of God, but are these empty words for you? Can you say with confidence—from the depth of your being—that you know God and are known by Him?

Paul tells the Galatians that the Holy Spirit is the one who assures our hearts that we are His children: "Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer slaves, but God's children; and since you are his children, he has made you also heirs." (4:6–7 TNIV).

These verses speak an amazing, beautiful truth! I can't fully explain it, but I've often experienced it in intimate moments with God. This is one of the precious gifts the Holy Spirit gives us. He assures us that we are in right standing with and loved by God. He guarantees believers of the gift of new life in Christ. He assures us that we have nothing to fear because we are His children and He is powerful. He tells us that we are accepted, fully and unconditionally. And He reminds us of the victory that is coming when God's kingdom is fully realized.

Paul emphasized these critical truths in his letter to the Romans:

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (Rom. 8:15–17)

I don't know where you are as you read this. Perhaps you're tracking 100 percent and just want to voice your affirmation. If that's you, then I say,

"Amen!" Maybe you are reading this and are thinking, Well, I just don't experience that kind of intimacy with God ... the Spirit in me never cries "Abba! Father!" If this is you, I don't have a four-step guide to connecting with the Holy Spirit. I would, however, like to suggest two potential obstacles for you to consider: comfort and volume.

Comfort (Maybe Your Life Is Too Safe)

From my own experience, I have felt closest to God when nearness to Him was a necessity. The Bible says that the Spirit comes through in situations where we would normally be afraid (Luke 12:11–12). We experience the Holy Spirit guiding us in desperate situations, such as being placed on trial for the gospel (in some countries), when we are asked why we believe in a God that allows _____ (fill in the world's most recent tragic horror) to happen, or when we receive a totally unexpected phone call that a close family member has died.

Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the "Helper" or "Comforter." Let me ask you a simple question: Why would we need to experience the Comforter if our lives are already comfortable? It is those who put their lives at risk and suffer for the gospel (Phil. 1:29) who will most often experience His being "with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20 NASB). Though this verse is true for all believers (of course God is always with us), if we are never alone or feeling like we need Him, how much do we care or need to know that God is with us?

I recently had dinner in Seoul, Korea, with an amazing man. He was one of the twenty-three missionaries who were held hostage by the Taliban in Afghanistan in July 2007. For those who don't recall the story, the Taliban

executed two of the missionaries before a deal was reached with the government of South Korea and the missionaries were released.

This man told me about the horrors of being locked up in a cell, knowing that martyrdom was a strong possibility. He also shared about the amazing time they had on the last day they were all imprisoned together (their captors later divided them into groups of three and took them to remote areas). Each of the twenty-three missionaries surrendered their lives to God that night and told Him they were willing to die for His glory. There was even an argument over who would *get* to die first. One of them had a small Bible that the missionaries secretly ripped into twenty-three pieces so each could glance at Scripture when no one was watching. The Word of God and the Spirit of God got them through the forty days of imprisonment.

One of the most fascinating things this man told me was about what has happened since. Now that they have been back in Seoul for a while, several team members have asked him, "Don't you wish we were still there?" He tells me that several of them experienced a deep kind of intimacy with God in the prison cell that they haven't been able to recapture in their comfort.

This is the precious gift of intimacy the Holy Spirit offers us. It is a security that is priceless and worth any loss of safety and comfort, even imprisonment by the Taliban.

Volume (Maybe Your Life Is Too Loud)

Multitasking has become the norm. When was the last time you had an uninterrupted conversation with anyone? No phones, text messages, or to-do lists running through your mind. It's so rare nowadays to be able to look someone in the eye without interruption or distraction. A while back, I found myself talking on the phone, emailing on my laptop, and playing Wii

with my daughter all at once. In my quest to accomplish much, I've lost the art of focusing on one thing or one person. This in turn has affected my prayer life, as I'm sure it has affected yours. I find it harder to simply be with God, to focus only on Him while spending intentional time with Him.

While Jesus didn't have to deal with emails, voice mails, or texts, He certainly understood what it meant to have multitudes of people pursuing Him at once. At any given moment of the day, people were looking for Jesus. Because of the priority of His relationship with His Father, He found ways to escape. He took the time to focus and be quiet (Mark 1:35). He was willing to remove Himself from people's reach in order to pray and commune with God the Father. Our lack of intimacy often is due to our refusal to unplug and shut off communication from all others so we can be alone with Him.

In the craziness of our world, it takes tremendous effort to find a quiet place. It takes time to quiet your mind and your heart before the Lord. It means turning off the music, the television, or your cell phone. It might mean going outside to your favorite spot. For some, this is curling up inside in the only place where you find privacy. For others it might mean heading to whatever wilderness is nearest to you or booking a few days at a local retreat center.

I don't know exactly what it will look like for you to be still before the Lord. But I do know that no matter what your personality, it is a spiritual discipline to be still, to listen, and to cut out the distraction and din of our world. And as we practice this stillness, this waiting, this being, it is then that we can experience deep intimacy and relationship with the Holy Spirit.

For some of you, reading this book could be a form of noise that keeps you from Him. Maybe you already hear lots of sermons and read plenty of books. What you need is direct communion with Him—to hear directly from Him and to speak directly to Him. Rather than reading my words, listen to His.

Right now I want you to take a break and open your Bible to the book of John. Read chapters 14 through 16 and give yourself some space to soak in the words you read. Notice particularly how Christ desires that His disciples have peace and how He comforts His disciples with the truth that they are not left alone. Part of His answer to how we are to have peace and be comforted is through the provision of the Holy Spirit, the other Counselor, who He promised would come once He left.

It makes sense that Jesus would say it's to our advantage to have this "other counselor." After all, Jesus merely walked beside the disciples; the Spirit would actually enter their human bodies (John 14:17). You've probably heard this truth a hundred times, but have you marveled at it? Would you be willing to take thirty seconds right now just to dwell on the fact that God is *in* you?

Astonished? This is not a distant, loose connection. This is the Spirit of God choosing you and me to be His dwelling place. That means that as I write, the Spirit of the living God is inside me. I might wake up on a particular day feeling physically tired or stressed or impatient, and humanly speaking, those things would probably define my day. But the reality is that I am indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And because of this reality, stress and tiredness and impatience don't have to define my day.

If you have received by faith the promise of the Holy Spirit, you are also His temple. As you drive your children to school. As you go to work every day. As you embark on a new, unknown season. As you go to school. As

you face tragedy and pain. As you buy groceries. As you give of yourself in relationships. As you walk the dog. As you make decisions. As you live your life, the Holy Spirit is dwelling in you.

Please don't let this reality slip past you like an interesting piece of trivia that might catch your attention for a minute but that you'll never take the time to really investigate. You are a temple of the Holy Spirit. You are not just a person living your life by human power. The Spirit of God is in you; that is why Jesus said it was better for Him to go and the Spirit to come. Don't walk away from this. Delve into it and let it impact you deeply, first internally and then outwardly.

Those chapters in John, where we read of Christ's compassion for and care of His disciples, are but one small example of the meaningful relationship and deep love that motivate God's interaction with us. In Galatians 3, we read that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us ... so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (vv. 13–14). Wow. I am sure I have read that often enough, but until I started paying attention to the Holy Spirit, I am not sure that it really struck me. Christ redeemed us from the curse we were under *so that* we could receive the promise of the Holy Spirit. The "promised Spirit" is not a small promise. Jesus suffered a grueling death *so that* I could have the amazing gift of the Holy Spirit. How dare I take this for granted?

Because of Jesus, I have received the promise. And this Spirit is not a remote force. He takes up residence in our lives, in our very bodies, and by doing so brings with Him a deep level of security. Again and again in the Scriptures we read about being God's children, being led by His Spirit, and how we have received the Spirit of adoption.

Kristen has been a friend of the family for the past ten years. I'll never forget being with her at her mother's memorial service. As I watched her grieve, there was no doubt that she was loved by this woman who had adopted her from Korea. She was Kristen's mother, not just some lady who looked after her and paid for her food. It's been years since her death, yet Kristen still has a hard time talking about her without getting emotional. She misses Mom. This is the type of adoption God speaks of in Scripture. It's not about having an impersonal guardian who looks over you. It's about having a parent. The best parent there ever was or will be.

We have been chosen, grafted, adopted into the family of God. And now that we are a part of the family, the Spirit causes us to call out, "Abba! Father!" Remember that Abba is the most intimate form for referring to a father. It is like saying "Daddy"; it connotes a deep level of familiarity and intimacy. As God's Spirit speaks to our hearts, we can call out to God as our Abba. We will begin to experience this intimate relationship more deeply than we ever thought possible, so much so that we will begin to wonder, *Does everyone feel this loved by God*?

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Don't let your personal baggage keep you from enjoying this intimacy that both your spirit and God's long for. I had issues that kept me from crying out to Abba. I often wished my testimony was like those of the drug addicts or criminals who came to know the Lord and then completely changed their lifestyles. Unlike them, I was raised in a Christian home and came to know Jesus personally in high school. After several years of walking with Him, I began to turn. I went through my sinful phase after knowing better and after having received the Holy Spirit. I quenched the conviction the Holy Spirit put in my heart over and over again.

I can totally relate to the prodigal son after he squandered his wealth (Luke 15:11–32). I resonate with the feelings he had when he was eating with the pigs, thinking he could go back to the father as a slave. Sometimes I waited a few days or even weeks before talking to Him because I wanted to have a period of proving myself. In doing this, I acted like a slave and obeyed as well as I could. I figured I could still serve Him even though I felt uncomfortable having a real conversation with Him.

Have you ever felt this way? Do you ever want to distance yourself from Him because you feel so much shame over your sin?

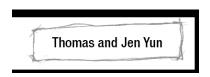
This was a regular pattern for me. I wanted to prove that I was sorry for what I did by being faithful for a period of time. I wanted to develop a good track record before pursuing my relationship with Him again. I wanted God to see that I could be a good servant. *Then* I felt good enough to talk with God again. But God didn't want a good slave who tried really hard. He wanted me to see that He was a good Father. He wants intimacy.

It takes faith to believe God is truly like the prodigal son's father, who from afar "saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20). Lest there be any doubt, the father made it absolutely clear that his son was to be forgiven, with no questions asked. He invited his son back into his life without bitterness or requiring penance and guilt.

In the same way, the Spirit speaks truth to our hearts, such as "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1 NIV) and "[nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:39 NIV) and "He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins" (1 John 1:9 NASB). These are verses we could probably spout

off, but often we need reminding of the power and veracity of them. And one of the Holy Spirit's roles is to do this reminding.

God said to Israel, "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the LORD" (Jer. 29:13–14). When is the last time you sought after God with *all* your heart? We are not Israel, but God still desires to be sought and found by His people. Ask the Holy Spirit to enable you to set *everything* else aside right now so that you can seek Him wholeheartedly. Tell God that you want intimacy with Him, no matter what, even if it necessitates suffering on your part. When this relationship with Him is as it should be, there is nothing more satisfying or meaningful.



Have you ever met people who are so joyful and kind you assume they are fake? After all, no one could genuinely be *that* cheerful, certainly not all the time. Thomas and Jen would be the first to admit their imperfections. But I secretly wish I could see those come out more so I would feel less guilty about myself.

Jen works in our church office, and she's one of the people I think of when I hear the term *Spirit-filled*. She doesn't have a list of accomplishments to amaze you. It is more about who she is than what she's done. I think you know the type—the person who convicts you just by how she lives her life and interacts with people.

I first met Thomas because he was a chef and co-owner of an extremely nice and expensive steak house in town. He sent a gift certificate to my wife and me so we could enjoy a meal that most pastors can't afford. While we were there, Thomas shared with me how great the restaurant was doing. It had far exceeded expectations. In another three years he would receive back not only his initial investment but a huge bonus on top of that. The only problem was that God was calling him away from the restaurant then, not in three years.

Thomas surprised his partners by giving up the money in order to pursue the ministry God was calling him to. Thomas left the fancy restaurant and took a position at the local rescue mission. He now cooks for the homeless, recovering addicts, and others who are seeking to rebuild their lives. He uses his training in the culinary arts to teach the homeless how to cook. He then helps them find jobs as cooks at local restaurants.

Thomas and Jen are a young couple in our church body; they are a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led couple. They believe God will soon call them overseas, but until that day comes, they seek daily to follow as the Spirit leads. And they are doing it.



Forget About His Will for Your Life!

And to expose our hearts to truth and consistently refuse or neglect to obey the impulses it arouses is to stymie the motions of life within us and, if persisted in, to grieve the Holy Spirit into silence.

-A.W. Tozer-

How many times have you heard someone say, "I just wish I knew God's will for my life"? I know I've longed for this before. But now I see it as a misguided way of thinking and talking.

There are very few people in the Scriptures who received their life plan from God in advance (or even their five-year plan, for that matter!). Consider Abraham, who was told to pack up his family and all his possessions and start walking. He didn't know where he was going. He didn't know if he would ever be back. He didn't know any of the details we consider vital (e.g., his destination, how long the venture would take, what the costs/rewards would be, whether he'd receive a 401(k) or health insurance). God said to go and he went, and that's pretty much all he knew.

I think a lot of us need to forget about *God's will for my life*. God cares more about our response to His Spirit's leading today, in this moment, than about what we intend to do next year. In fact, the decisions we make next year will be profoundly affected by the degree to which we submit to the Spirit right now, in today's decisions.

It is easy to use the phrase "God's will for my life" as an excuse for inaction or even disobedience. It's much less demanding to think about God's will for your future than it is to ask Him what He wants you to do in the next ten minutes. It's safer to commit to following Him *someday* instead of *this day*.

To be honest, I believe part of the desire to "know God's will for my life" is birthed in fear and results in paralysis. We are scared to make mistakes, so

we fret over figuring out God's will. We wonder what living according to His will would actually look and feel like, and we are scared to find out. We forget that we were never promised a twenty-year plan of action; instead,

God promises multiple times in Scripture never to leave or forsake us.

God wants us to listen to His Spirit on a daily basis, and even throughout the day, as difficult and stretching moments arise, and in the midst of the mundane. My hope is that instead of searching for "God's will for my life," each of us would learn to seek hard after "the Spirit's leading in my life today." May we learn to pray for an open and willing heart, to surrender to the Spirit's leading with that friend, child, spouse, circumstance, or decision in our lives right now.

To say that we are not called to figure out "God's will for my life" does not mean God doesn't have purposes and plans for each of our lives or that He doesn't care what we do with our lives. He does. In both the Old and New Testaments He tells us that this is true. The key is that He never promises to reveal these purposes all at once, in advance.

We do know that we are called to keep in step with the Holy Spirit. In Paul's letter to the Galatians we read, "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.... If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit" (5:16, 25).

The phrases *keeping in step with the Spirit* and *walking with the Spirit* are mostly likely familiar, but do they affect your life in a practical and meaningful way? Like I said earlier, I think dwelling on God's plan for the future often excuses us from faithful and sacrificial living now. It tends to create a safe zone of sorts, where we can sit around and have "spiritual" conversations about what God "might" have planned for our lives. Thinking, questioning, and talking can take the place of letting the Spirit affect our immediate actions in radical ways. God wants to see His children stake everything on His power and presence in their lives.

Nowhere in Scripture do I see a "balanced life with a little bit of God added in" as an ideal for us to emulate. Yet when I look at our churches, this is exactly what I see: a lot of people who have added Jesus to their lives. People who have, in a sense, asked Him to join them on *their* life journey, to follow *them* wherever *they* feel they should go, rather than following Him as we are commanded. The God of the universe is not something we can just add to our lives and keep on as we did before. The Spirit who raised Christ from the dead is not someone we can just call on when we want a little extra power in our lives. Jesus Christ did not die in order to follow *us*. He died and rose again so that we could forget everything else and follow Him to the cross, to true Life.

When people give their lives to God in exchange for a ticket out of hell, there is often no turning or change of direction, which is the definition of repentance. If all you want is a little Jesus to "spiritualize" your life, a little

extra God to keep you out of hell, you are missing out on the fullness of life you were created for.

Not only this, you don't need the Holy Spirit. You don't need the Holy Spirit if you are merely seeking to live a semi-moral life and attend church regularly. You can find people of all sorts in many religions doing that quite nicely without Him. You only need the Holy Spirit's guidance and help if you truly want to follow the Way of Jesus Christ. You only need Him if you desire to "obey everything" He commanded and to teach others to do the same (Matt. 28:18–20 NIV). You only need the Holy Spirit if you have genuinely repented and believe. And you only need the Holy Spirit if you understand that you are called to share in Christ's suffering and death, as well as His resurrection (Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 4:16–18; Phil. 3:10–11). Paul demonstrated this when he wrote,

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. (2 Cor. 4:7–11 NIV)

If you truly believe and have turned from the way you were headed and joined a different Way of living, then you desperately need the Holy Spirit. You know you cannot live this Way without the Spirit in you.

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I think repentance is one of those words we hear a lot but maybe don't incorporate into our lives very often. When I use the word *repent*, I think about the time I was in a dating relationship, until one day a girl named Lisa came to my church as a guest soloist and caught my attention. After getting to know her, I knew she was the one I wanted to be with. I didn't consider it an option to ask Lisa if she wanted to date me *also*. I knew I had to break off the other relationship if I wanted to begin one with Lisa.

In a sense, this is what repentance is like when we meet Jesus: We totally change direction.

Some people encounter Jesus and say, "Sweet! Jesus, do You want to join the party of my life with this sin, that addiction, this destructive relationship, and we'll all just coexist together?" But repentance means saying, "Sweet Jesus, You are the best thing that has ever happened to me! I want to turn from all the sin and selfishness that rules me. I want to let it go and walk with You. Only You. You are my life now. Help me to walk away from the enslaving, worthless things in life."

Do you see the difference between these two examples? Which do you think more accurately portrays your own life? Is there anything you need to go and make right with your Savior, the One who was killed for your sake? If so, don't hesitate to shut this book and spend the necessary time. Nothing else matters more than this relationship.

So if a little bit of spirituality added in to our lives is not what God has in mind, what does He want for His children? How does He desire that we live? The fact is we were called by Jesus to give up everything. His call is to come and take up the cross (Luke 9:23).

"Taking up my cross" has become a euphemism for getting through life's typical burdens with a semi-good attitude. Yet life's typical burdens—busy schedules, bills, illness, hard decisions, paying for college tuition, losing jobs, houses not selling, and the family dog dying—are felt by everyone, whether or not they follow the Way of Jesus.

When Jesus calls us to take up our cross, He is doing much more than calling us to endure the daily, circumstantial troubles of life. The people in Jesus' day were very familiar with the cross. Having witnessed crucifixion, they understood the commitment and sacrifice of taking up a cross.

It is a call to radical faith.

Jesus is calling us to be willing to suffer anything and forsake everything for the sake of the gospel. His call is to love those who have cheated us in business; those who have spread nasty rumors about us; those who would kill us if they could; those who disagree with us politically, practically, and fundamentally. His call is to consider everything a loss for His sake. His call is for total surrender. He calls us to give up all that we have, to give even to the point of offering up our lives as a living sacrifice. His call means realizing that His power is made perfect in our weakness, that when we are weak we are also strong (2 Cor. 12:9–10).

Do you remember the story where Jesus saw people putting gifts into the offering box? At first some rich people gave, and it sounds like their contributions must have been monetarily large. Then Jesus pointed out a widow (the text even says a "poor widow") who put in two small copper coins. Notice Christ's words in response to what he witnessed: "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on" (Luke 21:3–4). Jesus commends this woman, whom the

world—those people with power and money—overlooked and perhaps even derided. Jesus praises her for her revolutionary faith, for holding nothing back. She literally gave everything she had, even though she was a "poor widow" with no other means of income or support. And Jesus holds her up as an example.

What if you could hear the voice of the Holy Spirit and He asked you to literally give *everything* you owned? What if He asked you to sell *all* your possessions and give the money to the poor? Could you do it? Before you start explaining why He would never ask that of you, take a moment and answer the question honestly. It's not out of His character to ask for everything.

I don't know about you, but that challenges me like crazy. I say I want to give it all to God, to truly submit myself to the leading of the Holy Spirit. But I won't lie; sometimes the reality of what that means leaves me wanting to hold back a little. There are things on this earth that I *really* enjoy, like surfing, golfing, eating out, and laughing with friends. I know what you're thinking: that those things are not sinful. And you are right. But that doesn't mean the Spirit will not lead me to forgo those things occasionally or maybe even permanently for His purposes and the glory of the Father.

I struggle to always and actually keep in step with the Spirit moment by moment. To submit and give up everything truly is radical and terrifying. However, when I think deeply about it, walking in my own wisdom, contrary to the Spirit's leading, is even more frightful. Though I struggle, I know that ultimately I want nothing more than to live in total surrender and abandonment to the Spirit every moment I have left on this earth.

The Spirit may lead me into total sacrifice financially, or He may lead me toward humiliation in the opinions of people around me. The Spirit may ask

me to move to a different city, a different state, or a different country. The Spirit may ask me to stay where I am and spend my time in very different ways than I do now. He could lead me toward actions like in 2 Samuel 6, where David danced (it says in "a linen ephod," the equivalent of priestly underwear) before the Lord "with all his might" (v. 14). Others were shamed by his undignified display of worship to God, yet David said that he didn't care and that he would become even more undignified for the sake of the Lord. All he cared about was worshipping his God.

....

When I read this story, part of me says, "Yes, I want to live like David. I want to forget about what others think and worship my King with all of me." The other part of me says, "Okay, but practically, what does that look like?" How do I walk in such intimacy with the Spirit that my genuine response when He moves is to dance with abandon, heedless of those around me who might consider it inappropriate? And do I really need not to care about what others think of me?

The crux of it, I believe, is realizing that being filled with the Spirit is not a one-time act. As we read in Galatians about the Spirit and the flesh, walking with the Spirit implies an ongoing relationship. Being filled with the Spirit is not limited to the day we first meet Christ. Instead, throughout Scripture we read of a relationship that calls us into an active pursuit of the Spirit.

Christians can't ever lose the Spirit, but His filling is something we should constantly pursue. This business of sanctification is a lifelong process we are engaged in. Second Corinthians 3:18 says, "We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed

into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (TNIV). (See also 2 Thess. 2:13 and Rom. 15:16.)

Imagine I buy a treadmill to lose some weight. Three months later I take it back to the store and complain to the clerk that it didn't work—I didn't lose a pound. He asks me, "What was the problem? Did it not work properly?" I respond, "I don't know if it works. I never ran on it. I just know I didn't lose any weight, so I am done with it!"

This may seem like a silly example, but change the details and suddenly it sounds pretty familiar:

"I have prayed for the Holy Spirit to free me from my lust, and I am still addicted to pornography." Or, "I have prayed for years to be able to forgive my dad, but I am still racked with anger and bitterness thirty years down the road." "I have prayed for years to be free of my gluttony, but despite prayer, spiritually based support groups, and dieting, I am still a compulsive, unhealthy eater." Fill in whatever sin plagues you and suddenly the treadmill illustration doesn't seem so silly. In fact, it seems like those prayers for freedom from that ongoing sin didn't really "work" in much the same way the treadmill didn't help me lose any weight.

Receiving freedom and healing in answer to prayer is generally not something that is done to you, a situation in which you are just a passive participant. Occasionally God works this way and simply heals or frees a person outright. He is certainly capable of this. But in my experience, He typically asks us to play an active role in the journey toward wholeness. He doesn't need our help but invites us to participate. Often this journey to freedom takes time, sometimes a very long time. And it takes perseverance. It takes participation on our part. We have to get on the treadmill and run—

merely looking at the workout machine doesn't do a whole lot. (See also Rom. 12:11 and 1 Thess. 5:19.)

Have you been stuck in a cycle of sin for a long time? Have you given up on the Holy Spirit and resigned yourself to thinking that He doesn't "work" or doesn't have the power to bring freedom, at least not in your life? If this is you, then maybe you have not internalized the reality that walking in the Spirit requires action on your part.

Because the fact is that if you were in step with the Holy Spirit, listening to and obeying Him, you wouldn't sin (Gal. 5:16). In any given moment, it is impossible to live in the power of the Spirit and sin at the same time. Sin is wholly opposed to everything that is of the Spirit. They really are mutually exclusive and totally contrary to each other.

This does not mean that if you sin, you don't have the Holy Spirit or aren't a follower of Christ. It does mean that when you are sinning, you are not simultaneously submitted to the authority and presence of the Holy Spirit in your life. He is still present, but you are most likely suppressing or ignoring His counsel.

The hopeful part in all this is that even when we do ignore the Spirit and sin, the Holy Spirit convicts us of that sin. Though at times we sin, we are not ruled and enslaved by sin as we once were. We have cut off the headship of sin in our lives. When we are attuned to the Spirit, we are reminded of this freeing reality.

It's obvious when someone is not walking in the Spirit (at least not consistently). What you see and experience from such a person is usually along the lines of rage, selfishness, dissension, bitterness, and envy. However, when a person is habitually and actively submitted to the Spirit,

what comes out of his or her life is the fruit of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit will not—*cannot*—lead you into sin. If the Holy Spirit is in you, as a believer, then when you sin you are not listening to the Spirit's leading.

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Haven't you met those rare people who you can tell are daily keeping in step with the Spirit? Somehow they exude graciousness and peacefulness to a degree that is not humanly possible. Don't you want that in your own life? I mean, who really wants to be a stressed-out, angry, selfish person? It's not much fun, for you or anyone who happens to come in contact with you.

Several people in my own life come to mind when I think about people who walk with the Spirit daily. It would be easy to start comparing ourselves to others in this area. I can already hear the thought progression: *Well, I am obviously more Spirit-led than* that *person...*.

Instead of wasting time deliberating over whether others are walking with the Spirit (which is definitely *not* our job), I challenge you to examine yourself. Look at the "fruit" of your own life and let it be a gauge for you of your own connectedness with the Spirit. Do you listen to the Holy Spirit as you stand in line at the post office? Perhaps He is asking you to begin a conversation with the elderly lady in front of you. Do you allow the Holy Spirit to lead when you are making your budget? Perhaps He will direct you to allocate the monies differently than you otherwise would. Do you submit to the Holy Spirit as you spend time with your family? Often it is family members who are most difficult to love, and we need the Spirit's help to love them well. These are just a few of the many, many areas of our lives that we can submit to the Spirit's leading. Take some time to think about areas in your own life where you tend just to do your own thing, heedless of the Spirit's will and call.

Living by the Spirit implies a habitual, continual, and active interaction with the Holy Spirit. While this sounds exhausting, it really isn't because all of this living and action is done in the power of the Spirit. It is not by your own strength.

This, however, brings up a whole other confusing issue: Is it God's work or my work? God's responsibility or mine? Paul addresses this when he writes to the Galatians. He calls them out, asking whom they had been bewitched by (quite an accusation!). He asks, "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (3:3).

I think each of us has a strong tendency to attempt to wrestle control from the Spirit and "do" this life on our own. Each of us tends to switch from living the gospel of grace to trusting in a system of works. That's why Paul brings up this issue with the churches in Galatia. He knows it's hard to truly depend on sustenance and guidance from the Spirit rather than merely on our own wisdom and effort.

Remember the treadmill illustration? Perhaps you wonder how the concept of our actions fits in with the gospel of grace, which cannot be merited or earned. Suppose I bake a loaf of bread and you asked me, "Which ingredient is more important, the yeast or the flour?" I would look at my still-warm loaf of bread and reply that both are fundamentally necessary to the making of bread; you simply would not have bread without both yeast and flour.

This illustration bears a similarity to our spiritual lives. If we never responded to God, if we never acted based on what He has done for us, there wouldn't be much of a relationship there. God is still real and moving, but at some point we have to respond and act because of what He's done.

Like yeast and flour are both necessary to bread, both God's action and our response-action are necessary in this relationship with God.

In the book of Philippians, Paul writes, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (2:12–13). I love the apparent contradiction in this passage. Paul says in one breath, "Work out your own salvation," and in the next, "It is God who works in you." The both-ness here doesn't allow us to escape with a simple conclusion. Yes, it is God who works in you. And, yes, there is work for you to do. Yes, the Spirit empowers you to do the work. And, yes, you do the work.

Like many things in life, there really isn't a sew-it-all-up solution. And I love that. God is big and mysterious enough that we cannot simply put a label on this process and move on. It requires continual engagement and wrestling and discovering how to live a Spirit-filled life today. Not ten years from now. Not tomorrow. But right now, in the particular time and place He has put us. As we "work out our salvation" and as "God works in us." Let us keep in step.



Years ago, Dave Phillips and his wife, Lynn, had a talk about the callings they felt God was stirring in them. As they discussed what they were most passionate about, they agreed that bringing relief to suffering children and reaching the next generation with the gospel were at the top of the list. The thought of starting a relief agency was considered, but Dave's response was, "But that would mean I have to talk in front of people." By nature, Dave is a very quiet, behind-the-scenes man.

But after much prayer, Dave set aside his fears, and he and Lynn started Children's Hunger Fund out of their garage. Six weeks after CHF was launched, in January of 1992, he received a phone call from the director of a cancer treatment center in Honduras asking if there was any way he could obtain a certain drug for seven children who would die without it. Dave wrote down the name of the drug and told the director that he had no idea how to get this type of drug. They then prayed over the phone and asked God to provide.

As Dave hung up the phone, before he even let go of the receiver, the phone rang again. It was a pharmaceutical company in New Jersey asking Dave if he would have any use for 48,000 vials of *that exact drug!* Not only did they offer him eight million dollars' worth of this drug, but they told him they would airlift it to anyplace in the world! Dave would later learn that the company was one of only two that manufactured this particular drug in the United States.

Within forty-eight hours, Dave had the drug sent to the treatment center in Honduras and to twenty other locations as well. It was then he believed firmly that God was at work, validating his calling to this ministry.

Year after year, God continues to provide supernaturally. Today they have distributed more than \$950 million in food and other relief to more than ten million kids in seventy countries and thirty-two states. Children's Hunger Fund has distributed more than 150 million pounds of food and 110 million toys.

The uniqueness of CHF is that they train and equip volunteers from local churches to distribute the food through home deliveries in the United States and other countries. Going from family to family, they find the poorest of the poor and share not only food but love and the gospel. Forbes.com consistently rates CHF at the top of their list of America's most cost-effective charities.

One of the most beautiful things about this story is that if you met Dave, you would never think he was the CEO of a major organization. He is a quiet, soft-spoken man—not the type you envision leading a movement. His power doesn't necessarily come from a natural giftedness but from a dedicated prayer life. As a close, personal friend of Dave's, I don't know that I've ever spent time with him without spending time in prayer.

Dave lives a life we should long for and, incredibly, the kind of life that is offered to us as well. A life in which people know that our accomplishments could not have been attained by our own power. A life that brings glory to God in heaven. $\frac{4}{3}$



Supernatural Church

What the soul is in our body, the Holy Spirit is in the body of Christ, which is the church.

-Augustine-

I bet you'd agree that a group of talented, charismatic leaders can draw a crowd. Find the right creative team, musicians, and speakers, and you can grow any church. It doesn't even have to be a Christian church. The fact is that without making a conscious choice to depend on the Holy Spirit, we can do a lot. (Although without the Spirit, we wouldn't actually be drawing our next breath—but I am talking about cognizant and intentional dependence on our part.) My point is that a growing and energetic gathering is not necessarily evidence of the Holy Spirit's work.

We all have our natural talents and bents, things that we are "gifted at" (of course, the reality is that those gifts too are ultimately from God). I have friends who are gifted artists, and I love watching them paint and draw. Those of us who are artistically challenged are stunned by the beautiful works of art they create. Others are good with people and can easily work in a variety of jobs that require people skills. Still others know how to sell things, no matter what the product is. And some have the skill set required to pull off a decent church.

A while back I asked my church during a service if they thought I could successfully sell insurance as a career. I did this because I know that some

of my natural skills are connected to interacting with people and speaking. The fact is that we all have jobs that come naturally for us. Because of how I was made, I could be an insurance salesman if I had a little bit of training. And I can probably "pull off" a fairly adequate church on my own as well. But who wants or needs that?

I don't want my life to be explainable without the Holy Spirit. I want people to look at my life and know that I couldn't be doing this by my own power. I want to live in such a way that I am desperate for Him to come through. That if He doesn't come through, I am screwed. (I probably shouldn't write that word here, but it's how I truly feel about this.)

There was a time when I got excited over a crowd showing up to hear me preach, but those days are long gone. Now I deeply desire that the Spirit of God would do things that I *know* are not of me and that cannot be faked or accounted for by human reason.

I don't believe God wants me (or any of His children) to live in a way that makes sense from the world's perspective, a way I know I can "manage." I believe He is calling me—and all of us—to depend on Him for living in a way that cannot be mimicked or forged. He wants us to walk in step with His Spirit rather than depend solely on the raw talent and knowledge He's given us.

But instead of living this way, we've created a whole brand of churches that do not depend on the Spirit, a whole culture of Christians who are not disciples, a new group of "followers" who do not follow. If all God asked for were faceless numbers to fill the churches, then we would all be doing all right. Most of us would feel pretty confident. But simply having a good speaker, a service that is short and engaging, a good venue, and whatever else we add to the mix does not make a "good" or "successful" church. God

intended for His bride, those who claim His name, to be much more than this.

God is not interested in numbers. He cares most about the faithfulness, not the size, of His bride. He cares about whether people are lovers of Him. And while I might be able to get people in the doors of a church or auditorium if I tell enough jokes or use enough visuals, the fact remains that I cannot convince people to be obsessed with Jesus. Perhaps I can talk people into praying a prayer, but I cannot talk anyone into falling in love with Christ. I cannot make someone understand and accept the gift of grace. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. So by every measure that actually counts, I *need* the Holy Spirit. Desperately.

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Sometimes I leave Christian events wondering if we resemble the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18 more than Elijah, the prophet of God. If you've forgotten the story, it may be good to stop here and read that chapter, or else the rest of what I write in this section will make very little sense to you. The prophets of Baal had a loud, passionate worship gathering that lasted from morning till evening. When they were done, they had a great time of fellowship (I think you can call it that). But "no one answered; no one paid attention" (18:29). After all of that, Elijah prayed. God heard his prayer, and fire came down from heaven.

My favorite part of that story comes when it is all over and the prophets of Baal are saying, "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!" (18:39 NIV). They didn't say, "Elijah is a great speaker" or "Elijah sure knows how to connect with God!" They were stunned by *God*. They were in awe of His power. They knew that what they experienced could not have been manipulated by Elijah. They experienced the power of God.

Is that what happens at the Christian gatherings you attend? Or does it feel more like what the prophets of Baal experienced before Elijah prayed? We can have a great time singing and dancing ourselves into a frenzy. But at the end of it, fire doesn't come down from heaven. People leave talking about the people who led rather than the power of God.

This principle carries into the way we live our personal lives as well. People ought to see the transformation in our lives and respond by saying, "The Lord—He is God!"

Has anyone ever been amazed by your peace? Love? Joy? Have they ever envied your self-control? Have you ever prayed that God would so fill you with the Spirit that people would know the change could be empowered only by the Spirit? It is when we are filled with true peace and hope that people notice there is something different about us. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us both peace (Rom. 14:17) and hope (15:13).

I think we all could agree that living "according to our sinful flesh" is not what is intended for us as children of God. Yet even so, we often choose to face life's issues and circumstances in exactly the same way as someone without the Spirit of God. We worry, strive, and grieve no differently than unbelievers. While it is true that we are humans like everyone else, it is also true that we are humans with the Spirit of God dwelling in us. Yet, whether consciously or not, we essentially say to God, "I know You raised Christ from the dead; but the fact is my problems are just too much for You and I need to deal with them by myself."

Even in our daily living we can look more like the prophets of Baal as we live our lives, running about in a frenzy, trying to fix our problems, not stopping long enough to call on the power of God Almighty. Yet as children

of God, we are not called to trust in our idols or ourselves. We are made to be like Elijah, who did not question whether God would show His face that day. He prayed and asked for help, and God sent down fire from heaven in response.

Perhaps you don't need fire from heaven, but peace. Perhaps what you need is wisdom to know which decision to make. Or courage to do the right thing, even though you might lose your job. Or maybe you need love because you feel alone. Or you want people with a similar vision to journey with and support you along the way. Whatever you need, the point is that God is aware of you and your circumstances, and He knows what you really need. He is able to bring these things, people, and circumstances into your life.

But God is not a coercive God. And though He desires for His children to know peace and love and to have wisdom, I have noticed that often He waits for us to ask.

He desires to do more than "help out" a bit. He wants to completely transform us. He wants to take a timid heart and set it ablaze with strength and courage, so much so that people know something supernatural has taken place—life change just as miraculous as fire coming down from heaven. He wants to imbue us with His wisdom because He is the "spirit of wisdom and revelation" (Eph. 1:17; see Isa. 11:2). Even as the Spirit works in us to make us more like Christ, to transform us, He is also patient. This work will not be complete until His kingdom comes in full, though this does not deter Him from working now.

You are most likely familiar with the "fruit passage" in Galatians 5, which says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (vv. 22–23 NIV). You may even have the list memorized. But look over those traits right now and ask yourself if you possess each to a supernatural degree. Do you exhibit more kindness and faithfulness than the Mormons you know? Do you have more self-control than your Muslim friends? More peace than Buddhists? More joy than atheists? If GOD truly lives in you, shouldn't you expect to be different from everyone else?

What disturbs me most is when we're not really bothered that God living *in* us has not made much of a noticeable difference. Most churchgoers are content to find a bit of peace rather than a "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (Phil. 4:7). We want just enough peace to survive the week (or perhaps even the day).

Certainly there have been times in my life when just getting through the day was possible only with God's supernatural help and presence. You might understand the kind of desperate season I am talking about; most of us have experienced times like this—times when we really do have to ask for peace and sustenance every ten minutes. But what I am talking about is when we live our lives this way, when every day of our lives we are just barely hanging on, looking no different from the rest of the world.

When we exhibit the peace that surpasses the world's understanding, that's when the world notices. *That's* when people say, "Your Lord—He is God!"

Now, this chapter is not meant to make you feel guilty. But it *is* meant to be a challenge and make a space for you to take an honest look at yourself. Do you know what it's like to be filled with joy? Do you experience genuine

peace regardless of your life circumstances? Do you consistently respond with kindness no matter what you receive from others?

Can you imagine what it would be like never to get stressed-out or to worry because you are so filled with the peace and love of God? Don't you want to be characterized by these attitudes? Don't we all want peace, and self-control, and all the rest?

Notice that the subject ("fruit") in this verse is singular. It does not say that there are many *fruits* of the Spirit, but that one fruit incorporates all the different elements that follow (love, joy, peace, etc.). This certainly doesn't make it any easier.

I don't know about you, but I cannot simply muster up more love. I can't manufacture patience just by gritting my teeth and determining to be more patient. We are not strong or good enough, and it doesn't work that way. None of us can "do goodness" on our own, much less all the other elements that make up the fruit of the Spirit.

But despite our inability to change ourselves in this way, to simply become more peaceful or joyful, we expend a great deal of effort trying. We focus on what God wants us to *do* and forget the kind of people He wants us *to be*.

Instead of mustering up more willpower, let's focus our energies and time on asking for help from the One who has the power to change us. Let's take the time to ask God to put the fruit of His Spirit into our lives. And let's spend time with the One we want to be more like.

I know in my own life I don't just want to do what my mentors do; I also want to spend time with them. I have found that through spending time with those I respect, I become more like them than I would by simply trying to "do what they do." Grunting and saying through clenched teeth, "I *will* be

patient!" hasn't worked yet, and that isn't likely to change. But what does effect change is when we begin to ask God to make these fruit manifest in our lives, by the power of His Spirit, and when we spend time in communion with our God.

My favorite verse is quite possibly James 5:17, which reads, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently." Don't keep yourself from praying desperately and courageously for the Spirit to work in your life simply because you are not the prophet Elijah. As this verse says, Elijah was a human being with a nature like ours. He was just like us. The key thing about him? *He prayed fervently*.

Have you ever thought to yourself, "I'm praying to the exact same God Elijah prayed to"? Do you genuinely believe that Moses, Esther, David, and Daniel had *no* advantage over you spiritually? In fact, some would argue that you have the advantage of both the risen Christ and the indwelling Spirit. Let's stop looking at the godly men and women in Scripture as though their prayer lives are unattainable! Pray fervently, knowing that Peter and Paul and Mary and Ruth were men and women "with a nature like ours" (James 5:17). I know that I tend to run from situations where I need God, and I think that is true of almost every one of us. It is safer to avoid situations where we need God to come through than to stake it all on Him and risk God's silence. If Elijah had not had the courage to face down the prophets of Baal that day, if he hadn't prayed fervently and courageously, then he would not have experienced God's power in such a profound way. But in moments of doubt, I can't help but think, What if God hadn't sent down fire that day and Elijah ended up in the same predicament as the *prophets of Baal? What then?*

This is certainly not a call to demand that God prove Himself in each and every circumstance that we manufacture. But it is a profound reminder that God delights in showing up when His people are in desperate need of Him, because that means no one else can steal His glory.

.....

Let's delve into the Old Testament once again and look at the story of Gideon in Judges 7. Gideon started with an army thirty-two thousand men strong. In several stages, God purposely dwindled it to three hundred men. I think God did this so that no one could say, "Look what we did!" Instead, everyone knew that it was God's power that defeated the enemy. Only through God could a tiny army of three hundred men rout the much larger Midianite army.

God wants the praise for what we do in our lives. But if we never pray audacious, courageous prayers, how can He answer them? If we never follow Him to positions where we need Him, how can He show up and make His presence known?

Can you, along with Elijah and Gideon, say that when people see your life they respond by praising our Father?

When I live by my own power and strength, relying solely on my natural talents to see me through, then people naturally praise me for how I am living. But when I am living in a way that requires me to depend on the Holy Spirit, people respond by praising my Father in heaven.

.....

When was the last time you experienced the hand of God? Ask yourself. Think about the times in your life when you have been touched by God in a way that no one could convince you was a coincidence. These may not be "fire from heaven" or "voice like thunder" kinds of experiences; perhaps it

was the wordless whisper of hope when you were overwhelmed by depression. Or perhaps you experienced God through the unconditional acceptance of another human being. Or maybe you glimpsed some of His character through a sunset that just made you stop and worship. We experience God through a variety of means, and God delights to communicate and share Himself with His beloved daughters and sons.

The Holy Spirit is present throughout the New Testament as well as the Old Testament. I believe in Him because I believe the Scriptures. But even if you took away what I "know" about the Holy Spirit from reading the Scriptures, my "right answers" about the Holy Spirit, I would still believe.

I would still believe in the Spirit because I have experienced God the Holy Spirit working in and through and around my life in ways I cannot deny or ignore. I certainly do not advocate ignoring the Scriptures or basing everything on experience, but to completely ignore experience—including your personal experience and the experience of the wider body of Christ, both now and historically—is unbiblical.

If you have not known and experienced God in ways you cannot deny, I would suggest that you are not living in a needy and dependent way. God delights to show up when His children call on His name and when they are trusting fully in Him to come through, whether that is in relationships, in battling sin, in strength to make sacrifices, or in endurance to be faithful in daily life. Are you living this way? Or are you surviving only by your own strength, by your own wits?

We Were Family

A while back a former gang member came to our church. He was heavily tattooed and rough around the edges, but he was curious to see what church was like. He had a relationship with Jesus and seemed to get fairly involved with the church.

After a few months, I found out the guy was no longer coming to the church. When asked why he didn't come anymore, he gave the following explanation: "I had the wrong idea of what church was going to be like. When I joined the church, I thought it was going to be like joining a gang. You see, in the gangs we weren't just nice to each other once a week—we were family." That killed me because I knew that what he expected is what the church is intended to be. It saddened me to think that a gang could paint a better picture of commitment, loyalty, and family than the local church body.

The church is intended to be a beautiful place of community. A place where wealth is shared and when one suffers, everyone suffers. A place where when one rejoices, everyone rejoices. A place where everyone experiences real love and acceptance in the midst of great honesty about our brokenness. Yet most of the time this is not even close to how we would describe our churches.

Without the Spirit of God in our midst, working in us, guiding us, and living and loving through us, we will never be the kind of people who make up this kind of community. There is no such thing as a real believer who doesn't have the Holy Spirit, or a real church without the Spirit. It's just not possible. But what is possible is that we would individually and corporately quench and hinder the Spirit's activity in and through our lives.

As for me, I am tired of talking about what we are going to do. I am sick of talking about helping people, of brainstorming and conferencing about ways we can be radical and make sacrifices. I don't want to merely talk anymore. Life is too short. I don't want to speak about Jesus; I want to

know Jesus. I want to be Jesus to people. I don't want just to write about the Holy Spirit; I want to experience His presence in my life in a profound way.

A few months ago, the elders at Cornerstone Church began to ask the question "Why don't we live like the believers who made up the first church?" In Acts 2:42–47 we read the following:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (TNIV)

What followed was a beautiful time of sharing as our elders laid "everything" at one another's feet. We surrendered the keys to our cars, homes, and bank accounts. The elders looked me in the eyes and said, "What's mine is yours. If anything ever happens to you, I will support and care for your kids *as much as* I would care for my own. I will be your life insurance." And because they had a history of genuine sacrifice for the sake of the gospel, I believed what they said.

From there, we began going to some of our friends in the congregation and expressing our commitment to them. And now this mentality is spreading. New life is permeating the church as individuals back up their words with sacrifice. Cars and homes are being sold or given away. Expensive vacations are joyfully replaced with caring for others. People are being welcomed into others' homes—not only for meals, but to live. This is a small example of the kinds of things that happen when people start to walk with the Spirit and ask the Holy Spirit to affect every part of their lives.

I just shared about what a few people in one church in one city in one country are doing. What else might it look like when people begin to walk with the Spirit, submitting everything to Him? Dream a little with me. This will look different in various cultures around the world. The Spirit will lead believers in Beijing to do different things from believers in the United Kingdom or Argentina.

This is just a hint of what happens when we begin to actually live like we need the Spirit. For us at Cornerstone Church, it is only the beginning.

Forceful or Forced?

When I read the book of Acts, I see the church as an unstoppable force. Nothing could thwart what God was doing, just as Jesus foretold: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). The church was powerful and spreading like wildfire, not because of clever planning, but by a movement of the Spirit. Riots, torture, poverty, or any other type of persecution couldn't stop it. Isn't that the type of church movement we all long to be a part of?

So much of what we see today is anything but unstoppable. It can easily be derailed by the resignation of a pastor or an internal church disagreement or budget cuts. Churches we build only by our own efforts and not in the strength of the Spirit will quickly collapse when we don't push and prod them along. I spent years asking God to be part of whatever I was doing. When I read the book of Acts, I see people privileged to play a part in what God was doing.

Recently we held a discussion about how to solve some of the evident problems in our church. One of our pastors spoke up and said, "I think we're trying too hard." He went on to share of the supernatural things that had taken place through his prayer life. At that point, we decided to stop talking and thinking. The next hour was spent intensely in prayer. We never got "back to business" that day. While there is a time to brainstorm and think and act well using the gifts God has given us, far too often we never get to prayer (much less start, end, and allow it to permeate all that we do). Let's pray that God would build His church, an unstoppable force, empowered and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

.....

No matter where you live and what your days look like, you have the choice each day to depend on yourself, to live safely, and to try to control your life. Or you can live as you were created to live—as a temple of the Holy Spirit of God, as a person dependent on Him, desperate for God the Spirit to show up and make a difference. When you begin living a life characterized by walking with the Spirit, that is when people will begin to look not to you but to our Father in heaven and give Him the praise.

My prayer as I've written this book is that it would not merely add to your knowledge. Maybe that sounds strange, but I mean it. Often in Christian circles we talk about truth in lieu of applying it to our lives. We hear an incisive sermon, discuss at lunch afterward how "great" or "powerful" it was, and then never think about it again, much less allow the Spirit to change us through it. The truth is that greater knowledge does not

necessarily equal greater spirituality. Knowledge can lead to greater intimacy and a deeper relationship with God, but this is not an automatic effect.

Our Scriptures teach that if you know what you are supposed to do and you don't do it, then you sin (James 4:17). In other words, when we stock up on knowledge without applying it to our lives, we are actually sinning. You would think that learning more *about* God would be a good thing ... and it can be. But when we gain knowledge *about* God without responding to Him or assimilating His truth into our lives, then it is not a good thing. According to the Bible, it's sin.

May we not merely gain knowledge. Instead, as we learn, may we grow and confess and change more into the people we've been created to be by the power of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us. "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17).



What if this last biography were about your life? What would be written here? Would we read stories about the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit or stories about what you have accomplished on your own? Don't be discouraged if there is not a lot of the Holy Spirit's working in your past. Pray in complete faith right now. Ask God to have His Spirit work so mightily in you that it would make for an amazing biography. A biography that speaks of a life so supernatural that no one would even consider giving you the glory. A biography that displays the power of the Spirit and lifts up the name of Jesus to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

AFTERWORD

My hope and prayer for you, the reader, is that church people don't try to normalize you. What I mean is that we often try to calm people down who are just too passionate or too sacrificial and radical. I know at times I have done this to other people. And I've had it done to me.

Two years ago at a dinner I sat next to a man who runs a human-trafficking awareness organization. He described how these children, most of whom were sold or abducted into the sex trade, are raped and abused every single night, again and again, how they have no one to advocate for them, and how there is no way out.

That night I lay awake in my bed for hours—literally hours—and I imagined my own children in this situation. Maybe that was a stupid thing to do, but suddenly, vividly, I was sobbing and I couldn't get the images out of my mind. I started thinking about what I would do if this really happened to my little girl. I know that I wouldn't stop until I had saved her. I would mobilize everyone I know through whatever means possible to get them to help. Lying there in my bed that night I got more and more passionate about everything I would do to save my little girl.

Then something happened. I am not one of those people who often hears God's distinct, clear voice (though I know some people do), but on this night, the Spirit of God said to me: *I want you to love them as your own children*. This was overwhelming to me. After all, if I treated these kids as though they were my own, I wouldn't stop praying for them. I also wouldn't stop passionately begging people to figure out ways to seek them out and rescue them. I literally wept for hours. The thought of these

precious children of mine being taken advantage of was unbearable. I was now on a mission. A mission from God.

I remember getting back to Cornerstone and "rallying the troops." I was so fired up, and I got others fired up. But over the course of several months I got distracted. People around me started calming me down about sex trafficking. They said, "Francis, you can't save the world," and "You're already doing so much. Don't be so hard on yourself." And the passion I believe God gave me for children in the sex-slave trade slowly eked out of me.

Things like this happen all the time. As a church, we tend to do this to people who are passionate and bold. We mellow them out. Institutionalize them. Deaden them to the work that the Spirit is doing in them. In Acts 4:13 we read of the early church doing just the opposite. Peter and John testified before the Sanhedrin and "when they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus" (NIV). The people were astonished at their courage and that they were uneducated. Right after Peter and John were released, they returned to the other believers and prayed for even more boldness and courage (4:29). Some of the boldest people (John and Peter) were the ones asking for more boldness!

Why don't we do this today? I have found that we generally do the opposite. Instead of encouraging people who are doing courageous things for God and joining them in their discernment process of how to be faithful to what God is calling them to, we tell them to slow down and back off. Instead of being astonished at believers' courage, frequently (and unfortunately) I am astonished at believers' timidity and lack of boldness. What a contrast to the biblical model we are given!

A few months ago I was speaking at a summer camp, and I was speaking to one of the organizations there that sponsors children. This volunteer told me about a sixteen-year-old girl there at the camp who sponsors fourteen children, on her own. I was astonished by this. Fourteen children (at about thirty dollars a month for each child) is a lot of money for a high school student to come up with. I talked to this girl and asked her how she did it. She told me that she works year-round and she works three jobs in the summertime to pay for the child support. While other teenagers are saving for a car, she's saving lives! Instead of spending her hard-earned money on herself and her future, she gives it to these fourteen children because she believes God loves them just as much as He loves her.

My prayer is that churchgoers will not dissuade her from this calling. That they won't tell her things like, "You really need to start thinking about yourself now. Your future and your education are important. What you've done is great, but it's time to think about what's next for you." Maybe this girl will stand strong in her conviction that the children she is supporting around the world are as important as she is ... just maybe she won't be convinced out of her passionate love and sacrifice.

My wife and I recently decided to give all of the royalties from my previous book, *Crazy Love*, to the Isaiah 58 Fund. All of the money goes to the needy in the world—the starving, sick, impoverished, and to those in the sex-slave trade. We reasoned that if we kept all this money, we would end up spending it on things we didn't need. We knew that in the long run (eighty years from now), there would be no regrets. But if we bought things that wouldn't last beyond our time on earth, we would end up disappointed and regretful. I was a bit shocked and discouraged by some of the responses we received.

People told us that we were being foolish and irresponsible with the gifts God gave us. They said we should have at least put some away in case of an emergency. My response back was, "Is it not an emergency that children in Cambodia and Thailand and even the United States are being raped every single day of their lives? Why is that not an emergency?" I think the church often inadvertently teaches that the sex-slave trade is not an emergency. And this, I believe, is sin. Is an emergency only an emergency if it affects me and my immediate family?

I am not saying that every person is supposed to give all the money from their jobs to support children. Or that everyone has to create a fund from the royalties of their books. Or that each and every person is meant to get involved with organizations that work against the sex-slave trade. What I am saying, though, is that instead of thinking and telling people they are crazy when they feel like the Spirit is leading them into something that doesn't necessarily make sense to us, we should join them in the discernment process. Instead of discouraging people, we should pray for more insight and boldness. Instead of deadening people to the Spirit's leading with our words and our actions, we should celebrate and join the Spirit's movement in and through them!

This is not about one specific way of living radically. It is about discerning and obeying the Spirit's voice, especially when He asks you to do something that is hard, a little beyond "normal," and that requires sacrifice. This is a twofold thing: It is both about encouraging others to obey the Spirit's leadings and about listening to and obeying His leading in your own life. Do you feel bold and powerful? Whether your answer is yes or no, all of us need to ask for more courage and boldness.

So, finally, I just want to spend these last few paragraphs praying with you, the reader.

Spirit, we know that we have done wrong by You. Please forgive us for grieving, resisting, and quenching You. We have resisted You through sin, through our rebellion, and through our hardness of heart. At times, we have been spiritually blind. At other times, we knew what You wanted us to do, but we chose to ignore Your promptings. Yet this is not how we want to live now.

We need You to change us. Only through You can we truly worship. Spirit of the Lord, You are the one who brings us to a place where we can worship. You are the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of holiness, the Spirit of life. Thank You for the truth, the holiness, and the life You give us.

We need Your wisdom and understanding as we seek to live this life. Keep us from disbelief, from fear. We need Your strength to help us do what you are asking us to do and to live how You are asking us to live. Speak loudly and drown out the other voices calling us to conform to the patterns of this world.

You are the Spirit of self-control and love. Give us the self-control needed to deny our flesh and follow You. Give us a love strong enough to motivate courageous action. Manifest Yourself through us that we may serve and love Your bride, the church, as You do.

Come, Holy Spirit, come. We don't know exactly what that means and looks like for each of us yet, in the particular places You've called us to inhabit. But, nonetheless, whatever it means, we ask for Your presence. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

NOTES

- 1. See <u>www.JoniandFriends.org</u>.
- 2. See www.Rationalpi.com/theshelter/ and www.Labri.org.
- <u>3.</u> Esther Ahn Kim, *If I Perish* (Chicago: Moody Publishing, 2001).
- <u>4.</u> See <u>www.chfus.org</u>.

ABOUT THE COAUTHOR

Danae Yankoski graduated from Westmont College, where she studied English Literature and met her best friend, now husband, Mike. An avid reader and writer from a young age, Danae has authored, coauthored, and contributed to several books including *Things I've Learned Lately, Crazy Love*, and *Zealous Love: A Guide to Social Justice*. Some of Danae's favorite aspects of life include mugs of tea and thought-provoking conversation; hiking, running, growing things, and being outside; interacting with different kinds of people; and playing with her black Lab, Elliott. She and Mike recently moved to Vancouver, BC, where they are pursuing their Masters of Christian Studies.

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"Chan writes with infectious exuberance, challenging Christians to take the Bible seriously. He describes at length the sorry state of 'lukewarm' Christians who strive for a life characterized by control, safety, and an absence of suffering. In stark contrast, the book offers real-life accounts of believers who have given all—time, money, health, even their lives—in obedience to Christ's call. Chan also recounts his own attempts to live 'crazy' by significantly downsizing his home and giving away his resources

to the poor. Earnest Christians will find valuable take-home lessons from Chan's excellent book."

Publishers Weekly

"In Francis Chan's unique style, and with an urgency that seeks to awaken a sleeping church mired in the comfort of middle ground, Crazy Love quickly gets to the heart of the matter and leaves you wanting more ... more of the matchless Jesus who offers radical life for all right now."

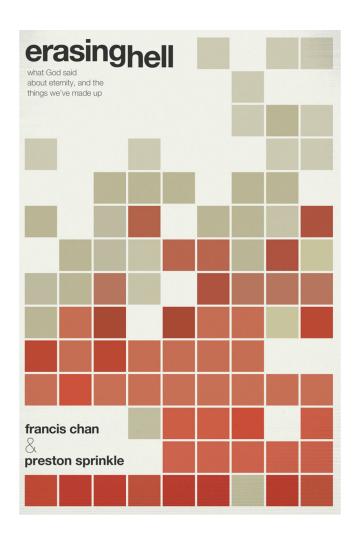
Louie Giglio, visionary architect, director of Passion Conferences, and author of *I Am Not*, *but I Know I AM*

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Kirk Cameron, actor and author of *Still Growing*



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what God said about eternity, and the things we made up

francis chan & preston sprinkle



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Preface

I wrote this book with my friend Preston. I recruited his help because he can interact with issues at a deeper level than I can. His expertise in language, history, and the New Testament has helped tremendously in our effort to be thorough and precise. Preston studied first-century Judaism for his doctorate and has published many works in this area. We thought it would be a good partnership because we have different gifts but similar convictions. As we wrote the book, we decided to write it with one voice (Francis's). Truth be told, the majority of research was done by Preston.

While Preston and I wrote this book, it could not have been completed without the meticulous help of many in our community. First and foremost, Mark Beuving contributed many hours to editing, correcting, and rewriting sections with precision and care. Also, many staff at Eternity Bible College and Cornerstone Church in Simi Valley set aside precious hours to read through early drafts. Thank you, Joshua, Spencer, Yvonne, Todd, and Matt. Your comments were invaluable. I also solicited the help of many scholars, who combed through the book, or portions of it, to make sure my interpretations of Scripture were sound. These scholars include Dr. Timothy Gombis (Grand Rapids Theological Seminary), Dr. Tremper Longman III (Westmont College), Dr. Joseph Dodson (Ouachita Baptist University), Dr. Simon Gathercole (Cambridge University), and Dr. Scott Hafemann (St. Andrews University). Although I didn't intend this to be a "scholarly" book, its subject matter demanded the utmost caution in handling the biblical text. I am therefore grateful for the close inspection it received before going to print.

