



TRINITY

Alive!



ON THE JOURNEY TO BECOMING FULLY ALIVE IN CHRIST

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The title is enclosed in a black rectangular frame. 'ALIVE!' is in large, bold, black, sans-serif capital letters. 'on the' is in a smaller, black, cursive script. 'JOURNEY TO BECOMING FULLY ALIVE' is in a black, outlined, sans-serif font. 'IN Christ' is in a black, cursive script.

INTRODUCTION BY DOUGLAS J. RUMFORD

"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (Jesus in John 10:10, English Standard Version [ESV]).

What would it be like to wake up every day with joy? With the sense of God being "right there" with you throughout the day and night? What would it be like to be calm in the midst of real pressure, and to feel confident that you know who you are and what you're all about? What would it be like to have a group of genuine friends who love you for who you are and are there for you when you need them most? What would it be like to be able to forgive yourself and move on constructively from mistakes and bad choices? What would it be like to be able to love, really love those around you every day? What would it be like to have no fear of failure and "go for it," pursuing the dreams God has put on your heart? I guess what I'm asking is: What would it be like to live the abundant life Jesus promises us?

Jesus Christ died and rose again to change lives. He came for us to have Life, with a capital "L." Too often, however, Jesus' followers live like "practical atheists," without any thought for God's involvement in daily life. ***God wants to set us free from our limited expectations for the Christian life.*** We may, for example, think faith is really about giving us comfort in thinking about life after death. But what about life *before* death? What does God want for us in this life?

A wonderful statement attributed to Irenaeus (Bishop in the area of Lyon, France about 150 years following Jesus' death and resurrection), is that "The glory of God is man [humanity] fully alive." Even as parents rejoice in the maturing and accomplishments of their growing children, so God rejoices when "we grow up in every way into... Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). Jesus did not die so we could stay the same. Paul expressed God's goodness and promise to us when he described "the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:27-28).

ALIVE! ON THE JOURNEY TO BECOMING FULLY ALIVE IN CHRIST is a course designed to help you experience what it's like to become mature in Christ. *ALIVE!* presents a definition of discipleship (following Jesus daily) modeled on six characteristics we believe best represent what it means to be fully alive in Christ. We believe a person fully alive in Christ:

- Creates life-giving community
- Passionately loves God
- Hungers for God's Word
- Pursues God's call
- Joyfully reveals the Good News
- Demonstrates Christ-like character

ALIVE! provides the vision, motivation, resources and support for you to enter into an experience of accelerated spiritual growth, both personally and in community.

We hope that every person going through this material will make some lifestyle changes and adjustments in various areas of their life: to care more intentionally for their spiritual life and to live the Abundant Life. One way to quantify these next steps is to take at least one step in becoming more like Jesus in our upward connection with God, one step in our developing our inner strength through personal growth and one step in developing our outward focus through serving.

So now we share this joyfully and with great anticipation. Take the next step on your life long journey with this study. Spiritual growth is not automatic. As Paul says, it's like a faithful farmer, sowing consistently for a fruitful harvest. Our prayer is that you will discover the joy of God's vision for becoming fully alive in Christ.

"Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (Colossians 2:6,7, ESV).

FORMAT

Devotional- The course is six weeks long, but we hope it will lay the foundation for your continuing journey of faith long after it ends. The format for each chapter consists of an introduction that presents the overall theme of the week, followed by three studies on various aspects of the weekly theme. We've provided questions for reflection that can guide your journaling and also be the basis for small group discussion.

Small Groups- Your experience of this study will be most effective if it includes both personal preparation and small group discussion. We encourage you to use this with your existing small group, if you are in one, or form a group for this experience which could continue afterwards.

Families- We have provided a question or activity for family discussion called "Around the Table," which could be a regular part of a family meal time or family devotions. We pray this series will be a catalyst for taking steps in fostering spiritual growth in your family.

Going Deeper- The end of each week will feature a "Going Deeper" section with additional resources and suggested books as you continue to dive into the various topics.

The Creative Development Team for *ALIVE! ON THE JOURNEY TO BECOMING FULLY ALIVE IN CHRIST* is drawn from the LEAD and Program Teams of Trinity United Presbyterian Church, Santa Ana, CA. Details on the contributors are in the end materials.

WEEK 1

A PERSON WHO IS FULLY ALIVE
 in CHRIST
 creates
 LIFE-GIVING
 COMMUNITY

FROM ME TO WE

Where are the people who care, really care, about you? Who are the people about whom you are really concerned and for whom you care? Where are the relationships in which you can be real? Where you can let down your guard and feel safe? Where do you turn when a crisis hits? Where's your community?

American culture emphasizes individualism. We tend to idolize the loner who is independent and self-reliant. The heroes of many action-adventure movies are individuals. The anthem of many is Frank Sinatra's song, "I Did It My Way!"

There is a very sobering consequence to this individualism: long-term loneliness, especially in our later years. In *Lifetrends: The Future of Baby Boomers and Other Aging Americans* (New York: Macmillan, 1989) Jerry Gerber and a number of sociologists reflect on the breakdown of community in America:

"The future of the American family will be profoundly influenced by a cluster of unprecedented demographic developments: low birth and mortality rates, high divorce rates, and an increasing number of people who never marry. Taken together, these trends mean that many people will live a substantial portion of their later years without any immediate family because they will have few or no living children or grandchildren. ... Everyone needs an intimate social support network of one kind or another. Where the family no longer fills this need, other kinds of relationships will have to be invented."

One of the most chilling statements in this study was offered by one suburban woman who said, "It's getting to the point around here where you're going to have to hire somebody to cry at your funeral."

We could write volumes about the origins of this problem in our day, but the good news is that there is a solution!

Jesus presented a much different way of life for his followers. Even Jesus didn't try to "go it alone." He began his ministry by surrounding himself with a community of followers. Within that community he had various levels of relationships. His closest associations seemed to be with Peter, James and John. Then there were the rest of the 12. But he also had special relationships with the sisters, Mary and Martha, and other women who were among those learning from him (Luke 8:1-3).

The early church continued this emphasis on community. Two passages describe the wonderful fellowship of those first believers.

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47, ESV).

In Acts 4, we read how some of them even shared freely of their earthly possessions:

“Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 4:32-37, ESV).

These passages present a number of the practical and spiritual benefits of community. First, their generosity provided for everyone’s needs. Second, the unity in the community was a powerful witness to Jesus’ resurrection and the new life he offered to all who believe. It’s noticeable when people live in the power and promise of the Living Lord Jesus! In fact, authentic Christian fellowship can sow the seeds of revival.

In *The Calvary Road*, Roy and Revel Hession writes:

“Revival is desperately needed in the church—in the country—in the world; but a revived church with unrevived homes would be sheer hypocrisy. It is the hardest place, the most costly, but the most necessary place to begin. But before we go

on, let us remind ourselves again of what revival really is...It is not man’s life, but God’s life, the life of Jesus filling us and flowing through us. That life is manifested in fellowship and oneness with those with whom we live—nothing between us and God, and nothing between us and others” (Mains, Dr. David, The Bible for Personal Use, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervanm, 1998).

It’s an old cliché for sure, but there is a great deal of truth in the saying that “The family that prays together, stays together.”

A person who is fully alive in Christ creates life-giving community. We engage in name-knowing, and need-knowing fellowship in which we value, encourage, challenge and care for each other. In Genesis 2, God first said, “It is not good for [a person] to be alone.” God called us together, moving us from “me” to “we,” because we are stronger together in the synergy of community.



DAY 1: CREATED
for
COMMUNITY

I remember watching the Angels go to their first World Series. They started the season with their worst record in history and ended by narrowly snatching a playoff berth. They had their fans biting their fingernails through it all, coming back from five-run deficits, injuries, and heart-wrenching defeats. Then the unthinkable happened. They came back yet again to win the championship. I could hear celebration erupt in houses throughout my neighborhood. I remember high fiving friends and even complete strangers at the stadium. It didn't matter their age or background. There was unity in that moment.

At the heart of all reality is a God who exists in perfect, unified community: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From the very beginning, God has been in relationship within Himself. If you and I are made in His image (Gen 1:27), then it makes sense that we should reflect this reality. In fact, Genesis says, "Let Us make [humanity] in Our image" (Gen 1:26). It is no wonder the one thing God said was "not good" in the Garden was for the man to be alone (Gen 2:18). We were not designed for isolation. Being a part of community is not optional; it is essential for us to live into that for which we were created. Evidence for this innate longing is all around us.

Whether it is a common sports team, friends in a similar life stage, or people in our neighborhood, we all have different types of communities. Studies have shown that strong communities are formed by shared experiences: the more intense the experience, the stronger the ties. Those who have gone through a life and death experience together share the strongest bonds.

When have you had a shared experience that brought you closer to others?

For Christians, we have been saved from death into new life because of Jesus. There is a unique togetherness and commitment we experience in Him. God invites us into a community that follows one Lord, exists as one body, and has one calling (Ephesians 4:17). This oneness is exemplified when Jesus first calls the disciples and then brings them together in community. They lived, ate, and had close spiritual and emotional contact with one another. In short, it was this life-changing and life-giving experience of the one Lord that grounded their life in community.

This gospel-centered community gives us a place for encouragement, help in times of struggle, and opportunity to love like Jesus.

What words would you use to describe your experience of Christian community?

We can talk about the value of community and even be given a beautiful portrait of what it could look like, but it cannot happen unless we show up. We hear the call in Hebrews:

"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25, NIV).

Jesus wants us to grow in both reflecting and receiving his love in community. For many, He is welcoming us back into the community for which we were created. He is saying, "Come follow me; it is not good for you to be alone."

What are the barriers and busyness that keep you from community?

What would it look like in your life to prioritize Christian community?

AROUND THE TABLE

A community which reflects God's love toward one another is one filled with encouragement and prayer. Share one way each person has reflected God's love this past week. Next share around the table a few ways you can pray for one another.

You could write requests on sticky-notes and post them somewhere you can't miss, to remind you to pray for one another throughout the day. Close your time by praying that God will grow all of you in the coming weeks.

DAY 2 welcome TO THE MESS

"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" (Acts 2: 42-44, ESV).

We all have probably been a part of a family dinner that has ended badly. The food gets cold, just another thing about which the family will complain, while arguing ensues. It is a shame so much work and preparation went into a time together that just ends with a fight and crying children. Every impulse is to call everyone off and just eat alone or with the distractions of technology. Without interaction things don't get so messy! There aren't any kids to throw the peas across the table, no family to get into disagreements with. There isn't as much cooking to do for just one. It is a kind of dysfunctional comfort.

