



# Relational Discipleship

*(Final Revision April 11, 2019)*

By Father Rob Paris

Founding Pastor, Church of the Advent

## Prologue

# A Convergence of Stories

I love good movies. I love the moment before the movie starts, when the lights go down. It is a wonderful moment of anticipation:

What new places will this movie transport me to?

What new characters will it introduce me to?

What new experiences will it invite me into?

And most fundamentally, will it be a good movie? Will it connect me with a deeper sense of life's significance, meaning, and purpose?

Some movies are made just for the fun or the spectacle of it. But, in my estimation, for a movie to be good, not just entertaining, it needs to move me. It needs to help me see the world, and my life in particular, with greater clarity and awareness. A good movie always involves a good story, a story that inspires me by the ways its characters face the joys and sorrows of life with courage and wisdom and tenacity.

We were created to live a story that has meaning, significance, and purpose. God himself is the author of this story in human history—a story that involves an amazing plot, colorful characters, and the wonder of all the beauty of our world. *And it is a story he is inviting you to participate in.*

Over the next few months, you are going to ponder two stories and consider how they are connected. The first is **God's Story**, the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the wonderful story of his work to reconcile and restore everything through his Son, Jesus.

The second story is **Your Story**. Every one of us is living out a plot line with interesting characters and fascinating locations. Our personal story does not always feel so exciting compared to the carefully edited and magnified stories we watch in the movies. But your story is highly significant, filled with the promise of meaning and significance because it is a gift from God, and you get to participate in writing it.

*The purpose of this Relational Discipleship process is to have your story reoriented and redefined by God's story—the gospel—more fully, beautifully, and powerfully.*

God has given us the script for his story: the scriptures of the Old and New Testament. And we are in the middle of it, learning from what has gone before and living in anticipation of its glorious conclusion. Our story takes shape within the overarching realities of God's story.

To help you ponder and see the connections between these two stories, we have broken up this process into various chapters.

- The first chapter focuses on your story. Together with your guide, you will explore the places, people, and events that have shaped your life and given it a peculiar, personal plotline.
- The second chapter focuses on God's story. You will begin to trace out some of the overarching themes and characters in the Bible.
- Chapters 3-6 explore both your story and God's story and encourage you to interact with some particular images (walls, doors, and tables, along with the image of a home) that give tangible expression to the gospel.
- Chapters 7-9 invite you to look at how the God's story—the gospel—comes to life within your story in relation to your identity, relationships, and labor.
- Chapter 10 ends by reconsidering what you have learned and seeking vision for what lies ahead in the ongoing development of your story.

We hope this will be season of insight and delight as you ponder God's work in history and in your life. We pray that it leads to a greater sense of meaning and purpose in your relationship with God through all the years of your life.

## Chapter 1

# Mapping Your Story

You have a story. It may not seem like a very exciting one. It may be frustrating and bewildering at times. You may wish it were different in various ways. And it may be something you do not think about much. But, you have a story.

Your life consists of a series of events in particular places that involved particular people. And whether you realize it or not, you have interpreted the significance of all these events in a variety of ways, often without thinking about it at a conscious level. There is what happens, and then there is the meaning and significance we attach to what happened. We all have interpretive lenses which cause us to see or “read” our life in particular ways. An extrovert generally reads and responds to a party differently than an introvert. Whether we trust or distrust someone impacts the way we read their words and actions significantly. British history interprets the Revolutionary War differently than American versions of the same events. If we are in a grumpy mood, we respond to the same events differently than we would if we are in a cheerful place.

Many things go into developing the lenses we use to interpret our life. Previous events in our story play a big role in how we interpret later events. The child who grows up in poverty has a different outlook on life, generally speaking, than the one who grows up amidst abundance. The child of happily married parents enters their own marriage with a different lens than the child of divorced parents.

When a story is told, whether *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* or the *Iliad*, the author gives the relevant details that demonstrate how the events unfolded in an interesting or significant way. He or she links events, people, and places in a “narrative arc” that expresses the story’s meaning and importance, creating an interpretive framework for understanding it all.

We may not recognize it, but we do this with our own stories too. When you look back on life, you can begin to see various themes. You can begin to see patterns in the events that help explain who you are and why you respond to particular events or ideas the way you do. We all form expectations of what will happen next based on what has happened before. If I have generally been well-liked, it is likely I will approach new relationships with confidence because I expect people to like me. If I have generally struggled to achieve my goals, it is likely I will lack confidence in approaching new projects because I expect to struggle in getting where I want to go.

A major concern in this curriculum is to help us recognize the primary interpretive lenses we use to read our lives and how these shape us. *The hope is to learn how to read our lives more faithfully through gospel lenses that our lives might be transformed and renewed according to the grace and truth of Jesus.*

Every good story has three major elements: setting, characters, and plot/events. The lesson today invites you to begin mapping out these major elements in your life. Although it may seem random at this point, the more thought and prayer you put into trying to answer the questions below, the richer your experience will be.

- Take 10-15 minutes to brainstorm a little. Survey your life. After 30 seconds of reflection, begin writing down every memory that comes to mind in a word or phrase on the bottom of this page. People who have been important, turning points in your life, and places that have left an impression on you are all legitimate things to write down. Don't censor yourself. Just write it all down, whether good or bad, joyful or sorrowful, trivial or substantial. Use more paper if you need it.

Hopefully, you have put together quite a list of important people, places, and events in your life. Now we want to help you put some order to this hodge-podge.

- Look back over your brainstorm page. What key settings of your life jump out at you? In other words, where have you spent significant time in your life? This should not only include the physical geography of places you have lived, but also places you have worked and worshipped. Please identify at least five significant settings in your life and write them in the box below.

*Settings*

- Look back at your brainstorm page again. Who have been the central characters in your life? In other words, who are the people who have had the greatest impact on you, for good or ill, in your life? Please identify at least 1 person per setting you wrote down above, and write them in the box below.

*Characters/People*

- Look back over your brainstorm page one more time. What have been some key events in your life? In other words, what are the experiences or situations that have had the greatest impact, for good or ill, upon your life? Please identify at least 2 events per setting you wrote down above and write them in the box below.

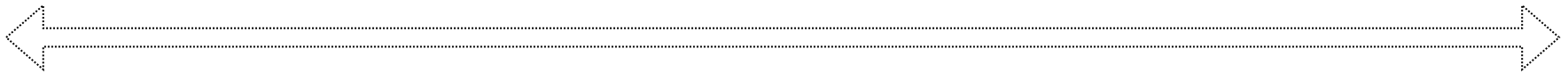
*Events*



- Now, using the lines on the next two pages, begin to plot out your life as a storyline, using the information you wrote in the boxes on the previous pages. One inch could be a year, or it could be more or less, depending on how much story you have to tell! Just visualize the length of your life along the two lines in more or less even spaces. Feel free to be creative. For example, for each setting you have identified, you can place it along the graph and color in the length of time you were in that place. Then fill in the people and events as appropriate.

**Settings**

**Characters/People**

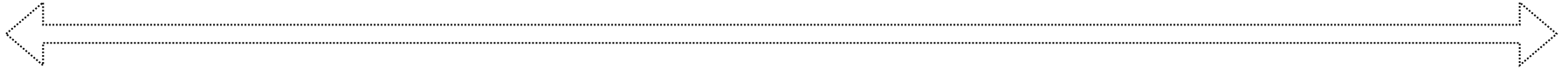


**Events**



**Settings**

**Characters/People**



**Events**

# Reflection

Reflection

- Have you gained any new insights into your story? Do you see trends that you never noticed before?
  
- How difficult was this process for you? Were there any parts of your timeline that provoked strong emotional responses?
  
- Now that you've finished your timeline, think about how you could summarize your story in 30 minutes or less. This will be one of the first things you and your guide do together. During this meeting, feel free to share only as much as you're comfortable sharing.

## Chapter 2

# The Overarching Plot of God's Story

Your life is a pretty amazing story, filled with joys and sorrows, twists and turns, that have formed you into the person you are today. And it is not finished yet. No matter your age, there are new joys to be discovered, new truths to learn, new relationships to form, new opportunities to face and new challenges to overcome.

Although each of us has a unique story, we share a common reality: Life forces us to make big decisions. Should I go to college? Join the army? Jump into the work force? Stay near home? Move across the country? Get married? Enjoy being single? We face so many choices in our life. Behind these questions lurk deeper ones, questions of meaning and purpose. What are we aiming for? What is life actually about?

Our stories take shape in significant ways through each of the decisions we make. We do not face these decisions alone, however. In fact, every one of us has been handed a “script.” We may not always be aware of it, but our parents, our friends, and the media have all kinds of ideas about how we should make these decisions and why.

These “scripts” are the expectations people place on us regarding what they believe our lives ought to look like. Usually they are written in pencil (meaning they do not control us), but they can be pretty persuasive. If you grow up in a family that places a lot of emphasis on academics, joining the army right out of high school might not be an easy decision to make. You will be expected to go to college. But, if your family values patriotism and skilled labor, joining the army right out of high school might be applauded. Different families, different scripts.

We usually get to choose whether we will fulfill the “scripts” handed to us, but they are powerful forces in our lives, and it is good to pay attention to them. Though they can be twisted and destructive, they are usually given to us in an effort to help us discover meaning and purpose in life, to help us navigate these big questions well. These “scripts” form another powerful set of “lenses” by which we interpret our lives. Even when we reject them, our way of reading life is often deeply impacted.

- What “scripts” have been given to you? Think in terms of education, marriage, work, family, where you live, hobbies, values, etc.? What have your parents and close friends expected of you? Which “scripts” have you fulfilled? Rejected?

- Did/Do the “scripts” you mention above give you a greater sense of peace and freedom as you navigate life’s big decisions or do you find yourself weighed down by them? How so?

Our parents, friends, and the media are not alone in handing us a “script.” God has one for us too. He is not usually concerned about whether we are a lawyer or an electrician, whether we are married or single, or where we live. These things are significant, of course, but God is more concerned with why we do what we do and the outcomes of what we do. He gives us clarity regarding the meaning and purpose of life so that all that we do in life can be guided and directed by a grander vision of what life is actually all about. Today we will explore this by looking at the Bible, where he gives us his “script” for human flourishing.

## Exploring God’s Story

You can tell a lot about a story by its beginning and its ending. The first two (Genesis 1-2) and last two (Revelation 21-22) chapters of the Bible reveal a lot about God and his purposes for us. Although they were written many years apart in two different languages by two different authors, they tell the same story. Take a few minutes to read and become (re)acquainted with these chapters.

Everything begins with God. He is the Creator of all things. Nothing exists apart from him. All things exist by his Word—he speaks everything into existence. And what he creates is wonderful and good! It is well-ordered (this is part of the point of the “days” of creation) and teeming with life. On the first three days, things are separated, and on the second three days, these spaces are filled with energy and life. At the end of each day he delights in what he has made: “And God saw it was good.” *God’s creative power results in life—well-ordered, flourishing, joy-filled life.*

And God chooses to share all this goodness. He creates human beings to enjoy a special role in, and relationship with, his creation. We see this in two amazing things we are told about ourselves:

- First, God created us in his image (Genesis 1:26). This is God’s script—what human flourishing looks like—to become God-like. Not God, but like him!
- Second, God gave human beings dominion (“rule”) over all the earth. He entrusted all the beauty and wonder of this planet to us! He has given us powers and capacities such as reason, perception, imagination, and speech by which we are able to make something of the world he made for us. Everything from the buttons on our shirts to the computers on our desks are expressions of the dominion God has entrusted to us.

This all points to the major theme of this curriculum, a theme that becomes especially clear in John’s Gospel: “To all who receive [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (1:13). This is the ultimate purpose of God for humanity—that we should become his children through his eternal Son. All that we are going to explore together ultimately traces back to this: our reconciliation and restoration as children of God.