However, no matter how many human filters we solicited to purify the words of this book, it's still fallible. Because of this, we have included many direct quotes from Scripture. Read the Scriptures we've quoted as truth directly from the mouth of God. Pause and meditate deeply on the verses whenever they arise. Those words are ultimately what God wants you to cherish and embrace.

Introduction

If you are excited to read this book, you have issues.

Do you understand the weight of what we are about to consider? We are exploring the possibility that you and I may end up being tormented in hell. *Excited* would be the wrong term to use here. *Necessary* would be more fitting.

For some, this discussion will open up old wounds. It certainly does for me.

The saddest day of my life was the day I watched my grandmother die. When that EKG monitor flatlined, I freaked out. I absolutely lost it! According to what I knew of the Bible, she was headed for a life of neverending suffering. I thought I would go crazy. I have never cried harder, and I don't ever want to feel like that again. Since that day, I have tried not to think about it. It has been over twenty years.

Even as I write that paragraph, I feel sick. I would love to erase hell from the pages of Scripture.

How about you? Have you ever struggled with hell as I have? Do you have any parents, siblings, cousins, or friends who, based on what you have been taught, will end up in hell? What a bone-chilling thought. Until recently, whenever the idea of hell—and the idea of my loved ones possibly heading there—crossed my mind, I would brush it aside and divert my thinking to something more pleasant. While I've always believed in hell with my mind, I tried not to let the doctrine penetrate my heart.

But I reached a point where I could no longer do this. I could no longer acknowledge hell with my lips while preventing my heart from feeling its

weight. I had to figure out if the Bible actually taught the existence of a literal hell. How great would it be if it *didn't?* Then I would be able to embrace my grandmother again someday.

So I decided to write a book about hell. And honestly—I'm scared to death.

I'm scared because so much is at stake. Think about it. If I say there is no hell, and it turns out that there is a hell, I may lead people into the very place I convinced them did not exist! If I say there is a hell, and I'm wrong, I may persuade people to spend their lives frantically warning loved ones about a terrifying place that isn't real! When it comes to hell, we can't afford to be wrong. This is not one of those doctrines where you can toss in your two cents, shrug your shoulders, and move on. Too much is at stake. Too many *people* are at stake. And the Bible has too much to say.

Who Should I Believe?

Part of me doesn't *want* to believe in hell. And I'll admit that I have a tendency to read into Scripture what I want to find—maybe you do too. Knowing this, I've spent many hours fasting and praying that God would prevent my desires from twisting Scripture to gratify my personal preferences. And I encourage you to do the same. Don't believe something just because you want to, and don't embrace an idea just because you've always believed it. Believe what is biblical. Test all your assumptions against the precious words God gave us in the Bible.

There are many things that I believed and practiced for years, only to change my views after further study of the Bible. I've learned to be okay with saying, "I think I was off on that one." While this is humbling and difficult, it's better than continuing to believe something that is inaccurate.

For example, I was "initiated" into the American church when people urged me to pray a prayer to "receive Christ" so I wouldn't burn in hell. After years of leading others down the same path, I changed. I now speak against this idea of simply praying a prayer as fire insurance—I just don't see it anywhere in Scripture.

I was also taught that the Holy Spirit no longer empowers our lives with miraculous deeds, because these "ceased" long ago. For many years, I discouraged people from pursuing the supernatural. After further study of Scripture, I now believe that the Spirit can heal the incurable, accomplish the impossible, and ignite believers to do greater works than Jesus (John 14:12). And I urge people to believe the same.

I have distanced myself from traditional forms of "church" in pursuit of what I believe is more biblical. I don't believe God wants our church life to be centered on buildings and services. Instead, God wants our churches—whatever specific forms our gatherings take—to be focused on active discipleship, mission, and the pursuit of unity.

At one point, I even sold my house, quit my job, and left the country because I didn't want any of my comforts to hold me back from pursuing God wholeheartedly. I wanted to follow God wherever He led me.

Why do I tell you all this?

I'm not going to hang on to the idea of hell simply because it's what my tradition tells me to believe. And neither should you.

Let's be eager to leave what is familiar for what is true. Nothing outside of God and His truth should be sacred to us. And so it is with hell. If hell is some primitive myth left over from conservative tradition, then let's set it on that dusty shelf next to other traditional beliefs that have no basis in Scripture. But if it is true, if the Bible does teach that there is a literal hell

awaiting those who don't believe in Jesus, then this reality must change us. It should certainly purge our souls of all complacency.

As we roll up our sleeves and dig into the topic of hell, it's important that you don't distance what the Bible says from reality. In other words, don't forget that the *doctrine* you are studying may be the *destiny* of many people. Hell should not be studied without tearful prayer. We must weep, pray, and fast over this issue, begging God to reveal to us through His Word the truth about hell. Because we can't be wrong on this one.

Let God Be God

But this book is actually much more than a book on hell. It's a book about embracing a God who isn't always easy to understand, and whose ways are far beyond us; a God whose thoughts are much higher than our thoughts; a God who, as the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of all things, has every right to do, as the psalmist says, "whatever He pleases" (Ps. 115:3 NASB).

God has the right to do WHATEVER He pleases.

If I've learned one thing from studying hell, it's that last line. And whether or not you end up agreeing with everything I say about hell, you must agree with Psalm 115:3. Because at the end of the day, our feelings and wants and heartaches and desires are not ultimate—only God is ultimate. God tells us plainly that His ways and thoughts are infinitely higher than ours (Isa. 55:9). Expect then, that Scripture will say things that don't agree with your natural way of thinking.

This is why we need to pray. We need to ask God to help us think rightly about hell. Before you read this book, I ask that you pray. Seriously. Pray. I'm the type of person who never does what a book tells me to do, and maybe you are too. But I ask you to make this one exception. Pray before

you read this book. The following is the gist of the prayers I prayed as I journeyed along in the writing of this book. It's also my prayer for you as you wrestle with this important issue:

God, I want to know what is true. I know I have cravings that sway and distort my ability to reason. You promise that Your Holy Spirit will guide me into all truth. I pray that He will now. I don't want to be wrong. I don't want to be deceived by others or myself. You alone possess all truth, and I want to be on Your side. Give me eyes to see and ears to hear. Give me courage to live and speak what is right no matter the cost. I don't want to believe anything about You that is not true. Amen.

Chapter 1

Does Everyone Go to Heaven?

Does everyone go to heaven?

Based on what I hear at funerals, the answer is an overwhelming "Yes!" How many funerals have you attended where this was even in question?

What we need to do is get down to what the Bible says about the matter. Questions about heaven and hell are too important to leave to our feelings or assumptions. But before we examine the biblical answers to these things, we have to settle an important question.

Do you want to believe in a God who shows His power by punishing non-Christians and who magnifies His mercy by blessing Christians forever?

Do you *want* to? Be honest.

Do you *want* to believe in a God like this? Here's my gut-level, honest answer:

No.

No way. I have family and friends who reject Jesus. I do not *want* to believe in a God who punishes non-Christians. Okay, maybe He should punish extremely wicked people—that makes some sense. But punishment in hell for seemingly good people, or those who simply chose the wrong religion? That feels a bit harsh, at least according to my sense of justice.

But let me ask you another question. *Could* you?

Could you believe in a God who decides to punish people who don't believe in Jesus? A God who wants to show His power by punishing those who don't follow His Son?

Now that's a different question, isn't it? You may not recognize the difference immediately, but read them again and you'll see that these two questions—do you want to? versus could you?—are actually miles apart.

The problem is that we often respond to the second question *because of* our response to the first. In other words, because there are things that we don't *want* to believe about God, we therefore decide that we *can't* believe them.

Let me be more specific and personal. I *want* everyone to be saved. I do. I *don't want* anyone to go to hell. The fact is, I would love for all people to stand before Christ on judgment day and have a chance to say, "They were right all along, Jesus. You really are the Savior. I am so sorry for not believing in You before, but I believe now. Can I have a second chance?"

I want to believe in a God who will save everyone in the end.

But is this what God says He will do? Do the Scriptures teach this? Despite what we may want to believe, we've got to figure out what God told us to believe in His Word. That's what this chapter is all about. We're going to tackle the question: Does the Bible say that everyone will be saved in the end?

Universalism: A Brief Survey

Throughout history, some Christians have not only wanted God to save everyone but have gone on to argue that the Bible says He will. This view is called Universalism.¹ The most famous proponent of Universalism was an

early church leader named Origen (ca. AD 185–254), who seemed to teach this, though his views were very complex and not always consistent.² Origen's beliefs were later deemed heretical,³ but this didn't stop others from embracing the view that everyone will be saved—though advocates were always a minority. In fact, for over 1,600 years, hardly any major theologians argued that everyone will be saved. This all began to change in the 1800s, when several thinkers resurrected Origen's beliefs and put them back on the table. Today, there are a growing number of confessing Christians who reflect in one way or another the views of Origen on matters of salvation and the afterlife. Even some evangelicals, such as Thomas Talbott and Gregory MacDonald, have argued that God will end up saving everyone in the end.⁴

Most recently, author Rob Bell finds this view compelling. With creativity and wit, he sets forth a similar position, though he avoids the label *Universalism*. Nevertheless, Bell suggests that every single person will embrace Jesus—if not in this life, then certainly in the next. He writes:

At the heart of this perspective is the belief that, given enough time, everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God's presence. The love of God will melt every hard heart, and even the most "depraved sinners" will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God.⁶

It's important to understand that Universalism comes in many shapes and sizes. This is why we have to be careful about slapping the label *Universalist* on people who say that everyone will end up being saved. The term *Universalist* is about as specific as the term *Baptist*. If you call

someone a Baptist, all you've said is that they don't baptize babies—beyond this, it's pretty much up for grabs. In the same way, all Universalists believe that everyone will end up being saved, but this belief is expressed in a variety of ways.

For instance, there are *non-Christian* Universalists. Sometimes called *Pluralists*, these people believe that Jesus is one of many ways to salvation. Pluralists believe that all religions present equally valid ways of salvation—Christianity is simply one among many.

Then there are *Christian* Universalists, some of whom call themselves *hopeful* Universalists. They believe that Christ is the only way, but they hold out hope that God will end up saving everyone through Christ in the end. But they go beyond simply *hoping* this will happen (don't we all?). They're hopeful, *and* they see strong biblical support for this view, though their view is often tempered with caution.

The least cautious *Christian* Universalists call themselves *dogmatic* Universalists. Like the previous group, they believe that Christ is the only way, but they go a bit further and say that the Bible clearly teaches that all will be saved. They find the view not just possible, but the most probable: They believe that the Bible clearly teaches that all will be saved through Jesus in the end.

It's important, then, to understand that *Christian* Universalists (hopeful and dogmatic) believe that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ and Christ alone. There's nothing untraditional about this. The difference is that they believe people will have another chance (or many chances) after death to believe in Jesus and be saved.

Universalism in the Bible

But how do they arrive at these views? As attractive as this position is, does anything in the Bible support the idea that God will end up saving everyone?

Maybe. At first glance, some passages seem to support the notion that everyone will be saved. But after taking a closer look, it doesn't appear that they do. We don't have time or space to cover every passage used to support Christian Universalism, so we'll take a look at a few of the big ones: Philippians 2, 1 Corinthians 15, 1 Timothy 2, and Revelation 21. We'll then conclude by looking at what the Bible says about choosing Jesus after we die.

Every Knee Will Bow

If you were on a deserted island and you uncorked an empty bottle containing Philippians 2:9–11, you would probably be a Universalist. After talking about Christ's humble life, death, and resurrection, Paul says:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The key phrase here is "every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (vv. 10–11). By itself, this could mean that every single individual who ever lived will embrace Jesus—if not in this life, then surely in the next.

But all we would need is for the rest of the Philippian letter to float ashore in order to see that Philippians 2:9–11 doesn't teach universal salvation. In Philippians 1:28, Paul says that those who oppose the gospel will face "destruction," while those who embrace it will be saved. There's a contrast here between believers and unbelievers; each have very different destinies. In Philippians 3:19, Paul refers to the enemies of Christ whose "end is destruction," while followers of Jesus look forward to resurrection and glory (3:20–21). Once more, there's a contrast. A contrast between believers and unbelievers and their individual destinies (note the word *end* in 3:19), which follow the decisions they make in this life.

We also need to see that Paul in Philippians 2 is actually quoting from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Here, the prophet Isaiah looks forward to a time when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess the name of God (45:23). But in that passage, Isaiah is referring to God's salvation, which is *witnessed* among the nations and embraced by *some* but not all. In fact, Isaiah himself, in the very passage that Paul quotes, says that there will be some who embrace salvation and some who continue to resist it.²

So what does Philippians 2:9–11 mean? It means that there will come a day when Christ returns to reclaim His creation, and *everyone will acknowledge this*. King Jesus will reign, and none will be able to deny it. But Paul doesn't contradict Isaiah.⁸ With this salvation and reign also comes judgment for those who opposed Christ in this life. Isaiah said this in the very next verse (45:24), and Paul affirms it as well (Phil. 1:28; 3:19).

All Will Be Made Alive

Several passages in the New Testament describe God restoring all people or reconciling all things to Himself. These verses are often used to prove that God will save every single person. Here are a few of the big ones:

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (1 Cor. 15:22)

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:19)

In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:19–20)

[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim. 2:4)

In looking at these passages, one Christian Universalist says, "Paul envisioned a time when all persons would be reconciled to God in the full redemptive sense." ¹⁰

Is that what these passages are saying, or is there something else going on?

There seems to be something else going on in 1 Corinthians 15:22, for instance, where Paul says, "In Christ all will be made alive" (NIV). The verse by itself could mean that everyone will end up being saved, but the context doesn't support this interpretation. When Paul says "all will be made alive," he's clearly thinking about the resurrection of *believers* at the second coming of Christ. In fact, he says this very thing in the next verse:

"All who belong to Christ will be made alive at his coming" (see vv. 22–23). So the verse can't mean that everyone will be saved in the end. In fact, following this verse is a whole lot of destruction: destruction of everyone and everything that opposes God in this life (vv. 25–26). This is why Paul concludes the letter with a forceful warning that everyone who does not love Jesus will be damned (16:22).

So in this case, "all" doesn't mean every single person. And this is a good thing to keep in mind when looking at 1 Corinthians 15:22 and other passages like it. You've got to figure out from the context what "all" means. For instance, when Mark said that "all the country of Judea" and "all the people of Jerusalem" were going out to be baptized by John (Mark 1:5 NASB), he certainly didn't mean every single individual in Judea—man, woman, and child. "All" here simply denotes a large number of people. In Acts 21:28, Paul is accused of preaching to "all men everywhere" (NASB). Did Paul really share the gospel with every single person on earth? Again, "all" means a whole lot of people in many different places, not every single individual.

So "all" doesn't always mean everything or everyone. And the same goes for 1 Corinthians 15:22, as is clear from the context. The "all" who will be "made alive" in Christ refers to believers of all types, not every single person.

Does God Get What God Wants?

The same goes for 1 Timothy 2:4, which says: God "wants all people to be saved" (TNIV).

We could spin a provocative question out of this verse by asking, *Does God get what God wants*?¹³ And this would set up a rhetorical slam dunk.

Of course God gets what He wants! Otherwise, He's not God. Or if He is God, He's not very powerful.

But hold on a second. This question of God getting what He wants passes over two other important questions about 1 Timothy 2:4: (1) What's the meaning of "all," and (2) what does the word *want* mean in this context?

The first question is fairly easy to answer in light of our discussion above. Once again, the context is key. Just a few verses earlier, Paul commands Timothy to pray for "all people" (1 Tim. 2:1), and this command is based on God's desire to save "all people" (v. 4). If we take the second "all people" to mean every single person, then surely we've got to take the other "all" in the same way. Does Paul really want us to march through a prayer list that includes every person on the face of the earth? Maybe this wouldn't be a bad thing, but I don't think this is Paul's point here. In 1 Timothy 2:1–2, he qualifies the prayer for "all people" by adding "for kings and all who are in high positions." It seems that Paul is urging Timothy to pray for all types of people—even those Roman leaders who may persecute Christians!

It's probably the case that Paul wants Timothy to *pray* for all types of people because God is on a mission to *save* all types of people.

What then does Paul mean by "want"? This issue is a bit more complicated, because this word can mean all sorts of different things. In any case, the word *want* does not have to mean that God wants something and is doing all He can to get it, in the same way that I want a coffee refill and simply walk up to the counter and get it. In fact, Paul, who said that God wants all people to be saved, also said that God "wants" all Christians to be sexually pure (1 Thess. 4:3).¹⁴

Ever met a Christian who was not sexually pure? Does this mean that God is not getting what God wants?

To figure out the meaning of "want," it's helpful to consider what theologians have called God's *moral* will and His *decreed* will. Some things may be part of God's desire for the world, and yet these desires can be resisted. God doesn't *desire* that people sin, but He allows it to happen because humans are moral agents who often make evil choices. God is not a puppet master who pulls everyone's strings to suit His will. That's why the Lord taught us to pray things like "your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). God's desire—His *moral* will—is resisted.

And then there's God's *decreed* will. This refers to those things that God makes happen regardless of what humans decide. He sometimes uses our bad choices—our rebellion against His *moral* will—to carry out His *decreed* will. There's a difference, in other words, between God's *values* that please Him (moral will) and those *events* that He causes to happen (decreed will).¹⁵

Is this getting too heavy? Maybe an illustration will help. In Judges 14—16, we read about a loose cannon named Samson. Though he was mighty in warfare, his moral compass was significantly flawed, as seen in his love for ladies of the pagan sort. At the beginning of the story, Samson fell in love with a Philistine woman, which was against God's *moral will* (Judg. 3:1–6). And yet Judges 14:4 says that his love affair was "from the LORD." God was "seeking an opportunity against the Philistines," and so He used Samson's lust to oppose the Philistines. Samson's love for pagan women went against God's *moral* will, but became part of God's *decreed* will. Samson was free to go against God's *moral* will, yet God intervened to carry out His *decreed* will in using this situation to fight against the Philistines.

Now back to 1 Timothy 2. In what sense does God *want* all people to be saved? The word underscores God's *moral* will, His desire to save all types

of people. They are free to reject this because it isn't God's decreed will, but the verse captures God's heart nonetheless. So a question framed as, does God get what God wants? implies that if He doesn't save everyone as He set out to, then He's a failure. But this is a naive assumption at best; at worst, the rhetoric is tremendously misleading.

Paul's point is *not* that Timothy is to pray for every single person who ever lived, and neither is it that God has decreed that He will save everyone. The point of 1 Timothy 2 and other passages like it (e.g., 2 Peter 3:9) is that God is not a bigot; He's not a racist; He loves to reverse social-class distinctions because His love knows no boundaries. The gospel has broken down all ethnic and socioeconomic barriers through the cross of Jesus Christ, as Paul says elsewhere (Eph. 2:11–22). God even wants pedophile maniacs like Caesar Nero (i.e., "kings and all who are in high positions" in 1 Tim. 2:2) to repent and come to Jesus! Paul nearly got to Nero with the gospel and had his head chopped off in the process. But that's another story.

Who Left the Gate Open?

Let's flip to the last book of the Bible, where some argue that all will ultimately be saved. Revelation 21 envisions believers flowing into the "New Jerusalem," which in one way or another depicts our final state. John, the writer, says that "its gates will never be shut" (v. 25) and that "the kings of the earth" will "bring their glory into" the New Jerusalem (v. 24). But who left that gate open? What is John saying by using this image of open gates? Some have taken this to mean that God will forever wait with open arms (or open gates) for unbelievers to turn to Him. "Once they have been purified in the lake of fire," says one writer, "those most vile of all men … will be free to enter the New Jerusalem through gates that never close." ¹⁷

But does the image of open gates show that "those who have said no to God's love in this life" will have endless opportunities to say yes to it in the afterlife?¹⁸ This is an interesting suggestion. I would love to believe it, but three things in the text make it hard for me to accept that theory. First, Revelation 20 and 21 have already described the "lake of fire" as the final destiny of those who don't follow Jesus in this life. There's nothing in Revelation that suggests there's hope on the other side of the lake. Second, there's nothing in the text that says the lake of fire is intended to *purify* the wicked. On the contrary, the judgment scene in 20:11–15 explains that the lake of fire is for *punishment*.¹⁹ And third, even after the open-gates passage of 21:24–26, John goes on to depict two different destinies for believers and unbelievers:

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. (22:14–15)

This passage says that there will be an ongoing separation between believers and unbelievers. What determines their destinies is whether or not they "wash[ed] their robes;" in other words, whether or not their sin has been dealt with through the blood of Jesus in *this life* (see Rev. 7:14). I think it's a stretch to suggest that unbelievers can wash their robes while in the lake of fire and then enter the gates.

To sum it up, there are some passages in the New Testament that seem to say everyone will be saved. But after looking at the context, we see that these passages probably don't mean this. Not only would this contradict many other passages that speak of judgment and retribution (as we will see in the following chapters), it doesn't align well with the context of the passages themselves.

What about Those Passages That Say There Will Be a Second Chance?

I said at the beginning that the one thing all Christian Universalists agree upon is that after death there will be another chance (or an endless string of chances) to choose Jesus. The Universalist view depends upon it. So we need to wrestle with all the postmortem second-chance passages to see if they actually teach this view. The problem is, there aren't any passages that say this.

No passage in the Bible says that there will be a second chance after death to turn to Jesus.

And that's frightening. It's frightening because the idea of an after-death conversion is the most important ingredient for the Universalist position. It makes or breaks this view. But there is no single passage in the Bible that describes, hints at, hopes for, or suggests that someone who dies without following Jesus in this life will have an opportunity to do so after death. One Christian Universalist admits this. Arguing for the possibility of people getting out of hell, he says:

Clearly my interpretation is underdetermined by the texts.... I am not so much exegeting the texts as trying to draw out the logic of New Testament theology as I understand it and its implications for those texts. In the process I may be offering ways of reading the texts that go beyond what their authors had in mind. $\frac{20}{100}$

Keep in mind that we're not simply trying to settle a doctrinal issue. We're talking about people's destinies. The thought that someone may end up banking on a second chance after they die even though the biblical authors never explicitly said this is ... well ...

Terrifying.

These are eternal *destinies* we're talking about. We can't be wrong on this one. To make a compelling case that "the love of God will melt every hard heart, and even the most 'depraved sinners' will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God"²¹ without clear biblical evidence is incredibly dangerous—especially if you are one of these "sinners" and things don't work out like this. If the doctor said your daughter is going to be fine, and she died three days later, you'd call the authorities.

The Bible does not say that there will be a second chance after death. In fact, some passages even warn against this type of false hope.

For instance, toward the end of His life, Jesus told a parable about second chances (Luke 13:22–30).²² Jesus is making His way to Jerusalem, and His disciples ask how many people will end up being saved. Jesus answers that few will be saved, but even worse, many who think they are saved will end up on the "outside" of the kingdom, so to speak. While outside, they'll knock on the door to see if Jesus will let them in. What will happen when Jesus comes to the door?

According to those who believe that there are second chances after death, Jesus answers, "Come on in!" He has to, right? To think that Jesus would answer any other way is cruel. It would be unloving and unjust! Could

Jesus actually say, "'Door's locked. Sorry. If you had been here earlier, I could have done something. But now, it's too late'"?²³

Yes, actually, He could. Though we may wish for the door to fling open, Jesus says that He will do the opposite:

"When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.... Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out." (Luke 13:25–28)

This passage "gives no hint whatever that the door will remain permanently open."²⁴ If Jesus believed in second chances for those who reject Him in this life, then this parable is dangerously misleading.

For those who follow Jesus, there is everlasting life in the presence of God, but for those who don't follow Him, there will be punishment. And as we have seen in this chapter, the Bible doesn't seem to hold out hope for a second chance. How scary this is for those who will find themselves on the other side of the door wanting to come in, banging and begging, wishing they had made some different choices while they had the opportunity.

It's sobering to think about this parable. Jesus did not say these words so we would one day merely discuss them in a book. Like all Scripture, this parable is meant to impact our souls. Please take some time to at least read it again. Read it with care. Read it with conviction, knowing that there will be people on the outside, in a terrible place of punishment.

A place called hell.

Notes

- 1 For a historical survey, see Richard Bauckham, "Universalism—A Historical Survey," *Themelios* 4.2 (1979): 48–54; Morwenna Ludlow, "Universalism in the History of Christianity," in Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, eds., *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003): 191–218.
- 2 For elaboration on the inconsistencies of Origen's thought, especially his views on universal salvation, see Mark S. M. Scott, "Guarding the Mysteries of Salvation: The Pastoral Pedagogy of Origen's Universalism," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18.3 (2010): 347–68; Tom Greggs, "Exclusivist or Universalist? Origen the 'Wise Steward of the Word' (*CommRom.* V.1.7) and the Issue of Genre," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9.3 (2007): 315–327.
- 3 Origen's views were deemed heretical at the fifth ecumenical church council held at Constantinople in AD 553. However, a great deal of politics drove this council, as well as other early church councils, so we shouldn't consider Origen's views heretical based solely on the decisions made at Constantinople.
- 4 Thomas Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 1999); Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006). Gregory MacDonald is a pseudonym.

- 5 In his book *Love Wins*, Bell never actually comes out and says that this is what he believes. To be fair, he is not explicitly arguing for this position but listing it as a valid view that would help explain a lot of the tension that we feel when thinking about the hard realities of hell. But he presents this position in such favorable terms that it would be hard to say that he is not advocating it. He even says the traditional view of a literal hell that features eternal torment is not "good news" at all. To use Bell's phrase, "The good news is better than that." He implies the view that all people will eventually be saved is actually much better news. So while he never says that this is the *correct* view, Bell certainly presents this view as the *good* view and the traditional view of hell as the *bad* view. See *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 110–111, 173–175.
- **6** Bell, *Love Wins*, 107.
- Zee Howard Marshall, "The New Testament Does Not Teach Universal Salvation," in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation*, 68–69. This reading is supported by the conclusion of the book of Isaiah, which depicts two groups of people, those on God's side and those who remain against Him: "[A]ll flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD. And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh" (66:23–24). And that's how Isaiah ends. There will be restoration for those who turn to God, and judgment followed by punishment for those who don't.
- 8 Throughout Isaiah 40—66, the nations will "see" (40:5; 52:10, 15), "understand" (52:15) and even "know" about (45:6; 49:26) God's salvation of His people, but this doesn't mean that they embrace it. For

instance, Isaiah says that the pagan king Cyrus the Great will "know that it is ... the LORD" who raised him up, and yet the next verse says "though you do not *know* me" (Isa. 45:3–4). So does Cyrus "know" God or not? Yes and no. He *knows* God in the sense that he acknowledges God's sovereignty, but he doesn't *know* God so as to believe in Him for salvation.

Now, to be sure, there will be many among the nations (i.e., Gentiles) who will embrace this God of Israel. This is an important theme in Isaiah as well (44:5; 45:14, 20– 25; 49:7; 55:5). But Isaiah never says that everyone without exception will be saved.

- 9 Passages include Romans 5:18–19, Romans 11:32, and Ephesians 1:10.
- <u>10</u> Thomas Talbott, "Christ Victorious," in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation*, 25. Similarly, Rob Bell says "no one can resist God's pursuit forever, because God's love will eventually melt even the hardest of hearts" (*Love Wins*, 108). In this quote, Bell is thinking of Colossians 1 in particular.
- 11 I've switched the order of words in 15:22–23 for clarity, but the meaning I'm giving here is clear from the context.
- 12 Thomas Talbott claims that God will only destroy the sinful nature of unbelievers, according to this passage ("Christ Victorious," 27). But there's nothing in the actual text to justify this interpretation.
- 13 This is the title of chapter 4 in Bell's *Love Wins*.
- 14 First Thessalonians 4:3 says "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality." The Greek word

- for "will" is *thelema*, which is the noun form of the verb translated "want" in 1 Timothy 2:4 (NIV).
- 15 See Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 387–88. Of course, it may be that God's decreed will includes the very resistance of His moral will. But that's getting a bit off track.
- 16 N. T. Wright calls this "biblical universalism" in his "Towards a Biblical View of Universalism," *Themelios* 4.2 (1979): 54–58.
- 17 Thomas Talbott, "A Pauline Interpretation of Divine Judgment," in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation*, 42. See also Vernard Eller, *The Most Revealing Book of the Bible: Making Sense Out of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 200–201; Bell, *Love Wins*, 114–115.
- <u>18</u> As Bell suggests (*Love Wins*, 114–115).
- 19 More specifically, retributive punishment and not remedial punishment.
- 20 MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 140.
- 21 Bell, *Love Wins*, 107.
- 22 The parable is not exclusively about the afterlife, because "the kingdom" is a present reality. However, the parable certainly includes the afterlife, because the kingdom extends into the age to come. Moreover, Jesus' words "in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (13:28), along with people being "cast out" (13:28) clearly point to hell, as they do elsewhere in Matthew (see 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). See Marshall, "The New Testament Does Not Teach Universal Salvation," 59.

- 23 The quote is from Bell, who raises this question in *Love Wins*, 108. In the context, Bell is summarizing the view that he finds legitimate and compelling, though he doesn't necessarily say it's correct.
- 24 Marshall, "The New Testament Does Not Teach Universal Salvation,"59.
- 25 See also Matthew 25:1–12; Hebrews 9:27; Revelation 22:11.

Chapter 2

Has Hell Changed? Or Have We?

I am embarrassed to admit this, but when I hear the name *Jesus*, a picture often appears in my mind. It's a painting of a Caucasian male with long blond hair, staring into the sky. It hung on the wall of a church I once attended. Growing up, I saw it every Sunday morning. It bothers me now, because it is ridiculously inaccurate. I know that Jesus did not look that way when He walked the earth, and He certainly doesn't look like that now. But as hard as I have tried, I have not been able to erase that picture from my memory. It occasionally creeps back into my mind when I hear the name *Jesus*. Sometimes it even happens when I'm praying! I doubt anyone struggled with this problem two thousand years ago.

Today, when you say the name *Jesus*, all sorts of images appear in our minds. There are millions of different ideas about what He was and is like. Some people, like me, have inaccurate images that we are still trying to shake. Others create new ideas about Jesus and spend their lives trying to convince themselves those ideas are true. Deep down, we all have a tendency to recreate Jesus in our own image. Before we know it, we have an American Jesus, a Western Jesus, a postmodern Jesus, a hippie Jesus, or a capitalistic or socialistic Jesus. Deep down in the heart of every person is

a hidden desire to reinterpret Jesus in light of our own culture, political bent, or favorite theological belief.

We do the same thing with hell. The question "what is hell?" has spawned many answers over the years. For Origen, hell was a place where the souls of the wicked were purified so they could find their way back to God. Dante depicted hell as a place under the earth's surface with nine levels of suffering, where sinners were bitten by snakes, tormented by beasts, showered with icy rain, and trapped in rivers of blood or flaming tombs; some were even steeped in huge pools of human excrement. C. S. Lewis's portrayal of hell was significantly less creepy. For Lewis, it was kind of like a dark, gloomy city, or a place where "being fades away into nonentity." A happier portrait of hell was painted by the band AC/DC, who said that "hell ain't a bad place to be"—it's where all our friends are. Most recently, Rob Bell said that hell is not "about someday, somewhere else," but about the various "hells on earth" that people experience in this life—genocide, rape, and unjust socioeconomic structures.

Through the years, many ideas of hell have been proposed—some attractive, some not. But if truth is what we are after, we need to stick to what Jesus actually said. We also need to try to understand Jesus' statements in the context of the world He lived in. We need to enter Jesus' world, His first-century *Jewish* world, if we're going to figure out what He meant when He spoke of hell.

We need to enter Jesus' world because Jesus was a Jew, a Jew who lived two thousand years ago in the Middle East. He spoke Aramaic and also a bit of Greek, though probably with an accent. He didn't know a lick of English —certainly nothing of the Elizabethan, KJV sort. He was a blue-collar man who worked long hard days as a woodworker (or mason), and probably

bore the physical features of a hardworking peasant: dark leathery skin, calloused hands, and a few scars here and there from working in the shop. Jesus probably didn't have long hair because this wasn't typical of Jewish men of His day, and He certainly didn't have blue eyes, blond hair, and milky white skin.

Jesus was a first-century Jew, so we need to leave behind all our Jesuses that have been refashioned and reshaped by our own cultural biases. The only way we're going to understand what Jesus said about hell is to soak ourselves in the Bible's own culture. Breathe its air. Feel its dirt. Smell the scent of first-century Palestine—and *then* we'll be in a better position to understand more clearly what Jesus and His followers were saying about hell.

So to this world we turn. What we find in this context is that hell was seen as a place of punishment for those who don't follow God. In fact, so ingrained was the belief in hell among first-century Jews⁵ that Jesus would have had to go out of His way to distance Himself from these beliefs if He didn't hold them. In the next chapter, we'll consider whether or not Jesus actually does this. For now, we'll dig into the Jewish culture around Him to see what His contemporaries said about hell.

Specifically, in this chapter we'll see that for the Jews of Jesus' day:

- 1. Hell is a place of punishment after judgment.
- 2. Hell is described in imagery of fire and darkness, where people lament.
- 3. Hell is a place of annihilation or never-ending punishment.

So let's take a quick tour of some of these Jewish writers to see what they say about hell. Just to be clear, none of the passages we'll look at here are

in the New Testament; rather, they were written by Jews right around the same time (200 BC—AD 100). To keep it simple, I'll just reference the dates of passages throughout and leave the rest of the information for the notes. I realize that some of you reading this are not on the edge of your seats thinking, *Cool! I* love *studying first-century Judaism!* But try to stay with me. I think a short history lesson is necessary to help us erase any twenty-first century ideas of Jesus we may have added.

The First-Century Jewish View of Hell

Jews in the first century used the Old Testament to build their theology. But the Old Testament doesn't say much about hell. The doctrine of hell is progressively developed throughout Scripture, much like heaven, the Holy Spirit, and even Jesus. This definitely does *not* mean that these things changed over time; God simply reveals more and more about them as Scripture unfolds. We see this especially with hell. The Old Testament does make a few vague references to punishment in the afterlife; Daniel 12:2 is the most relevant: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and *some to shame and everlasting contempt*" (see also Ezek. 32:17–32). Such statements, though, are infrequent in the Old Testament. It's not until the New Testament that these ideas are fully revealed.

Many first-century Jews, while studying the Old Testament (Daniel 12 in particular), developed certain beliefs about hell. Again, these beliefs are not in themselves inspired by God. Understand that I am not attempting in this chapter to determine whether or not the conclusions of first-century Jews were accurate. I am just describing the common beliefs about hell that Jesus

and other New Testament writers would have grown up with. In general, here's what the first-century Jews believed.

Hell Is a Place of Punishment after Judgment

The typical afterlife scenario among Jews in Jesus' day was that after the wicked die, they go to a place called hades, sometimes called sheol. This is not the same thing as "hell." Hades is not usually depicted as a place of punishment, though the wicked may suffer there. It is a place where the wicked wait until judgment day. After they are judged, the wicked are then thrown into hell as punishment for their sins. It's important to note that for the first-century Jew, this punishment is not *corrective* or *remedial* (think "remedy"); in other words punishment doesn't make them fit for salvation. Rather, hell is *retributive*—it's God's punishment for sin. Consider the following:

[T]he chambers shall give up the souls which have been committed to them. And the Most High shall be revealed upon the seat of judgment ... recompense shall follow ... unrighteous deeds shall not sleep. Then the pit of torment shall appear ... and the furnace of Gehenna shall be disclosed. (first century AD)^Z

The same writer described gehenna, or hell, as a place of "fire and torments," where the wicked "wander about in torments, ever grieving and sad." Worst of all, this judgment is final, "because they cannot now make a good repentance that they may live."

According to another Jewish writer,

[T]he sinners are set apart when they die and are buried in the earth and judgment has not been executed upon them in their lifetime, upon this great pain, until the great day of judgment—and to those who curse (there will be) plague and pain forever, and the retribution of their spirits. (second century BC)⁹

Here, after sinners die they go to a place where they await judgment. The author even notes that they have *not* received judgment in their lifetime. In other words, hell is not considered to be the various "hells on earth" that we face every day. It's a horrific place of judgment where God punishes people for their sins.¹⁰

Hell Is Described in Images of Fire, Darkness, and Lament

Of all the images used to describe hell, fire is the most common. Consider the following:

[T]he coming world will be given to these [i.e., the ones obedient to God], but the habitation of the many others will be in *fire*. (first century AD)¹¹

Woe unto you, sinners, because of the works of your hands! On account of the deeds of your wicked ones, in *blazing flames worse than fire*, it shall burn. (first century BC)¹²

On judgment day, all the sinners whose names are "blotted out of the book of life" will "cry and lament in a place that is an invisible wilderness and *burn in the fire*." This place "was *completely dark*" and yet "the *flame of its fire* … was burning brightly" (first century AD).¹³ Hell is an "abyss … full of fire" where the wicked are "cast into this fiery abyss, and they were burned."¹⁴

Fire, darkness, lamenting. These are the typical images used by first-century Jews to describe hell, and, as we'll see, they are the same images used by Jesus and other New Testament writers.

Now, as for the duration of hell, there was difference of opinion among the Jews. Some believed that the wicked would be annihilated in hell (their personal existence would cease), while others believed the wicked would be punished forever in an ongoing state of torment.

Hell Is a Place of Annihilation

Some Jewish writers believed that the wicked would be annihilated. One, who lived in Israel around the time of Jesus, put it like this:

And their dwelling place will be in darkness and the place of destruction; and they will not die but melt away until I remember the world and renew the earth. And then they will die and not live, and their life will be taken away from the number of all men. (first century AD)¹⁵

The fact that they don't die right away but "melt away" suggests some period of suffering. But ultimately, for this Jewish writer, there will be an annihilation of the wicked.

Hell Is a Place of Never-Ending Punishment

While some believed that the wicked would be annihilated, others believed that hell is a place of never-ending punishment. These Jewish writers described hell as a place of "all kinds of torture and torment" where "dark and merciless" beings would use "instruments of atrocities torturing without pity" (first to second century AD). Hell was called an "abyss" where its "prisoners were in pain, looking forward to endless punishment" (first to second century AD). Another writer described the wicked in hell:

pleading that he may give them a little breathing spell from the angels of his punishment ... begging for a little rest but find it not. ... Light has vanished from before us and darkness has become your habitation forever and ever; because we have formerly neither had faith nor glorified the name of the Lord of the Spirits. (first century AD)¹⁸

One graphic account depicts seven brothers being martyred by some Greek overlords. After the first six die, the seventh brother, after being tortured, blurts out before he dies,

Because of this, justice has laid up for you intense and eternal fire and tortures, and these throughout all time will never let you go. (first century AD)¹⁹

He basically tells his torturer to go to hell.

We could go on and on, citing Jewish writer after Jewish writer, all living and writing around the time of Jesus. If you want even more references to hell from first-century Judaism, you can check out the notes.²⁰ But from the passages cited above, one thing is clear: First-century Jews believed in hell. While there's some difference of opinion regarding the duration of hell, its existence as a place of punishment that awaits the wicked was nearly unanimously held.²¹ This is undeniable. This is the first-century *Jewish* view of hell.²²

And this Jewish world is the one Jesus grew up in. If we want to understand Jesus in light of His own first-century context, then we need to understand what this context believed about hell. This will keep us from reading back into the New Testament our own ideas about what Jesus was saying about hell.

Is Hell a Garbage Dump?

Now, some recent writers do try to situate Jesus in His own context. This is actually one of the most encouraging aspects of Rob Bell's preaching and writing. Bell rightly says that to "grab a few lines of Jesus and drop them down on someone 2,000 years later without first entering into the world in which they first appeared is lethal to the life and vitality and *truth* of the Bible." Says Rob. Amen!

In following Bell's advice, we have entered the world in which Jesus' statements on hell first appeared and have seen that this world believed in hell as a literal place of punishment. Bell also attempts to understand Jesus' view of hell in light of first-century Judaism but comes up with some very different results. We've already noted that Bell emphasizes that hell is the

"hells on earth," the tragedies that this life brings, as opposed to a place of punishment for the wicked after death.²⁴ But this emphasis does not match the first-century scene, as you have seen firsthand.

Bell suggests that when Jesus used the word *hell* (gehenna), He referred to a garbage dump outside Jerusalem, where the Jews used to throw their trash. Bell argues that "Gehenna, in Jesus's day, was the city dump" and that this is what Jesus meant by hell:

People tossed their garbage and waste into this valley. There was a fire there, burning constantly to consume the trash. Wild animals fought over the scraps of food along the edges of the heap. When they fought, their teeth would make a gnashing sound. Gehenna was the place with the gnashing of teeth, where the fire never went out. Gehenna was an actual place that Jesus's listeners would have been familiar with. So the next time someone asks you if you believe in an actual hell, you can always say, "Yes, I do believe that my garbage goes somewhere ..."25

But if Jesus was really referring to the literal city dump when He spoke of gehenna, then many of His statements are awkward to say the least:

"Whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the *garbage dump* of fire." (Matt. 5:22)

"It is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into the *garbage dump*." (Matt. 5:29)

"Fear him who can destroy both soul and body in the *garbage dump*." (Matt. 10:28)

"It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the *garbage dump* of fire." (Matt. 18:9)

Also, Jesus tells the scribes and Pharisees that they have made themselves "twice as much a child of the *garbage dump*" and then He asks, "How will you escape being condemned to the *garbage dump*?" (Matt. 23:15, 33, adapted).

While I applaud Bell's attempt to understand Jesus in His first-century Jewish context, his "gehenna is a garbage dump" theory is both misleading and inaccurate. Here's why.

First, it's misleading because it confuses the source of an idea for the idea itself. 26 Just because Jesus' description of hell may have been *inspired* by the image of a burning garbage dump (if it was) doesn't mean that He is referring to the actual garbage dump when He uses the word *gehenna*. For example, I've often heard people refer to a gridlocked freeway as a parking lot. The statement is inspired by a literal parking lot, but nobody is claiming that people drive to the freeway, stop, lock their cars, and then go about their business. That's just the way imagery works. So to say that Jesus was referring to an actual dump is to misunderstand the way language functions.

Second, the "gehenna is a garbage dump" suggestion is also inaccurate. The whole theory actually stands on very shaky evidence. Some commentaries and pastors still promote the idea, but there's no evidence from the time of Jesus that the Hinnom Valley (gehenna literally means "Valley of Hinnom") was the town dump. In fact, there is no evidence for

hundreds and hundreds of years after Jesus that there ever was a garbage dump in the Hinnom Valley in the first century. Nor is there any archaeological evidence that this valley was ever a dump²⁷ (if it was a dump, we'd be able to dig around and find evidence). In fact, the first reference we have to the Hinnom Valley, or gehenna, as a town dump is made by a rabbi named David Kimhi in a commentary, which was written in AD 1200.

AD 1200! That's over a thousand years after Jesus lived! This is the first time that the Hinnom Valley was ever associated with the town dump. Here's the quote from Kimhi:

Gehenna is a repugnant place, into which filth and cadavers are thrown, and in which fires perpetually burn in order to consume the filth and bones; on which account, by analogy, the judgment of the wicked is called "Gehenna."²⁸

Kimhi, writing in the late Middle Ages—from Europe, by the way, not Israel—is the first one to make this suggestion. So here's the problem: What are the chances that Jesus is thinking of this town dump in using the term *gehenna* when we have no evidence that there was such a place until over a thousand years after He lived? There's no evidence in the piles and piles of Jewish and Christian writings preceding the time of Kimhi that the word *gehenna* was derived from the burning garbage in the Hinnom Valley.

And did you notice what Kimhi himself said about the word *gehenna?* He said that the garbage dump of "gehenna" became an "analogy" for "the judgment of the wicked." So, even the first writer to connect gehenna with

the garbage dump saw it as an analogy for the place where the wicked will be judged.

Much of what Bell says about hell relies upon a legend from the Middle Ages.

So what was it about the Hinnom Valley that forged the word *gehenna* into an image of fiery judgment? In the Old Testament, the Hinnom Valley was the place where some Israelites engaged in idolatrous worship of the Canaanite gods Molech and Baal. It was here, in fact, where they sacrificed their children to these gods (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6) making them "pass through the fire" (Ezek. 16:20–21 NASB). When Jeremiah began to preach, the Hinnom Valley started to take on a metaphorical reference for the place where the bodies of the wicked would be cast (Jer. 7:29–34; 19:6–9; 32:35): "Behold, the days are coming ... when it will no more be called ... the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter" (Jer. 7:32). Jews living between the Testaments picked up on this metaphor and ran with it. The word *gehenna* was widely used by Jews during the time of Jesus to refer to the fiery place of judgment for the wicked in the end times, as we have seen.²⁹

For first-century Jews, the violent image of evildoers being punished in the Hinnom Valley provided a fitting analogy for God punishing the wicked in hell. Because Jesus lived and taught in this setting, His unqualified references to gehenna would have been taken to mean the same thing, unless He specified that He had something else in mind—a question that we will explore in the next chapter.

Understanding first-century Judaism and what those Jews believed about hell prepares us for understanding Jesus' teaching on the subject in His own context. As we turn to the next chapter, we need to ask ourselves a very important question: Did Jesus affirm or reject this widespread first-century belief in hell?

Notes

- 1 C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1940), 129.
- 2 AC/DC, "Hell Ain't a Bad Place to Be," *Let There Be Rock* © 1977 Atlantic Records.
- 3 Bell, Love Wins, 81.
- 4 For Rob Bell, hell is primarily the various hells on earth; at least this is the impression he gives in his book *Love Wins*. Hell is the evil of a child being molested by a family member (p. 72). Hell is the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide (pp. 70–71). Hell is "the very real experiences and consequences of rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity" (p. 73). It is important for Bell that we "don't take Jesus's very real and prescient warnings about judgment out of context, making them about someday, somewhere else" (p. 81). And the best word to capture all the "terrible evil that comes from the secrets hidden deep within our hearts all the way to the massive, society-wide collapse and chaos that comes when we fail to live in God's world God's way" is the word *hell* (p. 93). Now, in passing, Bell does say "there is hell later" along with a hell now (p. 79). And when he wrestles with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16), he mentions that the rich man is in "profound torment" (p. 77)—though he defines this torment as "living with the realities of not dying to" the unjust socioeconomic system in his previous life. But other than these two side comments, virtually everything Bell

says about hell refers to the various hells on earth, the evil of this world: rape, addictions, child abuse, poverty, violence, and so on. A similar view is taken by Andrew Perriman, *The Coming of the Son of Man: New Testament Eschatology for an Emerging Church* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005), 74–97.

- 5 Throughout this chapter, I'll be using the term *first century* broadly to refer to the general time of Jesus.
- 6 This chapter is going to dig into the wild and complicated world of Second Temple Judaism. Throughout this chapter, I'll be using the translations and dates of the Jewish literature from James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday: 1983, 1985). For the translations of the Apocrypha, I'm using the New Revised Standard Version; and for the Dead Sea Scrolls, Florentino Garcia-Martinez and Eibert Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, *2 vols*. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1997). There is a ton of secondary literature on the subject of early Jewish views of hell and the afterlife. Among the most helpful are Duane F. Watson, "Gehenna," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992): 2.296–298, and Richard Bauckham, "Early Jewish Visions of Hell," *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 (1990): 355–85.
- 7 4 Ezra 7:32–36.
- 8 4 Ezra 7:38, 80, 82.
- 9 1 En. 22:10–13.

- 10 See also *1 En.* 27:2–3: "This accursed valley is for those accursed forever; here will gather together all (those) accursed ones, those who speak with their mouth unbecoming words against the Lord.... Here they shall be gathered together, and here shall be their judgment, in the last days" (second century BC). For hell as a place of retribution, see *2 Bar*. 30:4–5; 54:21.
- 11 2 Bar. 44:15; see too T. Zeb. 10:3.
- <u>12</u> *1 En.* 100:9. See too *L.A.B.* 23:6: "[Hell is] the place of *fire* where the deeds of those doing wickedness against [God] will be expiated" (first century AD); *2 En.* 10:2 [J]: "And there is no light there, and a *black fire* blazes up perpetually, with a *river of fire* that comes out over the whole place" (first century AD).
- 13 *1 En.* 108:3–4. Another writer uses the imagery of fire and darkness together in *1 En.* 103:5–8. One writer even uses the image of worms and fire together, much as Jesus and Isaiah did (Isa. 66:24; Mark 9:48): "Woe to the nations that rise up against my people! The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgment; he will send *fire and worms* into their flesh; they shall weep in pain forever" (Judith 16:17; first century BC).
- 14 1 En. 90:26–27; see also 2 En. 40:13.
- <u>15</u> *L.A.B.* 16:3; see also Wis. 4:14–15; 1 QS 4:11–14; *1 En.* 91:9–14.
- <u>16</u> *2 En.* 10:1, 3 [J]. I'm following the first-century date for *2 Enoch* given in Charlesworth (ed.), but other scholars date this work in the second or third century AD. For similar references, see *1 En.* 53:3; 56:1; 62:11;

63:1, where these punishments seem to be *awaiting* the wicked after judgment, rather than happening upon death.

<u>17</u> 2 En. 40:13 [J].

18 *1 En.* 63:1–7.

19 4 Macc. 12:12.

- 20 Hell is described as "the measure of fire, the depths of the abyss ... the abundance of long-suffering, the truth of judgment ... the mouth of hell, the standing place of vengeance ... the picture of the coming punishment" and "the powers of the flame" (2 Bar. 59:5–12). On judgment day, God will "drag Beliar [the Devil], and his hosts also, into Gehenna," and He will then resurrect the dead and "cause fire" to "consume all the impious, and they will become as if they had not been created" (*Ascen. Is.* 4:14–18).
- 21 The Sadducees, who didn't believe in an afterlife, certainly wouldn't have believed in hell.
- 22 While some believed that upon death the wicked *awaited* punishment (as stated above), others believed that the wicked would enter fiery punishment immediately upon death. It seems that the Pharisees believed this. They said that the righteous receive rewards and the wicked receive punishment immediately after they die (*Ant.* 18.14). This also seems to be reflected in Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31, which Richard Bauckham says is the only place in the New Testament that mentions punishment immediately upon death ("Early Jewish Visions of Hell," 376).

- 23 Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 63.
- 24 At times, Bell does say that the behavior of the wicked will be corrected in the end (see *Love Wins*, 91–93). I assume that he's talking about hell as a place of correction in these contexts, though he doesn't use the term *hell*.
- 25 Ibid., 68. See also Perriman, *The Coming of the Son of Man*, 92: "By the first century, the Valley of Hinnom (in Greek *geenna*, gehenna) ... had become the city's refuse dump, where slow fires smoldered day and night."
- <u>26</u> In linguistic terms, Bell confuses the *referent* with the *sense*. See D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, *2nd ed*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 63–64.
- 27 See Lloyd R. Bailey, "Gehenna: The Topography of Hell," *Biblical Archaeologist* 49.3 (1986): 187–91.
- 28 Cited in Bailey, "Gehenna," 188. Some scholars still refer to this myth, but cite no evidence (see e.g., Perriman, *The Coming of the Son of Man*, 92–93). R. T. France mentions it but is doubtful regarding its veracity, citing Bailey's article (*The Gospel of Matthew* [New International Commentary on the New Testament] [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007], 202). Others, like Bailey, dismiss the myth altogether (see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986], 376; Peter Head, "The Duration of Divine Judgment in the New Testament," in Kent Brower and Mark Elliott, eds., *Eschatology in Bible and Theology* [Downers Grove, IL.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997],

- 223). Several bloggers also pointed this out shortly after *Love Wins* came out (see <u>bibleplaces.org</u>; et al.).
- 29 On gehenna, see Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2.296–298. For early Jewish references to gehenna as the place of punishment for the wicked, see *1 En.* 26–27; 54:1–6; 56:1–4; 90:24–27; *4 Ezra* 7:26–38; *Ascen. Is.* 4:14–18; *Sib. Or.* 4.179–91.

Chapter 3

What Jesus Actually Said about Hell

As I write this chapter about hell, I'm sitting in the middle of a busy Starbucks. Every time I look up from my computer screen, I see that I'm surrounded by thirsty customers racing to the counter to fuel up on lattes and iced teas and mochas. They're happy, busy, enjoying life, laughing, chatting, and, of course, texting. Two moms look as if they just got done jogging and sit next to me, digging into each other's lives. Another couple just left. They were all over each other—a typical young couple without a care in the world. The girl last in line looks sad. *Really sad*. It makes me wonder what just happened in her life. And what about the employees? Are they happy? Some look that way, but others don't.

Joy, laughter, coffee, jazz, texting, talking, flirting, friendship, depression and the hope to be freed from it one day. This is life! I love it—and so do they.

The place buzzes with life. Meanwhile, I sit here reading passage after passage after passage, which all say that *some of these people are going to hell*. It sickens me to say that, and I can't explain how conflicted I feel right now. There are at least a dozen people within ten feet of me right here, right now, that may end up in the agony that I'm studying. What do I do? Do I keep writing? Keep studying? Should I bag this whole book thing and start

building relationships with them? How can I believe these passages yet sit here silently? I know that some of you have faced this same conflict. Even as you're reading this, there are probably people within a few feet of you who may also go to hell. What will you do? It could be that the Lord wants you to put the book down.

Coming face-to-face with these passages on hell and asking these tough questions is a heart-wrenching process.

It forces me back to a sobering reality: This is not just about doctrine; it's about destinies. And if you're reading this book and wrestling with what the Bible says about hell, you cannot let this be a mere academic exercise. You must let Jesus' very real teaching on hell sober you up. You must let Jesus' words reconfigure the way you live, the way you talk, and the way you see the world and the people around you.

Jesus on Hell

In the last chapter, we took a tour of Jesus' world and saw that, without a doubt, first-century Jews believed in hell. They believed that hell was a place of punishment for the wicked after they faced God's judgment. They used various images to describe this hell, such as fire, darkness, and lamentation. Some Jews believed that the wicked would be annihilated after being cast into hell, while others described hell as a place of never-ending torment.

Now, in walks a Jewish rabbi named Yeshua, or Jesus. Based on everything we know about Jesus, we would expect Him to address the concept of the afterlife with much more compassion. Right? We can think of the Pharisees, who seem to have taken every opportunity to make the Old Testament Law as harsh as possible. A significant portion of Jesus' teaching

was dedicated to freeing people from the impossible yoke of the Pharisees. Surely Jesus backed away from these terrifying images and emphasized the love of God when talking about the judgment day. Right?

Well, not exactly. In fact, not at all.

Jesus grew up in the world of beliefs described in the last chapter. He would be expected to believe the same stuff about hell that most Jews did. And if He didn't—if Jesus rejected the widespread Jewish belief in hell—then He would certainly need to be clear about this.

That last line is very important. Better read it again.

In other words, if Jesus did not agree with the view of hell presented in the last chapter, then He would have had to deliberately and clearly argue *against* it. Remember that Jesus certainly wasn't afraid of going against some commonly held Jewish ideas, such as their view of divorce (Matt. 5:32; 19:9), forgiveness (Matt. 18:21–22), wealth (Luke 18—19), and laws about the Sabbath (Mark 3:1–6). So we can be sure that if Jesus didn't challenge the Jewish view of hell, it wasn't because He was afraid to.

So let's pull the focus in from Jesus' world to what Jesus Himself actually said about hell. What we're going to see is that His views stand in line with the dominant first-century Jewish view of hell. To show this, we'll look at Jesus' words through the same categories used in the last chapter. For Jesus:

- 1. Hell is a place of punishment after judgment.
- 2. Hell is described in imagery of fire and darkness, where people lament.
- 3. Hell is a place of annihilation or never-ending punishment.

Hell Is a Place of Punishment after Judgment

Jesus uses the word *gehenna* (translated as "hell") twelve times in the Gospels. He also uses images of fire and darkness in contexts where punishment after judgment is in view. A quick look at these statements shows that Jesus believed, like His Jewish contemporaries, that a horrific place of punishment awaits the wicked on judgment day.

The clearest example is Matthew 25:31–46, the longest and most detailed account of judgment day in the four gospels. Jesus begins by saying:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." (vv. 31–32)

We'll take a detailed look at this passage toward the end of this chapter. For now, it's important to note that the event is judgment day, which will occur when Christ comes back. After Jesus looks at the evidence (vv. 33–45), He gives His verdict: Believers are awarded everlasting life, while unbelievers are awarded everlasting punishment. Though the *word* hell (gehenna) is not used here, the *concept* of hell is conveyed by the phrases "everlasting fire" (v. 41) and "everlasting punishment" (v. 46).¹

Another place where the word *hell* is used in the context of judgment is Matthew 5. The whole passage talks about the potentially devastating outcome of going to an earthly court. But Jesus goes on to say that God's courtroom will be much worse, for here the Judge has the power to sentence you to the "hell [gehenna] of fire" (Matt. 5:22). This is not a vague reference to hell and certainly not a reference to a garbage dump. The legal

context of this statement ensures that Jesus is referring to the consequences of judgment day.

Here's one more passage where gehenna is used in the context of God's future judgment:

"You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell [gehenna]?" (Matt. 23:33)

The phrase *sentenced to hell* is once again reminiscent of something you would hear in a courtroom. Hell, as we have seen, is assigned to the wicked (in this case, the scribes and Pharisees) as a place of punishment. Jesus is not using the word *hell* to describe "the very real experiences and consequences of rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity."² Yes, a life of sin will certainly lead to some terrible life-experiences—lust destroys relationships, anger leads to violence, and covetousness leads to divorce. No doubt. But that's not what Jesus is talking about here. When Jesus uses stock phrases like "gehenna of fire" in legal contexts like this one, He means a literal place of punishment after judgment. He means hell.

Hell Is Described in Imagery of Fire and Darkness

Like His Jewish contemporaries, Jesus often used the image of fire to describe hell. Here are a couple of examples from Matthew 13. As Jesus tells a parable about "wheat" and "weeds," He says:

"Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in

bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn." (v. 30)

By itself, this verse says very little, but Jesus goes on to explain the parable and clarifies what He means by the burning weeds:

"Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all lawbreakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." (vv. 40–43)³

These are terrifying statements that Jesus makes. It's difficult to stomach, but the image of "weeping" as the wicked are cast into hell ("the fiery furnace") is common among first-century Jewish writers. Jesus, again, fits right into His own context by using the image here.⁴

Just a few verses later, Jesus says again:

"So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and *throw them into the fiery furnace*. *In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*." (vv. 49–50)

The hell that Jesus describes here is not a hell-on-earth that accompanies our bad decisions during this life, and it certainly isn't the never-ending party that AC/DC describes in their song. Hell is a place of punishment at the end of the age for "all law-breakers" who don't follow Jesus in this life.

