



starters

ENRICH YOUR BIBLE STUDIES,
MEDITATIONS, PRAYERS, DISCUSSIONS
AND PRESENTATIONS

BRUCE PARKER

Starters

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Here is a link to a website associated with this book that shares more ideas: www.startersandmore.com

Dedication

Three J's and a W: **J**esus, who loves me in my "unlovableness"; **J**oanie, who joined me for these five decades of love and growth; **J**im, who first spoke the Good News to a 23-year-old me; and **W**illard, who nurtured my love for God's Word.

Starters

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INTRODUCTION

How to Use This Book

These “Starters” are brief, intentionally incomplete studies of Bible-related topics intended to aid you in personal meditation, study, group discussions, or preparations for presentations. They are intended to prompt your initial interest, leading you to further thoughts and study, alone or with others. The intended result is the development of encouraging, relevant, and instructive materials.

Starters range from simple to more complex. They are intended to lift the burden of getting started and to provide a structure that you make your own. You may well find some don’t resonate with you. I hope you will find that many are engaging and that you share your engagement with others:

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. “They shall be mine”, says the LORD of hosts, “in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him” (Mal 3:16-17)

As you begin, please note that there are three examples in the Appendix section that show how you might turn a Starter into either a meditation, a group discussion, or a finished presentation. Please refer to them as needed. May God bless your efforts to grow yourself, encourage others, and praise and thank Jesus and his Father!

In the Psalms, the word “Selah” is tacked on 80 different times. It means “stop and consider.” Please don’t try to read this book in a conventional way. Use each Starter as a time to “Selah”, to stop and consider, to reflect, to add your own thoughts, to discuss the ideas with others, and to take advantage of the opportunity to act on your reflection.

Because there are 52 Starters here, you could use one each week as a personal meditation.

One couple is reading one Starter together before heading out to their occasional “date night”, so they are encouraged to talk about spiritual things together.

There is a website associated with this book that shares more ideas:
www.startersandmore.com

I look forward to hearing your ideas for using Starters.

Contact me at: author.startersandmore@yahoo.com

PART ONE

Christian Walk

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with... A mission statement

Bible References: 1 Kgs 19:10; Ezra 7:10; John 1:31, 20:31

Start your reflection:

It is sometimes easy for Christ's disciples to drift away from their essential duty (or mission) of serving Christ. Mission statements are used by businesses to keep their efforts and interactions aimed at their essential purpose. The most effective mission statements are brief and easily remembered. Famous examples from businesses include:

TED Talks: "Spread Ideas."

Starbucks: "To inspire and nurture the human spirit—one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time."

Amazon: "To be the world's most customer-centric company."

If you were an employee at those companies, how would these mission statements help you to be more effective?

Extend your reflection:

There are several examples of mission statements in the Bible. Here are some personal mission statements.

Elijah: "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts" (1 Kgs 19:10).

Ezra: Set his heart to study God's law, do it and teach it in Israel (Ezra

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7:10).

John the Baptist: "I came baptizing with water, that HE might be revealed" (John 1:31).

Jesus: "I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37).

Sometimes, in the Bible, there is a mission statement related to a task, such as this one from John's Gospel: "So that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you might have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Deepen your reflection:

One Christian suggests the following personal mission statement:

Christ-centered, Bible-based, Active in love.

What part of this mission statement resonates with you?

What is your personal mission statement? Does it reflect those values that are most important to you?

Which individual discipleship tasks would be improved through a mission statement?

Collective mission statements are different from individual mission statements.

What is OUR purpose as a Christian family, church, or community?

To what extent could a clear mission statement help us focus our efforts for the further glory of Jesus and his Father?

Act on your reflection:

Some ways to act on your reflection might be:

Develop a personal mission statement that is brief and easily remembered.

Pick one discipleship task (e.g., Sunday School teacher) and write out

a mission statement for that.

In your family or church group, engage others in developing a collective mission statement.

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with... The truth about our own self

Bible references: John 4:24, 4:39; 2 Sam 12:7; Psalms 32, 51

Start your reflection:

“Those who worship (God) must worship in spirit and **truth**” (John 4:24, **my emphasis**). The Bible places importance on worship in “truth”. We might think of this as accurate teaching and doctrine, but here we consider another aspect.

There was a long history of conflict between Jews and Samaritans, and Jewish society also discouraged a man from socializing with a woman outside his family. Yet Jesus bypassed both of these taboos to reach a potential disciple! When Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at the well, another thing also impressed her: “[Jesus] told me all that I ever did” (John 4:39). She was a woman with a history, much like each of us, and that truth was not hidden from Jesus, though we may wish to keep such things concealed. By addressing her “truth”, he reached her heart for conversion, faith, and witness.

In the Old Testament, we find a similar story of someone with a concealed history. When Nathan told King David a parable about a rich man stealing and consuming his poor neighbor’s lamb, David was enraged at the injustice. Then Nathan said, “You are the man!” (2 Sam 12:7). David had stolen his neighbor’s wife, and he even had the man killed in battle. David’s concealed truth about himself was out! This transparency became a vital part of David’s relationship with God. He wrote Psalms 32 and 51 to be used in public worship! These Psalms speak the truth about David.

Revelation 3:17 shows believers may have a stunning disconnect between their view of themselves and Christ’s view of them. Are there aspects of our lives that we would prefer to hide or not think about?

Further reflection:

Another example from the New Testament is Paul talking about this inner truth. “I do not do the good I want” (Rom 7:19) and “Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom **I am the foremost**” (1 Tim 1:15, **my emphasis**). Paul was revealing this truth about himself, in part to help us recognize this truth about ourselves!

Another leading character from the New Testament, Peter, announced to Jesus at one point, “even though they [other disciples] all fall away, I will not” (Mark 14:29). Yet he soon proceeds to deny Christ three times. Jesus later confronted him three times saying, “Do you [really] love me more than these?” (John 21:15-17). Peter was shown the truth about himself—he was no stronger than the others. He needed Jesus’ grace just as desperately as the others did. Now that he knew this, he could effectively feed and nurture his fellow believers.

Deepen your reflection:

The truth about ourselves is important. When we are stripped of the image we put on for others—all the social media pretense, all the hypocrisy—when it’s just us before our Lord, confessing and being forgiven, then he can use us, like Peter, to build up those around us.

Act on your reflection:

Worshiping God in spirit and in truth includes acknowledging the truth about ourselves. Honest self-examination, joined with transparent prayer and confession before God is vital (1 Cor 11:28; 2 Cor 13:5; Lam 3:40; Rom 12:3). There may also be an appropriate time and circumstance for sharing or acknowledging our hidden truths with others, for the glory of God (James 5:16).

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with... Telling our stories

Bible Reference: 1 Tim 1:15-16

Start your reflection:

I spent my childhood and some of my adult years as an unbeliever. I had “adequate” answers to where things came from (the Big Bang), where they were going (death), and the purpose of life (a battle between winners and losers and I wanted to be a winner). For a rural farm kid from a dysfunctional, alcoholic family I was pretty successful; I was a college graduate, a commissioned Army officer, had a good job as an engineer, enjoyed an okay social life, and had a beautiful live-in girlfriend.

Then a workmate started asking me questions I’d not thought about before (e.g., “Do we exist simply to stimulate our nerves and then die?”). I didn’t know the answers and asked him if he did. He claimed to have an answer book at his desk and asked me if I would like to read it with him at lunch. That’s how we began to read the Bible together.

Deepen your reflection:

I thought I knew what a “real man” was—hard drinking, focused on sexual conquests, being physically dominant at games, brawling, etc.

Then I encountered Jesus of Nazareth. Courageous but peaceful. Wise but not a show-off. A leader without being a bully. Able to address each person on a personal level. Loving without being too sweet. Simply unique. A totally different kind of man than any I knew. I found it magnetic. Worthy of emulation and of following. He said his secret was always doing his Father’s will.

Act on your reflection:

My girlfriend and I got married. We began to learn more (although she had learned a lot from her youth). We asked for baptism. We committed our lives to God through His Son.

Nearly 50 years have passed. We’ve hit some really challenging parts.

We've failed and recovered by grace. We've spent time in the Lord's service in foreign lands.

We've helped lead a small charity serving desperate needs in Latin America and the Caribbean. We've had successful working careers and raised a family.

Ongoing reflection: We look back and see the Lord's loving, protecting, and nurturing hand at various times. We look forward and see a beautiful and meaningful future.

And still, we experience the "present"—God's never-ending gift! A daily cycle of choices and activities aimed at honoring our Lord and his Father. A blessed life. A useful life. A thankful life.

My point in sharing this is so you too can tell your story: simple, honest, and powerful. And you can encourage others to tell their stories. Not to brag or impress, but so we know each other better, so we can appreciate our scars and hurts and hopes and dreams, and so we can see how the Lord is working in our lives for his Father's glory.

Write out your own testimony now, refine it over time, and share it as appropriate!

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with... Being saved by Grace

Bible references: Eph 2:8-9; Luke 10:30-37; 1 Sam 16:7

Start your reflection:

Grace is God giving us salvation through His Son. The Scripture is clear: We're saved by grace through faith, not by works (Eph. 2:8-9). Yet we keep trying to make it "salvation through faith in Christ, plus..."

Other requirements people might "add" to salvation by Grace...

- ☐ Legalism (thinking we can earn our own salvation by following a list of rules, whether made by God, or related to those made by God, or perhaps even purely man-made). Consider the lesson of the Good Samaritan story. The Levite and the priest avoided possible contamination by rushing to or from their important temple duties while ignoring a man in desperate need. Following religious rules overrode their love for their neighbor (Luke 10:30-37).
- ☐ Tolerance/Permissiveness arrogantly disguises itself as "love" (1 Cor 5:1-2).
- ☐ Following God for what we can get (the prosperity gospel of guaranteed wealth).
- ☐ Once saved, always saved, with no expectation of repentance, no striving for holiness or other faithful responses to the Gospel (James 2:17).
- ☐ Imagining that believing the right doctrine is enough (in contrast to the errors other people are making).
- ☐ Faithful works (e.g., generosity/regular attendance/daily Bible reading) don't save us, although they may witness to our salvation by grace (Eph 2:8-9).
- ☐ Birthright (i.e., "Our family has been followers of Christ for six generations!").
- ☐ Success/Power/Wealth/Popularity—the things the world admires (1 Sam 16:7).

Deepen your reflection:

There's a reason our meeting as a church often includes the Bread and Wine, taken to remember Jesus' giving himself throughout his lifetime and then on the cross. It's about strengthening our connection to our Lord. We symbolically take Jesus into ourselves, then go forth to release his presence into our world by being Christ to others, letting him work through us for the Father's glory, to provide and protect in His name. This is why Paul says: "No longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

Act on your reflection:

After suitable consideration of our salvation by grace and humbly remembering the life and death of our Lord in the Bread and Wine, we go forth to act, not for salvation but to celebrate and testify to our salvation by grace. They are the works of Christ in us.

What can you do today to be Christ for someone in need?

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with... Saved to serve

Bible references: Eph 2:8-9; Matt 25:35, 28:19-20

Start your reflection:

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). This love isn’t a passive, “sit and have warm feelings” kind of love. Jesus had work for his disciples to do! Practical love expressed in faithful works would show the world what Jesus’ disciples were all about (James 1:22, 2:17; Gal 5:13).

Extend your reflection:

“We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:8-10).

Deepen your reflection:

Here are examples of faithful work, but you can find your own gifts and use them!

- ☐ Mission work: Go! Preach! Teach! (Matt 28:19-20; Acts 4:18-20).
- ☐ Charity: “For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink” (Matt 25:35; Isa 58:10).
- ☐ Visiting widows and orphans (James 1:27).
- ☐ Staying faithful in the face of trials (Rev 3:5, 11-12).
- ☐ Serving our Faith community (Rom 12:13; Matt 25:40; 1 Pet 4:10).
- ☐ Serving your neighboring community (volunteer to push a wheelchair at your local hospital).
- ☐ Using your God-given gifts (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 2:10).
- ☐ Encouraging others (Heb 10:25).
- ☐ Mentoring (1 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4).

- Teaching children (2 Tim 3:15; 1:5).

Helping those who are differently abled, elderly, mentally challenged, and children. Help everyone to contribute and feel valued.

Act on your reflection:

Everyone needs and deserves the opportunity to serve others.

Which of these practical ideas for service resonated with you? Perhaps you can find a partner to work on one of these with, helping and encouraging one another.

You, too, were “saved to serve”!

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with ... To whom much is given, much is required: “stewardship”

Bible references: Luke 12:48, 13-21; Acts 4:34-35; 5:1-2

Start your reflection:

It seems to me that God provides enough of each necessary thing in the world for everyone (for example, food), but it is distributed unequally. Why? What are we to learn? It also seems that humanity is unable to share resources equally and has magnified this inequality through greed, politics, war, ineffective food storage, inadequate distribution, etc., leading to massive starvation and malnutrition.

Extend your reflection:

What can we do as followers of Jesus? Stewardship is a major theme in the Bible. What is our responsibility? What are we to do with what we’ve been given?

Early Christians shared generously with the poor believers (Acts 4:34-35). Yet Ananias and Sapphira wanted to appear generous without the full sacrifice (Acts 5:1-2).

Some wealthy people in the Bible were very faithful: Abraham and David. Other wealthy people fell short, like Nabal (1 Sam 25) and Solomon, who was given much (2 Chr 1:11-12) but abandoned his faith.

Reflect on these Bible passages:

- ☐ Proverbs contains advice about wealth (Prov 3:9-10; 30:9).
- ☐ Jesus spoke a parable about the foolish rich man (Luke 12:15-21).
- ☐ The widow’s mite was commended, in contrast to the large (but proportionally smaller to their income) gifts by the wealthy (Mark 12:41-44).
- ☐ Part of the commendation of Cornelius is his generosity (Acts 10:2).
- ☐ We are to help the weak—it is more blessed to give than to

receive (Acts 20:35).

Deepen your reflection:

The word “tithe” literally means a tenth (10%). Is giving a tithe expected? Is it enough (Deut 14:22; Mal 3:8-10)? What message is God giving us through his instructions to fast and tithe (Isa 58:6-7)? Do these principles hold today?