For some of us, this is what our faith looks like. We arrive at the "dinner table" for community. We spend time at church. We see Christian friends throughout the week. We may even share prayer requests. But when it comes to letting others walk us through a difficult circumstance, or confess a sin, or challenge us in our walk, we excuse ourselves from the table. We much prefer that our church family either be neat and tidy or not at all.

What obstacles keep you from really entering into community?

Technology is one such obstacle. With the rise of cell phones and social media, it may seem we are more connected than ever. We share pictures, thoughts, and experiences with one another online (which can be great!), but can easily miss the in-person connection. We were created for something more.

How has technology impacted your engagement in community? Do you notice any patterns that have caused you to grow distant?

Our fears, past experiences, expectations, preferences and stereotypes can keep us from truly participating in life-giving community. Most of us have been conditioned not to ask ourselves hard questions or dive deeper into fellowship.

What past experiences may have impacted how you interact with community? Are there any unmet or unrealistic expectations which have negatively impacted your willingness to invest in the body of Christ?

In Christ, we can overcome these obstacles and sit down at a table of a compelling life-giving community, where our names and needs are known. Paul invites us to live into this calling:

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:1-6, NIV).

Spend some time praying for God to both reveal obstacles and empower you to take practical steps to grow in community.

AROUND THE TABLE

Share one of your favorite memories you have as a family. Was it a family vacation, a holiday spent together, or just playing a board game? What made that moment so special? Brainstorm with your family what distracts you from spending quality time together. Spend time planning a future family time to be together.



"The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community"
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*).

Community does not happen by complaining about others or just wishing they would be better people. **When it comes to community, we need to be thermostats not thermometers.** A thermometer simply reflects the temperature in the room. We are a thermometer when we let the words and actions of others drive us. We let these obstacles limit our engagement in the community God created us for. We are called to be a thermostat with the ability to change the temperature. The gospel empowers us to be those who give life to life-giving community.

Changing the Climate of a Community

There are several ways we can affect the "temperature" of the Body of Christ at Trinity. We can make positive change through:

Authenticity- People may be impressed by our success, but they connect through our weaknesses. We grow into being a community fully alive in Christ as we share our doubts, fears, and failures. We can only grow towards being whole when we acknowledge what is broken about us. This atmosphere of authenticity can begin with just one person. Consider making the

first move towards authenticity in your communities.

"Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another" (James 5:16a, ESV).

How have you seen authenticity deepen your relationships?

Humble Care- In Christ, we are free to no longer just focus on our own needs; we can be the host. Jesus knew Judas would betray him right when he met him, yet still he welcomed him. By God's grace and mercy even in our sin we were welcomed. In community, we are called to practice the welcoming love of Jesus to all in response to Christ's love for us. It isn't easy, but it is good.

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Philippians 2:3, NIV).

What opportunity do you have to practice Jesus' welcoming love today?

Shared Burdens- "Their needs" are now our needs. In a body, if the hand bleeds, then the whole body is bleeding. If one part is in pain, then the whole body is in pain. In Ephesians 4, Paul calls us to understand that we are so connected with one another that we feel each other's pain, we carry one another's burdens. In verse 2, he invites us to "bear with one another in love with all humility and gentleness, and with patience."

"Live creatively, friends. If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore him, saving your critical comments for yourself. You might be needing forgiveness before the day's out. Stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens, and so complete Christ's law. If you think you are too good for that, you are badly deceived" (Galatians 6:1-3, *The Message [MSG]*).

Have you had someone walk with you in a difficult time? What was helpful about how they responded to your needs?

WEEK 2

A PERSON WHO IS FULLY ALIVE
 in CHRIST
 PASSIONATELY
 LOVES GOD

A SACRED ROMANCE

It is not easy to capture the emotive reality that God loves us. Too often “God” is an abstract concept, distant and foreboding. Or God is an object of debate and speculation. In some religious systems, god is an impersonal, amorphous state of being. The God of the Bible, however, is a powerful, energetic, and deeply personal God who is actively involved in this world and in our lives. Our God reveals Himself in poignant images of tender loving care:

*“Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you”
 (Isaiah 49:15, ESV).*

*“When Israel was a child, I loved him,
 and out of Egypt I called my son.
 The more they were called,
 the more they went away...
 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
 I took them up by their arms,
 but they did not know that I healed them.
 I led them with cords of kindness,
 with the bands of love,
 and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws,
 and I bent down to them and fed them” (Hosea 11:1-4, ESV).*

A. W. Tozer wrote, “What we think about God is the most important thing about us.” Our assumptions about God have profound implications for what we believe and how we behave. Wrong ideas lead to wrong decisions. Some think God is a cosmic law officer who has them constantly “on the radar” to catch them in wrong-doing. Others think of God as a “supernatural Santa Claus” who is all about giving us good gifts, health, and prosperity. Still others think of God as distant, aloof, and totally disinterested in our world and our lives. What you believe makes all the difference. Those who read God’s Word carefully get to know the grace, mercy, love and compassion of our God that passes all understanding.

A person who is fully alive in Christ passionately loves God. We experience Christ moment-by-moment through vital fellowship, worship,

gratitude, and grace that set us free to live with joy and purpose. In Hosea, God clearly communicates his great and tender mercy. When we truly know God in all His wonder and grace, we are in awe that God wants a personal relationship with us, as modeled by Jesus in the Gospels. As Isaac Watts's great hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" says, "Love so amazing, so divine demands my life, my soul, my all."

THIS MAY NOT BE AN EMOTION WE ALWAYS FEEL, BUT IT WILL BE A REALITY WE EXPERIENCE. Our love for God grows when we replace our misconceptions about God with the truth about his greatness, goodness and grace. Know God more fully to love God more completely.

DAY 1: NEEDING GOD'S love

"We love because God first loved us" 1 John 4:19 (NIV).

Complete the sentence: One thing I feel passionate about is _____

We live in a world where people are passionate about all kinds of things—pumpkin spice lattes, sports teams, acts of service, political parties, and the list goes on. But what about passion for God?

Where does this love begin? If we desire to passionately love God, then we must first realize that God passionately loves us. We see God's passion for us first in the Garden of Eden – Adam and Eve sinned and broke their perfect relationship with God. Their sin made them hide. What did God do?

"And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:8-9, ESV).

God – because of His great and passionate love – sought them out.

And God pursues us with that same question and opportunity to be in a relationship with Him – no matter what we have done or how we hide from Him. God's desire is to be in a relationship with me and with you. It is central to who He is. He would do anything to restore, maintain and grow that relationship. God loves you and me with a passionate, never-ending, and logic-defying love.

When was a time in your life that you were aware of God seeking you out?

"The Lord appeared to him from afar, saying, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore I have drawn you with steadfast love" (Jeremiah 31:3, Holman Christian Study Bible [HCSB]).

Sit with that Scripture for a minute. Often our hearts can grow numb to those words. Hear them afresh.

How do you respond to these words from God?

Let's take a closer look at this verse, specifically what it says about God's love.

First, God's love is everlasting. Whereas human love is so quick to grow weary and faint, the love of God endures.

The next thing to notice is that God's love is steadfast. This word is a bit tricky, but it is so important. The Hebrew word **חֶסֶד** (*hesed*) is often translated as "lovingkindness" or "loving faithfulness." Ultimately, this is the word used to describe God's fundamental way of relating to His people: His steadfast love "fills the earth" (Psalm 33:5) and "endures forever" (Psalm 136).

In Jeremiah 31, it is God's *hesed* that "draws" the people who were "far" into relationship with Him as well as the rest of the community. Not only that, but it is God's *hesed* that then constitutes and drives the way God's people live and interact with one another. Whether it be between family members (Genesis 20:13), friends (1 Samuel 20:8, 14), or a king and his subjects, God demands that *hesed* be the fundamental principle governing our relationships (Micah 6:8).

Ultimately, this steadfast love is defined and embodied in its fullness on the cross. There, Jesus both teaches us what it truly means to love and motivates us to do so: *"We love because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19, NIV).*

His love for us is real and powerful and dependent only on who He is, not our "niceness" or good works or how we measure up to the people around us. We are sinful humans – God knows us and still loves us.

"Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I stand up; You understand my thoughts from far away. You observe my travels and my rest; You are aware of all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue, You know all about it, Lord. You have encircled me; You have placed Your hand on me. This extraordinary knowledge is beyond me. It is lofty; I am unable to reach it" (Psalm 139:1-6, HCSB).

As you read the verses above what thoughts come to mind?

Spend time in prayer and reflection remembering that it is God who made you, knows you, rescued you, and loves you with all His heart. You may pray something like this- "Help me to passionately love you Lord and grow in understanding of what that means. Change my heart Lord. May I be more like You in how I see myself and how I see others."

Knowing that you are loved by the eternal God, close your time by writing a note of thanksgiving to Him.

AROUND THE TABLE

Play a game of hide-and-seek or Sardines in the dark as a family. Why do you think Adam and Eve were trying to hide from God? Are there times when we want to hide from God, too? Read Romans 8:38-39 and make a list of things that can separate you from God's love. Hang your list somewhere in your house.

DAY 2: RECEIVING

GOD'S
Love

We remember God's passionate love for us in the Passion of Christ:

"Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all." (Isaiah 53:4-6, New Living Translation [NLT]).

At some point our passion for God must begin with an appreciation of God's love for us – and what his passion – made him willing to do; to give his only Son, Jesus Christ.

"God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure" (Ephesians 1:5, NLT).

We must walk in that truth each day, meditate on it, and reflect that hope to the world around us.

Take a few minutes to write your response to God for His passion for you – receive it and thank Him for it.

"For God so loved _____ (your name here) that He gave His only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life" (John 3:16, NIV).

As Christians, we are learning to live and breathe and walk daily in a relationship with God through Jesus.

We can't just decide, "Hey, I think I will love God more today!" We are immersed in a culture that teaches us what to love and trains us to be passionate about certain things. In Colossians 3, Paul describes how we might counter this influence and come to love God better.

First, loving God comes in recognition that we are "beloved" of God (3:12). Only by recognizing God's love for us will we then be able to love. Paul then exhorts us to put on love by letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly; by teaching and admonishing one another; by singing psalms, hymns, and songs (3:16). In other words, the practices of Christian worship recalibrate our hearts and train our love. As we walk with Jesus in these practices, He begins to open our hearts to loving Him more and more. But this process is far from immediate. It takes time!

It's like the Velveteen Rabbit that could only become real by losing all the bright and shininess by being touched.

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand!" (Williams, Margery, The Velveteen Rabbit).

We grow in our passion for God as we set our eyes on Jesus – and off of ourselves (Colossians 3:1). When we become like Him, so many of the things that might have previously distracted us are put into a new perspective.