As children grow up to become like their parents, sharing their DNA, their values, and their characteristics, so we are meant to be like our heavenly Father, reflecting his life, his character, and his purposes in all that we do. If God is the great King over creation, we are princes and princesses—*rulers who have been given authority to manifest the good and gracious ways of our Father, the great King over all*. Each of us has our own little “realm” to rule. Our “realm” includes all the people, things, and places that are under our influence or control, such as our home, our bank account, our family, our friends, our workplace, etc.—anything that has our “fingerprints” on it.

- What are the primary “realms” where you have influence, or even control of? Think in terms of workplaces, community groups, home, family, hobbies, etc. Brainstorm, and then circle the 4-5 that have been the most significant for you.

God created and adopted us as sons and daughters so we can share in his rule. This is what it means to bear his image, to reflect his ways in all we do. Just as the result of God’s creative power was order, flourishing life, and goodness/delight, so the result of our exercise of dominion is meant to lead to an ordering of things that allows life to flourish and joy to grow (i.e., is GOOD!).

This happens as we enjoy a close relationship with him, growing in his character, his love, generosity, faithfulness, patience, and wisdom through his gracious Presence with us. As beloved sons and daughters, we are meant to abide with (be at home with) him such that his wisdom, his goodness, his beauty, his faithfulness, and his love define and orient everything about how we think, feel, and act.

So, the “script” God has given us as his image bearers is to exercise dominion over creation in ways that produce true goodness. We are to be good rulers who cause all that is under our care to thrive, to be well-ordered and teeming with life. When we are fulfilling God’s script in this way, we experience deep joy. Like God, we are able to declare, “it is good!” Notice these three intertwined strands:

- (1) EXERCISING POWER AND AUTHORITY OVER CREATION WITH ONE ANOTHER (DOMINION)
- (2) REFLECTING GOD AS HIS CHILDREN (IMAGE)
- (3) SO AS TO ESTABLISH ORDER, FOSTER LIFE, AND DEEPEN JOY (GOODNESS)

## **FULFILLING OUR PURPOSE**

In the second chapter of Genesis, God places Adam in the Garden of Eden and tells him to “till and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). This is another way of saying, “exercise dominion.” We are told to **“make something of it!”**

At the end of the Bible (Revelation 21-22), we find the image of the Garden again, only now the New Jerusalem surrounds the Garden. It is a glorious and majestic city, as Revelation 21 makes clear. Just as there was a river in the Garden of Eden and a Tree of Life (Genesis 2), so there is a river in the middle of the New Jerusalem, and on its banks is the tree of life (Revelation 22).

In Revelation 21:26 we are told, “People will bring into it [the New Jerusalem] the glory and honor of the nations.” The heavenly, eternal city will be filled with the treasures of our earthly, transient culture—the splendor of things we have made in our brief lives on this earth—only now they will be filled with even greater glory. The eternal will fill the temporal.

Christians in earlier ages built the great cathedrals of Europe. Most cathedrals were not completed in the lifetime of the people who began working on them, but they invested themselves in these glorious building projects to contribute to the everlasting glory of God, even if they never got to see the end result.

In a similar way, you are participating in God’s work of building a great “cathedral” of his glory—the New Jerusalem. Cathedral-building took many years and many hands. Although you may never fully comprehend how your efforts in life have contributed to the overall glory of God, in the end, you will discover that you have played a role. Whether it is the way you raised a family, the way you built homes, the way you cared for the poor, the way you taught children, or whatever it is that you have given yourself to doing, your work in this life can be a small, yet vital, contribution to the glory of the eternal city, the New Jerusalem.

**Our work in this life will carry on through eternity as an enduring expression of God’s glorious joy revealed through us.**

Of course, there is a gap between what we do on earth and how our labors will be fulfilled in the New Jerusalem. God will infuse it all with his glory in ways we cannot even begin to imagine. And yet, our labor matters. God’s purpose will be fulfilled. The Garden will have been tilled and kept. It will be cultivated. A fabulous city will be established around it—one that is well-ordered, teeming with life, and full of joy. God's intent for his image to be expressed through the dominion of humanity—introduced in Genesis 1 and 2—is fulfilled in Revelation 21-22. Something good, beautiful, and true has been made of the world God made for us. The children have become like their Father. We are at home in his love and enjoying his goodness forever!

This vision at the end of the Bible invites us to participate in the building of the city and find our rest/home in our Father’s love. Through our labor in this world, we are meant to bring forth the kind of goodness and beauty that we hope will be present in the eternal city, the New Jerusalem.

- What has been the **impact/outcome** of the 4-5 most significant “realms” you have authority over or influence within (circled above)?

**How has your “rule” over these realms affected you? How have they brought you joy? How have they shaped your character?**

**What goodness, truth, or beauty has been extended through them to others?**

## **The Significance of God’s Story**

God created us to share in his delight, the goodness of all that he has made. And he delights in us as his children. He *delights* in all the creative ways we utilize our capacities to make something good, true, and beautiful of the world he made. He *delights* in our exploration of art and literature and technology. The Bible’s “script” for our lives is an invitation to know deep and abiding joy—the delight our heavenly Father takes in us.

- As you look at the 4-5 most significant “realms” under your care (circled above), which ones do you delight in? Which ones are less joyful to you? Why?
  
- Are there other “realms” you would like to be able to invest your talents and abilities in? Different relationships, careers, hobbies, studies, etc. that you feel God might be calling you to pursue now or in the future?



- Do you know that God delights in you and the work you have given yourself to in life? Why or why not?

As you have read and thought this all through today, it may have felt a bit overblown or overwhelming. Me... a prince? A princess? Building cathedrals? Causing goodness and truth and beauty to flourish?

You may realize that there is no way you can fulfill God's "script," that you do not exercise this kind of responsibility very well. As we will see in our next lesson, we all fall woefully short of God's intention. We cannot fulfill the "script" through our own efforts. Thankfully, he has provided the means for the "script" to be fulfilled for us through Jesus. In Jesus, the meaning and purpose of our life is fulfilled, because he is the true, eternal Son of God! Under his rule, cathedrals are built, order triumphs over chaos, life swallows up death, and joy never fades. There is great peace and freedom in receiving and trusting him to do his work in us!

By reconsidering the lenses we view life through, and discerning what it means to put on gospel lenses, we will discover how God redefines and reorients everything in our life through Christ. By God's grace, you have something significant to contribute to the ongoing story of God. In the weeks ahead, we pray that this will become a source of great joy and peace for you.

- Having completed this chapter, what are your thoughts? Are you more excited about what you are doing with your life right now? Less? Do you have a bunch of questions? Are you overwhelmed? Jot down your responses and take a few minutes to offer them up to God in prayer.

## Chapter 3

### The Central Conflict in Our Story—Sin

Like many people, I love the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Although it has great special effects, beautiful scenery, good acting, and epic battles, what I really like about it is that it *connects me with a sense of life's meaning and significance*.

Through the significant temptations and dangers that Frodo and his companions face, we are able to see our own battles with temptations and dangers more clearly. Questions about power, friendship, beauty, and honor confront Frodo, and thereby, us. Along the way, he and his companions grow in courage, loyalty, and faith.

The most notable growth occurs in Samwise Gamgee. A simple gardener back in the Shire, Sam becomes an equal hero to Frodo as they journey to Mt. Doom. In their darkest moments, Sam recounts memories of the Shire, where they have known deep goodness. Through his bright descriptions, he finds enduring strength, and we are reminded that evil is resisted by tenaciously holding to visions of what is Good.

We will never face a quest as difficult and as important as Frodo and Sam's, but we have all faced situations that felt deeply dangerous, when we were tempted to despair, and yet somehow were able to press through. As we watch Frodo and Sam walk through their challenges, we are inspired to face our own difficulties with greater courage and hope. Just as the vision of the Shire sustained them, so the vision of the New Jerusalem sustains us.

Good stories do this for us. They are filled with deep tensions, significant conflicts, and profound hope. Through them we get glimpses of what it means to grow in courage, joy, peace, and strength. They provide light on life's meaning and beauty.

#### The Plot Thickens!

One of the key elements in any good story is the “critical juncture.” It is that moment when the main character is confronted with a change in his/her path or outlook.

**Frodo's critical juncture** → he was entrusted with the ring by Bilbo (and Gandalf).

Whatever Frodo had in mind regarding his future in the Shire, his life was radically changed when Bilbo decided to leave and entrusted all his possessions, including the Ring, to Frodo. From that point on, his life would never be the same.

We have all faced critical junctures in our life: our parents' decisions to move or change schools for us, a friend who tells us about Jesus, a man or a woman who sweeps us off our feet (or breaks our heart), a book we read which revolutionizes our understanding of life, or a job offer out of the blue. These events are not as dramatic as being entrusted with a Ring of Power, but they can have a big impact in our story.

- Take a moment to think about your life. Brainstorm for 3-5 minutes, and write down all the critical junctures in your life that you can think of—moments where an event took place that changed the direction you were headed in a dramatic way. If it helps, think of the major changes in your life, and then discern what events/people/ideas caused those changes.

- After you have come up with as many as you can think of, circle the 4-5 you consider to be the most significant. If you haven't already, write them into your storyline from chapter 1.

These critical junctures in our lives play a significant role in shaping our stories. They remind us that we are not “masters of our own fate” because there are many things which happen to us that are beyond our control. They can also become significant lenses through which we read our lives. A painful breakup can make it that much harder to read other suitors through a lens of trust. A layoff at work can make us read our boss with the expectation that she is going to fire us at some point soon.

And yet, we are not mere leaves floating downstream. We have the ability to respond to the events of our lives—both the big critical junctures and the everyday mundane things. We are participants in the writing of our stories. And how we respond plays a large role in who we become, the character we develop, and the impact we have on others. When tragedy strikes, we can become miserable or walk through it with hope and strength. When successes are achieved, we can become more self-sufficient or more deeply grateful. Our character is forged as we respond to the events of our lives and particularly by the lenses we develop to read life.

- As you look back at the 4-5 most significant critical junctures in your life. How were you shaped by them? How did you respond, both for good and for ill? Have they shaped the way you read life? How so?

## Exploring God's Story

In chapter 2, we introduced the idea of “scripts” for our lives. People around us—particularly parents and other authority figures in our lives—tend to have ideas as to what our lives ought to look like. These “scripts” are written in pencil, meaning that they can be overridden. We can go our own way (and often do).

We see this right at the beginning of the Bible when Adam and Eve face a critical juncture and respond poorly...

### The Story of Scripture – Adam and Eve

Back in Genesis 1:26, we saw that Adam and Eve were created in God's image in order that they might be “like him.” But then, in Genesis 3:1, Eve meets a cunning and devious serpent. This moment presents her, and later Adam, with a critical juncture. The serpent invites her to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, a tree from which God had forbidden them to eat. The serpent tells her that she will “become like God” if she eats it (3:5). Notice the irony: the serpent is encouraging her (and Adam) to take matters into her own hands and “take” what God had already promised to give (being like God).

Unfortunately, at this critical juncture, Adam and Eve failed. They chose poorly. And when God came looking for them a short time later, they tried to run and hide (3:10). They knew they had made a mistake. They were ashamed. But instead of owning up to their sin, they turned to blaming (3:12-13).

Adam and Eve's failure marked the beginning of a tragic and dramatic downward spiral for the earth and its inhabitants.

**The rulers of creation had become corrupt. The image-bearers turned away from their source and sought to rule independently.**

The significance of this event is captured at the end of chapter 3: Adam and Eve are exiled from the Garden. They are cast out from the place of full goodness, the place

where they once walked with God in the cool of the day. This image of exile haunts the scriptures. It reflects the basic reality of humanity. We live outside of Eden, distant from God in heart, mind, and soul.