Using our wealth appropriately can be a significant challenge in many of our lives
(Luke 18:18-30; 16:11; 12:18, 34).

Act on your reflection:

One believer told me he was unable to “tithe” because, as each month ended, he was left with less than 10% still available to donate. Is this what we do—give God our remainings? How can we be wiser as we think about and steward the abundance God has blessed us with? Can we be content with less so we can give God a fuller portion (1 Tim 6:6-10)?

Are there ways you are already showing good stewardship in Christ?

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with... Spiritual tools

Bible references: 1 Cor 11:1; 2 Tim 1:13; 2:15

Start your reflection:

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). You are a worker. You need to understand the tools you have been given in order to use them for God’s glory.

Reflecting on the more familiar spiritual tools:

- ☐ Prayer: talking with the Creator and his Son, knowing they are listening and that they care.
- ☐ Meditation: thinking deeply and exclusively on one aspect of faith at a time and having quiet time to listen deeply for guidance.
- ☐ Reading and studying God’s word with a purpose: to be changed into our Lord’s image!
- ☐ Commit: believe, be baptized, and attend church and Bible class.

Extend your reflection:

Additional useful spiritual tools:

- ☐ Practice: serving, charity, and loving our neighbor in practical ways. No one needs to know (Matt 6:4).
- ☐ Worship: honoring, adoring, and praising our God and His Son
- ☐ Hymns, Psalms, spiritual songs
- ☐ Fellowship:
 - Spiritual time together, as opposed to socializing, which also has a place.
 - Welcoming others in (not being cliquish or exclusive).
 - Seeking out the lost, lonely, least, and last among us.

Deepen your reflection:

- a. Finding or being a mentor: “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1; 2 Tim 1:13)
- b. Allow the Lord to help you weed your garden (Matt 13:18-23; Rev 3:17-20)
- c. Self-examination (1 Cor 11:31-32)
- d. Pray for God to correct you, “prune” you and bless your growth in his service (Psa 139:23-24).
- e. Preach and teach (Matt 28:19-20).
- f. Abide in Jesus (John 15:5).
- g. Fasting is one way to learn to say “No!” to ourselves (check with a doctor first).

Act on your reflection:

Choose one or more of these tools to focus on to grow your service to our Lord.

We don’t work to earn salvation. It is a gift by God’s grace. We use these tools, each in its proper place, to thank and glorify God as He has instructed us.

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with... Mending the nets

Bible references: Matt 4:18- 21; Col 2:2,19; 1 Cor 1:10; 2 Cor 2:5-7; James 5:19-20

Start your reflection:

When Jesus first called his disciples, some of them were mending their fishing nets (Matt 4:18-21). Tears in fishing nets leave holes big enough for the fish to escape. Nets need mending, holes in boats need plugging, and sails need repairs. Life involves continual maintenance!

The fishermen soon learned that their new calling would need plenty of maintenance, too.

We're told to "restore [one caught in transgression] in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal 6:1-2). The word "restore" here is the same Greek word as "mend" in Matthew 4:21 above, meaning "perfectly joined together".

Extend your reflection:

The basic mending/restoring in our spiritual community includes seeking the lost sheep, welcoming back the prodigal (Luke 15:11-32), softening the heart of the prodigal's elder brother, and renewing the faith of those who are physically present but otherwise far away. Here are more examples of basic maintenance for the community of believers. We are to:

- ☐ Be a community knit together in love (Col 2:2,18-19), united in the same mind and judgment (1 Cor 1:10)
- ☐ Forgive and comfort (2 Cor 2:5-7)
- ☐ Turn back the one who is wandering from faith (James 5:19-20).

Deepen your reflection:

This is what God and Jesus are doing for us (Rom 5:6-11). When we were helpless, Christ died for us. He loves us, reconciles us, and saves us (compare 1 Pet 5:10). In a sense, God and Jesus are inviting

us to join them in this work of community maintenance. One way is by participating in the Bread and Wine Service (1 Cor 11:23-26). We do it individually, but while we are all together. We're remembering the one Lord who is saving us all, one by one. It can become a time of healing, recommitment, and thankfulness.

1 Corinthians 11:18-22 gives the reason for Paul's instructions to partake of the bread and the wine in a proper and respectful manner. They had been doing it wrong, mistreating some and neglecting others. Perhaps this led to Paul emphasizing the importance of caring for the least, last, lost, and lonely (1 Cor 11:33-34).

Act on your reflection:

The work of the church is not simply rounding up new believers; it's loving and caring for the ones already there or who have left for some reason. It's not a glamorous work, but it's a glorious work. What can you do to help "maintain" your spiritual community? What challenges will you face as you begin? What can you do to overcome those challenges and begin to do this service? Someone needs your help and comfort.

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with... Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength

Bible references: Matt 22:37; 15:8-9; Rom 1:18-32

Start your reflection:

Consider the example in Romans 1:18-32:

“They knew God but didn’t honor him as God. They traded the truth of God for a lie.

They worshiped created things instead of the Creator.

They lived for sensations and passions, following these into unholy choices.

They descended into all sorts of shameful behaviors: not just murder or conflict, but also gossiping, boasting and disobeying those in authority.

Knowing these led to condemnation and death, they did them and enticed others to join them.”

While this sounds horrible, we might ask ourselves: “Are we really so different?”

Extend your reflection:

Do we obsess about things instead of focusing on God?

- ☐ appearance, body image, and achievements
- ☐ excessive car or home, clothes, wealth, hoarding
- ☐ events, entertainment, casual friendships, clubs, hobbies, sports

Do we live for sensations and passions instead of for God?

- ☐ controversies, the latest political issues, social media, injustice, pain, problems
- ☐ using substances to alter our mood, ease our discomforts
- ☐ casual intimacy, relaxed morality, flexible values, and ethics

Does God think, “these people honor me with their lips (only with words and the appearance of religion) but their heart is far from me” (Matt 15:8- 9)?

Deepen your reflection:

What are we holding back? God teaches us to “love [Him] with our heart, soul, mind, and strength” (Mark 12:30). What can we begin to do better today out of our deep love for God and His Son?

“Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psa 139:23-24).

Act on your reflection:

Look closely at what you are spending your money and time on, as well as what you are passionate about. Choose one thing related to your spending, your time usage, or your passion, and begin to turn it into something that more clearly shows your love for God.

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with... Journaling our experience of faith

Bible references: Rom 12:1-2; Mal 3:16-17

Start your reflection:

Like metal being compressed into the shape of a coin, the world is pushing us into shapes that don't honor God. Instead, He challenges us to be like the caterpillar transforming into the butterfly—a complete remake into the image of Christ. We are being told in this passage to transform, not conform (Rom 12:1-2). The word “transform” here is the Greek word *metamorphosis*, of which the caterpillar to butterfly change is one powerful example.

Extend your reflection:

God gives us the experience of watching this personal transformation happen over time. To facilitate your awareness of this, at the end of each day, you might record a few things you are thankful for and one new experience of faith (if you had one). Record the things you are praying for and about, so you can see how God has answered you over time. Record your reasons for believing as they occur to you. Record the people who have helped you build your faith and give one example of how they did that. For me, this is the man who first spoke to me of God's word when I was 23. Record any new/exciting discoveries you encounter while reading God's word—you know, those “that wasn't there before” moments.

Deepen your reflection:

After a few months, these notes will help you see the slow but important changes you are making. These notes may also become a resource for your own Starter ideas. Not suddenly saying, “I've got this all right,” but sharing your stumbling, grasping experiences before the Living God and His Son for the encouragement of others so they, in turn, can share their stories with you. We're told this pleases God:

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his

name. "They shall be mine", says the LORD of hosts, "on the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him" (Mal 3:16-17).

Act on your reflection:

You just read that God keeps a journal, a book of remembrance. This is another way that we can be like God. Why not start your journal today? Five minutes each day is better than 30 minutes twice a month.

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with... To “save” even one

Bible references: Heb 11:7; John 15:13

Begin your reflection:

As a child, I would imagine the courage and sacrifice required to win the American military “Medal of Honor”. I was later naturally attracted to the stories of courageous, faithful men and women in the Bible who saved others, some in a natural sense and some in a spiritual one. Here are some examples:

- ☐ Noah listened and obeyed God, which, in turn, saved his household (Heb 11:7).
- ☐ Joseph was rejected by his brothers, but God made him his family’s savior (Gen 45:5, 50:20).
- ☐ Saul saved Jabesh Gilead (1 Sam 11:9).
- ☐ David rescued his wives and others (1 Sam 30:18).
- ☐ Esther rescued her people, the Jews, from a potential genocide (Est 4:14; 8:3).

Deepen your reflection:

It would be lovely to save someone’s natural life. But how much greater would it be to bring someone to God and to Jesus, to true faith, that they might be saved for all time? Job interceded for his three friends (Job 42:7-9). Moses was rejected by the people, but God made him their ruler and redeemer (Acts 7:35-36). Within a family, God views children and spouses differently, even if only one parent believes in Him (1 Cor 7:14). Jesus puts it plainly: “Greater love has no man, than he lays down his life for his friend” (John 15:13).

If a workmate had not spoken God’s words to me when I was 23, where would I be today?

Act on your reflection:

Is there someone out there waiting to hear the timeless message of

love from you? That's probably not your first conversation. Maybe start with listening, helping, and being kind.

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with... Displaying our faith

Bible References: Matt 5:16; 6:1; John 14:31

Start your reflection:

In the USA, young people who join the Scouts earn merit badges in things like “first aid”, “cooking”, and “lifesaving”. They display these badges on a sash over their uniform. These displays show their achievements and glory.

For followers of Christ, our achievements are to reflect glory not on ourselves but on our Lord and on his Father. Jesus said, “I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (John 14:31) and “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:16).

Extend your reflection:

Unfortunately, religion can become a competitive performance sport rather than a loving service to our Master, whom we want to please. “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them” (Matt 6:1). The qualities we are encouraged to cultivate include meekness, kindness, humility, and joy in the spirit. If we feel pride in our achievements beyond those of others, then we’re wrong (Phil 2:3). Be thankful for what God is achieving in you.

Deepen your reflection:

When we feel God’s love for us, expressed so powerfully in His Son’s ministry and sacrifice, we should desire to respond in love for God and for our neighbor.

Christ spent a large portion of his ministry with those considered to be the dregs and rejects of society—the least, last, lost, and lonely. He wasn’t focused on saving the ones who presumed they were already in good standing with God; he focused on the ones who knew they desperately needed what Jesus was offering. In doing so, Jesus shows us that each one of us is precious in God’s sight.

Today, he and his Father have chosen to manifest their presence in the world through believers.

Act on your reflection:

You are the hands and feet and tongue of Christ to those you meet each day. Not to gain merit badges but for love.

Who are the undesirables, untouchables, and unloveables in your community? Will you go out of your way to meet them and serve them in love?

Can we learn to do these acts of kindness secretly so our pride doesn't intrude?

When people praise us, can we gently acknowledge that the glory belongs to God?

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with... Simply Christian

Bible references: Gal 5:22-24; Phil 4:8; Luke 18:17; Rom 12:1; Rev 2:19

Start your reflection:

Here's a list of characteristics we might admire in a Christian:

- ☐ Being clever on social media.
- ☐ Being attractive/well-dressed/fit.
- ☐ Being in all the right places and popular.
- ☐ Associating with the well-known, wealthy, and powerful.
- ☐ Being successful business people and wealthy.

In contrast, here's a list of things the Bible tells us characterize a Christian:

- ☐ Fruit of the spirit: including love, joy, peace, and patience. It goes on to say that they have crucified the flesh, with its passions and desires. (Gal 5:22-24).
- ☐ Virtues: true, honorable, right, pure, etc.... (Phil 4:8).
- ☐ Receive the Kingdom of God like a little child (Luke 18:17).
- ☐ Present your bodies as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1).
- ☐ Faith, service, and patient endurance (Rev 2:19).

There are stark differences between these two lists. Why are we drawn to the first list?

Extend your reflection:

Consider Jesus, who is saving us. He was not formally educated; he was viewed as rustic, yet he was generous, holy, faithful, pure, decent, loving, and sacrificial. He showed us by example how to truly follow him and how to truly be Christian.

Make a list of the things that people might think of first when they think of you.

As you review this list of your personal characteristics, are they focused on bringing attention to yourself or glory to our Lord? Do words like faith, service, sacrifice, and love lead the list?

Deepen your reflection:

For many of us, these spiritual qualities don't come naturally. This is one of the reasons Jesus and Paul encouraged us to partake of the Bread and Wine in remembrance of Jesus when we gather as a church. It forces us to think clearly about what has been done for us and reminds us to try to make the following days more like a reflection of HIM.

Act on your reflection:

Remember Jesus (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:23-26)! Choose to be so connected to him that your words and actions begin to reflect him... that you begin to be "simply Christian".

CHRISTIAN WALK

Getting started with... Seeing ourselves from God's perspective

Bible references: 1 Sam 16:7; Rev 3:17; Luke 18:9-14

Start your reflection:

Too often, we are not consistent in our service to God. We're told that "man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7) and that "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt 26:41).

Extend your reflection:

These weaknesses may account for our inconsistencies, like:

- ☐ Showered and dressed for church, but our hearts and minds were on the big game later.
- ☐ Spending lavishly on clothes, fitness, beauty aids, or sports while being neglectful toward the things of God. "Some gave of their surplus, while the widow gave all that she had" (Mark 12:44).
- ☐ Having a "show house" to look successful, but it is full of tension (Prov 17:1).
- ☐ The Pharisee and the Tax Collector—who was truly righteous (Luke 18:9-14)?
- ☐ The church at Laodicea thought they were rich and needed nothing but didn't recognize that they were poor, blind, wretched, and miserable (Rev 3:17).

Did you think of other inconsistencies as you read these?

Deepen your reflection:

There is a better way. Consider these examples, one by one:

"She did what she could" (Mark 14:3-9).

"First, clean the inside" (Matt 23:25-28).

"I am gentle and lowly" (Matt 11:29).

“Doing the will of God from the heart” (Eph 6:6).