Again, Jesus said:

"It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the [everlasting] fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell [gehenna] of fire." (Matt. 18:8–9)

These images of "everlasting fire" and a "hell of fire" were typical in the first century. Jesus used this common vocabulary to convey an unmistakable message—no Jew would have scratched his head wondering what Jesus was getting at. The everlasting fire of gehenna is a place of punishment for all who don't follow Jesus in this life.

Like other Jewish writers of His day, Jesus also used the image of "darkness" to describe hell. In Matthew 8, He says:

"I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the *outer darkness*. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (vv. 11–12)

This passage is a critique against Jewish people who think that their ethnicity can solidify a place in the kingdom. Strikingly, Jesus says that many Gentiles (those from "east and west") will come into the kingdom, while many Jews (the "sons of the kingdom") will not enter because they didn't follow Jesus. Jesus uses stock Jewish images of "outer darkness"

and "weeping" to refer to judgment day and its consequences. Nobody in Jesus' first-century world would understand these images of darkness and weeping in any other way, as we saw in the last chapter.

Jesus used the same imagery at the end of another parable He told just before He died:

"Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" (Matt. 22:13)

And again, in another parable:

"And cast out the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matt. 25:30)

Darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth—these are common Jewish images for hell. And again Jesus is referring to a place of punishment, much like His first-century contemporaries. It's also important to recognize that there is nothing in these passages that holds out hope for a second, third, or fourth chance for repentance after death.

The next category is more difficult to assess. Did Jesus believe that the wicked would be annihilated or suffer never-ending punishment in hell?

Hell Is a Place of Annihilation or Never-Ending Punishment

At times, Jesus seems to imply that hell won't last very long. "Fear him who can *destroy* both soul and body in hell," Jesus says (Matt. 10:28).

Destroy, not burn forever. This language of destruction is common not only in Jesus' words but also throughout Paul's letters (see chapter 4). However, there is one significant passage in which Jesus seems to speak of hell as a place of never-ending punishment, where unbelievers will suffer horrific, agonizing pain.

Before we move on, though, let me give two words of warning.

First, I believe it is beneficial to dive into the precise meaning of Greek words and grammar, but it may be more technical than some are used to. While the English text is clear, I think it would be good to show that the Greek text supports our English translation. The issue at stake is crucial and demands nothing less than rigorous, humble, and intense study of God's infallible Word. So we'll need to slow down, roll up our sleeves, and dig into some key texts for the rest of this chapter.

Second, let's not lose sight of what we're talking about. If all we do is believe we've figured out the duration of hell and leave unchanged, then we've failed. With that in mind, let's get back to the Bible, but with the solemn sense that this is real stuff we're reading about. These words have real implications for real people with real destinies.

On several occasions, Jesus said things that may suggest a never-ending punishment, though these passages in themselves are inconclusive. For instance, as we have seen, Jesus says the wicked will be thrown into "everlasting fire" (Matt. 18:8), but is it the fire or the suffering that is everlasting? The passage doesn't specify. Also, in Mark 9, Jesus describes the fire of hell as being "unquenchable … where their worm does not die" (vv. 44, 48). This may refer to never-ending punishment, but here, too, we have to be careful. Jesus is alluding to Isaiah 66:24 with this imagery (undying worm, unquenchable fire), and Isaiah was probably not thinking

of everlasting punishment.⁶ Another passage that is sometimes cited to prove never-ending punishment is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. But this passage doesn't refer to the final state of the wicked—only to a temporary state where the wicked await judgment.⁷

In almost every passage where Jesus mentions hell, He doesn't explicitly say that it will last forever. He speaks of torment, and we get the impression that hell is terrible, that it's a place to be avoided at all costs, but He doesn't clearly tell us how long it will last.

Jesus' most suggestive statement—perhaps His only statement—about the duration of hell comes in Matthew 25. In this passage, Jesus speaks of the final judgment that will take place at His second coming (v. 31). The sheep (believers in Jesus) and goats (unbelievers) are divided in two camps, and Jesus decides who's who based on what they've done in their lives. The sheep have served Jesus by clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and so on, while the goats did none of these things. Jesus then gives His verdict:

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the *everlasting fire* prepared for the devil and his angels." (v. 41)

Jesus reviews their behavior on earth and finds convicting evidence for their condemnation (vv. 42–44) and then concludes:

"Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into

everlasting punishment, but the righteous into everlasting life." (vv. 45–46)

The two key phrases are *everlasting fire* (v. 41) and *everlasting punishment* (v. 46). A simple reading of these phrases seems to infer that hell is never ending. But before we race to this conclusion, we've got to look closely at the Greek words lying behind the English translation, because it's been argued that they don't actually mean what the translations say. For instance, some people who say that hell won't last forever argue that the Greek words translated "everlasting punishment"—*aionios kolasis*—do not mean that the punishment is never ending. Instead, some have argued that *aionios* means "a period of time" while *kolasis* is a term from horticulture that means "pruning" or "trimming." For example:

An *aionios* of *kolasis*. Depending on how you translate *aionios* and *kolasis*, then, the phrase can mean "a period of pruning" or "a time of trimming," or an intense experience of correction.⁸

The argument goes like this: The purpose of "correction" or "pruning," of course, is to improve something, to bring out its fullest potential. Or in this context, to correct the wicked of their bad behavior until they are no longer wicked. So according to this argument, Jesus is not talking about an everlasting punishment for the wicked here, but rather a time of correction so that those enduring punishment will ultimately be saved.⁹ During this time, there may be "endless opportunities in an endless amount of time for people to say yes to God."¹⁰

Part of me wants to believe that this is true. This argument appears to reconcile God's love with Jesus' harsh words about hell. But is this what the words *aionios kolasis* actually mean? Is this what Jesus is speaking of in Matthew 25:46?

I don't think so, and here's why. Let's first deal with the word *kolasis*. Does it refer to *correction* or *punishment?* For three reasons, the word means "punishment."

First, the word *kolasis* is only used three other times in the New Testament, and in all three passages it clearly means punishment. It is also used in Jewish literature around the time of the New Testament in the same way. Jesus' Jewish audience would have heard Jesus say "punishment" not "correction" when He said the word *kolasis*. 12

Second, this "everlasting punishment" (*aionios kolasis*) is the same place as the "everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" from verse 41. This is where the goats, or unbelievers, are cast. If one thinks that unbelievers will undergo a time of correction-to-be-saved in that place, one must also say the same thing of the Devil and his angels. But this would be a huge stretch, especially in light of Revelation 19—20, where it says that the Devil and his angels will be tormented forever and ever. So Jesus actually says that unbelievers share the same fate as the Devil and his demons.

Third, as we have seen, Jesus often refers to "hell" or "the fiery furnace" or "everlasting fire" as a place of *retribution*—a place where sinners will be punished for their sins. And Jesus is not talking about correction in these other passages (Matt. 13:41–42, 49–50). So those who say that hell is corrective must argue that Jesus has something very different in mind when

He talks about "everlasting fire" and "everlasting *kolasis*" here in Matthew 25:46. But this is very unlikely.

I checked ten commentators from different theological backgrounds and fifteen Bible translations in five different languages on the word *kolasis*. I really wanted to see if other Bible scholars agree with what I said above. I found that they all translate *kolasis* with the word "punishment" (or *strafe*, or *castigo*, or наказание, or मा). ¹³ Translators and commentators are not infallible, but such a diverse and worldwide consensus should raise serious caution.

It seems clear that Jesus was referring to an "aionios punishment" in Matthew 25:46, and not an "aionios correction."

What about the word *aionios?* Bible scholars have debated the meaning of this term for what seems like an eternity, so we're not going to settle the issue here.¹⁴ It's important to note that however we translate *aionios*, the passage still refers to punishment for the wicked, which is something that Universalists deny.

Simply put, *aionios* can mean various things, including "lifelong," "enduring," or "everlasting." When the word is used twice in Matthew 25:46 ("*aionios* life" and "*aionios* punishment"), it probably means "everlasting" in both cases. ¹⁵ I say this for two reasons.

First, the contrast between "aionios life" and "aionios punishment" includes the notion of never-ending time. While it is true that aionios doesn't always mean "everlasting," when used here to describe things in the "age to come," it probably does have this meaning. Think about it: *Because* the life in this age will never end, given the parallel, it also seems that the punishment in this age will never end.

Second, the punishment is said to be in the "everlasting [aionios] fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). We know from other passages in Scripture that the Devil and his angels will suffer *never-ending punishment* (Rev. 20:10). Therefore, when Jesus says that unbelievers will go to the same place and suffer the same punishment, it logically follows that their punishment will also never end. 16

So Where Do I Land?

The debate about hell's duration is much more complex than I first assumed. While I lean heavily on the side that says it is everlasting, I am not ready to claim that with complete certainty. I encourage you to continue researching, but don't get so caught up in this debate that you miss the point of what Jesus was trying to communicate. I even deleted several pages that I wrote about the issue because I feared it would distract from the heart of Christ's message.

Jesus chose strong and terrifying language when He spoke of hell. I believe He chose to speak this way because He loves us and wanted to warn us. So let's not miss the point: He spoke of hell as a horrifying place, characterized by suffering, fire, darkness, and lamentation. I believe His intention was to stir a fear in us that would cause us to take hell seriously and avoid it at all costs.

I was a bit surprised at how many harsh statements Jesus made about hell. It probably caught me off guard because I am so used to people emphasizing His words of blessing, not His words of warning. Some of His words may have shocked you, but I would like you to consider the following thought:

We are bound by the words of the Creator, the One who will do what is right. The One who invented justice and knows perfectly what the unbeliever deserves. God has never asked us to figure out His justice or to see if His way of doing things is morally right. He has only asked us to embrace His Word and bow the knee, to tremble at His word, as Isaiah says (66:2).

Don't get so lost in deciphering that you forget to tremble.

Notes

- 1 Despite the ESV's translation, I will be using the term *everlasting* instead of *eternal*, because the latter term technically means transcending time, which isn't the best rendering of the Greek *aionios*. See the discussion toward the end of this chapter and in note 14 below.
- 2 Bell, Love Wins, 73.
- 3 This will happen at a future time when Christ comes back and everyone will stand before Him in judgment. The righteous will be resurrected (which is the meaning of "shine like the sun," cf. Dan. 12:2), and the wicked will be thrown into the "fiery furnace," an image that depicts hell (The two references to the "fiery furnace" in Matthew 13 are the only times that this image is used of hell in the New Testament. However, Revelation 9:2 uses a similar image, where smoke goes up from a great furnace [R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 537].). The phrase *gnashing of teeth* is used quite often by Jesus (see Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28), though we don't need to take it literally—as if a toothless unbeliever will have teeth provided on judgment day. The phrase probably depicts the pain that the wicked will experience in hell.

- 4 See e.g., 1 En. 108:3–5; 2 En. 40:12.
- 5 In the New Testament, the kingdom has both a present and future aspect. Many times the idea of entering the kingdom refers to something that happens in the present. Other times the idea refers to something that will happen after death or after the second coming of Christ. In this passage (Matt. 8), it's the future aspect of entering the kingdom that is in view.
- 6 In Isaiah's context, the worm doesn't die as it eats the flesh of dead bodies. There's nothing in the context that says the souls of the dead are still being tormented. The image of worms feasting on unburied dead people emphasizes the shame of defeat.
- 7 The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) says that the rich man goes to "Hades" while Lazarus goes to "Abraham's bosom" (NASB). Hades here should not be confused with hell. Hades is where the wicked go to await their judgment, after which they are thrown into hell—their final state. Lazarus is also in some sort of intermediate state where he is waiting for his resurrection. Significantly, the rich man, who's in hades, is "in agony in this flame" (16:24 NASB), and he's very aware of it. Moreover, Jesus says that there is a chasm that separates the wicked from the righteous and "none may cross from there to us" (16:26). So this passage affirms that there will be some sort of punishment and torment for the wicked immediately upon death, and there is no sign that these situations can be reversed. This intermediate state for the wicked should not be confused with the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, which has a very different function from what we see in Luke 16. So Luke 16 doesn't refer to the duration of hell.

Now, it's true that this is a parable, and so we shouldn't press the details too far. Jesus uses the parable in this context of Luke to confront the social structures of the day, not to teach us about the afterlife. On the flip side, parables do convey truth—real things about real life for real people. And given the fact that at least some first-century Jewish people believed that there would be real pain and torment in hades (and not just in gehenna or "hell"), Jesus was probably assuming this view here as well. According to Josephus, the Pharisees believed that the righteous receive rewards and the wicked receive punishment immediately after they die (*Ant.* 18.14). Also, *4 Ezra* 7:78–87 (ca. AD 100) says that there will be punishment in the intermediate sate (i.e., hades).

- 8 Bell, *Love Wins*, 91. Bell's original quote transliterated the Greek words as *aion* (a noun) and *kalazo* (a verb). But the Greek actually has *aionios* (an adjective) and *kolasis* (a noun). For clarity, I changed the words in Bell's quote to reflect the Greek of Matthew. New Testament scholar William Barclay also says that *kolasis* "originally meant the pruning of trees to make them grow better. I think it is true to say that in all Greek secular literature *kolasis* is never used of anything but remedial punishment" (*A Spiritual Autobiography* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977], 66). But see note 11 below.
- 9 Bell, *Love Wins*, 92–93.
- <u>10</u> Ibid., 106–107.
- 11 The noun is used in 1 John 4:18. Here, John says that "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment (*kolasis*)." The context here is "the day of judgment" (v. 17), and John is

contrasting love with fear. Love enables one to be confident on the day of judgment (v. 17), while fear instills that nagging sense that one will receive *punishment* (*kolasis*) on the day of judgment. The sense of "correction" wouldn't make sense. The verb form of *kolasis* (*kolazo*) is used two times in the New Testament: Acts 4:21 and 2 Peter 2:9. Both of these contexts demand that the word be translated "punishment." For its use in Jewish literature, see especially Wis. 16:1–2, where the verb *kolazo* is used synonymously with the verb *basanizo*, which means torment. Retributive punishment is clearly in view. See also *T. Reub*. 5:5; *T. Gad* 7:5 (though these texts have been edited by Christians). A related Hebrew expression is used throughout the Dead Sea Scrolls to mean punishment as well (see 1QS 2:15; 5:13; 1QM 1:5; 9:5–6; 4Q510 1:7). See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *Matthew* (The International Critical Commentary) (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004), 3.432.

- 12 Of course, Jesus would have used the Aramaic equivalent to this word, but this is the Greek word that Matthew (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) used to translate Jesus' word.
- 13 Commentaries: Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Piller New Testament Commentary) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 641; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3.432; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 966–967; D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14—28* (Word Biblical Commentary 33b) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 2.746; Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 606; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary*, trans. W. C. Linss (Minneapolis, MN.: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005), 282; Grant Osborne, *Matthew: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*

(Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 938–939; D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (The Expositor's Bible Commentary) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 586–587; Robert Mounce, *Matthew* (New International Biblical Commentary) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 236–237; Michael Wilkins, *Matthew* (The NIV Application Commentary) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 812–813. Translations: ESV, TNIV, NASB, HCSB, NKJV, NLT, CEB, AMP, CEV, GNT. Foreign translations: *Hoffnung für Alle; Nueva Traducción Viviente; Slovo Zhizny; Chinese Union Version (Traditional and Simplified). The Message* has "eternal doom," which is essentially the same thing.

14 The Greek word *aionios* is an adjective, and it's used seventy times in the New Testament. The noun, aion, is used over one hundred times in the New Testament. The noun can mean various things such as "an age" or "era" (Matt. 13:39; 28:20; Heb. 9:26; 1 Cor. 10:11), "the world" (Mark 4:19), and the never-ending "age" to come, as it does so often in John's gospel (John 4:14; 6:51, 58; 8:35, 51; 10:28; 11:26; 12:34; 14:16). The adjective aionios frequently means "everlasting," denoting never-ending time. We see this sense in the phrase "everlasting life" (aionios zoe) used so often in the New Testament (Matt. 19:16; Luke 10:25; 16:9; Rom. 2:7; 5:21; 6:22; 16:25; Gal. 6:8; 1 Tim. 1:16; 6:12, 16; 2 Tim. 2:10; Jude 21). This understanding of time does not refer to the Platonic notion of timelessness, which is inherent in the term *eternity*, but to the duration of the age to come—a vibrant Jewish concept of the future. Because this age to come will last forever, the adjective *aionios*, when describing this age, often connotes this idea of "everlasting" as well. For a full and quite technical discussion, see Joachim Guhrt, "Time," in Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids,

MI: Zondervan, 1986): 3.826–33; Hermann Sasse, "aion, aionios," in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 1.197–209. I thank Drs. Simon Gathercole of Cambridge University and Scott Hafemann of St. Andrews for their very helpful and critical comments on previous drafts of this discussion of *aionios*.

<u>15</u> Contra Bell, *Love Wins*, 91–92.

16 The way the Greek words are used here suggests a never-ending punishment. The word *aionios* modifies the nature of the punishment, not the results of the punishment. This is an important distinction, because some people say that it's only the results of the punishment that never end. In other words, some say that the wicked will be annihilated as they are punished, and this annihilation is never-ending in the sense that its results cannot be reversed. But *aionios* modifies *kalasis*, which is a noun of action (the root is *kolasis*). Greek nouns that end with *–sis* (rather than *–ma*) tend to focus on the action of the noun rather than its results. For the small handful of people still reading this note, you can look at 2 Thess. 2:16 in the Greek to see a parallel, where *aionios* modifies *paraklesis* ("comfort"), another *–sis* ending noun of action. Here again, it is the never-ending act of comforting that is in view.

Chapter 4

What Jesus' Followers Said about Hell

As we saw in the last chapter, Jesus agreed with His Jewish contemporaries about the realities of hell. But what about the people who came after Jesus? Did they imitate His example in speaking openly about the punishment of the wicked? This is a very important question to answer for a couple of reasons. First, it makes it much easier to come to conclusions if other New Testament writers made statements similar to those of Jesus. Second, it helps us understand the example that was set for us. In other words, if Jesus and His early followers spoke boldly about hell, then shouldn't we do the same?

So in this chapter, we will explore some other books and letters in the New Testament and see what they say about hell.

Hell in the Letters of Paul, Peter, and Jude

We'll start by examining Paul's view of hell. But the first thing to notice is that he never used the word. Did you get that? Paul *never* in all of his thirteen letters used the word *hell*. If you only focused on that one truth, you might conclude that Paul avoided the issue.

And yet, Paul referred to the fate of the wicked more than any other New Testament writer did. Though he never used the actual word *hell*, he did speak of "death" as the result of sin, whereby the wicked would "perish" or "be destroyed" by the "wrath" of God. The sinner, according to Paul, stands "condemned" and will be "judged" by God on account of his sin. And unless the sinner repents and turns to Christ, he will be "punished" by God when Christ returns. Paul described the fate of the wicked with words such as "perish, destroy, wrath, punish," and others more than eighty times in his thirteen letters. ¹ To put this in perspective, Paul made reference to the fate of the wicked more times in his letters than he mentioned God's forgiveness, mercy, or heaven combined. ² So even though Paul never used the actual word *hell*, nor did he describe the place with any detail, he assuredly believed that the wicked will face a horrific fate if they remain in their sin.

One would have to be creative and work hard to erase all notions of wrath and punishment from the letters of Paul.

I have always been convicted by Paul's efforts to reach unbelievers. At times, I have even felt guilty when reading of the suffering he endured in sharing the gospel. When I read what he writes about the punishment of the wicked, it helps me understand how he stayed so motivated. Could it be that his drive to reach the lost was directly related to his willingness to ponder their fate if he didn't reach them at all? It sure appears so.

This would explain Paul's strange sermon in Acts 17. In this chapter, we find Paul standing before a strictly pagan (rather than Jewish) audience, who wouldn't have had any knowledge of Jesus, the Old Testament, the God of Israel, or any other connecting points to the gospel. Paul stands up, and he's got only minutes to deliver a message, to share the good news with

them. What does he do? He speaks of judgment. He mentions plenty of other things, and he even quotes a few of their own poets (v. 28), but when it came to the punch line, Paul told them that God would judge them if they didn't repent:

"God ... commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." (vv. 30–31)

There's no cross, no atonement, no forgiveness, no conversion testimony, and no God-loves-you-and-has-a-wonderful-plan-for-your-life. Not that these things are unnecessary—Paul himself will talk about these on other occasions. But what these people needed to hear most was that Jesus has been raised from the dead and was going to judge them if they didn't repent.

Like most of you, I get annoyed at those street preachers who carry on about wrath and judgment—I wish they'd talk more about grace and love. Sometimes I wonder if they do more harm than good. Yet as I sit back and arrogantly judge their effectiveness, I must admit that Paul's sermon in Acts 17 sounds an awful lot like the preacher I heard screaming at the beach last week!

The point is this: While much of our church culture believes that talk of wrath and judgment is toxic and unloving, Paul didn't seem to have a problem with these things. In fact, Paul believed that these were essential truths. Similar to John the Baptist and Jesus, Paul believed that warning people of the wrath to come was actually loving. If my two-year-old son

runs out into the street, is it unloving to warn him of the destruction coming in the form of a Chevy 4x4? Does anyone criticize the fireman for waking up a family to rescue them from a burning house? Does anyone blame a doctor for telling a person that he has cancer that must be treated if he is going to live?

No doubt, many Christians have abused the ideas of judgment and wrath. One of the first sermons I ever understood, I heard when I was twelve years old. A preacher screamed from stage about the horrors of hell. He then warned us not to reject Jesus—and his exact words were, "It would be better for you to bite your tongue off and spit it out!" We have probably all been exposed to one of those preachers, who can't wait to tell everyone to repent, who only talks about judgment and wrath, yet never mentions love, forgiveness, compassion, and mercy. The Bible paints a much bigger picture of God, life, and the gospel than mere judgment and the need for repentance. Remember, it's "good" news.

But just because some have swung the pendulum so far in the direction of wrath and judgment, let's not swing it back too far the other direction and do away with what Scripture emphasizes. God is compassionate and just, loving and holy, wrathful and forgiving. We can't sideline His more difficult attributes to make room for the palatable ones.

Now back to Paul.

I said earlier that Paul never wrote about the details of hell. However, there is one passage where he comes pretty close—a passage blistering with passion and urgency about Christ's second coming and the wrath that follows:

God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. (2 Thess. 1:6–9)

There are several things to note in this passage. First, the wrath of Jesus here is *retributive* and not *corrective*. In other words, the wrath isn't intended to correct the behavior of those opposing Christ to make them fit for salvation. Rather, the wrath is an act of—dare I say—vengeance. In fact, this is the exact word that Paul uses. Christ will "inflict vengeance on those who do not know God" and don't "obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." Second, in light of this last phrase, Paul doesn't have a select group of people in view. Those who don't know God or obey the gospel include everyone not following Jesus. No matter how innocent some people may seem, Paul says that if they don't know God or obey the gospel, they will face God's vengeful wrath when Jesus returns.4

As I read those verses, I am struck by how allergic I am to repeating the very words that Paul wrote. Affliction, vengeance, punishment, destruction—for all who don't follow Jesus. I'm not sure if I have ever used the term *vengeance* in describing the fate of unbelievers. In my desire to distance myself from sadistic Christians who revel in the idea of wrath and punishment, I may have crossed a line. Refusing to teach a passage of Scripture is just as wrong as abusing it.

I really believe it's time for some of us to stop apologizing *for* God and start apologizing *to* Him for being embarrassed by the ways He has chosen to reveal Himself.

Hell in 2 Peter and Jude

Apart from those of Paul, two other letters speak extensively of wrath and judgment. In fact, 2 Peter 2 alone looks like a chapter out of Dante's *Inferno*, while the book of Jude reads like a medieval tract written to scare peasants into unwavering church attendance and a steady tithe. These books together speak of "destruction" (2 Peter 2:1, 3, 12; 3:7, 9; Jude 5, 10, 11), "punishment" (2 Peter 2:9; Jude 7), "judgment" (2 Peter 2:4, 9; Jude 4), "condemnation" (2 Peter 2:3; Jude 4), "hell" (2 Peter 2:4), and retributive suffering (2 Peter 2:13) that await the ungodly who don't follow Jesus. Hell is described as "the gloom of utter darkness" (2 Peter 2:17; Jude 13) and the "punishment of eternal fire" (Jude 7, 23), terms that would be very familiar, as we have seen, in the authors' Jewish contexts. 6

Now, these books emphasize that hell is reserved for evil angels and false teachers, who indulge in fleshly desires and distort the gospel for financial gain (2 Peter 2:1, 4, 15–16). But both authors affirm that the same punishment is in store for all unrighteous people (2 Peter 2:9; Jude 14–15). As much as these terrifying images of wrath and hell are unpleasant to read, they do capture an important part of the Christian message: God will severely punish those who don't bow the knee to King Jesus.

Hell in Revelation

But even 2 Peter and Jude don't match John's description of hell in the book of Revelation. So to the final book we turn.

The first passage where we see a depiction of hell is Revelation 14. Speaking of the final judgment of God, the author writes:

"If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence ... of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." (vv. 9–11)

The idea of "God's wrath" and "anger," along with the image of being "tormented with fire and sulfur ... forever and ever," is terrifying.² But that seems to be an important theme in Revelation: *God's wrath is terrifying!* John isn't trying to resolve the tension between this potent imagery of punishment and the loving God who dies for His enemies as described in Romans 5. Instead, John gives us a powerful warning: Don't oppose God!

Most terrifying is the nature of the punishment—it's ongoing with no end in sight. Not only does John say that people will be "tormented with fire" (rather than destroyed),⁸ but he goes on to say that the smoke of their torment goes up "forever and ever." And just to drive home the point, he adds the phrase "they have no rest, day or night." ⁹

Again, it's very easy to get caught up in arguments and word studies and theological views, and yet miss the main point. This is real. We're talking

about the fate of actual people. Let's keep that in mind as we look at one more passage in Revelation.

In the final chapters of the book, we are given a picture of what will happen after Christ comes back. John depicts a blessed, never-ending age of peace, joy, and victory for all who "follow the Lamb." No death, no sadness, no fear, no evil, no pain, no tears—only an ongoing blissful life with the Creator in His new creation (21:1; 22:1–2). This is the destiny of all who follow Him.

But there is also a future for all who don't follow Him. Here's how the author describes it:

The devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. (Rev. 20:10)

As you read that verse, keep in mind that the Devil is one of God's created beings. Sometimes we hide behind questions like "how could a good God create someone and then torment that person forever?" Yet few people deny that He does this to Satan. Some even rejoice in this. John then describes a judgment scene where he sees

the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened ... and the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done ... and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found

written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (20:12–15)

Even though it's the Devil, beast, and false prophet who will be "tormented day and night forever and ever" in the lake of fire, John says that unbelievers go to the same place. If they go to the same place, they probably suffer the same fate—never-ending punishment in the lake of fire. John says again in the next chapter,

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death. (21:8)

The lake of fire is the final destiny for *both* the Devil and unbelievers. We have already seen that the phrase "tormented day and night forever and ever" refers to a never-ending punishment for the wicked. The same phrase "forever and ever" is used to describe the "reign" of God's people, which will never end (Rev. 22:5). This is further supported by Revelation 22:14 where those redeemed by Christ (i.e., "those who wash their robes") live in the new creation, while "outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood" (v. 15). This passage depicts an ongoing separation between believers who live in the presence of God (v. 14) and unbelievers who live "outside," or apart from the presence of God in the new creation.

So why is the lake of fire called the second "death" if its punishment is ongoing? Doesn't this point to a final annihilation and not an ongoing

torment for the wicked? While the word *death* itself could suggest finality, it is often used throughout the New Testament in a more metaphorical (nonliteral) sense. For instance, New Testament writers often refer to unbelievers as "dead" (referring to their spiritual state), even though they are physically alive (Luke 15:24, 32; Eph. 2:1, 12; Col. 2:13). Also, we already saw that the phrases *forever and ever, torment*, and *day and night* (Rev. 14:10–11; 20:10) point to something that has no end in sight. So it seems best to understand the word *death* not in terms of total annihilation but as a description of those who will be separated from God forever in an ongoing state of punishment.

An ongoing ... state ... of punishment ...

For all who don't love Jesus.

What causes my heart to ache right now as I'm writing this is that my life shows little evidence that I actually believe this. Every time my thoughts wander to the future of unbelievers, I quickly brush them aside so they don't ruin my day. But there is a reality here that I can't ignore. Even as the conversations of people around me fill my ears, the truth of Scripture penetrates my heart with sobering statements about their destinies. We can talk about the fate of some hypothetical person, but as I look up and see their smiles, I have to ask myself if I really believe what I have written in this book. Hell is for real. *Am I?*

I would love to think, as some have suggested, that the Bible doesn't actually say a whole lot about hell. I would love to stare at my friend's face when he asked that question we all fear— "Do you think I'm going to hell?"—and say "No! There is no such place! Jesus loves you and wants to heal your pain and turn your sorrows into gladness!"

But the New Testament writers didn't have the same allergic reaction to hell as I do. Perhaps they had a view of God that is much bigger than mine. A view of God that takes Him at His word and doesn't try to make Him fit our own moral standards and human sentimentality. A view of God that believes what He says, even when it doesn't make perfect sense to us.

Notes

- 1 Here's the references for the individual words: "death" or "die" (Greek: apothnesko, thanatos; Rom. 1:32; 5:12, 14, 15, 17, 21; 6:16, 21, 23; 7:5, 9, 10, 11, 13; 8:2, 6, 13; 1 Cor. 15:21, 22; 2 Cor. 2:16; 3:6, 7; 7:10; Eph. 2:1); "perish," "destroy," "destruction" (Greek: apollymi, apoleia, olethros, phthora; Rom. 2:12; 9:22; 14:15, 20; 1 Cor. 1:18; 15:18; 2 Cor. 2:15; 4:3; Gal. 6:8; Phil. 1:28; 3:19; 1 Thess. 5:3; 2 Thess. 1:9; 2:10; 1 Tim. 6:9); "wrath" (Greek: *orge*, *thymos*; Rom. 1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; 5:9; 9:22; Eph. 2:3; 5:6; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:16; 5:9); "condemn," "condemnation," or "judge" (Greek: several words with the root *krin*-; Rom. 2:1, 2, 3, 5, 12; 3:7, 8; 5:16, 18; 8:1; 1 Cor. 11:32; 2 Cor. 3:9; 2 Thess. 2:12; 1 Tim. 5:24); "curse," "cursed" (Greek: anathema, katara; Rom. 9:3; Gal. 1:8, 9; 3:10, 13; 1 Cor. 12:3; 16:22); "punish" (Greek: ekdikos, ekdikesis, dike; 1 Thess. 4:6; 2 Thess. 1:8, 9). For all these references, see Douglas Moo, "Paul on Hell," in Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 92– 93.
- 2 Paul uses Greek words (verbs and nouns) for "mercy" twenty-seven times, "forgiveness" seven times, and the noun "heaven" twenty-one

- times. This word search was performed through the recent (and quite excellent) Bible program Scroll Tag (<u>ScrollTag.com</u>).
- 2 Paul here is alluding to Isaiah 66:14–16, where God will "show his indignation against his enemies" (v. 14), "render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire" (v. 15), and "by fire will the LORD enter into judgment ... with all flesh" (v. 16). The aftermath is sobering: "those slain by the LORD shall be many" (v. 16). Throughout this passage, Isaiah describes God's future punishment of those who reject Him. God will "choose harsh treatment for" those who "did not listen" to God's offer of salvation (v. 4).
- 4 In this passage, Paul uses the phrase everlasting destruction. Does this mean Paul affirms that unbelievers will live forever in never-ending torment? Or does he mean that unbelievers will be annihilated when Christ comes back? This verse is not crystal clear, and anyone who thinks it is needs a good dose of interpretative humility. On the one hand, the word destruction seems to speak of annihilation. But Paul says it's "everlasting," so some have said that Paul is thinking of never-ending punishment in hell. However, as we have seen, the word everlasting (aionios) doesn't always mean "never-ending." Even if it does mean never-ending here, it would seem to make better sense that the "never ending-ness" speaks of the results or effects of the destruction rather than its ongoing act. In other words, I don't think Paul is referring to the never-ending process of God "destroying but not completely destroying" the wicked in hell here. At least Paul's words here don't clearly convey this notion. Neither, however, does Paul clearly say that the wicked will be annihilated and will not suffer ongoing punishment. There is evidence

that first-century writers use phrases like *eternal destruction* and actually do mean the act of punishment that never ends. Therefore, while Paul makes a clear point about punishment, vengeance, retribution, and wrath, he doesn't speak unambiguously about the duration of this wrath.

- 5 The word Peter uses for "hell" here is the Greek *tartarus*. This term is used in Greek mythology to refer to the place where giants such as Cyclopes and the Titans were cast. *Tartarus* is also used in Hellenistic, or Greek, branches of Judaism, as seen, for instance, in the Septuagint of Job (40:20; 41:24), Proverbs (30:16), and other early Jewish writers (e.g., *Sib. Or.* 4:186; *1 En.* 20:2; Philo, *Mos.* 2.433; *Praem.* 152). For a discussion, see Richard Bauckham, *2 Peter and Jude* (Word Bible Commentary 50) (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 249.
- 6 As with Paul, I don't think Peter and Jude are very clear about the duration of hell. On the one hand, both books are laced with the language of destruction, which in itself suggests annihilation. On the other hand, the phrase *punishment of eternal fire* (Jude 7, 23) could refer to ongoing torment, though, as we have seen before, it doesn't have to. Therefore, again, I think we have to be cautious about pressing the language to support either annihilation or never-ending punishment. In any case, neither book holds out hope that those who meet God's wrath in the end with have other opportunities after this to repent and be saved.
- 7 The identity of the beast and its followers is widely disputed. Some say that the beast refers to Rome, and its followers are those who wave the Roman flag, so to speak. Others say it's the worldly systems and those who embraced them throughout all time. Still others say that the beast is some infamous leader: Hitler, Saddam, bin Laden, and even the Pope are

among the top candidates. (I personally think this approach is wrongheaded.) For our purpose, it's not that important to settle on this issue. The beast and its followers under any view refer to those who are not on the side of Jesus, whether in the first century, all centuries, or the final days before Christ comes back. The author here is speaking quite simply of unbelievers. This is confirmed by later passages that refer to unbelievers facing God's future judgment (see Rev. 20:15; 21:8).

- 8 The word for "torment," *basanismos*, is never used in Revelation nor in the entire Bible to refer to the annihilation of personal existence. In Revelation, it always refers to conscious suffering (see Rev. 9:5; 11:10; 12:2; 18:7, 10, 15; 20:10; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [New International Greek Testament Commentary] [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998], 762; contra Edward Fudge, *Fire That Consumes: A Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality*, 2nd ed., rev. Peter Cousins [Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994], 304–307).
- 9 The phrase *forever and ever* is used twelve other times in Revelation, eleven of which clearly refer to something that never ends—such as the existence of God, which is "forever and ever" (Rev. 10:6; 15:7). For all the uses of the phrase in Revelation, see 1:6, 18; 4:9, 10; 5:13; 7:12; 10:6; 11:15; 15:7; 19:3; 20:10; 22:5. For the use of the phrase in the New Testament, see Galatians 1:5; Ephesians 3:21; Philippians 4:20; 1 Timothy 1:17; 2 Timothy 4:18; Hebrews 13:21; 1 Peter 4:11; see David Aune, *Revelation 6—16* (Word Bible Commentary 52B) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 836. The never-ending nature of the punishment is further supported by the phrase *they have no rest, day or night*. Therefore, while the phrase *forever and ever* in itself *could* refer to the

intensity of the punishment and not the duration (see Revelation 19:3 where it may refer to the intensity), its dominant use in Revelation and the context of 14:9–11 supports the notion of a never-ending punishment. Moreover, the parallel passage in 20:10–15 refers to a never-ending punishment and uses similar terms to do so. As we will see, this latter passage says that the Devil and false prophet will be "thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur" where they will be "tormented night and day forever and ever" (Rev. 20:10). And this is the same place where all the wicked will go (Rev. 20:15). Both passages, Revelation 14 and 20, have the phrases *torment*, *night and day*, and *forever and ever*, which suggest that they are speaking of the same ongoing punishment.

Chapter 5

What Does This Have to Do with Me?

If you're a Christian and wondering what all of this has to do with you, keep reading.

The other morning, I woke up to start writing as I've been doing for the past few weeks, and I decided to do something different. I closed my laptop and just read through all of these passages on hell.

I didn't think about writing; I didn't try to figure out all the nitty-gritty details of the text. I just let the New Testament speak in its power and simplicity, and here are some of the shocking things that God hit me with.

You Fool

Jesus threatens hell to those who curse their brother (Matt. 5:22). He's not warning drinkers or smokers or murderers. Jesus preaches hellfire against those who have the audacity to attack a fellow human being with harsh words. It's ironic—frightening, actually—that some people have written books, preached sermons, or written blog posts about hell and missed this point completely. In fact, some people have slammed their Christian brothers and sisters in the process, simply because they have a different

view of hell, missing the purpose of Matthew 5: Whoever calls his brother a fool may find himself guilty of hell.

Have you called your brother a fool lately? On a blog? On Facebook? Have you tweeted anything of the sort?

So often these hell passages become fodder for debate, and people miss the point of the warning. Jesus didn't speak of hell so that we could study, debate, and write books about it. He gave us these passages so that we would live holy lives. Stop slandering one another, and live in peace and brotherly unity. Jesus evidently hates it when we tear into our brothers or sisters with demeaning words, words that fail to honor the people around us as the beautiful image-bearing creatures that they are.

But Jesus, Didn't We ...

And how about Matthew 7, probably the scariest passage on hell in the entire Bible? The most horrific word in this passage isn't *hell;* it isn't *fire, furnace, everlasting, gloom, darkness, worms,* or *torment.* In fact, none of these words occur in this passage. The most frightening word is *many.* Jesus says, "*Many* will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" (Matt. 7:22 NASB). This is judgment day. This is the end. There are no second chances. This is the last peaceful breath that "many" will breathe before they spend the rest of their life in hell. Put yourself there for a second. Fast-forward your life to that day. Will you sound like the many who call out in desperation, "Lord, did I not ______ and _____ in Your name?"

How will Jesus respond to your laundry list of Christian activities—your Easter services, tithe, Bible studies, church potlucks, and summer-camp

conversions? Are you sure you're on the right side? What evidence do you have that you *know* Jesus? Please understand my heart. I believe I am asking these questions for the same reason that Jesus gives the warning. It's the most loving thing I can do! "Many" will go to hell even though they thought they'd waltz into paradise. Jesus will say, "I never *knew* you; depart from me" (Matt. 7:23).

From Every Tribe and Tongue

Or take racism. The Christian church in many ages and in many places has stood on the wrong side of this issue, and it's damnable—literally. What's racism got to do with hell? you may ask. According to Jesus, it's got everything to do with it. In Matthew 8, Jesus smuggles a warning about hell into the context of racism and ethnocentrism (the belief that your ethnicity is superior). The entire context of Matthew 8—9 depicts Jesus reversing all of the cultural and social assumptions of the Jews of that day. One assumption is that the Jews, as the "people of God," are much more fit for the kingdom than all those other nasty sinners—those Gentiles, those Greeks, those Romans. But in Matthew 8, Jesus is absolutely floored by the faith of a Roman Gentile military leader. This leader of high standing had the faith and humility to submit to the authority of Jesus. And Jesus accepted him as he is, as a Gentile. From this encounter, Jesus spins out a short message about many people of all nations and colors and ethnicities that will flood into the kingdom. And it is here that Jesus says that the "sons of the kingdom" who think that God values one ethnicity over another (in this case, the Jewish people) are damned to hell: "The sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:12 NASB). The teeth that once gnashed at the person of another race or color will gnash in the agony of eternal torment.

Why is it that only 5.5 percent of American evangelical churches could be considered multiethnic (where no single ethnicity makes up more than 80 percent of its congregants)?¹ Why is that? Five and a half percent! And we're supposed to be living in the melting pot, the place where hundreds of languages and colors often live within a few miles—or feet—of each other. What's so sad about this is that many people outside the church are far less racially divided. Consider the military, our places of work, or athletics. Yet there are three places where racial division still persists: bars, prisons, and the American evangelical church.

We need to see the glaring contradiction in saying we believe in hell while making no effort to tear down the walls of racism and ethnic superiority. If we're going to take Jesus' words seriously, we have to make a more concerted effort to forge avenues of racial reconciliation and unity under the banner of the gospel of Christ. One day, Christ will come back and there will be an amazing worship celebration—with African bongos, Indian sitars, and an ensemble of Mariachi trumpets—where every tribe, tongue, nation, and color will bow the knee to their King and *celebrate!* If this sounds irritating, then go back and read Matthew 8. It's written for you.

Blessed Are the Poor

And what about the poor? While Jesus is ambiguous at times about the nature and duration of hell, He's crystal clear about the necessity of reaching the poor. Yet many hellfire preachers are overfed and overpaid, living in luxury while doing nothing for the majority of Christians who live on less than two dollars a day.² Contrast that with Jesus, who in His longest

sermon about judgment made helping the poor a vital criterion of who goes where.

Put simply, failing to help the poor could damn you to hell. I know, I know, everyone wants to qualify this. We want to add all sorts of footnotes to fix Jesus' shaky theology in Matthew 25—justification is by faith, not by works; you don't really have to help literal poor people, etc. But it's ironic that some will fight tooth and nail for the literalness of Jesus' words about hell in this passage, yet soften Jesus' very clear words about helping the poor.³

On the flip side, some want to keep the stuff about helping the poor but take hell out of the picture. Sometimes people even take Jesus out of the picture—fighting poverty, they believe, is an inherent virtue whether or not it's rooted in the gospel.

Why do we assume that it must be one or the other? Let's keep the teeth of both truths. There's a literal hell, and helping the poor is essential. Not only did Jesus teach both of these truths, He saw them as necessary and interrelated.

The Tongue of Fire

James doesn't say much about hell in his short epistle. In fact, the word *hell* only occurs once. But this one instance is directed right at me, a teacher of the Bible. In the context of warning teachers that they will incur a stricter judgment (James 3:1), James says that the tongue is capable of burning up an entire forest (v. 5). "The tongue is a fire," James says, and it is ignited by the fire of hell (v. 6). Again, think teachers, those who stand up and communicate God's Word to God's people. It is for this context that James reserves his only warning about hell. He doesn't warn drunks, thieves, or

adulterers about going to hell. No doubt James agrees that sinners of all sorts will go to hell, but for some sobering reason he saves his only explicit —and quite scathing—warning about hell for teachers of God's Word.

The same goes for 2 Peter and Jude. As we saw in the last chapter, these short letters are full of hellfire and emphasize that hell is a place for false teachers—those who claim to be speaking for God but are really only speaking for themselves. According to Peter and Jude, these teachers are among us, exploiting us with false words. They indulge the flesh, despise authority, are greedy and hypocritical—and they lead many astray. They speak a lot about God, but the gods they really delight in are their own bellies and wallets. Peter and Jude say they are heading for hell.

Lukewarm and Loving It

The most terrifying images of hell occur, as we have seen, in the book of Revelation. But let's remember the context in which John writes this book. This isn't an evangelistic tract written for unbelievers—the hell passages here weren't designed to make converts and scare people into the kingdom. They were designed to warn believers to keep the faith in the midst of adversity. In fact, the descriptions of hell in Revelation 14 and 20—21 were first written with the seven churches of Revelation 2—3 in mind. In these churches, there were those who had left their first love (Rev. 2:4), followed the heresy of false teachers (v. 20), and become complacent and "lukewarm" because of the earthly wealth they hoarded (3:15–17). It is to these types of people—people who confess Jesus with their lips but deny Him by their actions—that God reserves the most scathing descriptions of hellfire and brimstone.

I hate to sound as if I'm always singling out the church in America, but it's where I live. And I have seen enough of His church in other countries to know that not everyone lives like us. In fact, few do. We have become dangerously comfortable—believers ooze with wealth and let their addictions to comfort and security numb the radical urgency of the gospel. What's encouraging is that there seems to be a growing number of American believers who recognize this and are making changes. Be encouraged by the statement Jesus made while addressing the church in Sardis. He addresses the "few" who refused to succumb: "You have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy" (Rev. 3:4).

I would love for Jesus to grace me with those words: *You are worthy*. Wouldn't you?

Lord, Save Us

Racism, greed, misplaced assurance, false teaching, misuse of wealth, and degrading words to a fellow human being—these are the things that damn people to hell? According to Scripture, the answer is yes.

Let's not miss the very purpose for these lively warnings. God wants us to do more than intellectually agree with the words of Scripture: He wants us to live in light of them. Like the ER doctor who shocks the dead back to life, belief in hell should rescue our complacent hearts from the suffocating grip of passivity.

God, help me overcome my selfishness. I want to love the way You asked me to.

I don't want to say another insulting word to or about another person, not even jokingly.

I want to shock my enemies with Christian love.

I want to joyfully sacrifice for the poor, and to see You when I see them.

I don't want to fit in anymore.

Holy Spirit, save me. Set me apart. Make me worthy.

Notes

- 1 See Rodney Woo, *The Color of Church: Biblical and Practical Paradigm for Multicultural Churches* (Nashville: B & H Publishers, 2009); Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divide by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 2 Among the many books about Jesus and poverty, see Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997).
- In the context, Jesus is talking about impoverished Christians, not any poor person. This is clear from Jesus' description of the poor as "these brothers of Mine" (25:40 NASB). In the book of Matthew, the term *brother* is used to describe Jesus' literal brothers or his followers (Matt. 12:46–50). It's never a general description of all people. But this doesn't get the church off the hook. Many, if not most, of the two billion people living on less than two dollars a day are confessing Christians.

Chapter 6

"What If God ...?"

Now I want to approach the passage of Scripture that has caused me more confusion than any other: Romans 9. The text itself is not confusing. Please read it for yourself. It's fairly simple to understand. What makes it confusing is the "newness" of it. That's a strange thing to say about something that was written almost two thousand years ago. But it's a passage that isn't preached often, so when believers come across it, many find themselves confused. We find ourselves asking, "Is this saying what I think it's saying? If this is true about God, why hasn't anyone told me this before?" Is it because we are embarrassed? Maybe we don't want to admit that we believe in a God who is *so* free to do whatever He wants.

In this chapter, Paul asks a necessary question: What if?

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory? (Rom. 9:22–23)

What if? What if God decided to do this? What if God, as the sovereign Creator of the universe, decided to create "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction"? And what if He did so in order to "show his wrath" and "make known His power"? And what if it's His way of showing those He saves just how great His glory and mercy is? What would you do if He chose to do this? Refuse to believe in Him? Refuse to be a "vessel of mercy"? Does that make any sense? Would you refuse to follow Him? Really? Is that wise?

"What if?" is a probing question that forces us to face our inflated view of our own logic. It's another way of asking: Just how high is my view of God?

The Potter and the Clay

For much of this book, we've been discussing some unpopular topics: judgment, wrath, and, of course, hell. If you're like me, there's a part of you that doesn't want to believe these things. But as we discussed in chapter one, the more important question is not whether or not you *want* to, but *could* you believe these things, if in fact God says they are true? This seems to be the very thing that Paul is getting at in Romans 9:22–23.

Notice that Paul does not explicitly say that God destroys sinners for the purpose of showing the world just how powerful He is. Rather, Paul simply raises it as a legitimate possibility. In other words, God may want to display His wrath and power by punishing sinners, or He may have some other purpose in mind. Either way, we must come to a place where we can let God be God. We need to surrender our perceived right to determine what is just and humbly recognize that God alone gets to decide how He is going to deal with people.

Because He's the Potter and we're the clay. This, in fact, is the analogy that Paul gives earlier in Romans 9. Paul begins by saying that God will have mercy on whomever He wills and He will harden whomever He chooses (Rom. 9:16–18). These are some very tough statements to swallow, and Paul knows it. That's why he goes on to raise the question that every reader of Romans 9 raises: "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" (Rom. 9:19). Good question! If God gives mercy to whomever He wants, then why does He still find fault? Or put the question another way: If we all need mercy, and God grants it to some and not others, then who is really responsible—us or God?

But look at Paul's answer to this question:

But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? (Rom. 9:20–21)

Did Paul really just say that?

Does the Potter have the right to do whatever He wants with the clay? In the midst of the tragedies that life often brings, in the midst of the mysterious and hidden ways in which God often works, in the midst of the theological tensions and paradoxes that are woven throughout Scripture, in the midst of the pain and sorrow and misery and confusion that accompany our existence on earth—we must come to a place where we can answer yes to this question. *Yes, the Potter has this right*.

I often hear people say, "I could never love a God who would ..."

Who would what? Who would disagree with you? And do things that you would never do? Who would allow bad things to happen to people? Who would be more concerned with His own glory than your feelings? Who would—send people to hell?

But this makes about as much sense as the clay looking up at the Potter and saying, "I really think you messed up here, let me show you a better way to mold me." Picture the absurdity! Yet we do it all the time.

In fact, *I* do it all the time.

It has taken me forty-three years to finally confess that I have been embarrassed by some of God's actions. In my arrogance, I believed I could make Him more attractive or palatable if I covered up some of His actions. So I neglected speaking on certain passages, or I would rush through certain statements God made in order to get to the ones I was comfortable with. The ones I knew others would like.

I am just now seeing the ugliness of my actions. Like the nervous kid who tries to keep his friends from seeing his drunken father, I have tried to *hide* God at times. Who do I think I am? The truth is, God is perfect and right in all that He does. I am a fool for thinking otherwise. He does not need nor want me to "cover" for Him. There's nothing to be covered. Everything about Him and all He does is perfect.

Yet sometimes from our human perspective, it's tough to see exactly how God is perfect and just and good. That's why God says in Isaiah 55:

My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (vv. 8–9)

"My thoughts are not your thoughts." It means we think differently! He hasn't asked us to figure out why He does the things He does. We can't. We are not capable. Our thinking is inferior to His. Let's not think that spending a bit of time meditating on the mysteries of the universe places us on a level that allows us to call God into question. Our God is not a person who is slightly more intelligent: His thoughts are infinitely higher than ours. Knowing that the gap is so large, shouldn't we put our energy toward submitting rather than overanalyzing? It is natural—no, it is *expected*—that there will be times, many times, when you won't figure Him out.

I Wouldn't Have Done That

And sending people to hell isn't the only thing God does that is impossible to figure out. The Bible is bursting with divine acts that don't make a lot of sense to us.

Think about it.

Early on in the Bible, we read that people have become so evil that God regrets making them. So what does He do? He decides to save some animals and eight of His people—and then He kills the rest. But He doesn't just kill them. He drowns them all with a massive flood (Gen. 6—8).

A flood? He drowns everyone? If I were God, I wouldn't have done that.

Later on, Moses is up on a mountain while the Israelites are down below worshipping a golden calf. When Moses comes down, God commands the Levites to whet their swords and run through the camp and slaughter their brothers and friends and neighbors (Ex. 32:27). Three thousand people died that day, and the Levites were blessed for their obedience! They didn't stop to figure out whether or not the Potter's ways were just.

Years later, God commands the Israelites to slaughter all the inhabitants of Canaan (Deut. 20:16–18). Men, women, and children—*every* ... *single* ... *one*. Even though God is merciful, He tells them to take no prisoners. Slaughter them all.

If I were God, I wouldn't have done that.

While the Israelites are conquering the land of Canaan, a man named Achan steals some treasures from the town of Jericho. He lies about it, but when confronted he confesses his sin and returns the items. Nevertheless, Achan and his family—including all of his possessions, tent and all—are all stoned to death as a result (Josh. 7).

If I were God, I wouldn't have allowed that, let alone commanded it.

Many years later, God commands the prophet Ezekiel to do some pretty wild things. Ezekiel is told to lie on his right side for 390 days, to lie on his left side for 40 days, to cook food over human dung, to hold himself back from mourning over his wife's death when God takes her, and to preach sermons laced with sexually explicit rhetoric that would be rated NC-17 were it put to film today.²

I definitely wouldn't have done all of that if I were God.

The fact is, Scripture is filled with divine actions that don't fit our human standards of logic or morality. But they don't need to, because we are the clay and He is the Potter. We need to stop trying to domesticate God or confine Him to tidy categories and compartments that reflect our human sentiments rather than His inexplicable ways.

We serve a God whose ways are incomprehensible, whose thoughts are not like our thoughts. Ultimately, thoughts of God should lead to joy, because those same thoughts designed the cross—the place where righteousness and wrath kiss.

Would you have thought to rescue sinful people from their sins by sending your Son to take on human flesh? Would you have thought to enter creation through the womb of a young Jewish woman and be born in a feeding trough? Would you have thought to allow your created beings to torture your Son, lacerate His flesh with whips, and then drive nails through His hands and feet? Parents, imagine it.

I'm almost sure I would not have done that if I were God.

Aren't you glad I'm not God?

It's incredibly arrogant to pick and choose which incomprehensible truths we embrace. No one wants to ditch God's plan of redemption, even though it doesn't make sense to us. Neither should we erase God's revealed plan of punishment because it doesn't sit well with us. As soon as we do this, we are putting God's actions in submission to our own reasoning, which is a ridiculous thing for clay to do.

Wrestling with God

Yet God doesn't call us to be stoic about our painful experiences. He expects us to wrestle, and He knows that we will experience pain in this life. Life does deal us some heavy blows, and it's natural—*human*—for us to weep, struggle, and cry out in desperation. God calls us to "weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). Even Jesus did this (John 11:35).

Take Job for example. Job was literally the most righteous person in the entire world (the Bible actually says that), and yet he suffered intensely. In a single moment, God took all of his property, his possessions, and even his whole family. And as if this wasn't enough, God allowed Job to suffer from a physical disease—possibly elephantiasis—that produced unbearable pain. His skin became crusty and oozed with puss, his bones burned like fire, and

his entire body became deformed.³ Naturally, Job demanded some answers. He deserved to know what God was doing. He had every cause to sit God down and have Him explain a few things.

Or did he? Again, think Potter and clay.

Job did get his chance to enter the courtroom and plead his case, but when he did, Job quickly discovered that he didn't get to put God on the stand and bombard Him with questions. Instead, Job found himself in the hot seat, and God rebuked him for thinking that he knew better than his Maker: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (Job 38:4); "Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this" (38:18); "I will question you, and you make it known to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?" (40:7–8); "Shall the faultfinder contend with the Almighty?" (40:2).

In other words, will the clay say to the Potter, "Why did you do this to me?"

What if God, whose wisdom and justice are beyond our understanding, decided to rain down severe suffering upon Job without feeling the need to tell him why? Do you *want* to love a God who would do this? *Could* you love a God like this?

Job did. In fact, after stepping down from the interrogation stand, Job clung to God even more, despite the fact that he never received answers to his questions. Job's response is remarkable: "I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5). In other words, Job used to know God from a distance ("by the hearing of the ear"), but now, after having been through the grind and clinging to God when nothing else made sense, Job knew God in a much more intimate way ("now my eye

sees you"). And with that, Job arrived at the most important point: It's not about figuring out all of the mysteries of God, but embracing Him and cherishing Him—even when He doesn't make perfect sense to us.

Jeremiah had a similar experience and came to the same conclusion. After the Babylonians ripped through Israel, slaughtering and torturing men, women, and children, Jeremiah threw up his arms and cried out, "You have killed them in the day of your anger, slaughtering without pity" (Lam. 2:21). That's not a typo. You read it correctly. This is exactly what Jeremiah said. *He believed that the actions of the Babylonians were ultimately acts of God*. As Jeremiah looked around and saw a bunch of bodies lying in the street, he said, "God did that."

I almost didn't want to quote that verse. Honestly, as I started quoting Lamentations 2:21, my first thought was, "Don't do it; it's too harsh; it raises too many questions about evil and justice and God's ways; it may turn people off." But then I remembered my confession. God wasn't embarrassed to have Jeremiah write that; it's time I stop being embarrassed by God's actions. His thoughts and ways are infinitely higher than mine. It's time to stop apologizing *for* Him and start apologizing *to* Him.

Please forgive me, Lord, for wanting to erase all the things in Scripture that don't sit well with me. Forgive me for trying to hide some of Your actions to make You more palatable to the world. Forgive me for trying to make You fit my standards of justice and goodness and love. You are God; You are good; I don't always understand You, but I love You. Thank You for who You are.

Jeremiah goes on in his lament to speak of the appalling images of the Babylonian invasion. Starving women eat their own children. Leaders hang by their hands. Children lay dead on the streets because of starvation. There is little in Lamentations that is pleasant. It's a horrifying little book, and aptly titled. If anyone had grounds to "not love a God who would ..." it was Jeremiah. He certainly had his doubts and came close to questioning God's justice. But through it all—through tears, pain, confusion, anger, and doubt—Jeremiah clung to the faithfulness and goodness of God, even though he didn't *feel* that God was very good at the moment:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lam. 3:21–23)

In the midst of his pain and confusion, Jeremiah clung to the fact that God was God and Jeremiah was not. He let the Potter be the Potter and understood that he was clay.

His Name Is Tobiah

Throughout Scripture and throughout history, godly women and men have embraced the God of Job and Jeremiah. They held on to a God whom they didn't always understand; a God who is immeasurably good, even though circumstances in life seem to suggest otherwise.

Years ago, I came across an article entitled "Two Minutes to Eternity" by Marshall Shelley, one of the editors of *Christianity Today* at the time.⁶ In the article, Marshall tells the story of the miraculous birth of his son. When

the child was in the womb, Marshall and his wife, Susan, found out that their child had an abnormal heart and would probably not survive the birth, if he even made it that far. And so the Shelleys wrestled with God. "This was a design flaw," Marshall writes, "and the Designer was responsible." So they prayed. They prayed for a miracle, they prayed for survival, they prayed that the God of all compassion would give the child the breath of life.

Then the day of birth came, and the child was still alive. The child had survived the pregnancy! God is so good! As the child was born, Marshall looked upon his beautiful son: "He was a healthy pink, and we saw his chest rise and fall. The breath of life. Thank you, God."

And then the child died. Two minutes later, their son turned from pink to blue, and he died. The miracle of life was followed by the mystery of death. And as far as the Shelleys were concerned, the Designer was responsible. When the nurse asked the Shelleys if they had a name for the child, Susan responded: "Toby. It's short for a biblical name, Tobiah, which means 'God is good."

God is good.

God is good? How could they say that? How could they believe such an unbelievable attribute of God, when everything in that moment seemed to be proving the opposite? Because the Shelleys believed that God is good not only when He makes sense to us, but even when He doesn't. God is good, because God is God. Goodness is inherent in who He is. And the Shelleys believed this. "The name was what we believed, not what we felt," Marshall writes. "It was what we wanted to feel again someday."

And so it is with many things about God that don't seem to add up. And so it must be with hell.