What about you? What new perspective do you gain as you grow in understanding God's love for you?

"Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and Grace" (Helen Howarth Lemmel).

AROUND THE TABLE



Find time to bake a cake or some brownies together. While you are enjoying this homemade treat discuss the following: What were the ingredients we used? What did we do first, next and last? How long did it take until we had our treat? As your family learns to passionately love God, know that it's a process and will take some time. What are some "ingredients" that you can commit to as a family that, over time, will transform the way you receive and share God's love?

DAY 3: *sharing* GOD'S *love*

I remember walking to school as an elementary student – no one wanted to walk alone. Everyone wanted to walk with the right crowd – the cool kids. The ones with just the right bell bottoms and the vests with fringe (this was the 60's after all). Everyone knew who 'they' were, and I was decidedly not one of them. But if I timed it just right, and walked not too fast and not too slow, there was a chance I just might reach the corner at the right moment and become part of the "cool kids" pack shuffling together to school.

Contrast that scenario with God – waiting for you, encouraging you, delighting in you. Put yourself in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-51). How his father saw him is how God sees you.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20, NIV).

God wants us to walk with Him! This is the daily joy and comfort of being a Christ follower. We are now fully identified as God's children, and that relationship has eternal consequences and immediate rewards.

"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1, NIV).

But things get in the way, and we often choose to devote ourselves to various idols.

"When anything in life is an absolute requirement for your happiness and self-worth, it is essentially an 'idol,' something you are actually worshipping" (Keller, Timothy J., *Counterfeit Gods*).

"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24, NIV).

As you seek to passionately love God – what idols have tended to vie for God's place in your life?

Spend a couple of minutes in prayer surrendering these idols over to God.

One practical way Jesus says we demonstrate our love for God is through sharing that love with others.

"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, ESV).

We are to be like Christ in the way we love others. It will not always be easy. Remember when He washed everyone's stinky feet? Jesus said in John 13:15, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

Take a moment to reflect, how is your love for the people in your life?

Where might you begin loving others as an outpouring of your passionate love for God?

We are challenged by the words of Jesus to Simon Peter after his denials. When Jesus rose again He sought Peter out –

"He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' and he said to Him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep'" (John 21:15-17, NIV).

It is clear our passion for God is connected to our love for others. The Rule of Love given by Jesus – Love God and love your neighbor is to be lived out each day.

Is there someone in your life now that you feel God is calling you to love, care for, or minister to?

AROUND THE TABLE



When we passionately love God we love those around us. Put each person's name on a slip of paper and then, Secret Santa style, each choose a name of someone to pray for and show extra love to this week. Take time to think of something that would really show that person you love him or her – and then do it! At the end of the week, reveal who each person had chosen. Now as a family pray about a need of another family, neighbor or organization you can meet as an act of love. Read John 14:9.

GOING DEEPER

R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, Wheaton, Illinois, Tyndale House, 1985

A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, New York, Harper & Row, 1961

J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 1973

Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2011.

A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*. Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1982.

"Galaxy Buck: Mission to Sector 9," Performed by Phil Vischer. *What's In the Bible?*, 2015. DVD.

"Shows and Movies Where God Is Real." JellyTelly – Shows, Movies and Devotionals Where God Is Real. Accessed December 13, 2016. <https://www.jellytelly.com/>.

WORD POWER

Reliable information is essential in so many ways. If your car's fuel gauge read full when in fact it was empty—you could be stranded. If your phone's GPS was somehow giving you directions based on the wrong destination, you'd be lost and frustrated. If the report of your medical test results were mixed up with another person's, the consequences could be catastrophic. Bad information can lead to poor decisions.

Perhaps you've heard the story of Sarah Winchester. Her father-in-law, Oliver Fisher Winchester, had built an industrial empire around the lever-action rifle bearing his name. After Sarah's husband, heir to the Winchester empire, died of influenza in 1881, she moved with her vast fortune to San Jose, California. Because of her grief and her longtime interest in spiritism, Sarah sought out a medium to contact her dead husband. The medium told her, "As long as you keep building your home, you will never face death." Sarah believed the spiritist, so she bought an unfinished 17-room mansion and started to expand it. The project continued until she died at the age of 85. It cost 5 million dollars at a time when workmen earned 50 cents a day. The mansion had 150 rooms, 13 bathrooms, 2,000 doors, 47 fireplaces, and 10,000 windows. And Mrs. Winchester left enough materials so that they could have continued building for another 80 years. Today that house stands as more than a tourist attraction. It is a silent witness to the power of a lie and the fear of death that held a woman in bondage.

Where do you turn for truth? We all develop our concept of "how the world works," either consciously or unconsciously. Many develop their "worldview" based on ideas like luck, superstition, ancestral traditions, sentimental poetry, pop culture trends, horoscopes, astrology and a mish-mash of Christian and cultural traditions. They rarely take time to think through the consistency or implications of their philosophy of life—until it may be too late.

A person who is fully alive in Christ hungers for God's Word. The Bible tells us where the universe came from, where we came from and why we are alive. It tells us what went wrong with the world and how Jesus Christ came to make things right through His death and resurrection. It is the authority for what we believe and how we behave. And the Bible gives us reasons to live now and have hope for the future God has for us. The transforming power of God's Word renews our minds. In God's plan, the mind is at the heart of change. When we renew, re-frame, and revise our thinking according to God's revelation,

we view God, ourselves, our world, and our purpose in life in entirely new and exciting ways.

Psalm 19 gives us a rich description of the qualities of God's Word and its impact on our lives:

*The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the Lord is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules of the Lord are true,
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward" (Psalm 19:7-11)*

Notice the various descriptions of God's Word: The Law (Torah) is the comprehensive term for God's revealed will for us and His world. A more accurate term may be "the teaching." Testimony is used to convey personal verification of that truth in life. Even as a witness gives a testimony to what she saw, so God's Word tells us the truth about experience. Precepts and commandments communicate God's authoritative direction for our lives. The Ten Commandments, for instance, guard us against actions and behaviors that will hurt us and our relationships while directing us to the way of Life.

It isn't enough, however, to just know God's Word. We are to assimilate it, to make it a very part of our beings. This is behind the concept of "hungering" in the Bible. In Israel's history, especially the Exodus, the themes of hunger and satisfaction were central to God's provision of both physical food and spiritual direction.

"People do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (paraphrase, Deuteronomy 8:3).

The prophet Ezekiel speaks of a visionary experience of consuming God's Word:

"And he said to me, 'Son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.' So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. And he said to me, 'Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.' Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey" (Ezekiel 3:1-3, ESV).

When we hunger for, consume and assimilate God's Word, the Holy Spirit renews, re-frames, and revises our thinking to align with God's revelation. We then view God, ourselves, our world, and our purpose in life in entirely new and life-changing ways. God's Word satisfies our souls, instructs our minds, empowers our wills and directs our daily steps. Let's feast on God's Word.

DAY 1 : NOURISHED BY GOD'S WORD
 THE ROLE OF
scripture
 IN OUR DAY TO DAY LIFE

In a world of confusion and chaos people long for an authentic voice of authority. **Our deepest questions and our greatest longings find their answers in the Bible.** The Bible gives insight into our human nature and the problems of our world, while pointing to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ who is "the way, the truth and the life." (John 14:6, NIV)

In the Scriptures, we find the answers to life's ultimate questions: Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? What is the purpose of my life?

Our faith does not rest on human knowledge and the latest scientific advances. Ideas and advances come and go. The apostle Paul understood this about the culture of his time. In many respects, it was like ours with conflicting philosophical ideas debated at every turn, each proclaimed as wisdom and "truth." Morality was fluid, decadent, often with no shame. The times were turbulent.

Paul gives a charge to Timothy, a young man about to enter into leadership, and he points to Scripture:

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man (woman) of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17, New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]).

The Scriptures have a dynamic impact on our lives. Let's look at a few of the uses.

Teaching: As we intentionally and prayerfully study God's Word we encounter truth that is relevant for our time now! God's Word comes alive shaping our entire life – thoughts, beliefs and behaviors. The Spirit teaches us as God's Word is taught through weekly preaching, in small groups, and in our personal study time.

Can you think back on a time when a "light went on," and you learned a truth from Scripture that changed your way of thinking and living?

Rebuking: Just the word "rebuke" can leave a bad taste in our mouth. Our relativistic culture has shaped us into accepting all principles and ideas as "truth" while vehemently opposing anything proclaimed as ultimate truth. Destructive behavior is re-labeled, no longer called 'right' or 'wrong.' We are constantly fearful of being interpreted as "judgmental" or "hateful." Today it takes real maturity to both receive and share rebuke in a healthy manner which complies with the Scriptures.

When we are wrapped up in the destructive pattern of sin, often what we need, but do not want, is rebuke. Even healthy rebuke can be painful! It can hurt our ego and disrupt entrenched thoughts and behaviors. While the word rebuke conjures negative connotations, God's vision is for us to be lovingly awakened from the slumber of sin and live out our identity in Christ with authenticity.

Was there a time in your life when a healthy rebuke from Scripture awakened you from a pattern of sin?

What does a healthy rebuke based on God's Word look like? What should we avoid?

Correcting and training in righteousness: Parents and teachers can be a wonderful example of how this happens in life! Teachers are important when we learn how to write, spell and think critically. Parents constantly redirect their children to make life giving choices. As we mature in faith it is critical for us as children of God, to become students of the master teacher, Jesus Christ.

While rebuke confronts sinful behavior and belief, correction often confronts the distorted patterns, practices and theological ignorance we have inherited from our culture and personal context.

Correction requires us to hear the Word of God with a humble and responsive heart. The men and women of the Scriptures often needed their concept of God and understanding of faith to be corrected by God. We see from their story that disobedience and false belief has consequences. Yet, God's correction is motivated by love and mercy, graciously steering us toward life.

When has God's Word corrected a belief or behavior you were unaware was false or sinful?

What are some potential barriers in your life that may prevent you from hearing correction from God's Word?

What about training? In any new endeavor training is always crucial. For the athlete, training prepares the body and mind for a sport or contest. For the Christian, Scripture trains us in how to live out our new identity in Jesus Christ. Scripture trains our character, motivation, patterns and life direction. We must be trained into living as a new creation!

What might it look like for you to be on a spiritual training regimen? What are practical steps you can take for God's Word to train you?

God's teaching through the Scriptures; the rebuking we need to get us back on God's path; the correcting and training necessary to become more like Jesus has purpose. It all works together so that we can be equipped for every good work ... working for His kingdom, living into all God calls us to be and do.