Act on your reflection:

God tells us that our thoughts and ways do not naturally line up with His (Isa 55:8-9). It can be challenging to see our own inconsistencies. Spending time in God’s word and examining ourselves in that light is helpful. We want to be consistently His! Let’s show it with our choices! What is one better choice you could make? Can you pray about it and begin now?

PART TWO

Relationships

RELATIONSHIPS

Getting started with... .The streets shall be full of playing

Bible references: Zech 8:5; Phm 7; Rom 15:32; Exod 23:12

Start your reflection:

My wife, Joanie, and I spend a few months (every 18 months) in India.

In the building where we stay, there is a space with some equipment for table tennis (locally known as TT). Every Tuesday evening, we gather some of the young (and not-so-young) men together to play short games with lots of substitutions.

Soon, wives and other young women began to join us. Some played while others cared for infants and young children.

It was a lovely atmosphere, filled with lots of laughter, some enjoyable “TT” moments, teasing, and joking comments, with at least two languages going at once.

Extend your reflection:

We followed with a “take-out” communal meal, and almost everyone stayed to enjoy it. Everyone helped set up and clean up. There was always prayer before the meal, and there were often discussions about church activities and individuals, bringing up who had been absent and how we could encourage them. Often it involved inviting these people to “TT Tuesdays” first and transitioning them to more involvement later if they wished. Others began to bring friends from outside the church circle. They were welcome. No pressure. What began as recreation for young men expanded into a lovely forum for fellowship, fun, and

inclusion. Although it was unplanned by us, we were encouraged as it developed.

Deepen your reflection:

The Bible encourages us to find ways to refresh together (Phm 7; Rom 15:32; Exod 23:12).

Act on your reflection:

You can begin your own “TT Tuesday”, Wednesday soccer, Friday basketball, Sunday evening board games, or sewing circle—whatever will be enjoyable for your youth. And then see what happens when you make each person feel welcome and cherished and then make their friends feel welcome and cherished too.

What could you begin this week?

RELATIONSHIPS

Getting started on... God doesn't have grandchildren

Bible references: Matt 13:44-46; 2 Tim 1:5; 3:15; 1 Cor 7:14,16

Start your reflection:

“God doesn't have grandchildren” means each mature individual comes to a faith personally, not just because we are part of a believing family or because we attend a church (Matt 3:9). Coming to faith may be a surprise to some. Maybe a friend witnesses to them, or a faith story or song suddenly makes sense. Perhaps this is one meaning of the Parable of the Treasure (Matt 13:44).

Coming to faith may be the result of actively seeking it (e.g., through prayer, reading God's word, and seeking spiritual guidance). Is this one meaning of the Parable of the Pearl (Matt 13:45-46)?

Extend your reflection:

The examples we set are a powerful witness to our families and friends:

- ☐ The impact of a faithful mom and grandmother on Timothy (2 Tim 1:5; 3:15).
- ☐ The impact on an unbelieving spouse's decisions and also how a faithful parent influences how God views their young children (1 Cor 7:14,16)
- ☐ There is a powerful promise about the effect of our training on our children that is not always easy to see (Prov 22:6).

As parents, grandparents, and members of the church, are we committed to raising children who will want to pursue faith for themselves?

Act on your reflection:

Do we put our best nurturers and teachers in our Sunday School or youth program?

Are we actively preaching (in word, but first in deeds) to the people

around us? Do we think of them as “not yet believers” with the positive focus that projects?

Do we seek the least, the lost, the last, the lonely?

Do we honestly listen to our teens (and others) as they grapple with a challenging world?

There is “no greater joy” than seeing faithful choices by the next generations (3 John 4).

What could you start today to help another of God’s creation become a child of God?

RELATIONSHIPS

Getting started with... Metaphors for our relationship with Jesus

Bible references: Eph 5:25-27; Rev 19:7-9; John 10:7-15 (see more below)

Start your reflection:

Jesus went to great lengths to help us understand his desire for a relationship with us. One of the ways he used to convey this message was through a series of powerful metaphors. They require thought to fully understand.

Extend your reflection:

Some of Jesus' metaphors relate to us as a group, connecting to Him:

- ☐ The bride and groom (Eph 5:25-27; Rev 19:7-9). The bride is all believers, collectively. What does it mean to you to be a part of Jesus' bride?
- ☐ The shepherd and sheep (John 10:7-15). What does this teach us about his care, protection, and guidance for us as a flock?
- ☐ The body and head (Eph 5:23; 1 Cor 12:27). How does this challenge us to implement his guidance and recognize his primacy over us collectively?

Some of Jesus' metaphors relate more to our individual connection to Him:

- ☐ The vine and branches (John 15:5-8). He gives us food and support; we are separate from but in unison with others.
- ☐ The servant and master (Luke 17:7-10). We rely on his care and authority.
- ☐ Yoked together (Matt 11:28-30). He says, "Learn from me!" Don't drift away.
- ☐ The teacher and student (John 13:13-15). We are under his instruction and discipline.
- ☐ The master and disciples (Luke 14:26-27). He chose us; we respond, doing his will.

- ☐ The High Priest and petitioner (Heb 4:14-16). We have access to God through his Son; we receive from him spiritual guidance, grace and mercy.
- ☐ He is our brother (Matt 12:50). We share much in common with him, as children of God.
- ☐ He is our friend (John 15:13-15). He is welcoming us to a more equal relationship; he died for us.
- ☐ Judge and those judged (John 5:22, 9:39). He decides, one by one; it is not a negotiation.

Deepen your reflection:

Is there a progression in this list?

Does each one help us appreciate his “invitation to relationship” more?

Are our responses the same or different to each of these metaphors?

Jesus’ metaphors help us understand him better and respond more completely to him.

Act on your reflection:

Choose ONE of these metaphors and think about it long and hard. Try to find a way to LIVE it. Find a partner to join you in exploring these metaphors one-by-one.

RELATIONSHIPS

Getting started with... A relationship with Jesus

Bible References: Rev 3:20; John 15:15; Luke 10:41; John 14:18

Start your reflection:

All relationships require communication. The overwhelming Biblical evidence is that we pray to God through Christ; however, the Biblical record is clear that disciples spoke to Jesus after his ascension to God's right hand:

- ☐ Acts 7:56-60 (Stephen)
- ☐ Acts 9:3-6 (Paul)
- ☐ Acts 9:10-17 (Ananias)
- ☐ Acts 18:9-10 (Paul)
- ☐ Acts 22:18-21 (Paul)
- ☐ Acts 23:11 (Paul)
- ☐ 2 Cor 12:7-10 (Paul)
- ☐ Rev 22:20 (John)

One writer puts the necessity of our communication with Jesus in this way:

We give thanks to God, through our Lord Jesus (Romans 7:25, Ephesians 5:20). Yet this need not exclude such prayer and thanks (subordinately permissible to him) as are illustrated in "Lord Jesus come quickly" (Rev 22:20), "Lord, save me" (Matthew 14:30), "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord" (1 Timothy 1:12). If Jesus were on earth, and we were to meet him, would we not do homage and make requests of his favor? Undoubtedly. Well, he lives, and though we see him not, he sees us, and has all power for it is given to him...He is able to succor those who are tempted, Hebrews 2:18, and shall we not make request?"(Robert Roberts, *The Christadelphian* Vol 10, page 233)

Applying this Scriptural principle in my life, I say:

Jesus, you did indeed live, died, and live again forever as my Savior. I've heard and believed the Gospel, and I demonstrated that belief by being baptized. I've tried to live a faithful life, but I failed often, always returning to your mercy and love. The Bible has been a source of

guidance, encouragement, and hope for me.

I've seen you and God work in my life, especially looking back over the years.

It is clear that you want a personal relationship with me and with all your followers.

I find it difficult to be conscious of your presence in the moment. I'm often distracted, and not open to your guidance. I seem to need your offer over and over. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev 3:20).

Extend your reflection:

Lord, your invitation to "no longer be a servant, but to be a friend" (John 15:15) is stunning. I get stuck in the "Martha syndrome" (Luke 10:41), grinding away as a servant instead of relishing the "friend mode". I can tell when I'm wrong when my service to you is simply a job instead of a joy.

Deepen your reflection:

I've moved from "I have to go [on Sunday]" to "I want to go" to "I get to go!" I believe you will surprise me in unexpected ways to answer the desires of my heart. I ache to be more conscious of your presence, to understand what you mean by "I will not leave you as orphans" (John 14:18).

I'm thankful for prayer. I wish I had quick answers that were clearer, but I'm learning patience.

I love that I can be honest with you, ask the tough questions, and wait for your guidance.

The closer I am to you, the freer and more joyful I feel.

Deliver me, Oh Lord, for good!

Act on your reflection:

Who do you think was Jesus' best friend during his ministry, and why? Is it possible that each one ended up feeling like his best friend, not in a competitive way but in being understood, loved, and encouraged?

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Can you write out your own reflection on your relationship with Jesus?

RELATIONSHIPS

Getting started with... Intimate Nicknames

Bible references: Gen 17:5, 15; Mark 3:16-17

Start your reflection:

Often, a nickname denotes a close, intimate, and special relationship.

God gave new names to Abraham and Sarah (Gen 17). Joshua is a new name, not his birth name (Num 13). So is Jacob (Gen 32). God called Solomon “Jedidiah” (or “Beloved of the Lord”, 2 Sam 12). Jesus called Simon “Peter” (or “Rocky”, Mark 3), and James and John “Boanerges” (or “Sons of Thunder”, Mark 3).

In each case, the new name denotes a changed relationship. Take a look.

Extend your reflection:

God gave His son the name Jesus at birth, and later He exalted this name (Phil 2:9-10). Jesus also has a new name, “The Word of God” (Rev 19:13).

Deepen your reflection:

You and I can be a part of this too.

Revelation 2:17 speaks of giving his conquering followers a white stone with a new name written on it that no one knows except the one who receives it.

In Revelation 3:12, Jesus speaks of writing on his faithful servants “the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God... and my own new name”.

God’s purpose from the beginning was to have a close relationship with each of us. He loves us, He wants us to be saved, and His purpose is to be present with each of us (1 John 4:19; Lev 26:12; 1 Tim 2:3-4; 1 Cor 15:28).

The same intimacy, the same feeling of being special to our God and His Son, as was felt by Abraham and Sarah, Peter, James, and John,

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will be ours if we are faithful and endure to the end.

Act on your reflection:

What are you doing to build this intimacy with God through his Son?

What do you think your nickname is or will be?

RELATIONSHIPS

Getting started with... Love your spouse

Bible references: Eph 5:25-33; 1 Pet 3:7; 1 Cor 7:12-16

Start your reflection:

Our world has a great deal of confusion about love and commitment. There are many broken or unhappy relationships. God wants us to enjoy healthy relationships now.

Extend your reflection:

“Love your wife as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... so that he might present the church to himself in splendor without spot... in the same way husbands should love your wives” (Eph 5:25-33). This can mean seeking out her gifts and nurturing them, sacrificing your interests or pleasure to assure her needs are met, expressing your love for her in ways she finds meaningful and being sure you seek and understand her counsel before going forward. Be faithful to her.

Ephesians 5:24 talks about the wife submitting to her husband as the church submits to Christ. More than once, I’ve heard wives say, “If my husband loved me and gave himself for me like Ephesians 5, it would be easier to submit to him in this way.” Submit doesn’t mean ignoring your gifts or giving up being a whole and vital disciple of Christ. It can mean “help him by sharing the burden”, “work cooperatively for Christ”, or “seek out your husband’s wisdom”. It can mean gently challenging him in a positive direction or being faithful to him.

Too often, instead of helping to save his bride, a husband is a source of irritation and affliction for her. Live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor, “so your prayers might not be hindered” (1 Pet 3:7).

Our behavior as a believer may help to save our husband or our wife (1 Cor 7:12-16).

Deepen your reflection:

Your marriage, grounded in Ephesians 5:25-33, can show your

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children, your friends, and the world the true relationship between Christ and HIS bride, the church, and his followers.

In an adulterous world full of disposable relationships, your marriage can be a beacon. And if circumstances disrupt your marriage, rather than giving up, your faithful work to heal and forgive can be a powerful witness too.

Act on your reflection:

What area/aspect of your marriage needs attention or requires restoration? How would you want to go about it? Professional counselors who have respect for your faith can be useful. Loving and wise older couples may be helpful too.

RELATIONSHIPS

Getting started with... You are an important point of reference

Bible references: Matt 22:39; 6:12,14-15; Eph 5:28; John 13:34

Start your reflection:

The second-greatest commandment says to love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:39). What does this look like in practice?

- ☐ The widow who put in her two small coins could be wildly generous, trusting God would care for her. She is contrasted to the wealthy, who gave a small part of what they had, perhaps thinking they had to rely on themselves (Luke 21:1-4).
- ☐ The rich young ruler understood what it meant to love his neighbor as himself but refused to do it because he didn't want to have as little as others had after they gave it all away (Luke 18:18-23).

Extend your reflection:

In what ways have we refused or welcomed this challenge to love others as ourselves?

Deepen your reflection:

Consider more Bible examples: (Lev 19:9-10, 17-18; Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14; James 2:8)

- ☐ The Lord's Prayer says, "Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors" (Matt 6:12, 14-15). If we want complete and forever forgiveness, we must extend it to others. Not grudgingly, not by constraint, but because we want to love our neighbors—showing compassion and encouraging healing.
- ☐ Ephesians 5:28 encourages a husband to love his wife as his own body because, when we marry, we become one and no longer two (Matt 19:6). We naturally feel things that happen to our own bodies much more than we sense what our spouse is experiencing. Yet the challenge is there to be as sensitive on behalf of your spouse as you are to yourself.

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- Jesus said, “Love one another, as I have loved you” (John 13:34). Obviously, we can’t know what this love he has for us feels like from his direction (giving), but we know what it feels like to us to receive this love from him (1 Tim 1:15-16). This then becomes the standard. We want those we love to have the same assurance, peace, and joy in their lives from our love as we have experienced from Christ’s love.

Act on your reflection:

God and Jesus use us as the practical reference point for how we are to love others! Who do you already treat according to that high standard? Who else could you begin treating with that level of love?