As I have said all along, I don't *feel like* believing in hell. And yet I do. Maybe someday I will stand in complete agreement with Him, but for now I attribute the discrepancy to an underdeveloped sense of justice on my part. God is perfect. And I joyfully submit to a God whose ways are much, much higher than mine.

Notes

- 1 James Dunn, for instance, says that Paul's statement in Romans 9:22 amounts to the question "Do you think the creature knows better than the Creator?" Dunn goes on to interpret Romans 9:22–23 the same way I do, as suggesting a legitimate possibility yet not offering a dogmatic answer (*Romans* [Word Bible Commentary 38B] [Waco, TX: Word, 1988], 566).
- 2 See Ezek. 4, 16, 23, and 24.
- 3 See Job 7:5; 13:28; 30:30, 18. The fact that Job's friends could hardly recognize him (2:12) suggests that his body was deformed. The Hebrew word often translated "boils" or "sores" in 2:7 may refer to the disease we now call elephantiasis.
- 4 See Lam. 2:11, 20–21; 4:10; 5:11–12.
- 5 See for instance 5:21–22, where he seems to question whether or not God will hold true to His promises (cf. Lam. 2:10–21).
- 6 Marshall Shelley, "Two Minutes to Eternity," *Christianity Today* 38 (1994): 25–27. I first heard about this story in a sermon by John Piper about ten years ago.

Chapter 7

Don't Be Overwhelmed

The thought of hell is paralyzing for most people, which is why we often ignore its existence—at least in practice. After all, how can we possibly carry on with life if we are constantly mindful of a fiery place of torment?

Yet that's the whole point—we shouldn't just go on with life as usual. A sense of urgency over the reality of hell should recharge our passion for the gospel as it did for Paul, who, "knowing the fear of the Lord," persuaded people to believe (2 Cor. 5:11). We should not just try to cope with hell, but be compelled—as with all doctrine—to live differently in light of it.

In fact, Peter makes exactly this point in 2 Peter 3. He describes the Lord's return, the day of judgment, and the destruction of the ungodly. And what does he conclude? That we should throw our hands up in despair because there's nothing we can do about it anyway? No. He asks a pointed question: "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness?" (2 Peter 3:11).

In light of this truth and for the sake of people's eternal destiny, our lives and our churches should be—no, they must be!—free from the bondage of sin, full of selfless love that overflows for neighbors, the downcast, and the outsiders among us.

In other words, we need to stop explaining away hell and start proclaiming His solution to it.

A Greater Urgency

Paul's drastic statement in Romans 9 reveals the heart behind his incredible missionary career:

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. (vv. 2–3)

Did you catch that? Paul wished he were *accursed*—or sent to hell—so that his fellow Jews could live. That's insane! I don't know what to do with that. I don't want anyone to go to hell, but I would never be willing to go to hell on someone else's behalf! I hate the thought that people around me could end up in hell, but I can't say that I have *great sorrow* and *unceasing anguish* in my heart.

Paul had some frightening things to say about the eternal destiny of those who reject Jesus in this life, but he loved those people like crazy. His life was devoted to seeing them reconciled to God. He even begged people to pursue the healing and salvation that only Jesus offers (see 2 Cor. 5:20).

More Reason to Rejoice

It's a bit odd that the same Paul who had "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" in his heart commanded us also to "rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil. 4:4). Somehow Paul was able to grieve and rejoice at the same time.

This is the tension we live with as followers of Jesus. We are thrilled to know Jesus and be saved from God's wrath, yet we are burdened for our loved ones who don't know Him.

One of the unexpected blessings that came from this study has been a deeper sense of gratitude for the cross. This past Sunday, I attended a worship service at a small church that had no musicians. So we sang some songs with a background track, and others a cappella. In small crowds, I try to sing softly because my voice is not very pleasant. Yet as we sang songs about the cross, I found myself crying out at the top of my lungs.

"TILL ON THAT CROSS AS JESUS DIED, THE WRATH OF GOD WAS SATISFIED!"

I've sung songs like that a thousand times, and I'm sure you have too. But think about that line. Jesus satisfied the wrath of God. This is the same wrath that Jesus, Paul, Jude, Peter, and John spoke and wrote so vividly about. This is the same wrath that is being poured out for your sins. This is the same wrath that ultimately will be satisfied, either in hell or on the cross. We deserve it; Christ endured it. How could I keep from bursting out in joy?

While hell can be a paralyzing doctrine, it can also be an energizing one, for it magnifies the beauty of the cross.

Hell is the backdrop that reveals the profound and unbelievable grace of the cross. It brings to light the enormity of our sin and therefore portrays the undeserved favor of God in full color. Christ freely chose to bear the wrath that I deserve so that I can experience life in the presence of God. How can I keep from singing, crying, and proclaiming His indescribable love?

Finally ... Are You Sure?

It would make no sense for me to write all I have written without at least asking the question. Are you sure that you have embraced the God who can save you from hell? I don't want to make this all about avoiding hell. As I mentioned earlier, the gospel is far deeper and more wonderful than just that. However, in light of our discussion, it is fitting that I beg you to be absolutely sure that you are not headed there. This is for everyone. Pastors, leaders, seekers, skeptics—no one knows what you are thinking right now. Let down your guard, and take time to deal honestly with the issue.

Do you know Him? Are you secure in Him? In love with Him?

I don't know what your life is like or what hardships you've faced. I don't know what your thoughts on hell are, or whether or not you've been attacked or manipulated with threats of hell in the past. All I know is that from my best understanding of Scripture, hell is a real place for those who choose to reject God. Yet God is not licking His chops looking for any poor soul that He can send to hell. In fact, the opposite is true: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (Ezek. 18:23; cf. 33:11).

And so we all have a choice before us. Choose life or choose death. God asks you to turn from your ways and live.

Paul addressed a crowd in Lystra with these words:

"We bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness." (Acts 14:15–17)

Again, I don't know who you are or what God has done in your life, but I know He has not "left himself without witness" in your life. Paul says that every single one of us knows the truth about God (see Rom. 1:18–25). In light of this truth, God calls you to respond in love. Turn to God. Embrace Him. Trust Him. Put your faith in Him. Accept the incredible gift of the cross, where Jesus took upon Himself the punishment we deserve and gives to us the life, healing, and redemption that come only through grace.

I can't think of a better way to end this book than to point you to the words of Paul, who urges us to be reconciled to the God who loves you more than you can possibly imagine:

We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God ... behold, now is the day of salvation. (2 Cor. 5:20–21; 6:2)

God extends mercy to all *now*, He wants us to know Him *now*, He urges all of us *now* to be reconciled to Him through His Son Jesus Christ. The door is open *now*—but it won't stay open forever.

Appendix

Frequently Asked Questions

This book raised many questions about hell; some have been discussed in detail, while others were brushed over to focus on the purposes of this book and in order to keep the book a reasonable length. This appendix is an attempt to answer some of the most frequently asked questions related to the topic of hell.

Question 1: Are the images of fire, darkness, and worms to be understood literally?

The most well-known imagery used to describe hell is fire. Jesus, for instance, describes hell as the "fiery furnace" (Matt. 13:42), the "eternal fire" (Matt. 18:8–9), and the place where the "fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). Likewise, John, in the book of Revelation, depicts hell as a "lake of fire" where the "burning sulfur" torments forever (Rev. 14:10–11; 20:10, 15). Are we to understand these images of fire literally? Will unbelievers literally burn forever, yet never fully be consumed?

Most evangelical Christians who believe that hell is a literal place and that its duration is forever do not interpret the fire imagery literally. Wellknown figures such as John Calvin, Martin Luther, C. S. Lewis, Billy Graham, D. A. Carson, J. I. Packer, and Sinclair Ferguson all understand the fire images nonliterally. Other conservative commentators and theologians, such as Charles Hodge, Carl Henry, F. F. Bruce, Roger Nicole, Leon Morris, and Robert Peterson agree. These scholars note that fire imagery is used in many other places in the Bible—not just in passages relating to hell—in obviously nonliteral ways. Jesus says that He "came to cast fire on the earth" (Luke 12:49), which in the context symbolizes judgment. Our Lord didn't literally gather sticks and leaves to set the planet ablaze. John describes Jesus' eyes as like "a flame of fire" (Rev. 1:14); for James, the tongue is a "fire" (James 3:6); and according to Paul, our mundane works will be burned with fire on judgment day (1 Cor. 3:15). Fire is used metaphorically throughout Scripture, and I agree with the host of evangelical scholars above that fire is probably *not to be taken literally when it's used to describe hell*.

This is supported by several passages in which a literal fire would conflict with what the author says elsewhere. Jude, for instance, describes hell as an "eternal fire" (Jude 7), while six verses later he calls hell the "blackest darkness" (Jude 13). Jesus and John the Baptist both describe hell with images of "fire" (Matt. 3:10, 12; 25:41) and "darkness" (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). These metaphors of fire and darkness are clearly mixed—where there's fire, there cannot be complete darkness. The mixing of metaphors suggests that these images are just that: *metaphors*. This is further supported by Jesus' statement that hell was created for the Devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41), who are spirit beings. If fire imagery is taken literally, one wonders how fire would work on such nonphysical creatures.

Of course God could make all this work. He could prevent fire from penetrating darkness and enable spirits to feel the pain of the flame. But given the widespread use of fire as a metaphor in Scripture, I find it best to take these images nonliterally.

The same probably goes for other images, such as thick darkness (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; Luke 13:28), undying worms (Mark 9:43–48), and the gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). On one occasion, Jesus even says that the unbeliever will be cut into pieces (Matt. 24:51). With such images, I find it best to view them all as powerful ways of conveying the inexplicable notions of punishment that will occur in hell. Fire and the gnashing of teeth depict intense pain and suffering; darkness conveys separation from God; worms that don't die (see Isa. 66:24) probably emphasize the shame of eternal death, if not its neverending duration.

So while the passages examined in this book are clear about hell as a real place where the wicked will be tormented, the Bible does not seem to tell us exactly what that torment will entail.

Question 2: Are there degrees of punishment in hell?

Will the Buddhist monk sit next to Hitler in hell? Or will some people suffer a greater degree of punishment than others?

The Bible suggests that there will be degrees of punishment in hell. Jesus said in Matthew 11:24, "It will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you"—the "you" being those who witnessed the works of Christ. In Luke 12, Jesus tells a parable about some disobedient slaves who receive punishment for their misdeeds. One slave is cut into pieces, another collects many lashes, while the last one gets a "light beating" (vv. 46–48). If this parable applies to punishment in hell, then it affirms that there will be degrees of suffering. Paul also suggests this when

he says that unbelievers are "storing up wrath" for themselves on judgment day (Rom. 2:5).

Though Scripture is not crystal clear on the issue, there is support for the view that there will be degrees of punishment in hell.

Question 3: Is hell at the center of the earth?

Some first-century Jews and many medieval Christians would have said yes. Some books, such as Dante's *Inferno*, suggest this, and such widely read books have a way of creating ideas that seep deep down into the fabric of many cultures. But there is nothing in the Bible that clearly locates hell at the center of the earth.

The Old Testament does say that when people die they go "down to Sheol" (Gen. 37:35). But sheol is not necessarily hell (see question 4), and the reference to "going down" is more of a figure of speech than a geographical designation. Also, as we saw in chapters two and three of this book, "hell" itself is reserved for the wicked *after* judgment day. In other words, no one is in hell right now. They may be in hades (see Luke 16), but hades, like sheol, is where the wicked await their judgment. Hades is not hell.

It's probably best to follow the advice of the early church leader Chrysostom, who said that we shouldn't be concerned about where hell is, only how to escape it. Other than that, we know nothing of its location or geography.

Question 4: Does the Old Testament word *sheol* refer to hell?

The simple answer is no, sheol isn't hell. The meaning of sheol, often translated as "pit" or "grave," is difficult to translate. The word occurs sixty-five times in the Old Testament, and it describes the place where both the righteous (Gen. 37:35; 42:38; Isa. 38:10, 17–18) and the wicked (Num. 16:30; Isa. 14:19, 11) go after death. Still, this doesn't mean that they go to the same place. It only means that the word *sheol* is flexible and doesn't have to designate the specific destiny of the righteous or wicked. At the very least, sheol is simply a synonym for death; at most, it may refer to some sort of shadowy subhuman existence after death, without specifying the details.

The Old Testament doesn't give us many details about hell. Daniel 12:2 says that the wicked will be resurrected and punished, but no other details are given. Ezekiel 32:17–32 is by far the longest description of the existence of the wicked after they die, but it's a rather ambiguous passage, preventing us from coming to any firm conclusions about the nature of hell. In the passage, Ezekiel seems to make a distinction between sheol (vv. 21, 27) and what he calls "the nether world" (v. 18, cf. v. 24 NASB), where the wicked go when they die. Here, the wicked are arranged according to nationality (vv. 22, 24, 26, 29), where they receive their punishment for what they did while alive. Moreover, it seems that though they are not fully alive, they are fully conscious of what's going on. The wicked receive punishment (v. 27), feel shame (v. 30), and are even "comforted" at the arrival of more inhabitants in this "netherworld" (v. 31). "Misery loves company" seems to be the point here.

Despite what seems to be a detailed description of hell, the genre of the passage prevents us from taking all of these descriptions in a literal manner. At best, we can say that God revealed to Ezekiel that the wicked would

receive some sort of punishment after they die. Beyond this, caution must rule our interpretation.

Question 5: What about the person who has never heard the gospel?

This is a tough one. It comes up in almost every Bible study I've ever taught. What about the man in the jungle who has never heard the gospel and therefore never has the opportunity to accept Jesus? What if he simply responds to the light he's been given? He lived as best he could, and if he had heard the gospel, he probably would have believed it. Will God save such a person?

Everything in me wants to say yes. Because saying yes makes sense. Yes seems fair. But here's the problem: There's nothing in Scripture that says anyone will be saved apart from faith in Jesus.

Scripture also teaches that the so-called "light" we've all been given through creation, what theologians call *general revelation*, is sufficient to condemn but not sufficient to save. In other words, when people look at creation and see that there must be a God, and yet have no way of knowing His name or the plan of salvation, the Bible says that these people do not respond positively to such "light." Paul addresses this directly in Romans 1:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world,

in the things that have been made. *So they are without excuse*. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Rom. 1:18–22)

This passage says that all people have been given light—general knowledge that there is a God—and yet all people reject this knowledge and are therefore without excuse. Even though I have theoretical stories in my mind of a person living in the jungle who responds positively to the light he's been given, Paul argues otherwise. This passage teaches that all people are condemned *not for rejecting the gospel but for rejecting the "general revelation" that's given to all people.*

Scripture teaches that a person must come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ to be saved. However, God can reveal knowledge through many different forms: dreams, visions, or divinely given thoughts that penetrate the mind of the person living in the jungle, or whomever. I've heard countless stories, maybe you have too, of people living in places thick with Islam, or other religions, where there is little or no exposure to the gospel, and yet people come to Christ. They have a vision or dream in which Jesus appears to them, and they respond. God can save whomever He wants, however He wants, but He always does so through the one avenue He Himself paved: His Son Jesus Christ.

I must mention, however, that in Scripture, people are normally saved through a human messenger. In fact, Romans 10:13–15 indicates that preaching the gospel is the prescribed means through which God saves people. While God has used dreams and visions to reach people (cf. Gal 1:12–16), we should not depend on such means to reach the unreached.

There are still 1.5 billion people who have never heard the gospel. God makes it clear that it is our responsibility to go to them.

Everything I've said thus far seems clear to me from Scripture. There are heaps of important follow-up questions that could be asked, but at the end of the day, we have to simply believe what Scripture says and not go beyond it. With all these tough questions, it's best to let God be God and believe that the Judge of all the earth will do right (Gen. 18:25).

Question 6: Did Jesus preach to people in hell between His death and resurrection?

According to 1 Peter 3, Jesus, "proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared" (vv. 19–20). This is a rather strange passage, but it almost certainly doesn't mean that Jesus was preaching the gospel to unbelievers who had died. The word *spirits*, when used without any qualifications (such as "spirit of man," etc.) refers to supernatural beings, whether good or bad (Matt. 12:45; Luke 10:20; Heb. 1:14). Peter also says that these spirits were disobedient "in the days of Noah." This probably refers to another strange passage in Genesis 6:1–4, where evil angels apparently had sexual relations with women and were "imprisoned" by God for it (see 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). This raises many other questions, I'm sure. In any case, it seems that here in 1 Peter 3, Jesus went to that angelic prison and proclaimed victory in light of the cross over these disobedient demons (see Col. 2:15).

So Jesus did not preach the gospel to unbelievers in hell, at least not in an evangelistic sense.

Question 7: How can God be loving and still send people to hell?

This is a question that many intelligent theologians have wrestled with over the centuries. It was, in fact, this question (among others) that drove the early church leader Origen to believe that all people will end up in heaven. He believed that the love of God demands it.

Can God be loving and still send people to hell? If what I have argued in this book is correct, then we must answer yes. Here are three reasons why:

First, God is love, but He also *defines* what love is. We don't have the license to define love according to our own standards and sensibilities. We often assume that love means achieving the ultimate happiness of everyone you are able to. If this were love, then yes, hell would be incompatible with God's love. But Scripture doesn't define God's love in this way. Love is part of who God is. And God defines what love is. God does not *have* to save everyone for Him to *show love*. Love, in other words, is essentially wrapped up in the character of God. Though God acts in ways that *seem* unloving by our standards, they are not unloving by His standards—and His standards are the ones that matter.

Second, we must understand the love of God in light of His other characteristics. God is love, but He is also holy and just, and He frequently pours out wrath toward sin. In fact, God sometimes withholds certain attributes in order to exercise others. For instance, God withholds His wrath to exercise mercy. God withholds justice to pour out His grace. Of course, God *could* choose to lavish all humanity with His mercy and therefore choose to withhold His wrath toward everyone. But the Bible doesn't support this.

Third, and to my mind most importantly, we must understand God's love in light of God's freedom. As we have seen in this book, God, as the Creator, is free to do whatever He sees best. He is compelled by none other than Himself. And God's freedom means—though it's difficult to swallow—that God *can* withhold love (Rom. 9). It's a logical (and theological) mistake to think that God can't be loving unless He saves everyone. Such an assumption, while seeking to cherish the love of God, violates His freedom and sovereignty.

I'm not at all trying to minimize the pain we feel when we think about the unsaved being tormented in hell, nor am I suggesting that we simply snuff our emotions and move on with our lives: Remember Paul's anguish (Rom. 9:2–3). All I'm suggesting is that as the all-powerful, all-wise Creator of the universe, God does what is just, right, and loving in a much more profound way than we can possibly imagine. We must cling to Abraham's words in Genesis 18:25: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"

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About the Author

Francis Chan has a BA in youth ministry (The Master's College) and an MDiv (The Master's Seminary). He was in youth ministry for six years and was a senior pastor for sixteen years. In 1994 he started Cornerstone Church, and the church has since established eight additional church plants. He served as senior pastor of Cornerstone Church until 2010. Through Cornerstone, Francis also founded Eternity Bible College in 2004, where he taught and served as chancellor until 2010.

Francis's heart for people is evident through his involvement on the board of World Impact. He travels extensively on mission trips to places like El Salvador, Japan, Peru, Mexico, and Africa in order to see the needs firsthand and to generate love and support for the people there.

A popular teacher and speaker, Francis addresses tens of thousands of people annually, both in the United States and internationally. His passionate, honest, and unabashed speaking style imprints the truth he shares on his listeners. Typical venues include college chapels, churches, and high school retreats; pastors' conferences such as Catalyst, Orange, and Exponential; and youth conferences such as Passion. *Crazy Love*, a New York Times best seller that has sold over one and a half million copies, was Francis's first book. David C Cook also released the *Crazy Love DVD Study Resource*, based on the book, in January 2009.

His second book, *Forgotten God*, released in 2009 and was followed by the *Forgotten God DVD* and the *Remembering the Forgotten God* workbook. Francis's BASIC. seven-film series, created with Flannel, launched with the first three films *FEAR GOD*, *FOLLOW JESUS*, and

HOLY SPIRIT. In addition, he has written three children's books: The Big Red Tractor and the Little Village, Halfway Herbert, and Ronnie Wilson's Gift.

Francis lives in California with his wife, Lisa, and their five children.

About the Coauthor

Preston Sprinkle has a BA in bible exposition from The Master's College, an MDiv from The Master's Seminary, and a PhD in New Testament from Aberdeen University in Scotland. He has taught biblical studies at Nottingham University in England and at Cedarville University in Ohio, and he currently teaches at Eternity Bible College in Simi Valley, California.

Preston has authored many essays and scholarly articles in publications such as Bible Study Magazine, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society, Currents in Biblical Research, and many others. He has also worked on three books: *Law and Life, The Faith of Jesus Christ* (coedited with Michael Bird), and the forthcoming *Judaism Revisited*. In addition to teaching and writing, Preston currently serves on the pastoral staff at Cornerstone Community Church in Simi Valley, where he participates in preaching and the global ministry team.

Preston and his wife, Christine, have three daughters and a son. Along with his love for baseball and surfing, Preston enjoys the outdoors—including hiking, camping, and having fun in the sun with his family, as well as hanging out with college students.

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Erasing Hell

"Erasing Hell is an extraordinarily important book. Francis Chan speaks with trembling and compassion. He recognizes this debate is about God, His nature, and His authority. At stake is whether or not we will trust Him. Francis lays his heart on the table; I was not only informed, but moved. It's rare that a book mixes straight-from-the-heart talk with diligent citation of Scripture. Erasing Hell is highly readable yet goes deep and into detail exactly when it needs to. Preston Sprinkle's research and Francis Chan's presentation are a dynamic combination. This remarkable book embraces not what, in pride, we want to believe, but what, in humility, we must believe. My heartfelt thanks to Francis Chan for taking us to God's Word in a Christlike spirit of grace and truth. And for calling on us not to apologize for God, but to apologize to God for presuming to be wiser and more loving than our Savior."

Randy Alcorn, author of Heaven and If God Is Good

"It's time for the H word. A lot of people go through hell on earth, but what if there is also a hell *after* earth? Hell's stock has fallen off lately from lack of public confidence, but how can thousands, perhaps millions, reject hell as a myth and yet still believe in heaven and cherish fond hopes of going there? Surely if we hate suffering, God must hate it worse and could never have founded an institution as horrible as described in Dante's *Inferno*. But the same Jesus who gave heaven a five-star rating also described an otherworldly chamber of horrors. Who goes there and why? And for how long? In *Erasing Hell*, my good friend Francis Chan takes a close look at

some tough, frightening questions ... and his answers may honestly surprise you!"

Joni Eareckson Tada, Joni and Friends International Disability

Center

"Everyone needs to read *Erasing Hell* by Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle. Chan and Sprinkle accurately and clearly reflect the biblical teaching on heaven, hell, and eternal destiny. They provide a timely reminder that we don't define God, but He reveals Himself to us in the pages of Scripture."

Tremper Longman, Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies at Westmont College and author of *Reading the Bible with*Heart and Mind

"Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle raise the questions we all have about this very critical topic and respond with biblical integrity and a commitment to truth, as well as incredible compassion for people. *Erasing Hell* is an extremely important and much-needed book."

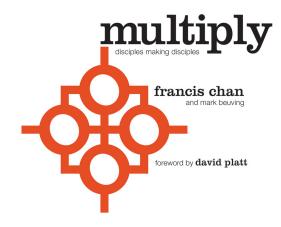
Dan Kimball, pastor and author of *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*

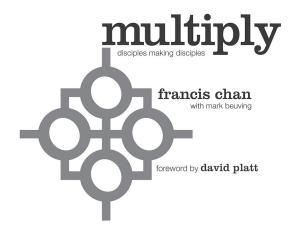
"Francis holds the fine line between committed biblical faithfulness and a deep compassion for people and refuses to create a false dichotomy between the two. He feels the weight and horror of the reality of hell and yet avoids the error of lapsing into mere humanism, all the while providing a well-reasoned defense for the view of Scripture on the subject. I am so thankful for this book, as will you be."

Britt Merrick, pastor of Reality Santa Barbara

"Recent works by evangelicals on the postmortem future(s) of humanity have raised important questions and brought some sobering and uncomfortable issues to the fore. Chan and Sprinkle provide a remarkable service to the church by engaging these issues with courage, clarity, and grace. This book is a model of careful biblical scholarship, providing fresh light from the Jewish context of the New Testament. They also write as pastors seeking to provide wisdom for ministry, enabling the people of God to embody the love of God for the world."

Timothy Gombis, associate professor of New Testament at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary







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Foreword

From the beginning of Christianity, the natural overflow of being a disciple of Jesus has always been to make disciples of Jesus. "Follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19). This was a promise: Jesus would take His disciples and turn them into disciple makers. And this was a command: He called each of His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey Him (Matt. 28:19–20). From the start, God's design has been for every single disciple of Jesus to make disciples who make disciples who make disciples until the gospel spreads to all peoples.

Yet we have subtly and tragically taken this costly command of Christ to go, baptize, and teach all nations and mutated it into a comfortable call for Christians to come, be baptized, and listen in one location. If you were to ask individual Christians today what it means to make disciples, you would likely get jumbled thoughts, ambiguous answers, and probably even some blank stares. In all our activity as Christians and with all our resources in the church, we are in danger of practically ignoring the commission of Christ. We view evangelism as a dreaded topic, we reduce discipleship to a canned program, and so many in the church end up sidelined in a spectator mentality that delegates disciple making to pastors and professionals, ministers and missionaries.

But this is not the way it's supposed to be. Jesus has invited all of us to be a part of His plan. He has designed all of His people to know His joy as we share His love, spread His Word, and multiply His life among all of the peoples of the earth. This is the grand purpose for which we were created: to enjoy the grace of Christ as we spread the gospel of Christ from wherever we live to the ends of the earth. And this purpose is worth giving

our lives to seeing it accomplished. It's worth it for billions of people who do not yet know the mercy and majesty of God in Christ. And it's worth it for you and me, because we were made to be disciples who make disciples until the day when we see the face of the One we follow, and together with all nations we experience His satisfaction for all of eternity.

This is the heart behind the material you hold in your hand. When Francis Chan and I first met, our hearts immediately resonated around a shared passion for making disciples. We have a lot to learn, but we eagerly want to make disciples in our lives, and we zealously long to see every member of the church mobilized to make disciples through their lives. This material is part of the product of that passion. Francis and Mark have provided a simple, practical, biblical, helpful, and personal tool for disciples of Jesus who want to make disciples of Jesus. I pray that it will be used in God's mercy to fuel the multiplication of the love and life of Christ literally all over the world ultimately for the glory of God's name.

David Platt

How to Use the Material

After Jesus rose from the grave, He left His followers with a simple command: "Go into all the world and make disciples" (see Matt. 28:19). The church should be known for this. If we are going to call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ, we should be making disciples.

But most Christians today are not known for making disciples. We have developed a culture where a minister ministers and the rest of us sit back and enjoy "church" from a comfortable distance. This is not what God intends for His church. Every Christian is called by God to minister. You are called to make disciples.

Multiply is designed as a simple resource that you can use to begin making disciples. Our prayer is that it will give you the confidence you need to step out in faith and disciple the people whom God has placed in your life.

Using This Material

The goals of the *Multiply* material are to help you understand the Scripture and to give you the tools to disciple others in this process. We have a responsibility to grow in our love and service to God and others. This is what it means to be the church. We are not merely responsible for our own spiritual well-being; we are called to minister to the people around us, teaching them to obey all the things that Jesus commands.

For this reason, there are two guidelines we ask you to follow when using this material. Obviously, we can't force you to use this curriculum in a specific way, but it's good for you to know the heart behind *Multiply*.

- 1. Teach what you learn. This material is not meant to be read, but to be taught. There are plenty of other Bible studies you can do if you just want to absorb more information. The emphasis of *Multiply* is to get you in the habit of passing on the knowledge you gain.
- 2. Share life, not just information. The *Multiply* process is meant to be highly relational. True discipleship involves deep relationships. Jesus didn't simply lead a weekly Bible study. He lived life with His disciples and taught through actions as well as words. While this requires a much deeper commitment, it is the only way to truly make disciples.

God wants us to live, serve, and process truth in the context of a community. You will encounter many difficult questions and life-changing truths in the weeks ahead. Working together with other people will be invaluable as you seek to sort out what the Bible is saying and how God wants that truth to play out in your life.

Discipleship by definition requires a leader and followers. This material is designed for a leader and a disciple to work through together. This doesn't mean that the leader needs to be old and completely mature, or that the disciple needs to be a full-fledged novice. We're all at varying stages of maturity, and we all need the people around us to help guide us toward Christlikeness. But ideally, you will either lead another person through this material or be guided through it by a more mature Christian. The goal is that once you've walked through the material, you can turn around and guide someone else through it. In fact, you are encouraged to guide others as you are learning. Don't wait until you have completed it all before teaching others what you learn.

God wants us to be talking about Him all throughout the week. Discipleship is all about living life together rather than just one structured meeting per week. However, it's shocking how quickly time gets away from us, so it's good to establish at least one regular meeting time each week. Without a little bit of structure, our good intentions often don't result in action. At the core of the *Multiply* material are weekly sessions, which involve study guides and videos.

Weekly Study Guide

Every week you will work through a session of the study guide. These study guides will help you reflect on biblical truths and how those truths should shape your life. Some of the sessions focus on key concepts related to discipleship—what it means to be a disciple, how the Bible is meant to be studied, how we help the people around us live in obedience to Jesus, etc. Other sessions focus on important biblical concepts and major developments in the biblical storyline—creation, the fall, God's covenant with Abraham, the life and death of Jesus Christ, etc. In each of these sessions you will read sections of Scripture and think through the truths presented and their implications for your life and ministry. The goal is to understand what the Bible is saying and allow that truth to transform your thought process and lifestyle.

Each study-guide session includes a number of questions that will challenge you to think about the material you have covered. These questions can also be used to structure the time you spend meeting with your disciple(s)/discipler(s). When you work through the study guide on your own, you can read through the material and answer the questions. When you meet with your partner(s), however, you can simply jump from one question to the next, sharing your answers and addressing any other thoughts or questions your study raised. If you are taking someone else (or

a small group) through this material, don't feel any pressure to know more than everyone else. Knowledge isn't the point. Instead, start a discussion on the material in the study guides (this is where the questions come in handy). We all "know" things that have no practical bearing on our lives, so the more you can make your discussion practical and applicational, the better.

Each of these weekly sessions is available for free download at <u>multiplymovement.com</u> so that you can take as many people through this material as possible without putting a financial strain on anyone.

Weekly Video

Each session also includes a video (roughly five minutes long). You can find these videos at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>. The videos are designed for the leaders. If you are guiding another person through the material, the videos will coach you on how to truly "disciple" someone through these truths. Ideally, you will first work through the study guide session and answer all the questions. You may want to write in your book or use a separate notebook. Then you will watch the video and take notes on how you want to guide your disciple(s) through the session. (It shouldn't be problematic if your disciple wants to watch the videos as well, but the videos are directed toward the leaders.)

Structuring Your Weekly Meetings

Each person will be approaching this material from a unique position and in a unique setting. So structure your weekly meetings according to your specific needs and restraints. If you are leading your meetings, be sure to spend time talking through the material you covered for that week. The questions in the study guide sessions are designed to guide your discussion, but you may come up with a number of other important issues to address.

As important as covering the material is, make sure that you don't stop there. God's Word is meant to change our lives; James says that if all we do is hear the Word but never put it into practice, then we are deceiving ourselves (James 1:22). In many ways, it's better to not know His commands than to know and ignore them. Don't fall into the trap of studying the Bible without doing what it says. Take time to share prayer requests, discuss personal sins and struggles, and hold each other accountable to living out the truth of God's Word.

What You're Working Toward

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means that we learn from Him, fellowship with Him, and obey everything He commands us. We study the Bible to learn about who God is, who we are, and what God is doing in our world. The Bible compels us to join God in what He is doing in and around us. Studying the Bible is important, but the goal is never knowledge for the sake of knowledge.

As you work through this material, you should be looking to change. Being a disciple of Jesus means that we are being transformed into His image. God wants to change us so much that it intrigues others. This gives us the opportunity to tell them about the God who is transforming us. Teaching others about Christ is essential to being one of Jesus's disciples. As we teach others to love and obey Jesus, we are fulfilling His command to make disciples. Your goal should be to train up other followers of Jesus who are even more committed, talented, and equipped than you are. Whether you guide others through this material or use some other means to

teach them to be followers of Jesus, make it your goal to spend your life raising up followers who will give everything for the glory of God.

Part I: Living as a Disciple Maker

1: What Is a Disciple?

Two thousand years ago, Jesus walked up to a handful of men and said, "Follow me."

Imagine being one of those original disciples. They were ordinary people like you and me. They had jobs, families, hobbies, and social lives. As they went about their business on the day Jesus called them, none of them would have expected his life to change so quickly and completely.

The disciples could not have fully understood what they were getting into when they responded to Jesus's call. Whatever expectations or doubts, whatever curiosity, excitement, or uncertainty they felt, nothing could have prepared them for what lay ahead. Everything about Jesus—His teaching, compassion, and wisdom; His life, death, and resurrection; His power, authority, and calling—would shape every aspect of the rest of their lives.

In only a few years, these simple men were standing before some of the most powerful rulers on earth and being accused of "turn[ing] the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). What began as simple obedience to the call of Jesus ended up changing their lives, and ultimately, the world.

What Is a Disciple?

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? As you will discover, the answer is fairly simple, but it changes your life completely.

The word *disciple* refers to a student or apprentice. Disciples in Jesus's day would follow their rabbi (which means teacher) wherever he went, learning from the rabbi's teaching and being trained to do as the rabbi did. Basically, a disciple is a follower, but only if we take the term *follower*

literally. Becoming a disciple of Jesus is as simple as obeying His call to follow.

When Jesus called His first disciples, they may not have understood where Jesus would take them or the impact it would have on their lives, but they knew what it meant to follow. They took Jesus's call literally and began going everywhere He went and doing everything He did.

It's impossible to be a disciple or a follower of someone and not end up like that person. Jesus said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). That's the whole point of being a disciple of Jesus: we imitate Him, carry on His ministry, and become like Him in the process.

Yet somehow many have come to believe that a person can be a "Christian" without being like Christ. A "follower" who doesn't follow. How does that make any sense? Many people in the church have decided to take on the *name* of Christ and nothing else. This would be like Jesus walking up to those first disciples and saying, "Hey, would you guys mind identifying yourselves with Me in some way? Don't worry, I don't actually care if you do anything I do or change your lifestyle at all. I'm just looking for people who are willing to say they believe in Me and call themselves Christians." Seriously?

No one can really believe that this is all it means to be a Christian. But then why do so many people live this way? It appears that we've lost sight of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The concept of being a disciple isn't difficult to understand, but it affects everything.

1. Up to this point in your life, would you call yourself a follower of Jesus Christ? Why do you say that? Do you see evidence of your faith as described in Luke 6:40?

How Do I Become a Disciple?

To understand how to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, it makes most sense to start where Jesus started. While it is true that He said to the disciples, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19), the Bible records one message He proclaimed before that. In Matthew 4:17, Jesus said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Try taking this phrase literally. If someone warned you to be prepared because a king and his army were coming, what would you do? You would make sure you were ready to face him. If you weren't prepared to fight this king, then you would do whatever it took to make peace with him.

The word *repent* means "to turn." It has the idea of changing directions and heading the opposite way. It involves action. In this context, Jesus was telling people to prepare themselves—to change whatever needed to be changed—because God's kingdom (the kingdom of heaven) was approaching.

So how do we prepare to face this heavenly kingdom? How do we make sure we are at peace with this coming King?

Jesus says we need to repent. This implies that we all need to turn from the way we are currently thinking and living. Romans 3:23 explains that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Every person reading this sentence has done things that are evil and offensive to this King. Romans later explains that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Because of our sin, which is an offense to God, we should expect death. But then comes an amazing truth.

"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). The death penalty we should have faced from this King was actually paid for by someone else. The King's Son, Jesus Christ! $\frac{1}{2}$

The Scriptures then say, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). We are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. It is all about who Jesus is and what He has done. Part of our repentance is to turn from believing that there's anything we can do to save ourselves—for everything was accomplished by Jesus Christ.

The thought that someone else has paid for our crimes is strange to most of us because it defies our natural way of thinking. And the idea that we need to trust in another person's sacrifice on our behalf is even more foreign. But understand that while it is strange to us, it is consistent with God's actions throughout the Scriptures.

We get a picture of this when we read the book of Exodus. In this story, Moses warned Pharaoh repeatedly about what God would do if he did not repent. It climaxed when God said He would bring death to the firstborn of every household if they did not repent. Meanwhile, He told His people that if they put the blood of a lamb over their doorposts, His angel would pass over their homes and not kill the firstborn of that house. So even in the story of the exodus, we see that people had to trust in the blood of a lamb to save them— and this was the *only* way they could be saved.

2. Read Ephesians 2 carefully and take some time to consider the truths it presents. Do you trust in the death of Christ for your salvation? Do you ever struggle with believing you need to do something to save yourself?

The Lord of Grace

Salvation is all about the grace of God. There is absolutely nothing that you can do to save yourself or earn God's favor. Paul said, "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). No one can brag about his or her good deeds because our works cannot save us. Salvation comes through the grace of God as we place our faith in Jesus Christ. All salvation requires is faith: Do you believe that Jesus is who He says He is?

But keep in mind that while this is simple, it's not easy. Faith in Jesus Christ means believing that He is Lord (according to Rom. 10:9). Have you ever thought about what that word *Lord* means? We sometimes think of it as another name for God, but it's actually a title. It refers to a master, owner, or a person who is in a position of authority. So take a minute to think this through: Do you really believe that Jesus is your master? Do you believe that He is your owner—that you actually belong to Him?

Paul is so bold as to tell us: "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). The same Lord who by His grace set us free from sin and death now owns us. We belong to Him, and He calls us to live in obedience to His rule.

The problem is, many in the church want to "confess that Jesus is Lord," yet they don't believe that He is their master. Do you see the obvious contradiction in this? The call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is open to everyone, but we don't get to write our own job description. If Jesus is Lord, then He sets the agenda. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then your life belongs to Him. He has a plan, agenda, and calling for you. You don't get to tell Him what you'll be doing today or for the rest of your life.

3. Evaluate your approach to following Jesus. Would you say that you view Jesus as your Lord, Master, and Owner? Why or why not?

It All Comes Down to Love

But don't get the impression that following Jesus is all about joyless sacrifice. More than anything else, following Jesus boils down to two commands, which He said were the most important commandments in the Old Testament Law:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matt. 22:37–40)

It all comes down to love. Peter expressed it well for people like us, who didn't see Jesus on earth but follow Him nonetheless: "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" (1 Pet. 1:8).

Following Jesus is not about diligently keeping a set of rules or conjuring up the moral fortitude to lead good lives. It's about loving God and enjoying Him.

But lest we think that we can love God and live any way we want to, Jesus told us very clearly, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). The love for God in the first commandment

is made practical in the love for our neighbors in the second commandment. John actually told us that if we don't love the people that we can see around us, then we don't love God, whom we can't see (1 John 4:20).

True love is all about sacrifice for the sake of the ones you love: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16). When we understand love in this light, it's not difficult to understand that love for God and obedience to Jesus Christ cannot be separated. God's love changes us from the inside out and redefines every aspect of our lives.

4. As you look at your life, how would you say that your love for God is shown in your actions? (If you're having trouble coming up with an answer, take some time to think through some changes you may need to make in your lifestyle.)

Count the Cost

As you work your way through this material, you will be challenged to consider what it means to be a follower of Jesus. You will think through what the Bible teaches and its implications for the way you live your life today. Everything you study will be for the purpose of applying it to your life and teaching other people to do the same. But before you set out to teach other people to be disciples of Jesus, you need to examine your heart and make sure you are a disciple.

Read the following words from Jesus slowly and carefully. Understand that Jesus is speaking these words to you. Think about what Jesus is saying and how it should affect the way you approach this material and your relationship with Him. After you have read this section, use the questions below to help you count the cost of following Jesus.

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:25–33)

5. If you choose to obey Jesus's call to follow, what might it cost you? (Avoid being vague. If following Jesus would cost you specific possessions, comforts, or relationships, list them below.)

6. What might hold you back from following Jesus at this point? Are you willing to let go of these things if necessary?

7. Before you end this session, spend some time in prayer. Ask God to work in your heart and prepare you for what is ahead. You don't need to have all the answers or know specifically how God will use you. He simply calls you to follow wherever He might lead. As you pray, be honest about your doubts, hesitations, and fears. Ask Him to give you the strength to proceed and follow Him no matter what the cost. In other words, place your faith in Him.

- Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.
- <u>1</u> These simple truths will be unpacked in far greater detail in Parts III and IV: "Understanding the Old Testament" and "Understanding the New Testament." The full significance of these truths will be explained then, but the truths themselves are important to understand from the outset.

Part I: Living as a Disciple Maker

2: The Command to Make Disciples

Imagine your reaction if someone came back from the dead to speak to you. Seriously, try to imagine that right now. What would you feel? How intensely would you listen? How seriously would you take his or her words?

Think about what this must have been like for the disciples. They were working their everyday jobs when a mysterious teacher asked them to follow Him. As they followed, they saw Him challenge religious leaders, embrace sinners, heal the sick, and even raise the dead. They knew that He was not an ordinary man. At various times and to varying degrees, people saw Him as the Messiah who would bring salvation for God's people. But He never quite fit anyone's expectations of what the Messiah would do or say.

The disciples walked beside Jesus through all of this. They watched as the blind were given sight. They heard Jesus forgive the hopelessly unrighteous and restore the lives of the broken. They helped pass out bread and fish as Jesus miraculously fed huge crowds. The disciples seem to have been more aware of Jesus's true identity at some points than at others, but they followed Him until the end, believing that He was the one who would restore the fortunes of God's people.

And then He died. Just like that. It was over. It seemed that Jesus could do absolutely anything, that He had power over sickness, death, every person, and every thing. By this power, Jesus was bringing the healing and redemption that the world so desperately needed. But the disciples' hopes of a better world died as Jesus was nailed to a Roman cross.

And so the disciples spent three days in confusion and disillusionment. Everything they had hoped for was gone. Perhaps they had wasted their time following this mysterious person for three years.

Then it happened. He came back from the dead! When Jesus reappeared on the third day, all of their hope came rushing back! Now there could be no doubt! Now that Jesus had conquered even sin and death, He would certainly fix this broken world. Jesus would accomplish what everyone was longing to see. There could be no stopping Him.

Once again, He surprised everyone. Instead of telling them that He would immediately transform the earth, Jesus gave His disciples one final command and ascended into heaven. Just like that, out of nowhere. What was the command? Essentially, He told them it was their job to finish what He started. They were to take the message that Jesus declared and exemplified in and around Jerusalem and spread that message to the very ends of the earth:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:18–20)

1. Stop for a minute and read Matthew 28. Try to place yourself in the disciples' shoes as they witnessed these things and heard these words from Jesus. How do you think you would have reacted?

The Great Commission and the Church

So what comes to your mind when you think about Jesus's command to make disciples of all nations? Many read these words as if they were meant to inspire pastors or missionaries on their way out to the mission field. But have you ever considered that maybe Jesus's command is meant for *you*?

As we read the rest of the New Testament, we see God's people working together in obedience to Jesus's command. They reached out to the people around them, calling them to obediently follow Jesus. The disciples went about making disciples, teaching them to obey everything that Jesus had commanded and baptizing them. Some of them even moved to different areas or traveled around so that they could tell more people. They took Jesus's words seriously—and literally.

Reading through the New Testament, it's not surprising to read that Jesus's followers were focused on making disciples—it makes sense in light of Jesus's ministry and the Great Commission. The surprise comes when we look at our churches today in light of Jesus's command to make disciples.

Why is it that we see so little disciple making taking place in the church today? Do we really believe that Jesus told His early followers to make disciples but wants the twenty-first-century church to do something different? None of us would claim to believe this, but somehow we have created a church culture where the paid ministers do the "ministry," and the rest of us show up, put some money in the plate, and leave feeling inspired or "fed." We have moved so far away from Jesus's command that many Christians don't have a frame of reference for what disciple making looks like.

2. Assess your church experience in light of Jesus's command to make disciples. Would you say that your church is characterized by disciple

More Than a Program

So what does disciple making look like? We have to be careful about how we answer this question. For some of us, our church experience has been so focused on programs that we immediately think about Jesus's command to make disciples in programmatic terms. We expect our church leaders to create some sort of disciple-maker campaign where we sign up, commit to participating for a few months, and then get to cross the Great Commission off our list. But making disciples is far more than a program. It is the mission of our lives. It defines us. A disciple is a disciple maker.

So what does this look like? The Great Commission uses three phrases to describe what disciple making entails: go, baptize people, and teach them to obey everything Jesus commanded. Simple, right? It's incredibly simple in the sense that it doesn't require a degree, an ordination process, or some sort of hierarchical status. It's as simple as going to people, encouraging them to follow Jesus (this is what baptism is all about), and then teaching them to obey Jesus's commands (which we find in the Bible). The concept itself is not very difficult.

But the simplest things to understand are often the most difficult to put into practice. Let's start with baptism. In your church setting, baptism may not seem like that big of a deal. Maybe that's why so many Christians today have never been baptized. But in the early days of the church, baptism was huge. Baptism was an unmistakable act that marked a person as a follower of Jesus Christ. As Jesus died and was buried in the earth, so a Christian is

plunged beneath the surface of the water. As Jesus emerged from the tomb in a resurrected body, so a Christian comes out of the waters of baptism as a new creation.

When first-century Christians took this step of identifying themselves with the death and resurrection of Jesus, they were publicly declaring their allegiance to Christ. This immediately marked them for martyrdom—all of the hostility that the world felt toward Jesus would now be directed at them. Baptism was a declaration that a person's life, identity, and priorities were centered on Jesus and His mission. Depending on where you live in the world, you may not see the same reaction to your choice to be baptized, but that act of identifying with Christ is essential, no matter where you live.

3. Have you identified yourself with Jesus through being baptized? If so, why do you think this was an important step for you to take? If not, what is holding you back from being baptized?

Just as baptism is more significant than we might have thought, so teaching people to obey Jesus's commands is an enormous task. Realistically, this will require a lifetime of devotion to studying the Scriptures and investing in the people around us. Neither of these things is easy, nor can they be checked off of a list. We are never really "done." We continually devote ourselves to studying the Scriptures so that we can learn with ever-greater depth and clarity what God wants us to know, practice, and pass on. We continually invest in the people around us, teaching them and walking with them through life's joys and trials.

We never "finish" the discipleship process. It's much like raising a child: though there comes a day when she is ready to be on her own, the relationship doesn't end. The friendship continues, and there will always be times when guidance and encouragement are still needed. In addition to that, God continually brings new people into our path, giving us fresh opportunities to start the discipleship process all over again.

Following Jesus by making disciples isn't difficult to understand, but it can be very costly. Jesus's teachings are often difficult to stomach. By sharing His teachings, we are often rejected along with His message. Jesus said:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. (John 15:18–20)

It's easy enough to understand, but it can be extremely costly.

4. Would you say that you're ready to commit yourself to studying the Scriptures and investing in the people around you? Why or why not?

Equipped to Do the Work of Ministry

Unfortunately, disciple making has become the exclusive domain of pastors (and missionaries). Salesmen sell, insurance agents insure, and ministers minister. At least, that's the way it works in most of our churches.

While it's true that the pastors, elders, and apostles in the New Testament made disciples, we can't overlook the fact that discipleship was everyone's job. The members of the early church took their responsibility to make disciples very seriously. To them, the church wasn't a corporation run by a CEO. Rather, they compared the church to a body that functions properly only when every member is doing its part.

Paul explained the function of the church in Ephesians 4:11–16:

He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ ... we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Paul saw the church as a community of redeemed people in which each person is actively involved in doing the work of ministry. The pastor is not the minister—at least not in the way we typically think of a minister. The pastor is the equipper, and every member of the church is a minister.

The implications are huge. Don't think of this as merely a theological issue. See yourself in this passage. Paul said that *your* job is to do the work of ministry! Jesus commanded *you* to make disciples!

Most Christians can give a number of reasons why they cannot or should not disciple other people: "I don't feel called to minister." "I just have too much on my plate right now; I don't have time to invest in other people." "I don't know enough." "I have too many issues of my own. I'll start once I get my life in order."

As convincing as these excuses may seem to us, Jesus's commands don't come with exception clauses. He doesn't tell us to follow *unless* we're busy. He doesn't call us to love our neighbors *unless* we don't feel prepared. In fact, if you read Luke 9:57–62, you'll see several individuals who gave excuses for why they couldn't follow Jesus at the time. Read the passage and take note of how Jesus responded to them. It may surprise you.

God made you the way you are; He has provided and will continue to provide you with everything you need to accomplish the task. Jesus commands you to look at the people around you and start making them into disciples. Obviously, only God can change people's hearts and make them want to become followers. We just have to be obedient in making the effort to teach them, even though we still have plenty to learn ourselves.

5. What excuses tend to keep you from following Jesus's command to make disciples? What do you need to do in order to move past these excuses?

Taking the First Step

Being a disciple maker means that you will begin to look at the people in your life differently. Every person in your life is created in the image of God, and Jesus commands every one of them to follow Him. God has placed these people in your life so that you will do everything you can to

influence them. Following Jesus means that you will be teaching other people to follow Jesus.

Take some time to consider your first step toward disciple making. Whom has God placed in your life that you can teach to follow Jesus? Maybe God is laying someone on your heart you don't know very well. Your first step could be building a relationship with that person. Maybe it's someone you've known for years, and God is calling you to take that relationship to another level. God has placed you where you are, and the people around you are not there by accident. Keep in mind that the Great Commission calls us to every type of person, to those inside of the church as well as to those outside, to those who are like us and those who are very different. Everyone needs to understand who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him.

6. Whom has God placed in your life right now that you can begin making into a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Working Together to Make Disciples

God wants you to view the other Christians in your life as partners in ministry. God has not called you to make disciples in isolation; He has placed you in the context of a church body so that you can be encouraged and challenged by the people around you. And you are called to encourage and challenge them in return.

As you begin this study, think about how you will proceed. Are there Christians in your life you can study this material with? Are there mature

believers you can approach with the questions that will inevitably arise? The goal is for you to think through this material and let these truths saturate your mind, heart, and lifestyle. But you'll get a lot more out of this if you have other people to talk with, be challenged by, and work together with. Human beings are simply not designed to function in isolation.

7. Whom has God placed in your life for you to partner with in making disciples?

8. Spend some time praying that God will make you into a committed and effective disciple maker. Confess any feelings of unpreparedness and insecurity. Ask Him to empower you for the ministry He is calling you to. Ask Him to lead you to the right people to partner with and the right people to begin discipling.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part I: Living as a Disciple Maker

3: The Heart of a Disciple Maker

Why do you want to make disciples?

Have you ever asked yourself that question? The answer is incredibly important.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we should be focused on making disciples. But if we don't do it with the right motives, we are wasting our time. Worse yet, we could be doing more harm than good. Ministering to other people has been a deadly trap for seemingly godly people throughout the ages. If God cared only about outward appearances and religious activities, then any effort toward ministry would please Him. But God tells us repeatedly that He cares more about the heart than the externals.

If God cared only about religious activities, then the Pharisees would have been heroes of the faith. They were continuously engaged in ministry: they vigorously pursued outward demonstrations of godliness; they made sure the people around them kept themselves holy, and they diligently taught the law of God. And yet the Gospels present the Pharisees as villains. Jesus's harshest words were reserved for these religious overachievers:

This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. (Matt. 15:8–9)

The Pharisees devoted their whole lives to religious activity. They must have seemed so impressive to the people around them. Yet Jesus came along and declared that it was all in vain! An important theme that runs throughout Scripture is this: "The LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). Clearly, God wants us to pursue certain actions, but as we put God's commands into action, our motivation makes all the difference.

1. Take a moment to examine your heart. In all honesty, why do you want to make disciples? Do you struggle with wanting your actions to be noticed by others?

Teaching Is Dangerous

Ask yourself again: Why do you want to make disciples?

Maybe your decision to be a disciple maker has been reluctant. Perhaps the only reason you are still working through this material is because Jesus commands you to make disciples, and you don't want to be disobedient. You're not sure if you have much to offer, but you know you should let God use you however He desires.

Or maybe you've always seen yourself as a leader. You have a message that the church needs to hear, and you're ready to teach anyone who will listen. You don't need motivation; you just want to be better equipped.

For those of you who are reluctant, remember that God wants you to minister out of joy, not mere obligation. God wants us to enjoy the privilege and pleasure of ministering to others. He wants us to be cheerful when we give (2 Cor. 9:7), and He wants us to lead others willingly and eagerly:

Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly. (1 Pet. 5:2)

For those who are eager to lead, remember that God wants us to be cautious as we lead. Remember that you will be teaching people about the Bible and guiding them into godly living. The Bible takes the role of a teacher very seriously, and so should we.

James gave us a terrifying warning about the power of the tongue. While we can speak truth and bring life to people, he warned that our words can also cause incredible damage. The tongue is untamable, James said, capable of diverting the direction of our lives, producing deadly poison, and "setting on fire the entire course of life" (James 3:6). Indeed, James even accused the tongue of being set on fire by hell!

If you look at your heart and find even a trace of desire for the glory and prestige that come through teaching and leading other people, take some time to let James's warning sink in. Think about what your tongue is capable of. As a disciple maker, you could make a huge impact for the kingdom of God. Or you could lead people horribly astray.

2. Read James 3:1–12 and meditate on James's warning. How do these powerful words affect you? How might you need to adjust your approach to making disciples?

Love Comes First

Paul added a challenge from a different angle. In the most beautiful terms, he said that gaining knowledge and power—even sacrificing our own bodies—is completely worthless apart from love:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1–3)

The result of loveless ministry is serious: "I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal ... I am nothing ... I gain nothing." In other words, even the most impressive and sacrificial actions are worthless if they are not empowered by love.

Are you the type of person who would teach someone without loving them? Don't be quick to answer. Many good pastors have confessed that they got so caught up in the busyness of ministry that they went through the motions without loving their people. Most of us have to work hard to keep love at the forefront.

What do you think and feel when you are in a group of people? Are you overly aware of the ones who are wealthy, attractive, or have something they can offer you? Do you worry about what people think of you? Or do you look for ways to love and opportunities to give? A sure sign of a loveless heart is seeing people as a means to your own ends—they listen to you, give you affirmation when you want it, stay out of your way when you don't, etc. Teaching other people with this type of mentality is bound to be sterile and unfruitful. According to Paul, every time we try to teach someone with this mentality, we can be sure that we have become nothing more than a clanging gong or resounding cymbal; we have made ourselves both annoying and irrelevant.

Fulfilling Jesus's command to make disciples is about more than having the right theology or well-developed teaching points. Remember that if you "understand all mysteries and all knowledge" yet don't have love, you are nothing. Earlier in the same letter, Paul said, "If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God" (1 Cor. 8:2–3). It's not about what you know—or what you *think* you know—it's about love.

If you're not willing to make loving God and loving people your highest priority, then stop. Seriously, walk away until you've settled this one essential point. Lack of love is the unmistakable mark of death: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death" (1 John 3:14).

Making disciples isn't about gathering pupils to listen to your teaching. The real focus is not on teaching people at all—the focus is on loving them. Jesus's call to make disciples includes teaching people to be obedient followers of Jesus, but the teaching isn't the end goal. Ultimately, it's all about being faithful to God's call to love the people around you. It's about loving those people enough to help them see their need to love and obey God. It's about bringing them to the Savior and allowing Him to set them free from the power of sin and death and transform them into loving followers of Jesus Christ. It's about glorifying God by obediently making disciples who will teach others to love and obey God.

So the question is, how much do you care about the people around you? When you stand in a crowd, interact with your family, or talk to people in your church, do you love them and long to see them glorify God in every aspect of their lives? Honestly assessing your heart and asking God to purify your motives need to become habits in your life.

3. Up to this point, would you say that your desire to make disciples has been motivated by love? Why or why not?

Take some time to consider your existing relationships—family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, etc. The way you think about and interact with the people that God has placed in your life can tell you a lot about your heart. Think about your relationships and ask yourself how well you love those around you. By assessing your current relationships, you should be able to identify areas you need to work on.

4. Describe your love for the people God has placed in your life. What evidence can you point to that shows that you love the people around you?

5. In addition to praying fervently, what practical steps can you take to increase your love for people?

Teaching by Example

One of the worst things you can do is teach truths that you are not applying. We call this hypocrisy, and it's the most common criticism of Christians in America. You could argue that it may be better not to teach at all than to

teach truth without applying it to your own life. Jesus gave some harsh warnings toward the religious leaders who were doing that very thing. He said:

Do and observe whatever they [the scribes and Pharisees] tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. (Matt. 23:3–5)

Hypocrisy has damaged many, so let's run far from it.

James also gave a strong warning against this type of thinking. He said that if we hear the Word of God, but don't do what it says, we are merely deceiving ourselves (James 1:22–25). He went on to say that religion without practical action is worthless (vv. 26–27). Let's be realistic: a self-deceived teacher who practices worthless religion is probably not the best candidate for a disciple maker.

Maybe the clearest explanation of teaching by example can be found in the book of Hebrews: "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7). The author of Hebrews actually called us to consider—literally, "to examine carefully"—the outcome of a teacher's lifestyle. We can get so caught up in examining a person's doctrinal positions that we overlook his or her pattern of life. But this is essential because Hebrews calls us to imitate the faith of these people. If you are going to make disciples, you need to be putting your faith into practice so that the people around you can imitate your faith.

Because of this, being a disciple maker demands your entire life. The job description of a disciple maker is the same as that of a disciple of Jesus Christ. It requires everything. It means following Jesus in every aspect of your life, pursuing Him with a wholehearted devotion. If you're not ready to lay down your life for Christ's sake, then you're not ready to make disciples. It's that simple.

This doesn't mean that you need to be perfect before you start. Perfection is a lifelong process that won't end until eternity (see Phil. 1:6 and 3:12–14). But it does mean that you need to "count the cost" (see Luke 14:25–33) and allow God's truth to change your life. Making disciples is all about seeing people transformed by the power of God's Word. If you want to see that happen in others, you need to be experiencing such transformation yourself.