AROUND THE TABLE



Share a time something "really bad" would have happened if you had not been corrected. Can you think of a verse or story in the Bible that might teach or correct us from going in a bad direction?

OR

Think of the movie *Pinocchio*. What verses from the Bible could have helped some of its characters avoid disaster if they had followed God's way to live?

DAY 2: hungering for GOD'S WORD

God's Word is inspired and transformative. It is the great story of the redemption for both us and the world. Yet we can be like a deer in headlights as we look at the magnitude of the Bible. Or we are like people standing before a vast buffet, so paralyzed by the scope that we simply stand hungry. It is natural to be overwhelmed and intimidated by the breadth of the Bible. It is crucial for our health that we learn simple steps to take the next "bite."

In our task-oriented society, investing in our spiritual life can easily be bumped off our agenda. Here are a few suggestions for getting the most out of your time in God's Word.

First, we must read slowly. When we approach reading the Bible like skimming our emails or Facebook, we let culture determine how we interact with God's word. **This is not just about getting through Scripture, but about getting it through us.** We must, instead, commit to a slow and disciplined engagement with Scripture.

What ways are you training yourself to skim and read information superficially? How can you counter that impulse to slow down and sit with God's word?

Second, be attentive. We love to multi-task! But if we are to allow Scripture to effect deep and lasting change in our hearts, then we must sit with undivided attention. This is about being fully present!

What disturbances get in the way of attentive engagement with Scripture? How might these be removed?

Finally, we need to read in community. Others provide a perspective often different from our own. We can encourage, challenge, and convict each other with the words of the Bible in a way that begins to form our hearts and minds in truth and righteousness.

Bible Study Activity

The goal of studying is not to simply be more knowledgeable (although that will certainly be true), but to be transformed as the Word penetrates your heart and mind. As Paul writes, "Be transformed through the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:1, NIV).

Get practical! How about taking 5 minutes each day to do this? The richness of this exercise will energize you and the time will extend into 10, 15, or even 30 minutes.

Below is a simple approach for thoughtful reflection on a passage. Take time now to journey through the process below.

- **Select** Choose a passage to study. For today read Psalm 46:10
- **Pray** Ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate your heart and mind to receive what God wants to give to you through the passage.
- **Reflect** What do I notice about this passage? What is the context?
- **Apply** What do I need to hear and apply from this passage?

At the end of your study time, **give thanks** for the presence of God's Spirit and your time alone with God's invigorating Word!

AROUND THE TABLE

Parents, Deuteronomy 6 gives you the charge to share the Scriptures with your kids in your everyday life! This *ALIVE* study is a great time to begin this pattern together. Share with one another the Scripture from the sermon and Sunday School lesson or from your devotional. What was one thing you needed to hear from this passage?

As a family activity, pick a memory verse your entire family can learn. Post the passage in various places around the home so it will be on the hearts and minds of the entire family.

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF DAY 3: YOUR study

How should I read the Bible? It is a logical question. The last study gave practical suggestions for approaching God's Word. But there is not simply one way to study the Bible. Today we explore a few helpful tools and approaches as you continue to grow.

Regardless of the method we choose for study, the Bible is alive and relevant -- timely for our lives today. It is God's story and how we make sense of our story. It is our rule for life and it points us toward life and hope. It is the pathway for spiritual formation.

A few approaches for your study:

Read the Bible the entire way through In this approach it is essential we recognize this is one narrative of God's eternal design to redeem humanity through Jesus.

Do a word study Select key concepts or specific words that are important such as the word Covenant, Redemption, Holy Spirit, Love, etc. Meditate on one key concept and dive into God's Word. A Bible concordance can be a helpful tool.

Inductive/deductive study Meditate on a passage, selection or book of the Bible and ponder its depth and application.

One transformative tool is to keep a prayer journal as you pilgrim through God's Word. This is about taking the extra step to write, reflect and ponder as you journal. This can help you process the Word as you are honest with yourself and with God.

Some Suggestions on Praying and Journaling Through the Scriptures:

Find a quiet place and a specific time to pray. This can be in your home, office, garage, garden, wherever it is quiet and you are

alone with God. Shut out distractions. Put your cell phone away. You choose the length of time appropriate for you. ***If you only have 10 minutes then be fully present for 10 minutes.***

Prayer begins in the Scripture. Choose to read and stay with a passage from the Scripture each day. If you are moved to stay with one text for more than one day, do it. Put yourself in the text and make it your prayer. Say it aloud and insert your name in the text. For example, if I am reading Romans 12:9-21, I am reading as if Paul is writing to me! The text becomes my personal prayer.

The text may draw me to a variety of responses:

- ***Reflect*** As you pray and journal about this Scripture ask, “What is it saying to me?” Be specific as you write. Be honest.
- ***Praise and Thanksgiving*** Offer praise and thanks to God for his goodness, mercy, and love. Make a list of things for which you are specifically grateful.
- ***Intercession*** How does this passage move you to pray for others?
- ***Petition*** What needs and requests do I want to bring before God?
- ***Forgiveness*** Where in this passage do I need forgiveness?

Jot down words or phrases that speak to you. Ask the Holy Spirit to give insight into what God is saying to you and how you should respond. You don’t have to write out long sentences. You may find a word or a brief phrase that ignites you and causes you to reflect, act, give thanks and ponder.

These moments count for eternity! Reflecting on your journal at a later time will reinforce that you are growing in Christ and becoming more like Jesus.

GOING DEEPER

Looking for somewhere to start? As you continue your study in the Word, here are some selected Biblical passages that may be a good start for your journaling and reflection- Psalm 1, Psalm 27, Isaiah 40:21-31, John 14:15-31, John 15:1-17, Romans 8:18-39, Philippians 2:1-18 & 3:12-16, Colossians 3:12-17, II Timothy 1 (chapter), II Timothy 2:1-13

There are many online Bible Study tools, we recommend BibleGateway.com: A searchable online Bible in over 150 versions and 50 languages.

Henrietta C. Mears, *What the Bible is All About*, Minneapolis, MN, Gospel Light Publications, 1966

Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1981

Josh McDowell & Sean McDowell, *77 FAQs About God and the Bible*, Eugene, Oregon, Harvest House Publishers, 2012

Life Application Study Bible, Iowa Fall, Iowa, Tyndale, 1989

WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

In the opening sentences of his best-selling, high-impact book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, Rick Warren writes, “It’s not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness... If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose” (page 17).

It may be very difficult to grasp the idea that God cares about each of us and actually has a purpose for our lives. With over seven billion people living on earth now, how could we dare to imagine God notices each one of us? Of the estimated 107 billion people who’ve ever lived, how could I ever think God has a plan for my life? These are reasonable questions. The wonder of God, however, is that He is not limited by our human conceptions. Jesus gave amazing images for God’s personal interest and care for us:

“What is the price of five sparrows—two copper coins? Yet God does not forget a single one of them. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows” (Luke 12:6-8, New Living Translation [NLT]).

No person is a purposeless accident. We are loved by God in Christ and we are called to be a part of God’s purpose.

A person who is fully alive in Christ pursues God’s call. What does this mean? It means we view every aspect of life in terms of our faith. We partner with God in fulfilling His will in all the arenas of our life. We think about how God, who has given life itself, would like us to use our time, our talents, our financial resources, our experiences, our opportunities, our relationships, and even our pains and struggles. We are “stewards” of the life God has entrusted to us. We acknowledge we are not the owners of our lives. We are the managers.

The word “call” is a biblical, theological term used to describe God’s intentional engagement with us in all areas of life. God calls and we respond to God’s call, invitation, and direction. Our primary calling in life is to love God and to love others as we love ourselves. We are called to continue Christ’s work in this world by how we do everything we do. As followers of Jesus, we will continue to pursue all the ordinary ventures of life: working, providing for loved ones, being involved in

our communities. While we may not do different things, we will do everything differently.

Too often people think there are two classes of Christians: ministers (pastors, “vocational” Christians) who are called to do most of the work and “ordinary lay people” who aren’t as important. Nothing could be further from the truth. The apostle Paul wrote,

“[Christ] gave some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:11-12).

A. W. Tozer wrote,

“Let every [person] abide in the calling wherein he is called and his work will be as sacred as the work of the ministry. It is not what a [person] does that determines whether his work is sacred or secular; it is why he does it. The motive is everything. Let a [person] sanctify the Lord God in his heart and he can thereafter do no common act. All [a person] does is good and acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For such a [person], living itself will be sacramental and the whole world a sanctuary” (The Pursuit of God, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1961, p. 127).

Don’t get the idea that your calling puts a damper on your life. When we pursue God’s call, we find ourselves experiencing a level of meaning and satisfaction beyond anything we’ve ever known. We find ourselves saying, “I was made for this.”

Dick Grace, a long-time church member at Trinity, told the story of a turning point in his life. Back in 1985, Billy Graham held a crusade in Anaheim Stadium. Since Dick had a good reputation as a criminal justice administrator, he was asked to head up the security for the crusade. Even though he was teaching a heavy load in criminal justice at Cal State University Los Angeles, Dick jumped in to organize the effort. He recruited 70 local police officers, acquired radios, rented cars, and did the myriad of tasks involved in criminal administration. During this entire flurry, he said to his wife, “Doris, I feel guilty because I love this so much.” She was happy to tell him, “When you are using a gift given by the Lord, it makes you happy – even elated.”

One clue to your call is to discover your spiritual gift(s).

"There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good"
(1 Corinthians 12: 4-7, NIV).

There are several lists of gifts in the New Testament that you'll read about in this chapter. God gives us gifts so that we can give to others. And, again, a significant indication that you're serving out of your giftedness is a sense of joy and satisfaction. It may not be easy—in fact, it may be quite demanding. Still, you know it "fits" you.

God is still working in this world—and we get to join Him. The best way is to do what you love to show others God's love.

Before the Tuesday evening Alive! session or your regular small group, please take the spiritual gift inventory online at <http://www.kodachrome.org/spiritgift>. This should take you around 20 minutes.



"You did not choose me, but I chose you . . ." - Jesus

I can remember as a young boy when I first came to grasp the idea of God calling me to be His. I was into sports and played often with my schoolmates. We would select two captains to choose teams. Many kids held their breath wondering... will I be picked or will I be the odd one out? That moment of being chosen to play on the team filled me with a joyful feeling I can remember to this day. God, unlike some schoolyard team captains, does not reluctantly pick us because we beg or eagerly choose us because of our skill.

God **wants** me on His team! God **wants** me to join His work in the world!

God chooses us, and through the grace in Jesus Christ, we become beloved children of God. That is our primary identity! What are you doing here? You are a beloved child of God, here to give Him glory and to enjoy Him forever. You are called to respond by loving God and loving others as you love yourself.