RELATIONSHIPS

Getting started with... Knowing Jesus without seeing him

Bible references: 1 Pet 1:8; John 20:29

Start your reflection:

In Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, we learn that she had had a series of husbands and that her current man was not her husband (John 4:18). Perhaps that is why she was shunned from society, and that is why she was alone at the well. She was full of questions, focusing on Samaritan versus Jewish ideas of the Messiah (v 25). She knew some things and wanted to know more. Then Jesus stunned her. He said, "I who speak to you, am he" (v 26). She abandoned her water jar and went to tell everyone that "a man just told me all my secrets. Could he be Christ, the Messiah?" (v 29). The whole town went to hear for themselves, invited him to stay two more days, and many more believed. What made it effective was her story; she now knew Jesus as her Messiah.

Extend your reflection:

After the crucifixion, two people were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). The resurrected Jesus joined them on the walk, but they didn't recognize him. They talked with him about what they had seen and heard in the days prior, about "Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word," who everyone hoped would deliver Israel from Rome, but he'd been killed (v 19-21). There was a rumor he'd since been seen alive. Jesus then gave them a world-class Old Testament explanation of the need for the Messiah to die and rise. They came to a stopping point and invited this teacher to eat with them. When he took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them; their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. They went from having an awareness of events and hopes related to him to a rich understanding of his place in God's plan of salvation and onward to knowing him for themselves.

Deepen your reflection:

Here we are, 2,000 years removed. If people told us they had an

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invisible best friend, we might question their sanity. Yet, it is essential that we come to know Jesus for ourselves. Too often, we settle for having information (maybe lots of information) about Jesus without ever really knowing him for ourselves.

Peter commended the first-century followers in 1 Peter 1:8 by saying, "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do now see him, you believe in him..." Jesus himself said to Thomas in John 20:29, "Blessed are those who have not seen me, and yet have believed."

What does it mean to know Jesus and have a relationship with him, although we do not see him?

Act on your reflection:

How might this transformation occur for us? Jesus tells us: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev 3:20).

Do we have the faith and courage to open the door to him?

RELATIONSHIPS

Getting started with... Getting our youth involved in the church

Bible references: 2 Tim 1:5; 3:15; 1 Tim 4:12; Matt 19:14; Prov 22:6

Start your reflection:

The youth are the lifeblood of the church, the leaders of the next generation. But only if they stay, commit, and grow spiritually. We need to listen to them and stop assuming we know what they need or want. Don't pretend to listen while you prepare your next answer. Carefully listen, especially if they talk about why they might not want to attend church or bring their friends there.

Find ways they can actively participate (welcoming others, singing, reading the Scripture, helping with children's classes, planning meals and helping arrange them, choosing topics for Sunday School classes, having youth gatherings they help plan and implement, etc.).

Give them the very BEST teachers for Sunday School, Bible School, Youth Weekends, etc. Good teachers often function as older siblings; they are not perfect but can point them in the right direction.

Find ways the young people can be authentically involved in mission work, including internationally. Mission work should not just be a ride-along. It needs to include authentic hard work. It can lead to seeing how our Brothers and Sisters and their families really live, despite incredibly challenging economic circumstances. It needs to expose them to the rich faith that often lives in these tough circumstances.

Find ways they can engage in charity work (food kitchens, national and international charity efforts, etc.). Find ways they, like the widow who gave her only two coins, can willingly experience personal sacrifice for the benefit of others who are getting their basic needs met.

Help them understand the range of approaches people take on issues close to their hearts (e.g., equity, homosexuality, pre-marital intimacy, abortion, charity, the roles of women and men, climate change, etc.). Discuss these from a Biblical perspective. Help them understand that standing up for God's way may require courage, but it always expresses love; otherwise, it's not God's way.

Pray for and with them.

Don't assume they get enough spiritual guidance at home; it truly does

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“take a village to raise a child.” Don’t assume they get enough spiritual guidance at church. They need all the love, encouragement, and teaching that parents can provide at home.

Find ways to connect members of all ages. Create opportunities for elders and youth to sit and listen to each other, just for the pure joy of it.

“Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them” (Matt 19:14).

“Train up a child in the way he should go” (Prov 22:6).

Act on your reflection:

We have lots of ways to help our youth; however, we have lots to learn from them as well.

What is one thing you can begin now that would encourage your church’s youth in their faith?

PART THREE

Bible

BIBLE

Getting started with... The heart of the Lord's Prayer

Bible references: Matt 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-4

Start your reflection:

The Lord's Prayer is one of the most recognized pieces of literature in the world. Many of us have memorized it, which makes it too easy to speak it mindlessly. Let's force ourselves to slow down, think about it deeply, and take it to heart each day!

Deepen your reflection:

The initial focus is on God: "Your name, your Kingdom, your will." Is Jesus encouraging us to keep our focus on God instead of on ourselves?

It isn't individual; it is collective: We, our (three times), us (five times). We practice our faith individually and as part of a community. Why is he calling our attention to this? Jesus seems to be inviting us into his Father's presence as part of his family! "Our Father" (Matt 6: 9).

God is worthy of our honor (Matt 6:9-10).

May God's Kingdom come, now and forever: How do we practice Kingdom values now (Luke 1:33)?

God's will to be done (Matt 26:39, 42; Heb 10:7-9). Not my will, but God's be done. This is staggeringly difficult when we are so certain of our desired outcome.

Give us bread, day by day; free us from the worry of starvation and the resulting desperate need to do absolutely anything to feed our families.

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Help us to recognize your care (Prov 30:8-9).

Free us from the burden of guilt and failure through forgiveness: Help us learn to be like God, forgiving others, as emphasized by Jesus (Matt. 6:14-15). Help us to desire forgiveness for others like we do for ourselves, which is part of the second-greatest commandment (Mark 11:25; Matt 5:44). Our natural tendency is to want “bad people” to receive “justice”, but we want “mercy” for ourselves. How do we learn to want God’s mercy for others? By praying for their forgiveness too. And by extending our forgiveness to them.

Trespasses/Debts: this word in Greek apparently carries more meaning than simply “Oops, we made a little mistake”. It speaks of “Broken Trust”. Our God is a God of Covenants and Promises. When trust is broken, with HIM or with one another, it’s crucial to repair it by seeking and offering forgiveness.

As a further thought, our consciousness of guilt is meant to call us to action: to repent, ask God for forgiveness, apologize, and do what we can to make up for our failing. Right Now! Guilt isn’t meant to be carried around long-term, wearing us down and causing mental and emotional damage. When you feel the pangs of guilt, make the necessary changes quickly.

Lead us not into temptation: the Emphatic Diaglott suggests this is better translated as “Leave us not” in our temptations and don’t abandon us to what we’ve gotten ourselves into, but rather deliver us from evil!

It’s HIS Kingdom, it’s HIS power, it’s HIS glory, and it’s forever (this portion of Matthew 6:13 is missing in some translations).

Act on your reflection:

Let’s not approach this prayer in mindless repetition but in thoughtful consideration and then in loving application. It’s not meant to be simply read or said; it’s meant to be done (Luke 8:21; James 1:22)!

How can you begin to put this prayer into action? In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus seems to emphasize the need to forgive. Is there anyone or anything that you haven’t forgiven? Is now the time?

Nelson Mandela popularized the saying, “Holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.” Begin by praying for the faith, courage, and wisdom to do our Lord’s will in this matter, even if forgiveness seems beyond you right now.

BIBLE

Getting started with... Abraham Rejoiced

Bible references: John 8:56; Rom 10:6-10; 4:13-25; Heb 11:19

Start your reflection:

Abraham lived about 2000 years before Jesus, yet Jesus tells us that “Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). How was that possible? Did Abraham have a dream or vision? Did he hear a prophecy?

There is an interesting passage in Romans 10:6-10 that invites us to focus on having faith in Jesus.

Confessing with our mouth that “Jesus is Lord” is recognizing him as the Son of God, the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15), and our Lord and Master.

Believing in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead is recognizing that Jesus is exalted to be our Living Savior forever (Heb 7:25).

Romans 10 shows us that belief and confession are vital for our salvation, but how does this connect with Abraham?

Extend your reflection:

Abraham had his own experience with a miraculous birth and a resurrection and saw them as a preview of what would happen with Jesus.

Abraham recognized that both his body and Sarah’s were past the point of being able to conceive children or give birth, yet God had promised they would, and Abraham believed in this miraculous birth of his son, Isaac (Rom 4:13-25).

When tested to sacrifice his only child of promise, Abraham was able to go forward. Not by blind faith but in confidence that God would fulfill His promise of descendants through Isaac. He believed that if Isaac died, God would raise him from the dead. Hebrews 11:19 says Abraham witnessed (in a sense) the resurrection of his son by faith when the angel stilled Abraham’s knife (Gen 22:11).

Abraham saw in Isaac both a miraculous birth and a symbol of the

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resurrection. These two aspects tie into the Romans 10 passage and point forward to the miraculous birth and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Deepen your reflection:

The Gospel message is grounded in God's double intervention—the birth and resurrection of Jesus—to offer us salvation by grace through faith.

This was the joy of faithful Abraham. He recognized that sacrificing his own son would not accomplish humanity's salvation but that God was showing Abraham a preview of what God would do with His own Son, Jesus—miraculous birth, sacrificial death.

Act on your reflection:

Is our faith firmly grounded in God's double intervention—the birth of Jesus and the miraculous resurrection of Jesus from the dead?

How can we derive this same joy from our faith in the birth and resurrection of Jesus?

Galatians 3:27-29 links our faithful baptism into Christ to the Old Testament promises to Abraham. Perhaps understanding the amazing life of Abraham can help us understand how our faith develops as we take steps forward in faith, as Abraham did.

Take time to read about Abraham (Gen 12 to 25), taking note of his growing faith. Are there similarities to how God is growing your faith?

BIBLE

Getting started with... Timeless values

Bible references: Psa 119:105; Matt 4:7; 5:1-12; Exod 20:1-17

Start your reflection:

Are there values that stand the test of time (e.g., love, family, honesty, respecting oneself and others, freedom)? How are these different from “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 21:25)?

Extend your reflection:

Where do your values come from? Where does the Bible fit into your thinking? Is it the driver of your values? Or is it where we look simply to confirm our preconceived ideas or cherished opinions?

How did Jesus apply/show his Bible-based thinking? “It is written” (Matt 4:7).

There are no perfect verses addressing EVERY life situation. How did Jesus apply God’s timeless principles to the situations he encountered?

Deepen your reflection:

How do the enduring values in the Bible help us connect with our neighbor who is concerned with justice, climate change, peace, old age, or dying?

How can we apply the second great commandment—“love your neighbor as yourself”—in a way that encourages others in their journey, including drawing nearer to God? Often, simple human kindness opens the door for deeper conversations.

Who needs to see you living these values? Who needs to hear the “good news”?

When you live a life grounded in God’s principles and values, it is a blessing to you and to those you encounter, and it may open the door for important conversations and more.

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Act on your reflection:

Choose one or two “living values” that you hold dear. Are they solidly Bible-based? How might you adapt them to align more closely with God’s guidance? Now think about one or two new and practical ways you can “live” Godly values each day.

BIBLE

Getting started with... Jesus' metaphors about himself

Bible references: John 6:35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12

Start your reflection:

Jesus frequently uses metaphors as a powerful teaching tool. Think about these:

I am the Bread of Life (John 6:35, 41, 48, 51). The most basic food for our most basic need. To be eaten and digested, to become part of us and energize us, like manna for Israel in the wilderness.

I am the Light of the World (John 8:12). He illuminates our path, and the light allows discernment of right and wrong, casting out the darkness like the pillar of fire for Israel in the wilderness.

I am the Door (John 10:7, 9). Access to God is through him.

I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-18). He protects and guides, and he does this sacrificially.

I am the resurrection and the life (John 11:25; 14:6). These won't happen without him.

I am the vine, and you are the branches (John 15:5). By him, we are fed, supported, and changed over time as we grow. Any fruit we produce is from him.

The bread is my body, and the cup is the new covenant in my blood (1 Cor 11:24-25).

Jesus' healing work can be seen as a metaphor for his saving work (Luke 5:23-24).

Just "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). Why would a serpent be a suitable symbol for our crucified Lord?

I am "the bright and morning star" (Rev 22:16). Like the star in the east leading the wise men to the infant Jesus, where does Jesus lead us to?

Deepen your reflection:

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He wants us to explore these metaphors to enrich our appreciation for him! Which of these metaphors resonates the most with you? Why?

Acting on your reflection:

Choose one of these metaphors to explore more fully. Here's an example of these metaphors: Jesus' healing work can be seen as a metaphor for his saving work (Luke 5:23-24).

Consider how you need Jesus' healing in your body, mind, and spirit right now and how this relates to your ultimate salvation.

BIBLE

Getting started with... Contrasts

Bible references: 1 Cor 15:45; Luke 7:41-50; 1 Tim 1:15-16

Start your reflection:

Contrasting situations highlight lessons for us, making it easier for us to “get the point”.

Here are a few examples:

1. Adam choosing to join his bride in sin, versus Jesus choosing to save his “bride” (Gen 3:6; 1 Cor 15:45).
2. Two of us with our sins forgiven. Which will love Jesus more? The one who was most conscious of his “debt” (Luke 7:41-50). Consider the Apostle Paul, who was a murderer (1 Tim 1:15-16).
3. Two seemingly identical houses, but only one survives because it is grounded on the rock. Let’s consider if we are “grounded” in our Lord (Matt 7:24-27).
4. Ten lepers are healed, but only one returns to give thanks. Which am I (Luke 17:11-19)?
5. Two people who disagree (each thinking he/she is right). Get advisors, and ultimately the whole church, to discern who is correct. The goal is peace and reconciliation (Matt 18:15-17).
6. Marriage, where a man and his wife become one (Matt 19:6). Marriage has been called the greatest cross-cultural encounter. We are not naturally one.
7. Two sons: It’s not what we say, but what we ultimately do that shows our true character (Matt 21:28-31; Luke 15:11-32).
8. Two brothers: Cain and Abel (Heb 11:4).
9. Two men in a field, two women grinding at the mill (Matt 24:40-41). There is no obvious difference between them; they are both doing the ordinary stuff of life, but the Lord knows those who are truly His.

Extend your reflection:

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The Bible is full of contrasts to help us see lessons more clearly. What other contrasts can you find?