6. Would you say that your life is being transformed by the truth of God's Word? Why or why not?

7. What changes do you need to make in order to live the truths that you will be teaching other people?

8. The things you've been thinking through in this session are not easy to address—there are no "quick fixes" here. End your time with this session by praying that God will give you the proper motivation to make

disciples, increase your love for Him and the people around you, and empower you to live out the truths that He has called you to teach to others.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part II: Living as the Church

1: Life in the Church

Not every culture is individualistic. But in the Western world, we tend to look up to Lone Rangers. Our heroes are strong and self-sufficient, and they tend to walk alone. Very often, the Western church tends toward this type of individualism. We hear Jesus's call to take up our cross and follow Him, and we decide to follow no matter what any one else says or does. Of course, this is the right response, but we need to be careful here. While every individual needs to obey Jesus's call to follow, we cannot follow Jesus as individuals. The proper context for every disciple maker is the church. It is impossible to make disciples aside from the church of Jesus Christ. Look at it from this perspective: the New Testament is full of commands to do this or that for "one another." Love one another, pray for one another, encourage one another, etc. So how can we teach people to "observe all that I have commanded" if they have no one to love, pray for, or encourage? It's impossible to "one another" yourself. It's impossible to follow Jesus alone. We can't claim to follow Jesus if we neglect the church He created, the church He died for, the church He entrusted His mission to.

In this session and the two following sessions, we will place disciple making squarely within the context of the church. This session will examine the way in which we are called to live together as the church. Teaching people to obey what Jesus commanded is a never-ending process that requires us to intertwine our lives with the Christians around us. As disciple makers, we will join together with other believers, help them overcome the sin that holds them back, and challenge them to grow into more effective disciple makers.

The next two sessions will focus on the call to reach out to the people in our local setting and to the rest of the world. In each case, our call is to make disciples, and we must learn to fulfill that calling through the Godordained vehicle of the church.

Committing Your Life to the Church

First, let's make sure that we are not guilty of belittling God's church in any way. It's not a social club; it's not a building, and it's not an option. The church is life and death. The church is God's strategy for reaching our world. What we do inside the church matters. We tend to equate church life with events and programs. But these are not what make a church. Programs are helpful to the extent that they facilitate the life and mission of the church, but we can't equate well-attended events with the health of the church.

God cares about the way we love each other and the way we pursue His mission. The church is a group of redeemed people that live and serve together in such a way that their lives and communities are transformed. What matters is your interaction with the people God has placed in your life. If you are not connected with other Christians, serving and being served, challenging and being challenged, then you are not living as He desires, and the church is not functioning as He intended.

Throughout the Bible, we see pictures of the global church (which includes all followers of Jesus in all locations) and the local church (which includes particular followers of Jesus in a particular location). Out of 114 times that the "church" is mentioned in the New Testament, at least ninety of them refer to specific local gatherings of believers who have banded together for fellowship and mission. God intends for every follower of

Jesus to be a part of such a gathering under the servant leadership of pastors who shepherd the church for the glory of God.

Despite the clear priority that the Bible puts on believers being part of a local church, many followers of Christ try to live the Christian life apart from serious, personal commitment to a local church. The reasons are many. We are self-reliant and self-sufficient, and the kind of mutual interdependence and even submission and accountability to others that the Bible talks about frightens us. We are often indecisive, hopping from one church to another looking for the "perfect place" and the "perfect people." Many of us have been hurt in the past by things that have happened to or around us in the church, and others of us simply don't see the importance of being specifically connected to a local church.

But the Bible says the local church is important. God has entrusted local churches with godly leaders who teach us His Word and care for our souls (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1–8; 1 Tim. 3:1–13; 5:17; Titus 1:5–9). God has united us together in local churches to keep one another from sinning and straying from Christ (Gal. 6:1–5; Matt. 18:15–20). God has commanded us to gather together in local assemblies where we preach God's Word, celebrate the Lord's Supper, baptize new believers, and pray for and encourage one another (Acts 2:42; Heb. 10:24–25). Then we scatter to care for believers and to share the gospel with unbelievers (Acts 2:43–47). Clearly, being a disciple and making disciples involves committing your life to a local church where you are joined together with other believers under biblical leadership to grow in the likeness of Christ and to express the love of Christ to the world around you.

1. Why do you think the New Testament places such a priority on Christians being committed members (or parts) of local churches? How can this

priority best be reflected in your life?

2. Read Ephesians 4:1–16. How should this passage affect the way you view your responsibility to other Christians in the church?

Bearing One Another's Burdens

In Part I, we said that every Christian is a minister. Paul said that God gave pastors, teachers, and elders to the church so that they could teach the rest of us to minister. A pastor's job is not to do all of the ministry in a church, but to "equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12).

So the question becomes: Whom should you be ministering to and how? Don't be overwhelmed by the task of ministering to others. It is just about faithfully serving the people God has placed in your life. Paul explained:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:1–2)

Ministry sounds intimidating until you develop a realistic view of what ministry is really about. Maybe you're not gifted to preach sermons, start a rehabilitation clinic, or lead a marriage retreat. But do you know people who struggle with sin? Do you know people who are carrying burdens? If so, then your first steps toward ministry are easy: help them.

We don't like getting involved in other people's problems. Our own problems are messy enough—why complicate things by taking on other people's junk? But the reason is simple: God calls us to help other people. He created us to function this way. Your problems are not just your problems—ultimately, they belong to the church body that God has placed you in. You are called to encourage, challenge, and help the other Christians in your life, and they are called to do the same for you. If you wait until all of your own issues are gone before helping others, it will never happen. This is a trap that millions have fallen into, not realizing that our own sanctification happens *as* we minister to others.

3. Think about your unique setting and identify a few opportunities that God has given you to minister to the people around you. Have you taken advantage of these opportunities?

4. Take a few minutes to meditate on Galatians 6:1–2. What would it look like to help bear someone else's burden? Is there anyone in your life right now whom you should be helping in this way?

Getting beneath the Surface

We have to be clear about what it means to help the people God has placed in our lives. We gravitate toward solutions that are quick and easy. When it comes to helping people, we often address the surface level of the problem but never get down to the heart of the matter. When someone is grieving, we might hand him a book that helped us in a difficult moment. But how many of us would take the time to really invest in his life? Would we listen on a consistent basis and offer help whenever we find a need that we are able to meet?

Or when we learn that a friend is struggling with sin, we are quick to explain why that sin is harmful and tell her we will pray for her (whether we follow through or not). But how many of us would take her struggle with sin so seriously that we would walk with her as she works through the issues involved?

It's not that Christians are uncaring. Very often, we really do want to help the people around us however we can, but we get so focused on finding a quick solution to the external behavior that we overlook the real problem. Here's an example. If a friend struggles with anger, we find out what makes him angry, and then keep him away from the things that provoke his anger (e.g., don't drive during rush hour, interact with your boss as little as possible, avoid talking politics). But changing the external situation doesn't change his heart. In reality, his anger is rooted in his heart, and that anger will find a way to express itself even if his circumstances change.

When Jesus's disciples started eating without going through the necessary cleansing rituals, the Pharisees accused them of defiling themselves. But Jesus's response calls us to look beyond the external to what is going on in the heart:

"Whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. (Mark 7:18–23)

Every struggle with sin that we could possibly encounter in our own lives or in the lives of the people around us are represented in the list Jesus offered here: evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. Jesus said that these things come from within. In other words, if we are trying to address these problems by regulating a person's circumstances or behavior, then we are wasting our time. These things come "out of the heart of man." Whatever help we can offer people who are struggling with sin has to be aimed at transforming hearts, not behavior.

5. Why do you think we tend to focus on the external circumstances and behavior when we try to help people change?

6. Using your own words, try to explain why it is essential to get to the heart of the problem rather than merely addressing the circumstances and behavior.

Transformed by the Gospel

So how do we change a person's heart? It's impossible. We might be able to restrain a person's angry outbursts by tying him up and gagging him, but we are powerless to change a person's heart.

This is where God's plan of redemption comes into play. The gospel is not merely about "getting us saved," as if we simply pray a prayer and are immediately transported into heaven. God describes "salvation" and the transformation of the Christian life like this:

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:26–27)

This is a cataclysmic event. "Getting saved" is not about praying a prayer and then continuing to live our lives as though nothing happened. No, when God enters our lives, we are changed from the inside out.

The good news is that God has acted in the person of Jesus Christ. Through His life, death, and resurrection we are transformed, made new. Our problem lies at the core of our being, but God transforms our hearts. God literally places His Spirit within us and changes us from the inside out.

So as we come alongside the broken, hurting people God has placed in our lives, let's remember where our power comes from. These are not mere physical issues that we can correct through hard work. These are spiritual issues that run deeper than we can imagine. Yet God has supplied us with everything we need in order to fulfill His calling. The power to transform hearts and change lives comes from the Holy Spirit (John 6:63), through the

Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16–17), and through prayer (James 5:16–20). As we use the Scriptures to give counsel to others, there is power (Heb. 4:12). As we pray passionately for their hearts to change, there is power. We cannot remove the lust from another's person's heart by our own efforts, but we have the Spirit of God working through us. Through the gospel, people can be set free from the enslaving power of sin (Rom. 6). Through the gospel, we are actually empowered to uproot the sin in our hearts and live in a way that pleases God (Gal. 5 and Rom. 8). Paul promised: "If *by the Spirit* you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom. 8:13).

7. How should the truth of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit affect the way we approach helping people change?

Bearing one another's burdens is not easy, but it is also not optional. We have to face this challenge head on: a church full of isolated individuals feeling defeated by their sin and stripped of their joy was never God's plan for the church. Jesus intended for His church to advance powerfully through the centuries, full of love and joy. Jesus was clear: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

Paul reminded us that the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus Christ from the dead is working through us (Eph. 1:15–23; Rom. 8:11). God intends for His church to be a united body, not a cluster of isolated individuals. He has empowered us to bring truth and transformation into the lives of the people around us, not to be satisfied with handing out books and warm wishes. If the church is going to fulfill its God-given mission in our modern world, we are going to have to take our responsibility to one another seriously. We will

have to accept His call to bear one another's burdens—even when it's messy, even when we find ourselves in over our heads.

So when a sister in Christ is speaking harmful words about another member of the church body, we will take the time to help her see the pride and lack of love in her heart and walk with her as she asks the Spirit to transform her heart on this issue. When we find a brother in Christ who is enslaved to his lustful desires, we will help him to understand the fear of the Lord and call out to God to transform his selfish desires into genuine love. Though you may not have a degree in psychology, you are still called to stand with the Christians in your life as they pursue the healing and transformation that only come through the power of the Holy Spirit.

8. Would you say that your church body is characterized more by defeat and isolation or the power and transformation of the Holy Spirit? Why do you say that?

9. What steps can you take right away to help your church function more like God intended?

Every Member Doing Its Part

The mission of your church is too important to leave to everyone else. The moment you begin to believe that your church can be healthy while you sit on the sidelines, you have given up on God's plan of redemption. God

placed you in your unique situation because He wants you to minister to and with the other Christians He has placed around you. Paul's vision for the church included every Christian:

We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph. 4:15–16)

The goal of the church is to grow up in every way into the likeness of Christ. But the church will never reach this goal unless "each part is working properly." This doesn't mean that we will all function in exactly the same way, but it does mean that we all have a responsibility. It also means that if you are not active in the church, you are hurting your brothers and sisters. One paralyzed leg forces the rest of the body to work twice as hard to make up for that leg's inactivity. God made you to be exactly who you are, and His Spirit has empowered you with unique spiritual abilities, or "gifts." Together, we function as one body. Until you and every person in your church are actively ministering to the people around you, your area will not have an accurate picture of what the church was created to be.

When we step outside of ourselves and begin bearing the burdens of the people around us, it is time-consuming, messy, and often confusing. But it is necessary. Helping people change is what discipleship is all about. As we help other Christians follow Jesus, we are going to run into the temptations, lies, and idols that hold them back. It will be difficult, but we know what Jesus has accomplished, and we know how this story will end. We have a

part to play in God's plan of redemption. It won't always be fun, but we must be faithful to God's calling.

10. Would you say that you have been playing your part in the body of Christ? If so, how might you still need to grow in this? If not, are you ready to get involved? What steps might you need to take?

11. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to give you confidence in the Spirit's power to use you in ministering to other people. Ask Him for the wisdom to know what to do and the discernment to recognize people who need help. Pray that God would use you and your church to continue His plan of redemption in your unique setting.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part II: Living as the Church

2: The Local Church

You are on this earth to continue the mission that Jesus left for you: "Go and make disciples of all nations." But you can't do that on your own, nor are you expected to. God tells us to work together with the Christians He has placed in our lives to bring His healing and transformation into the life of the world. His plan of redemption involves the church working in unity to reach the people around.

Inside the church, this means that we devote ourselves to the members of our church body. We have a responsibility to challenge one another, to love one another, and to serve one another in a variety of ways. When every member takes this seriously, it makes for a healthy church (Eph. 4:16). And when the church functions as God intended, the results are nothing short of miraculous. The church becomes a place of healing, a picture of how God wants humanity to live.

But this vision goes beyond the people within a church body. We don't love and serve the Christians around us solely to maintain healthy churches. God's plan is bigger than that. It involves reaching out to the whole world. His plan of redemption will not be completed if we are satisfied with those who are already on the inside. An inwardly focused church is an unhealthy church. It is a dying church. Biblically, a church that fails to look at the world around it is no church at all.

Jesus was clear about His purpose on earth: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Similarly, our calling is focused on reaching those who don't know God:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:14–16)

Our focus is not inward. We live in the midst of a threatening environment, but we are more like a lighthouse than a bomb shelter. We are not called to hide from trouble but to guide others through it. We cannot fulfill our mission unless we serve one another in love, but living together in a tight-knit circle is not our ultimate goal. God has placed your church in the midst of a broader community so that He can spread His love, hope, and healing into the lives of the people around you.

1. Would you say that your church is more inwardly focused or outwardly focused? Why do you say that?

Known by Our Love

We know that we're supposed to love one another. The two greatest commandments are to love God and love people (Mark 12:28–31). Love is basic to what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and it should be what motivates us to reach out to the world around us. The only reason that we can love anyone else is because God loved us first (1 John 4:19). We are transformed by love because "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5).

But what is the purpose of this love? Love should characterize the way we interact with one another. But why?

Because this is how the world will recognize us:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34–35)

Let's say you spent three years following Jesus closely and studying at His feet. That should make a difference in your life, right? Other people should be able to look at your life and notice a change. Something about you should signal your connection to Jesus. But the difference should not just be in our teaching or even in our pursuit of holiness. They should notice a love like they have never seen.

Jesus told His disciples that they should look different because of their love. Something about the way we love the people around us should signal to the world that we belong to Jesus. Our mission will include preaching, encouraging, rebuking, serving, studying, suffering, and many other things. But if all of these activities are not manifestations of love, then we have missed the point.

2. Read 1 Corinthians 13. Would you say that the life of your church is characterized by love? Why or why not?

3. What steps can you take to be an example of love in your church? Whether you are an official leader in your church or not, how can you lead others in being more loving?

A Compelling Community

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus prayed for His disciples. This was a pivotal moment for them, and Jesus prayed that they would be strengthened, focused, and protected. Interestingly, Jesus did not pray only for His disciples, but for "those who will believe in me through their word." In other words, *Jesus prayed for us*. Pay careful attention to what Jesus prayed on our behalf:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (John 17:20–23)

Jesus prayed that we would be united. Why? So that the world would believe that Jesus was sent by God, and so that the world would know that God loves us. Isn't it amazing that Jesus believed that the unity of His church would communicate all of this to the world? So often we assume that having right and logical arguments will be enough, but Jesus said the

world will be convinced by our unity. And when you think about it, haven't we all heard the objections from unbelievers who point to divisions in the church as a cause for their disbelief?

Notice that Jesus's prayer assumes that our life together as Christians won't be hidden from view. Our unity is something that the world will be able to see. Nowadays, church life can become so introverted and privatized that the world never sees the way we interact with one another. If all we ever do is gather in a private building on Sundays and perhaps meet in someone's home for a midweek Bible study, the world will never know whether we are united or not. If Jesus's desire for us is to be realized, we are going to have to stop hiding from the eyes of the unbelieving world. Jesus prayed for our unity, which means that we have to focus on loving and serving each other. But we need to be doing this in such a way that the world can see what we are doing and recognize it as a picture of unity.

4. Read John 17. Pay careful attention to Jesus's desire for His followers. Would you say that your church could be characterized by this kind of unity? Why or why not?

5. Take some time to think about your church and your unique cultural setting. What would it take for your church to be united, and for that unity to be displayed to the unbelieving world?

When was the last time someone *asked you* about your faith? Most of us would have to answer "never." Why do you think that is? The New Testament assumes that people will be able to look at the church, and that they will be struck by what they see. Listen to Peter's exhortation:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Pet. 3:13–16)

Peter was speaking about suffering when we haven't done anything to deserve it. What should happen when we suffer for doing good? We should honor Christ in our hearts, and we should be ready to explain our hope. Peter assumed that we are going to suffer unjustly, and that when we do, we are going to respond with so much hope and joy that people will ask us what is going on. And when that happens, we should be ready to proclaim the gospel.

But it doesn't happen like that for most churches. There isn't anything compelling about the way we live together. Our love isn't very noticeable. Our unity is either nonexistent or hidden behind the doors of the fellowship hall. When we suffer, it's usually because we've done something wrong. In the rare event that we experience suffering that we didn't earn, we respond by complaining.

In other words, we don't give anyone a reason to ask about what makes us unique, so nobody asks. Yet we still feel the need to evangelize. So we end up coming across like salespeople peddling a product that didn't really work for us. We should all pray for the courage to tell others about Jesus, but we also should be working toward the love and unity that makes the church attractive. Let's not place our hope in clever sales tactics. Let's not give up on Jesus's strategy of reaching people simply because it feels impossible at times. Jesus's strategy was the life of the church. We must stick with His plan and pray that supernatural love begins to characterize our churches.

Jesus said that the world would recognize us by our love and unity. Peter said that people would be compelled by our hope. But are *love*, *unity*, and *hope* the words that unbelievers use when describing your church?

6. Do you ever feel like a salesperson when sharing your faith? What steps can you take to change this?

7. What would it mean for your church to live as a compelling community— a group of people who demonstrate love, unity, and hope in such a way that the unbelieving world is compelled to find out what is going on?

A Kingdom of Priests

As you will see in the sessions on the Old Testament, God made a covenant with Moses and Israel. As God spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai, He explained how Israel would relate to Him and what it would mean for Him to live in their midst. Israel's calling and identity were clear: "You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5–6). Though all the earth belongs to God, Israel belonged to God in a special way—they were His people. They were a holy nation, a group of people set apart for God's purposes. And they were a kingdom of priests. A priest represented the people to God—interceding on their behalf—and represented God to the people—mediating His truth, commands, and grace into their lives. Israel stood collectively as a kingdom made up of priests. They stood amid all the nations of the earth in a priestly role, ready to represent the nations to God and God to the nations.

When you study the New Testament, you will see that the church is given this same vocation. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). In God's plan of redemption, the church is called to be and to do what Israel failed to be and to do. The purpose of the church is to work together to reach out to the world around us. We have been called out of darkness into His marvelous light *so that* we can proclaim God's excellencies to a watching world.

8. Read 1 Peter 2:4–12. How should Peter's description of our calling as the church affect the way we think about and interact with our surrounding community?

Your Church Matters

We are called to make disciples, and strengthening the other members of the church body is an important part of this. But if we are not working together to help the unbelieving world around us become followers of Jesus, then we are missing the point of our salvation. God blessed Abraham so that He could bless the world through him (see Gen. 12). If your church is not actively blessing the surrounding community, then you are ignoring God's mission. We can never forget that we have a role to play in God's plan of redemption. You should feel honored to know that God has a plan for your church in particular.

Though God's church is meant to cover the globe, there is no church aside from the local church. God has placed you in your unique setting, alongside a unique group of Christians, for the purpose of proclaiming Him to the unbelieving world around you. The way you interact with these people matters. It doesn't matter whether your church is thousands strong or if you meet with two other Christians in a living room. It doesn't matter if your church was formed yesterday or one hundred years ago. But the way your church functions does matter. Your church is essential to God's ongoing plan of redemption. Remember that God left His church to fulfill His mission, and He didn't leave a backup plan. If your church does not pursue God's mission, then your community misses out on being exposed to the hope that God offers them in the gospel. Too many churches miss out on the vibrant life Jesus wants us to experience as we pursue His mission together.

The life of your church is a matter of life and death. God tells us how the story will end, but you have an essential role to play nonetheless. Will you help your church step up, look at the community around you with the

compassion of Jesus, and call them into the plan of redemption that has transformed your church body? There's a reason God has you in this church at this point in history. You can help your church become an attractive community that exhibits Christ's love, unity, and hope.

9. Spend some time in prayer. God's calling for your church is too important to neglect, and it's too important to take on without the power of the Spirit. Ask God to so fill the life of your church with His Spirit that your community notices a difference. Ask Him to equip you for the role He has called you to play in His plan of redemption.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part II: Living as the Church

3: The Global Church

As important as the local church is, God's plan extends way beyond your town. As much as God wants you to reach the people in your community, He has no intention of stopping there. God's plan of redemption reaches into your neighborhood—and to every other city, village, and jungle around the globe!

If your church bands together and reaches out to every individual in your community, you are still not done with God's mission. No matter how big of a revival you experience, your area is still only a small part of the world that God has sent us to transform through His gospel. Until our vision of the church encompasses the entire globe, we do not have an accurate view of God's church or His plan of redemption.

All the Families of the Earth

Let's go back to the very beginning. As soon as God's good world became corrupted by the sin of Adam and Eve, God made a promise to restore it. God told the serpent:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. (Gen. 3:15)

The devastating influence of sin would affect all of mankind, and the struggle for redemption would be between the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent. Ultimately, this promise became a reality in the

person of Jesus Christ, who crushed Satan's head by dying on the cross and rising from the grave. But it is also important to see that this promise belongs to the human race. It is not confined to any ethnic group or geographical location. The promise of redemption is as broad as humanity.

God reiterated this promise to Abraham:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:2–3)

The blessing that God promised here worked itself out through Abraham's descendants: the people of Israel. Ultimately, the blessing centered upon one Israelite in particular, Jesus of Nazareth. But we have to remember that although the promise came *through* one nation, the blessing has always been intended for all nations.

God has called your church to play a role in His plan of redemption. And since His plan is a global plan, your church needs to think beyond your city limits. You can't be everywhere at once, and your resources and manpower are limited. But in order to be a part of God's mission on earth, you need to think in global terms.

1. In your own words, why is it important to think about God's plan of redemption in global terms?

2. When you think about the mission of your church, does the rest of the globe factor in at all? How so?

Where Christ Has Not Been Named

When you study the New Testament, you will look at Paul's missionary career. Though we may think of Paul as a theologian or a pastor, he was a missionary in every sense of the word. Much of the book of Acts follows Paul as he travelled—often amid great danger, difficulty, and persecution—from place to place, proclaiming the gospel and forming churches among those who responded by following Jesus.

It wasn't an accident that Paul spent so much of his life spreading the gospel to new areas. In Romans 15:20–21, Paul explained that this was his passion:

I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written,

"Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand."

When Paul said "as it is written," he was quoting Isaiah 52, which describes Jesus as the servant of the Lord who would suffer in order to bring healing to His people. Earlier in the chapter, God clearly explained that although He was speaking directly to Israel, His salvation is for all of

the nations, and He would specifically send ministers to spread this good news:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."
... The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. (Isa. 52:7, 10)

Interestingly, Paul cited the beginning of this passage earlier in the book of Romans. Paul made clear not only that salvation is offered to all mankind but also that we are called to take an active role in spreading the gospel:

There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" (Rom. 10:12–15)

So what does this all mean? God's plan of redemption belongs to all of humanity, yet only those who have heard the message are able to respond to it. Paul's ambition in life was to take this message of redemption and bring it to those who had never heard.

Keep in mind that Paul's passion to spread the gospel more broadly was not a personal preference. It was an essential part of the mission that Jesus gave to the church. Remember that Christ commanded us to make disciples among all nations. We misunderstand God's plan of redemption unless we see it reaching to all humanity.

3. Take some time to think about the passages above (Romans 15:20–21, Isaiah 52:7–10, Romans 10:12–15). How should these truths affect the way we think about our calling?

Before the End Will Come

This world will not end until God's plan is accomplished. God sends His people out into the world to embody and to proclaim His healing, and He will not wrap up human history until this has been accomplished. If His plan has always been about redeeming people from every nation on earth, then He is not content with happy, healthy churches in our communities alone—and we shouldn't be either. Though we should long to see Christ glorified in our immediate context, we should share Paul's passion to see Him glorified in every corner of the globe.

Though the details surrounding the end of the earth and the timeframe of many of the prophesies in the Bible are the subject of frequent debate, Jesus made clear that the message of the gospel should not be isolated to one part of the globe: "This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14).

Many Christians are surprised to hear that there are still many groups of people around the world that have never heard the name of Jesus. We take it for granted that the people around us have access to the gospel if they ever develop an interest. Even if there's not a church or a Christian in close proximity (though this is difficult to imagine), at the very least everyone has access to gospel messages on the television, radio, or Internet. But that is simply not the case worldwide. There are people around the world who desperately need hope, healing, and salvation, but who don't have access to the message of redemption.

Paul's questions are as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago: How will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?

These questions should burn in our minds and in our hearts. We are not following Jesus fully if we are not concerned about proclaiming the "gospel of the kingdom ... throughout the whole world" (Matt. 24:14). This is what Jesus did while He was on earth. And now, through the power of His death and resurrection, Jesus calls us to do the same.

4. Have you given much thought to the unreached people groups around the world? If so, how does this affect your thinking and lifestyle? If not, why do you think you have never thought about it?

Working Together for the Gospel

Once we start developing a passion for Christ's glory to be seen around the world, we need to figure out what role we are called to play. Make no mistake, every Christian is called to be involved in spreading the gospel around the world! No one is off the hook. No one is called to a life that is separate from global missions. But this doesn't mean that we all need to immediately start packing for the jungle.

God may well want you to take His gospel overseas. Too many Christians discount that possibility too quickly. Some people are too comfortable with their current lifestyle and would never dream of sacrificing their comfort for God's glory. Others quickly assume that they are called to something else, something more normal. We shouldn't make these assumptions. Have you ever genuinely told God that you would submit yourself to His will in this area? Right now, you should ask God if He wants you to pursue living in a different location for the sake of the gospel. It may be a terrifying thought, but we have to trust God more than we trust ourselves. We are here on this earth for His glory. God has blessed you so that you will use whatever He has given you for His glory, not yours. Ultimately, we should expect God's plan to lead us places that we wouldn't naturally go.

5. Take a minute to pause and ask God what He wants for your life. Ask Him to break through any excuses you may be hiding behind and idols you might be clinging to. Ask Him to make you willing to follow Him in whichever direction He might lead. If you have any thoughts based on this time of prayer, make a few notes below.

We all need to consider whether God is calling us to follow Him onto the mission field, but we have to remember that this is not the only way of working to fulfill God's plan to reach every nation. If we decide that God wants us to remain in the area in which He has placed us for the time being, then we need to be using our resources to further the mission around the world. Even if we find our primary ministry in the people directly surrounding us, we need to be praying for our fellow workers in other parts of the earth. The church is spread across the world, and we need to be doing everything in our power to reach people in every corner of the globe.

John wrote a letter to a Christian man named Gaius who had been helping missionaries as they travelled to spread the gospel more broadly. His words put our role in supporting missionaries around the world in perspective:

It is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth. (3 John v. 5–8)

John said that "we ought to support people like these" (i.e., missionaries), and that in supporting them we are actually "fellow workers for the truth." None of us is beyond the task of missions. We are all in this together. We all have a part to play. We may never set foot in a remote jungle, but our lives should be devoted to seeing God's will be done in our neighborhoods and in Africa and Papua New Guinea. When we take up the call to follow Jesus, we are committing to making disciples in our hometowns and in the Middle

East. The question is not whether or not we will be working to spread the gospel around the world, but what role we will play in this. A church that is not devoted to the cause of Christ around the world is not a church in the biblical sense.

6. How would you describe your role in furthering the gospel around the world? If nothing comes to mind, write down a few things that you can begin to pursue in order to make missions a part of your life.

A Vision of the End

God tells us that history is moving toward a specific and glorious end. God promised Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. This is what God's plan of redemption has been about from the very beginning. And when we look ahead to the end of the story, we see that God's promise to Abraham will be fulfilled. There is no doubt about whether or not the church will fulfill its mission; we know for certain that this is how the world will end.

John was actually allowed to see the fulfillment of this promise that God made to Abraham:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9–10)

This is where we are headed. As distant and unfamiliar as the churches in India, Africa, China, and Papua New Guinea may seem, our future is inextricably tied to theirs. When Jesus returns to reclaim this world as its rightful King, we will find ourselves praising God alongside Christians from every age and from every nation on earth.

God's plan for our future ought to affect the way we live and think today. Does the church in China matter to you? When you hear about the persecution that Christians are enduring in other parts of the world, do you feel any compassion for them? When you hear about a mission setting off for Iraq or Thailand, do you make plans to pray for them or support them financially? These are our brothers and sisters. Their mission is the same as ours. They are working together with us toward the same goal. We cannot fulfill the mission that God has given us without them.

Jesus called His followers to be His witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). We have not yet reached the end of the earth, but through the power of God's Spirit, we will. As followers of Jesus Christ, our calling is to faithfully make disciples. These disciples are also called to make disciples. Jesus promises that He will be with us as we do this, right down to the very end (Matt. 28:20). We don't know when that end will come, but we want to be faithful in making disciples until that time comes. We are God's creations, living in God's earth, placed within God's plan of redemption. May our lives be devoted to His kingdom and His glory.

7. In order to faithfully follow Jesus and play your part in God's plan of redemption, what should your life look like right now? (This is a huge question, but try to write down a few things to guide you as you seek to put the things you've learned into practice.)

8. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to help you submit to Him entirely. Ask Him to guide you and empower you in anything He calls you to do. Pray that God would use you in your neighborhood and around the world in any capacity that He sees fit.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part III: How to Study the Bible

1: Why Study the Bible?

As we have said, an important part of making disciples is teaching people to obey everything Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:20). This means that we need to know Jesus's teaching and commands. It may seem that the first disciples had an advantage on us here. How can we teach people to follow Jesus if we haven't observed His ministry and listened to His teaching? But we are not at a disadvantage at all because God has recorded His words and the testimony of Jesus's followers in a book—the Bible.

For a Christian, nothing should seem more natural than reading the Bible. Peter, one of Jesus's first disciples, compared it to a baby's natural craving for milk: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good" (1 Pet. 2:2–3).

As a newborn depends on milk to survive and to grow, we should equally depend on the words of Scripture for our spiritual survival and growth. The words of the Bible have impacted millions of lives over thousands of years, and God wants it to change our lives as well. If you don't already love the Bible, pray that you would.

No matter what your experience with the Bible has been, it's helpful for all of us to step back and think about what the Bible actually is. When we talk about the Bible, we sometimes use profound language without considering what we're really saying. Perhaps the strongest thing we can say about the Bible is that it is the "Word of God." But have you ever thought about what that means? That concept should blow our minds. When we talk about the Bible, we're actually talking about something that the all-

powerful, all-knowing, transcendent God decided to write to us! What could be more important?

Think of how you would respond to hearing a voice from heaven speaking directly to you. We should approach the Bible with the same reverence.

If we really believe that the Bible is the Word of God, then it should be much more than a book that we are familiar with. It ought to shape every aspect of our existence. It should guide the decisions we make in life. If God is the designer and creator of this world, if He made us and placed us on this earth, and if He has taken the time to tell us who He is, who we are, and how this world operates, then what could be more important to us than the Bible?

But even after we decide that the Bible is important, we still need to learn to approach it in the right way and with the right motives. Many Christians misuse the Bible because they never ask themselves *why* they are studying it in the first place. The purpose of this session is to help you think through the nature of the Bible, why it is important to study, and how it should transform our lives.

Studying the Right Book for the Wrong Reasons

Before you go any further, ask yourself why you study the Bible. Don't be overly optimistic with this; try to assess your heart. When you pick up the Bible and begin to read it, what is motivating you? Are you driven by guilt? Do you have a desire to know God more fully? Are you looking for arguments against other perspectives? Are you looking for material for a Bible study or sermon?

1. Take a few minutes to examine your motivations and write down a few thoughts below.

The fact of the matter is that most Christians study the Bible for the wrong reasons. Here we will explore three motivations for studying the Bible that we need to move beyond: guilt, status, and teaching material.

Guilt

Many people are motivated by guilt. We all know that we should be reading our Bibles—it's just one of those things that Christians are told they are supposed to do. It is often added to a list with things like church attendance, tithing, and not swearing. Nobody wants to admit that they read the Bible out of guilt, but guilt is a powerful motivator.

Very often this guilt is connected with legalism. We create our own standard ("I must read x chapters per day") and then hold ourselves to it, never stopping to consider that God has not placed this standard on us, we have placed it on ourselves. It doesn't take long before we begin holding other people to that standard as well. And thus a culture of guilt is formed, a culture where "good Christians" read their Bibles because they're afraid not to, and "bad Christians" feel guilty about not meeting their Bible-reading quota.

Status

There is a certain status or air of respect reserved for those who know their Bibles well. And rightly so. We should all aspire to know God's Word inside and out. It should be on the tip of our tongues and deeply ingrained on our hearts and minds.

But take a minute to ask yourself why you want to know the Bible well. God is pleased when we treasure His Word, but do you really think He is pleased with your desire to appear intelligent? Does your desire to be the "go-to guy" who is never stumped really bring Him glory? What about your desire to be recognized as the best or the most spiritual person in the room?

It's not about studying the Bible too much (as if that were possible); it's about your motivation. Too often Christians are motivated by status when we should be motivated by a desire to know God, to be changed by His Word, and to love and serve the people around us.

Chances are, you know someone who knows the Bible inside and out. Maybe you've noticed how that person gets treated, and you want what he or she has. Competition is a great motivator, but it's the wrong reason to study the Bible. God cares more about your character than your productivity, and let's face it, studying the Bible in order to be better than someone else is ridiculous.

Teaching Material

Sometimes our motivations get skewed when we have to study the Bible in order to lead a Bible study, preach a sermon, or just have some sort of scriptural gem to share with someone. This tends to be a much more subtle misuse of the Bible. It's not wrong to use the Bible in preparation for teaching other people. In fact, it's necessary. The problem arises when we begin to approach the Bible *only* as a source for teaching material. If you are in a role where you preach or teach to others, do you find yourself simply scanning the Bible for nuggets to share? Or do you soak in the

Scriptures because of what they have to say to *you*, listening to what God wants to teach *you*, allowing the Bible to transform *you* in unexpected ways?

2. Take a minute to think about your past experience with studying the Bible. Which of the wrong motivations listed above are you guilty of? Can you think of any others?

Why Did God Give Us the Bible?

The best place to begin in refining our motivation for studying the Bible is to ask a simple question. Why did God give us the Bible? We're used to the thought that the Bible is God's Word. But why did He give it us? If the Bible is God's Word, why did God decide to speak to us in the first place? Until we understand what the purpose of the Bible is, we are bound to keep approaching it in ways that miss God's intention.

To Teach Us about Himself

So why did God give us the Bible? One reason that seems obvious is that He wanted to describe Himself to us. From beginning to end, God is the subject of the Scriptures. Everything in this book is God centered. Genesis begins with a God who existed alone and then spoke all things into existence. Revelation ends with this same God reigning eternally over all that He created. Every book in between reveals His character and attributes by narrating His sovereign actions throughout history.

God in heaven wants us to know certain things about Himself, and He uses the Scriptures to reveal these things. People naturally want to believe in a human-centered world, so God gave us the Bible, which shows that everything revolves around God. He is the First and the Last, the King of kings, and Lord of lords. He is described as "holy," which speaks to the massive disparity between God and people. It is important to God that we understand this.

It is through the Bible that we learn about God's power, justice, mercy, wrath, love, kindness, anger, faithfulness, jealousy, holiness, compassion, etc. Because God is already described in the Bible, we are left with no room to formulate our own opinions. We should all study in order to understand God better. We search diligently to know the truth about God and to rid ourselves of any misconceptions we hold about Him.

To Teach Us about Ourselves and the World We Live In

God also gave us the Bible so that we can understand the world we live in. It is a grand narrative that explains where we came from, why the world is the way it is, and where everything is headed. It explains who we are as human beings and how we should think about our existence.

Many Christians think that the Bible is helpful for answering religious questions and teaching us how to live godly lives, but it doesn't have answers for the tough questions that we face in philosophy, science, or sociology. This is not true! The Bible gives us answers to all of life's most important questions. The Bible gives us much more than "religious truths"; it accurately explains the world we live in. The God who wrote the Bible is the God who designed this world. Since this is His world, it only makes

sense to view the world from His perspective and live according to His principles.

All of this means that as we study the Bible, we should be seeking to understand our God, our world, and ourselves. Rather than pursuing an emotional experience or trying to accumulate religious knowledge, we should be learning to live in the world that God made.

To Enable Us to Live Godly Lives

Another reason that God gave us the Bible is to enable us to live godly lives. Peter said that God's "divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence" (2 Pet. 1:3). Simply put, through the knowledge of God we gain everything we need for living godly lives. Whatever motivations we may have for studying the Bible, godly living needs to be near the top of that list. We study because we want to be godly.

Paul said that "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, *that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). First, Paul said that Scripture is literally "breathed out" by God. Though He used human authors to write each book of the Bible, God Himself is the ultimate source of these words. But notice the purpose statement that Paul included: "that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." So why did God give us the Bible? He gave it to us *so that* we would be complete, mature people who are equipped and ready to do anything God asks us to do.

This means that as we study the Bible, we should be looking to change. Hebrews 4:12 warns us that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Though we primarily think of the Bible as something we read in order to gain knowledge, we actually have it backward. The Bible reads us —it penetrates to our core and exposes who we really are. If you ever find yourself reading your Bible and not changing, then you can be sure that you're approaching the Bible in the wrong way. It's not about finding support for our lifestyle or way of thinking; it's about approaching the mind of God and letting Him change and redefine who we are.

To Facilitate a Relationship with God

God wants you to know Him, and He gave you the Scriptures so that you can. Every relationship requires communication—the loving expression of each person's thoughts, emotions, concerns, and dreams that strengthens the relationship and deepens intimacy. This is how our relationships with one another function, so why would it be any different with God? The Bible is His means of sharing His thoughts and desires with us! We are relational beings because He created us that way. He Himself exhibits pure relationship in the perfect union and love between the members of the Trinity. From the day He placed Adam in the garden, God has maintained a relationship with mankind, and communication has always been central to that relationship.

When we open the Bible, therefore, we are engaging with God's communication to us. He chose specific words to say to specific people at specific times. He chose sixty-six books to preserve for us so that we could know Him better. Though different parts of the Bible are addressed to different people, everything in the Bible is ultimately written for our

benefit. If the Bible is indeed "breathed out by God"—words delivered from the mouth of God Himself—then reading the Bible is listening to the voice of God.

Every time we read the Bible we are strengthening our relationship with God—unless we approach the Bible for the wrong reasons. If we approach the Bible with humility, eagerly listening for God to speak to us, waiting to hear what God has to say rather than what we want to hear, then we are drawing closer to the one we were made to be in relationship with. True Bible study must always have intimacy with God as a primary goal.

To Exalt Jesus

God uses the Scriptures to explain how and why He has exalted Jesus to the highest place. All of the events in biblical history point to His Son. The law was given to show us our sinfulness and our need for Jesus. Old Testament priests and sacrifices point to our need for the greater high priest and ultimate sacrifice. The Gospels record the loving words and actions of the Son of God. The epistles explain how it is only through His work on the cross that we can be saved from sin and filled with the Spirit. Revelation shows how He will one day return to judge and restore the earth, and reign with His followers forever. All of this is written to exalt Jesus to the glory of God the Father. These words should move us to exalt Jesus in our everyday lives.

To Prepare Us for Our God-Given Mission

From the very beginning, God has had a mission for humanity. After God finished creating the world and everything in it, He created the first man and placed him in the garden "to work it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). God also

gave humanity dominion over the creation. Whatever it means for people to have "dominion" over the creation, it does not mean that we have the right to destroy the creation in any way that serves our purpose. Instead, if humanity's dominion is to look anything like God's dominion, then our responsibility is to lovingly care for the world that God made. From the moment Adam was created by God, people have had a mission on this earth.

God chose Abraham to be the father of the nation of Israel. God blessed Abraham, promised to make him into a great nation, and said, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). When we think about the nation of Israel, we often think that God chose them so that they could be separated from the rest of the world, enjoying God's blessings and living their lives as God's "favorites." But from the moment He chose Abraham, God made it clear that Abraham was to look outward with the blessings he had been given. Abraham was blessed *so that* he could be a blessing to all of the nations of the earth. Israel's mission was to show the world who their God was.

In the New Testament, the mission of God's people becomes even clearer. We are not on this earth merely to enjoy our own personal relationships with God. We are here to be God's servants, His ambassadors: "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

Though much of Christian thought tells us that we are the center of it all—that it's all about you and God and nothing else really matters—the reality is that God is the center, and He has saved us so that we can work with Him in His mission to redeem humanity and restore creation to what He originally intended it to be.

This means that when we read the Bible, we need to view it as our marching orders. Rather than coming to the Bible with our own agenda and trying to find verses that support what we'd like to do, we need to allow the Bible to shape our hopes and dreams. Every time we read the Bible, we should understand our mission a little better. Why are we on this earth in the first place? How can we take part in what God is doing in this world? These are all questions that the Bible answers—as long as we are ready to listen.

3. Take a minute to think through why God gave us the Bible. How should these things affect the way you think about studying the Bible?

Approaching the Mind of God

Ultimately, when we read the Bible, we are approaching the mind of God. Every time you open the Bible, you ought to prepare yourself for an encounter with the Creator of the universe. So how do you prepare yourself for this type of encounter?

It should go without saying that we ought to approach God with humility. We know that we ought to be humble with other people and with God, but we don't usually think of being humble with the Bible. We make this mistake because we don't think about what it is that we're doing when we read our Bibles. Reading your Bible with humility means that you're assuming the role of a student. Too often we search the Bible to find agreement with the views we already hold. This is backward. Instead, we need to recognize that we know nothing.

We don't have the answers—that's why we're reading the Bible.

Approaching the Bible with humility means that we're laying aside our agendas and looking for what God will teach us. Every time you find yourself struggling to accept something the Bible says, you've found an area of your life that needs to be brought into submission to Christ. Unfortunately, we often waste these opportunities by finding ways to explain away what the Bible is saying to us.

And that's the real test—when you find that your beliefs or lifestyle don't match the Bible, do you assume that the Bible is wrong? Every time we find ourselves disagreeing with God, we can be certain that we are the ones who need to change. God didn't give us the Bible to help us feel better about the way we do things; He wrote the Bible to tell us what He wants us to be and do. Until we begin reading the Bible in order to draw close to God and do what He says, we are completely missing the point.

4. How do you tend to respond to the Bible's teaching? Would you say that you approach it humbly with a desire to change? How do you need to adjust your approach to studying the Bible?

Right Motivation Makes All the Difference

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul talked about food offered to idols. The pagan religions at that time would offer meat to their idols. After the ceremony, they would take the meat (obviously the idols didn't eat it) and sell it in the marketplace at a reduced price. Understandably, some Christians who had converted from paganism had a problem with eating this meat because they felt as if they were participating in idolatry by doing so. Other Christians

rightly understood that these idols were nothing, and they could eat that meat with a clear conscience.

The problem came, however, when these Christians began to use their knowledge to push their brothers and sisters to act against their consciences. In addressing that issue, Paul said these profound words: "Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that 'all of us possess knowledge.' This 'knowledge' puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1).

Paul's warning serves as a great case in point for what happens when we study the Bible with the wrong motives. When we study the Bible in order to gain more knowledge, to look more intelligent, to prove a point to someone else, or to convince other people that they should think and act just as we do, then we are studying the Bible with wrong motives. And what is the fruit of this type of study? We become "puffed up." Ironically—tragically—the act of studying the Bible has produced some of the most arrogant people this world has ever seen. Chances are, you know one or two of these people.

5. Rather than thinking about all of the arrogant people you know, take a minute to consider whether or not your efforts in studying the Bible have simply puffed you up. How has studying the Bible changed you? Are you more arrogant, argumentative, or judgmental? Write down a few thoughts below:

Clearly, this is not the way God wants us to study the Bible. Instead, reading God's Word should lead us to become more like God. As Paul said, knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. When we come to the Bible

without an agenda, looking for the ways in which God wants to teach us and change us, then we will walk away more like the people that God desires us to be.

Remember Peter's exhortation: "So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation" (1 Pet. 2:1–2). We should set aside every ungodly desire and inclination and simply long to be fed and nourished by the Word of God. It's a very simple concept that brings life-changing results. Imagine how different you would be if you aligned your thinking and lifestyle with the Bible. Rather than becoming arrogant, you would love God more; you would be in tune with your Godgiven mission; you would see people not as means to your own ends but as valuable creations of God, and you would find ways to love and serve the people around you.

6. Take a minute to meditate on 1 Peter 2:1–2. What would your life look like if you desired the Word as Peter described?

Before You Move On

To sum it all up, the right way to approach the Bible is to first let go of everything that we want and expect, and to let God tell us exactly what to think and what to do. Of course, this is contrary to our natural tendencies, so we need God to work in our hearts to remove our poor motivations and give us a pure longing for His Word. In the next sessions, we will talk about methods for studying the Bible carefully. But before you develop skills in

studying the Bible, it's absolutely essential that you work through your motivation for studying in the first place. Unless your heart is right, you will misuse the Bible, no matter how skilled you are at studying it carefully.

7. Close this session by praying. Ask God to purify your heart with regard to Scripture. Ask Him to produce in you a longing for the pure milk of the Word.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part III: How to Study the Bible

2: Studying the Bible Prayerfully and Obediently

Is there a "right" way to study the Bible?

We will probably all agree that studying the Bible is critical, but we may not agree on the best method of study. There is no universally accepted pattern for how Christians should interact with this book. Some approach the Bible as a textbook or rulebook that gives them direction for how to live their lives. Others gravitate toward the stories and characters in the Bible as an inspiration or model for living a godly life. Still others take a more mystical approach: let it fall open to any page and you will find some spiritual encouragement or guidance to help you through the day. And then there's the academic approach, which carefully examines each passage of Scripture to determine precisely what the original authors intended to say.

Most of us cycle through each of these approaches and several others in our attempt to get the most out of the Bible. We know that we need the Bible, but we sometimes struggle in our quest to get the most out of our reading.

1. Describe your experience with studying the Bible. What approaches have you tried? What has been effective? What has been ineffective? What have you learned in the process?

Studying the Bible Devotionally

Before we decide on the best approach to studying the Bible, let's not forget what the Bible is: God's Word. It is His words to us, so we should be mindful of His authority as He conveys His purpose and will to us. When we read the Bible we are hearing the voice of God.

So how should we read a book that carries the same weight as the audible voice of God coming down from heaven? Obviously, we should read the Bible carefully, paying close attention to what exactly God is saying—a concept we will explore in the next session. In this session, we will focus on another important point: we should read these words devotionally. In other words, we should be "devoted" to them. When God speaks to us, we should be quick to listen, eager to absorb everything He tells us. And we should enjoy the process.

Have you ever thought to simply *enjoy reading the Bible*? We often get so caught up in the busyness of our lives or the details of the biblical text that we forget that we should be thrilled. We are hearing God's words to us!

If you want to get a feel for what it means to enjoy the Bible, then read Psalm 119. It's basically a love letter written to God's Word. Two things are particularly striking about this psalm: (1) The psalmist had a lot to say about God's Word (it's 176 verses long!), and (2) he really, really liked it. The repeated refrain is that he *delights* in God's law, statues, precepts, commandments, etc. At one point (vs. 131) he even said, "I open my mouth and pant, because I long for your commandments." That's a serious desire!

Recall once again Peter's exhortation to long for the Word of God as a baby longs for its mother's milk (1 Pet. 2:2–3). If these statements reflect the attitude a Christian should have toward the Bible, then it's safe to say that all of us are falling very short.

We should approach the Bible with the same intensity, aware of the fact that we are reading God's words, and that His words are directed to us. God has given us the Bible to use in discipling, counseling, teaching, and encouraging the people around us (see 2 Tim. 3:16–17). But whatever else we do with the Bible, we cannot fail to read the Bible devotionally. As we study the Bible to teach, correct, or encourage other people, we need to let God's truths saturate every aspect of our minds, hearts, and lifestyles.

2. What does it look like to take joy in reading the Bible? Have you ever experienced this? If so, what is it like? If not, why do you think you've never enjoyed the Bible?

3. Read through Psalm 119. What do you find striking, challenging, or encouraging?

Prayer and Understanding

Christians often talk about praying *and* reading their Bibles, but we don't hear much about praying *while* reading the Bible. While many Christians will acknowledge that prayer is an important part of understanding Scripture, not many of us have done a good job of actually putting this into practice.

Some believe that if we examine the biblical text closely enough—possibly even learning Hebrew and Greek—if we consult enough

commentaries, and if we diagram every passage perfectly, then we can arrive at the true meaning of any biblical text. Each of these elements is important, but this mentality leaves no room for prayer, which means that there is no dependence on the Holy Spirit. It is a mentality of complete self-reliance.

Paul's description of the difference between human wisdom and the wisdom of God is worth quoting at length:

As it is written,

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:9–14)

Make sure you understand the point of that passage: you *cannot* understand the Bible without the Holy Spirit's help.

Dependence on God in our thinking is a fundamental aspect of being human—and was even before the fall. When Adam and Eve were in the garden of Eden, they needed God to tell them what to do. This is huge! Even before sin entered the world, people needed revelation from God in order to understand the world they were living in. Part of what it means to be human is that we depend on revelation from God in order to understand our existence. And this dependency only intensified after the fall.

As a result of the fall, people are corrupt not only in their actions, but also in their minds (Rom. 1:21). That means we naturally stray from God morally (a concept we're all pretty familiar with), but in addition to that, our minds are tainted by sin. We no longer think the way we ought to think. This intensifies our dependence on the Spirit of God to help us see God's truth as it really is, not as we'd like it to be.

And this is exactly Paul's point: we simply cannot understand spiritual truths apart from the Spirit of God. Without the Spirit, we will look at God's revelation in nature and in the Bible and misinterpret it.

This is why prayer is absolutely essential to Bible study. It's not a symbolic gesture; it's not a formality: it is foundational to understanding the mind of God. If the Bible is God's Word, then understanding the Bible means understanding the mind of God (not fully, of course, but insofar as He has revealed His mind to us). And Paul said explicitly that the only way we can understand the mind of God is through the Spirit of God.

If our Bible study is not saturated in prayer, then we are not studying the Bible the way God intends. The Scriptures are full of the wisdom of God, and we are absolutely dependent on the Spirit to reveal that wisdom to us and establish it in our lives.

4. In practical terms, what does it mean to study the Bible prayerfully? What can you do to build prayer and dependence on God into your study of the Bible?

Studying the Bible Obediently

Perhaps the strongest reason for saturating our Bible study in prayer is that we desperately need the Spirit to make our lives align with the truths we are studying. We don't need statistics to convince us that churchgoers tend toward hypocrisy. We all know people who are passionate about the truth but don't seem to understand the concept of practicing what they preach. What we need is the Spirit to keep us from becoming one of them.

What is the value of truth if it doesn't change us? Paul said it this way:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1–2)

If you could amaze people with your ability to speak, if you understood everything and had more faith than anyone on earth, but you didn't love your neighbor as yourself, then what would be the point? This is why prayer is critical. We need Him to make us loving—to make our knowledge translate into loving action.

Too many Christians study the Word of God as if gaining knowledge is the sum total of our mission on this earth. But according to Paul, knowledge can be completely worthless and even harmful: knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (1 Cor. 8:1).

If we believe that statement, then why do we have so much admiration for people who know lots of facts? Have we forgotten that knowledge is a means to a greater end? Knowledge enables us to love God and love our neighbors more fully.

If we're not putting what we know to work in our lives, then our knowledge will simply make us more arrogant. There's a terrifying irony here: your study of the Bible could actually lead you further away from the Lord.

The problem definitely isn't solved by studying less. Instead, we should be learning everything we can and immediately applying it. We should be begging God to give us a deeper love for Him and others so we can take the truths He reveals and put them into practice. Very often, the truths we learn will actually lead us to search for situations in which to apply them (such as caring for the poor or considering other people better than ourselves).

We can't afford to overlook this point. If you find yourself studying the Bible without applying what you're learning, then you're misusing the Bible. It's that simple—and that serious.

You may not consider yourself a biblical scholar, but think about all the things you do know about the Bible. The Bible is filled with God's commands, and you probably already know some of the things that He clearly wants you to do. Start there. Pray, obey, and begin enjoying the peace that comes from studying the Bible obediently.

5. Take a minute to think through the commands that you know God wants us all to be doing (for example, loving the people around you, forgiving others, praying, etc.). Write down a handful of these things below.

Now evaluate your life in light of these commands. If you find that the things you listed above aren't an active part of your life, then it's pretty evident that you need to change the way you study the Bible. If these things are not manifested in the way you live, then you're misusing the Bible. Putting our knowledge into practice will be a lifelong pursuit for all of us, and we rarely see dramatic, immediate results. But if you're not seeing the things you learn translating into the things you do, then something foundational is out of place.

6. Take a minute to examine your life in light of what you already know about the Bible. If you find that you haven't been applying biblical truth to your life, then what changes do you need to make to the way you study the Bible?

Studying the Bible with Faith

Something that is often overlooked when studying the Bible is the importance of faith. Once again, this goes back to the very nature of the Bible. If the Bible is indeed the very words of God, then those words carry the same authority and power as God Himself. Every promise is backed by a person—the promise is as trustworthy as the person who makes that promise. When the Bible gives us a command, that command carries all the authority of God. Likewise, when the Bible makes a promise, that promise is as trustworthy as God.

One of the church's greatest handicaps is that Christians don't study the Bible with faith. We read the Bible, but we don't act as if we believe what it says. We read about judgment for those who deny Jesus, but it doesn't change the way we reach out to the people around us. This raises the question: Do we really believe (i.e., have faith) in what God has said? Another example is when we read of God's grace. The Bible is clear that God forgives (Eph. 2:1–9, 1 John 1:9), yet many of us walk around with doubts and insecurities based upon past actions. If we studied with faith, wouldn't we live with visible peace and joy?

If we are going to study the Bible as the very words of God, then we need to believe what it says. We need to study the Bible with absolute faith. When we read that God works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11), then we need to believe it and live as though it were true. When we read that the Holy Spirit empowers us to put to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13), then we need to put our complete confidence in that truth and live as people who are empowered by the very Spirit of God.

7. In your own words, explain what it means to study the Bible with faith. Do you see this playing out in your life? How so?

The Bible and Transformation

Often people come out of study groups saying, "That was a good Bible study." But what do they actually mean by that? Does it mean that they learned something or felt convicted at points? Or do they say this because their lives actually changed? Good Bible study leads to transformation. It may not happen all at once, but we should be noticeably different because of our time with Scripture.

We've already looked briefly at Hebrews 4:12: "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The Bible isn't merely an inanimate object that we study and pull information from. It has a life of its own. It acts. *It reads us*; it pierces to the deepest parts of our being and discerns our motivations. Since our God is a living God, His Word is alive, and He works through His Word to actively transform every part of our being.

James used striking imagery to highlight our need to be transformed by the Bible:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (1:22–25)

James compared the process of studying the Bible to a man looking into a mirror. Just like a mirror, the Bible has the ability to reveal to you the truth about your condition. First, he described a man who looks into the mirror, clearly sees the reflection, and then walks away without doing anything. This person is clearly foolish, but he also perfectly represents the way most Christians study the Bible. They read their Bibles, see the truth that demands transformation, then walk away as if nothing ever happened.

James contrasted this fool with the person who looks into the mirror and does something about what he sees. This person reads the Word of God,

takes what he sees at face value, and then acts on it. James is clear that this person is the one who will be blessed in what he does. There is no reward for merely hearing the truth. Bible study is incomplete and illegitimate until it turns into obedience and transforms us.

So again we have to ask the question: Why do you study the Bible? Is it because you want to be changed, or are you studying to gain knowledge?

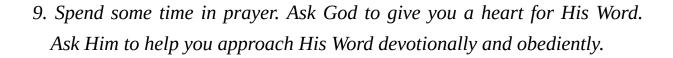
James followed his powerful metaphor with these startling words:

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:26–27)

Once again, he pointed out that there are going to be those who "deceive themselves." Don't be one of them. If you think you are a religious person, but don't act on God's truth, Scripture says your "religion" is worthless. Don't kid yourself—true religion is not about what you know, it's about putting what you know about God and His Word into practice.

God has been so gracious to speak to us. His words lead to life. They set us free! So much of God's blessing comes to us as we listen to His voice and put His Word into practice. It would be a shame if we merely studied and didn't allow these words to bless us as He intended.

8. Take a minute to consider everything you've thought through in this session. What changes do you need to make in the way you study the Bible?



Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part III: How to Study the Bible

3: Studying Logically

As we said in the previous session, an academic study of Scripture does not ensure a proper interpretation. If studying the Bible were all about academics, then our best bet would be to find the most intelligent person we know, and have him or her interpret it for us.

But while it's true that rigorous study does not guarantee right results, it does not mean that hard work and a logical approach to Scripture is insignificant. Not only is it helpful, it is necessary and commanded:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. (2 Tim. 2:15)

God calls you to "do your best." Laziness is inexcusable. We are studying the very words that God chose to communicate to us, so in addition to studying prayerfully and obediently, we must study diligently. God calls us to love Him with our minds (Matt. 22:37), so it is an act of worship to use our minds to understand His thoughts, which in turn will lead us to love Him even more.

We tend to listen carefully when there are consequences for not listening. It's like misunderstanding driving directions and ending up lost and frustrated. How much more important is it to truly understand what God is telling you? As Christians, we claim to base our lives upon the teaching of the Bible. But what if we misunderstand that teaching?

The fact of the matter is that we all misunderstand certain passages of Scripture. If we all understood the Bible perfectly, we would all agree on every point of doctrine. Clearly this is not the case. There are many factors that lead us to misunderstand what the Bible is saying: our own assumptions, blindly following the views of people who have been influential in our lives, our sinful desire to do our own thing, etc. All of these factors are only intensified when we don't pay close attention to what the Bible is actually saying, rather than what we think it must be saying.

It is good for us to keep in mind some general principles for interpreting Scripture.

Consider the Context

Every text belongs to a context. Every chapter, paragraph, sentence, and word derives meaning from its relationship to the words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters around it. This is true in reading ordinary books, and it is certainly true in reading the Bible.

Consider the simple word *ship*. We all know what the word means (and even if we didn't, we could easily find its definition in a dictionary). But *ship* means different things in different contexts. How do you decide whether *ship* is referring to a large boat or to the process of sending something? You look at the context. This isn't a complicated process, but it is absolutely essential in determining the meaning of the word.

We don't usually think about this because reading words in their context is second nature to us—it probably hasn't even occurred to you that you're thinking in terms of context right now, as you read these sentences. As you read, you are deciding what these words mean based on the words around them. When you run into an ambiguous word (like the word "read" in the last two sentences, which could be taken as past or present tense, depending

on the context), you automatically choose the appropriate definition or tense based on the context.