Jesus expresses this truth powerfully in his parable of the prodigal son(s) in Luke 15. The younger son leaves home and lives in a distant country on his own, squandering his Father's inheritance. He is in exile and miserable. The older son seems better, but in fact, reveals himself to be just as alienated from his father as the younger son. He thinks he has to earn his Father's love. At the end of the story, he is the one outside of his Father's house, refusing to come in. Both sons are prodigals.

This parable points out a deep truth: we are all prodigals, or to put it even more starkly, orphans. We are not at home with our Father in his love. We often think we need to prove ourselves to God in order to be fully accepted and loved (like the older brother), or we decide we are better off on our own, living according to our own resources and provision without his oversight and care.

- Take a moment to think about your life. Where are things “wrong” or “off” for you at work, in your relationships, in your sense of yourself, in your body, mind, or heart. How is your life less than what you would want, less than “Edenic.” How do you experience distance from God?

Despite our best efforts, we cannot return to Eden, fix the world's (or even our own) problems, and be restored to a close awareness and enjoyment of God's Presence.

Just as the serpent lies to Eve (that she will become like God and that she will not surely die), and Eve begins to form falsehoods in her mind as well (that God told them to not even touch the tree), so *we all have become stuck in lies* of all sorts: lies of the media, of our parents and teachers, and lies of our own inner voice. Our vision of God, ourselves, and our world are distorted. We read life through corrupted lenses.

Everything was created by the power of God's Word (“God said... and there was”). When we turn from God's Word, we turn away from the goodness of creation towards the formless void (see Genesis 1:2). Turning from God's Word, away from his “script,” means living like a prodigal, apart from the Father's loving provision and according to our own will and purpose. It leads to exile, to decay, and to death.

The prodigal, or orphan, spirit is deeply embedded in each of us. It is the essence of our sin and a core component of our broken world. Although the varieties of sin are legion, in the story of Adam and Eve and of the prodigal sons, a few overarching patterns emerge.

First, there is **self-righteousness**. Eve eats the fruit in order to become like God through her own effort. She is trying to establish power, honor and significance for herself apart from God. And, when Adam and Eve are caught in their sin, they resort to blaming. Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the serpent. They are trying to justify their actions rather than confessing their failure. Any time we want to justify ourselves in thought, word, or deed, we are in danger of self-righteousness. Similarly, the older brother thinks of himself as a slave, working tirelessly for his father to prove his worthiness. He lives from obligation, rather than gift. He thinks he is justified in his anger when he refuses to join the party. He has no place for the grace his father is showing to the younger brother.

- How do you struggle with self-righteousness? You may struggle with judging or blaming others, pride, low self-esteem (inverse pride), anger/bitterness vanity, argumentativeness, legalism, or anything that involves justifying yourself.

Second, there is the problem of **ingratitude**. God gives Eve all the plants of the entire garden, and tells her not to eat of just one tree. But, she gets stuck focusing on the one thing that is forbidden. Instead of recognizing and delighting in the gift (that they were created in God's likeness), Adam and Eve seek to become like God through their own effort. Similarly, the younger brother takes his father's inheritance and leaves, acting as if his father is already dead. He is profoundly ungrateful. Meanwhile, the older brother can't see all that his father has given him throughout the years, only that he has never been thrown a party like the one his younger brother is being given. This is the pattern of ingratitude: we fail to give thanks for what we have been given and become focused on what has been withheld instead.

- What patterns of ingratitude do you see in your life? This might take the form of envy, anxiety, selfish ambition, discontentment, impatience, greed, or any attitude that is rooted in seeing ourselves as lacking rather than as blessed.

Third, there is **disordered desire**. Eve eats the fruit because she sees that it is “good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise” (3:6). The younger brother squanders his wealth pursuing pleasure in a distant country. Desire is a good thing. But, it is easily corrupted and turned towards that which is not good for us. We all have things we want too much, in unhealthy ways, or things we want that God has told us not to pursue.

- What patterns of disordered desire do you see in your life? You may struggle with lust (which can take forms other than sex), gluttony, addictions, excessive debt, or any pattern of desire that is excessive or displeasing to God.

Finally, the passage points to the sin of **apathy**. At the end of 3:6, we discover that Adam was with Eve when she was talking with the serpent, but did nothing. He goes along without resistance. We tend to think of sin as what we do. It can also be what we fail to do. The older brother ought to have taken it on himself to protect his father’s honor and his brother’s well-being by going after his brother, but he stayed home. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the enticements and powers of evil. Fighting evil is hard work. Sometimes we would rather not invest the effort to resist.

- How do you see apathy expressed in your life? Sloth or laziness, despair, cowardice, passivity, or any pattern of failing to resist evil or unwillingness to make needed changes is an expression of apathy. In what areas of life are you most prone to be apathetic (relationships, job, chores, spiritual growth, etc.)?

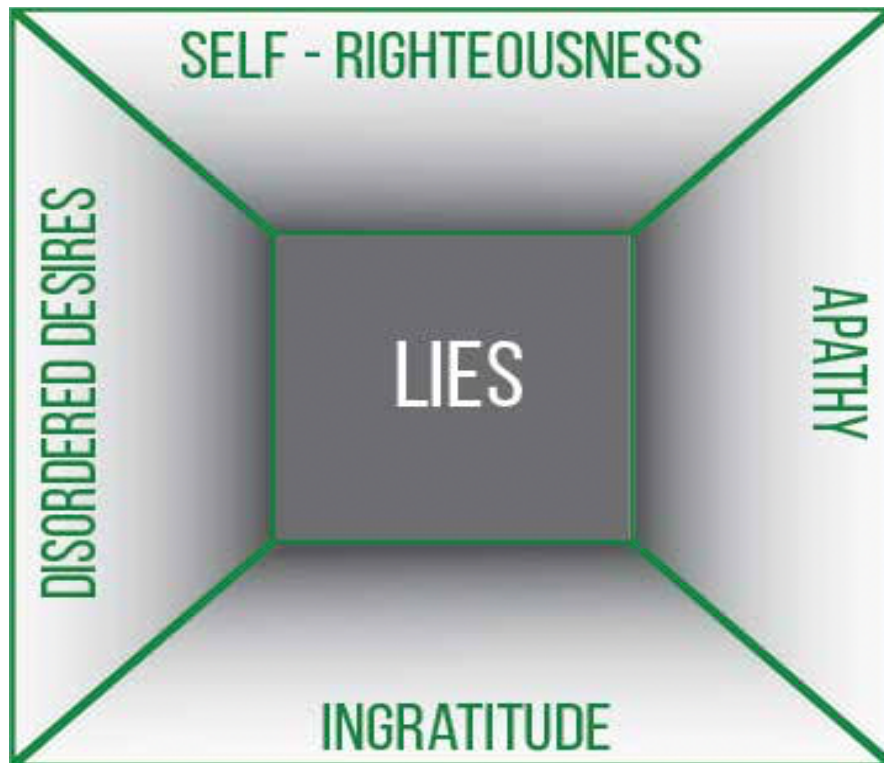
- Which of these four areas (self-righteousness, ingratitude, disordered desire, apathy) do you struggle with the most? Why?

At Advent, we have developed a set of images to help us visualize what it means to be a follower of Christ. The first image is one that reflects the realities we have been

discussing today, our “exile” in the place of sin. It is a picture of a box-like room (four walls). These **walls** represent all the ways we are cut off from the life of our Father—making our home apart from him as orphans or prodigals rather than dwelling with and in him.

On the floor, we write “lies” because we realize that we are all stuck in patterns of falsehood. The four types of sin listed above form the four walls. These sins “wall” us in and cut us off from God and from his good purposes for us. They “exile” us.

As we have discussed, there are a host of sins that fit within each larger category/wall. Take a look at the diagram below. We encourage you to write the sins you recognized above on the wall which that sin is connected to.



- As you look your sins, choose one or two, and ponder how you have tried to address them. Have you found much success in combatting sin in these ways?

Our sins and our sorrows—everything that walls us in—are important parts of our story. Thankfully, however, we are not the final authors of this story. *Sin is part of our*



*story, but it is not the most important part; God's grace is!* In Christ, God is re-writing our story. The coming of Jesus is history's critical juncture—an event that changes everything! Jesus entered our exile, and overcame our sin. Jesus, our older brother, did what the prodigal's brother failed to do: he sought us out, saved us from our exile, and is bringing us home (see John 14:1-3).

In the coming weeks, we will consider other images, besides the **walls** of sin that box us in, to help us visualize what God is doing in our lives: namely **doors**, **tables**, and **home**. The sad reality we all must face is that we are walled in by our sin, living like orphans, alone in a room. In Christ, God has provided a door (the gospel) through which we can welcome him in; and when we do, he sits with us and eats with us at a table. Throughout our lives, we will face many walls, but the door of the gospel beckons: we can enjoy relationship with God by welcoming him in and “abiding” (making our home) in his love. We do not have to live like orphans. God has come to make his home with us! As we delve into these images and their biblical roots, we hope they will become helpful guides for your journey.

## Chapter 4

# Jesus Knocking—At Home with Our Father

The idea of “home” plays a powerful role in our life. A “home” is more than a house. A house is a physical structure, but a home is filled with meaning—a variety of memories and feelings, unique sounds, smells and tastes that are embedded in it. Homes are places of safety and rest, of joy and love and laughter. Houses are not always homes. For some of us, the sin we discussed last chapter may have so marred our relationships, that our houses have been filled with sad or difficult memories. For others, the physical house we live in may merely be a temporary place to sleep, eat, and store stuff. A home, on the other hand, is a place where we experience *shalom*: peace/abundance/well-being—a haven or sanctuary from the troubles of life. “Home” gives expression to what the entire Bible is about: God making a home for us where we will enjoy *shalom* with him forever (John 14:1-3, Revelation 22:1-4).

- What are some words that come to mind when you think of being “home”?
  
- How “at home” (peaceful/joy-filled) are you right now in your life? Why? Or why not?

## The Gospel of Jesus Christ

This curriculum is meant to help us allow our whole lives from beginning to end to be redefined and reoriented by the gospel. There are many, many ways to express the gospel, but at the end of the day *the gospel is always all about Jesus*, who he is and what he has done for us in the past, is doing in us in the present, and will do for us in the future. It is not about who we are or what we do, but him (2 Corinthians 4:4-5).

In the Old Testament God promised to send an anointed one (“Messiah” or “Christ”) to save his people. Jesus came into the world in accordance with God’s eternal plan. He is the fulfillment of the larger story of God that begins in Genesis with the creation of the world and concludes in Revelation with the re-creation of the world. And God’s

eternal plan is salvation through his grace (good given beyond what is deserved, free gift). Jesus' life, death, and resurrection bring the story of sin and death to an end and open up a new story—the story of reconciliation and restoration. In John 14:1-3, Jesus promises that he is going to prepare a place for us in his Father's house. This is our destination, the culmination of our story: we will be at home with our Father forever. We will become all we were meant to be and live amidst the peace and freedom we were meant to enjoy as God's children.

Take a moment to read John 1:1-18. There are a number of really important truths here that give summary not only to the Gospel of John, but to the Bible as a whole.