Acting on your reflection:

The Bible is written to help us understand so that we will align our thinking and actions with God's. Choose from among these examples (or others you can think of) to explore the richness of a lesson taught by means of contrast and then take action. For example, #7 above could help us be sure to commit ourselves when we should and then follow through on that commitment.

BIBLE

Getting started with... Brought low to be raised up

Bible references: John 15:2; Dan 4:37; Josh 2:1; Heb 11:31

Start your reflection:

Think about these individuals in the Bible who were brought low only to be raised up. They were pruned first, so they might bear more fruit (John 15:2). What can we learn from them?

Nebuchadnezzar: He was humbled to know that the Most High rules over men (Dan 4:37).

Job: He lost everything and even struggled with his “friends” for understanding. God Himself clarified all in Job 42:7-11; then Job’s life was re-established with a double of everything he had lost, except he only got one new set of children (maybe implying he’d also get the original set of children {Job 1: 19} back at the final resurrection?).

Rahab: She’s a foreigner in Israel and a prostitute, yet she was saved by her faith (Josh 2:1; Heb 11:31).

Joseph: He was sold and imprisoned, yet he raised up to be second in charge of Egypt “to preserve life” (Gen 45:5).

David: He was repeatedly attacked by Saul. He was betrayed by his son and had to flee. He sinned with Bathsheba, yet they were given a son, Solomon, named Jedediah by God, which means “beloved of God” (2 Sam 12:25). How many cycles of down and up does one man require (Prov 24:16)?

Jesus: He was first despised and murdered, then exalted (Isa 53; Phil 2:5-11).

Extend your reflection:

How are we being brought low to be raised up (Rom 8:28; Prov 15:33)? How are we being humbled under the hand of God, so He may exalt us (1 Pet 5:5-6)?

Acting on your reflection:

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Consider your life and connect to any ups and downs where you've seen the hand of God working actively. It's not difficult to do after the fact, but it's hard to see as we are going through these challenging moments.

Not everyone experiences these cycles the same way. But when we do, we can look for spiritual lessons and pray for deliverance and growth. James 1:2 encourages an attitude of joy when facing trials, knowing they promote growth that glorifies God.

BIBLE

Getting started with... Jesus, the teacher

Bible references: Matt 5:27-28; 6:9-13; 7:3-5; 13:3-8; 18-23

Start your reflection:

During his life, Jesus was well known as a “rabbi”, or teacher (John 1:38; 3:2). He used a variety of teaching methods, including:

Straightforward teaching (e.g., the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13).

Parables (e.g., the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:3-8; 18-23; and the parable of the prodigal son and his elder brother in Luke 15:11-32).

Correcting errors (Matt 5:27-28).

Personal examples (1 Cor 11:1; Luke 5:30-32).

Separating fact from opinion (Matt 15:11).

Hyperbole (e.g., Beam and Mote in Matthew 7:3-5).

Visual images (e.g., the widow’s mite in Mark 12:41-44).

Practical experience (e.g., sending out the disciples in Mark 6:7-13)

Miracles, which also serve as enacted parables (e.g., healing in Matthew 9:5-6)

Deepen your reflection:

Do you consider yourself one of Rabbi Jesus’ students?

Which of Jesus’ teaching methods is most effective for you?

Act on your reflection:

Choose one of his teaching methods that you are less familiar with and explore it. What aspect of this lesson could you begin to put into practice today?

BIBLE

Getting started with... Never in the Bible

Bible references: Phil 1:27; James 2:12

Start your reflection:

Some ideas are never found in the Bible, yet we sometimes act like they are. Here are a few examples:

- a. Just in case you can't make it on your own, there's always Jesus.
- b. Don't bother caring for the environment; God's coming Kingdom will fix everything.
- c. It's Sunday—it's time to be a Christian.
- d. God will just have to forgive me.
- e. Stop asking me for help, you poor/blind/ sick/widow/orphan. I've already done what I can.
- f. If you're lucky, you can be in the Kingdom of God.
- g. The "righteous" are the ones who don't get caught.
- h. Blessed are the rich, successful, attractive, or popular.
- i. I'm owed health, happiness, and freedom from pain.
- j. Our job as Christians is to keep "undesirables" out.
- k. Do good deeds when it is convenient.
- l. Pride and self-reliance are under-appreciated.
- m. Right doctrine alone is sufficient for salvation.
- n. Faith without works is easier.
- o. Whenever two or three Christians gather, there will be an argument or gossip.
- p. You have your sins, and I'll have mine.

Deepen your reflection:

As people watch us and listen to us, they can pick up unintended

messages. Let's be careful that the message we project is God's message: salvation, love, and joy in Christ.

Act on your reflection:

Take a moment to examine yourself. Think about the unintended message you give out occasionally (e.g., that laxness you tolerate in yourself, that habit that falls short of God's glory, that slip of the tongue that recurs too often).

Make a commitment now to try to change that, and may your effort be blessed.

PART FOUR

God and Jesus

GOD AND JESUS

Getting started with... Self-discipline and the Lord's discipline, working together

Bible references: Phil 2:12-13; 1:6; 1 Cor 11:31-32; 2 Tim 1:7; Rom 2:9

Start your reflection:

God and Jesus want us to be part of their plan. They will always do their part to make that happen. They want us to cooperate, participate, and focus on our eternal goal of being with them forever.

1. God is working in you to will and to do His good pleasure (Phil 2:12-13; 1:6).
2. Examine yourself and act accordingly; otherwise, God and Jesus will act, for your salvation (1 Cor 11:31-32).
3. God gave us a spirit of power, love, and self-control (2 Tim 1:7).
4. Circumcision of the heart (cutting away sin) is by the Spirit, not the Law (Rom 2:29).
5. By the Spirit, putting to death the deeds of the body (Rom 8:8-13).
6. Love of Christ controls us; we no longer live to ourselves, but to him (2 Cor 5:14-15).
7. "I've been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).
8. "I can do all things through him [Christ] who strengthens me" (Phil 4:12-13).

Deepen your reflection:

We've been invited to be part of our salvation, which is an amazing thing.

Act on your reflection:

We're saved by grace through faith. It's never the product of our work. Yet we're called to a new life, holiness, and faith in action.

God often uses moments like this, as we're considering His call, to convict us and revive us. Choose one aspect of your life to devote more fully to God. He's doing His part; do yours!

GOD AND JESUS

Getting started with... Jesus as Lord

Bible references: Luke 6:46; 19:8; 22:42; Phil 3:8

Start your reflection:

We're far from the days when "lords" held power over the lives of many. We don't naturally recognize what it really means—that Jesus is our Lord! Jesus himself helps us understand: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord', and not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46). If he's our Lord, we'll do our best to do what he wants.

Extend your reflection:

We try to do his will (Phil 3:8; 2:9-11). We may visit the lonely or help feed the starving. Those are good things to do, and the Scripture encourages them. We visit widows and orphans. We keep ourselves unstained from the world (James 1:27).

But what would it look like if Jesus was really Lord over every aspect of our lives?

It would look different for each of us and probably involve some hard things.

- ☐ For Zacchaeus, it involved revising his thinking about wealth and justice (Luke 19:8).
- ☐ For Paul, it involved completely rethinking what religion meant (Phil 3:8).

Deepen your reflection:

What needs to change in our lives? Self-examination and prayer can help us see what changes are needed. A friend can help. A Bible-based professional counselor who knows us well and respects our faith can help.

Too often, we cannot imagine really making a "Zacchaeus" or "Paul"-type break from our habits and thinking.

Many who struggle with substance addictions have found help in

Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and other similar programs. They all start with an acknowledgment of our powerlessness and our need for God.

People who struggle with pornography can get help through an app called “Covenant Eyes” if they can find one person they trust to help hold them accountable.

Whatever our issue, there is a way to find help.

When Paul spoke of us “crucifying our flesh, with its passions and desires,” he was acknowledging how hard it is (Gal 5:24). When Jesus faced the cross, he asked his Father for a different path forward, yet said, “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22: 42). Jesus acknowledges us as his sisters and brothers and friends as we become doers of his and his Father’s will (Mark 3:35).

Ultimately, Jesus as Lord is either a quaint old notion or a living and powerful reality.

Act on your reflection:

Perhaps we’ve got that one thing in our lives that is too big to imagine changing. When you do, it will change you forever. But you can’t do it on your own. If he’s your Lord, you can ask him for help. He loves you. According to Hebrews. 4:16, we can come with confidence to his throne to find mercy and grace in time of need. Begin now.

GOD AND JESUS

Getting started with... Jesus (and his Father) at work

Bible references: Rom 7:5-6; 8:6; 12:2; Eph 5:17; 3:20

Start your reflection:

It is almost too much to believe that the two most powerful beings in the universe are actively working for our salvation. God and Jesus are inviting us to participate. Listen to these powerful passages. Let them motivate you.

Extend your reflection:

“The word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13).

God is preparing us for good works (Eph 2:10).

God is doing far more than we ask or think (Eph 3:20).

God repeatedly promised that “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb 13:5).

Jesus promised, “I am with you always” (Matt 28:20).

God uses events in our lives for good (Rom 8:28).

We don’t naturally please God. However, guided by His spirit, we can (Rom 7:5-6; 8:6).

The challenge is to be transformed—with a renewed mind—discerning God’s will

(Rom 12:2; Eph 5:17).

God’s will is “Be faithful in what you do” (Rev 2:25; Phil 1:6; Matt 24:45-46).

Paul tells us that Jesus saved him to be an example for others. It could be said that “If God and Jesus can save him, maybe they can save me too” (1 Tim 1:15-16).

Deepen your reflection:

God allows us to make choices. These choices impact us and those around us: family, friends, Brothers and Sisters in Christ, and the “not

yet” believers. Your choices can have eternal consequences. Learn to sense our Lord’s guidance and choose well!

Act on your reflection:

Praise God and Jesus for their love and work on your behalf. Then renew your commitment to being a person of integrity, faithfulness, and holiness. Stop settling for less. Let grace move you to keep starting anew if you fail. Be the person they called you to be! How can you “start anew” today?

GOD AND JESUS

Getting started with... Beatitudes – Jesus’ list of the keys to being blessed

Bible references: Matt 5:2-12

Start your reflection:

The Beatitudes stand the world’s values on their heads (Matt 5:2-12). They have the potential to change your thinking and change your life.

Extend your reflection:

Will it be the bold and aggressive who are in the Kingdom of Heaven? No, it is the poor in spirit!

Is it the people who are celebrating now who will find the comfort of God? No, it is the ones who see/experience this world as it is and mourn for it.

Is it the powerful, successful achievers who will inherit the earth? No, it is the meek—the ones who have a broken and contrite spirit.

Is it the ones who are accomplished, full, and overflowing who will be satisfied? No, it’s the ones who continue to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Is it the judgmental, arrogant, superior ones who find mercy? Again, no. It’s the ones who practice mercy who will receive it.

Deepen your reflection:

It isn’t the hearers of Jesus’ words who will be commended, but instead, those who do them.

To help us understand, he showed us what this looked like in the way he lived each day:

- ☐ He was meek (gentle, patient), lowly, and humble in spirit (2 Cor 10:1).
- ☐ He ached for his followers who walked away (John 6:66; Mark 10:21-22). He must have been sad when Judas betrayed him or when his mother witnessed his crucifixion.

- On the other hand, he was motivated when he saw the joy set before him (Heb 12:2). Was he envisioning the effect his sacrifice would have on the salvation of many—for you and for me?

Act on your reflection:

Jesus showed us how the Beatitudes are to be lived and calls for us to join him (Matt 28:19-20).

How do these Beatitudes affect you today?

What is the challenge to doing these?

What is the one Beatitude that you might find impossible to grasp and fulfill in your life?

Can you pray about it, asking our God and his Son to help you?

GOD AND JESUS

Getting started with... The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

Bible references: Exod 4:5; 2:24; Matt 22:32; Gen 17:1-10, 19; Heb 9:14-15

Start your reflection:

Ten times the Bible says, “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (Exod 4:5; Matt 22:32). Is this different from simply “the God of Abraham” (7x) or “the God of Jacob” (16x) (Psa 76:6)?

Extend your reflection:

Perhaps God is telling us that He deals in families. Perhaps it is saying that Abraham fulfilled what God said—that Abraham would “teach his children” (Gen 18:19). But what if it is more than that? What if God’s work with Abraham was different from his work with Isaac and Jacob? What can we learn from each of these stories, individually and collectively, that will help us understand God better?

God’s relationships with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were based on His promises to them, His covenant with each of them (Gen 17:1-10, 19; Exod 2:24). Is that also true of our relationship with God and His Son (Heb 9:14-15)? Remember, God’s covenants are not contracts or transactions; they are promises. They are gifts from Him to us, pointing to His work through His son, Jesus Christ! See the connection to ourselves (Gal 3:16, 27, 29).

Deepen your reflection:

What about our parents’ relationship with God or our children’s relationship with Him? Are they the same as our own relationship with God and His Son? Should they be?

Act on your reflection:

How can we encourage each other as a “multi-generation spiritual family”, when we worship “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” and enter the same covenant promises through Jesus? What one step

could you begin right now to help your parent, sibling, child, or grandchild to better know “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”?

GOD AND JESUS

Getting started with... Christ in us: How to understand this

Bible references: Gal 1:15-6; 2:20; Matt 28:18-20

Start your reflection:

Have you ever noticed the prevalence and frequency of the concept of Jesus being “with us” right now?

Extend your reflection:

No longer I, but Christ in me. The life I now live... (Gal 2:20).

(God was) pleased to reveal his Son in me [not ‘to’ me, as some translate it] (Gal 1:15-16).

I am with you always (Matt 28:18-20).

I am the vine, and you are the branches (John 15:5).

I will not leave you as orphans, but I will come to you (John 14:18).

Christ in you (Col 1:27-29; Eph 3:17; 2 Cor 13:5; Rom 8:10; Gal 4:19).

Nothing separates us from the love of God and Christ (Rom 8:38-39).

Deepen your reflection:

Like any relationship, the more you talk and listen, the stronger it gets. Feeling estranged? The parable about the prodigal son shows us how to return (Luke 15:11-32).

Not feeling his presence? I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me (Rev 3:20).