The point of using these simple examples is to highlight an essential aspect of studying the Bible: in order to understand a particular word, verse, chapter, or book, we need to consider it in light of its context. Too often, verses are read and quoted in isolation. While this is not necessarily wrong, it greatly increases the chances of misinterpretation.

Here's a helpful way to get the point across: when studying Scripture, think apple rather than orange. Typically, when you eat an apple, you take a bite out of the whole fruit. When you eat an orange, you break it into isolated pieces and then eat the pieces individually. Whenever we read a verse, we should be mindful that we are taking a thought (a "bite") from a larger story. Always keep in mind that every verse is connected to a chapter, a book, and the entire Bible.

One of the best things we can do to understand context is to read the Bible in its entirety. Some choose to do this every two years, others on a yearly basis, and others even more frequently. Whatever approach you take to reading the Bible, the more often you read it, the better you will understand the whole story. 1

1. Think about the way you tend to study the Bible. Would you say that you make an effort to seek out what the Bible is actually saying? Do you pay attention to the context? If so, how has this helped you? If not, how do you think this might change the way you read the Bible?

Know the Difference between Interpretation and Application

Maybe the most common mistake made in Bible interpretation is when people focus too much on "what this verse means *to me*." It's not uncommon for Bible study groups to go around the circle as each person shares an individualized interpretation. Often these interpretations are made with little study and are heavily influenced by opinion and desire. Many times, the various interpretations are incompatible with one another. In this type of setting, the focus is not on what God is saying through the Bible. Instead, each person is focused on what he or she thinks the verse means. Whether it's clearly articulated or not, this approach reveals the assumption that the Bible has a personalized meaning for each Christian. It might mean one thing to me, but another thing to you.

I don't want to completely disparage this approach. For one thing, many biblical passages have nuances of meaning, and you might notice something that others miss. In that sense, "going around the circle" can be a very helpful exercise. But this is not the same thing as saying that the Bible has a personalized meaning for each of us. Once we head down that road, there is no longer such a thing as "misinterpretation," and people are free to make the Scripture say anything. It's important to understand that the Bible means what God intends for it to mean. When we ask our children to wash the dishes, we have a clear message we want to get across, and we expect them to figure out what we mean by that statement. In the same way, God has a message to get across, and we all need to work together in order to examine God's words and find out what He is really saying to us.

Sometimes when we talk about "what this passage means to me," we are actually talking about application, rather than interpretation. With

interpretation, we are asking what the passage is saying and what it means. With *application*, we are applying that meaning to our specific situation. Ultimately, each passage has one meaning, but it might have many different applications.

For example, in Matthew 22:39, Jesus quoted Leviticus 19:18, which says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The meaning is pretty easy to grasp: we need to love the people whom God has placed around us. But how do we apply that truth to our lives? One person might apply it by helping a neighbor with her yard work, and another person might apply it by listening graciously to a coworker as he shares his concerns about his family. They might each apply the same truth to their lives in different ways tomorrow.

Application depends on our specific life situations, so we may all read the same passage and walk away with different applications. *Interpretation*, on the other hand, is all about discovering what God has actually said and what He intended to communicate. We should all read the same passage and walk away with the same meaning.

2. In your own words, why is it important to distinguish between interpretation and application?

Find the Plain Meaning

Sometimes our personal agendas or assumptions divert us from what God is saying in a biblical passage. For example, in Luke 12:33, Jesus said, "Sell your possessions, and give to the needy." We will often read a verse like

that and say, "Okay, obviously God is not asking me to *literally* sell my possessions and give to the needy. This passage must mean ______." Really? Because it sure seems that Jesus is saying that these disciples should literally sell their possessions and give to the needy. In fact, looking at the context of Jesus's teaching and ministry only strengthens the literal meaning of that passage. Based on the rest of the book of Luke, this is exactly the sort of thing that Jesus would call His followers to do.

The fact that Jesus called His disciples to sell some possessions at that moment in history does not necessarily mean that every Christian has to sell every possession at all times, but the point is that our own agendas can keep us from even considering such a thing. If Jesus called His disciples to sell some of their stuff and use that money to meet the needs of the poor, shouldn't we be open to His calling us to do the same thing today?

We need to learn to take Scripture at face value. While some sections of the Bible are difficult to understand (2 Pet. 3:16), so much of the Bible is easily understood. When we read that "those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8), we will have to carefully study the verse and its context to decide what it means to be "in the flesh," but the plain meaning of the verse is clear: God does not want us to be in the flesh.

Other passages are more difficult. What happens when we read one of the many portions of the Old Testament that seem so distant? In Exodus 17, for example, Israel goes to war against Amalek. As Joshua lead the army in battle, Moses sat on top of a hill and kept his hands raised in the air. The Bible says, "Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed" (Ex. 17:11). This is a fascinating account, but how do we interpret it? We will probably all agree

that the verse isn't telling us to go sit on a hilltop and hold our hands in the air. Should we be seeking a spiritual meaning that lies beneath the surface, then? Maybe the verse means that we must keep our hands and our hearts pointed toward heaven if we are going to defeat our spiritual enemies. While that may be true, there is no indication that this is what God is telling us through this passage.

If we are going to take this verse at face value, we will read it as a description of the unusual way in which God used Moses to lead Israel to victory in a historical battle over the Amalekites. Through that story we can gain insight into the power of God and His ability to save His people, but those insights do not change the clear meaning of what God recorded in Exodus 17. It might seem more "spiritual" to try to find some deeper meaning behind the text, but what could be more spiritual than simply taking God at His word?

The Bible is a fascinating book. It is the communication of the Creator of the universe to His people. God wrote the Bible using human language, in words that we understand and use every day. He chose to communicate through a book, and He obviously has the ability to communicate His message clearly.

If we say that we shouldn't take God's words at face value, that we need to discover some sort of hidden meaning beneath the plain meaning of the words of Scripture, then we are saying that God is using human language in a way that is different from the way human beings use language. But we have absolutely no indication that this is the case. To the contrary, when God spoke to human beings in the Bible, they understood Him and acted according to the plain meaning of His words. When God told Israel to build a tabernacle, they didn't perform some sort of dance as a spiritual

interpretation of His words. Instead, they took His words at face value and created a tabernacle in accordance with the plain meaning of God's words. Our approach to Scripture should be the same.

3. In your own words, why is it important to look for the plain meaning of each passage rather than seeking out a deeper meaning?

4. Would you say that your study of the Bible is focused on finding the plain meaning of each passage? Why or why not?

Take the Bible Literally

There is an old statement that is worth repeating here: if the literal sense makes sense, seek no other sense. We need to be careful with this, because we are still left to determine when the literal sense actually makes sense. But it makes an important point: we should look for the plain meaning of the words of Scripture. When we examine each word, verse, chapter, and book, we need to allow the context to suggest whether that verse should be taken as a literal statement, a rhetorical question, a figure of speech, etc.

Accepting the Bible as literal truth does not mean that we interpret every passage literally. When we read the Bible, we find many places where the author uses metaphors, parables, poems, prophecies, and other literary devices. For example, when Jesus said, "I am the door" (John 10:9), He was using a metaphor. We understand that He was not claiming to be made of

wood and attached to a doorframe. Jesus was conveying literal truth, but using a figure of speech to do so.

But notice that this is not using any sort of strange spiritual or allegorical interpretation. We are following the normal usage of human language, which allows for metaphor, imagery, and other rhetorical devices. So when we say that we need to take the Bible literally, we need to be careful to understand what we're really saying. What we mean is that we will take the Scriptures at face value, and when the context suggests that the author is using a figure of speech or some sort of poetic or prophetic imagery, then we will follow the normal rules of human language and interpret the passage accordingly.

Don't misunderstand—this isn't always a simple task. As an illustration, consider the fact that whole camps have formed over which portions of the book of Revelation should be read literally and which should be read figuratively. We will often disagree over which specific passages are speaking literally and which ones are using rhetorical devices. This means that we need to be gracious as we discuss the Bible. There is room for discussion and exploration—in fact, it glorifies God when we humbly and patiently examine the Bible together. The point is simply this: take God's words at face value and do what He tells you to do.

5. Do you have a tendency to interpret the Bible allegorically or figuratively? If so, why do you think you tend to do this?

Study the Grammatical Context

As we have seen, God used human language to write the Bible. He led human authors to use human words and human grammar in order to record His truth. So it only makes sense to pay attention to the grammar of the Bible. This doesn't mean that you need to be a grammatical expert to read the Bible (though God does give these people to the church to guide the rest of us), but we should pay attention to how the words in the Bible are being used.

The biblical authors often pay very close attention to grammar. To give one example, Paul made a significant theological point based on the use of a singular noun (rather than a plural) in Genesis 12:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. (Gal. 3:16)

This doesn't mean that we will always find interpretive gems by examining the grammar, but when we come to difficult passages, we will want to ask questions like the following:

- Who is doing the action here? (Find the subject)
- What action is the actor performing? (Find the verb)
- How are the actor and the action described? (Find the adjectives and adverbs)
- Who or what is being acted upon? (Find the direct and indirect objects)

Most of the time, we do this sort of analysis automatically, without even thinking about what we're doing. (You just did it with the previous sentence, and now you're doing it again.) But when you encounter a passage that seems difficult, try breaking it down and examining what is really going on with each sentence. God's words are worth evaluating at this level.

Study the Historical Context

The historical setting of a passage will often shed light on what the passage means. Sometimes this will require outside resources, like a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or commentary. But many times the historical insights can be found in the Bible itself. For example, much of the Old Testament consists of detailed historical accounts. And many New Testament books give historical insights—particularly the Gospels and the book of Acts.

Consider just one example of how the historical setting can help us understand the Bible. Walk into any Christian bookstore and you will find decorative knick-knacks bearing Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." People love it because they interpret it as God saying He will keep us from harm and bless us. But is that really what Jeremiah intended to communicate to us?

If we look at the historical context, we find that Jeremiah was writing to Jewish exiles in Babylon. They had gone into captivity as punishment for their lack of faithfulness to God. Jeremiah told them that they would be in captivity for seventy years, so they should settle in and seek to bless Babylon while they were there. And then comes Jeremiah 29:11. God promised that He did indeed have a plan for His people, and He would restore them to the land of Israel after their days of exile were over.

The historical context reveals that Jeremiah 29:11 is not a blank-check promise from God that nothing bad will ever happen to any of us today. We

have much to learn from God's provision for Israel in the midst of their exile and punishment. We can even make observations about God's compassion in this story and trust that this same compassionate God will care for us today. But we would be misusing Scripture if we assumed that those words could be directly applied to every circumstance as a promise of prosperity. The historical context does not always affect the meaning of a passage, but we must always consider who the biblical authors were addressing and why.

6. In your own words, explain why paying attention to the grammatical and historical context is important. How should these concepts shape your study of the Bible?

Let Go of Your Baggage

As important as it is to pay attention to the context of the passages we read, the greatest danger in biblical interpretation comes from our own "baggage." For example, many Americans assume that Jesus is a white, blond-haired, blue-eyed capitalist who bleeds red, white, and blue. But that is simply not the case. We often assume that God wants us to be happy, healthy, and fulfilled because that's the message we get from everyone around us. But again, that's not the case. Read the Bible carefully and you'll see that God doesn't necessarily want those things for us, at least not in the way our culture defines and pursues them.

Life experiences can also taint the way we read the Bible. Those abandoned or abused by their fathers may struggle more to understand what the Bible says about our loving heavenly Father. Those who were raised with few rules and weak parents may have a hard time seeing the power and sovereignty of God. Our experiences have an impact on our desires, which in turn affect our interpretations.

When we read the Bible, we need to do everything we can to avoid making assumptions about what the Bible is saying. We need to let it speak for itself. We are all tainted by the commitments and assumptions of our culture. We also have been heavily affected by our life experiences, but the more we let go of our baggage and ask God to speak directly to us through His Word, the more we will find God's truth transforming our minds and actions, and the better we will understand the mind of God.

7. What would it mean for you to read the Bible with an awareness of your own baggage and a willingness to get rid of those assumptions for the sake of understanding God's truth more clearly?

A Note on Application

Don't forget what you read in the session. Accurately interpreting the Bible is not the final step. The purpose of reading and interpreting the Bible is obedience and fellowship with God. If we interpret Scripture perfectly, yet fail to live in accordance with what we read, we are fooling ourselves (James 1:22). God has given us the precious gift of the Bible so that we will be transformed by its truth, becoming more like Him and growing in our love for Him.

8. In light of what you have thought through in this session, how do you need to change your approach to reading and studying the Bible?

- Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.
- 1 Refer to <u>multiplymovement.com</u> for reading guides that will help you get into a habit of reading through the Bible regularly. If you are interested in resources that will help you place individual portions of the Bible in their context, consider using a study Bible, such as *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008). Another excellent resource that will help you understand the overall story of the Bible is Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

Part IV: Understanding the Old Testament

1: Creation

Setting the Stage

The Bible tells a story. We tend to view the Bible as a bunch of fragmented bits of history, poetry, and moral tales, but in reality, the Bible tells a story. And it's a *true* story. It's a story that gives meaning to our existence, our daily lives, and to every other story on earth.

As you read through the Bible, pay attention to the story that is unfolding. But don't imagine that you're merely looking into the past when you read this story. This is a story that has yet to be finished. Though Revelation ties up the loose ends and tells us how the story will come to a close, we're not there yet. The story continues, and each and every one of us has a role to play. But we won't be able to play our part until we buy into the story so deeply that it shapes everything about our lives.

Ultimately, this is a story about God, the world He created, and the incredible plan of redemption that unfolds as He creates a people for His own glory. As you walk through key points in the biblical story over the weeks ahead, make sure you place yourself within this story. How do the actions, events, and truths presented in the story touch your life? How should you live now in light of this amazing story?

The passage you will consider in this session (Genesis 1–2) sets the stage for the rest of the Bible. In this section, we see the world as it should be. We see God crafting a world that is everything He desires it to be—no sin, no imperfection, everything glorifies God perfectly. Understanding this first part of the story will help us understand everything that follows.

1. Read Genesis 1–2. As you read, look for elements that will help orient you to the biblical story. Who are we introduced to in this section? What is being emphasized? What seems to be the point? After reading these two chapters, make some notes below.

Who Is God?

The story begins with familiar words: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." With these words we are introduced to the most important character in the story. It's interesting that although these are the first words in the entire Bible, the author doesn't pause to tell us theologically or philosophically who God is. There are many questions that we could ask at this point: Where did God come from? What was He doing before He created? Why is He creating in the first place?

But Genesis proceeds in a different manner. The author teaches us about God by simply telling us what He did: He created. We're going to find out so much more about God as the story unfolds, and at points we will get specific theological answers to some of the questions we may have. But it's important to let the story drive our understanding of who God is.

2. Take a minute to reflect on what you read in Genesis 1–2. What do God's actions in this passage reveal about who He is?

This Is God's World

Perhaps the most obvious thing that we see in this passage is God's absolute power and unrivaled glory. The story starts with Him alone. There is great significance to the fact that God is the only character in Genesis 1. He is the only eternal person or thing in the universe. This means that nothing else can be equated or even compared with Him.

Allow yourself to feel the weight of this for a minute. There was a time when our universe did not exist. Immediately before our world began, God existed—and that's it! Then God began creating our world out of nothing simply by speaking. He told land to form and it obeyed. He called light into being and it happened. Every single thing in our universe came into existence in obedience to God's command.

Try to get a feel for the absolute difference between this all-powerful God who has always existed and the creation that He called forth through the repeated refrain: "Let there be ______." There is no person, force, or thing that can compete with God or claim any importance in comparison with Him. It is this absolute distinction between God and everything else that leads the angels in heaven to cry out, "Holy! Holy!"

3. How should God's eternality and power in the creation account affect the way we view and relate to Him?

We cannot read Genesis 1–2 without realizing that this world belongs to God. If we were to begin with our own perception of the world, we might get the sense that the world belongs to us, that we are the rightful rulers of this planet. But Genesis tells a different story. God lovingly and powerfully created this world. No person or thing had any place in this world until God

put it in its proper place. God alone can claim ownership of this world because He spoke it into existence.

This should lead us to great humility about our place in this world. We are not the center of the universe. God created this world and graciously placed us in the midst of it. But all ownership and authority belongs to God. As we will see, God does delegate a certain authority to us, but this is a derived authority, graciously given to us by God to be used in a specific manner. Any attempt to claim power for ourselves independent of God is like a clay pot challenging the authority of the potter who formed it. (This is an image, by the way, which Scripture uses to describe the foolishness of challenging God—see Is. 29:15–16, 45:9–10, and Rom. 9:19–24.)

4. How should God's power, authority, and ownership affect the way we view our place in this world?

In the Image of God

After creating every detail of every aspect of the universe in which we live, God looked at everything He had made and declared it good. But in the midst of this episode of creation, God paused to confer with Himself:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (Gen. 1:26).

There is something absolutely unique about humanity. On the one hand, we are utterly unlike God because, just like everything else in creation, He made us. But on the other hand, *God specifically created us to be like Him*. This is impossible to wrap our minds around, but God created us like Him in some respect and then set us in the midst of this world to represent Him!

There is a lot of debate about what exactly the "image of God" is. Everyone seems to agree that being created in God's image is more than a physical resemblance—He is *Spirit*, after all (John 4:24). Suggestions as to what God's image in humanity consists of are varied: our ability to reason, our ability to make moral decisions, our personalities, and our capacity for relationships are all leading views. Others suggest that the image of God relates to the dominion over the rest of creation that God gave to man (this ties Gen. 1:26–27 to Gen. 1:28).

Perhaps it is best not to attach the image of God to any one faculty or attribute of humanity. In the New Testament, we are told that Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). Jesus is said to be "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb. 1:3). It seems that being the "image of God" is about reflecting God in some way. Jesus did this perfectly, but humanity has also been given a responsibility to show God to the world—His handiwork, nature, and attributes are displayed in us in a way that they are not displayed in the rest of the creation. (Of course, this image has been tainted by sin, but that comes later in the story.)

In the ancient world, kings would set up an image of themselves as a visual announcement of who was in charge. It reminded the king's own people and the surrounding nations that this land was under the king's jurisdiction and authority. Psalm 8 says that God placed human beings in a

privileged position amid the universe He created—it says we are "crowned with glory and honor" and that we have been given dominion over the works of God's hands (v. 5). It seems that God made people to humbly and graciously mediate His rule on the earth. Human beings stand as a reminder that God is the King of this world.

So rather than trying to identify the image of God with a specific aspect of the human condition, perhaps we should simply acknowledge that God made us to reflect Him to the world. We represent to the world its rightful King and we illustrate His workmanship, attributes, and characteristics.

5. In your own words, describe why it is significant that God created us "in His image." How should this affect the way we view ourselves and the people around us?

The Personal God of Genesis 2

Something interesting happens when we move from Genesis 1 into Genesis 2. In chapter 1, God is referred to by the title "Elohim," which simply means "God." It's a lot like referring to a person based on his or her title: "Doctor, Professor, President, King," etc. But when we get to chapter 2, the name for God changes. Now He is referred to as "Yahweh Elohim," which combines the title "God" with a personal name: Yahweh. (For good but complicated reasons, most English translations render *Yahweh* as *the LORD* (notice it's in all caps).)

This is significant because God tends to use His personal name, Yahweh, when He is relating to His people in a personal way. God uses the name

Yahweh when He enters into a covenant with His people. When God makes a covenant, He specifies what His relationship to His people will look like, makes them promises, and often charges them to be obedient in return. The personal name Yahweh is appropriate for this type of interaction.

Genesis 2 is a much more intimate account of the world's origins than Genesis 1. Whereas Genesis 1 gives a broad overview of how the world was made, Genesis 2 takes that account for granted and tells the story in a much more specific way. It tells the story of humanity—created in God's own image—and the privileges and responsibilities that God gave them.

We see God doing something unique with humanity. God first formed Adam out of the ground, then bent down and breathed life into his nostrils. This is a much more intimate form of creation than we saw in chapter 1, where God simply spoke the world into existence. Notice also that God spoke directly with the man in chapter 2. He told Adam about the garden—in particular, He told Adam what he could and could not eat. Right away we see that humanity was made to communicate with God. Even in his perfect state (before sin entered the world), Adam was dependent on revelation from God in order to live in the world that God made.

And then notice that God did not want the man to be alone. This is the first time that God said something was "not good." He created a "helper fit for Adam." It's easy to imagine God enjoying His relationship with Adam and lovingly watching Adam enjoy the perfect companion that God made for him. While it is important to see the implications for marriage inherent in this passage, we should also see that God did not want man to live in isolation. God solved Adam's loneliness by creating a wife for him, but keep in mind that Eve was not just a wife—she was another human being. In other words, God designed human beings to live in relationship with

other human beings. This will have major implications when we begin discussing the concept of the church in the New Testament.

6. What can we learn about human beings and their relationship with God and each other by reading Genesis 2?

Life in the Garden

Genesis 1–2 also gives us an amazing vision of what God originally intended the world to be. After creating the earth and everything in it, God took the time to plant a garden (2:8). God placed people in the midst of this garden and gave them the specific task of "working it and keeping it" (Gen. 2:15).

We sometimes think that work is the product of the fall, a punishment for sin. When humanity sinned, God cursed the ground, and labor became frustrating and painful (Gen. 3:17–19). But God's original intention for people was that we would be actively involved in caring for the creation. God placed Adam in the garden (keep in mind that a garden is different from a wilderness or jungle in that it is tended, planned, and ordered) and gave him the specific task of working it.

God intended for humanity to have a caring relationship with the surrounding world. God gave people dominion over the creation, placing it under their feet (Gen. 1:28 and Ps. 8:5–8), not so that they could exploit and destroy the earth, but so that they could lovingly care for it as a good creation of God meant to be protected and enjoyed.

It is also fascinating to read the account of Adam naming the animals (2:18–20). Here we get another taste of the interaction between God and humanity in a perfect world. Surely God could have named the animals on His own, but He chose to give them names by working together with Adam. At this early point in the story, it is clear that God's rule over the earth will be exercised in conjunction with His chief creation, Adam.

We cannot miss the peace, harmony, and perfect beauty described in Genesis 1–2. It gives us a picture of the world as it was meant to be. It is a world that we all long for. But this is only the beginning of the story. As we will see in the next session (and as we all know from experience), something has gone tragically wrong. But this peaceful picture where everything works in perfect harmony with everything else will reappear. The paradise that we lost will eventually be regained—surpassed even—when Jesus returns to set the world to rights.

7. Take some time to consider the picture of the world presented in Genesis 1–2. Why is this picture so appealing? Which aspects of life in the garden of Eden should we long to see restored in our world?

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part IV: Understanding the Old Testament

2: The Fall

You may not realize this, but you felt the result of Adam and Eve's sin today. In fact, you can't go five minutes without encountering the effects of the fall. Every aspect of God's creation has been in some way tainted or distorted by sin. Everywhere we look we see pain, rebellion, brokenness, hopelessness, despair.

Even in our own hearts, we see the influence of sin. We are in a battle, and we feel it every day. No matter how badly we want to honor God, sin screams at us from all sides, begging us to rebel against God and pursue our own desires. We struggle with temptations, and we have a hard time making sense of the things we see happening around us. Every one of us has a profound sense that the world is not now as it was intended to be.

How did we get to this point? The first two chapters of Genesis describe a wonderful existence, but the next chapter takes a dark turn. Genesis 3 describes Adam and Eve's tragic failure—their fall into sin—and the devastating impact this has had on our world.

The Story Takes a Sudden Turn

The initial chapters of Genesis paint a picture of earth as a paradise. This is the world as God intended it to be. Everything is good; there is no sin, sorrow, pain, or death. Humanity lives in perfect fellowship with God, each other, and with the creation.

But turn the page from Genesis 2 to Genesis 3 and the story takes a turn for the worse. We refer to this tragic part of the story as "the fall," and it has affected each of us to the core of our being.

As Adam and Eve joyfully cared for God's creation, the serpent (whom we later learn is Satan—see Rev. 12:9) entered the scene. In a seemingly innocent manner, he asked Eve a simple question: "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" (v. 1). God had given Adam and Eve every tree in the garden as food, and only the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was off limits. But as we might expect, this was the only tree that Satan wanted Eve to think about. He wanted her to feel that God was depriving her of something. He told her that eating the forbidden fruit would open her eyes so that she would be like God. He promised her good things.

Of course, life in the garden of Eden was full of good things enjoyed through the grace and presence of God. But Satan began to promise goodness *apart from God*. With this simple twist, the world that God created to be "very good" changed dramatically.

1. Read Genesis 3. Based on the first three chapters of Genesis, why was it such a big deal for Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?

Pay attention to a key observation from this story: Satan is subtle. He does not show up dressed in a red cape with a pitchfork saying, "I am Satan, and I am here to destroy you. Follow me." Instead, he comes to us in ways that we would not expect and offers us things that seem good. This is what he did in the garden, and he does it to us today. He deceives people by making false promises. He takes what is evil and makes it appear beautiful. He takes truth and twists it.

It is also important to notice that Satan enters the biblical scene as part of God's creation. This means that he is not all powerful. He is only alive because God gives him life. He is a deadly deceiver, but his power is infinitely less than God's power. So we shouldn't be terrified of Satan's power, but we do need to be wary of his lies and manipulation.

In the case of Adam and Eve, Satan cleverly avoided asking them to reject God outright. Instead, he offered them the knowledge of good and evil. He gave them an opportunity to be in charge, to decide for themselves the difference between good and evil. God made people to be dependent on Him (that's not a bad thing, by the way!), but from this moment on, every sin has involved men and women claiming the right to govern themselves. Sin is always a declaration of autonomy.

God had given Adam and Eve specific words to follow, but they failed to view the word of God as the supreme authority. They allowed someone else's words to carry weight. They treated God's word as a lesser authority, putting their own desires above His. Whenever we disobey His commands, we are rejecting His authority and asserting our own. We basically say, "God, You may be the author of my life, but You're not the authority in my life. I choose what I do, not You. I'm in control here, not You."

2. Analyze the sin in your life in light of the rebellion of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Do you see the same tendency toward independence and rebellion in your actions? How so?

The World Became a Different Place

From this point on, the biblical story is saturated with the effects of the fall. Suddenly people find themselves separated from God, those around them, and the creation. Whereas Adam and Eve once enjoyed perfect fellowship with God, they now hid from Him in shame and were sent as exiles out of the paradise that had been their home. They once enjoyed a perfect relationship with each another, but now their relationship was filled with shame, distrust, and blame. Adam and Eve once happily cared for the creation, but now they would experience pain in childbearing, the curse upon the ground, and the promise of toil in the work they had once enjoyed.

The effects of the fall are also known as "the curse." In response to the sin of the first human beings, God cursed (1) the serpent, (2) Eve, (3) Adam, and (4) the rest of creation. The serpent was cursed to crawl around on his belly and, along with his offspring, to live in enmity against the offspring of the woman. Eve was cursed through pain in childbearing and strife with her spouse. Adam was cursed with pain and frustration in working the ground. And on Adam's account, the rest of the creation was cursed to produce thorns and thistles, or as Paul later stated it, the creation was "subjected to futility" and was placed in "bondage to corruption" (Rom. 8:20–21). Of course the greatest consequence was death—spiritual death immediately, and physical death eventually.

Many Christians have heard the story of the fall so many times they have become anesthetized to just how tragic this event was. We don't know how long Adam and Eve lived in the garden, but they literally lived in Paradise. They inhabited a perfect world where everything and everyone did exactly what God designed them to do. They actually experienced a perfect human relationship! They enjoyed relationship with God—to the point that they

would walk with Him through the garden! We are so far from this reality that it is entirely unimaginable.

But then they lost it. The action itself might appear harmless (how much harm can a piece of fruit cause?), but the outward act represented something far more sinister. The first sin was rebellion, idolatry, treason, and pride, all rolled into a single bite. Both Adam and Eve made a conscious choice to rebel against their Creator and live on their own terms. And we imitate their decision every time we choose our desires over God's.

3. Think back to the world of Genesis 2. Spend a few minutes imagining what our world would look like without sin, if everything had stayed the way God intended it to be. Make some notes below.

4. Now consider the ways that sin has affected our world. How is our experience of the world shaped by the fall? Be specific and describe how it affects you today.

From Cain to Babel

As we keep turning pages from Genesis 3, we see the effects of sin continuing to play themselves out. First we see Cain kill Abel. When his brother's sacrifice pleased God and his own did not, Cain acted in jealous passion and committed the first murder. As if this wasn't bad enough, we immediately find Lamech writing the first poem recorded in the Bible in

order to brag about being more vengeful than Cain. Clearly a trend has begun in the wrong direction.

In fact, sin and rebellion spread so quickly that before we get very far into the story, God felt the need to destroy the whole world. It's a stark reminder of the devastation that so quickly comes upon us when we live independently of God. Genesis 6 opens with a disturbing analysis: "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (v. 5). The creature whom God crafted into His image to be His representative on the earth had now become so twisted that his mind and will were described as "only evil continually."

Next, God punished them for their rebellion. He sent a flood that destroyed every person on the face of the earth with the exception of Noah and his family. God's purpose for the human race would start over through Noah and his descendants. You would think that the horror of the flood would cause Noah's descendants to live in obedience, but soon after the flood we find humanity joined together in rebellion against God.

This time people gathered together at Babel to build a tower to the heavens. Their purpose was to unite themselves in this great project and make a name for themselves. Once again, God looked down on humanity's declaration of autonomy and destroyed the fruit of their rebellion. This time He confused their language and scattered them across the face of the earth. As we come to the end of Genesis 11, humanity's ability to accurately represent God on earth—to live as His image bearers—is in serious question.

5. Think about the current state of the world. In what ways is humanity still caught in the rebellion that led to the flood and the tower of Babel?

The Story Continues in Spite of Sin

Thankfully, the biblical story does not end with Genesis 11! We need to understand that the Bible could have stopped at Genesis 11, and God would have been completely fair and loving to end the human race right there. But in His perfect wisdom, God kept the story in motion. Now the stage was set for God's plan of redemption. God gave humanity a responsibility, but they completely failed, and now they needed someone to redeem them.

Even in these early stages of the story, we see snapshots of God's willingness to rescue and redeem. Immediately after Adam and Eve rebelled against God, we read God's promise in Genesis 3:15 that there will be enmity between the serpent and the woman, and between the serpent's offspring and the woman's offspring. God says, "He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." This imagery is a picture of a forthcoming battle between Christ and the serpent, and we are guaranteed that the serpent will be crushed. When we arrive in the New Testament, we find Paul encouraging Christians in Rome by promising that, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom. 16:20).

We receive even more hope when God makes a covenant with Noah (Gen. 6:18, 9:9). A covenant is a promise from God, an agreement between God and His people that He will bless them in accordance with certain terms. As the story unfolds, we see God establishing a people through covenants. These covenants play a major role in how God relates to His people. With Noah, the covenant was about saving a people for Himself.

Amid all of the people who would justly experience His judgment, God made a covenant with Noah. He called out a people by His grace and promised to preserve His creation.

The plan will continue to unfold as we continue in the biblical story, but Genesis 1–11 lays the groundwork and orients us to what is coming.

7. As you think back over Genesis 1–3 (and even the events we discussed from chapters 4–11), briefly describe how these chapters lay the groundwork for what is to come in the biblical story.

8. How should our understanding of the first chapters of the Bible affect the way we view ourselves and the world around us?

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part IV: Understanding the Old Testament

3: God's Covenant with Abraham

Though we are still at the beginning of the biblical storyline, a pattern has already developed: People sin, people face the consequences, God redeems. People sin, people face the consequences, God redeems.

As we saw in the previous session, when Adam and Eve sinned, God cursed the earth and then told Eve that her descendant would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15)—a promise that Jesus will one day destroy Satan and his works (Rom. 16:20). Only a few chapters later, we find people sinning continually, to the point that God destroyed all but eight humans by flooding the earth. But as soon as the waters subsided, God made a covenant with Noah, promising, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done" (Gen. 8:21). People sin, people face the consequences, God redeems.

Once again, in Genesis 11, the human race gathered at Babel in defiance of God in order to "make a name for themselves." God's response was to confuse their speech and divide them. But just when we think that humanity has no hope, God launched a plan of redemption that was global: to create a people for Himself who would embody and spread His salvation to every group of people on the planet. After cursing and scattering humanity, God made a promise to bless all of the nations. And God set this plan in motion by calling one man living in the middle of an idol-worshipping nation away from everything he once knew. And He promised to change the course of history through this man and his offspring.

God's Promise of Redemption

God's plan to rescue the world from sin started very quietly. God chose one man, Abraham, and said:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:1–3)

It may not sound like much, but with these words God put into motion a plan that would lead Paul to cry out in amazement about "the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God" (Rom. 11:33). This plan would eventually reach its climax in Jesus's incarnation, death, and resurrection—events that took place at "the fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4). In other words, human history was working toward this moment, the central point in God's plan of righting what went wrong with the fall.

As soon as sin entered the world, God began to reveal His plan to reverse the effects of the fall. He would restore us and the world around us to what He originally created—and more. God made a promise to Adam and Eve, then to Noah, and here God made a covenant with Abraham. At a few key points in Abraham's life (Gen. 12:1–9; 15:1–21; 17:1–14), God spoke with Abraham and revealed more about His plan. But the basics are clear from the beginning: God promised to make Abraham into a great nation, to make his name great, and to bless him so that he would be a blessing to "every family of the earth."

- 1. Take some time to read and meditate on Genesis 12:1–9, 15:1–21, and 17:1–14. What stands out to you from reading the promises that God gave to Abraham?
- 2. What does God's covenant with Abraham reveal to us about God?

3. What does God's covenant with Abraham reveal about God's plan of redemption?

4. Consider the biblical pattern: people sin, people suffer the consequences, God redeems. How have you seen this pattern in your own life?

The Covenant Confirmed

Land was an important part of God's promise to Abraham. God's initial call to Abraham involved leaving his own land and going to the land that God called him to (12:1), a land that God would promise to give to Abraham and his offspring (12:7; 15:7, 18–20). God was going to establish His people in the land of Canaan, the "promised land." It would belong to Abraham and

his descendants. In many ways, the rest of the Old Testament (and much of subsequent history) revolves around this land.

When God promised to give this land to Abraham, Abraham asked, "How am I to know that I shall possess it?" God's answer to Abraham was to confirm His covenant by walking in between the separated halves of dead (sacrificed) animals (Gen. 15:9–17). Around the time of Abraham, covenant agreements often took this form, where the parties involved in a covenant would walk between animals that had been sacrificed. By doing this, each person was essentially saying, "If I break my word in this covenant, may I be cursed like this dead animal."

In the case of His covenant with Abraham, God caused Abraham to fall asleep, and then He came down in the image of a smoking firepot and flaming torch and walked through the separated halves of the sacrificed animals by Himself. This gives us a picture of God's commitment to His people. For one thing, it's incredible to think that God would come down and make an agreement with a mere man. But it's also amazing that God put Abraham to sleep while He walked through the animal pieces alone. He seems to have been showing that He was committed to keeping the covenant regardless of whether Abraham and His offspring were faithful to keep it or not. Theologians call this a unilateral covenant. God made this promise to bless Abraham and to use him to bless the world. This was God's decision, and He will uphold the covenant no matter what happens.

5. In Genesis 15, God made it clear that His promises to Abraham were not dependent on Abraham. How should this affect the way we think about God's plan of redemption?

Creating a People for Himself

We might have expected God to rescue the world through some loud and dramatic event. But it all started very subtly. God began to unfold His plan with a promise. But it isn't a small promise. It's a promise with huge implications. The entire plan of redemption that unfolds in the rest of the Bible is God's fulfilling His promises to Abraham. Literally, all of world history is related to the promises that God made to Abraham. God would make a great nation out of Abraham and his wife Sarah, and through that nation He would re-form creation and transform the nations.

God's covenant with Abraham signaled the introduction of what would become known as the people of Israel, the covenant people of God in the Old Testament. In Genesis 17:7–8 God began using language that gets repeated throughout the Old Testament in the phrase: "I will be your God and you will be my people." First of all, don't miss the crux of this promise. God was offering the greatest blessing He could give anyone: Himself. He promised to be their God! We often forget what an honor it is that God would offer relationship. We can get so accustomed to people begging us to follow God that we forget what a miracle it is that we are invited. In making this covenant with Abraham, God made the tremendous offer of being his God and the God of his offspring. Here God was creating a people for Himself. In a special sense, God would belong to this people, and this people would belong to Him.

When we studied creation, we noted that because we are created in the image of God, we have a responsibility to reflect God to the world around us. By the time of Abraham, humanity had generally failed in this. But through Abraham and his descendants, God was forming a people who would embody God's intention for humanity. They would live in a close

relationship with God and reflect Him to the world around them. With His promise to make a great nation for Abraham and to bless all the nations through Him, God was once again commissioning humanity to live as His representatives on earth.

6. In your own words, explain why it is significant that God created a people for Himself. What did God want to accomplish through this "great nation" He promised to form?

The Gospel According to Abraham

It would be difficult for us to overestimate the importance of God's covenant with Abraham. God was defining what His relationship with fallen humanity would look like and announcing His plan to bless the world. What we see in God's promise to Abraham is nothing short of the gospel itself. Paul said:

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, *preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham*, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Gal. 3:7–9)

Paul was saying that when God spoke these simple words to Abraham, "In you shall all the nations be blessed," He was preaching the gospel. Though Abraham may not have known exactly what this blessing for all the

nations would entail, He took God at His word (at least at this moment in his life) and trusted in what God would do.

From the very beginning, God called Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel, to be a blessing to the nations. But as we will see as we study the rest of the Old Testament, they never really rose to that task. In fact, the nations were not fully blessed through Abraham until Jesus Christ, the ultimate descendant of Abraham, arrived. Jesus identified Himself as the fulfillment of this promise to Abraham: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). With Jesus, we finally see all the nations being blessed as they are called to join the people of God.

7. Consider God's intentions to bless "all the nations" through His promise to Abraham. What implications does this have for the way we view the world today?

God told Abraham, "I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2). Don't miss this principle: God's blessings are meant to be shared, not hoarded. In blessing Abraham, God was intentionally seeking to bless the world. This is much different from the way most Christians view their blessings. We tend to think that God blesses us so that we can be happy, comfortable, secure, etc. We live as though our blessings were meant for us alone. But God's blessing for Abraham shows us God's plans in blessing us. When we receive God's blessings, we should immediately look around us to see whom we can bless.

8. Think about the ways that God has blessed you. How should these blessings be used to benefit the people around you?

The Faith of Abraham

The New Testament makes a big deal out of the faith of Abraham. And rightly so. In Genesis 15, Abraham stood before God and voiced his confusion over God's promise to make him into a great nation. Abraham said to God, "You've made these promises [back in Genesis 12], but I have absolutely no offspring. I have only a servant in my household to be my heir." God responded by bringing him outside and telling him to look toward the heavens and count the stars, if he was able to number them. And then God said, "So shall your offspring be."

And what did Abraham say in response to this? Nothing. Genesis 15 doesn't record a single word from Abraham in response. It seems that he was speechless. But the Bible does tell us one important thing about Abraham's response: Abraham believed God. God made a huge promise that seemed impossible, and Abraham simply took God at His word. He believed it would happen just as God said. And then Genesis 15 adds a very significant comment: "He believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness" (v. 6). His simple belief in God's promise was "credited to him" as righteousness. He was declared to be in a right relationship with God because of his faith.

Romans 4 adds an incredible commentary on this statement and applies it to those of us who follow Jesus today:

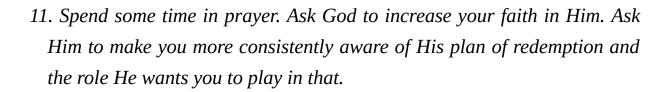
The words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (vv. 23–25)

Paul was saying that Genesis 15:6 was written down for our sake so that we would believe in the Jesus who died to pay for our sins and the God who raised Him from the dead. Abraham lived some four thousand years before Jesus came to the earth, but he was declared righteous because he believed what God said about what He would do through Abraham's descendant, Jesus Christ. We live some two thousand years after Jesus came to the earth, but we are declared righteous when we believe what God says about what He has done through Abraham's descendant, Jesus Christ.

Through Abraham, God set into motion His plan to redeem the world by creating a people for Himself. And ultimately He would send His Son Jesus Christ, Abraham's descendant, to set the world to rights. We will discuss Jesus much more in future sessions, but for now, it's important to see the plan as it develops with Abraham.

9. Read Romans 4. Why do you think the New Testament makes such a big deal about Abraham's faith?

10. How should Abraham's faith affect the way you think about and relate to God?



Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part IV: Understanding the Old Testament

4: Exodus and Redemption

As we turn the last pages of Genesis, we see God working toward the fulfillment of His promises to Abraham. God's people had grown significantly, which was perfectly in line with His promise that Abraham's descendants would be "as numerous as the stars in the sky." But as soon as we start reading in the book of Exodus, it looks like something has gone wrong. Exodus begins with a significant problem: God's people are slaves in a foreign land.

Israel's Captivity

Understand that the first two chapters of Exodus cover four hundred years.

We can quickly read over descriptions of the Israelites making Pharaoh's bricks and building Pharaoh's cities, yet overlook the fact that this had been going on for a long time! These short stories summarize a huge amount of suffering. Understandably, the Israelites seem to have given up hope by this point—after all, they were forced to continue in backbreaking labor day after day, generation after generation, without any indication that it would end.

This raises an important question: Was God really keeping His promises to Abraham if his descendants were slaves in Egypt? The answer is yes. In fact, God specifically told Abraham that this would happen:

The LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will

bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions." (Gen. 15:13–14)

God's promises to Abraham were exactly on track, and as the book of Exodus opens, the scene is being set for the greatest act of redemption that the world has seen to this point. Here we find God's people in an impossible situation without any hope of relief. If God is going to keep His promises to Abraham, then He will have to accomplish something spectacular. As it turns out, God's display of power in Israel's exodus is frequently mentioned in the rest of the Bible as clear evidence of God's commitment to His people and His power to redeem.

Moses's Encounter with I AM

Adding to the agony of slavery, Pharaoh commanded that all male Hebrew babies were to be drowned in the Nile River. It is at this seemingly hopeless time that we meet Moses. By his mother's cunning and God's provision, Moses survived this slaughter. At this vulnerable moment at the beginning of his life, no one could have predicted how greatly God would use Moses.

After Moses's mother saved him by floating him down the Nile in a basket, Pharaoh's daughter discovered, raised, and educated him. Though trained in the house of Pharaoh, it seems that Moses deeply understood his connection to the nation of Israel. In fact, it was an early attempt to fight for his people by murdering an Egyptian that led Moses to flee to the wilderness.

During this period of exile, God was preparing to rescue His people from slavery:

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew. (Ex. 2:23–25)

It is important to recognize that what God was about to do here was directly related to His covenant with Abraham. Though the situation seemed entirely hopeless, God "saw" His people, and He "knew."

Just as He did with Abraham, God chose to begin this next phase of redemptive history through one man: Moses. As Moses tended his father-in-law's sheep in the wilderness, Moses had an unforgettable encounter with God—an event that changed his life and shapes our understanding of who God is.

1. Read Exodus 2:23–3:22 carefully. It records one of the rare instances when a human being had an audible conversation with Almighty God. What stands out to you about Moses's encounter with God in this passage?

When Moses saw the burning bush, he walked closer to see what was going on. As he approached, He heard the voice of God telling him to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. As God revealed His plan to use Moses to set Israel free, Moses asked God two questions.

The first question was "Who am I?" Who am I, God, that You would send me, a stammering shepherd, to defy a powerful king and lead Your people? The second question was, "Who are You?" When people ask who sent me, what should I tell them?

Though Moses was backpedaling from what God was calling him to do, these are both excellent questions. They are the most fundamental questions we could ever ask, because everything in our lives—not only here and now, but for all of eternity—is based on a right answer to those two questions: Who am I, and who is God?

God answered Moses's first question by pointing to Himself. Moses asked, "Who am I?" and God simply replied, "I will be with you." God's response at this point should be fundamental to the way we view ourselves. From the very beginning, God's people are known as those whose God is with them. We belong to Him, and there is no way that we can define ourselves apart from God. It is His presence with us that enables us to accomplish the tasks He gives us.

In response to Moses's second question ("Who are You?"), God said very simply, "I AM WHO I AM." This is not a dismissive statement. It is very significant, and there's much to be learned from this declaration. God was explaining that He cannot define Himself by pointing to anyone or anything else. The name I AM speaks of His eternality. Whereas an appropriate name to describe us would be "I became" or "I was brought into existence," God's name is "I AM" because He has always existed. He is who He is, and that is who He will always be. This is a statement of absolute being, absolute power, absolute importance. God is who He is, and He never changes.

When we examined the creation account, we briefly looked at God's personal name in Genesis 2. That name is "Yahweh" (translated in most English Bibles as "the LORD," with all capital letters), a name that comes from this statement to Moses. "Yahweh" carries the significance of God's statement to Moses: I AM WHO I AM. The name "Yahweh" is actually used over six thousand times in the Old Testament—three times as often as the simple name for God, "Elohim" (which is the title for God we saw in Genesis 1). The implication of this frequent use of God's personal name is that God aims to be known in Scripture not just as a generic deity, but as a specific person with a wholly unique character and a special relationship with His people.

It's impossible to convey exactly what this encounter must have been like for Moses. He walked away from his sheep because he saw something remarkable—a bush that was burning without being consumed—but he had no idea that he was actually walking into the presence of the living God. God immediately commanded Moses to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. As soon as Moses saw what was really happening, he hid his face. God's holiness was more than he could bear. All he could do was listen and obey.

Let My People Go

God then sent Moses back to Egypt to lead His people out of slavery and into the land that He had promised to give Abraham's descendants. When Moses arrived, he gave Pharaoh a simple command from God: "Let my people go!"

Not only did Pharaoh refuse to let Israel go free, he intensified their labor to the point that the Israelites got angry at Moses for provoking Pharaoh. Even Moses himself seemed to have lost heart at this point. But God continued to carry out His plan of redemption, showing His resolve to keep His covenant with Abraham and to free His people from bondage.

2. Read Exodus 5:22–6:13. What does this passage reveal about God and His relationship to His people?

Understand that this battle is nothing short of a showdown between Yahweh, the God of Israel, and Pharaoh, the supposed son of the sun god, Ra. The Egyptians earnestly believed that their king was a god, and as such, he was responsible for maintaining order in the natural world. When God used Moses to deliver the ten plagues, He was demonstrating His absolute power over everything that Egypt's god-king claimed control over. Many of the plagues seem to have been directed against specific Egyptian deities (e.g., the plague of darkness would have been an embarrassment to Ra, the sun god), but all of them would have undermined Pharaoh's claim to deity.

Just as we saw in the accounts of creation, the flood, and the tower of Babel, we are seeing that God controls every aspect of the world He created, and He will not share His authority with anyone. He fights for His own glory and proves that He is the ultimate power and only true God.

The Passover Lamb

Though God clearly demonstrated His power over Pharaoh and all of Egypt's gods through the first nine plagues, it was the tenth plague that ultimately got Pharaoh's attention. God warned that unless Pharaoh released His people, every firstborn in the land of Egypt would be killed. Tragically, Pharaoh refused, and the consequences were devastating:

At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. (Ex. 12:29–30)

It is difficult to image such a scene. It is morbid and hard to stomach, but it teaches us an important lesson about God. Just as He is faithful to keep His promises of blessing, God is also faithful to carry out His warnings of wrath. This is important to keep in mind in a time when so many doubt and even ridicule God's intention to punish.

Notice that God had graciously offered the Egyptians an alternative before it got to this point. Pharaoh could have submitted to God's call and his nation would have been preserved. God also provided an alternative for the Israelites. Any Israelite who put the blood of a lamb on their doorpost would be "passed over"—the angel of death would move on to the next house.

Imagine what this would have been like for the Israelites. Imagine bringing a cute lamb into your house, a lamb that you and your kids feed, care for, and play with. And then, just when your kids are getting used to this nice little lamb, you slaughter it. You take its blood, and as your children watch, you wipe it across the doorpost over your home. That's an image that sticks with a kid—and a family.

And imagine your little boy or your little girl asking, "Why did you do that, Daddy?" And your response would be: "The lamb was a substitute. Instead of someone in our family dying, the lamb died. Look at your brother, and realize that the lamb died instead of him."

The stark reality of that night is that the only people who were exempt from judgment were those who put blood on their doorposts, and in so doing, trusted that death would pass over them. It's not that the Israelites didn't experience God's judgment because they were better people. They escaped God's judgment simply because they trusted in the sacrifice provided by God. And everyone—even slaves—who trusted in that sacrifice was spared on that night.

This is the picture we see throughout Scripture, and it is important to keep in mind for the next session when you read about God's covenant with Moses and the laws that God gave to govern His people. Keep in mind that from the very beginning the only way to receive forgiveness was through trusting the Forgiver. The only way to be a recipient of the promises of God is to trust God. The people were saved only because they trusted God as they saw the blood of a spotless lamb over their doorposts.

This night was the first Passover, an event that the Jews have celebrated once a year ever since. It is full of significance that Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, recast the Passover celebration in terms of His own death and resurrection. Jesus could hardly have been clearer that He was laying down His life for His followers, as their Passover Lamb. Paul makes this connection explicit in the New Testament where he told us, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7).

3. How does God's provision of the Passover Lamb for the Israelites help us understand Jesus's sacrifice for us?

Through the Red Sea

Though the death of every firstborn in Egypt convinced Pharaoh to release the Israelites, he soon changed his mind and chased after them. This provided the backdrop for one the most memorable events in salvation history. As Israel sat with their backs to the Red Sea, Pharaoh's army approached rapidly. It seemed certain that their exodus from slavery was over immediately after it began.

But nothing is too difficult for God; nothing can stop Him from fulfilling His promises. He proved this by splitting the waters of the Red Sea, allowing His people to walk across on dry land, and then destroying Pharaoh and his army as the waters closed in around them. As God redeemed His people by leading them out of slavery, He demonstrated in dramatic fashion that Israel's God is unlike any other so-called god.

4. Read Exodus 15:1–21. How did the Israelites describe God's act of redemption immediately after He led them out of slavery?

Take a minute to consider the exodus account. Though God sometimes makes direct statements about who He is and how we should relate to Him, He often reveals Himself to us through His actions. Reflect on what God did as He called His people out of Egypt and answer the questions below.

5. What do God's actions in Israel's exodus teach us about God?

6. The story of the exodus sets the paradigm for what God's redemption looks like. How have you seen God's hand at work in your own life?

A Forgetful People

As we close this session, it may be helpful to take note of Israel's long-term reaction to God's incredible deliverance. What did they do, time and again, in response to God's redemptive grace? They forgot! They complained! They longed for the days when they were back in Egypt.

As we read these accounts, it seems unbelievable. How could this people who had so clearly seen God's hand at work stop trusting God and begin complaining about their circumstances?

But before we become too critical of the Israelites, let's look at our own lives. We may not have been saved from an oncoming army by walking through the sea on dry land, but those events are a part of our heritage. Not only that, but we have seen God come through for us in incredibly powerful and personal ways. No matter what we try to make ourselves believe in our darkest moments, every one of us has unmistakably seen the hand of God in our lives. But we forget. We complain. We lose our trust in God and try to go back to doing things our own way.

Take some time to learn from Israel's example and focus on remembering God's provision in life's most difficult circumstances.

7. What does Israel's tendency to forget God's redemption and begin complaining teach us about humanity?

8. Make this more personal. Take some time to write about the times that God rescued you. What can you do to keep yourself focused on who God is and what He has done?

9. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to make the story of Israel's exodus vivid to you. Ask Him for the faith to believe that He will come through on His promises to you no matter how desperate the situation appears. Pray that God would help you trust Him for your salvation.

- Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.
- <u>1</u> The "Israelites" are the descendants of Abraham. They are named after Jacob (Abraham's grandson), whose name God changed to "Israel."
- 2 "Pharaoh" was the title of the ruler of Egypt.

Part IV: Understanding the Old Testament

5: God's Covenant with Moses

Try to place yourself in the shoes of the Israelites. They quickly went from being the slaves of one of the most powerful nations on earth to being set free through a series of frightening miracles. They watched as God made fools of Egypt's gods and Egypt's "divine" ruler through the ten plagues. They marched out of Egypt as their former masters showered them with gifts of gold, silver, and clothing. They witnessed the impossible as God led them along dry ground through the midst of a parted sea. They saw God singlehandedly destroy the most powerful army in the region by simply unparting the sea.

Picture Israel standing on the far side of the Red Sea, having just witnessed some of the most dramatic events in history. They had just been claimed and rescued by a God whose power was clearly uncontested. After the glow of their exodus had worn off, the Israelites had to face some important questions: Who exactly is this God who rescued us and claimed us as His own? Where is He leading us and what are His intentions for us? What does it look like for us to live as the people of this God?

At the Base of Mount Sinai

As they walked away from the Red Sea into the wilderness, the Israelites did not know exactly what to expect. The first few months of their journey were filled with turmoil. The Israelites complained about lacking food and water. Then, when God miraculously provided fresh water and rained bread (manna) from heaven, they complained about the monotony of their diet. At one point they even got so upset that they wanted Moses dead. But

everything changed—at least for a time—when they approached Mount Sinai.

When Israel arrived at the base of Mount Sinai, they discovered that God had chosen this place to reveal Himself to His people and enter into a covenant with them. Moses went up the mountain to meet with God, and God immediately explained His intention for Israel:

The LORD called to him [Moses] out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel." (Ex. 19:3–6)

Here God defined Israel. First of all, they were the people whom God had miraculously rescued from slavery. It would be impossible for God's people to define themselves without making reference to God's act of redemption in their exodus. But this was not all. God had "brought them to Himself." They were now God's "treasured possession." God was using this moment at Mount Sinai to identify Himself to His people and to tell them about their new identity. They could now rest in the security of being treasured and protected by God! It was also here that God would set the terms for how their relationship would work.

Before they could begin this process, however, the people of Israel had to prepare themselves:

The LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.'" (Ex. 19:10–12)

The Israelites had to "consecrate themselves." Basically, they had to set themselves apart for a specific purpose; they had to prepare themselves for an encounter with God. This is what a relationship between a holy God and sinful people requires. While Moses met with God on Mount Sinai, the mountain was surrounded by smoke, lightning, and thunder. The people were not even allowed to touch the base of the mountain lest they be killed. God was doing something unique here, and He demonstrated this reality in dramatic fashion.

1. Read Exodus 19. Explain the significance of the people's cleansing themselves and staying clear of the mountain.

2. How should Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai affect the way we view Him?

A Holy God and Sinful People

At Sinai, God entered into a covenant with Moses and the rest of the Israelites. When God made His covenant with Abraham, He promised to make his descendants into a great nation, to give them the land of Canaan, and ultimately to bless all the nations of the earth through him. The covenant that God made with Moses built upon the covenant He made with Abraham. As they waited at the base of Mount Sinai, Israel learned that they were the great nation that God had promised to Abraham; they were the ones who would inherit the land of Canaan, and ultimately, their responsibility was to be a blessing to all the nations. The implications of this covenant were clear: the LORD would be Israel's God, and Israel would be His people.

As we might anticipate, however, there were some potential problems with a holy God binding Himself to sinful people. How could this sinless God maintain a relationship with people who were prone to rebel and do the things He hates? Israel would need to know what God expected of them and what it looked like to live as the people of God.

This is where the Old Testament Law came in. Unlike the covenant with Abraham, the covenant with Moses included an extensive code of conduct. This Law spelled out God's expectations for His people in their civil, religious, and moral lives. The Law began with the Ten Commandments, but from these ten simple laws followed more than one hundred specific laws related to all aspects of the life of the people of God. These laws were not intended to be comprehensive; they were meant to provide judiciary precedents through which Israel's judges could make wise decisions about any issue that might arise.

These laws were legally binding on the people of Israel in the Old Testament. When we read the New Testament, however, Jesus explained that He fulfilled the Old Testament Law (Matt. 5:17), and it is no longer binding on us as Christians (Rom. 6:14, Gal. 5:18). This means that we should not simply read the Law and directly apply it to our lives. At the same time, we cannot discard it or consider it meaningless. The Law gives insight into the character of God and His intention for His people.

For example, God commanded Israel to leave some of their produce in the fields and on the vines when they did their reaping and harvesting (Deut. 24:19–22). Strange as that may sound, it was God's way of making provision for the "sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow." As we read this command today, we don't need to literally leave some of the fruit on the vine when we harvest (how many of us actually harvest, anyway?). The point is, we need to provide for the poor. This command teaches us about God's character and about the way He wants His people to function in the world He created.

Another thing we learn from the Law is that God has every right to dictate to His created beings how they must act. He *can* tell people what they can or cannot eat, what they can or cannot touch, etc. He determines what is morally right and has the freedom to set boundaries on our conduct. This is an important lesson given the prevailing arrogance in our culture.

3. Read Exodus 20:1–21. What do the Ten Commandments reveal about the character of God?

4. What do the Ten Commandments reveal about the way God wants humanity to live?

Maintaining the Relationship

The Law poses some difficult theological questions for Christians today. We know that we are saved by grace and not by works. In other words, there is no way that we can earn our way to God by keeping rules and doing good deeds—we are too sinful to be sufficiently obedient, and God saves us by grace through faith. When we read the Old Testament Law, however, it appears as though God is giving the Law to Israel so that they can be made right with Him by rule-keeping and good deeds.

But there is nothing in the Law that tells the Israelites that they will receive ultimate salvation if they perfectly keep every aspect of the Law. In fact, the Law itself assumes that the Israelites will fail in keeping it—that's why the sacrificial system was included (we will discuss this more in the next session). The Law does promise blessing for obedience and a curse for disobedience (we will discuss this in a moment), but this is not the same thing as salvation by works. Even now God blesses us for obedience, and we suffer consequences when we rebel against Him.

In reality, the Law was never intended to give the Israelites a moral ladder they could climb and thereby earn God's favor by showing what good people they were. Instead, the Law was about maintaining a relationship with God. The Law solved the problem of how a holy God can bind Himself to a sinful people. It gave the people of Israel a tangible code of conduct that would allow them to faithfully live out their identity as the people of God. It taught them to relate to God and one another appropriately. We put too much strain on the Law when we try to make it into a system of salvation through good works.

5. Explain the difference between Israel's keeping the Law in order to earn God's favor and keeping the Law in order to maintain a relationship with

6. In your own words, explain why it was important for God to give Israel the Law.

Blessing and Curse

While the covenant with Moses was an extension of God's covenant with Abraham, there is an important difference between the two. With Abraham, the covenant was unconditional. In other words, God was making a promise to Abraham that was not dependent on Abraham's actions—God would fulfill this covenant no matter what Abraham did or didn't do. With Moses, however, God added a conditional element. God would bless Israel, bring them safely into the Promised Land, bless them in the land, and make them a blessing to the rest of the nations *if* they were faithful to observe God's Law.