Listen to what God says about our call:

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you" (John 15:16, NIV).

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God

foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified" (Romans 8:28-30, NIV).

The Lord Almighty has chosen you to be a member of His family. Let that sink in for a minute.

How do these verses make you feel? What other responses do you have to the fact that Lord has chosen or called you?

Another way to say this is something we have already studied: God first loved us.

You might want to create a doodle or drawing that shows your reaction to this concept of God calling or choosing us out of His love.

Now read these passages:

"... I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12-14, NIV).

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9, NIV).

How do these verses further define our calling from the Lord?

In Trinity's Vision Frame we describe pursuing God's call: "We partner with God in fulfilling His will in every area of our life. The word "call" is a biblical term used to describe God's intentional engagement with us in all areas of life. God calls and we respond to God's call, invitation, and direction."

An article on Chuck Colson's Breakpoint website states:

"It's really easy for 'ordinary' believers in Jesus Christ to feel like they are second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God. Why do they feel this way? Because frequently the language used in our churches conveys the clear message that only pastors, missionaries, evangelists, and other 'full-time Christian workers' are called into the ministry serving God. Everybody else just has a secular job. But reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin developed the classic Protestant doctrine of vocation which means that God calls all Christians to the ministry regardless of the specific sphere of service into which He leads them."

So, part of the idea of God's calling for each of us includes the concept of the priesthood of all believers — that we all as followers of Jesus are to represent Him to one another and the world. No believer sits on the bench in life and ministry. As one who is called by God you are on the team and in the game!

AROUND THE TABLE

Get a deck of cards and drop them on the floor. Have one person start picking up the cards and sort them by suit in order. No one else can help! Now drop the cards again, but this time work as a team to sort and put them in order. Which way was more efficient and fun? Pray together asking God to show you ways He has planned for you to be part of "the game" of working together in His big God story.

DAY 2: "HERE AM I, *Lord* USE ME."

We are called to continue Christ's work in this world. Where the Lord calls, He also equips. Where He guides, He provides. God doesn't ask us to put His love into action in the world without giving us what we need to accomplish the task.

The first time I took a spiritual gift assessment I was a bit leery. But I was pleasantly surprised to find both affirmation of what I guessed about myself and a challenge to expand my experience outside of my comfort zone. Exploring various ministries and missions using my gifts is exciting. It is always fun to see how God works with my willingness. I pray this will be the same for you!

After taking the online Spiritual Gift Inventory listed at the end of the session introduction, what were your thoughts from the results? Excitement? Questions? Confusion?

Read and reflect on these scripture passages:

"Serve one another with the particular gifts God has given each of you"
(1 Peter 4:10, NIV).

"[God] gave ... some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up"
(Ephesians 4:11-12, NIV).

What would it look like for you to use your gifts to "serve one another"?

How might the body of Christ be built up through your service?

"There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good"
(1 Corinthians 12: 4-7, NIV).

In our western culture, we can mistakenly think that receiving a gift and service is "all about us." It is tempting to get stalled out as we compare ourselves with others, even perhaps wanting someone else's gift and ministry. This can rob the body of Christ from how it will be uniquely built up through you! 1 Corinthians 12 is the great corrective to a distorted focus.

How have you seen this attitude creep into your own service? How?

As people who are called by God, the Bible says you are now a part of the Body of Christ, the Church. That drives us to use our gifts to serve and care for one another. As we build one another up, we will then be equipped to give witness to His work in the world. Jesus tells us:

"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16, NIV).

Using our gifts for both the common good and for the sake of the world shines a light on the saving work of Jesus. You have uniquely been given your Spiritual gifts to continue the work of Christ. Remember, there are no benched Christians!

Are you actively engaged in some ministry or mission right now? If not, why not?

What would it take for you to explore ministry or mission possibilities (at church or in the community) that would use your unique spiritual gifting?

AROUND THE TABLE

Affirmation Circle – take turns putting each member of your family on the “Hot Seat.” Tell that person the gifts or traits they possess that you could see God using for His purposes. You might want to write these down and add to the list throughout the year.



The call of Christ goes far beyond using our Spiritual gifts or engaging in conventional ministry. Wherever God has placed us, He has called us. And we represent Him by how we do all that we do.

Read this scripture passage:

“Then Jesus said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?’” (Luke 9:23-25, NIV).

This can be a tough passage to digest. Read that scripture again.

What is your initial response to this reading?

What do you think it means to deny yourself and take up your cross daily to follow Jesus?

Where do you see this passage playing out in your life?

God's call for us to follow Jesus extends to every facet of life. This includes our care for those around us — if you are called to be a spouse or a parent, then fulfill that role well. He also calls us to our vocations — wherever the Lord places us in life. The first step is to realize and understand that as believers we do things for a different reason now.

“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering” (Romans 12:1-2, MSG).

“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17, NIV).

Another article on Chuck Colson’s *Breakpoint* states:

“Of course, it’s true the Lord has gifted us in unique ways to serve Him, and that we can discover these gifts through our passions and use them for His glory.... While the biblical picture of calling and vocation includes our giftedness, it also includes things like sacrifice, persecution, and an awareness of the needs of my neighbors. Jesus said that those who follow him carry crosses. Paul said that anyone who wishes to follow Christ will be persecuted . . . The Protestant Reformers understood calling to be primarily about a commitment to glorify God in whatever station we find ourselves. It may be your calling right now to be a student, or a mom or a dad, or a minimum wage employee simply just having to make a living. God calls us first and foremost to do the next thing well, to His glory, with all of our might.”

How does the idea that we should “do the next thing well, to His glory, with all of our might” change the way you might approach your daily tasks — at home? At school or work? With your friends?

How might you do the ordinary differently, given God’s loving call for you?

Christian author Os Guinness defines the concept of God’s calling for believers in these generous terms:

“Calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion, dynamism, and direction lived out as a response to his summons and service.”

So really, every part of our lives can be regarded as if it were a call from God! The 17th Century monk Brother Lawrence is quoted as saying, “We must not grow weary of doing little things for the love of God, who looks not on the great size of the work, but on the love in it.”

What are you doing these days that might benefit from you putting a bit more special devotion or love in it? If you did so, what would change?

Ask that the Lord would show you the little “callings” He has for you every day as you simply go about living life. Pray through each aspect specifically that He would help you to fulfill those callings in His power and love.

AROUND THE TABLE



As a family, look at your typical week schedule. Your challenge is to look at the “ordinary” differently. What would it look like to do the ordinary things of your life for the glory of God? Have each family member share ideas of what this might look like.

Or. Think of your “ordinary” neighborhood differently. Pull up a map of your neighborhood on Google Maps and talk about what you know about your neighbors. Is there something you could do in the next week or two that would bless one of your neighbors? Make a plan together to take action – it might be small like saying a prayer for each home as you walk, taking a meal to someone ill or inviting someone lonely over for a game night. Ask God to guide you – He will.

GOING DEEPER

* Read the entire chapter of Romans 12 and think about your part to play in the body of Christ.

* Consider attending a Discovery Class as a follow up to *ALIVE!*

Kise, Stark & Hirsh, *Discover Who You Are*, Minneapolis, MN, Bethany House, 2005

Mark Labberton, *Called*, Downers Grove, Illinois, IVP Books, 2014

Os Guinness, *The Call*, Nashville, TN, Word Publishing, 1998

Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle*, Sisters, Oregon, Multnomah Publishers, 2001

Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002

WEEK FOUR NOTES

WEEK 5

A PERSON WHO IS FULLY ALIVE
in CHRIST
REVEALS THE good news

IT SHOWS

One thing about good news—you can't wait to share it!

"I got the job!"

"I was accepted into the program!"

"She said, 'Yes!'"

"The lab results are negative!"

"God answered my prayer."

Sharing completes the joy. An old Swedish proverb says it this way: "Sorrow shared is half the sorrow; joy shared is twice the joy."

The Gospel is Good News—not just good advice. The God who created us, who saw us turn against Him, never gave up on us. God has continued to reach out to humanity across the centuries, preparing for the sending of His Son, Jesus. And at just the right time, God sent His Son, His only Son, Jesus whom He loved, in the flesh. Jesus, who was fully human, entered fully into the human experience. And Jesus, who was fully divine, offered Himself as the substitute, accepting the judgement we deserved for rejecting God. Jesus rose again from the dead! And He has created a new community, the Church, to bring the message of His Good News to this world. And through the Church, God's Kingdom is coming to inaugurate His rule of mercy and justice. That's the Great News!

We can't wait to share this news! Great news changes our outlook on life. We all know the stereotype of the person in love: he has a spring in his step; she seems to smile a lot more. Love brings a sense of optimism, lightness, and buoyancy that weathers life's disappointments with greater resilience. It is the same with faith. Faith in Jesus Christ gives us a new outlook on life, and it awakens a new awareness of others. We want them to experience God's love and grace and power.

Sadly, however, many feel a burden of fear and intimidation when they are challenged to "share their faith" with others. They have stereotypes of high pressure, invasive, intrusive encounters that make them feel (and rightly so) uncomfortable. That's why it helps to reframe what it means to share our faith.

Jesus said, "You shall be my witnesses..." (Acts 1:8) A witness is someone who shares their experience. Don't confuse a witness with the

calling to be an evangelist. An evangelist is called and equipped by God with the gift of bringing people to a decision of faith in Christ. And don't confuse being a witness with being an apologist. An apologist is not a person who says they are sorry! An apologist is a person called and equipped to provide a logical, rational, intellectual defense of the faith, answering its toughest questions. We are all called to be witnesses, while some are called to be evangelists and apologists.

So here's a way to think of ourselves as witnesses: Do we lead lives that make others curious? Do people wonder, "Why does she do that? Why does he use his time that way? Why do they seem so calm?" Does our life make others want to know what makes us tick?

In a job interview, the employer may ask the question, "How would your work colleagues (peers, subordinates, supervisors) describe you?" This is called a "360 Review," meaning that all the people around you "hold up the mirror" for you to see yourself as they see you. It's intimidating to think of receiving an assessment of that scope. But then we realize it's happening all the time. People are watching and listening, looking for those who "walk the talk." A life well-lived attracts interest.

A person who is fully alive joyfully reveals the Good News. We reflect the joy of the Lord by sharing the life-giving truth of the gospel and showing God's love in practical ways. Jesus did not call his followers to form a holy club, or, as some have called it, a holy huddle. The church does not exist merely for Christians to take care of themselves. We are called to be outwardly focused. We are witnesses who long for others to experience what we have experienced in Christ. We witness through verbal conversation, acts of kindness, compassion and service.