Take the symbols (bread and wine) of Christ into ourselves (1 Cor 11:24-25); Jesus invites us to understand the symbolic eating of bread and wine as something much deeper. Feed on my flesh, drink my blood = abide in me and I in (you) (John 6:56).

Act on your reflection:

Christ in us is a relationship, a presence that we invite, and he

accomplishes. How would you describe your relationship with Jesus today? What would you want it to be? Think deeply about some of the key passages above. Can you do what Revelation 3:20 suggests right now?

GOD AND JESUS

Getting started with... Coming to know Jesus

Bible references: Phil 3:8, 10; 1 Cor 11:1; 2:2; Matt 11:29

Start your reflection:

There is a fundamental difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus.

By the life he lived, Jesus is inviting us: “Come, be like me, as I am like the Father.”

Paul understood the difference:

- ☐ (I want to) know (Jesus) and the power of his resurrection, and share in his sufferings (Phil 3:8, 10).
- ☐ “Be imitators of me (Paul) as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1, 2:2).

Extend your reflection:

Coming to know the Lord Jesus Christ is not only academic knowledge; rather, it is about following him and learning daily lessons as his disciples did.

- ☐ “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt 4:19).
- ☐ I gave you an example... do as I did (John 13:5-17).
- ☐ “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12; 13:34-35).
- ☐ “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matt 11:29).

Deepen your reflection:

Jesus lived prayerfully, sacrificially, and lovingly. He turned the world’s values upside down and invites us to join him in living a God- directed life (Matt 5:1-12). Discipleship is about coming to KNOW Jesus as our living Lord, moment by moment. Paul describes the result: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Act on your reflection:

Do you want to know Jesus? He awaits your invitation (Rev 3:20). He invites us to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow him (Mark 8:34-36).

What is one way you can begin to deny yourself today so you might more fully follow our Lord?

PART FIVE

Trials

TRIALS

Getting started with... Temptations in the wilderness

Bible references: Matt 4:1-11; 6:24; Mark 7:20-22; 1 John 2:15-17; Heb 4:15; Deut 8:2

Start your reflection:

Jesus chose to share his temptation experience with us, showing us how his mind works and how temptation occurs (Mark 7:20-22). He demonstrates to us how we often call the Scripture to mind and misuse it to serve ourselves (Matt 4:6). He then goes on to show us how we may use Scripture to say “no” to ourselves (Matt 4:7) in order to glorify our Father.

God’s Holy Spirit had sent Jesus to the wilderness (Matt 4:1). He knew it was a place of trials to prove his faith (Deut 8:2).

Extend your reflection:

Jesus was hungry. He thought about turning stones into bread. He responds: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Sometimes our appetites demand our attention (i.e., lust of the flesh, 1 John 2:16). There are many ways for us to satisfy these appetites, but some may not be appropriate, or the timing is not right.

Learning to say “No!” to ourselves is an essential skill. Deferred gratification is a mark of maturity. Jesus indicated the correct priority. God’s word (i.e., reading and searching to understand and apply it) takes priority over our desire for food, sleep, etc.

Then Jesus grapples with the thought, “If you are God’s Son, prove it

in a spectacular way” (dive off a high place, let the angels catch you, because “it is written...”). It might be tempting to do things that amaze people, grab their attention, or kick off your efforts in a big way. This is the “lust of the eye” (1 John 2:16). Would these things bring glory to our Father or to ourselves (Matt 5:16)?

The mark of discipleship is love, expressed in practical, unspectacular ways. Not the proud person, but the humble and contrite is honored by our Lord. Even though God could save us if we intentionally stepped in front of a speeding bus, it is not our Lord’s way for us to “test” God.

Then Jesus wrestles with the thought, “Look at the world, all the good you could do if you just follow the whispers of the ‘devil’ inside each person. Skip the Cross, live a long and productive life. Use your mind and the Holy Spirit powers to change the world.” This is the “pride of life” (1 John 2:16). Jesus answers, “You shall worship the Lord, your God, and him only shall you serve.”

Deepen your reflection:

It is tempting to try to serve God and ourselves, but it isn’t possible. We can’t serve two masters (Matt 6:24).

Most people are content to serve themselves. Some do lots of good along the way. But to be our Savior, Jesus had to focus on **ONLY** serving his Father. To be his disciples, we want to follow his example and do our best to make him Lord over every aspect of our lives.

Act on your reflection:

Think about that one temptation that keeps coming back to you. And then think of the Scripture that will be useful when that happens. Add this to your morning prayers: that God will not leave you in this temptation but will deliver you from this evil. Then, if it occurs to you during the day, focus instead on the Scripture you have chosen and again pray for help. May God and his Son bless your efforts to glorify them in overcoming this trial.

TRIALS

Getting started with... Thy will be done

Bible references: Matt 6:10; 26:42; Dan 3:17-18; Eph 5:17-20; Luke 9:23

Start your reflection:

We often make choices that are quite similar to those made by people who don't know God or His Son. Here's the alternative: Jesus prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done" (Matt 26:42). Or like Daniel's three friends, "We know our God can preserve us, but even if he doesn't, we still won't worship your idol" (Dan 3:17-18).

God doesn't hide what He expects of us. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic 6:8). Understand the Lord's will, be filled with the spirit, make music from your heart, and give thanks to God for everything, in Jesus' name (Eph 5:17-20). God works in our lives, using the circumstances as opportunities to shape us, refine us, and rescue us, all for His glory (Rom 8:28).

Extend your reflection:

Do you want to be Jesus' disciple? Deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow him (Luke 9:23).

Put on Jesus; make no preparation to gratify our fleshly desires (Rom 13:14). Renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and devote ourselves to holiness and faithful ways (Titus 2:11-14).

Too often, when we come to that fork in the road, we go wrong. Then we need the U-turn God has provided—repentance and forgiveness, that fresh start. Even as our Lord taught us to pray, "Lead us not into [or, as I think is more correct, 'Leave us not in'] temptation but deliver us from evil." God and Jesus don't want us going down that wrong path, so they actively work in our lives to interrupt that and turn us back to faithfulness!

We need regular reminders: we read His Word, we ask for help in prayer, and we meet together to encourage and be encouraged.

Deepen your reflection:

A life of faith is a yielded, service-focused, loving, and holy life. A life with mistakes for which we quickly repent and ask for forgiveness. A life of joy and peace, looking forward in hope. A life of witness, in deeds and words. A life of seeking to do God's will!

Let's follow Jesus to ensure triumph, even if we face trials or tragedy along the way.

Act on your reflection:

Is there an area of your life where you recognize you are not fully seeking God's will? Write it down. Write down the circumstances that brought you to that point, the companions involved, any substances used, or other factors. Try to identify the "tipping point", the point at which you start down the wrong path. Think about alternatives. What will help you make a better choice? Write that down and pray about it.

TRIALS

Getting started with... A brother is born for adversity

Bible references: Prov 17:17; 2 Cor 12:20-21; 1 Cor 11:17-34

Start your reflection:

How do we choose our church? Comfort, excitement, truth, or convenience? What do we do when there is a problem? Notable in Revelation 2 and 3, the message from Jesus to members of churches with problems is never to “divide” or “leave and join a different nearby Church.” The message is to remain personally faithful and have confidence that Jesus is at work on the big issues.

In another challenging spiritual situation, Paul encourages failing individuals to repent. Just like Jesus, Paul doesn’t recommend the faithful depart (2 Cor 12:20-21).

In Corinth, there were issues with the Sunday morning practice of remembering Jesus in the emblems of Bread and Wine (1 Cor 11:17-34). Paul recommends self-reflection and changes to the Corinthians’ flawed practices (v. 31). He says that when we fail to act ourselves, our Lord is prepared to do so (v. 32) for our salvation. There’s no need to leave or to divide the church.

Extend your reflection:

Many passages testify to the need for and benefits of having love within our faith community (1 Cor 13; Rom 13:10; Eph 4:15-16; Phil 2:2; 1 John 3:14). This love isn’t grounded in popularity, good feelings, or cliques; it is our response to being loved first by God, who showed the magnitude of His love by offering His Son for our salvation (1 John 4:19).

Act on your reflection:

When challenging situations arise, we don’t panic or depart. We do what we can to ease the tension by staying faithful ourselves and by loving in sacrificial and practical ways, including loving the unlovable and loving our enemies even. The mark of the community of Christ is that we love one another (John 13:34-35).

Can you make a difference by loving that difficult person?

TRIALS

Getting started with... Our virtues may fail, but Jesus won't

Bible references: Psa 6:2-3; Hab 1:2; Rev 6:10; Luke 2:51, 4:1-13

Start your reflection:

We don't know if:

- ☐ We are truly loving until we are called upon to love the unlovable
- ☐ We have patience until we are placed in a trying situation
- ☐ We are truthful until the truth brings difficult consequences (Psa 15:4)
- ☐ We are holy unless circumstances tempt us
- ☐ We are long-suffering until we are called upon to suffer long
- ☐ We are true friends until a situation arises where being a friend is costly

We have faith until our prayers seem to go unanswered, or our will seems not aligned with God's, and we cry, "How long, oh Lord?" (Psa 6:2-3; Hab 1:2; Rev 6:10).

Deepen your reflection:

How Jesus responded to tests is our example:

- ☐ Returned home for 18 more years after being in the temple at age 12 (Luke 2:51).
- ☐ Three temptations in the wilderness = lust of flesh, eye, pride of life (Luke 4:1-13, 1 John 2:15-17).
- ☐ Those temptations recurred throughout his ministry, including:
 - Care for yourself—come down from the cross, and we'll believe you (Mark 15:32).
 - Refuse to do a miracle to amaze (Luke 4:29-30).
 - Avoid the cross entirely: temptation in Gethsemane (Luke 22:42-44).

- Jesus was tempted in every way without sin. We face tests of our virtues and want to be faithful but often fail. We go to Jesus to receive mercy and grace (Heb 4:15-16).

Act on your reflection:

We might imagine we could do so much more for HIS glory if only this obstacle were removed. If we've asked repeatedly, yet it remains, we need to come to peace that it is for our own good, though we can't see it. Choose to rejoice in his grace, which is sufficient (2 Cor 12: 8-10)!

TRIALS

Getting started with... Let's be Christians

Bible references: 2 Cor 12:7-10; Rom 8:18, 28, 35, 37; 1 Cor 11:31-32; 2 Tim 2:24-25

Start your reflection:

In Acts 11:26, we read that followers of Christ began to be labeled "Christians." Peter tells us that such a label should be worn as a badge of honor, especially in times of adversity: "Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name" (1 Pet 4:16).

Occasionally, those in the family of God (who we thought we could count on) are a source of difficulty rather than support. Facing this reality many years ago, in a terribly stressful situation, my wife said to me, "Somebody must be the Christians here. Let's be the Christians."

Extend your reflection:

Paul tells of being incredibly blessed but then being given a trial to keep him from becoming conceited. He asked repeatedly for the "thorn in his flesh" to be removed but was told instead, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor 12:7-10). Sometimes our trials have a purpose beyond our current understanding, and we need to be content that our salvation is by grace. We should try to see the current troubles from our Lord's perspective:

- ☐ "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom 8:18).
- ☐ "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28).
- ☐ "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom 8:35, 37).

Deepen your reflection:

Difficulties offer us the opportunity to examine ourselves, to find our shortcomings that may have contributed to the problem, and resolve these before our Lord: "But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world" (1 Cor 11:31-32).

Difficult times, often at the hands of someone we count on for support, can be a "change point". These challenging times can give us the opportunity to reflect, pray, and (if required) gently confront, hopefully turning the situation for the better: "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness" (2 Tim 2:24-25).

Act on your reflection:

Each of us occasionally faces situations where we could use the reminder: "Somebody must be the Christians here. Let's be the Christians." Why not write it out on a sticky note and place it where you will see it? May God bless you to "be the Christian" in those challenging moments.

TRIALS

Getting started with... Faith in the face of challenges

Bible references: Heb 11:7; Gen 45:5-9; Deut 8:2

Start your reflection:

Here are situations where people faced challenges. How did their faith help them?

- a. Noah: Built an ark that saved his family (Heb 11:7).
- b. Joseph: Suffering in the pit and dungeon on the way to the throne (Gen 45:5-9).
- c. Israel in the wilderness: "You shall remember... the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not" (Deut 8:2).
- d. David: Faced the lion, bear, Goliath, and ultimately himself (1 Sam 17:34-36).
- e. In a horrid situation, "yet will I rejoice in the Lord" (Hab 3:17-18).
- f. Mary was told she would become pregnant by a miracle. Yet the world around her would imagine it a shameful situation for a young woman who is not yet formally married. She responded with great faith and courage (Luke 1:34-38)!
- g. Disciples: leave everything and follow Jesus (Matt 19:27-29).
- h. Paul's trial: thorn in the flesh... my grace is sufficient (2 Cor 12:7-10).

Extend your reflection:

Christ was strengthened through trial: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8).

We are grounded in Christ and strengthened (Eph 3:16-19). Discipline is hard for us but necessary (Heb 12:1-11; James 1:2-4). Challenging situations give us a chance to choose the things of the spirit over things of the flesh (Rom 8:3-17).

Act on your reflection:

Challenging situations occur in most lives. We can learn from these and other Bible examples to face our challenges with faith too!

What is the biggest challenge you are facing right now? Can your faith help you through it? Which Bible examples help you most to do this?

PART SIX

Faith

FAITH

Getting started with... A place for “personal testimony”

Bible references: Luke 22:31-32; Rom 8:28; James 5:13-16

Start your reflection:

Our family recently went through a terrible time. The family members involved have given me permission to share this story. One member of our family was experiencing a bipolar manic episode, and it was devastating for all involved. The hardworking, kind, and loving person we knew and loved was gone. He had transformed into a man we didn't recognize—a man who only seemed capable of viewing his loved ones through a lens of judgment, anger, vitriolic words, and irresponsibility. This went on month after month.

I was doing everything I knew to do for this person and his family. I prayed so much. I cried in secret while trying to be strong and supportive of others.

Extend your reflection:

I watched myself losing my faith, hardening myself to walk away from this God and his Son, who seemed so absent. And yet... and yet, I didn't want to lose what had been central and essential to my being for decades.