1. Jesus is the Word of God. By taking on flesh, he interpreted (made known) the Father to us (1:18). As the eternal Son of God who has known the intimate love of the Father through eternity (at the Father's bosom—like a child on his Father's lap) and the Word of God, only he can reveal the fullness of God to us in his intimate love and faithfulness—the fullness of grace and truth. Jesus corrects our distorted lenses! He enables us to “read” the Father as he truly is: full of grace and truth.
2. When we receive Jesus by faith, we enter a new relationship with God. We become children of God. We are not orphans or prodigals. Our exile comes to an end as we are restored to an intimate, loving relationship with our Father.
3. Through him we receive grace upon grace, gift upon gift. The provision of our Father is restored to us, and we are able to mature into the life we were intended to live, to reflect his image as sons and daughters, to enjoy eternal (John 3:16) and abundant life in him (John 10:10), and to enjoy intimate relationship—*shalom*, to be at home with him forever.

The gospel involves the invitation to *receive* all the Father has to *give* to us by trusting him. In the garden of Eden, we sought to take/grasp on our own initiative. In Jesus, we learn to receive by faith, trusting in our Father's goodness. Here are some particular components:

*We are saved by his life:* Jesus lived the life we were meant to live, remaining obedient to God in all he said and did (Philippians 2:5-8). In him God's expectations for his children are fulfilled. When we receive Jesus, we receive his faithfulness as a Son.

*We are saved by his death:* Dying in our place, Jesus broke the power of sin by taking the full consequences of our sin on himself (Romans 5:8-10). When we receive him, we receive his sacrifice. We are forgiven and set free from our sins.

*We are saved by his resurrection:* The Father raised Jesus up on the third day, revealing that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. God's purpose for us is life! When we receive Jesus, we receive his victory and his life—eternal life.

## **The Gospel: At Home in the Father's Love—Reconciliation**

We all long for people with whom we can let down our guard, laugh deeply, or shed tears. We treasure the experience of knowing and being known. To know ourselves through the eyes of someone who loves us is one of the best gifts in life.

God created us to know and enjoy him deeply. In the book of Revelation, Jesus tells John to write letters to seven churches. The last of these letters is written to the church in Laodicea. Here is part of what he has to say: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Rev. 3:20).

We are created to enjoy a close relationship with God through Christ, the kind that involves connecting around a kitchen table, being at home together. This is God's heart, which is expressed in one of the titles for Jesus: "Immanuel" (God-with-us). Jesus has come to make his home with us, to abide (be at home) with us, forever. This is the intimate knowledge of God we are intended to enjoy—being part of his family, gathered around the table, and delighting in each other's company.

## **Union**

Our adoption as children is not just a nice idea to make us feel better. It is a real work of God. The Bible often utilizes the language of union to make this clear. When we unite two things together, we make it possible for an exchange and co-mingling to take place, like when we unite people in marriage or plunge iron in fire. When such a union takes place, a real change happens. Married couples intertwine their lives, their property, their relationships, in ways that profoundly affect both parties. When iron is plunged into fire, it takes on the heat and even the color of the fire. It is changed and becomes moldable.

Likewise, the gospel proclaims that a real union has taken place between God and humanity. Our reconciliation with God begins in the womb of Mary, where God is united with humanity in his very being. In time and space, God became one of us. In Jesus, God and humanity are reconciled—united, never to be separated.

Not only does God unite himself with humanity in Jesus, but through the Holy Spirit, he unites himself with us personally. This union is tangibly expressed in baptism. Just

as a couple is united through a wedding, so those who trust in Christ are united with him through baptism. “We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we might walk in newness of life. For if we are united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:4-5).

*Christ does not stand apart from us as someone we merely admire or emulate. Christ has united himself with us. We are irons plunged into his fire. Our nature is changed (2 Corinthians 5:17). What is his has become ours, and what is ours has become his. Because he is the Son of God, we are children of God. His death is our death. His resurrection is our resurrection. His love, joy, and peace are ours (John 15:11, 16:33, 17:23). In him, we are fully forgiven. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). The fullness of God is ours (Colossians 2:9-10)!*

## **Our Struggle to Believe: Living as Prodigals and Orphans**

All this is true like the sun in the sky is hot, and the river is cool. It is truth we can count on. The gospel invites us to continually remember and receive Jesus by faith into all the various aspects of our life. This is how we grow in Christ and enjoy the full effect of our reconciliation: we make our home (rest or dwell in as the primary reference point of our life) in the truth of our Father’s love revealed in Jesus.

And yet, we often fail to read our life through this lens. Earlier, we considered the good news of Jesus knocking in Revelation 3:20. This verse addresses a problem: Jesus is *outside*. Here are the preceding verses:

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. Therefore, I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. (Revelation 3:15-19)

We often read this and think the Laodiceans (and therefore, us) simply need to get “hot,” that is, “passionate” or more fully “committed.” But, this is not what Jesus says. Certainly, their temperature is a problem. They are lukewarm. When you are cold or hot, you are different from the surrounding environment. Something has affected you. When you are lukewarm, you are “room temperature,” unaffected.

But, Jesus does not tell them to become hot. He is good with them being hot or cold. He wants them to be changed, affected by the gospel, whether by becoming cold (deeply peaceful) or hot (emboldened with hope and desire).

Their temperature signifies a deeper problem. The Laodiceans say, “I am rich, I have prospered and need nothing.” Jesus counters, “You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.” Their real problem is they are stuck in lies of self-righteousness and ingratitude. They are not trusting in Jesus, but themselves.

Like the Laodiceans, we can easily return to living like orphans or prodigals—grasping after life and trying to provide for ourselves. We can become stuck in lies that blind us to the truth of the gospel.

- Can you identify any ways you are living like a prodigal or orphan (as if you are on your own)? Think through any struggles in your relationships or at work and how you are facing them. Think through your ambitions and dreams and how “involved” God is in the way you view them.

Notice what Jesus calls the Laodiceans to do in Revelation 3—to stop trusting in themselves and trust in him. He calls them to *receive* from him the “gold” (riches of salvation), “white robes” (forgiveness), and “salve” (the healing of sight that enables us to know the truth) that they need. Or to use the vivid imagery Jesus employs: they are to turn away from their self-deception and trust him by opening the door to him (i.e., by receiving him). The **door** is our next image of the Christian life.



It is the truth of who Jesus is, who we are in him, and God's Presence through the Holy Spirit that sets us free from the lies and deceptions which bind us. We are not simply stuck, alone in a room, bound by sin and deception. There is a door, the gospel: Jesus is knocking, inviting us to open to him and to be *at home* with him.

Jesus saw beyond the lies of the Laodiceans. He knew the depths of their sin, pride, and shame, and *he still wanted in!* We do not need to “pretty ourselves up” for Jesus. He wants us as we are. He wants in on all our mess, weakness, and struggle. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, he stands at the door and knocks. This is what the Christian life boils down to: welcoming Jesus into our thoughts and desires, our struggles and fears, our ambitions and actions again and again by trusting in who he is, what he has done, and what he has promised.

- Look back at the sins you listed in chapter 3. Write down 5 of them below.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Which of these sins brings significant condemnation, frustration, or shame into your heart and mind? Describe how this particular sin affects your relationship with God and life more generally.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Take some time to utilize your imagination and welcome Jesus into this area of your life. What words does he have to say to you? How does his forgiveness free you? In particular, ponder what it means that there is no condemnation for you (Romans 8:1) as a child of God through Christ Jesus, that this sin does not separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:35-39).

The realities of our world invite us to interpret life as if we are still orphans or prodigals because the world is not Eden. It is fallen, and we are in exile. However, in John 15:7, Jesus calls us to allow his words to abide in us, to be at home in us. This is central to our reconciliation with God—to trust in his Word, his promises, such that they become our primary and overarching lens through which we interpret all things.

They are to be the truths that we are most comfortable/at rest/home with. The gospel invites us to stop viewing God as distant, angry, or against us. It invites us to recognize God as our Father who loves us, is for us, and has provided for our total forgiveness. The gospel calls us to live in the freedom of the children of God.

In particular, there are three “fruit” that Jesus emphasizes in the last part of John that come from trusting in him: **peace** (John 14:27), **joy** (John 15:11), and **love** (John 15:9). When we make our home in Jesus, we are able to experience the *shalom* that a home is meant to provide: the peace of being secure and provided for, the joy of celebrating life together, and the love of being known and cared for.

➤ In what ways have you experienced real intimacy with God? Write out some particular experiences or times of intimacy with God.

➤ Now contemplate your relationship/intimacy with God more generally:

-- What do you love about God? Why? What draws you to him?

--How has your relationship with God produced peace/rest in your life?

--How/Where have you found joy and delight in God?

➤ What lies, challenges, or fears have been hindering your intimacy with God lately?



- What particular gospel truths might be especially helpful for you to remember and proclaim to yourself on a regular basis? In other words, what truths do you need to confront the lies, deceptions, and sins you struggle with?

As you end this lesson, pray. Ask God to give you conviction—to allow the truth of the gospel to rule your mind and control your heart in all things. You have been eternally united with God in Christ. You are not an orphan and shall never be abandoned. Indeed, nothing can separate you from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:37-39). He has overcome the world, and death shall not be victorious over you. Jesus has come to make his home with you, and to take you home to be with him forever! Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief (Mark 9:24)! Grant us this freedom, joy, and peace.

- Entrust yourself to these gospel truths where you need it most right now.

## Chapter 5

# Jesus Knocking—Restoration

As we discussed last time, one key component the gospel addresses is our need to be reconciled to God, to be in a right relationship with him. This need is further reflected in the ways we often think of spirituality.

When we think of “spiritual” activities, we tend to think of praying, reading our Bible, going to church, meditating, and feeding the poor or caring for orphans and widows. All of these activities are great, of course, but they do not define spirituality, at least not spirituality as the Bible explains it.

When we think of spirituality in these ways, we limit spirituality to something we do at particular times and in particular places. But, Jesus came into the world to be with us *all* of the time, not just *some* of the time. He wants us to enjoy his Presence, to abide in him (be at home with him), in every dimension of our life—not only when we are doing “special” things, but also when we are doing normal, everyday things like working and playing, cooking and cleaning, laughing and exercising.

Part of the reason we have a hard time thinking of certain activities as spiritual is that they are not. Human business, government, and entertainment, for example, are often characterized by the patterns of sin we discussed in chapter 3: pride and anger, (self-righteousness), lust and gluttony (disordered desires), selfish ambition and greed (ingratitude), indifference and despair (apathy). Every area of human life reflects the problem of sin. Some just reflect it more clearly and obviously.

Many Christians are tempted to withdraw from “secular” areas of life so as to stay pure. Others compartmentalize their life, doing “spiritual” things alongside of the “unspiritual” things, but not connecting the two. Neither of these options represents a biblical answer to the problem.

As we are reconciled to God through Christ, we also need to be *restored*: reunited with our purpose as image-bearers and enabled to exercise dominion the way God intends by growing up as his children. *As reconciliation and restoration come together through the gospel, every element of our life becomes “spiritual.”*

Part of the challenge in all of this is to move from the abstract to the concrete. How does the hope of a “spiritual life” get expressed in the day-to-day realities we face? While we need to remember the awesome, overarching realities of who God is and

what he has done at a global scale, we also need to bring these glorious truths down into the nitty-gritty details of life.

One of the ways we can do this is by taking the language of “exercising dominion” and recognizing the concrete ways this gets expressed. As we discussed in chapter 2, we are children of God (the King over all), and therefore, “princes” and “princesses” who have various “realms” of influence and responsibility. In each “realm” (whether our home, workplace, neighborhood, church, sports team, etc.), we play a particular role—as parent, homeowner, boss, bible study leader, president of the PTA, coach, etc. It is in these particular roles that our “rule” gets expressed.

- Take a moment to write down all the various “roles” you play in life. Many of us will have more than 5.
  
- Which 3 of these roles seem most significant to you? Take a moment to think through your sense of “spirituality” in them. How closely connected to God and his purposes for your life do you feel in each of them? Write down a word or phrase which explains why you feel that way for each one.