God would always keep His promise to Abraham, but the promises He made at Mount Sinai to bless Israel were dependent on faithful obedience. These blessings were not dependent on Israel's sinless perfection—remember that God built a system of sacrifice, atonement, and forgiveness into the Law itself—but God required the Israelites to faithfully uphold their end of the covenant. If they did, they would be blessed and receive the promises. If they didn't, they would be cursed and taken into exile.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Israel stood at the brink of the Promised Land (many years after Israel stood at Mount Sinai) and prepared to walk in and claim the land that God was giving them. But before they entered the land, Moses gathered them together and reminded them of this covenant. Deuteronomy 28 clearly explains that if Israel would be faithful to God and keep this covenant with Him, He would bless them unimaginably. But if they rebelled and failed to keep their end of the covenant, God would send them a curse instead. The second half of Deuteronomy 28 is hard to read because God painted a horrifically vivid picture of what would happen if Israel chose to disobey. As we will see, the rest of the Old Testament shows Israel's failure to remain faithful to this covenant and the consequences they suffer for it.

7. Read Deuteronomy 28. How do these promises of blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience help us understand the importance of God's covenant with Moses and Israel?

A Kingdom of Priests

Though God's covenant with Moses promised blessings for Israel, there was more at stake than the well-being of a single nation. Just as God promised to bless Abraham so that he would be a blessing to "all the families of the earth," God intended His covenant with Israel to be a blessing for every nation.

In Exodus 19:5–6, God told Israel that they were to be a "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation." These two titles are extremely important for

understanding Israel's calling. A priest has two responsibilities: to represent a holy God to sinful people, and to represent a sinful people to a holy God. As a kingdom of priests, Israel was meant to represent their God to the nations around them. Collectively, they were to show the world who their God was and what He demanded of the world. On the other side, God meant Israel to represent these nations to Himself. In other words, they were to pray on behalf of the people around them, asking God to bless them. These concepts are also present in the title "holy nation." They were meant to stand out, to be clearly different from other nations. They were set apart for God's purposes. They were to minister on God's behalf, to show the holy character of God to the world around them and be a light to the nations.

As the rest of the Old Testament unfolds, we find that Israel was largely unfaithful to this command. But that did not change God's heart. Israel was still God's "treasured possession," but that did not mean that God wanted Israel to feel superior to the world around them. They were special because God chose them for a specific purpose: to show the world that the LORD is God and to call them into a relationship with Him. God's heart has always been to restore every part of His creation, and He still calls His people to join Him in this work.

8. As a "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation," what was Israel's responsibility to the nations around them?

9. We are not the nation of Israel, but God uses similar phrases to describe the church (see 1 Peter 2:5, 9). How should God's covenant with Moses and the Israelites affect the way we view ourselves as the people of God?

10. Spend some time in prayer. Thank God for reaching down into this broken world and choosing to work in and through broken people to accomplish His purposes. Ask Him to give you a heart that is set on obedience and a passion for reaching out to the world around you.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part IV: Understanding the Old Testament

6: Sacrifice and Atonement

This is the best news in the world: God invites humanity into relationship with Him. However, as God makes covenants with people, it creates a serious tension. After all, isn't it impossible for a holy God to stay connected to sinful people? At this point in the biblical storyline some important questions develop. Will God need to lower His standards? (Could He lower His standards even if He wanted to?) Will God's people be able to live sinless lives so they can enjoy God's presence?

Of course, the answer to these questions is no. God would never and could never lower His standards or diminish His holiness. And since the fall, human beings are incapable of living sinless lives and enjoying God's presence on the basis of their own moral purity. So if God is going to bind Himself to human beings, something has to be done about the sin that inevitably enters the lives of the people of God.

God's solution for the problem of sin is sacrifice.

Most Christians today understand that when Jesus died, He was serving as a sacrifice on our behalf. What many don't understand, however, is the major role that sacrifice played in the Old Testament. Most Christians today understand that Jesus's death on the cross paid for our sins and allowed us to have a relationship with God. But we rarely consider that Jesus's death was the culmination of a larger story of sin and sacrifice that develops throughout the Old Testament. Only when we understand the Old Testament sacrifices can we see how the Old and New Testaments dovetail perfectly into one amazing story. Jesus didn't decide on a whim that the problem of sin could be solved by dying on a cross; the Old Testament sacrificial

system demanded a sacrifice for sin, and Jesus offered Himself as the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf.

1. Explain what you already know about the Old Testament sacrifices. Have you ever thought of Jesus's sacrifice in light of the Old Testament sacrificial system? How so?

Sacrifice in the Unfolding Old Testament Story

Sacrifice is seen throughout the Old Testament. Think back to your study of Adam and Eve. As soon as they ate the fruit that God had forbidden, they felt ashamed of their nakedness and tried to cover themselves with leaves. God's response to this problem foreshadowed the way He would continue to deal with human sin: God made clothes for Adam and Eve out of animal skins. The text doesn't tell us much about the significance of these new garments, but think about it—where did those animal skins come from? Being careful not to read too much into it, we can make a simple observation: an animal had to die so that the shame of sin could be covered. As soon as sin entered the world, God made a way to deal with that sin through sacrifice.

The sacrificial method isn't fully developed or explained until we get to the book of Leviticus, but the unfolding story of the Old Testament does point to sacrifices being made prior to this point. One example from Abraham's life is particularly helpful in understanding how sacrifice works.

In Genesis 22, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. At first glance, this request can appear cruel or even absurd. How could God

ask Abraham to do such a thing? But as the story continues (and especially the larger story of the whole Bible) the beauty of this request becomes obvious. Keep in mind that God had promised to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation, and Isaac was Abraham's only descendant. Imagine the struggle that Abraham must have gone through. Should he obey the Lord? Wouldn't it make more sense to protect his son in order to pursue the promise that God made to him? Abraham decided to obey the Lord, trusting that God could do anything, including raise his son from the dead (Heb. 11:19). Abraham arrived at the place that God designated for the sacrifice, prepared the altar, and raised his hand to sacrifice his only son. But at the last moment, God stopped him and instead provided a ram for Abraham to sacrifice in place of Isaac.

As amazing as this story is in itself, don't miss what it teaches us about the nature of sacrifice. First, it suggests that God could *potentially* accept a human sacrifice for sin—though He did not allow it to go to this point until the death of Jesus. And second, it shows us that God could accept a substitute—in this case, the ram was sacrificed so that Isaac wouldn't be. Of course, it's not until we see the sacrifice of Jesus in the New Testament that the significance of Abraham's offering becomes clear. Like many things in the Old Testament, Jesus's life, death, and resurrection takes these beliefs and rituals and displays them more beautifully and powerfully than anyone could have imagined.

2. Why was sacrifice an important theme in the Old Testament?

Sacrifice in the Law of Moses

We see occasional sacrifices throughout the first part of the Old Testament, but it wasn't until God gave the Law to Moses that animal sacrifices became an integral part of the life of Israel. The Law encompassed many things. It dictated their civil life and government, their moral behavior, and their religious and ceremonial practices. The Law was specific about when to sacrifice, what to sacrifice, and how to sacrifice. There were a variety of sacrifices or burnt offerings, and each type of offering served a different function. But in general, these sacrifices were designed to show gratitude to God, to demonstrate a contrite heart before God, and to atone for sin.

That word *atone*, or *atonement*, is significant theologically. An easy way to remember the meaning of *atonement* is to break it down like this: at-onement. Essentially, atonement is all about reconciling, making amends for what has gone wrong, and reestablishing peace where there was conflict. Atonement allowed people who were distanced from God because of their sin to once again enjoy being "at one" with God. So in addition to providing avenues for expressing love and gratitude for God, the Law of Moses gave the Israelites specific instructions for making atonement for sin. Animal sacrifices gave the Israelites a tangible way of showing their sorrow and desire to have their relationship with God restored. Sacrifices also provided a substitute that could be offered in Israel's place.

A proper understanding of sacrifice and atonement is so helpful for those of us who tend to do good works in hopes of making up for the wrong we've done. Just as the Israelites found atonement through the sacrifices, we must learn to put all of our hope in a sacrifice. The New Testament clearly explains that the sacrifice we must trust in was made by Jesus.

3. Summarize the role that sacrifices played in the way Israel related to their God.

A Graphic Reminder of Sin

One of the most striking features of the Old Testament Law is the blood. There seems to be blood splattered everywhere in Leviticus! It's because blood was necessary for an effective sacrifice: "The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life" (Lev. 17:11).

Try to imagine yourself in ancient Israel. Like every other group of people on the face of the earth, your community is prone to sin. But on a regular basis, you are required to bring the appropriate sacrifices in order to make atonement for your sin and restore peace with God. Every time a sacrifice was offered (which was often), an animal would die, its blood would flow, and the blood would be splattered on the altar. Imagine standing there watching this. It would have been messy, bloody, and smelly. Every time you witnessed this, you would be reminded of the seriousness of sin and its awful consequences. You would see a graphic representation of what your sin requires, and you would be thankful that that lamb, goat, or bull died in your place.

Even though we don't need to make animal sacrifices for sin today, this Old Testament practice still gives us a vivid picture of the seriousness of sin.

4. How should the Old Testament sacrificial system put our sin into the proper perspective?

The Day of Atonement

We have already raised the question, "How can sinful humans live in proximity to a holy God?" The answer is found in the sacrificial system generally, but there is one event in the middle of Leviticus that cuts to the heart of this question: *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement (an event that Jews still celebrate today). Every year the Israelites would celebrate the Day of Atonement and God would atone for His people's sins and enable them to dwell with Him.

5. Read Leviticus 16. What stands out to you from reading this description of the Day of Atonement?

As we read through Leviticus 16, it is clear that God takes His worship very seriously. The chapter begins as God gave Aaron (Moses's brother and the first high priest) very specific instructions on how to enter His presence. The rest of the chapter describes what is supposed to happen on the Day of Atonement. On this one day out of the entire year, one man out of all the Israelites (the high priest) was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place, the Holy of Holies, and stand before God on behalf of the people.

The high priest was to take with him the blood of a spotless animal. Actually, three animals were involved in this ceremony. First, he was to sacrifice a bull as an offering to atone for his own sins, because he could not come into the presence of God on his own accord—no one, not even the high priest, is holy or perfect. Then the high priest would offer two goats. The first goat would be sacrificed, and its blood would be smeared on the cover of the ark of the covenant just as the bull's blood had been. Picture the significance of this. Inside the Holy of Holies, God's presence was looking down on the ark of the covenant, which contained a copy of the Law that Israel had broken through their sin. Then the lid (also referred to as the "mercy seat") of this ark is smeared with sacrificial blood. This blood satisfied the wrath of God because a substitute was offered in place of the people who deserved His wrath. So instead of seeing the Law that was broken, God looked down and saw the blood of atonement. Essentially, this sacrifice died in place of the entire community of God's people.

Try to picture the intensity of this scene. Imagine waiting outside of the Holy of Holies as the high priest entered to make his offering on behalf of the people. Here was a sinful man entering into the very presence of Almighty God! Imagine the joy you would feel as the high priest safely emerged from God's presence, a sign that the sacrifice had been accepted and your sins had been atoned for.

The priest would then take the second goat (the first goat had been sacrificed), symbolically lay his hands on the head of the goat to represent the sins of the people being transferred to this animal, and then release that goat to "bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area." This was another powerful picture of what was happening with the sins of God's people.

Their sin was being removed, carried off to a remote location, never to visit them again. Their guilt and condemnation were gone.

Keep in mind that as amazing as this feeling of joy over the cleansing of their sin must have been, it inevitably faded. This ceremony was to be repeated every year because Israel would not stop sinning. And the Day of Atonement was supplemented by an ongoing and detailed sacrificial system because Israel's sin was constant. Sin is not an external problem; it runs through the core of each of us and continually manifests itself in a variety of ways. Dealing with sin was therefore an important and familiar part of the everyday lives of the Israelites.

6. What does the Day of Atonement teach us about the nature of sin and the reality of forgiveness?

The Problem with Animal Sacrifices

The need to constantly repeat these sacrifices points to a limitation inherent in the Old Testament sacrificial system. But that wasn't the only problem. The effectiveness of these sacrifices was never based on the mere performance of a ritual. From the very beginning, it has been about the heart of the worshipper, not about the value of his or her offering. God said explicitly through the prophet Hosea, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (6:6).

Probably the most startling picture of the shortcomings of animal sacrifice is found in the book of Malachi. In this short book, God spoke forcefully to His people about the uselessness of their sacrifices. They had

kept up the outward forms and rituals of the sacrificial system, but their hearts were not behind it. Consequently, they were no longer offering God the best of their flocks; they were simply going through the motions. God said explicitly, "Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand" (Mal. 1:10).

Surely God would rather have *something* than nothing. Even if what we offer Him is less than our best, He must be pleased that we are giving Him some consideration. Right?

God actually said the exact opposite. He would rather someone shut the doors and prevent sacrifices from being offered at all than to have people making casual sacrifices. Why? Because God is holy and His name is great: "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts" (Mal. 1:11). God is actually so offended by these false displays of piety that He threatens to take the dung from their sacrifices and smear it in their faces: "I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it" (Mal. 2:3). This is a vivid reminder that God takes worship and sacrifice very seriously—and so should we!

7. How should God's emphasis on the heart of the worshipper affect the way we approach God in our worship and in our everyday lives?

The Ultimate Sacrifice

Everything we have been saying about the Old Testament sacrificial system finds its culmination in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The sacrifices that Israel offered on a regular basis laid the groundwork for the coming of Jesus. When He arrived, the full significance of the sacrificial system finally came into view.

Take a minute to read Hebrews 9:11–10:25. This gives you an opportunity to apply what you just learned from the book of Malachi. Here is a way that you can worship God with excellence: Read this passage with all of your heart. Don't just skim through it, but study it carefully, reverently, as an act of worship.

8. Read Hebrews 9:11–10:25. In light of what you've studied about the Old Testament sacrificial system and what you read in Hebrews, how does the Old Testament system of sacrifice and atonement help us to better understand the significance of Jesus's death?

9. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to affect your heart with the significance of the sacrifice that Jesus offered on your behalf. Ask God to break your heart over the sin in your life. Ask Him to give you the strength and motivation to identify and uproot that sin. Pray that your life would be the "living sacrifice" that Paul described in Romans 12:1. And most of all, thank God for sacrificing Jesus as a substitute for you.



*Watch the video for this session at multiplymovement.com.

Part IV: Understanding the Old Testament

7: God's Presence on Earth

Does anything matter more than God's presence with us? Think about it: What could be worse than being separated from Almighty God? The Bible is filled with stories that describe the blessings that come with His presence and the horrors that accompany His rejection. God's presence with people is a central theme of the Scriptures.

God made *covenants* to show that He wanted to be present with humanity. He gave the *Law* to show people how to conduct themselves in His presence. And He established *sacrifices* when sin separated people from His presence. So much of what we see in the Old Testament relates directly to the presence of God.

One of the most fascinating features of the Old Testament Law was a tent, referred to as the tabernacle. This was where God would meet with His people. God had been leading Israel through the desert as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. With the tabernacle, God was creating a home for Himself on earth. The tabernacle would go with Israel wherever they went—from this point on Israel would be known as the people who literally had God dwelling in their midst.

The establishment of the tabernacle and the presence of God on earth were huge events. But in order to understand the full significance of what was taking place here, we need to go back to the beginning of the story.

God's Presence in the Garden

In the perfect world that God created, humanity lived in the presence of God. In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve could interact with God without

the division that comes through sin. They lived in peace with God, His creation, and one another. The distance we feel from God now was not a part of the human experience prior to the fall. But as we've seen, the fall changed everything.

When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, their fellowship with Him was destroyed. First Adam and Eve broke the relationship by sinning, then they tried to hide from God's presence when He entered the garden. This separation was only intensified when God expelled them from the garden and placed an armed angelic guard at its entrance. Since then, nothing has been more important for humanity than regaining God's presence.

1. Why is the presence of God so important for humanity?

The Tabernacle

After Adam and Eve walked out of the garden, people struggled to find the presence of God. Of course, God's presence is literally everywhere, and He was active throughout the Old Testament, just as He is active today. But encounters with God only show up here and there, and God's presence—in the sense that Adam and Eve experienced it—was missing. This is why the tabernacle is so significant. God was offering a solution to what went wrong in the garden. His presence was gone, but now He would live with His people again.

In the previous session, we focused on the Old Testament sacrificial system. This sacrificial system centered on a specific location: the tabernacle. The tabernacle was essentially a tent where God's presence

would dwell on earth. The centerpiece of the tabernacle was the ark of the covenant. This ark was basically a box, covered in gold, that contained a copy of the Ten Commandments, a jar of the manna that God used to miraculously feed the Israelites as they journeyed through the wilderness, and Aaron's rod, which God had caused to bud as a sign of His life-giving power. On top of the ark were two cherubim, and God's presence sat atop the ark, enthroned between these angelic figures.

The tabernacle was God's creating a way for His presence to dwell on earth in the midst of His people. Because the laws governing the tabernacle, its design, and the ceremonies involved are so complex, it is easy to miss the significance of the tabernacle as we read the Old Testament. The stunning truth was that God once again blessed His people with the greatest gift He could give: Himself.

At this point in Israel's history, God still led them from place to place with a pillar of cloud or fire. Every time God wanted His people to stop, His presence would descend on the tabernacle until it was time to move on again. The tabernacle meant that God would now be with His people wherever they went. It was a clear sign of God's presence on earth. It was a glimpse of the kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdoms of this world. It was a taste of the garden of Eden that went with them from place to place.

2. Read Exodus 25:8–9 and 17–22. What is so significant about the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant?

God's Blessing without God's Presence

Before Israel had a chance to take God's presence for granted, they almost lost it. As soon as God delivered the covenant to Moses on Mount Sinai, Moses walked down the mountain to convey it to the people. But what Moses encountered was shocking. He left a discussion with God Himself only to find the people of Israel dancing and worshipping a golden calf that they had created. The first two commandments (Moses had just watched the finger of God carve these into stone) were "You shall have no other gods before me" and "You shall not make for yourself a carved image ... for I the LORD your God am a jealous God" (Ex. 20:3–5). It seemed that God's covenant with Israel was over even before it began.

The way that God responded to Israel's idolatry was devastating in at least two ways. First, about three thousand men died as a direct result of their sin. Second, the nation of Israel came uncomfortably close to losing the presence of God. In Exodus 33, God reaffirmed His promise to give Israel the land He had promised them, but He added a twist. He basically said, "I have promised to give the land of Canaan to you and your descendants. Now go and take it, but I will not go with you. I will send an angel to lead you instead."

The language that God used in Exodus 33 has changed drastically from what we have seen thus far. He referred to Israel as "the people" instead of "my people." Even in sending an angel as a replacement for His presence, God's language was impersonal. He said He would send "an angel," when previously He had talked about "my angel" (compare Ex. 23:23 and 32:34).

Keep in mind that in the preceding chapters, God had outlined the plans for the tabernacle. God had just said, "Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (25:8). Now we see Him using the same

terminology to express a devastating concept: I will not dwell among you (33:3).

At this point, Israel was facing life without God. As terrible as that sounds, think about what God was really offering here. God was offering to bless the Israelites apart from a relationship with Him. From a practical standpoint, this makes a lot of sense. The people are going to keep on sinning, so maybe it would be easier if they accepted God's blessing and went on their way.

And sadly, isn't this exactly what most people today really want? God's presence is nice, but what we really want is what He can give us.

3. Read Exodus 33:1–6. What makes this such a devastating pronouncement for the Israelites?

4. Consider God's presence in your own life. How would you respond to the prospect of God's blessing apart from God's presence? Forget about how you "ought" to answer this, try to answer honestly.

At this moment in history, Israel was standing at a crucial turning point. Moses's response to God's offer of the Promised Land without His presence shows that Moses knew exactly what was at stake here. He said:

If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth? (Ex. 33:15–16).

Moses recognized that Israel had no hope—that there was no point in being the nation of Israel—if they did not have God with them. God's presence is what made them distinct. Israel could not be the people of God without the presence of God.

5. Read Exodus 33:7–23. What stands out to you about Moses's response?

6. As you think of the experiences Moses and Israel had with God, how might it affect the way you interact with God?

The Temple

Ultimately, God went with His people, and they carried the tabernacle from place to place until God gave them the land of Canaan as He had promised. After Israel was well established in the land, David became the king of Israel. David decided that he wanted to build a temple, a permanent dwelling to replace the tabernacle. Because David had been a man of war, God told David that his son Solomon would build the temple instead.

It took Solomon seven years to build the temple. It was carefully constructed and elaborate. When it was finally completed, Solomon dedicated the temple to God, and there was a tremendous celebration as

God filled the temple. Just as God's presence had resided in the tabernacle, now it would fill the temple. The most significant difference between the tabernacle and the temple was that the temple was not portable. Remember back to Abraham and to God's promise that He would give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan. Now that God had fulfilled that promise and His people were living in that Promised Land, God decided to take up a permanent, stationary residence on earth. The land of Canaan, the Promised Land that He had given to Israel, was the one place out of the whole world where God chose to dwell.

With the temple, God was delivering a powerful visual message. Though mankind had rebelled against God's authority, God was reestablishing His reign on earth. The kingdom of Israel, with the elaborate temple in its midst to house the presence of God, was a glimpse of what the world ought to be. It was a picture of God's dwelling in the midst of His earth, ruling over and blessing His people.

When Solomon finished construction on the temple, he dedicated it with a solemn prayer. This prayer shows that Solomon understood the importance of this moment in human history.

7. Read 1 Kings 8:1–13 and 27–30. What does this passage reveal about God's glory and the significance of God's dwelling among His people?

An Important Warning

As soon as God's glory descended and filled the temple, God warned Solomon that His presence would dwell among them only as long as they remained faithful to His covenant and obeyed His Law. In other words, God was dwelling in the midst of His people, but only as long as their lives acknowledged His presence. As soon as they began to take God and His presence for granted, as soon as they turned their backs on God and His commands, then He would leave them to their sin. Instead of the blessing that comes with God's presence, Israel would experience the judgment that comes with rejecting God.

8. Read 1 Kings 9:1–9. What does God's warning to Solomon teach us about what it means for God's presence to dwell in the midst of His people?

Tragically, God's warning in 1 Kings 9 became a reality. In the book of Ezekiel, God's people found themselves in exile as a punishment for rejecting God's reign (we will discuss this more in a future session). Ezekiel records the glory of God departing from the temple (Ez. 10–11), an event that was just as dramatic as God's glory filling the temple in 1 Kings 8. Once again, God's people found themselves alienated from God's presence on earth. It had become clear that the tabernacle and temple would not be the ultimate solution, so how would humanity be able to live in God's presence?

God Became Flesh

Once again, Jesus solves the problems raised by the events in the Old Testament. John opened his gospel by describing Jesus as the Word, who

was with God in the beginning, and who was God. Then John said something that is shocking in light of what we've been saying about God's presence on earth: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

That phrase, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," carries huge significance. The word John used for "dwelt" literally means "set up a tent." John's word is a Greek translation that comes from the Hebrew word for "tabernacle" used in the Old Testament. So John was announcing that the tabernacle has once again returned, but this time, the tabernacle exists in the person of Jesus Christ. With Jesus, the problem of God's presence among people is solved once and for all. Jesus shows us what it looks like for people to dwell with God and what it means for humanity to embody the presence of God. With Jesus, we never have to worry about losing the presence of God—He came and dwelt among us, and we are joined to Him because of His death on the cross.

Beyond that, God's presence now dwells in us through the Holy Spirit! In fact, Paul said that we are "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19). He said that we are joined together as the church and we grow "into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:21). In Jesus we are "being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (v. 22).

9. How does what you have studied thus far help you understand the significance of God becoming man in Jesus and of the church being identified as a dwelling place for God?

God's Presence Will Fill the Earth

We will discuss this in greater depth at the end of the New Testament section, but the Bible ends with a beautiful vision of God's glory filling the entire earth (Rev. 21–22). From the moment that the Holy Spirit filled the early church in Acts 2, God's presence has dwelt on earth through His church. But when Jesus returns to set the world to rights, the whole world will be filled with God's presence. What Adam and Eve enjoyed in Eden will be experienced on every point on the globe as renewed humanity enjoys God's renewed presence in a renewed creation.

10. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to help you understand the significance of His presence on earth, and to help you live together with the other Christians in your life in a way that reflects His presence and glory in your midst.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part IV: Understanding the Old Testament

8: The Kingdom of God

Finally, after years of Israel's sin and struggling in the desert, God marched His people into the Promised Land! Israel witnessed God's unmatched power firsthand as their army consistently destroyed enemies that were far bigger and much better armed.

At this point in the story, you would think that we would see Israel thriving, rejoicing in God's power, enjoying God's presence, walking in His ways, and living happily ever after. But tragically, that is not how the story goes. Whereas the book of Joshua records God's faithfulness in delivering the Promised Land to Israel, the book of Judges records Israel's unfaithfulness and refusal to live as God intended. Judges feels like a roller coaster: Israel falls into sin and apathy; God raises up a leader to deliver them; the people once again acknowledge God; Israel again falls into sin and apathy; God again raises up a leader to deliver them, and on and on it goes.

But Israel entered a more hopeful period as Samuel came on the scene. Samuel was a prophet of God and the last of the judges. With Samuel, Israel received a godly leader who faithfully delivered God's word to the people. It was during this time that Israel became a monarchy. But to understand the significance of this shift, we have to look back to the beginning once again.

The King of Creation

Maybe you have never thought about the creation account this way, but Genesis 1 and 2 present God as the King of creation. This King is so powerful and His word is so authoritative that He has only to speak to call things into existence. Genesis 1 and 2 depict the King creating a realm over which He will rule. In the garden of Eden, everything functioned in perfect harmony; everything operated in perfect submission to the King's rule. In the first pages of the Bible we find a beautiful picture of what the world looks like when everyone and everything joyfully embraces the King's reign.

Though we often see human beings rejecting God's authority and trying to establish their own, God originally created humanity to rule on His behalf:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen. 1:26–28)

The picture we are given here is of God, the absolute Ruler over creation, delegating His authority to mankind. We were created to mediate God's gracious rule to every part of His creation. Humanity was made to function under God's kingship.

But when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they abused their freedom and rejected God's kingship. With this simple act, God's rule on earth was challenged. Adam and Eve chose to follow the serpent, Satan. This reversal is so significant that Satan is now referred to as "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31). The reality in which we now live would have seemed inconceivable to Adam and Eve before the fall. Could God's kingship really be disputed in the world He created? Would humanity really reject God's reign and live in defiance? As strange as it would have sounded before the fall, this is the struggle we experience every day of our lives.

1. Take a minute to think about what you learned about God by reading Genesis 1 and 2. How is God's kingship established and displayed in the creation account?

The True King of Israel

We get another powerful picture of God's kingship when He led His people out of slavery in the exodus. Through the ten plagues, God showed that He was the supreme Ruler of this world—He entered the dominion of Pharaoh and of Egypt's gods and asserted His ultimate authority. By defeating the false gods of Egypt and leading His people victoriously out of slavery, God demonstrated that He was the true King of Israel and of the whole earth.

The covenant that God made with His people at Mount Sinai was an expression of His kingship. This type of covenant, where the conquering king would establish terms for how his people would relate to him, was common for nations at the time. We can see this clearly in Exodus 19:5–6:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

God was the King, and Israel was His kingdom. The tabernacle and the temple were dwelling places for the King—they were His palaces. Remember that the ark of the covenant, where God's presence dwelled, was the centerpiece of the tabernacle and the temple. The Bible actually refers to the ark as the footstool of God's throne (1 Chron. 28:2, Ps. 132:7). This shows us that the tabernacle and temple were about more than containing God's presence as some sort of good-luck charm or spiritual force. These dwelling places acknowledged the kingship of God; they were a reminder that God was in the midst of His people, ruling over and caring for them.

After God led Israel into the Promised Land, the people consistently chose to move away from God and the clear direction He had laid out for them at Sinai. Instead, they chose to do whatever seemed good to them at the time. We read in the book of Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6, 21:25). Not only does this statement indicate that Israel ignored God's laws, it also suggests a solution: Israel needed a king. God was the rightful King of Israel, but they were unwilling to view Him as such. It looked as if God's kingdom would never be fully established in Israel.

Israel Takes a King

At first glance, it might seem like a good idea for Israel to be ruled by a human king. The period of the Judges was chaotic, so it would make sense to establish a clear ruler who would lead and govern the people. Besides that, every nation that surrounded Israel had a king, so they must have felt conspicuous. All they had was a tent and an imperfect series of leaders whom God appointed to govern His people for a time. Wouldn't they be better off with a human king?

This is the line of reasoning that led Israel to ask God for a normal king. Read the account in 1 Samuel 8 and pay special attention to the warnings that God gave about what was really at stake with this decision.

2. Read 1 Samuel 8. What does this passage tell us about the significance of Israel's choosing to be ruled by a human king?

The problem is apparent right away: Israel wanted a king so they could be "like every other nation." But Israel had never been like the other nations—and that is basically the point throughout the Old Testament. Israel was to be unique because their God was unique. They were set apart from everyone else because they had Almighty God dwelling in their midst. Becoming like the other nations was a huge step in the wrong direction. God warned them of this, but they didn't see the significance of what they were doing. In choosing a human king, Israel was rejecting God as their king.

First, God appointed Saul as the king of Israel, but he turned out to be a poor representative of God's reign. The people learned firsthand why God had warned them about taking a human king. Once again, Israel had come to a dead end. Israel's history continually teaches us that if it weren't for God's plan and His persistent grace, all hope would have been lost long ago.

God's Covenant with King David

But God still had plans for Israel. When God rejected Saul as king, He called Samuel to anoint David, a shepherd, as the next king. The concept of anointing is important. The king of Israel would literally be anointed with oil, and then he would be known as "the Lord's anointed," an idea that finds its fullest expression in Jesus.

Though it took some time and confidence in God's promise to him, David eventually became the earthly king through whom God would relate to His people as the heavenly King. David was far from perfect, but the Bible describes him as a "man after [God's] own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14), and he set the ideal for what the king of Israel should look like.

The significance of what God would accomplish through David is brought out in 2 Samuel 7, where God makes a covenant with David. In the context of this chapter, David looked at all the blessings the Lord had given to him and decided that he would honor the Lord by building a house for the ark of the covenant. (This "house" would be the temple we looked at in the previous session.) God said that David would not build the temple—this task was left to Solomon, his son—but God also affirmed His purposes for David by making a covenant with him. This covenant built upon the covenants that God made with Abraham and with Moses. It also expanded these covenants and made promises that find their perfect fulfillment in Jesus.

3. Read 2 Samuel 7. What promises did God make to David in this passage?

God's covenant with David shows that He is still at work to fulfill His promises to Abraham. Think back to God's covenant with Abraham. In Genesis 12:1–2, God promised to make Abraham's name great. In Genesis 15:18, God promised to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan. In Genesis 17:3–7, God told Abraham that He would continue His covenant with Abraham's descendants and that from Abraham would come nations and even kings.

Now consider what God promised to David in 2 Samuel 7. God promised to make David's name great (v. 9), to plant Israel in the land of Canaan (v. 10), and to raise up David's offspring and keep David's line on the throne (v. 12). The promises that God made to Abraham were reiterated in the covenant He made with Moses and now again in the promises He made to David. Despite Israel's faithlessness, God was still at work to accomplish His purposes for His people.

Before Israel entered the Promised Land, God prophetically told His people that after they settled into the land they would reject Him and choose to be ruled by a human king (Deut. 17). Knowing this would happen, God had already established a way for Israel to continue to pursue His purposes for them as a kingdom. The intent was that God would reign as King over His people through His relationship—His covenant—with this earthly king. The earthly king of Israel would follow God's rule and submit to God's reign. In doing so, he would be a reflection of the true King of Israel. In addition to this, God continued to give Israel prophets who would hold the power of Israel's kings in check, showing that God is the true King and ensuring that these human kings were ruling on God's behalf.

The Coming King

What God did through David as the king of Israel is a picture that reflects what He had been doing through His people from the time He formed them. But it also points forward to what God would do through His Son, Jesus Christ. It shouldn't surprise us that David ultimately failed to be the perfect king of Israel. He failed in several respects, most memorably by impregnating Bathsheba and then having her husband murdered in an effort to hide his sin. David received God's forgiveness and was still the standard by which all other kings were compared, but his imperfect obedience left God's people longing and waiting for another Ruler.

The prophets continued to revisit the idea that a Ruler was going to come from the line of David and that this Ruler would put the kingdom of Israel—and all the kingdoms of the earth—back in order. This coming King would restore the world to what it was intended to be. Isaiah 11 describes this King as a "shoot from the stump of Jesse" (Jesse was David's father) upon whom the Spirit of the LORD would rest. He would rule Israel and the nations perfectly. Jeremiah 23:5–6 describes the King as a "Branch" from the line of David who will "reign as king and deal wisely" and whose name would be "The LORD is our righteousness." Ezekiel 34:23–24 describes the coming King as a perfect shepherd for God's people. Amos 9:11–12 says that God will rebuild the fallen house of David, and Hosea 3:5 envisions Israel once again pursuing the LORD under the reign of "David their king."

God's future for Israel was very much tied to the concept of Israel as a kingdom under the reign of the Lord's Anointed, who would mediate God's sovereign rule. Notice the imagery God used as He spoke about the future of His people in Ezekiel 37:

My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore. (vv. 24–28)

4. Spend some time thinking about these promises of a coming King (consider looking up the passages mentioned in the last two paragraphs). How does the concept of a King arising from the line of David set the stage for Jesus's arrival in the New Testament?

Searching for the Kingdom of God

After the reign of King David, Israel had a disappointing line of kings. Eventually, the kingdom of Israel grew so wicked that God sent them away from the Promised Land and into exile (a period in Israel's history that we will explore in the next session). Once Israel lost the kingdom, their national identity was at stake. They desperately wanted to regain the kingdom. But not until the arrival of Jesus would this become a reality.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record a partial return of God's people from exile, but there is still no kingdom. The book of Daniel promises that the kingdom will come in the future and that the "Son of Man" will rule all the nations.

As we turn the last pages of the Old Testament and begin reading the New Testament, we find that the kingdom of God is still a major issue. In fact, Jesus came onto the scene preaching "the gospel of God," saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14–15). This is an incredibly exciting proclamation in light of Israel's history as a kingdom! The kingdom has finally come—the good news that Jesus was preaching was that the kingdom of God had once again returned and Jesus was there to rule as God's anointed! In fact, from the moment Jesus's birth was announced, it was clear that He was the coming King, the Ruler from the line of David who would bring the perfect kingdom of God to earth.

5. Read Jesus's birth announcement in Luke 1:26–33. How does the language used here help us see Jesus in light of the Old Testament kingdom?

6. Why is it important for us to see Jesus as the culmination of the kingly line of David?

When the angel announced Jesus's birth, he used essentially the same terminology that we saw in 2 Samuel 7 when God made His covenant with

David. Jesus was the true King of Israel:

You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Luke 1:31–33)

We have almost arrived at the New Testament. Most of us are more familiar with the teaching of the New Testament, but understanding the Old Testament helps us see more clearly what the New Testament is telling us. Ultimately, the New Testament is all about Jesus Christ. That term *Christ* is a title, not a last name. It is actually the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for "Messiah," or "Anointed One." When Jesus walked onto the scene, He came as the anointed King of Israel. His role is to mediate the sovereign reign of God over His earth and His people. We still have a part to play in this, but first we need to see that the kingdom of God has a long history.

7. How should the kingship of God and of His Anointed affect the way we view our relationship to God and His Son?

8. Spend some time in prayer. Pray that God would help you to lovingly submit to His rule as the King of creation. Pray that God's reign over this world would be established and that this rebellious world would see Jesus as the true King.



*Watch the video for this session at multiplymovement.com.

Part IV: Understanding the Old Testament

9: Exile and the Promise of Restoration

God's Faithfulness and Israel's Disobedience

Time and again, God was faithful to keep His promises to His people. He multiplied Abraham's descendants into a great nation; He planted the Israelites in the land of Canaan, and He established David's kingly line. But God had also promised Israel that if they disobeyed, they would be conquered by a foreign nation, pulled from their homeland, and led into exile. God had promised this judgment if Israel disobeyed Him, and after generations of patiently waiting for His people to repent, God remained faithful to His promise.

It's hard to read the Old Testament without being blown away by Israel's constant disobedience. As Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness, they continually complained. When Moses went onto Mount Sinai to receive the Law from God, they created a golden idol and worshipped it. When God placed them in the land of Canaan, they kept turning away from Him to worship idols. Idolatry shows up throughout Israel's history. Though there were times of reform, Israel seemed bent on rejecting God. God dealt with this idolatry patiently, but His justice would not be detained forever.

The Curse for Disobedience

When God made His covenant with Moses and Israel, He gave them the Law to show them exactly what was expected of them as the people of God. He promised them that if they obeyed His Law, they would be blessed and would live in the land of Canaan in peace and security. But if they disobeyed, God promised them that they would experience His judgment

rather than His blessing. Among other things, this meant that they would be pulled away into exile.

1. Read Deuteronomy 28. Based on what you have studied in the previous sessions, how did the blessings offered in verses 1–14 become a reality in the life of Israel?

2. Summarize the judgments in verses 15–68 that God said would come upon Israel if they disobeyed.

The Promise of Exile

Every one of the judgments listed in Deuteronomy 28 is terrifying. Israel was defined by their unique relationship with God. They were known for receiving special favor from God, so the thought of experiencing God's judgment rather than His blessing would have been devastating. The promises of agricultural failure and military defeat were bad enough, but the exile brought a much deeper level of judgment. Israel would be abandoned by God, defeated by a distant enemy, and then torn from the land that God had given them. Without the presence of their God and the land He had given them, Israel would lose their identity.

Imagine the horror of hearing these words from God:

The LORD will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone.... Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you. (Deut. 28:36, 47–48)

If Israel would not serve their God, they would end up serving their enemies. They would worship carved images, crying out to blocks of wood and stone to deliver them. Notice that when God spoke these words, it was merely a warning: Israel had not even entered the Promised Land by this point. Yet Israel's disobedience was inevitable, and the only real surprise was how long God waited before punishing Israel.

A Divided and Defeated Kingdom

We mentioned in the previous session that the book of Joshua shows Israel's taking over the land of Canaan, and that the book of Judges records the chaos, apathy, and idolatry that characterized Israel after they had settled into the land. We also talked about David's becoming the king of Israel and God's promise to establish His kingly line. But a mere generation after David's kingship, the Israelites became so stubborn and power hungry that they ended up dividing into two camps: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

Israel never fully recovered from this split. The northern kingdom (Israel) was almost completely godless—they followed ungodly kings into every form of sin. The southern kingdom (Judah) had a few good kings and experienced some good years, but overall they followed the same pattern of

ungodliness and idolatry. In 722 BC, Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and carried them away into captivity. The southern kingdom of Judah should have learned from Israel's mistakes—God allowed them to hold on for over one hundred years longer, but eventually they suffered the same fate. In 597 BC, Babylon conquered Judah and carried them off into captivity.

3. Read 2 Kings 17:1–23. This passage describes Israel's being taken into exile. The author did not simply describe the event; he included a theological explanation for what happened. According to this passage, why was Israel sent into exile?

God's judgment on Israel was totally appropriate in light of what they had done, but it is important to recognize that this was never God's intention. In other words, God didn't want to send His people into exile. Hear the anguish in God's voice as He lamented the loss of His people:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, O Israel?

How can I make you like Admah?

How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

My heart recoils within me;

my compassion grows warm and tender. (Hos. 11:8)

God hated the exile, and the history of Israel shows that He moved slowly and regretfully toward it. God kept sending prophets to warn His people, but they refused to listen. Ultimately, Israel chose exile for themselves, and God remained faithful to His promise to punish Israel for their rebellion.

4. In light of Israel's persistent rebellion, why do you think it still grieved God to send them into exile?

Israel in Exile

With the exile, Israel's future seemed uncertain. But God was still working. God still spoke to the exiles through the prophets. Even after removing Israel from their land, God still called them to repent and promised them a future.

How could God still love and pursue His people at this point? They did not love Him, and they proved that through constant rebellion. They had long since turned from God to trust in themselves. They followed foreign kings and worshipped false gods. They deserved the wrath and judgment that God showed them. But they still were not completely destroyed. Why not? The Old Testament is filled with stories of God's destroying entire nations for their godlessness. Why didn't God do this with Israel?

God had too much at stake to destroy Israel. His purposes of redemption were wrapped up in the nation of Israel. They were His people—He had created them, claimed them, and was working out His plan to restore the world through this unique group of people. Israel was known as God's people. When Israel was conquered and taken into exile, the other nations assumed that it was because their God wasn't strong enough to give them military victory. Listen to the way God explained this situation:

In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them. But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, "These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land." But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. (Ezek. 36:19–21)

In this passage, God made it clear that Israel deserved their punishment. But He also gave the ultimate answer as to why He was not going to give up on His people: His name. He was going to preserve them out of concern for His holy name.

5. Read Ezekiel 36:16–38. Why was God promising to restore Israel? Why is this significant?

6. Look closely at verses 25–27. God promised to cleanse His people, to give them a new heart, and to empower them by His Spirit. What is the significance of these promises?

The New Covenant

While Israel was in exile, God made promises to Israel in Ezekiel 36 and other passages. He guaranteed that He would bring them back to the Promised Land. He would once again be their God, and they would be His people. In many ways, God was reaffirming the covenants He made with

Abraham, Moses, and David. Without question, Israel's exile would not last forever. In fact, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah record God's amazing provision in sending Israel back to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall and the temple, both of which had been destroyed. But even still, something was missing. Only a relatively small number of Israelites returned to Jerusalem at this time; the rebuilt temple could not match the grandeur of the temple that Solomon had built; the glory of God did not return to the temple, and the kingdom of God was not restored to Israel. God's people knew there had to be more. And there was.

God made huge promises to Israel in Ezekiel 36:25–27 and restored hope to a desperate nation. Israel had become defiled through their idolatry, but God promised to cleanse them. Israel had a heart of stone that was incapable of loving God, but God promised to remove that heart of stone and give them a living heart made of flesh. Israel had proven that they were incapable of obeying God's commands, but God promised to place His Spirit within them and enable them to follow His commands. These promises show that God's plan for His people would involve a lot more than simply bringing them back from exile. God was going to recreate His people. They were going to be changed from the inside out.

Recall from the previous session that God made a promise to David that his kingly line would continue. Even though the kings who followed David failed to be good stewards of God's kingly authority, the prophets believed and taught that a king would come who would establish God's perfect reign over His people. This king would be one of David's descendants, and he was sometimes simply called by the name David. Soon after promising to restore and recreate His people, God told Ezekiel that this coming king would establish a new, eternal covenant with His people:

My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore. (Ezek. 37:24–28)

The promise of a new covenant raises an obvious question. What was wrong with the old covenant? The answer is simple: sin. Because of their sinful hearts, the people of Israel were constantly breaking God's covenants with them. Throughout most of its history Israel was idolatrous and immoral. The sad reality is that they were incapable of anything different. Despite the hundreds of times that God's prophets called the people to repentance, they continued in their rebellion. But that was all going to change.

Listen to the way Jeremiah described this new covenant:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:31–34)

The new covenant was different in significant ways. In the old covenant, the law was written on stone. In the new covenant, the law would be written on human hearts. Under this new covenant, God's people would no longer get caught up in external religion; they would experience spiritual change—they would be made spiritually alive. Obedience would no longer be a condition for entering the covenant; obedience would be a promise that God's people would experience through the new covenant.

Under the old covenant, God's people came into contact with Him through the mediation of flawed men (the priests). These flawed men would offer up continual sacrifices, and God would patiently pass over their sin. But under the new covenant, God's people would encounter God directly through the mediation of a flawless man—Jesus Christ. And this flawless man offered Himself as a sacrifice once and for all. Jesus's sacrifice did not pass over sin; it paid for sin and permanently removed it.

7. Take some time to meditate on Ezekiel 36:25–27 and Jeremiah 31:31–34. What makes this new covenant so unique and important?

It is easy to read the Old Testament and get fed up with Israel. We get tired of their rebellion and want to scream, "Why don't you understand this? Stop worshipping idols! Turn to God!" And to a certain extent, the Old Testament is meant to show us how unwise and destructive our sin can be. But we need to be careful not to be too harsh with the Israelites. In reality, their problem is our problem. We need to be careful not to get so caught up in their stubborn rebellion that we overlook our own. In fact, Jeremiah described Israel's sin in universal terms:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? (17:9)

We all face the same problem. Sin is not some external factor that we encounter from time to time. It pervades every human heart. Israel's sin is our sin—we were all covenant breakers by nature and incapable of obedience. And because we faced the same problem that Israel did, the new covenant is good news for us as well. We can now enjoy the benefits of being recreated by God, changed from the inside out.

This new covenant would include the key elements of the older covenants that God had made with Abraham, Moses, and David. It still centered on God and His people—notice that important phrase, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people"—and it still promised restoration for Israel, but the new covenant also included hope and healing for all the nations of the earth (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6, 55:3–5, 56:4-8, 66:18–24). God's plan of redemption had always been to redeem all of His creation, but Israel had lost sight of this calling. The new covenant would bring together Jew and Gentile. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, the whole world fell

under the destructive power of sin. But now with the new covenant, all creation would experience God's power to redeem and restore.

The New Covenant in Jesus's Blood

As the Old Testament draws to a close, we see Israel's future was still uncertain. But we are left with two very important promises: (1) God was going to send His Messiah, a King from the line of David, and (2) God was going to make a new covenant with His people that would recreate them and enable them to follow His rule.

From the moment of His birth, Jesus demonstrated that He was God's Messiah. His ministry demonstrated that He was Israel's true King. And before Jesus was crucified, He gathered His disciples together and celebrated the Passover. Remember that the Passover celebrated God's act of redemption in setting His people free from slavery and that immediately after this exodus, God had established His covenant with Moses and Israel. When Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples, He broke the bread and passed around the wine and told His disciples that these elements would now represent His crucified body and His shed blood. With great significance, Jesus took the wine and said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). With Jesus, the new covenant had arrived. And we will continue to discuss the beauty of this as we study the New Testament.

8. As the Old Testament comes to a close, we see that God promised to send a King in the line of David and to make a new covenant with His people. How should these promises affect our lives today?

9. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to address the sin in your heart and to give you a heart that loves Him and submits to His rule. Thank Him for His promises of redemption and for the amazing reality of the new covenant established in the blood of Jesus.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part V: Understanding the New Testament

1: Jesus the Messiah

Between the Testaments

From the moment that Adam and Eve sinned, God has been working a plan of redemption. Even through Israel's failures, God's plan remained intact. In our last session on the Old Testament, we noted that God gave Israel two important promises: (1) God would send His Messiah, who would be a King from the line of David, and (2) God would establish a new covenant to restore His relationship with His people.

God's plan could not fail, but the Israelites must have had their doubts. At the close of the Old Testament, most of the Israelites were still in exile. They were separated from the things that gave them their identity. They had been removed from the Promised Land and pulled away from the temple, which was subsequently destroyed. These were major problems for Israel. How could they be the people of God if they could not worship in the temple and offer sacrifices to atone for their sin?

Eventually, many Israelites made their way back to the Promised Land, but it was not the same. The Roman Empire now ruled the land. The Israelites did have some freedoms. Most significantly, Herod built a new temple and allowed them to worship and offer sacrifices there. Nonetheless, they were subject to Roman rule, and Israel looked nothing like a kingdom.

Many Jews still believed that God would restore the kingdom, but they were deeply divided on how they thought this would happen. Various groups of Jews formed based on the way in which they expected the kingdom to be restored. The Pharisees believed that radical obedience to the Law would cause the Messiah to come and remove the Gentiles from

power. The Sadducees forged an alliance with the Romans so they could gain status and control the temple. The Zealots hoped for a revolutionary Messiah who would come as a warrior and defeat the pagans. The Essenes believed that the situation in Jerusalem had become so corrupted by both Romans and faithless Israelites that they retreated into the desert so they could please God in isolation. Overall, the situation was confusing and at times seemed hopeless.

It was into this mess of conflicting hopes and ideologies that Jesus was born in the little town of Bethlehem to humble Jewish parents, both from the little town of Nazareth and descended from the line of David.

The connection between the two Testaments is clear. The last two verses of the Old Testament read:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. (Mal. 4:5–6)

Then the New Testament narrative picks up with an old, God-fearing priest named Zechariah. He was in the temple burning incense when an angel appeared and told him that his wife was going to bear him a son who would

turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. (Luke 1:16–17)

Getting to the Point

This prophet who came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" was John the Baptist. His role was to point the way to Jesus. And in effect, this is what the entire New Testament does. It presents Jesus's life, teaching, ministry, death, and resurrection in such a way that we must come to terms with Him. From the moment Jesus came on the scene, it was clear that He was different. His actions, teaching, and ministry came as a surprise to virtually everyone who crossed His path. But before we go too far into the story, take a minute to experience the beginning of Jesus's ministry.

1. Read Mark 1 slowly and thoughtfully. As you read, consider what it must have been like to have seen Jesus say and do these things. What stands out to you from reading this description of Jesus?

Jesus the Messiah

Jesus once asked His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:15–16). We are so used to the term *Christ* that it probably doesn't stand out to you. Yet it was significant to Peter, and it should be significant to us as well.

Remember that Israel was waiting for the Messiah, the King who would come from the line of David. When Jesus was referred to as "the Christ," He was being identified as that Messiah. "Christ" is simply the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah*. So to refer to Jesus as the Christ is huge because we are saying that He is the promised Messiah—the person through whom God would accomplish His plan of redemption. God's

ultimate solution to the problem of sin had arrived. Paul even referred to this moment as "the fullness of time," the culmination of human history (Gal. 4:4)! So important is the New Testament claim that Jesus is the Messiah that John wrote his gospel to prove this one point: "These are written *so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ*, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

2. What are some of the answers people in our culture give to Jesus's question "Who do you say that I am?" Why are these answers inadequate?

A Man, but More Than a Man

When Jesus began traveling the land of Israel, He created quite a stir. Imagine how interested you would be if you heard about a man going around restoring sight to the blind, healing the sick, and even raising the dead! Think about this for a minute. People who had spent their entire lives in complete darkness had an encounter with Jesus, and suddenly they could see. People who were irreversibly maimed or diseased suddenly became whole again. People who were mourning the death of a family member sobbed in disbelief as they held their son or daughter in their arms again. He was doing the impossible! It's no surprise that Jesus attracted crowds wherever He went.

But before we focus on the supernatural elements in Jesus's life, it is important to acknowledge one obvious point: Jesus was a real man. The New Testament shows that Jesus was fully human. Matthew and Luke do

this by recording Jesus's genealogy—Matthew traces Jesus's family tree back to David and Abraham, while Luke traces it all the way back to the first man, Adam. We also know Jesus was truly human because He got hungry (Matt. 4:2), grew tired (John 4:6), and wept (John 11:35). The most graphic picture of Jesus's humanity was His excruciatingly painful death on the cross. His agony was real, and He truly suffered. A crown of thorns drew real blood as it was shoved onto His scalp. The whippings He endured and the nails driven into His hands were as painful for Him as they would be for you. Jesus was just as human as you are.

Having said that, however, the New Testament is equally clear that Jesus Christ was *more* than a mere man. In fact, this is one of the teachings that separate Christianity from the religions of the world. The New Testament writers emphasize that Jesus of Nazareth was fully God. While Matthew and Luke recount Jesus's earthly genealogy, John's gospel explains that Jesus did not begin His existence at His human birth. He was eternal. He has always existed. John tells us that He existed with God in the beginning (before creation) and that He was God (John 1:1–3). This means that Jesus was integrally involved in the process of creation (John 1:3), and that before He came to earth, He lived in a perfect relationship with God the Father. $\frac{1}{2}$

The other gospels also testify that Jesus was divine. Both Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus was conceived not by a human father but by the Holy Spirit. Matthew tells us that Jesus calmed a storm (Matt. 8:26), while Mark records that Jesus forgave sins (Mark 2:5). In Luke we read of Jesus's knowledge of future events, including the end of history (Luke 21). We could go on and on with such examples, but the point is clear: Jesus is God in the flesh (John 1:14).

Jesus Christ was much more than just a great teacher or a prophet of God. He was the only person ever to live in sinless obedience to the Father. He was the unique Son of God, both fully human and fully divine. These truths mean, among other things, that we cannot treat Jesus lightly. Nothing matters more than the way we respond to Jesus.

3. Why is it important to understand that Jesus was fully human? How should this reality shape the way you think and speak about Him?

4. Why is it important to understand that Jesus was more than a man—that He was, in fact, divine? How should this reality shape the way you think and speak about Him?

The Fulfillment of God's Plan

Many people heard the teachings of Jesus, saw the unexplainable miracles, and understood that He was sent from God. However, many of Israel's so-called religious experts opposed Him. The religious groups in Israel (the Sadducees, Pharisees, scribes, etc.) emphatically rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Much of this was because as Jesus's popularity rose, theirs declined.

The Jewish leaders who rejected Jesus did not have spiritual eyes to see Jesus for who He really was. But before we get overly critical of the firstcentury religious leaders, remember that our own sin and ignorance often keep us from recognizing Jesus for who He is. As you continue studying, pray that Jesus would open your mind so that you can see Him for who He truly is.

Jesus was clear in identifying Himself as the One who would fulfill God's Old Testament promises. In Luke 24:44, Jesus said, "Everything written *about me* in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Did you catch that? The Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms (these three categories combined were a common way of referring to the entire Old Testament) all speak about Jesus. Jesus was saying that when the Old Testament writers wrote about God's plan of redemption and the hope that God was promising to His people, *they were actually writing about Him!*

The Old Testament is filled with references to Jesus, though many of them are subtle. When Adam and Eve sinned, God told Eve that Satan ("the serpent") would bruise the heel of her descendant, but that this descendant would crush Satan's head. This promise from the first pages of the Bible finds its fulfillment in Jesus, who triumphed over Satan on the cross (Col. 2:15; see also Rom. 16:20). When God made His promise to Abraham, telling him that all the nations would be blessed through Abraham and his descendants, He was referring to Jesus and what He would accomplish (Gal. 3:8). When God made His covenant with Moses and Israel and gave them the Law, everything about that Law would ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus (Matt. 5:17). When God gave Israel the tabernacle and the temple as an earthly dwelling place for His presence, He was providing a picture of God's dwelling with people that would become a literal reality in the person of Jesus (John 1:14). When God promised David that his throne would be

established forever, He was ultimately pointing ahead to the coming of Jesus (Phil. 2:9–11, Rev. 17:14).

As you read through the New Testament, it's good to pay attention to all of the times that the New Testament writers cite Old Testament prophecies as a way of explaining the fullness of what was happening in the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

5. Why is it important to recognize that Jesus was fulfilling the promises and prophecies made in the Old Testament?

The Kingdom of God

There is one central message that both John the Baptist and Jesus preached: The kingdom of God had arrived.

In the Old Testament, there was an expectation that God would establish His kingdom in the future. This purpose included salvation and blessing for His people and the defeat of Israel's enemies. This expectation must have added weight to Jesus's announcement at the outset of His ministry: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

Many Jews expected God's kingdom to be established at some point, and Jesus claimed that the time was now. The Spirit's power in Jesus's life proved that God's rule was present. The authority of God's kingdom was clearly seen when Jesus cast out demons, healed the sick, ruled over nature, and even raised the dead (John 11:1–46)! Jesus's teaching was also unprecedented, and those who heard it were often astonished at His

wisdom. Understanding this kingdom context should prevent us from seeing Jesus's life and teaching as merely a good source for moral instruction. He didn't come just to establish a vague sense of peace in the world, but to reestablish the rule of God over His creation.

While God's kingdom was certainly present in the ministry of Jesus, Jesus also spoke of a fuller expression of the kingdom in the future. In the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13) Jesus taught us to pray for God's kingdom to come and for His will to be done on earth. One day, at a time known only to God, Jesus Christ will return to save His people and bring judgment on those who have rejected Him. This is a painful reality as we think of those who have not yet submitted to Jesus. But the kingdom of God is open to all who will enter, and Jesus sends us out as His ambassadors to call the lost to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20). And for followers of Christ, God's coming kingdom is everything we have been waiting for! The powers over which Jesus ruled during His ministry in the Gospels—Satan, sickness, death, and the curse that haunts creation—will finally be overcome forever. Believers will enjoy their salvation in its fullness with Christ their King.

6. Based on what you studied in the session on the kingdom of God in the Old Testament, why is Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of God important?

7. How should the concept of the kingdom of God and the reality of Jesus as the King affect your daily life now?

Life through Death

Jesus is significant on so many levels. As we read through the Gospels, we are amazed at Jesus's power, His compassion, His wisdom, etc. But ultimately, it was very difficult for the Jews to believe that this man was their promised Messiah for one very important reason: He was executed as a criminal.

Israel's history was filled with kings and judges who conquered their enemies, and the prophecies about the Messiah pointed to a victorious king. So it must have been confusing when Jesus began to speak about His death. And they didn't know what to do about this would-be Messiah once He died.

In Mark 8:31–33, Jesus told His disciples that He was going to "suffer many things" and be put to death. (He also foretold His resurrection.) Peter, unable to see how such a course of events could fit with Jesus's mission, replied by rebuking his Master and suggesting another path. A triumphant king who dies on a cross? Who ever heard of that? Yet all of the Gospels describe Jesus's death as central to His mission, and Luke spent almost ten chapters dealing with Jesus's journey to Jerusalem to die (Luke 9:51–19:27).

Before Jesus was born, an angel declared that He would "save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). John the Baptist referred to Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The problem of sin had threatened humanity's relationship with God ever since Adam and Eve's disobedience in the garden. In order for God's people to be in a right relationship with Him, sin had to be atoned for. All of the sacrifices that God's people made in the Old Testament pointed forward to the sacrifice that Jesus would offer on the cross (Heb. 9–10). Jesus was the

true Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7)—He sacrificed Himself so that we can live.

In the last Old Testament session, we talked about the promise of a new covenant, and the reality that the death of Jesus established this covenant. As we discuss Jesus's death here, we cannot forget this connection with the new covenant. As Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples, He held the cup and said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). Thus Jesus fulfilled both of the major promises that carry over from the Old Testament: (1) He was the coming King from the line of David (the Messiah), and (2) through His death He established the new covenant that would heal and recreate His people.