So, I spoke with my Lord. I said, “Lord, when Peter was about to face his biggest challenge, you prayed for him [Luke 22:31-32]. You didn't pray that he wouldn't face the trial. You didn't pray that he would be successful in facing this trial. You prayed that he wouldn't lose his faith in the process. Lord, please pray that prayer for me. Not that my dear

one wouldn't face this hard thing, which weighs on me so much. Not that I would somehow be able to fix it. But Lord, please pray that through this horrid experience, that I would not lose my faith in you."

Deepen your reflection:

From that very moment, I felt that the risk of losing my faith was gone. The trial remained. The pain was intense. The situation was unresolved. But my faith was no longer in danger. I felt at peace.

I'm so very thankful for that specific and dramatic answer to my prayer. No one else could see it. No one else could feel it. Only me. Thank you, Lord!

Act on your reflection:

By God's grace, the situation described above has been mostly resolved (Rom 8:28). My reason for sharing this account is to show the power of sharing our weaknesses and confessing our faults (Jas 5:13-16). Share your own story.

STARTERS

FAITH

Getting started with... Our most “Kingdom-like” experiences

Bible references: Heb 11; Psa 16:11; 3 John 4; Luke 15:7; 1 Cor 11:23-26

Start your reflection:

One day Jesus will return and set up God’s Kingdom. For now, we are able to catch glimpses of that joy in a variety of ways:

Birth of your children

Sunsets

Mighty Storms

Desert blooming

Handel’s Messiah

Bible-based Kingdom-like experiences include:

Creation

Virgin Birth

Christ’s crucifixion, for our salvation

His Resurrection

Joy in Heaven at each new conversion

The endurance and faith of the people in Heb 11, etc.

In your presence is fullness of Joy (Psa 16:11)

Extend your reflection:

Where the “personal” and the “Biblical” converge may include:

Lord’s prayer: Kingdom come, will be done on earth (now AND forever)

When your faith first awakened

Your baptism

Your marriage

Children committing to a life of faith (3 John 4).

Answered prayers

Conversion of a dear friend to faith (Luke 15:7).

Bread and Wine (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

Deepen your reflection: What events or experiences in your life feel most like “Kingdom moments”? How do you sustain your vision of and hope in the Kingdom of God?

How do you keep it real and relevant?

Act on your reflection: Choose one of the things listed above or one you thought of while considering them. Hold it in your mind as a cherished memory, and offer praise and thanks to God and HIS Son for the gift of such moments. Repeat as needed.

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FAITH

Getting started with... For many of us, our faith feels fragile at times. Why is that?

Bible references: Matt 13:3-9; 18-23; Luke 16:13; 17:26-30

Start your reflection:

Look at the details of the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13; Mark 4; Luke 8):

- ☐ The seed represents the Gospel message, shared generously with all.
- ☐ No moisture (no living water/words of Christ) = wilt in persecution or affliction.
- ☐ Cares of the world: success, possessions, popularity, focus on appearance, just being too busy.
- ☐ Deceitfulness of riches: careless stewards, coveting wealth, wanting to “appear” wealthy.
- ☐ Desire for the pleasures of this life: physical pleasures, substance use, vacations, parties, fun, distractions.
- ☐ Desire for other things: beauty, hobbies, social media, big home, nice clothes...

These all lead to the plant being strangled! A failure to mature or be fruitful.

Extend your reflection:

We need to be:

- ☐ Grounded in the good soil of Christ and sowed with the seed of God’s message.
- ☐ Have an honest and good heart (transformed by Him).
- ☐ Hear the word, understand it, bear fruit... 30x, 60x, and 100x.

This parable teaches us to make choices that nurture the precious seed.

Consider these similar messages:

- ☐ God versus Mammon (Luke 16:13).
- ☐ Like the days of Noah and Lot (Luke 17:26-30), believers were probably not as bad as the people around them, yet maybe they were still overwhelmed by the pleasures of life, which replaced their focus on God
- ☐ Hearts weighed down (Luke 21:34).
- ☐ Hard for the rich to enter: on the world's scale, disciples in North America, Europe, and Australasia are rich (Luke 18:24-25).
- ☐ Love of money (1 Tim 6:9-10).
- ☐ Demas, in love with the present world (2 Tim 4:10).
- ☐ Love of this world: lust of flesh, lust of eyes, and pride of life (1 John 2:15-17).

Deepen your reflection:

The things that weaken our faith are often the things we choose that displace our full focus on God and his Son. Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt 6:24-25, 33).

Act on your reflection:

Examine yourself. Be ruthlessly honest. Are there things in your life that are hindering your growth in faith? If you can't do that successfully, ask our Lord to help you.

Once you know one thing that is hindering you, decide if it needs removal, reorientation, or rededication. Focus on that one thing for a month, with prayer and positive change. As you see progress, rejoice in the Lord.

FAITH

Getting started with... For the joy set before us

Bible references: Dan 7:27; Matt 6:10; Isa 9:6-7; Luke 1:31-33; Rom 12:1-2; Heb 11:13-16

Start your reflection:

Let's spend a few minutes imagining God's coming Kingdom:

1. "And the kingdom and the dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom... shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High, his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him" (Dan 7:27).
2. The Lord's Prayer: may God's will be done on earth (Matt 6:10).
3. Christ on David's throne (Isa 9:6-7; Luke 1:31-33).
4. Faithful participating as a Kingdom of priests (Rev 5:10).
5. No more death or pain, no more sin (Rev 21:3-4; 1 Cor 6:9-10).
6. God will be all and in all (1 Cor 15:24-28).
7. Wolf and lamb dwell together (Isa 65:17-25; 11:6-9).
8. Blooming desert (Isa 35:1-10).

Extend your reflection:

The Bible's message of the Kingdom should inspire us. Is this inspiration visible in our lives, or are we indistinguishable from our non-believing neighbors? Are we huddled in a defensive crouch, trying to stay "untainted"? Are we only cerebral in our Christian life?

Do we seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness first (Matt 6:33)? Are we "Not conformed to the world, but transformed" (Rom 12:1-2)?

Deepen your reflection:

True believers lived faithful lives, then died waiting for a better world to come (Heb 11:13-16). The hints we are given in the Scripture show

there is a lovely future for God's faithful ones!

How can our responses and choices now affect our future destiny?

Act on your reflection:

Choose one aspect of Christ's coming Kingdom that resonates with you. Write it on a card to carry with you, where you will encounter it at random moments. Each time, spend a moment thinking of the goodness to come.

FAITH

Getting started with... ~~False Gods~~, True God

Bible references: Luke 17:26-32; 1 Sam 2:12, 22-25; 8:1-3; Acts 5:1-5; Matt 23:1-36

Start your reflection:

God began His Ten Commandments, telling us, “I am the Lord your God... have no other gods before me.” He understands our tendency to drift from true worship and holiness. Here are some examples:

- ☐ Days of Noah and Lot and today (Luke 17:26-32).
- ☐ Eli’s sons using their religious position for personal gratification (1 Sam 2:12, 22-25).
- ☐ As did Samuel’s sons (1 Sam 8:1-3).
- ☐ Ananias and Sapphira wanted praise without all the sacrifice (Acts 5:1-5).
- ☐ Hypocritical Pharisees: to appear righteous before men (Matt 23:1-36).
- ☐ They knew God but chose other things to worship and corrupted themselves (Rom 1:18-25).
- ☐ First century believers falling away from the true faith (Heb 6:4-6).
- ☐ When we corrupt the things of God or give our love to “things” (1 John 2:15-17).

Deepen your reflection:

As we pray, as we fellowship with true believers, and as we read and meditate on God’s words, our hearts can convict us of the ways we are falling short spiritually. Then we can focus on turning things around:

- ☐ Begin with prayer (Phil 4:6).
- ☐ Parable of Sower: weed out sins, clear away rocks, refocus (Matt 13:1-8, 18-23).
- ☐ Stop conforming to this world, be transformed...discerning

God's will (Rom 12:1-2).

- ☐ Apply the examples of turning situations around (Eph 4:17-32)
- ☐ Try to see God's intent and fulfill the spirit of each religious practice (Isa 58:6-7).
- ☐ We are invited to a holy task, loving and serving God. Why settle for less? (John 4:24).

Act on your reflection:

Look closely at Ephesians 4:28. A person is stealing. Their thought process is "What's yours is mine." Simply saying, "Don't steal anymore," isn't sufficient. They needed to work to cover their own expenses. The attitude then is, "What's mine is mine." But then they move on to helping others. The attitude becomes, "What's mine is yours, if you need it."

What area of your life needs a change in behavior from sinful to sanctified?

Addictions can be transformed, holiness can prevail. Prayer is essential.

Counseling may be required. Group support may be helpful. Don't settle for less than a complete transformation.

FAITH

Getting started with... Life-transforming experiences

Bible references: Acts 7:23-30; 2 Chr. 33:10-13; John 21:15-19; Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11

Start your reflection:

Looking at the lives of the faithful from long ago can encourage us as we too face life-transforming experiences.

Noah realized that his 120 years of preaching had not been in vain; during these years, he got a faithful wife, three sons, and three faithful wives for them!

Moses expected the Hebrews to understand God had sent him to deliver them, but they didn't. It took 40 years to become the meek man God would use (Acts 7:23-30).

Gideon wondered if he had enough men, while God removed more and more of them until "the sword of the Lord and of Gideon" could prevail.

Boaz was unmarried and found a woman of faith. They produce another generation in the line of Messiah.

Manasseh was far from God, but God humbled him, and he changed (2 Chr 33:10-13).

Peter denied Jesus three times, then, in John 21, Jesus questioned him three times. The questioning made Peter see himself more clearly; then, he was able to focus on caring for others.

Deepen your reflection:

These things are written to encourage us (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11). How are God and Jesus working in our lives to bring about unexpected transformation? Look at what is ahead, for them and for us: "All these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect" (Heb 11:39-40).

Act on your reflection:

Choose one of these Bible accounts to explore more completely.
Which of your personal experiences show how God is working in your life? Pray to see it from His perspective.

FAITH

Getting started with... Teflon and Velcro

Bible references: 1 Sam 18:10-11; 2 Pet 3:1-3; Phil 4:6; Luke 24:30-35

Start your reflection:

According to a saying I recently heard, “Positive experiences are Teflon, negative experiences are Velcro,” suggesting that we may forget the positives relatively quickly, but too often, the negatives cling to us, bringing us down over and over.

King Saul couldn’t seem to let go of the false idea that David meant him harm. As a result, Saul let that control his actions repeatedly (1 Sam 18:10-11).

In the New Testament, another Saul let his wrong ideas and feelings about Christ and his followers lead him to terrible behaviors until Jesus confronted him.

Extend your reflection:

The Bible can seem a bit repetitive sometimes, but this happens because God and His Son are dealing with our forgetful nature.

Hebrews 10:3 tells us that the repetitive nature of the Old Testament sacrifices was intended to remind them of sin and how it must be dealt with. 2 Peter 3:1-3 reminds believers of prophecies and of the teachings of Jesus and his apostles as preparation for the faithless and trying times that will come. Paul reminds us not to be the victims of our thoughts but to take them to the Lord in prayer and find his peace (Phil 4:6).

Reminders are essential.

Deepen your reflection:

Jesus provided a small, very repetitive ritual to be done as we assemble: the simple actions of eating bread and drinking wine.

Why these actions? Did Jesus know that we need frequent reminders to remember him? Is this one of the meanings of Jesus being “known”

to the disciples in breaking bread (Luke 24:30-35). Is Jesus known to us anew in this simple service?

Recognizing our natural inclination to focus on the negative (Velcro) and be less attentive to the positive (Teflon), we need to consciously let the bad stuff go and actively focus on the good that God and His Son are bringing into our lives!

Act on your reflection:

Consider your participation in the Bread and Wine. Re-read the passages (Matt 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 11:23-26). Is Jesus teaching us more than we realize? Is he inviting us to see this ceremony as welcoming him into ourselves, to be present with us through our daily lives (Rev 3:20)?

FAITH

Getting started with... What can we do to encourage our faith?

Bible references: Heb 11:1; 2 Pet 1:21; Luke 17:5; Mark 9:24; and more (see below)

Start your reflection:

Faith is our conviction that God and His Son exist (Heb 11:1), that they want the best for us, and that the Bible is their word for us (2 Pet 1:21).

Extending your reflection:

How can we increase our faith?

Praying for faith (Luke 17:5; Mark 9:24).

Devoting quality Bible time: Faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom 10:17).

Cultivating our consciousness of Jesus... growing that relationship (2 Cor 13:5; Col 2:6-7).

Learning (repeatedly) that grace is sufficient for us (2 Cor 12:8-9).

Learning to “wait for the Kingdom of God” (Mark 15:43; Titus 2:13).

Meditating on and looking for God’s direction when making decisions

Fellowshipping with God’s people, including Sunday morning (Heb 10:25; Acts 2:42; 14:22).

Spending time with people whose faith has persevered through trials (Rom 4:19-20).

Seeking opportunities to serve others (Luke 22:26-27).

Growing our gratitude by journaling to become more aware of His answers (Rom 8:28).

Seeing how faithful decisions have been blessed by looking back over the years

Being aware of “Suddenly God” moments (2 Chr. 29:36; Luke 2:13; Acts 2:2, 9:3).

Enduring difficulties faithfully (James 1:3; 1 Cor 10:13).

Deepen your reflection:

Faith is a gift from our Father and His Son. We can choose to ignore it, neglect it, or nurture and cherish it. What will you do? How will you begin?

Act on your reflection:

Show your appreciation for the gift of faith by thanking God and His Son and asking for a more complete faith, an enduring faith, and a faith that motivates faithful living.

APPENDIX

The following examples show how to turn Starters into finished notes for your applications. The first is to develop a personal meditation, the second is to develop notes for a group discussion, and the third is to develop a presentation.

The first example, using a simple Starter:

Comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth (Eph. 3:18)

Why are the four dimensions to the Love of Christ?

House built on rock (dug deep = unseen) (Luke 6: 48).

Be still and know that I am God (Psa 46:10).

Gathering thoughts for a more focused meditation:

Ephesians 3:18: comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth...
Why are there four dimensions to the Love of Christ?