Our faith will "show" and be expressed in two primary ways—Story and Service. It is a two-legged Gospel. If we have only one aspect, the Gospel "limps." By Story we mean sharing God's Story and story. The "old fashioned" word for our story is our testimony. It's the witness of our experience of coming to faith in Jesus Christ and the difference faith makes in our lives. It's important to know your story—and to be able to share various "chapters" in it, both the joys and struggles (and everything in between) on your faith journey. Your story will touch people in ways nothing else can.

And, just as Jesus came preaching, teaching and healing, we not only share God's Story and ours, but we serve, showing God's love and care

in practical ways. Kindness reaches hearts. Service shows God's love and compassion in ways people can immediately grasp. There are countless ways to serve, from the formal organized programs to the "random acts of kindness" that can brighten a person's day. And service shapes us as something sacred happens to us when we give to others.

Story and service, witness and helping—these are the ways to show God's love to a curious world.

WHAT IS DAY 1: GOD'S story

Have you ever received news that you couldn't help but share? Birth of a grandchild, a new job, an amazing sports play, winning the lottery (don't we wish). In today's culture, it doesn't even have to be great news for us to want to share it. Social media has provided an outlet for people to share news from what they had for lunch to their child's school performance. These things matter to us, so we want to share them!

So, what happens when it comes to sharing the news of Jesus Christ? The irony is that sharing the Good News (also called the Gospel) can be so intimidating! We often have tons of baggage that come along with sharing that news.

What are those things in our lives that hold us back from sharing the Gospel?

The obstacles can be numerous. Is it because we don't think it's that great? Have we become numb to the message of Jesus because we have heard it so many times before? Are we embarrassed to share this news with our friends for fear of rejection? Or is it because we feel ill-equipped or unprepared for the questions that may come up once we get the conversation going?

Sit with God and begin to unpack why you have a hard time sharing the Gospel. Have you settled for "less" than good news?

It is easy for the Gospel to be subtly distorted by our culture, presuppositions and desires.

Have you noticed any "Gospel distortion" leaking in to your life that may diminish your need to share the good news?

Is God up close and personal or useful only when you have a need?

The awesome news of God's story of rescuing humanity ought to compel us to share. But before we can share it, we must know what it is.

There are many ways to summarize the Gospel. Some may use a few sentences to share the simplicity of the Gospel, while others write page after page to try and capture the rich depth of it. Thinking of the "big picture" of the Gospel, it is something like this:

God, out of His goodness and grace, created man and woman in His image. But out of our free will, we chose to sin and separate from God leading to alienation, shame and death. However, this was not the end of the story! God began a steadfast mission of redemption. God chose the people of Israel to be a covenant people who would be a light to all nations and through whom salvation would come. He freed them from slavery in Egypt, and led them to a land of their own. God sent prophets to lead His people, and made promises of redemption and salvation that would come in the form of a Savior. Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. He is the God-Man, 100% God, and 100% man. Where we were faithless He was faithful. In Jesus Christ God's salvation, had come to all peoples. He lived the sinless life we could not. His ministry, filled with teaching, preaching, healing, was bursting with evidence that in Him God's Kingdom had come. His faithfulness was met by fierce opposition. He was condemned by the Jewish and Roman authorities

and was crucified. Yet even this was a part of the plan of redemption. On the cross Jesus redeemed us, taking our place of punishment, bearing our sin and shame on Himself. He died. Then, three days later, the Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the grave conquering death. Regardless of nation or background, we can each be a new creation in Christ beginning now and stretching on into eternity. Jesus instructed His followers to now live as a redeemed people, testifying to both the eternal hope and authority found in Him. His church is now to live as His witnesses in the world making disciples and reflecting both His character and purposes in the world until that final day when He makes all things new.

As you look at the description of the Gospel what stands out? Is this different than the Gospel you live your life by? What does Christ mean to you in your own life? Be honest with God as you think about who He is to you.

God uses people to tell His story. From Abraham, Moses, the people of Israel and the prophets, to the Apostles and the leaders of small house churches throughout the Roman Empire. These people were a means for God to share His story and encounter His people. God's Story comes to a climax in Jesus Christ. This is the one moment the entire Scripture had been pointing toward! The Word made flesh, living the life we could not. Jesus took our place on the cross accomplishing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

This reality changed the world. Literally! Individuals, households, cities, countries, and whole empires were (and continue to be) affected by the life-changing reality of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for all of creation. And on that final day all will be humbled, marveling at His grace, goodness and holiness.

However, the beauty is, while God's Story climaxed in Christ, He is not done with it yet. In fact, He is far from it. He chooses to use us to tell His story to all nations. Last week, we looked at our individual calling and gifts. Additionally, there is a general call to Christians to make disciples of all nations, and that hinges on the telling of the Gospel.

Spend some time with God asking Him to show you the beauty of the gospel again. Maybe take some time to write out the Gospel in your own words to become comfortable sharing it.

AROUND THE TABLE



Have everyone write down what they think would be the best news someone could burst in the door and share with your family right now. Choose someone to read each person's response and try and guess what each person wrote down. How do these really great things compare with the Gospel?

Parents, take time to explain what this is to your children and why this is the best news ever.

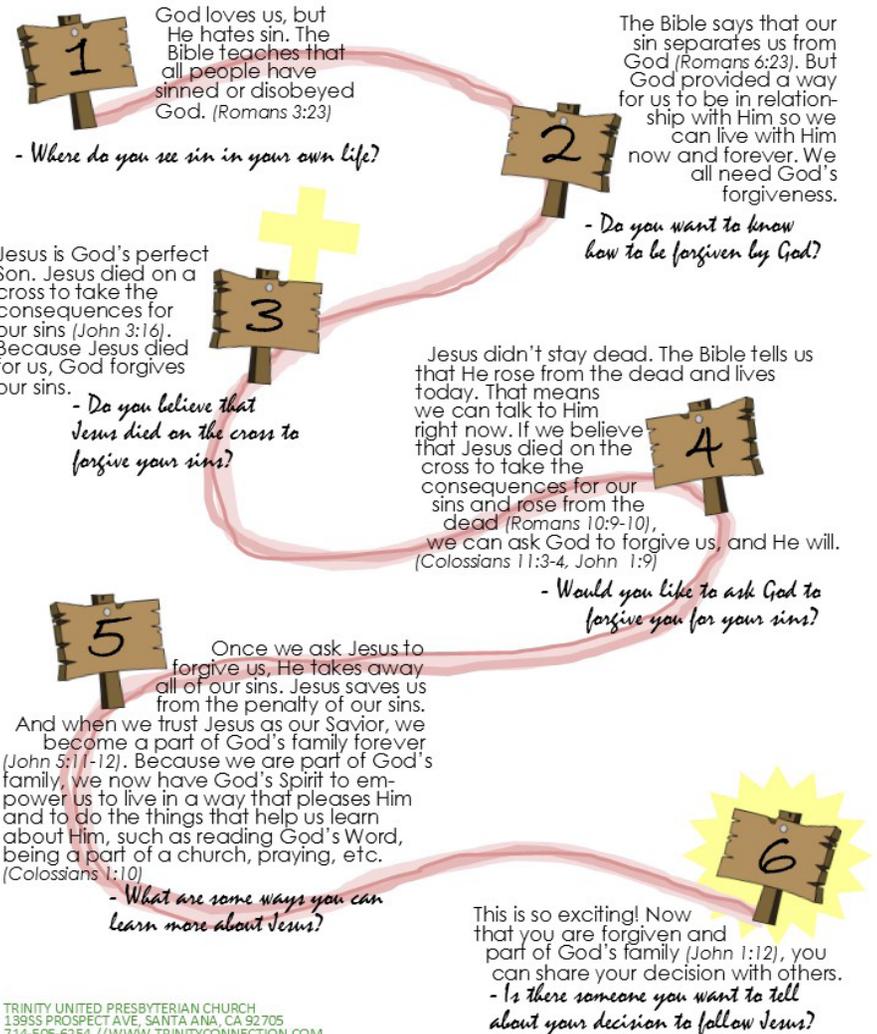
Pray together thanking God for the Good News that Jesus died for our sins and we can invite Him to be Lord and Savior of our lives right now.

Additional family resource: Parents, please see the notes on "Following Jesus is a Life-long Journey" on the next page. Make time this week to share one-on-one with each of your children and offer them the chance to ask Jesus into their heart. If they have already accepted Christ, pray as a family for God to open doors for sharing the Good News of salvation with a friend, family member or neighbor.

Following JESUS is a Lifelong JOURNEY

Following Jesus is a lifelong journey that begins with a few basic steps. Below you'll find a path with discussion points to help guide your conversation with a child who expresses an interest in God's plan of salvation.

THE PATH TO SALVATION



WHAT IS
DAY 2: MY
story

You may have heard the saying often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, "Preach the Gospel at all times, use words when necessary." While that is a challenging statement, there is another quote that should challenge our thinking. Duane Liftin of Wheaton College said, "It's simply impossible to preach the Gospel without words. The Gospel is inherently verbal, and preaching the Gospel is inherently verbal behavior."

How do we come to terms with these two ideas? There is a tension here! And rightly so! We are called to live a life that is different from culture, and yet, Jesus also calls us to preach, teach, and share:

"Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'" (Matthew 28:18-20, NIV).

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Romans 1:16, NIV).

One of the easiest ways to ease the anxiety of spreading the Gospel is to internalize it into your own story. In the last devotional, we explored the concept of how God moves through an overarching story. It is the experiences of individuals that make up the bulk of these narratives. We remember the classic Bible stories of Moses, David, Paul, and Jesus because they were presented as stories.

Gispy Smith, a British evangelist of the early 1900s wrote, "There are five Gospels of Jesus Christ – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and you, the Christian. Many people will never read the first four."

God uses stories to impact the world. And He wants to use your story as well! When we learn to see how God is working in our own lives, it becomes easier to share not only our story, but also how God's Story intersects with ours.

Think about some major events in your life- the good, and the bad- possibly the first day of college, starting your job, battling with your bills, your wedding day, losing someone close, the day your kids were born, battling an illness, or the first homecoming dance your child attended.

List some major events here. As you do, notice what God was doing during these life events. Or maybe even what God was doing despite our poor decisions or difficult circumstances. Where do you recognize His movements within that time?

When did you experience God's grace and love for the first time? (many years ago, or very recently)

Once we understand our story, it is so much easier to tell other people about it! At times, life can seem monotonous; however, once we begin to understand God's movement in our past situations, we can begin to see God moving in our lives every day.

Reflect again on your life. Ask God to reveal to you how he has specifically shaped your story for His glory. Where can you see God's redeeming work in the different times in your life?