## **The Gospel: At Home in The Father’s Love—Restoration**

The world is filled with signs of kingdoms and empires that have lost their former glory: ruins of temples and monuments, even entire cities, such as Machu Picchu, the Roman Coliseum, the Great Wall, the pyramid of Giza, and Angkor Wat.

Many times, kingdoms and empires fall because they are attacked by outside forces that overwhelm them. But, most of the time, they fall from within first. The leaders become corrupt and the people become decadent, leaving them vulnerable.

Like the larger political realities of our world, every human being is fallen. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). When the serpent tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden, and they obeyed, Satan gained authority over the earth. God’s warning became reality for us: “you shall surely die.” Under Satan’s authority, the earth is now filled with death and decay. The world has become like a fallen

kingdom, full of ruins that speak of a glory that has been lost. The entire creation is “subjected to futility,” in “bondage to decay,” and “groaning” (Romans 8:20-22).

To see this in the concrete realities of our lives, we can think about our particular roles in life, the places where the tragedy of sin actually hits us smack in the face.

- For each of the 3 roles you identified above, consider how you have “fallen short.” What are you most frustrated, distressed, or confused by in these roles? Where has futility, bondage to decay, and groaning been evident?

Thankfully, this is not the end of the story. Kingdoms can be overthrown. New kings can establish a more glorious and just rule in the place of the old, corrupt one. This is precisely what has happened in our world through Jesus. This is the other effect of the gospel: *restoration*. Jesus came to establish a new kingdom, God’s kingdom (Matthew 4:17) amidst the ruins of this world. He is “*Christus Victor*,” Christ the Conqueror.

Jesus rejected sin (Luke 4:1-13), overthrew the powers of darkness (Colossians 1:13, 2:15), and defeated death (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). As God’s Son in human flesh, he fulfilled the image of God and became the ruler over God’s creation that Adam and Eve were meant to be. God gave him “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18) and “the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

In Christ, righteousness triumphs over sin and life triumphs over death. Under his rule, the entire earth will be transformed. When he returns, he will cast all evil—rebellious spiritual powers, unrepentant humanity, and death itself—into the lake of fire (Revelation 20). With evil defeated, he will restore heaven and earth, in the glory of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22). The world we now know is not permanent. It shall be changed. Everything will be made new.

The gospel invites us to dream of the day when everything in our lives and our world—our bodies, our relationships, our neighborhoods, our cities, our forests and seas—are all healed, teeming with life, and overflowing with goodness and beauty. This is the promise of the new creation, the renewal of the world under the eternal reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is one of the sources of the peace, joy, and love that

come with making our home in the Father's love—because as we trust in these promises, we are able to live beyond the realities of this world, and in the rest, delight, and love of God's eternal nature.

- As you contemplate this glorious hope, what do you find yourself longing for? What do you want to see changed about our world most deeply?

## Participants in Christ's Victory

In our discussion of Revelation 3 in the last chapter, we ended in verse 20. In the next verse, Jesus makes a startling promise: “To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Revelation 3:21).

Thrones express dominion. What Jesus is promising here is that opening the door to him not only means being reconciled to him (having him “come in” and “eat” with us), but it also means being restored as bearers of God's image—exercising dominion the way we were intended to. As we turn to him in faith and allow him to rule in our lives, he allows us to rule with him, to sit on his throne with him.

The wider glory of this hope is expressed in Romans 8:19-21: “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility... in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

Although this promise will only be fully realized when Christ returns, we are being remade in the likeness of Christ even now. Through the eternal Son, we are being renewed as the children of God. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul proclaims, “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” Through the Holy Spirit, we are being restored in God's image, which means our dominion is being healed as well.

This is one of the key elements of the Christian life. The Holy Spirit is at work to transform every element of our lives. No area of our lives is to be left untouched. Every area of life is to be spiritual. *From our private, wilderness moments to the heart*

*of the city, all aspects of human endeavor are to be brought under the rule and reign of Christ.*

We sometimes catch glimpses of this. We see people give of themselves sacrificially in the name of Christ. We see executives choose the expensive, yet honest, way to do business. We see men and women rise up to call for a more just and peaceful political and economic order, even when it costs them dearly. We see movies that reveal the beauty and grandeur of what it means to be human, rather than exploiting the distorted desires of sinful humanity to sell tickets. We see loving marriages and lifelong friendships, enjoy beautiful gardens, and eat fabulous feasts that speak of God's bounty and goodness. Amidst the darkness, the light of Christ continues to shine. It cannot be overcome. It merely awaits its full and complete victory over the darkness.

- What are some glimpses of the new creation that you find particularly delightful or hopeful? Where do you see glimpses of restoration even now?

## **Baptism and Repentance**

If Jesus is Lord, and he has come to establish a new kingdom, how does one become a part of his insurgent kingdom? The New Testament is clear: we confess faith in Jesus (Romans 10:9). But there is an outward act that accompanies our inward faith.

In the political realm, when someone wants to change their citizenship status, they go through a ceremony to express this change in their identity, often by swearing an oath and pledging allegiance. Baptism is the Christian form of this. In baptism we submit to Jesus' rule and reign (Acts 2:36-38). We transfer our citizenship from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God. We are born again, as children of God, born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5).

Water cleanses, renews, and restores. We are baptized in water to physically express the spiritual reality of our salvation in Christ. Baptism marks out the profound change—the restoration—which is ours in Christ. This change involves nothing less than death and resurrection. Being submerged in the water expresses our death with Christ. Baptism is a watery grave. In him we die to ourselves and to the kingdom of this world. Being raised back up from the water reflects our resurrection with Christ.

We are lifted up out of our tomb, out of this age of death and decay, into the glory of the new creation, where Jesus reigns.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4).

Baptism is a one-time event, but the call of baptism is ongoing. We fulfill our death to sin and our resurrection with Christ by repenting and living out the glory of our true nature as those who have been united with Jesus, as children of God. Paul explains, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11).

When we live out this verse, we see the power of the gospel displayed in us. The essence of sin says “not your will, but mine be done.” It is the pattern of the prodigal who seeks life apart from God. To consider ourselves dead to sin is to reject the prodigal spirit, to reject the demand that life conform to my will, my plans, and my purposes.

To be alive to God, on the other hand, is to embrace his rule and provision as our Father. It is to say with Jesus, “not my will, but yours be done” even when we do not understand or like it. It is to acknowledge that God is God, and we are not. It is to affirm that God is good and wise and sees what we do not, so we will live according to his will and plan, rather than our own. To be fully alive is to submit to and even delight in God’s will, even when it involves dying, being crucified with Christ, because we know that God’s will always leads to life, to resurrection.

- In the 3 most important roles you identified earlier, would you say you are dead to sin and alive to God? Do you find yourself trusting God for the people and opportunities these roles present to you?
  
- In what ways do you struggle to trust God to guide, provide, or otherwise be a loving Father for you? How do you struggle to entrust yourself to God’s will? How are you tempted to follow your own wisdom or plans?

- What would it look like for you to be more “alive to God” in these roles? How do you need to entrust your ways and your future to God within them?

In all the various roles we play in life, Jesus is knocking and asking us to welcome him in. He is inviting us to fulfill the truth of our baptism day by day—to allow him to reign in us, to live not according to the norms of the world, but according to the truth of his kingdom. *This is true spirituality: Christ ruling in us.*

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me (Galatians 2:19b-20).

Notice what Paul proclaims here: an objective reality and a subjective response. “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” Done. Completed. If you have been baptized into Christ, you belong to him. You have been crucified with him, and Christ now lives (and therefore reigns) in you. The good news is that Christ reigns in us whether we are consciously aware of it or not.

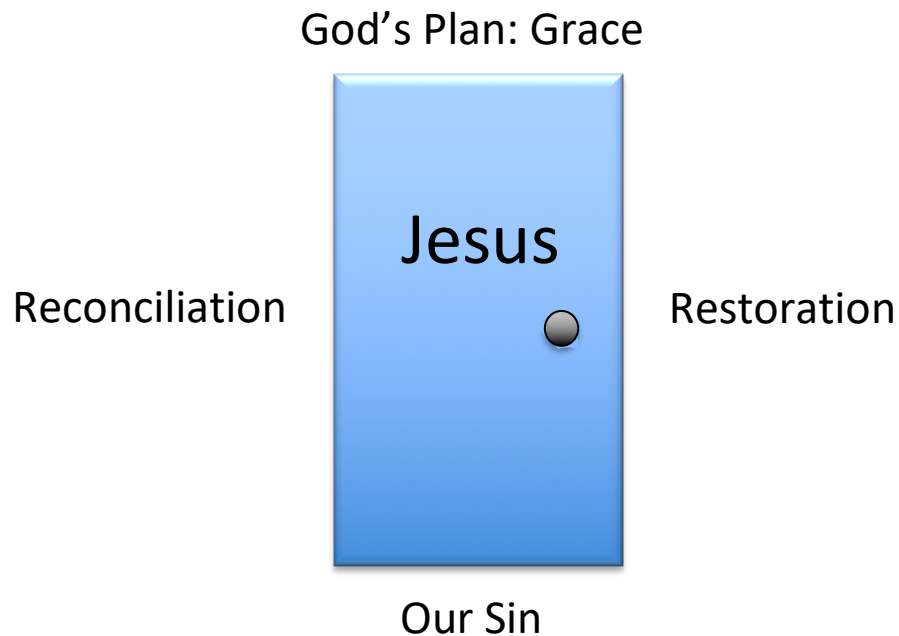
But, he goes on: “And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.” Paul’s response is to live by faith. We have been invited to enjoy the fruit of his rule and reign by living by faith in him. The Christian life is not about trying harder or doing more. It is about trusting in Jesus—welcoming him in to every trial, longing, and opportunity, and letting him do his work in us. As we open the door to Jesus, we find his power at work in us to restore us—to make us rule in our little realms of influence more justly, wisely, humbly, lovingly, and graciously.

There are many practices that help us actively live by faith, that enable us to live out our baptism and cooperate with Jesus reigning in us. We will consider some of these in future chapters. But the real issue, the primary question, we face each day is simply one of submission and faith. Are we willing to trust in Jesus, to receive his rule such that **he** changes us and the ways in which we live our lives?

In other words, the question we face each day is: will we actively engage Jesus in a relationship of trust—saying yes to him and desiring to have his will worked out in us? Will we allow the truth of the gospel, the hope of the new creation, to be paramount in our hearts and minds such that we look at our lives through a different lens—



allowing peace, joy, and love to supplant fear and anger even when life is not going the way we desire? Will we engage with scripture through the Holy Spirit in prayer and meditation such that his grace and truth guide and shape our thoughts and desires?



- As you think about the roles you play, consider each of them as a “room” in your life. Jesus is knocking on the door to each of these “rooms.” Take some time to pray and invite Jesus to reveal to you what he wants to give you. What gospel truth does he invite you to receive and allow to abide (be at home) in you? Write down anything he reveals to you.
  
- Did you find yourself eager to open the door to him? Why or why not?

## Chapter 6

# New Creation—Thanksgiving

As we've seen, the story of humanity begins with a tragic decision to grasp after life on our terms rather than receive it on God's terms. This is the pattern of human sin. Instead of living by faith in God's good provision to us as his children, we seek to provide for ourselves, as if we were on our own, like prodigals or orphans.

In Christ, God has demonstrated how worthy of our trust he is. He has given us his own Son to stand in our place and die for us. As Paul asks in Romans 8:31b, "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him for all of us, will he not along with him, also give us everything else?" This is what the gospel reveals: the unimaginable generosity of God in delivering us from sin and death so that we might be reconciled to him and restored as his children. God gives! He gives everything, including his own Son for us. This is the meaning of grace: GIFT! God our Father is our provider, the one who meets our needs for life, eternal and abundant life. The way of life is to live by faith in his generous love, his unfailing grace/gift. This is the truth that lies at the core of the story. We are being invited to live by faith, by trusting in God our Father.