Of course, the ultimate proof of the power of the cross is the resurrection. Many had claimed to be the Messiah, but only Jesus rose from the dead to prove it. After all, a conquering King cannot remain buried in a tomb. The resurrection is crucial to our faith and to the fulfillment of God's saving purposes. Without it, we have no hope. The Gospels testify that Jesus rose from the grave and appeared to His disciples.

8. Carefully read Ephesians 2:1–10 and Colossians 2:13–15. If you are familiar with these passages, force yourself to read them slowly, as though you've never read them before. What do these passages say about the significance of Jesus's death and resurrection?

9. According to these passages, how should we relate to Jesus?

"Follow Me"

It is critical that you understand the story of Jesus, but understanding the story is not enough. It is not enough to merely absorb the information—you must respond to it. The message of Jesus's death and resurrection demands something of us. Jesus continues to call people—He calls you and me—to follow Him and live, even if it costs us everything. Christ's death and resurrection should give us confidence in the salvation He offers. Listen carefully to the message proclaimed by Jesus's earliest followers:

What God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. (Acts 3:18–21)

10. Spend some time in prayer. Pray that God would take the truths you have been thinking through and use them to affect your heart. Ask God to help you respond to Jesus appropriately—whether you have never considered Jesus's call to follow Him or you have been walking with Jesus for many years.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

1 There has only ever been one God, yet the Bible teaches that He exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The concept of the Trinity is a profound mystery, but it is essential to the way the Bible describes God.

Part V: Understanding the New Testament

2: The Great Commission

Jesus's life, death, and resurrection should affect every day of your life. During His short time on earth, Jesus challenged the religious leaders and their assumptions about what it meant to please God. He showed us what God intends humanity to look like, and tore down every barrier that would keep us from being the people God made us to be. Jesus's mission on earth was to see God's power, love, and healing permeate every aspect of this broken world and our broken lives. He came to see God's will done on earth as it is in heaven. One day, Jesus will return to finish this task, to take all things and make them new (Rev. 21:5). But in the meantime, He has given us a mission to accomplish.

The Mission of the Church

In every way, Jesus was what the world had been waiting for. He was the answer for all of Israel's hopes and the embodiment of God's plan of redemption. Nothing could be more important for this world than Jesus's mission on earth. As the disciples began to recognize that Jesus truly was the Christ, the Messiah, they must have seen the importance of what Jesus was doing. Imagine how surprised and disappointed they must have been, then, when Jesus died. And imagine how their excitement must have hit an all-time high when He rose from the grave! This mission to restore the world was back in motion. Jesus could now assume Israel's throne and rule the world in righteousness and peace.

But that's not how the story goes. At least, not immediately. Instead of wrapping up human history then and there, Jesus gave His disciples an all-

important task:

Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:18–20)

What exactly should the church be doing? The answer has been the same since the day Jesus spoke these words. Sure, each church will have some distinctives, and the church in different places and in different times has had some unique issues that it has needed to address. But the church has one mission. It is the mission that characterized Jesus's ministry on earth, and it is the mission that He left to the church when He returned to His Father.

Our mission on this planet is spelled out here in the "Great Commission." We are called to spread Christ's rule on earth through making disciples. We share the good news of a King who conquered death, and who calls every part of His creation to submit to His benevolent reign. This is what Jesus taught His followers to pray for (Matt. 6:10) and it is the reality He calls us to work toward here on earth.

1. Read Luke 24 and Acts 1:1–11. As you read, place yourself in the scene and try to feel the significance of these events. How do the circumstances surrounding the Great Commission add significance to Jesus's words?

The Authority of Jesus

In order to more fully understand what we are called to do here on earth, we will analyze the Great Commission in this session. As Jesus delivered this command to His followers, He began with a very important statement: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt 28:18). Here we have the foundation for the Great Commission.

We serve a King who has absolute authority over every square inch of creation. This authority extends not only to animals, plants, and weather patterns, but also to every human being on the planet. Understanding this truth should give us confidence as we move out into a world that is opposed to God's reign.

Since all authority belongs to Jesus Christ, we are obligated to obey the Great Commission. The command is clear. But this is about more than cold obedience. The King who commands us to make disciples is the same King who sacrificed Himself to give us life. It is our *pleasure* to serve this King, and we should find joy in submitting to His will. Furthermore, it should not be enough that we ourselves enjoy a healed relationship with our King; we should want every person on earth to experience this great salvation.

A Worldwide Mission

Though Jesus entered a specific culture in a specific part of the world, He is more than a local religious figure. Jesus is the Savior given by God for all people, regardless of race, nationality, or any other distinction. And because every person on the planet has rebelled against God (Rom. 3:23), everyone needs the salvation that Jesus offers. Because of this, Jesus calls His church to move out into every corner of the world with this one and only hope of healing and salvation: "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no

other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Jesus first gave the Great Commission to the early disciples. They took this task seriously, and spread the gospel throughout much of the known world within a relatively short amount of time. Yet the task of taking the gospel to all peoples did not end with them. This worldwide mission belongs to the church, and it ought to characterize our efforts today.

There is no denying that the task of taking the gospel to the nations is massive. There are a lot of people in this world, and a huge percentage of them have no way of even hearing about the gospel. And don't forget about your family members, friends, and coworkers who reject the claims of Christ. Thankfully, we aren't alone in this supernatural task. Making disciples is ultimately God's work, and He will accomplish it in His power. But God's commitment to His plan of redemption does not absolve us from our responsibility to obey His commands. God *will* reach every corner of this world, and He has chosen to accomplish this task by working through His church.

2. We can get so caught up in our own personal relationships with God that we forget to think about the global implications of the Great Commission. Why is it important to see the mission of the church as a global calling?

The Call to Make Disciples

With the Great Commission, we are back to where we started in Part I. It all comes down to making disciples. But now we can see that disciple making

is rooted in God's plan of redemption. It is central to God's heart for His people, for His world.

As we have said, a disciple is simply a follower of Jesus. If we believe that Jesus is who He says He is and we do what He tells us to do, then we are disciples. So the process of disciple making amounts to telling other people about Jesus and calling them to follow Him as well. Discipleship is a lifelong process where we are continuously made more and more like Jesus.

Jesus said that in making disciples of all nations, we are to baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and to teach them to obey all that He commanded (Matt. 28:19–20). The first step for those who choose to follow Christ and have been transformed by His Spirit, then, is to identify with Christ through being baptized. Just as Jesus was buried in the earth and then raised up into new life, so the new Christian is "buried" under the water in baptism and brought up again as a symbol of the new life he or she has received. Baptism also initiates the new believer into Christ's church where he or she becomes a member of a local body of believers. This initial step is nonnegotiable. It is a command of Jesus Christ, and we should consider it a privilege to identify with Jesus and His people through baptism. Who could put their trust in such an amazingly gracious Savior and not want to identify with Him?

One result of Jesus's command to teach others to obey all that He commanded is the New Testament itself. These gospel accounts and letters were written to believers in various churches in order to tell them more clearly who Jesus was and to deliver ongoing instruction on living as followers of Christ in a hostile world. Salvation is not like receiving a train ticket to heaven, where the ticket gets us aboard, but after that we can put it in our pocket and forget about it. Rather, it is like a marriage, where we

enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ and become a part of His family, the church. The Christian life is a process of better understanding what Jesus taught, learning to apply that teaching in our everyday lives, and then teaching others—people directly around us and people on the other side of the globe—to do the same.

3. Why do you think Jesus would give us the strategy of disciple making as the means for accomplishing our mission on earth?

4. Take a minute to consider the significance of baptism. Write down some thoughts below. If you have been baptized, include some reflections on your own experience with baptism.

5. What role should teaching play in our Christian lives and in the life of the church?

The Continuing Presence of Jesus

If the Great Commission sounds impossible to you, that's because it is. As daunting as the task to make disciples of all the nations on the face of the earth would be by itself, we also face serious opposition. Satan, the world, and our sinful desires fight against our growth in the Christian life and the

advance of the gospel. Paul warned us that if we are going to live out this mission, we will experience persecution: "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). This very day, Christians around the world are being persecuted, beaten, and even put to death for identifying with Jesus Christ. We are mistaken if we think our message will always be received warmly.

But while the opposition is real and intimidating, Jesus's final words in the Great Commission should give us courage: "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Jesus's very presence is promised to us so that we do not need to be afraid. Imagine how fearless you would be if you could physically see the Son of God by your side. He promises to be with us. Remember that God's plan has never wavered, and our ultimate victory is assured.

6. Most likely, you already believe that God's presence is with you as you seek to honor Him in this world. But take some time to meditate on that simple truth: "I am with you always." How should this statement affect your daily life and the way you view your God-given mission?

The Power of the Holy Spirit

After telling His disciples that they would be His witnesses to the entire world, Jesus's next instruction must have been surprising: "Wait." For many of us, that doesn't sound like great advice. After all, there's a mass of humanity out there that needs the gospel. Don't we need to hit the ground running?

The Great Commission will never be accomplished by human effort or wise planning, though both are crucial for the task. We need God's power in order to carry the gospel into every part of the globe. Only God's power can transform rebels into disciples. This is precisely why Jesus commanded His disciples to wait (Acts 1:4). Before moving out to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, the disciples had to be empowered by the Holy Spirit for this supernatural task.

7. Have you ever tried to follow Jesus apart from the power of the Holy Spirit? Why is this approach bound to end in frustration?

8. Given your specific setting, what would it look like to pursue the Great Commission through the power of the Spirit?

Finished and Unfinished

As we consider God's mission here on earth, it is important to recognize what has been finished and what is still unfinished. The New Testament is very clear that the work of salvation is complete. Hebrews says, "When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (Heb. 10:12). In other words, Jesus did what needed to be done in order to reconcile humanity to God; then He sat down because everything was finished. This means that our message is simple and

straightforward: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).

But we still have a job to do. What remains unfinished is the task of bringing this message to the ends of the earth. God calls us to be His colaborers (1 Cor. 3:9) and ambassadors (2 Cor. 5). We are to carry the good news of what He has done in Jesus Christ to the very ends of the earth and work to see His rule fully established in every corner of the world. This means that we reach out to our next-door neighbors and the masses of East Asia. This is our calling in life. And ultimately, this is where God's plan of redemption has been moving from the very beginning.

If the command to make disciples and minister sacrificially to God's people seems overwhelming, recall Jesus's reassuring words in the Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me ... and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." By the power of the Holy Spirit, the church can fulfill its mission. Actually, Jesus promised that the church *will* fulfill its mission: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). God chose to fulfill His purposes on earth through His church, and He does not have a backup plan. God will use us as the church to reach the world with the hope and healing found in Jesus Christ.

9. Read Revelation 7:9–12. This passage gives us a vision of the end of the story. This life will conclude with an enormous community of redeemed people from every nation, tribe, people, and language praising God together for His salvation. How should this vision of the end of the story affect the way we think about our mission now?

10. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to affect your heart with the urgency of the mission He has given you and the other Christians in your life. Ask Him for the strength, wisdom, and perseverance to pursue His mission in the strength of His Spirit.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part V: Understanding the New Testament

3: The Spirit of God

Do you feel desperate for the power of the Holy Spirit today? If not, you may have a misunderstanding of who you are or who the Holy Spirit is. Every aspect of our salvation is dependent on Him. Without the Spirit, we can't know God, understand Scripture, overcome sin, or transform the people around us. We are spiritually impotent without the Spirit, so it is vital that we have a right understanding of who He is and what He does.

Our need for God's Spirit goes all the way back to the beginning. Adam and Eve rebelled against God in the garden, and humanity has been rebelling ever since. The history of Israel is a powerful reminder that human beings cannot faithfully follow God without the Spirit. God pinpointed Israel's problem in Ezekiel 36: they had a heart of stone. They were spiritually dead. They needed a new heart and a new spirit. And God's solution to this problem involved nothing less than the complete transformation of His people:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:25–27)

What God's people needed was the Spirit of God. They needed to be changed from the inside out and empowered by the very presence of God.

This may have sounded far-fetched to the Israelites. After all, they stood terrified at the base of Mount Sinai when God spoke with Moses on the mountaintop. They fell on their faces as God's glory filled the temple. They had to be so cautious with God's presence dwelling in the tabernacle and temple. How could this all-powerful God possibly dwell within stained and fragile human beings?

Yet this miracle is the exact reality that we find in the New Testament. It is the solution to humanity's rebellion, the culmination of God's plan of redemption.

When Jesus told the disciples of the Spirit's coming, He was not implying that the Spirit had not yet come into existence, or that the Spirit was previously inactive in the world. The Spirit was active in creation and in God's redemptive work in the Old Testament. However, the Old Testament pointed ahead to a time when God's Spirit would work in humanity in a new and powerful way.

1. Take a minute to consider the significance of the promise of the Holy Spirit in Ezekiel 36:25–27. Explain why this promise is so important in the history of redemption.

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

We must be careful when we discuss a topic as sacred as the Holy Spirit. The most important thing is to recognize that the Holy Spirit is God. Just as Jesus Christ is a distinct person but is also fully divine, so too the Holy Spirit is both unique and fully God. This is the mystery that we refer to as

the Trinity, and it is based in the reality that the Bible talks about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as distinct persons, but also clearly identifies each of these persons as God.

This carries important implications for how we think about the Holy Spirit. He is more than a mystical guru or a genie—He is God and worthy of the love and obedience that God deserves. This also tells us that the Holy Spirit is a person. He is not an impersonal force, so we should not refer to the Spirit as an "it." The Holy Spirit is a "He," a person with the ability to act, will, and even be grieved (Eph. 4:30). These brief thoughts should frame the way we think about the Spirit of God.

2. How should seeing the Holy Spirit as a person and as God Himself change the way you relate to Him?

The Spirit in the New Testament

The Holy Spirit's actions fill the pages of the New Testament. From the very start we see that John the Baptist and Jesus were filled with the Holy Spirit as they grew and fulfilled their ministries (Luke 1:15 and 4:1). The Gospels are full of reminders that Jesus's ministry was empowered by the Spirit of God. The incredible events that unfold in the New Testament are the direct result of the Holy Spirit's working.

In Acts 2, the Spirit came in dramatic fashion to the disciples and empowered them in an unprecedented way. This came at a crucial moment. Jesus returned from the dead, gave them an impossible task in the Great Commission, and then ascended back to heaven. The disciples had been

commissioned, but Jesus told them to wait until they received power from above. Suddenly, the Spirit came upon the disciples, and they began "telling the mighty works of God" in multiple languages. Peter pointed out that this outpouring of the Spirit had been promised in the Old Testament. God's people had been waiting for the Spirit to empower them, and that long-awaited day had arrived. The Spirit of God was now working in humanity —not only on the leaders of Israel but on all of God's people.

3. Read Acts 2 carefully. As you read, pay attention to two things: (1) references to Old Testament truths and promises and (2) references to the Holy Spirit. What references do you see in Peter's sermon to some of the key concepts you studied in the Old Testament sessions?

4. What does this passage say about the Holy Spirit? How was the Holy Spirit working at this significant moment in redemption history?

The Spirit of God and the Word of God

Not only is the Holy Spirit responsible for the miraculous events recorded in the New Testament, He is also responsible for the writing of the Bible itself! Jesus told His disciples that the Spirit would remind them of what He had been teaching them (John 14:26). These are the things that the disciples and their close associates recorded in the New Testament. Similarly, 2 Peter 1:21 tells us that Scripture is not a human invention, but rather the result of

the Spirit's working through the authors of the Bible. Every detail of the text of Scripture, even down to the seemingly mundane grammatical features,² is inspired by God and is therefore authoritative. While it is true that God used the personalities and other characteristics of the human authors in recording Scripture, even these human words are referred to as the Spirit's speaking (Heb. 3:7).

The Ministry of the Spirit

When Jesus was ministering on earth, there was no doubt that He was working toward the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption. We might have expected Jesus to continue ministering, gathering more and more followers, and finally completing the redemption that the world was longing for. But just when it seemed that redemption was a possibility, Jesus left. Was God's plan being cut short?

Of course not. Jesus left when He did because that was part of God's plan. Jesus must have stunned the disciples when He said that it would be *better* for Him to leave than to stay! How could that be? How could God's mission on earth possibly proceed more effectively without Jesus? The answer is found in the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth: *it is to your advantage that I go away*, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7).

Jesus sent us His Spirit ("the Helper") so that we can fulfill God's purposes on earth. The Spirit dwells inside His people—just as God dwelt in the tabernacle and temple in the Old Testament—so that He can work through us. This indwelling of the Spirit is not a special gift for some Christians, but rather it is God's gift to *all* of His people. Paul said very

simply, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Rom. 8:9).

The Spirit is absolutely essential for fulfilling the mission we have been given. Unless the Spirit gives us the power to faithfully follow Jesus, we will follow in the footsteps of disobedient Israel. So great is our need for the Spirit that we are commanded to walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16), be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18), pray in the Spirit (Jude v. 20), and put sin to death by the Spirit (Rom. 8:13), among other things. The Spirit secures our faithfulness till the end. Even the assurance that we are God's children comes from the testimony of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:16). In Romans 7 and 8, Paul contrasted the life that is lived in the flesh (that is, apart from the Spirit of God) with the life that is lived in the Spirit. The difference is staggering.

5. Read Romans 7 and 8. What does Paul's comparison of these two ways of living say about the role of the Holy Spirit and our need for Him?

The Spirit in God's Mission

God's plan of redemption marches on, and He is using His Spirit in the lives of His people to do this work. The church's mission is too difficult to accomplish without relying on the Spirit. Our mission is too important to attempt without His power. We simply cannot fulfill the Great Commission without seeking and depending on the Holy Spirit.

But we do need to be careful that our pursuit of the Spirit leads us toward Jesus, not away from Him. John told us that the aim of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Jesus Christ (John 16:14). Like a spotlight, the Spirit focuses the attention on Christ and His salvation. Therefore, we should not separate the work of the Spirit from the work of Jesus (or God the Father, for that matter). If we are not led to love and trust Jesus Christ more, it's likely that we are out of step with the Spirit.

The Spirit can do unbelievable things in and through us. The miracles recorded in the New Testament often inspire us to pursue similar experiences today. But keep in mind that it is the Spirit we are pursuing, not a specific supernatural experience. As you seek to live by the power of the Spirit, look to the promises of God's Word. Trust the Spirit to show His power however He wants. More often than not, the Holy Spirit guides us by shaping who we are. He gives us new desires so that we gradually begin to live with the goal of glorifying God in all of our decisions. Though this doesn't look as dramatic as healing the sick or foretelling the future, it is every bit as miraculous.

6. How have you seen the Spirit of God working in the life of your church? If you are having trouble identifying the work of the Spirit, why do you think the Spirit's work isn't being clearly seen in your church?

The Spirit of God in the Church

In order to experience everything the Spirit offers, you need to be in close fellowship with other Christians. God designed us to function in a community of believers, each with our own spiritual gifts. To neglect your local church is to cut yourself off from one of the Spirit's most powerful ministries.

All believers need the spiritual gifts of other believers. We need their teaching, leadership, encouragement, mercy, and even their loving confrontation, to name only a few gifts. On the other hand, consider how the Spirit has gifted *you*. How are you supposed to minister to your Christian brothers and sisters?

The Spirit works not simply through individuals, but through the church as a whole. Everyday church life—manifest in things like encouragement, prayer, and communion—may sound very "ordinary," but there's nothing ordinary about God's people. They are a Spirit-filled community; they are God's holy temple. We have already seen that the Spirit dwells within each Christian, just as He dwelled within the Old Testament temple. As important as that truth is, Paul also told us that the church is built *together* into a temple for the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:19–22). That is, the Spirit does not simply dwell within each one of us, He also dwells in our collective midst. The church is so central to God's mission on earth that He dwells among us to empower us for the work He has called us to.

7. How are you partnering with other members of the body of Christ to be used by the Spirit in fulfilling God's mission on earth?

8. Spend some time in prayer. Thank God for the incredible gift of the Holy Spirit. Pray that you would be empowered to pursue and rely on the Spirit's power in your life. Pray that God would work through the life of your church to bring healing, hope, and change to the world around you.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

- <u>1</u> One of the most direct statements in Scripture that equates the Holy Spirit with God Himself is found in Acts 5. In verse 3, Peter asked Ananias why he chose to lie to the Holy Spirit, then in verse 4 Peter told Ananias that he had lied to God. The same assumption is made throughout the Bible: the Holy Spirit is fully God, just as Jesus Christ and the Father are fully God.
- <u>2</u> For an example of this, see Galatians 3:16, where Paul made an important theological argument based on the Old Testament's usage of a plural noun rather than a singular.

Part V: Understanding the New Testament

4: The Early Church

Somewhere along the line, it became popular to pursue Jesus while shunning organized religion. We even hear from people who "love Jesus but hate the church." While no one can deny that the church has its share of problems, Jesus never gave us the option of giving up on His church. And He certainly would not approve of us "hating" her. The church was His idea, so it is impossible to follow Him while shunning the church He died to save.

The reality is that God is using His church around the world to transform lives and accomplish His will on earth. In many ways and in many places the church today is healthy and focused on fulfilling God's mission. But it is also true that much of the church is in a state of disarray. Churches define themselves by virtually every issue under the sun. Christians are known more by their bumper stickers and T-shirts than by the love of Christ. Gossip and hypocrisy run rampant. Many churches are more concerned with preserving the status quo than reaching out to the people around them.

With such a wide array of sentiments about the church, we have to ask some important questions: What is the church? What should the church look like? What should the church be doing? If we can't answer these questions biblically, then we will only be adding to the confusion. If the church doesn't understand its identity and its role in this world, then it is bound to be confused, paralyzed, and ineffective.

When Jesus ascended to the Father, He left one group in His place to carry on His mission: the church. If we don't do everything we can to understand who we are and what we should be doing as the church, then we

are not taking Jesus's mission seriously. By God's own choice, the continuation of His plan of redemption now rests on the church.

The Early Church

There is so much that could be said about the church. Peter said that the church is "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9). Paul called the church a "pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), a temple of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:19–22), the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12), and the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:22–33). Each of these descriptions should be explored and discussed at length. But in this session, we will assess the church's identity by examining the founding of the church in Acts 2.

At the beginning of the book of Acts, there were about 120 people who followed Christ. The twelve apostles formed the core of this group. Then came the day of Pentecost. Peter stood up and proclaimed that God had raised Jesus from the dead, the same Jesus whom the crowds had demanded to see crucified. Peter's Spirit-empowered proclamation brought great conviction, and about three thousand people repented of their sins and put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. With this unbelievable demonstration of the Spirit's power, the church was born.

There was something so attractive and intriguing about this first group of believers. Not only was the birth of this group miraculous, the way they began to live together and interact was something the world had never seen. Acts 2:42–47 describes life in the early church. Take a minute to think through the way this group is described.

1. Read Acts 2:42–47 slowly. After you read it, spend a few minutes meditating on what characterized this group of people. What stands out to you?

Several things made the early church blatantly stand out. For one, Luke told us that the early church "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). They had a deep commitment to what the apostles taught. The apostles' teaching emphasized everything that happened in Christ and the significance of these events. In other words, the apostles were dedicated to the gospel. Their teaching was the fulfillment of what was prophesied in the Old Testament, and this teaching would later be recorded under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to form the New Testament. So the New Testament we hold in our hands is "the apostles' teaching"—the same truths that the early church was devoted to. God's Word has always been essential to the life of the church.

2. Why do you think the early church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching? What implications does that have for the church today?

Luke (the author of Acts) also said that the early church was devoted to fellowship. The word *fellowship* sometimes has strange connotations in the church today. If it sounds cheesy, lighthearted, or old-fashioned to you, then you have the wrong idea about fellowship. The first Christians shared their

lives with one another. It wasn't about church picnics, potlucks, or small talking in the "fellowship hall." They were real people meeting real needs and joining together to fulfill a real mission. They weren't meeting together because they kind of felt like they should. They shared their lives because in Christ they had everything in common. They truly loved each other. They cared deeply about God and His mission on earth, so they joined with the other Christians around them and worked together toward the goal.

We are called to do the same. In fact, God tells us that fellowship is even more important for us *now* since His return is coming soon: "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, *and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*" (Heb. 10:24–25). Our fellowship has never mattered more than it does right now.

3. Why was fellowship so important for the early church? Why is it important for the church today?

The reference to the "breaking of bread" is either a reference to taking the Lord's Supper (communion) together as a body of believers, or to the sharing of meals together. It probably refers to both. The early Christians often took the Lord's Supper as part of a larger shared meal. Both the Lord's Supper and the early church's practice of eating together served as expressions of their common faith in Jesus Christ. Paul pointed back to the night when Jesus observed the Passover with His disciples and transformed that ritual into what we know as the Lord's Supper. The bread became a reminder of His broken body and the wine of His shed blood. This

celebration is a reminder of the new covenant that Jesus made with His people, the church. Paul highlighted the significance of this ritual: "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). In taking communion, we are proclaiming that Jesus's sacrifice is central to our mission and our life together as the church.

4. In your own words, describe why the Lord's Supper is significant. Does communion carry this significance in your church? Why or why not?

Luke also told us that the early church was devoted to prayer. To say that prayer was important to these early Christians would be a gross understatement. Immediately after Peter and John were released from prison in Acts 4, they gathered with the church to pray for more boldness, and for the Lord to work signs and wonders. Prayer was the church's means of receiving strength and guidance from the Lord. They depended on intimate communion with the One in whom they had put their trust.

Sadly, our churches aren't typically characterized by devotion to prayer. Could it be that we have lost sight of our absolute dependence on God? Have we lost the urgency of our mission and the sense that if God does not work through us, we will not be able to do what we have been called to do? Prayer is exactly this type of declaration. A church that is devoted to prayer is a church that knows God's mission is the most important pursuit on earth. It is a church that knows it cannot succeed without God. May this type of devotion to prayer define the attitude of our churches.

5. Explain why prayer is essential to the life and mission of the church. What would a devotion to prayer look like in the life of your church?

More Than Individuals

The early church was made up of those who embraced the gospel. God's Spirit had been poured out on them and their sins had been forgiven. These people had been saved from a "crooked generation" (Acts 2:40). This is exactly what the church has been in all ages. The church consists of those who have been called out of their spiritual darkness and have responded to the good news that Jesus Christ died to remove the separation of sin and rose from the grave to demonstrate that He is the true King of the world. In every generation, God takes those He is redeeming and joins them together in the church.

Individualism is widely celebrated in our culture. We like to think of ourselves as self-sufficient and independent, able to "make it on our own." Sadly, many Christians have adopted this individualistic mindset. Nobody is going to tell us how to spend our time or our money or tell us what to think. Sound familiar? If so, then we need to look long and hard at the early church's life together.

Notice what the first Christian converts in Acts 2 did not do. They did not simply make a profession of faith and then seek to live the Christian life on their own. No, these early converts were baptized as a sign of their identification with Jesus Christ and His church. Actually, to identify with Jesus Christ is to identify with the church, His beloved bride. Jesus Himself said: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have

love for another" (John 13:35). One crucial aspect of submitting to Jesus is committing to the ministry of His church. We are no longer isolated individuals, but members of Christ's body.

6. Read 1 Corinthians 12. How should Paul's analogy of the church as a body affect the way we think about the church?

7. Does the life of your church look anything like the body that Paul described in 1 Corinthians 12? How so? If not, why do you think this is?

What Are We Missing?

Reading the book of Acts can almost be depressing because we are forced to recognize deficiencies in our churches. On the one hand, this is healthy. We should be challenged by the vitality of the early church. But on the other hand, we need to be careful not to simply imitate what we see in Acts. God gave a mission to the church, and it worked out in a specific way in the life of the early church. We have the same mission, but God may want to do something unique in our churches. Rather than trying to reproduce the tongues of fire, the powerful sermon, and the mass conversion we find in Acts 2, we should be looking for God to fulfill His purposes through our churches in whatever ways He sees fit. Read through the following description of life in the early church, then take some time to consider how

some of the characteristics of the early church might play out in your unique setting.

A Generous Community

Members of the early church had such a concern for their brothers and sisters in Christ that they were willing to sell their own possessions to meet a physical need. The Scriptures say that they had "all things in common" (Acts 2:44; see also 4:32). In other words, these Christians voluntarily gave of what they had for the welfare of fellow believers. Likewise, Paul described a time when the churches in Macedonia joyfully gave even in the midst of "extreme poverty" (2 Cor. 8:2). He even said, "they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints" (vv. 3–4). Such generosity is the fruit of transformed hearts.

A Holy Community

The early church was a community set apart for God's purposes. Even the outside world took notice of what was happening. Luke says that "awe came upon every soul" (Acts 2:43). This group of believers was noticeably different from the outside world. Their obedience and God's presence among them caused them to stand out, so that they had favor with the unbelievers around them (2:47).

A Fearless Community

Not everyone was happy about the Holy Spirit's work in the early church. Suffering was a very real part of following Jesus in the first century, and the same holds true today. Christians around the world are often under physical

threat for confessing Jesus Christ, while our own culture continues to grow increasingly intolerant of the gospel message. Paul promised: "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). The early church boldly proclaimed the truth of the gospel and fearlessly reached out to the hurting world around them. Because of this, they often encountered persecution and even martyrdom.

A Multiplying Community

There's no denying that the growth of the early church was remarkable. What began as a small band of fledgling disciples multiplied supernaturally into a large movement consisting of believers in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and eventually to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Churches were planted as the apostles and other believers took the gospel all over the known world. All of this was clearly the Lord's work: "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

In a providential twist, it was often the persecution of the church that resulted in its growth. As believers were scattered, they took the gospel with them (Acts 8:1). Instead of retreating into silence, they prayed for boldness when they came under scrutiny from the authorities (Acts 4:23–31). We are reminded that the Lord's plan for growing His church turns the world's wisdom on its head.

8. What do you find most compelling about the way the book of Acts describes the life of the early church?

9. Does your church possess these compelling characteristics? If so, briefly describe them and thank God for them. If not, why do you think these characteristics are lacking?

The Church in the Modern World

Read through almost any letter in the New Testament, and you'll quickly see that the early Christian churches were anything but perfect. In fact, many of these letters were written to address specific sins or false teachings. For example, the Galatian Christians were in danger of distorting the gospel (Gal. 1:6), while the church at Corinth was tolerating gross sexual sin (1 Cor. 5:1). Or take an example from the early Christian congregation in Acts: one part of the church felt that their widows were being neglected in comparison with another part of the church (Acts 6:1). Similar complaints threaten to divide many of our own churches today. Our experience may be closer to the early Christians than we think.

In this session we have highlighted many of the positive characteristics about life in the early church, and Acts certainly gives us much to imitate in the example they set. God's Spirit worked in extraordinary ways in order to empower the church for its mission. However, we have misunderstood the early church if we feel that we cannot relate to the early church's experience. This group of believers did not live in some spiritual fantasyland untouched by sin and weakness. In fact, the point of their example is not primarily to make us dwell on their strengths, but rather to make us marvel at God's strength. His Spirit caused the message of Christ to bear fruit as it was taken to city after city.

The church must continue to exalt Jesus Christ in our own day by the power of the Spirit. We shouldn't expect to experience another Day of Pentecost, or to see precisely the same signs and wonders that the apostles performed, but we should continue to pray that the Holy Spirit will transform the way we live and give us boldness to proclaim the good news to the people around us. The same God who multiplied the early church works through the church today. And the same Spirit who lived in the midst of the Christians in the first century lives within the church of the twenty-first century. It is our responsibility to bring that same message of healing and salvation to our modern world through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

10. What do you think the Holy Spirit would want your church to do in an effort to fulfill the church's mission in your unique setting? If you don't have an answer for this, make it a priority to pray and seek the Spirit's guidance on this issue.

11. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to guide and empower your church for the mission He has given you. Pray that the church today would be everything that God designed it to be.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

1 The twelve "apostles" were Jesus's original twelve disciples who followed Him throughout His ministry. After Judas betrayed Jesus, he committed suicide and the other eleven disciples replaced him with Matthias in Acts 1. The word *apostle* means "one who is sent," "delegate," or "messenger."

Part V: Understanding the New Testament

5: Good News for All Nations

Is Jesus your *personal* Savior? That's a common phrase in the Christian world. Jesus should be your personal Savior. But make sure He is much more than that. Jesus absolutely saves individuals in a personal way. If your broken relationship with God has been restored, it's because Jesus sacrificed Himself for your sin and God's grace has renewed your heart. This happens to individuals—no one is saved because she has Christian parents, attends a church service, or lives in a "Christian nation."

But your relationship with God should not be characterized by individualism. God worked in your individual heart to give you new life, but salvation is not about your making it to heaven as an individual. Jesus saves us as individuals to place us within a body—the church. In reality, Jesus is the Savior *of the church*. He died to create a people who together love and worship Him and fulfill His purposes in the world.

This means that the gospel is not only good news *for me*, it is good news *for everyone*. Jesus is the Savior of the world (John 11:51–52; 1 John 2:2). With Adam and Eve, the whole world fell into sin. With Jesus, the whole world can be redeemed, restored, saved, made new (Rom. 5:18). God's plan of redemption has always been global in scope. There is not a single tribe, tongue, or nation on the planet that will not be affected by the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rev. 5:9). The good news is for all nations (Luke 2:10).

God's Plan for the Nations

Spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth was not a new plan implemented by Jesus and His disciples. From the very beginning, God's

intention was to restore every aspect of the world He created. His plan of salvation is not for the Jews only, but also the Gentiles (a broad term that simply means "non-Jews").

The Old Testament pointed ahead to a day when all people, both Jew and Gentile, would come to the one true God. God promised Abraham that in him *all the nations* of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 18:18). Similarly, the psalmist exclaimed, "Let the peoples praise you, O God; let *all the peoples* praise you!" (Ps. 67:5). God told Isaiah: "I will make you a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Is. 49:6). God's heart has always extended to every nation on earth.

When Jesus came as the Messiah, He demonstrated the worldwide scope of His mission. Even though His initial focus was to go to the "lost sheep of ... Israel" (Matt. 15:24), He always had a larger goal in mind. The Jews tended to focus on their national heritage and to look down on the Gentiles. They particularly disliked a group called the Samaritans. Yet Jesus had a loving discussion with a Samaritan woman in John 4 and demonstrated His heart for those outside of the people of Israel. Similarly, Jesus healed the demon-oppressed daughter of a Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:28). Jesus's goal was "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10), including the wealthy and the poor, the accepted and the outcast, the Jew and the Gentile. Luke's gospel especially highlights this theme, where God's grace reaches even the least likely.

The Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) proves that Jesus wants all people to know Him. Both then and now He works through His disciples by His Spirit to accomplish this very purpose.

1. How should God's heart as revealed in the Old Testament and in Jesus's ministry affect the way we think about and relate to those people who

A Jewish Messiah for All People

After He rose from the grave, Jesus announced to His disciples that the Holy Spirit would empower them so that they could be His witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The rest of the book of Acts explains how this played out, beginning with the growth of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 2) and ending with Paul's proclamation of the gospel from prison in Rome (Acts 28).

Acts 10 records an especially significant moment in the history of the church. God directly sent Peter (who, like the rest of the disciples, was a Jew) to bring the gospel to Cornelius (a Gentile) and his household. At this point in history, the Jews avoided close contact with the Gentiles. Yet God gave Peter a vision to show him that the gospel was for all the nations. As Peter told this household of Gentiles about the new life that God offers through Jesus Christ, they believed, and God testified to the validity of their belief by sending the Holy Spirit upon them.

As the gospel continued to take root in the non-Jewish world, a question emerged: Did these Gentiles need to become Jews before they could become Christians? Remember that God's plan of redemption had been firmly rooted in the people of Israel from the time that God chose to bless Abraham. Jesus was a Jew, and the concept of the Messiah was Jewish to the core. Some believed that while the Gentiles were invited to share in the life of the Jewish Messiah, they could only do so by taking on a distinctly Jewish identity.

The issue came to a head in Acts 15, when the leaders of the church gathered in Jerusalem to decide how these Gentile converts should be handled. Should they submit to the Law of Moses? Did they need to be circumcised and offer sacrifices? James offered this solution:

We should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. (Acts 15:19–20)

Basically, they decided that being a Christian is not the same thing as being a Jew. This was a turning point in the spread of the gospel. While Christianity will always have Jewish roots, it is not bound to a particular ethnicity. The gospel is good news for all nations.

2. Read Acts 15. How is the global aspect of God's plan of redemption demonstrated in this passage?

An Apostle to the Gentiles

When God chose Paul to be an apostle, He specifically called him to reach the Gentiles. The second half of Acts focuses on Paul's ministry and follows his missionary journeys across the vast Roman Empire. In most church circles today, we tend to think of Paul mainly as a theologian. We explore his letters as we look for answers to deep theological questions. But most likely, Paul would have thought of himself primarily as a missionary.

Paul said that he received his apostleship "to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations" (Rom. 1:5). His ambition was to share the good news in areas that had not yet heard about what Jesus had done (Rom. 15:20). And when people responded and began to meet together as Christians, he urged them to walk in obedience.

Paul had some important things to say about the Jew/Gentile question. He argued that faith in Jesus Christ was all that was necessary to become part of God's people. It's not about fulfilling the Jewish law or identifying with a certain ethnicity—all people have sinned (Rom. 3:23), therefore all people need God and His salvation. Jesus's life, death, and resurrection are the only bases for sinners to be reconciled to a holy God, regardless of their ethnicity or background. No other work or ceremony is necessary. To add to this firm foundation is to pervert the gospel (Gal. 1:8). Paul could not have been more clear on this important issue:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal. 3:28–29)

3. Take a minute to meditate on Galatians 3:28–29. Why do you think Paul made such a big deal about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles?

The Missionary Church

Proclaiming the gospel to a lost world cannot be just another activity to add to the church's crowded agenda. It must be central to who we are. It forms our identity. Being a follower of Christ means being a part of this mission. The gospel message was never intended to be a private matter. As Jesus told His disciples, "A city set on a hill cannot be hidden" (Matt. 5:14). The light was intended to invade the darkness. The entire New Testament is about Christ's redeeming the world and calling every nation on earth to praise Him for this.

When Jesus called the twelve disciples to follow Him, He promised to make them "fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:17). These disciples, some of them former fishermen, would now "fish" by telling people what they had heard and seen in Christ's ministry, death, and resurrection. Their goal was to be intentionally seeking new followers of Christ. Though Jesus certainly spoke about how we are to live our lives, His instructions were far more than an ethical code to be admired. He was preparing His followers to engage in the battle for souls.

In our modern world, it is increasingly popular to keep your faith to yourself, to not "push your beliefs on others." But according to Jesus's commands, our faith is anything but private. He tells us to proclaim His message everywhere and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20). These are our marching orders, regardless of whether or not the world approves.

Every aspect of our world has been stained by sin and death. From the very beginning, God has had one plan of redemption, a plan that reached its culmination in the person of Jesus Christ. The people around us may not realize that they are lost and broken (though they often do), but the world is in desperate need of redemption. God is working to set this broken world to rights. As we will see in the next session, this will not be fully

accomplished until the story ends. But He has given His church the task of sharing His good news and bringing healing to that which is broken.

4. What does it mean to be a "fisher of men"?

5. Is there anything about your life that would identify you as a "fisher of men"? If so, what? If not, what can you do to grow in this area?

We all have a responsibility to take part in this mission, but we will all play different roles. Some of us will be sharing the gospel in some remote jungle or deep within Muslim territory. Others will be sharing the gospel locally while training others to go to the less-reached areas. Those who feel called to spread the gospel locally should still pray diligently and give sacrificially for those who leave. We all have to be involved. Carrying the good news into every corner of the world is the mission that Jesus left for us. Missions cannot simply be a department of your church. It should be a vital consideration in everything your church does. A church that does not care about reaching the nations is not a church in the New Testament sense. It's our identity. It cannot be neglected without compromising who we are and dishonoring the One we claim to serve.

6. How would you describe your church's attitude toward and participation in spreading the gospel to all nations? How might you encourage your church to work toward this end?

7. What is your own involvement with missions? Are you at all involved in going, sending, training, supplying, praying, etc.? What changes might you need to make to this area of your life?

The Multicultural Community of the Redeemed

The book of Revelation assures us that God's purpose to save people from "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9) *will* succeed. Let there be no confusion: God's mission cannot fail!

While aspects of Revelation can be confusing for all of us at times, it clearly teaches that God will redeem a people from all parts of the earth through the death of His Son, Jesus Christ. It seems the apostle John (the author of Revelation) was overwhelmed as he wrote:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9–10)

This picture of worship in the book of Revelation should give us confidence in our great God. All authority belongs to Him, and His plans always succeed. Therefore, we should have confidence as we reach out to the world around us. Because the Holy Spirit empowers us, we can be certain that our effort to make disciples of all nations is not futile. With God on our side, victory is assured. If God is for us, who can be against us

(Rom. 8:31)? Even when we are rejected and endure suffering for our witness, God is completely in control. The power of the gospel will ultimately prevail. So, pray, go, share, and rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ.

8. How does this picture of a multiethnic multitude worshipping God at the end of history affect the way you think about our task of reaching out to the nations?

9. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to give you a burning desire to see the good news of Jesus Christ embraced in every corner of the world. Ask Him to show you what part He wants you to play in seeing His name spread around the world.

Watch the video for this session at <u>multiplymovement.com</u>.

Part V: Understanding the New Testament

6: The End of the Story

The more we think about the end, the stronger and more effective we will be as Christians. It keeps us focused on the goal. It reminds us that God is not finished working and that everything will be accomplished in God's perfect timing.

How often do you meditate on the way the world will end?

With this session, we come to the end of the biblical storyline. As we have seen, God's good world fell under the power of the curse after Adam and Eve rejected the reign of their King. The Bible recounts God's plan of redemption as it plays out in the promises to Abraham, the exodus of Israel, the Law of Moses, and the royal throne of David. This plan of redemption reaches its culmination in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and carries into the life of the church as Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to empower His people to continue God's mission.

In essence, the story of the Bible follows God's actions as He works out His plan to reverse the effects of the fall. God created human beings in His own image and placed them in the midst of His good world to shape it and lovingly rule over it on His behalf. But from the moment Adam and Eve rebelled against God, this world has been under the curse, stained by sin and death. As Paul put it, the entire creation is groaning to be set free from its bondage to corruption (Rom. 8:19–22). God's comprehensive plan of redemption is to reverse everything that sin has done to corrupt this world. The Bible begins with the statement that "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" and ends with God's declaration: "Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

The Beginning of the End

We can't talk about the end without talking about Jesus. Our final salvation is coming at the end of history when Jesus returns. But that salvation has already been purchased and secured. Jesus assured us of this when He announced from the cross: "It is finished" (John 19:30). Whatever will take place in the future, our hope is secured in the reality that Jesus has acted decisively in history and restored our broken relationship with God. Jesus's life, death, and resurrection were not just *a part* of the story of redemption; they were the climax. This was where Eve's descendant crushed the head of the Enemy (Gen. 3:15).

Because of what Jesus has done on our behalf, history is moving toward a glorious end. Just as history changed when Jesus came to earth, everything will be changed again when He returns (an event we refer to as "the Second Coming"). The author of Hebrews explained the significance of both of Jesus's appearances on earth:

He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Heb. 9:26–28)

Jesus appeared the first time to sacrifice Himself and secure our salvation, and He will appear again to bring that salvation to fruition. This is the future that history is moving toward. This is how the world will end.

Christians tend to disagree about many points of theology, especially when it comes to future events. Theological camps have formed around differing views of how the end times will unfold. Much of the disagreement centers on the precise timeline of end-times prophecies. Some of these Old and New Testament prophecies are notoriously difficult to interpret. Because some of these concepts are tough and have at times caused division, many choose to avoid the topic altogether—as if the end of the world isn't really that big of a deal. But Jesus often spoke about the end. In fact, holding on to the promise of the end can help to carry us through difficult situations today. As Christians, peace comes from knowing our pain will end. Joy results from our confidence that Jesus is returning to make all things new.

It would be wrong for us to ignore end-times events, but there are some issues that are too complex to sort out here. We will focus on the big picture and the concepts that God clearly wants us to recognize in these prophecies.

1. Have you done much studying or thinking on how and when the world will end? If so, what has been your impression of the end times? If not, why do you think you haven't approached this issue in the past?

What We've All Been Longing For

Throughout history, humanity has not been able to shake the feeling that there is something wrong with the world. People have tried to blame God, political leaders, religions, and just about everyone and everything else for the disappointment we feel about the state of the world. We see the problem in the crimes we hear about on the news, and also in the frustrations and injustices we experience in our daily lives. This problem even permeates

the very thoughts that pass through our minds. There is something fundamentally wrong with the world, and it pervades every aspect of our existence.

As Christians, we see some of the effects of the fall reversed in our lives. The gospel has freed us from bondage to sin (Rom. 6), and the Spirit of God enables us to follow Jesus in ways that non-Christians cannot (Rom. 8 and Gal. 5). But we also experience an added struggle—Paul promised that everyone who desires to live a godly life will experience persecution (2 Tim. 3:12). We experience the joy of the Lord, but life in a fallen world is difficult and often disappointing.

We are called to faithfully follow Jesus in the midst of this sin-stained world, but we also have the sweet promise that it won't be like this forever. Jesus will return, and the world will be set to rights. Whereas we now experience injustice, God will bring justice. Where there is division, God will bring peace. Where there is sin, God will bring righteousness. This is the promise that carries us along when we feel as though this world is too broken to be fixed or that we are too weak to endure much longer.

2. Read Romans 8:18–25. How does this promise affect your view of the world?

The Return of the King

The most important thing that we should understand about the future is that Jesus is coming back. When He returned to His Father, He left the church to carry on His mission and sent the Holy Spirit to empower us for the task.

But Jesus is not done with this world. He will return, and when He does, He will rule over a perfect, peaceful, re-created earth.

Read the first chapter of Revelation and you will quickly see that Jesus's second coming will be much different from His first. The meek Servant, once ridiculed and spat upon, is shown to be the Ruler of the universe and worthy to be feared. At His return, Jesus will bring final salvation to His people, restore justice to the earth, and destroy all of God's enemies. The book of Revelation records fierce warfare and portrays Jesus as a conquering King, boldly reclaiming the world that rightfully belongs to Him (Rev. 19). As weak as the church has seemed at some points in history, as persecuted and defeated as we sometimes feel, this is what lies in our future.

God's plan of redemption has never been contingent. There has never been any doubt about the way history will end. This is God's world; He created it; He vowed to reclaim it; He died to purchase His people, and finally, when the time arrives, He will come and take this world by force. Paul illustrated the reality of this last day powerfully:

Therefore [because of Jesus's obedience and sacrifice] God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9–11)

No matter how much opposition we face, the day will come when everyone will see Jesus for who He truly is. His reign will finally be realized on earth in the same way that it has always been realized in heaven. 3. Read Revelation 1. Based on this description of Jesus, how will Jesus in His second coming be different from in His first coming?

The New Heavens and New Earth

Turn to the last pages of the Bible and you will find a beautiful picture of creation restored. The first chapters of Genesis and the last chapters of Revelation function as bookends to God's plan of redemption. In Genesis, God created all things and called them "good" (Gen. 1–2). People were created to have fellowship with God and to reflect His glory as a ruling steward of creation. In similar fashion, the Bible ends with a picture of a new creation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1). This new creation was anticipated in the Old Testament, so it is no accident that Revelation describes the new creation using imagery from both the garden in Eden and the temple in Jerusalem. These locations, the garden and the temple, were God's meeting places with humanity. The leaves of the tree of life will now bring healing, and the river of the water of life will flow from God's throne (22:1–2). There is also a new Jerusalem; only this holy city has no need for a temple building, because "its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (21:22).

Everything about the old creation that has been marred by sin and death is no more, for God has made all things new. The new creation will be so full of joy that it seems difficult to fathom. But the best news about this new creation, this eternal paradise, is not that the flowers will be more beautiful or the grass will be greener, or even that our bodies will be free from disease (as great as those things will be); rather, the greatest feature of the

new creation is that we will have perfect communion with God. Listen to how John put it: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (21:3). This statement echoes the covenants that God made with His people from the very beginning, and it points toward the reality that we are all longing for. Imagine what it will be like to physically see our Holy God dwelling with us.

This fellowship with God extends far beyond one man (as in the case of Abraham) or one nation (as in the case of Israel). We read of people from "every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9) who will be worshipping at Jesus's throne. The command that Jesus gave in the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations will finally be fulfilled. God's purposes for this world will finally be accomplished. Redemption will be completed.

4. Read Revelation 21–22. As you read this beautiful description of the New Creation, don't get caught up in trying to interpret every detail. Instead, try to picture and feel the beauty and peace of the scene that awaits us. What stands out to you most from reading this account?

5. Based on what you read in Revelation 21–22 and what you read and discussed in the session on creation, how will God's new creation reflect the reality of God's initial creation before the fall? How will it be better?

A Day of Judgment

There is also a horrifying flip side to this glorious consummation in Revelation. Everlasting judgment awaits those who have rejected God and opposed His people. Sin will be seen for what it is—not an inconsequential part of life, but a serious affront to God. Those who do evil will be kept out of the glorious city. Christ will judge people according to what they have done (22:12), and only those who are united to Jesus will be allowed to enter. The rest will be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11–15).

This should cause us to literally tremble as we think of those who have not submitted to Jesus as Lord (see Rom. 9:1–3). Our mission to those who are lost could not be more urgent. The unreached people groups across the globe and our next-door neighbors need to hear the only message that can save them.

What about you? Do you understand the extent to which sin stains your life and separates you from the Holy God of the universe? Do you see your rebellion for what it is? Have you embraced the sacrifice that Jesus made to remove your sin and restore your relationship with God? Or are you under the illusion that your own moral effort will grant you access to God's everlasting rest? Hear Jesus's words: "To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment" (21:6). Come, believe, and drink freely.

6. How should the promise of judgment at Jesus's return affect the way we think about and interact with the non-Christians in our lives?

7. Is there anyone in your life whom you need to be more purposeful in reaching out to? If so, spend some time asking the Holy Spirit to give you confidence and wisdom in reaching out to this person with the gospel.

Living with the End in View

The message of Revelation has huge implications for the way we live our lives today. It's not just about what will happen in the future. Just as God's actions in the past should affect the way we live today, so God's actions in the future should shape everything we do now. One of the strongest features of the book of Revelation is its encouragement to remain faithful in the midst of seemingly hopeless circumstances.

When the apostle John wrote Revelation, he was in exile on the isle of Patmos. He was banished there because he refused to stop preaching the gospel (Rev. 1:9). As he waited in exile, God gave John a glimpse of the world as it really is, and as it really will be in the future. Although the then-dominant Roman Empire seemed to be in control of the known world, John received a different picture of reality—he saw the world as God sees it. The book of Revelation essentially conveys this message to seven churches during the first century AD, and by extension, to all Christians.

The message to the seven churches in Revelation, and to us today, is that we cannot let go of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Although we may face opposition and suffering, Jesus is reigning over every earthly authority. The judgment that is coming upon those who reject Christ is terrible, but believers should long for Christ's return, since their ultimate destination is a new creation. God's purposes will ultimately succeed, and the good news

will be proclaimed and believed in every part of the earth. Revelation calls those who don't follow Jesus to repent and receive the salvation Jesus offers before it is too late. It also calls those who are followers of Jesus to stand strong until the end.

Peter warned us that in the last days, people will mock us for believing that Jesus will return: "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation" (2 Pet. 3:4). In other words, "We haven't seen Him do anything to punish the wicked, so why should we believe that there will be a day of judgment?" Peter's answer offers us great hope:

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. (2 Pet. Make no mistake, Jesus is returning. He is patiently waiting for the men and women He created to repent, but He will not wait forever. The day will come when this world that He created will be purified by fire, just as the world was purified by a flood in Noah's day. The reality of judgment and the promise of the new heavens and new earth should motivate us to remain faithful to Jesus now. We do not need to doubt that God's plan of redemption will come to completion, but the end toward which history is headed should set our agenda for today.

8. How should the end of the story affect the way we live today? Be as specific to your own situation as possible.

Why We Make Disciples

The Bible ends with these words: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen" (Rev. 22:20–21). Our God- given task is to reach into every corner of creation and make disciples of all nations. Jesus gave us this command when He left, and He is coming again soon.

This life is about Jesus and His glory. Our mission is about God and His plan of redemption. We have seen God's story of redemption unfold from the moment Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit until the early church spread the good news about Jesus around the known world. The church also has a two-thousand-year history of continuing the mission of making disciples and spreading the gospel around the world (though we have not

always done this perfectly). And in this session, we have seen where the story will end.

We can follow the storyline from beginning to end, yet there is one gap that still remains in the story, and that is the part that we are called to play. The end of the story has been written, but we still have a responsibility to faithfully play our part. The hope and healing of the gospel still needs to reach people all around the world *today*. This moment has been entrusted to us by God. Making disciples has always been the calling of the church, and it is our responsibility to be devoted to that end.

Jesus said,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:18–20)

The King has full authority, and He has given us this command. He will be with us always, even to the end of the age. We don't know exactly when the end will come, but we know that making disciples is what we need to be doing. Let us pray that when Jesus returns, He will find us faithfully pursuing His mission with the skills, relationships, and resources that He has entrusted to us.

9. Spend some time in prayer. Thank God that Jesus will return to set the world to rights and that His plan of redemption will be completed. Ask God to affect your heart with the reality of what the future holds. Ask Him to guide you and empower you to live as a faithful disciple maker at this moment in history.



*Watch the video for this session at multiplymovement.com.

Conclusion

Where Do We Go from Here?

Now that you have finished *Multiply*, we want to be clear that you're not done. The call to make disciples is not about getting through a book, completing a set number of sessions, or growing from Point A to Point B. The mission we have been given claims every aspect of our lives from now until the day we die or Christ returns. Completing this material is a milestone, but it is not the end.

So where do we go from here?

First, understand that reading about the Bible is not a substitute for actually reading the Bible. We trust that what we have written here has given you some helpful tools and perspective on what the Bible is and how to study it carefully and obediently. But if you stop here, then it has all been a huge waste of time. The point is that you go on from here to spend a lifetime of reading God's Word and doing what it says.

It is helpful to read and talk about the Bible, but remember that there is something unique about actually reading the Bible directly. God's Word is actually *living* and *active* (Heb. 4:12). It gets inside of you; it transforms you from within. We should talk about God's truth often. But we can't talk about God's Word if we are not reading it regularly. We need to be saturating ourselves in Scripture so that it naturally comes out in every area of our lives.

Reading the Bible is simple, but if you discipline yourself to make it a regular part of your life, it will transform you in more ways than you can imagine. Obviously you will want to read as much of the Bible as you can, but don't let your ambition become a roadblock. Some people have the time

and ability to read larger sections of Scripture than others. Start with an attainable goal, and if you find that you are able to read more than you planned, that's great. All of the Bible is important, but it's not about how much you can read in a single sitting. It's about allowing God to speak to you through His Word and responding in obedience and faith.

With each section of Scripture you read ask yourself two questions:

- 1. What is God saying in this passage?
- 2. How am I going to respond?

Be sure to use the skills you learned in Part III about studying the Bible.

Second, don't let this be the end of your disciple making. If you have just finished walking someone through this material, then begin reading through books of the Bible with that person. Choose a passage of Scripture that you will read through, then get together and talk about what you learned. You're going to find plenty of things in each passage that you don't understand fully. That's okay. It's not about knowing everything. There are answers out there, but being a disciple maker is not about knowing all of the answers. It's about being committed to following Jesus and taking seriously His command to help other people follow Him more fully.

As you meet with the person you are discipling, don't worry about overpreparing. Study the passage on your own, then get together and share what stood out to each of you. What did you learn? What does God seem to be saying? What questions do you have? How should these truths be applied to your life? How can you help each other faithfully follow Jesus in light of this passage of Scripture?

Discussing Scripture in this way is not simply a means of becoming more knowledgeable, it is a way of building a relationship that is focused on God

and saturated in His Word. God's Word will constantly challenge and transform you.

Finally, we encourage you to find someone else to take through *Multiply*. If you have been walking someone through this material, keep reading the Bible with that person and find someone else to begin this process with. If you have just been guided through the material by someone else, then take what you have learned and walk someone else through it.

Paul showed the multiplying effect of disciple making when he told Timothy: "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). The process never ends. This is how the church grows and continues to build itself up. This is the mission that Jesus left for us, and it is what we want to be found doing when He returns.

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CRAZY LOVE

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FORGOTTEN GOD

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ERASING HELL

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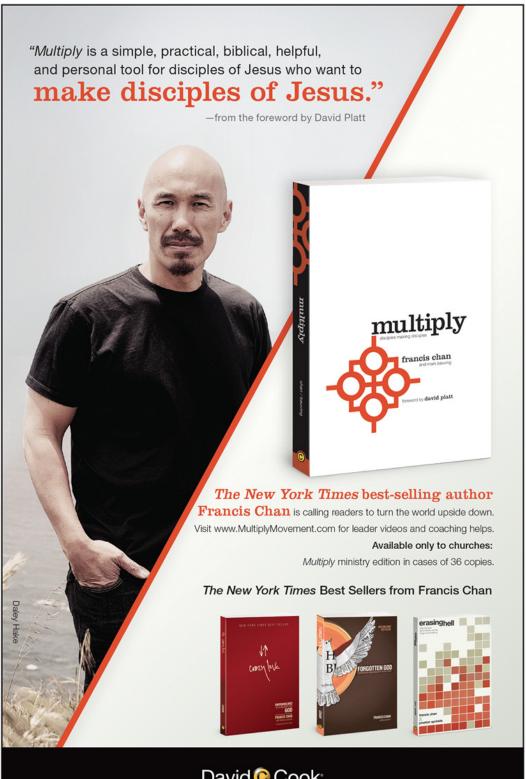
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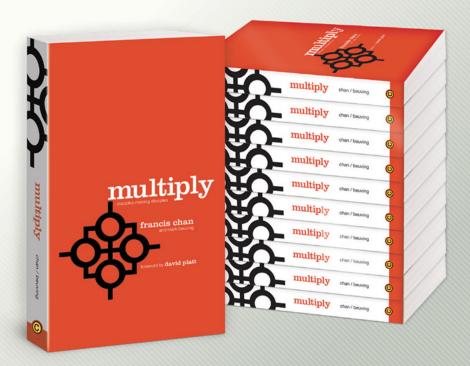
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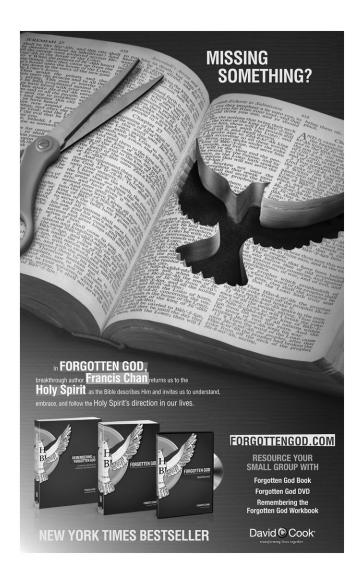
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