Where does He have you now, and what is He trying to teach you at this time?

Sharing your story shouldn't be intimidating. You don't need to necessarily talk to strangers about your whole life story! Start out with a friend or another parent you meet through shared activities. Talking about your life isn't formal, and there isn't a three-step process to share it. You know your story, and you know with whom you're talking.

Looking back at your story and how God has worked through it, take a moment to pray about who could be blessed by this story.

List two people with whom you could share your story in the coming weeks.

What would it look like for you to begin to share your story, interwoven with God's?

As you finish your time, ask God to give you opportunities to share even today.

AROUND THE TABLE



Draw your story in diagrams. Starting with your own name in the center, draw pictures of people, places and things around your name that remind you of God and His great love for you. Use this drawing to share out loud what a story about you might sound like.

DAY 3: LIVING OUT HIS story

Our lives are to be shaped by this good news. As Christians, we should stand out from our culture. Peter says it clearly:

"Friends, this world is not your home, so don't make yourselves cozy in it. Don't indulge your ego at the expense of your soul. Live an exemplary life among the natives so that your actions will refute their prejudices. Then they'll be won over to God's side and be there to join in the celebration when he arrives" (1 Peter 2:11-12, MSG).

We must come to an understanding that we are now in the midst of a cultural shift. Christianity is no longer celebrated in everyday society. However, we cannot respond to that shift by retreating and being on the defensive. We can be moving forward in showing Christ's love in tangible ways.

Jesus demonstrated living out love driven by grace rather than gain. He loved with compassion, and embraced those on the fringes of society. And then, He saved all of humanity out of the overflow of His love on the cross. This is a love that speaks to every nation and every heart. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to love like He did.

Our lives should be shaped by the grace of God. God rescues us out of the pit, redeems us, and calls us by name. And this love is not just for us! We now demonstrate the gospel by caring for those who are in need, because we too were spiritually destitute. Our worldview has shifted, and it is out of love for God that we can embrace those in need.

Jesus himself explains what will set His people apart:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35, NIV).

This type of love is a sacrificial love. A love that transcends race, background, class, and gender.

“... where there is no longer Greek nor Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and in all.” (Colossians 3:11, NRSV)

This is a type of love that makes the world around us stop and wonder. And if, as Christians, we are not living this out our American society sees this! One of the biggest arguments against Christianity is the fact that we don't practice what we preach. Gandhi famously said, “If Christians were to live their lives to the full, there would not be one Hindu left in India.”

Why does it often feel so hard to live out the Christian life? What is it about loving like Jesus that makes us nervous or hesitant?

We are not called as God's people to just sit in the happy bubble and live quietly to ourselves. We instead are called to be ambassadors. An ambassador is called to go into a foreign country to make an impact for their home country. As Christians who long for another, heavenly land (Heb. 11:16), our residency is not in this country or in this culture. Instead, we are here as representatives of a heavenly reality that is ruled by another King and embodied in Spirit-filled lives. As Christians, we are called to be the hands and feet of God who goes into the broken world to bring about change and to bring love into the brokenness.

How might understanding your purpose in the world as being God's hands and feet change how you live? What comes to mind when you hear that phrasing?

One of the biggest misconceptions about service is that people think it only matters on the large scale. They say, “I am only one person! Look at all the work and stress I already have on my plate. I can't be asked to go out of my way every day to serve other people too.” However, service isn't only going to your local soup kitchen. While those needs are great, and we as the Church should be serving in that capacity as well, this is more about the alignment of our hearts and a readiness to respond in the moment. Remember we serve out of love for God.

When our hearts are focused on what God is doing, it becomes easier to see where we might be able to serve in the moments of each day. When your coworker or friend really needs a listening ear, are you able to focus and listen to their hearts? This is service! When the person you sit next to in church every week hasn't shown up in three weeks, do you notice enough to call and check on them? This is service driven by love! When your neighbor needs to take care of her elderly mother, do you offer to watch her kids for a few hours?

When service flows out of genuine love, it doesn't simply become an obligation. It just seems like what we should do for a friend. It is this type of service that God calls us to! What would our community look like if we cared for others as if they were our friends? Orange County would be changed drastically!

Spend some time with God, asking him to reveal where He is calling you and your family to serve.

Is your neighbor in need of something? Where could God be using your specific gifts to serve your neighborhood?

WEEK 6

A PERSON WHO IS FULLY ALIVE
 in **CHRIST**
DEMONSTRATES CHRIST-LIKE
 character

FROM THE INSIDE OUT

All of us have an idea of the kind of person we want to be. We want to experience inner peace and energy. We want to behave with grace and maturity, especially when facing hostility. We want to be known as generous, caring people. In short, we want to be Christ-like. Yet we often find ourselves falling far short of that desire. It's like a continual experience of breaking our New Year's resolutions. How do we change? How do we move from desire to experience?

Madam Chang Kai Shek, who was the first lady of the Chinese people during their struggle against the Japanese invading armies, said in a radio speech:

"If the past has taught us anything, it is that every cause brings its effect. Every action has a consequence. We Chinese have a saying, 'If a man plants melons, he will not reap beans; If he sows beans, he will reap beans,' and this is true of everyone's life. Good begets good and evil leads to evil. True enough, the sun shines on the saint and the sinner alike, and too often it seems that the wicked prosper. But we can say with certainty that with the individual, as with the nation, the flourishing of the wicked is an illusion. For unceasingly life keeps books on us all. In the end, we are the sum total of our actions. Character cannot be counterfeited nor can it be put on and cast off as if it were a garment to meet the whim of the moment. Like the markings on wood, which are ingrained in the very heart of the tree, character requires time and nurturing for growth and for development. Thus also, day by day, we write our own destiny, for inexorably we become what we do" (Denis Waitley, "We Become What We Do" Seeds of Greatness CD, #3).

If this is true for political bodies, how much more is it true for God's people! One of the greatest accusations against the Church is that it is full of hypocrites (literally, "play actors") who say they believe in God and the Ten Commandments, but lead lives that deny their words. Believers are to mature in Christ in a process the Bible calls "sanctification." Jesus saves us not only from sin's penalty, but also from its power.

A person who is fully alive demonstrates Christ-like character. That Christ-like character develops as we cultivate godly life-giving habits in thought, word and deed. We learn to turn intentionally from self-

centered, sin-driven, self-reliant living. Failure to apply our faith into life has far-reaching consequences.

In my book, *SoulShaping: Taking Care of Your Spiritual Life*, I tell the story of a time my friend Gary and I were talking over coffee about a colleague who had left the ministry because of sexual misconduct. As in so many of these situations, this news had surprised and grieved us. It also raised the troubling paradox of an obviously gifted pastor who had been caught in the trap of leading a secret life for years. He had inspired many people to commit their lives to Christ. He was an effective communicator and had disciplined many others in the ways of Christ. Yet he had fallen prey to dark desires, hurting countless others in the process. Why? The devastation in his wake was almost beyond calculation. How did this happen?

Gary took the napkin (one of his favorite writing surfaces!) and a felt-tip pen and drew two lines, as on a graph. The first line gradually sloped upward. The second line, just above it, started to slope upward slowly, then shot up dramatically, leaving a huge gap between the two.

"The line with the gradual slope," said Gary "is the 'character line.' The second line is the 'gift line.' This pastor's gifts in ministry promoted him to a place that couldn't be supported by his character. His opportunities outgrew his character. That's what makes many people so vulnerable."

A character gap develops when we allow activity in the outer world to distract us from the daily business of bringing our attitudes, desires, words, and behavior under the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. Character is like physical exercise or any form of learning; you cannot "cram," hoping to do in a day or week what can only be accomplished by months and years of consistent practice. (Douglas J. Rumford, *SoulShaping: Taking Care of Your Spiritual Life*, Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996, pages 353-354).

Character is the product of countless small choices. C. S. Lewis says it so well:

"People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, 'If you keep a lot of rules I'll reward you, and if you don't I'll do the other thing.' I do not think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of

you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other" (C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943, pp 86, 87).

What does it look like to be Christ-like? One of the best descriptions is in Paul's words to the Galatians:

"But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives" (Galatians 5:22-25).

May the Holy Spirit make our faith real from the inside out!

DAY 1: WHO DO YOU WANT TO BE?

Reflecting on our childhood, we probably can remember a time when we wanted to be like our favorite superhero or celebrity. We may have found ourselves imitating them with costumes and signature catchphrases (even specific mannerisms). And while we were obviously not the hero, it was easy for people to notice who we were imitating.

As we pursue a life fully alive in Christ, we are on a lifelong pursuit of imitating our ultimate hero... our Lord, Teacher and Savior Jesus Christ. As we live into our identity as people who are now "in Christ," we are to reflect Jesus to both the world and our immediate community. Our call as Christians is to pattern our very lives after Jesus in a way that testifies to our deep relationship with Him.

To pattern our lives after Christ, we must identify the areas in our lives that are rooted in sin and contrary to Christ. In Ephesians 4, Paul describes this as putting off the "old self" that is corrupted by sin and "putting on" the new self that is renewed in Christ.

He clarifies this distinction in Galatians 5 as paraphrased in The Message:

"It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on. This isn't the first time I have

warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom" (Galatians 5:19-21, MSG).

As you look at this list from Galatians 5, what aspects of this kind of life resonate with you?

What areas of your life are threatened by this corruption of sin? Spend a couple minutes turning these over to the Lord and receiving his grace.

These first few verses make it clear: when we don't live as a demonstration of the character of Jesus, nothing good is produced. However, pursuing the life, attitude, and character of Jesus leads us to a life that is more complete and more satisfying.

Now Paul moves on to what it looks like to live out the identity we have in Christ:

"But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely" (Galatians 5:22, 23, MSG).

What does it mean for you to incorporate the Fruit of the Spirit into every area of your life?

What are some areas of your life where you know you need to practically demonstrate Christ-like character?

Paul tells us that it is not enough to recognize Jesus' teachings and character as good ideas or taglines. No, He tells us that these qualities of Jesus must be an integrated part in every area of our lives:

"Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives"
(Galatians 5:25, MSG).

The life of the Spirit is the life that Jesus lived, and we know this through the character He displayed. The fruit of the Spirit was made known to those around Him, because Jesus made it a point to demonstrate these qualities in everything He did. If we truly want to reflect Jesus, then it is not enough to just quote catchy memory verses, or to say that affection and serenity are good ideas. Rather, everything we do and everything we pursue are opportunities to grow in and demonstrate the character of Jesus.