1. How wide is his love? It encompasses all the world and all the people in it. God has indicated he isn't willing that ANY perish, he desires all to come to salvation. He finds no joy in those who refuse his gracious offer.
2. How long is his love? His love extends from the original creation to the final judgment and beyond. His every action is intended to encourage, protect, and refine those who respond to him.
3. How high is his love? He knows our every thought. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without his awareness. He knows the hairs (or absence thereof) on our heads. Isaiah 55:8 shows that his ways exceed ours and his thoughts are far beyond ours, yet he invites us to join him, to be his. Christ brings us into his Father's presence in the Spirit now. In the final Kingdom age, we'll know them, even as we are known.

4. But what is the depth of his love? Tell the story of the houses, one built on sand and one where the builder dug deep and anchored it to the rock. Both looked the same when completed. We see that people can appear religious without a firm anchor to our ROCK, which is Christ. “Man looks on the outward appearance, but God sees the heart.”
It isn’t the showy part, the performance part, the part too often done to impress people, that is important; it’s the widow’s mite, the repentant prodigal, the reformed sinner who anointed Jesus’ head, the Syrophoenician woman begging for her child’s well-being, the broken and contrite, the least and last and lonely, the meek and poor, and poor in spirit. These are the ones our Master’s love celebrates because he sees ‘deeply.’

Here is one possible meditation, reflection, worship, or praise that might result.

Oh Lord, it’s good to be reminded of your love, that it exceeds our awareness, surprises us in our secret places, humbles us, refreshes us. Help me to be still now and remember that you are Lord.

I praise you, Lord, for the width of your love. No one is excluded by you, though some may exclude themselves. I pray for them, Lord. The ones who don’t yet know your love or haven’t yet laid down their crowns before you. And I pray for myself that I will have the faith and courage to demonstrate to them through my actions and, if needed, with my words.

I praise you for the length of your love. Every person ever born has/had /will have the opportunity to see you in your creation and to know you by your nurturing spirit of our budding faith.

I acknowledge, Lord, that your wisdom and love are far higher than my own, and I’m thankful for that. Too often, I can be petty and judgmental and gossipy, but you, Lord, are faithful. You see the end from the beginning. For you, a thousand years is a day. You hear each of our thoughts, prayers, and agonizing cries for help. New are your mercies every morning. You must increase, and I must decrease. I rejoice that you are greater than me in every good way. Thank you.

I am in awe of the depth of your love. You knew that we needed to see perfect love displayed in the Son of God—a man like us, but in perfect tune with your thoughts and subject to your will. You knew that we were weak and forgetful and needed regular communal worship. You

knew that we needed the reminder of the emblems of our Lord's body and shed blood to reset us and prepare us for the weeks ahead.

I'm so thankful for your written word, Lord. You invite us to see what sort of people please you—not simply the hearers but the doers. Have mercy on me, Lord, that in your width, length, height, and depth, you will forgive even me. Help me be a doer today. Let my light shine so others may see the good and glorify YOU, Lord.

USING THE STARTER, “A MISSION STATEMENT”, TO LEAD A BIBLE CLASS

Here is one way to use the Starter, “A Mission Statement” (page__) in a Bible class to encourage others to draft their own mission statement.

STARTER	BIBLE CLASS
	<p>“Welcome</p> <p>If we have a productive group discussion today, we’ll each think about how God’s servants were <u>motivated by their mission</u>, which was often embodied in a mission statement of sorts. Then we’ll take a shot at writing our own mission statements. It’s not a competition. If you are willing to share your mission statement at the end, great. If you would rather keep yours private, great!</p> <p>Any questions?”</p>
	<p>“Let’s read this entire Starter together and then re-read the first Bible example and discuss it.”</p>
Getting started with... a mission statement	<p>Ask if someone would read the first example: “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts” (Elijah, 1 Kgs 19:10).</p>

Bible References: 1 Kgs 19:10; Ezra 7:10; John 1:31; 20:31

Start your reflection:

It is sometimes easy for Christ's disciples to drift away from their essential duty (or mission) of serving Christ. Mission statements are used by businesses to keep their efforts and interactions aimed at their essential purpose. The most effective mission statements are brief and easily remembered. Famous examples from businesses include:

TED Talks: "Spread Ideas."

Starbucks: "To inspire and nurture the human spirit—one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time."

Amazon: "To be the world's most customer-centric company."

If you were an employee at those companies, how would these mission statements help you to be more effective?

Extend your reflection:

There are several examples of mission statements in the Bible. Here are some personal mission statements.

Elijah: "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts" (1

This appears to be how Elijah viewed his "mission."

As you glance through the remainder of this chapter, how does God address Elijah's thoughts? [(v. 18) You are not alone. I have thousands who have not served idols. And (vv. 15-16) God had Elijah anoint people to lead politically and spiritually, and others (v. 21) to assist him.]

Stating our "mission" may make it clear that we're trying to do too much, that we need to allow the Lord to do his part, that we need to focus on what we do best, and prepare others to replace us as needed.

If appropriate, repeat this process for one or more of the other examples in the Starter, with leading questions and helping the group(s) draw conclusions. Keep an eye on the time remaining.

Kgs 19:10).

Ezra: Set his heart to study God's law, practice it, and teach it in Israel (Ezra 7:10).

John the Baptist: "I came baptizing with water, that HE might be revealed" (John 1:31)

Jesus: "I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37).

Sometimes in the Bible, there is a mission statement related to a task, such as this one for John's Gospel: "So that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you might have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Deepen your reflection:

One Christian suggests the following personal mission statement:

Christ-centered, Bible-based, Active in love.

What part of this mission statement resonates with you?

What is your personal mission statement? Does it reflect those values that are most important to you?

Which individual discipleship tasks would be improved through a mission statement?

Collective mission statements are different from individual

"Let's work together briefly to write a "mission" statement for our group." [Facilitate. Possible outcome... "we meet to encourage each other in our faith, and to simply enjoy each other as encouragement for the challenging lives we lead."]

"Let's each take a few minutes to write a first draft of our own individual mission statement.

Here's an example: 'My mission is to be Christ-centered, Bible-

<p>mission statements.</p> <p>What is OUR purpose as a Christian family, church, or community?</p> <p>To what extent could a clear mission statement help us focus our efforts for the further glory of Jesus and his Father?</p> <p>Act on your reflection:</p> <p>Some ways to act on your reflection might include:</p> <p>Develop a personal mission statement that is brief and easily remembered.</p> <p>Pick one discipleship task (e.g., Sunday School teacher) and write out a mission statement for that.</p> <p>In your family or church group, engage others in developing a collective mission statement.</p>	<p>based, and Active in Love."</p> <p>"I'll come around and chat privately with each of you, but only if you want me to. Then we'll share (for anyone willing) and close with a prayer and then head out to put our mission statements into action."</p>
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USING THE STARTER, “COMING TO KNOW JESUS”, TO GIVE A PRESENTATION

Here is one way to use the Starter, “Coming to Know Jesus” (page___), in a presentation to encourage others to reflect on their relationship with Jesus.

STARTER	BIBLE CLASS
<p>Getting started with... Coming to know Jesus</p> <p>Bible references: Phil 3:8,10; 1 Cor 11:1; 2:2; Matt 11:29</p> <p>Start your reflection:</p> <p>There is a fundamental difference between knowing <u>about</u> Jesus and <u>knowing Jesus</u>. By the life he lived, Jesus is inviting us: “Come, be like me, as I am like the Father.”</p> <p>Paul understood the difference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> (I want to) know (Jesus) and the power of his resurrection, and share in his sufferings (Phil 3:8, 10). <input type="checkbox"/> “Be imitators of me (Paul) as I am of Christ” 	<p>As you develop your presentation notes from the Starter, reflect on the following:</p> <p>Jesus encouraged his followers to use Him as an example, even as he used his Father as one:</p> <p>Disciples “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt 4:19), literally followed Jesus (Luke 5:11). Failure to follow was to be unworthy of him (Matt 10:38).</p> <p>Foot washing...I gave you an example... do as I did (John 13:5-17), “Love one another just as I have loved you” (John 13:34-35).</p> <p>They were to pass this message on: “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you... I am with you always” (Matt 28:20).</p> <p>As people sought to obey him, they discovered additional depths</p>

(1 Cor 11:1, 2:2).

Extend your reflection:

Coming to know the Lord Jesus Christ is not only academic knowledge; rather, it is about following him and learning daily lessons as his disciples did.

- ☐ “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt 4: 19)
- ☐ I gave you an example... do as I did (John 13:5-17)
- ☐ “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12; John 13:34-35)
- ☐ “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matt 11:29)

Deepen your reflection:

Jesus lived prayerfully, sacrificially, and lovingly. He turned the world’s values upside down and invites us to join him in living a God-directed life (Matt 5:1-12). Discipleship is about coming to KNOW Jesus as our living Lord, moment by moment. Paul describes the result. “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

to this experience. “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ... that I may know the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death (and resurrection)” (Phil 3:8-10).

Intellectual knowledge is the starting point of our relationship with Jesus. It is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Following him, experiencing what he experienced, suffering along with him, and sacrificing yourself as he sacrificed himself daily—all these go far beyond an intellectual understanding of Jesus.

Their experience became more than following a set of instructions or a record of his life... It became a relationship:

“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23).

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matt 11:29-30).

Jesus chose to be poor, no possessions/home/spouse/children.

He associated with the lowly, the outsiders, the disinherited, and with the marginalized, prayerful,

<p>Act on your reflection:</p> <p>Do you want to know Jesus? He awaits your invitation (Rev 3:20). He invites us to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and <u>follow him</u> (Mark 8:34-36).</p> <p>What is one way you can begin to deny yourself today, so you might more fully follow our Lord?</p>	<p>sacrificial, and loving. Jesus gave up his “rights” (e.g., turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, give up your cloak). And he invites us to share these “kingdom” values and live them out as a vital part of our faith in action.</p> <p>He asked us to remember him in a communal yet personal and intimate way... using the emblems of bread and wine, as taught in 1 Cor 11:23-26.</p>
	<p>Then you turn this into <u>your</u> presentation by putting your own personal spin on it.</p> <p>The following is how I would personalize the presentation:</p> <p>As I was working hard to bring this book to completion, I was distracted by a commitment I had made to spend time with a lonely fellow Christian. Not my favorite thing. Perhaps that was four hours that I really could have used to make some real progress on the book.</p> <p>Then I had to laugh at myself. Jesus didn’t say, “Go into all the world and write books.” He said, in essence, “Go into all the world and be me... show them what love looks like, show them your joy in representing me, and show them your sacrificial love by spending yourself, your time, and serving them.”</p> <p>Silly me. So I put down my Bible study tools, took my car keys,</p>

and went to show my Brother as much of Jesus Christ as I could, praying for our Lord's presence as I went.

One of the many things to love about Jesus is that he doesn't call us to do the impossible. He calls us to embrace him as our savior and to go do the work he is preparing us for. "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt 4:19).

Yet we all know there are times in our lives when Jesus seems to be asking more than we can give. Here's an example: Jesus' challenge to the Rich Young Ruler... "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess (all) and give to the poor... and come, follow me" (Matt 19:21-22). It tells us the young man went away sorrowful because he had great possessions.

We might ask whether Jesus was asking too much, being unreasonable, or being unfair.

It appears that Jesus understood the young man's desire to be perfect was sincere but that his great finances would always come first for him unless they could be released in faith.

In contrast, we see another person respond to the call of Jesus with joy. Zacchaeus says, "Half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it

fourfold!" (Luke 19:8). There's the spirit... demonstrate clearly that what you once held as central to your life has been replaced by Jesus!

Paul caught on to this saying about "all our possessions, worldly rewards, status"... all of that stuff... Paul said, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth (excellency!) of knowing Christ.... that I may know... the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death (and resurrection)" (Phil 3:8-10). Knowing now Christ is not only about mental knowledge. It is about following him, experiencing what he experienced, suffering along with him, and sacrificing yourself as he sacrificed himself daily.

"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me" (Matt 11:28-30). Not just "learn about me" but learn from me!

Often, there appears to be a backstory to Bible accounts. Let's consider foot washing (John 13:5-17). We understand from historic accounts that it was the custom for a servant, most frequently a Gentile servant, to wash each guest's feet upon arrival. In this case, that hadn't happened. The Disciples surely noticed the need, but no one stepped forward to do this menial task. Jesus used it as a teaching

moment. He did what they wouldn't; he humbled himself, served them one by one in the most common way, then helped them understand that their pride had interfered with their service and that it should not recur. He told them, "Foot washing... I gave you an example... do as I did." They, and we, were to do as he had done... serve, even in humiliating circumstances, as a witness to our love for others and for him!

I know a Christian man who uses each church volunteer workday to remind himself of this. He volunteers to clean the bathrooms. Every time. Such a loving reminder that Jesus' spirit is present.

Jesus emphasized this when he said we should deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow him (Mark 8:34).

But he includes a vital point. In his "Great Commission", he included "Teaching them to observe all I have commanded you... I am with you" (Matt 28:20). And love me, keep my word, the Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home with you (John 14:23; Rev 3: 20).

Sometimes this is hard for us to understand and believe, but he was clear about this. He wouldn't abandon them as orphans, he would continue to help, encourage, and empower them

and us. Just as he made the first 12 into fishers of men, he's making us — what? Preachers, teachers, hosts and hostesses, caregivers, parents, children, husbands, wives, servants... to get his work done and to serve as living examples.

Jesus chose to be poor; with no possessions/home/spouse/children, he associated with the lowly, the outsiders, the disinherited, and the marginalized.

He did it prayerfully, sacrificially, and lovingly. He gave up his "rights"... he showed us and taught us to turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, and give up our cloak... and he invites us to share these "kingdom" values and live them out as a vital part of our faith in action.

He asked us to remember him in a communal yet personal and intimate way, using the emblems of bread and wine, as taught (1 Cor 11:23-26).

With these emblems, he reminds us that he wants to be in us. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in unto him and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev 3:20).

He does not want to join us in a self-serving or inactive life; he's

	joining us to help us live a Christ-centered life, one, Active in Love. Let's go be Jesus to the world!
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