### Exploring God's Story—The Emmaus Road

This truth is illumined at the end of Luke's Gospel in events that unfold along a road to Emmaus. Please read Luke 24:13-35.

**Scene 1:** A couple of people are walking away from Jerusalem on the Sunday after Jesus died. They are deeply distressed and confused by all that has happened.

**Scene 2:** Jesus shows up and begins walking along with them, but they do not recognize him. Jesus asks them what they are talking about. They are amazed that Jesus seems unaware of all that had happened in Jerusalem. They explain that they had thought (notice the past tense) that Jesus was the Messiah, the one who was to deliver Israel, but then he went and got crucified, and earlier that day the women told them crazy things about a resurrection. Very confusing!

**Scene 3:** Jesus goes on to rebuke them for a lack of faith and explains why the Messiah had to suffer and die by taking them on a guided tour of God's story (the Old Testament at that point).

**Scene 4:** When they get to the village of Emmaus where the two disciples were headed, Jesus acts like he is going on. They beg him to stay, so he does.

**Scene 5:** Having spent the day walking and talking with Jesus, but still unable to recognize him, they sit down to eat with him. And as they sit, *Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. In that moment their eyes are opened, and they finally recognize Jesus* (Luke 24:30-31).

**Scene 6:** The disciples immediately run back to Jerusalem, filled joy and gratitude, to tell their fellow disciples that they have seen Jesus.

Like the disciples, we are often engulfed in confusion, deep disappointment, and even despair. We all must wrestle with the problem of evil at many points in life, leaving us bewildered and distraught, feeling cut off from God and from hope.

But, in the midst of our sorrows, Jesus journeys with us. Even when we are unaware, he is there. Jesus' presence forms a wonderful irony in the story, and it is no less ironic in our own story, as we cry out to God as if he were far away. Jesus speaks to us and invites us through the scriptures to trust that God has a plan and is working it out, and thereby, to return to hope—a hope that is greater than death.

There are moments of epiphany, moments when we encounter the reality of the risen Jesus afresh. Our sorrow melts away amidst the joy of beholding our Lord and our God. Again, we behold Immanuel, “God with us.”

## **The Emmaus Road and the Eucharist**

Historically, Christian worship has been rooted in this same pattern. That day's journey is the paradigm for the journey we take every Sunday in worship together. We come together out of the confusions and sorrows of life to hear the explanation of God's story revealed in scripture—with a particular concern for understanding the purposes of God revealed in Jesus. We come to the Table to share a meal in remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection. Then we go forth to proclaim the joy that is ours in Christ. We also follow the same script Jesus did—both in the Last Supper and in the home at Emmaus: *we take bread, bless it, break it, and give it to the people* in what we call the Eucharist.

Although our experience may not always reflect it, what is happening in the Eucharist is incredibly profound. The celebration of the Eucharist expresses the great redemption of our story. The significance of the Eucharist carries on far beyond our shared worship: *it provides a gospel-shaped lens for our life.*

**The Eucharist proclaims the gospel: we have been reconciled  
with God and restored as his image bearers.**

Jesus instituted this unique meal in the Gospels at the Last Supper. The bread and wine are identified with his body and blood. Through his sacrifice, we are forgiven, reconciled to God. In fact, the significance of the meal extends back to the beginning of the grand story of Scripture. Notice the parallels between Genesis 3 and Luke 24. Both events involve a couple of people eating and having their eyes opened as a result. Where Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their eyes were opened, and they recognized their nakedness, the two disciples on their way to Emmaus eat the bread, their eyes are opened, and they recognize Jesus—seeing him for who He really is. Relationship is renewed. Reconciliation is enacted.

**The act of eating—when done in rebellion to God—brought shame  
and led to death. The act of eating—when done in response to the  
obedience of Jesus—brings joy and leads to eternal life.**

The Eucharist not only reflects our reconciliation, however. It also reveals our restoration as image bearers.

Bread and wine do not emerge from the ground. Bread and wine are products of human dominion. We sow wheat, harvest it, grind it, add water to it, knead it, form it, and bake it. It is our creativity and labor which makes bread out of wheat. Likewise, we creatively turn grapes into wine. Bread and wine are expressions of God's call to make something of the world he has made for us.

In the Eucharist, we offer the work of our hands—the bread and the wine—to God with *thanksgiving*. (The word Eucharist *means* thanksgiving.) This is the attitude we were always meant to have as image-bearers: gratitude for the multitude of his *gifts*. We are meant not to grasp as orphans, but to receive like children—children who trust and delight in the goodness of God our Father. Even the way we practice the Eucharist is important. We open our hands to receive the bread—reminding us that this is our true and right posture in all of life—to receive the gifts of our heavenly Father, to be at home, trusting in his loving provision.

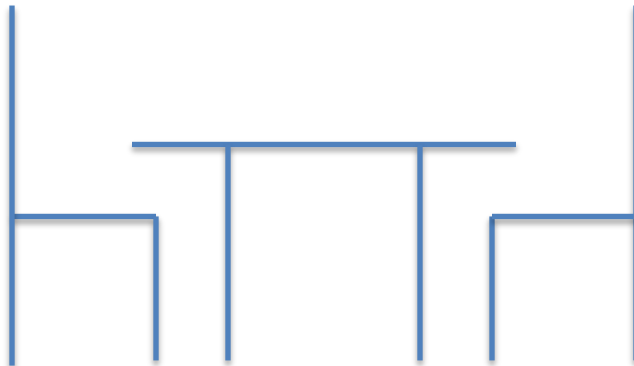
## **Weaving The Stories Together: Living Sacramentally**

The disciples on the road to Emmaus discovered, in the midst of a normal, every-day event like eating, that God reveals himself to His people. Even in mundane things like making bread and wine and eating and drinking them, *God has come to be with us*.

When we gather at the table in worship, Jesus continues to make himself known in the breaking of the bread. The Eucharist enacts the gospel for us in a tangible way every week. It is one expression of Jesus' promise in Revelation 3, that when we open the door to him, he will come in and eat with us.

This truth re-defines our understanding of God in the world. Just as God makes himself known to us through bread and wine, so, through the work of the Holy Spirit, God can reveal himself at any moment in our lives. Through the Gospel, we live our lives with a readiness to encounter God in Christ anytime, anywhere, through anything. There is no secular aspect of life. Not work. Not friends. Not food. Not home. Not family. Not our neighborhood. Everything is permeated by God's presence! What begins with the bread and wine extends to all creation. We are invited to be at home with the Father in all things.

*What does this mean for us?* It means we not only receive the sacrament on Sunday mornings, but we *live sacramentally* the rest of the week. The Eucharist reorients every element of our life. The next image for the Christian life invites us to embrace life sacramentally. It is the image of a **table**:



Tables are places where we sit to enjoy good food and good conversation. A good meal is one we linger over—grateful, our hunger satisfied, not only the hunger of our bodies, but of our souls as well. And often, our meals are eaten in a home. The Eucharist points to our rest in the eternal home Jesus is preparing for us.

The story of the Emmaus Road encounter and the story of Jesus knocking at the door in Revelation 3 both promise us that our story ends in satisfaction, with Jesus making himself known to us and filling us with joy and thanksgiving. We are offered a feast.

Through the gospel, we are invited to look at life with the eyes of faith—beholding and celebrating the multitude of ways God provides for us and the ways Jesus makes

himself known to us in the everyday stuff of life. It is a call to recognize the tables he sets for us (in a wide variety of places and at odd times in our lives) and to sit down and eat with him, grateful and satisfied by the riches of his love and grace.

We use the image of the table to remind ourselves of this ongoing invitation. It could come in the form of a moment where the light streams through the window in a particularly beautiful way, inviting you out of the dark mood you are in. It could come through the way your child laughs as you pick her up, which reminds you of the love God has for you. It could be that moment after you complete a difficult task which leaves you completely drained, yet wonderfully alive, because you have done the work you know you were created to do. Moments of deep satisfaction in life are wonderful. They make the challenges we face day-to-day worth the struggle.

- What are some tables Jesus has set for you this week? Take some time to try and remember at least 7 things you are deeply thankful for.

Of course, at some points in life it is hard to be thankful for anything at all. Although it is not realistic to think we should be perpetually thankful, if we are honest, we often fail to embrace even some of the obvious opportunities to celebrate God's good gifts to us. We are too focused on imperfections, too tired, or too busy. But the invitation remains to receive and enjoy God's gifts to us. Even if our present circumstances cloud our vision, the good news of what he has given us in his Son is always true and always able to give us a different lens to interpret our situation, to enter into the joy of God's faithful love for us.

- How faithful are you at paying attention to the good things that are happening to you or around you? Why do you think that is?

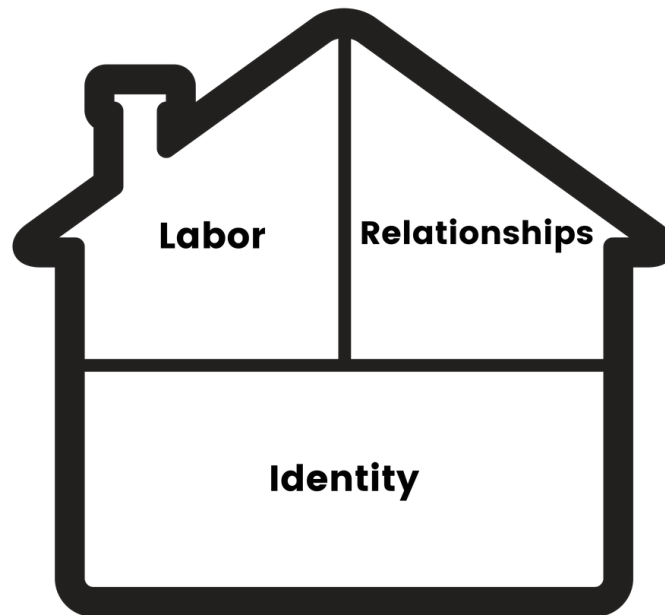
Every good, true, and beautiful moment in life is a picture of our future—when sin, death, and sorrow will be no more. They are reminders that Jesus has won the victory for us, and as a result, the day is coming when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the seas” (Habakkuk 2:14). They are foretastes of the even greater joy which await us in Christ (Colossians 3:1-4).

The image of a table is an invitation to celebrate. It is a reminder of Jesus' ongoing invitation: to hear him knocking and to welcome him in so we can sit and enjoy his company at the table he has set for us. It is an invitation to let the hope of the gospel transform the way we see the world, through the joy of God's promise and the wonder of his presence, even in the midst of the world's brokenness and sorrows. As God provided for the needs of Israel in the wilderness—setting a table for them through the manna he provided—so he is able to provide for our needs in difficult and challenging times, our “wilderness.” May your eyes be opened in fresh ways to the tables God is setting before you. May your trust in his gift and open the door to greater love, joy, and peace, even in the midst of life's troubles.

- Can you identify some times when you were in a season of struggle or turmoil, and the gospel provided peace and strength to you? What truth granted you that peace and strength?
  
- Now think beyond your own experience, and write down a variety of ways the truth of the gospel provides a “table in the wilderness.” This might be sustenance amidst difficulty, provision amidst lack, delight amidst sorrow—any ways we are able to transcend the difficulties of the present.