AROUND THE TABLE



Share a story of when someone (it can be someone in the family or from throughout your day) demonstrated the fruit of the Spirit to each of you. Make it a point this week to memorize the list of the fruit of the Spirit (perhaps in the NIV). Think, as a family, of situations in your days where you can live out or learn to live out these characteristics. Take it a step further; when has living out the fruit of the Spirit caused hurt?

DAY 2: STOP _____ HESITATING

Imagine standing at the beginning of a bridge; one that you have never crossed but must get across. As you approach the bridge, you quickly notice it is covered in a dense, dark fog, making visibility practically impossible. Anxious questions flood your mind as you begin to cross. How far is it to the other side? Are there holes in the walkway? How stable is this bridge? Stepping onto the uncertainty of the unknown is almost always difficult because there is an inherent risk of losing control and comfort.

*What areas of your life are you hesitant to give over to God?
Where is it easy to focus on maintaining control in your life?*

When we think of living out the fruit of the Spirit and getting rid of our sinful patterns, we can have the same timid uncertainty. As humans, we allow ourselves to be hesitant towards attitudes and behaviors God has called us to reflect, because to do so would mean giving up control over our own patterns of self-preservation. If you look back at the list of the worldly lifestyle, Paul is clear in stating that nothing good comes from trying to save ourselves (Galatians 5:19). Yet, we continue to push back against what we know is ultimately good for us because our sinfulness has allowed our minds to be focused on satisfying our selfishness.

Reflect on these words from Romans:

“Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God’s laws, and it never will” (Romans 8:5-7, New Living Translation [NLT]).

What do you think it means that focusing on sinful behaviors leads to death? How does focusing on the Spirit lead to a life of peace?

When we focus on pleasing the sinful nature and feeding sinful desires we set ourselves up to live a life of spiritual death and separation. Our culture often glorifies gratifying sinful desires while often ignoring the spiritual consequences. But the Bible is clear, even though we may be comfortable with patterns of sin, when we gratify the sinful nature we become a slave to it. This robs us and others of the life God has for us.

As we shift our focus from gratifying our desires to what pleases the Spirit, we are empowered to boldly step forward in faith. It is in living according to the Spirit’s lead, keeping our focus on Christ’s example, that we find ourselves fully alive. Jesus said He has “come to bring life abundantly” (John 10:10). Still, this goal may seem unattainable to those of us who have been trained to think in terms our own needs and desires.

What might it look like in your own life to take steps of faith in putting these principles into concrete practices?

How might you cultivate the Spirit-led life each day?

As we look to Christ’s example, the Spirit empowers us “to look not to our own interest but to the interest of others” (Philippians 2:4), thereby replacing the sinful mind with all its selfish ambition, with the mind of Christ. It is to be a constant habit for us to examine the regular patterns of our daily life and thought.

What do you need to bring before Jesus and surrender so that you may be renewed with the mind of Christ?

AROUND THE TABLE



When have you desired to do something wrong this week but stopped... knowing that it was not what Christ desired for you? How would it have been detrimental if you had given in to the immediate desire? Parents you might want to share one humorous example (like being impatient in a line and wanting to scream) or more serious (how you treated someone at work who wronged you).

What is an area in your life or your family in which you can focus more on the life of the Spirit?

DAY 3: KEEP practicing

Anyone who has played a sport or instrument knows there are three main reasons for practicing a given skill: to learn, improve, and memorize. Think of an instrumentalist rehearsing a piece of music. At first, the musician must learn about the music, its notes, tempo, and sound. Then, the musician must, often painstakingly, practice what has been learned to be better at creating the intended music. After repeating the process over and over again, the piece becomes locked into the musician's muscle memory, becoming natural. However, once the music is memorized, the musicians must repeat the process as they continually take on new music.

In the same way, embodying Christ-like character requires training. It requires learning about and growing in the attitudes of Jesus until they become a part of our spiritual muscle memory so our reactions to the world around us take a Christ-like shape. Everything we have learned throughout this series is just the starting point. Now we must continue to internalize these rhythms as we seek to be faithful embodiments of Christ's character and purpose in the world.

What have you learned about reflecting Jesus' character throughout this past week?

How has it changed some of your attitudes and behaviors towards the people around you?

As we improve at imitating Christ's character, learning and practice can mean many different things. It could mean spending more time in Bible study or small groups with a focus on developing Christ-like character; it could mean diving deeper in Christian instruction through sermons, seminars and reading Christian authors; or it could mean devoting more time to service opportunities; it could mean growing in your prayer habits and spiritual disciplines. Whatever it means for you, the goal should be to seek to reflect the character of Jesus with every resource in your life!

One of the many practices that can aid us in our endeavor to pattern our lives according to Christ is spiritual mentorship. Consider these Scriptures:

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me [Paul], or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:9, NIV).

"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1, NIV).

"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29, NIV).

"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15, NIV).

Name three people in your life who have been consistent examples of the character of Jesus. How do they encourage you and help you to grow to be a stronger demonstration of Jesus' character?

Is there a Christian in your life you can more intentionally walk alongside as you learn to pursue Christ?

Is there someone you can more intentionally walk with to assist them in pursuing Christ?

We seek out coaches, teachers, job counselors, tutors and countless resources to train us to grow in various aspects of life. Spiritual growth is no different! There are spiritual coaches, teachers, pastors, authors and helpful resources that help train us to embody our identity in Christ and reflect His character and attitude. As we learn and practice these qualities, may we become stronger in representing the one who has made us fully alive!

AROUND THE TABLE



In what ways can you help each other grow in and practice the characteristics of Jesus?

Plan a small group family dinner and focus the evening on blessing each other.

Then, as a small group, think of ways to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit throughout the evening.

You can cook for each other, write letters to your family, or just spend time affirming each other; whatever you can come up with to demonstrate Jesus love throughout the night will work.

GOING DEEPER

Pursuing Christ's character: 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Colossians 3:1-17; The 10 Commandments

Letting go of our own ambitions: Ephesians 4:17-32; Galatians 6:10; 2 Corinthians 5:15-21

Growing in our character: Philippians 3:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9; 2 Timothy 3:14; Proverbs 9:9

O.S. Hawkins, *The Joshua Code*, Thomas Nelson, 2012 (This is a year-long journey of developing Christ-like character.)

Beth Moore, *Living Beyond Yourself: Exploring the Fruit of the Spirit*, Lifeway, 2006

John Ortberg, *The Me I Want to Be*, Zondervan, 2014

Stevens & Ung, *Taking Your Soul to Work*, Eerdmans, 2010

N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: The Forgotten Role of Virtue in the Christian Life*, HarperOne, 2010

David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, New York, Random House, 2016

C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, New York, Macmillan Publishing, 1947

E.M. Bounds, *The Essentials of Prayer*, Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Book House, 1979

C.J. Mahaney, *Humility*, Sisters, Oregon, Multnomah Books, 2005; *Living Beyond Yourself: Exploring the Fruit of the Spirit* by Beth Moore

WEEK SIX NOTES

STAYING ALIVE!

So now what? We've completed this course, but it's just the beginning. As we conclude this series, the greatest danger now is to drop our guard, reduce our efforts and let up on the disciplines that brought us this far. "Well begun is half done," so the saying goes. The real joy comes from making your new spiritual focus a "holy habit." The danger isn't so much a dramatic fail; it's drift. Letting up a bit here, neglecting a bit there... and pretty soon, you've gone back to where you began.

Hopefully, it goes without saying that there important elements for cultivating spiritual vitality that should mark every person's faith walk. Daily Bible reading and prayer and weekly worship are essential—like cardiovascular workouts for physical health. But you've now been through an accelerated time of spiritual growth, and you've reached a new level of vitality. Let me suggest five simple steps for staying *ALIVE!* at this new level.

First, go back over this workbook again for the next six weeks. Take it week by week. You will be reminded of important truths, insights and practices that were very helpful. You'll also be amazed at what you discover the second time through. You'll see thoughts and ideas you didn't notice the first time. One of the hindrances to spiritual growth is that we don't slow down long enough to assimilate what we're learning. We're impatient and anxious to get on to the next thing. But time spent "soaking" or "marinating" in already-familiar material yields rich returns.

Second, purchase one of the books recommended in the "Going Deeper" materials and read it on a regular basis. There are enough recommended books to carry you through at least the coming year! A book is an amazing gift. Warren Farha (founder and owner of Eighth Day Books) wrote in Christian Century magazine, "The book is a discrete object that changes your life. It is not just what was in the book, but the book itself—it is the object that is woven into your memory. My first copy of Mere Christianity is 40 years old now. I can see the marked-up pages, the squiggly blue ink, the now-falling-apart copy, and I remember the experience of reading that book. These books are Bethels (Genesis 28:16-19)—stones of revelation. They are sacramental objects." Granted, you may not feel the passion for books that moves some of us. But a book is like a private tutorial. It is an author's best effort to communicate a message that burns within. And often that fire can spark your own personal blaze.

Third, continue in your small group—perhaps using one or both of the ideas recommended for reviewing the study or focusing on one of the additional resources. If you haven't connected with a small group, then find a friend who will enter into a "spiritual friendship" with you. A spiritual friendship is an intentional relationship between two people, founded in Jesus Christ, in which they alternately focus on the nurture of each other's spiritual life. There is no better stimulus to accountability and consistency than mutual support. Group members or spiritual friends encourage us and give us perspective, as we do the same for them.

Fourth, start (or continue) a daily prayer journal based on the simple process of previewing your day. Previewing may be a new concept to you. I developed the idea of previewing when I was leading a weekly Bible study of men in Old Greenwich, CT. We met in the early morning and then the men would catch the train into Grand Central Station, New York City. One morning one of the men suggested that we change from a morning time to a noon lunch meeting in midtown Manhattan. I said I was open to the idea, but was curious why he wanted to make the shift. "This study is really helpful, but to be honest, by the time I get to my office, I have pretty much forgotten what we did here. I just have a feeling that if I had an appointment for a Bible study on my calendar midday, I'd think more about God through that day."

His comment about his calendar sparked an idea. After we talked about his proposal I said, "Let's do something different for our closing prayer. Get out your calendars. Take some time to pray over each of your appointments and to do lists. Picture the Lord with you in every situation. After you pray, put a cross, or a bible verse or any idea that comes to you in prayer. Then, when you look at it during the day, you will think of the Lord and this prayer time."

That Sunday each of the men sought me out to tell me some story of what God did that day. "Great!" I said, "So how was the next day?"

None of them had done it the next day—because that wasn't the assignment! After that, however, we worked on making it a regular practice.

I call this the discipline of Preview, seeing our days as ordered by God. We learn to see our meetings as appointments with people God wants to influence through us. We see our studies, our work, our activities as assignments in God's Kingdom. We see our recreation as re-creation, the

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