These first six weeks have invited you to consider a deeper and richer awareness of your significance and purpose. *You have been reconciled to God and are being restored as a Child of God, one who shares in all the beauty and truth of Jesus—of who he is and what he has done.* God has invited you to participate in a story of beauty, truth, and goodness that far exceeds anything you could dream up on your own. The images of **walls**, **doors**, and **tables** give expression to how we participate in this story—by welcoming Jesus into all areas of our lives and delighting in him. In the next 3 chapters, we will explore how all these ideas come together in this invitation to be “at home” in the Father's love—resting and trusting in his provision and delighting in his gifts, particularly in relation to our identity, our relationships, and our labor in this world.

One more image will help us engage with these concerns: a **home** with three rooms. These rooms are: **identity** (how we think of ourselves—the bottom floor, since it is where we begin and the foundation from which the other concerns rightly flow), **relationships** (who we count on and rely upon in life—our people/clan), and **labor** (what we do/work at in life). In the coming chapters, we will explore what it means to invite Jesus into each of these rooms of our lives. We will then conclude with an invitation to ponder what this all means for you moving forward: what practices might help you to retain an ongoing awareness of the gospel and interpret life through a gospel lens?



*What's coming next?*

Chapter 7—At Home in the Father's Love: Identity

Chapter 8—At Home in the Father's Love: Work

Chapter 9—At Home in the Father's Love: Relationships

Chapter 10—Growing as God's Children: Developing Grace-Filled Rhythms of Life



## Chapter 7

# At Home in the Father's Love—Our Identity

“Who are you?” It’s a question we get asked a lot, though usually indirectly. Where do you work? What are your hobbies? Where did you grow up? All these questions point back to our unique identity.

The Bible doesn’t have anything to say directly about personal identity, at least not in the way we typically mean it. What it does talk about, however, is the “soul.” Every human being is a world unto him/herself, full of particular ideas, experiences, feelings, and abilities. All of this taken together is our “soul”—our unique way of being in the world—which is why identity does not capture the full range of meaning of “soul.” I will use the terms interchangeably because we are more used to thinking in terms of identity, but realize that we are talking about something more wonderful than merely the markers that distinguish one person from the next. We are talking about all the deep, personal realities that make a person a unique bearer of God’s image.

Picture an ocean. The water in the ocean is our heart and mind. These parts of us interact with the outside world, changing and possibly getting churned up by various cares and concerns on a day-to-day basis. Our soul, however, is the bedrock on the ocean floor. There, our thoughts have settled into convictions, and our desires have settled into satisfactions. The soul is what makes Rob, Rob and Cindy, Cindy.

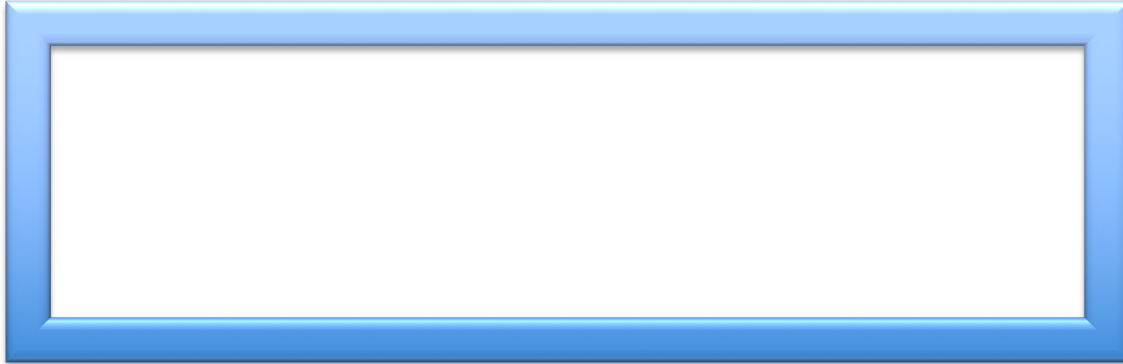
- Who are you? Take a moment to describe yourself? What are core truths about you—personality traits (introvert/extrovert, thinker/feeler, inhibited/uninhibited, etc.), likes and dislikes, unique habits and perspectives on life, etc. If someone was just getting to know you, what key truths would be most important for him/her to understand?

If it helps, utilize the chart below to develop some ideas, but first and foremost, use your own words to express how you see yourself.

Enneagram type \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_  
Life-stage \_\_\_\_\_ Politics \_\_\_\_\_

Faith \_\_\_\_\_ Self-Esteem \_\_\_\_\_  
Socio-Economic Status \_\_\_\_\_ Introvert vs. Extrovert \_\_\_\_\_  
Future/Present/Past Focused \_\_\_\_\_ Thinker vs. Feeler \_\_\_\_\_  
Optimist vs. Pessimist \_\_\_\_\_

- Which aspects of your identity shape the way you see the world most profoundly? Write the top three in the frame provided.



*“It’s not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters.” - Epictetus*

What we allow to define us—how we view ourselves—has a profound impact on our lives. This lens in particular can lead to great joy or sorrow, hope or despair.

When I was a kid, I was often accepted in the in-group at school, but I was rarely sought out (i.e., I cannot remember being invited to a single party in high school). At age 47, I finally was able to put words to how this had impacted how I saw myself: I believed deep down that I was merely “tolerated,” not really “wanted,” by most people. As a result, I expected to be disappointed by people or to prove disappointing most of the time. I lived with an underlying anxiety that I was not good enough, especially for the “popular kids.”

One of the things this did is that it caused me to feel like I needed to excel at whatever I did, to be as good as the best, or at least very close, whether academically or athletically. After becoming a Christian, I transferred this to my spirituality. I became a “Super Christian,” the guy who read his Bible voraciously and talked about Jesus incessantly. I was proving myself to be a good Christian. And, in many ways, I succeeded. I was given lots of accolades and offered positions of leadership and authority, including being a youth pastor while I was still in my first years of college. This led to an inflated sense of my ability, that led me into deep frustration (ok,

depression) when I did not feel I was measuring up as a church planter years later. My identity, my worth, was threatened by my failure to “measure up.”

Most of us have distorted perspectives on ourselves—often rooted in our experiences—which cause us to think more poorly or more highly of ourselves than we ought.

- As you look back at your description of yourself (and perhaps at words you did not use, but come to you now as you think about it), how have you been affected for good or for ill by the ways you have viewed yourself? What are some positive words, and how have they impacted you? What negative, or slightly negative, words have impacted you and how so?
  
- What has contributed to you allowing these words to shape or even define you? (Who or what helped you decide these were truths about yourself?)
  
- As you look at them now, to what degree are they really true? How do they align with or contradict the gospel? Do they reflect the truth that you are a beloved child of your eternal Father? How so? How not?

The gospel redefines and reorients everything in our world, including how we view ourselves. *The gospel is the Reality that is meant to shape how we engage with all other realities.* But, few of us begin here. We typically begin with our experiences, our joys, our disappointments, what others say about us, and what we tell ourselves.

In the diagram of the Father’s house, we have “identity” as the first floor because it is critically important to begin from who we are and then think through our relationships and our labor in the world. Our identity is something God gives us. We

do not achieve our worth or significance. It is rooted in the reality of how God has made us and what he has done for us. In Mark 8:36, Jesus asks, “What does it profit anyone to gain the whole world and yet forfeit their soul?” In this way, Jesus indicates that our soul is worth more than the world. And he gave his life to redeem our souls. Your soul is worth the blood of Jesus. You are an adopted child of the Eternal Father. Your worth is not found in who you know and love or in what you accomplish. Rather, how you love and what you do flows from knowing you are a child of God. Rooting our identity in Christ enables us to grow in healthy relationships and fruitful labor.

When we turn it around—seeking our identity in our relationships or in our labor—we are prone to grasp after life and to be deeply disappointed. Anxiety and/or self-righteousness flow from a failure to know/trust in our identity in Christ.

Here are a bunch of truths about who we are and how God relates to us in Christ:

- Child of God (John 1:13)
- Home (Temple) of God (1 Corinthians 3:16)
- Beloved (Colossians 3:12)
- Chosen (John 15:16, Colossians 3:12)
- Sung Over with Joy (Zephaniah 3:17)
- Forgiven/Cleansed
- No Condemnation (Romans 8:1)
- Alive (Ephesians 2:5)
- Holy (Colossians 3:12)
- Empowered by the Spirit (Acts 1:8)
- More than Conquerors (Romans 8:37)
- Royal Priesthood (1 Peter 2:9)
- Citizen of Heaven (Philippians 3:20)
- New Creation (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Each of these has profound significance. For example, if I am a child of God, I am rich and abundantly provided for. The God of the universe is my Father. All that is his, I have a share in. Given that he is eternal, I have eternal life as well. It also means that I am like him. There is a family resemblance. As I mature I will reflect his character/ways more and more. As a child, I am under his discipline and guidance. Knowing these things frees me up from trying to prove myself or obtain security in my life. I am already provided for and already have surpassing worth.

- Choose 3 of the words above and ponder them. What do they mean for who you are, and how do they speak into whatever challenges you face in life? How do they speak to the ways you described yourself at the beginning of this chapter?
  
- Do you believe each of these is true? In what ways do you struggle to believe?

The invitation of the gospel is to allow these (and many other truths from scripture) to be the primary lens through which we view ourselves—to let God define us. We cannot overlook or deny our experiences and feelings, but we can view them differently, graciously, truthfully, in the light of God’s words spoken over us and his actions taken to demonstrate our value to him. We can invite God to make these truths resonate within us day by day and to reorient our view of ourselves. We can let these be the important thoughts—the things we realize we need to remember and pay attention to—above and beyond the things we tend to place importance on, such as what others think of us or what we have accomplished.

Rejecting the lies that condemn or distort our view of ourselves and embracing the truth of Christ by faith is the means by which we grow in the freedom of the children of God and experience greater love, joy, and peace in life. It all begins with marveling at the greatness of God and delighting in who we are in him. To do this, we need to engage with God’s Word. We need some way of allowing God’s Word to dwell in us richly such that we can trust in it and allow it to speak into the realities of our lives and identity day to day.

- What has your relationship with God’s Word looked like in the past? Has it been an obligation to read it? Why? Has it been a joy to read and ponder it? Why?

Unfortunately, many people have been guilted and shamed into reading the Bible. Many have felt that the measure of their spirituality was how much they read the Bible, with a daily devotion being the baseline standard. Although it really is important to know scripture, it is meant to liberate us, not obligate or bind us to some sense of duty. It all points to Jesus and to the gospel of our adoption as God's children. Many of us will experience confusion in our reading at some point, but ultimately, its meaning and significance is found in Jesus. It all points us to him. Reading it so as to know Jesus, and to know ourselves in him, leads to freedom, love, joy, and peace for us as the children of God.

- When has the Bible come alive to you? What ways of reading scripture help you connect with God and see Jesus and yourself more fully?

Although it can be quite helpful to simply read through the Bible in a year (utilizing a devotional reading plan), there are many other approaches to consider. You might want to do some form of *lectio divina*, where you take a shorter passage and read it multiple times, paying attention to the word or phrase that jumps out at you. You might want to read scripture along with an accessible commentary. The Bible Project online is helpful for many people as an introduction to the books of the Bible and the narrative arc as a whole. There are many ways to get the Bible in our hearts and minds, and no one way is right for everyone. Experiment and find out what helps you the most. But whatever you do, remember to allow scripture to point you to Jesus and the gospel—what God has done, is doing, and will do for you in Christ. God is both the author and the main actor in this story.

When we abide (make our home) in God's Word, it has liberating power to offer us. We are set free from the words others have spoken over us and that we have spoken over ourselves. Instead of listening to words of condemnation, we are freed to live according to who we are in Christ (Romans 8:1).

Take a minute to engage with God's Word right now. Read Ps. 131. It's a really short psalm, which makes it an excellent prayer to repeat on a regular basis.

- What does it mean to be a "weaned child?" How is a weaned child's relationship with his/her mother different from that of an infant?

One way that a “weaned” child is different from an infant is its level of trust. Children, over time, develop a trust in their parents that they are able to provide food for them. Instead of screaming (or at least screaming constantly) whenever they are ready to eat, they are able to wait for the next meal.

A settled, “weaned” soul develops by trusting that God is ultimately working all things for our good. This trust relies on the belief that he is powerful enough and good enough to do so. If God is the ultimate source of all things—if he created all thing by his Word and made them good—then his words spoken over us determine the true reality of things. He will bring all things into conformity to his purposes eventually. But, if we don’t believe God is really all-powerful, we have a God who sees our struggles, sympathizes, but ultimately, is unable to help us. And if we don’t believe God is good (for us), then we have a God who we cannot trust when things go poorly, and as a result, his words may feel empty and void.

All of us have both a theoretical and functional view of God. A theoretical view of God is the picture of God we have in our minds. For most of us, we believe God is both all-good and all- powerful. Our functional view of God comes from how we actually live life. Do we live like God is all-good and all-powerful?

- Think for a few moments about your functional image of God. Do you have a harder time believing and living in the reality of God’s goodness or His power? Why?

It does us no good to pretend. Our struggles to trust in God’s power or goodness will affect our ability to allow his Word—his promises and declarations—to truly define us and set us free to live beyond the circumstances and words of this world. Be honest and write down (on the next page) any reasons you struggle to believe either in God’s goodness or power. Now write down all the reasons you can think of that support confidence in God’s goodness or power.

*Reasons for Questioning/Doubt:*

God's Goodness

God's Power

*Reasons for Confidence:*

God's Goodness

God's Power

Although there are many reasons to be confident, the bedrock on both counts is the gospel: that God revealed his goodness and power in Christ by fulfilling his promises, coming to be with us, to die for us, and to overcome death for us. Developing our confidence in the realities of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is key.

The freedom of knowing yourself to be a child of God through Christ is worth the time to confront and overcome any questions or doubts you may have about God and his Word. May God's Word be the bedrock of your life and the lamp that not only guides your feet, but illumines your soul and defines who you are.

Look back over this lesson and consider the following **walls**, **doors**, and **tables** questions:

- What walls have been built up in your way of seeing yourself? These could be words/thoughts about yourself which bring shame or condemnation, your struggles to trust in God's power or goodness, or anything that is keeping you from knowing God's delight in you.
  
- What doors is Jesus knocking on? What particular truths about your identity is Jesus inviting you to embrace?



- What tables has he set before you? How has Jesus changed you that you delight in and can celebrate? What love, joy, or peace has come to reside in your soul?

## Chapter 8: At Home in the Father's Love—Labor

Work is a huge and complex part of our lives. We love and hate it. We need to work, and we need to rest. We do so many things in any given day. Like our identity, our labor is another key component of our lives for us to ponder so we can discover how the gospel redefines and reorients our approach to our work day by day.

- What do you do? Take a moment to think through an average week for you. List out the things you labor at—whether they are ways you make money, care for others, pursue hobbies, or take care of yourself. Be fairly comprehensive. List things like laundry and cleaning dishes, along with being a lawyer, writing code, or woodworking.
- Take five of these things and write them below. Then write out why you do each of these things. There may be multiple layers of reasons.

Work/Labor	Reasons
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Our labor can be motivated by many things: to make money, for the pleasure of it, to demonstrate our worth/value by doing something significant/meaningful, to fulfill an obligation, or it's just something that needs to be done.

Unfortunately, we often labor as though we are orphans rather than children—as if we are providing for ourselves, rather than trusting in God's provision as our Father. For example, we may feel “less than” the people around us. We compare ourselves to a friend, a classmate, a neighbor, or a family member, and feel like we just haven't accomplished as much as they have. When I was in my 20s, I was fairly discouraged

when I discovered Dietrich Bonhoeffer published *The Cost of Discipleship* when he was 31. I had no idea how I could write a masterpiece like that within the next few years of my life! If I was going to leave an impact on the world like him, I was falling far behind! This reflects my excessive desire to prove myself, but my story is far from uncommon. The details are different, but most of us try to obtain a sense of our value from our accomplishments and accolades in the world. Indeed, we are encouraged to do so very early on: grades tell us what a good (or bad) student we are, praise and trophies express our superiority in various forms of competition, and attention for our good looks or funny jokes make us feel special.

When we go down this path, we put ourselves in competition with the people around us. I need to be better than others to demonstrate my worth. Otherwise, they outshine me, and my worth is questionable. And so, we find ourselves “grasping” after the significance God invites us to receive from him.

- Who do you tend to compare yourself to in one way or another? How do you look in these comparisons—better or worse?

Even if this is not a struggle for us, we probably have other “walls” we face in our labor. We might feel like we are never paid enough to enjoy the life we want. We might experience significant tensions with our co-workers. We might find certain aspects of our labor trivial or boring, and/or we might feel overwhelmed by how much we have to do. In such situations we are often tempted to be anxious, angry, ashamed, or feel like God is distant.

- As you look at your labor, can you see any ways you are “walled in?” Ways your labor is less than a joyful expression of your identity as a child of God?

We are meant to make something of the world God has made—to bring our creativity to it so as to let the world reflect the glory and grace of God even more fully and beautifully. So how do we do this well? How do we do this as children at home in our Father’s love, rather than orphans who need to provide resources, satisfaction, and value for ourselves?

## At Home in Our Labor: Opening the Door to Jesus

*Jesus is knocking. He wants in on our labor—to work with us, and for us to work with him.* Remember Matthew 11:28-30: “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

This is referring to the larger reality of how we approach spirituality in general, but it also applies directly to our labor. Jesus wants us to work with him (a “yoke” is the harness plow animals share to work together), and he promises that he will ease the burden. So, how do we labor effectively in this world? We invite Jesus into our labor. We work with him in whatever we do. This has a couple components:

1. Trusting in God’s grace and believing in his generosity/gift, so that our life/labor can then be an expression of grace/gift to others.

This is a truth that reverberates in the scriptures: God is our Creator, and he has given us gifts! Indeed, everything we have is a gift: our ability to breathe, our personalities, our abilities, and our talents. God has given each of us abilities and talents to utilize for our enjoyment, others benefit, and his glory. Some may be obvious, like an ability to paint, write, or solve complex mathematical problems. Others may be less obvious, like an ability to make friends quickly or to think outside the box. As followers of Christ, we also have gifts that are given to us by the Spirit as a part of our relationship with Christ. Some examples of these are listed in 1 Cor. 12:4-11 and Rom. 12:3-8. These lists can help generate an understanding of particular ways we have experienced the power of God at work in and through us.

- What are you good at? What do other people commend you for? Write your “top ten” below. Some of these things may fit the lists of spiritual gifts and some of them may not. It does not really matter. Just write out the skills and abilities that you find yourself excelling at.

Creativity is not just something artists do. It is something we all do! As children of God, we are being formed in his likeness. He created us to be creative (like he is!). By taking the mundane things of this world and making them beautiful, we imitate God and reflect his glory through our unique personalities. The invitation of the gospel is to allow God to work in and through the gifts he gives us to creatively express his goodness in ways that bless others and glorify God.

- Think of a time this past year where you have taken something mundane and creatively turned it into something useful or beautiful. This could be an object, relationship, situation, location, etc. Tell that story here. What effort did you have to make to see the transformation?

Here is another important verse to ponder in relation to our labor. It, too, is an invitation to open the door to Jesus:

〔 ***“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” Eph. 2:10*** 〕

- Read this verse several times, prayerfully. What does this verse say about humanity’s role and God’s role in the creative use of abilities and gifts?

There are two traps we can fall into in relation to our labor. Either we think we are the primary actors, as if it is up to us to make things happen (losing sight of our identity as a child of the Creator of all things), or we imagine that God cannot possibly use us (how could God trust us with anything?).

- In what ways do you tend to place too much emphasis on your own abilities?
- In what ways do you tend to doubt that God can work through you?

All of this points toward a second aspect of what it means to open the door to Jesus amidst our labor:

2. Recognizing that our labor is not just our labor. It is God's work in and through us.

When we understand this, then prayer becomes intertwined into our labor. We turn to Jesus in prayer, to talk things over with him, much as we would with anyone we are cooperating with in a job or project. We turn to him with our weariness and invite him to strengthen us. We turn to him with our frustrations and ask him to give us perseverance. We turn to him when our co-workers are driving us crazy and ask for his wisdom, patience, and ability to forgive. We daily invite him to grant us success in our work and give him thanks for all we accomplish.

We are not alone! We are not orphans! *We have a co-worker.* Jesus is knocking. We can turn to him and welcome him in as we go about whatever we do. We can turn to him for help, delight in his companionship, and celebrate what he does through us. Ongoing conversation—prayer—transforms our labor as it continually expresses our trust that God is with us and our Father is providing for us, since all our labor in this world is an expression of his gifts given to us in the first place.

- What does your engagement with Jesus look like when it comes to your labor? What do you actually talk over with him? What might it look like to invite him in more fully?

God works through us in a variety of ways. Sometimes we develop a pretty clear sense of what makes us tick and what God has made us to do. Eric Liddle says in “Chariots of Fire,” “God made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure.” At other times, we may just have work put in front of us, and we do it.

In my early 20s, my passion was to develop people and form leaders for God's church. As time went on, this developed into a particular call to listen well and discern God's call in people's lives more generally. I come alive when I see people discovering what God is inviting them into, especially when I can do this in personal conversations. This is why I wrote this curriculum: to promote deep explorations of God's grace, his gift,

and how trusting in his grace transforms us. It took many years for this to become clear though, and it is still being refined as God keeps working in me.

- Do you have a sense of what God has given you to do in life? If not, think about what brings you a sense of God's pleasure/joy when you do it and when your gifts and talents come together most powerfully to honor God and bless others. Does this point out ways you can give to others the gifts God has given to you that express his love, peace, and joy?
  
- What are some words you would use to describe your understanding of what God has made you to do?

Asking this question is a bit dangerous, since it can seem like I am “missing something” if I do not have a clear answer. You are not “less than” if you do not have an answer to this question! It can help clarify what we say “yes” to and what we say “no” to in life, but the real question is: *Am I honoring and serving God in whatever I do?* It need not boil down into a nice, succinct sentence.

- If you have a sense of God's overarching “call” on your life, which of the gifts and abilities you identified at the beginning of this chapter are expressed through it? Which are not? Some may be utilized in other ways.
  
- If you do not have a succinct sense of call, how are you utilizing your gifts and talents to serve God day-to-day? What joy and peace do you find in the everyday ways you labor in this world?

Whatever form our labor takes in the world—whether we are a bookkeeper or a lawyer, an athlete or a student—the *bigger question is whether we do what we do from a place of trust in God as our Father or not?* Are we grasping after life through our labor, trying to provide for ourselves money or significance, or are we receiving what God gives joyfully, graciously giving it to others as a gift? Are we living like orphans or beloved children in the way we approach our labor?

If we are approaching our labor as a child rather than an orphan, whatever we do, there will be times when we experience deep joy and satisfaction in what God has done or is doing through us. Hopefully there are at least a few things we can look back upon each day, give thanks to God for, and say, “it is good!” even in the more difficult days.

- What are some “Tables” you find God sets for you fairly often in your labor? When do you experience God’s pleasure in what you do?
  
- In what ways can you delight in setting tables for others through your labor? What good does your labor do for the people around you? How do you get to be a reflection of the gospel, a means of God’s goodness, of his gift, to others?

As with everything else, our labor is an act of faith. We do not always get to see the fruit of our efforts. And yet, as we obey God’s call and cooperate with him, we can rest assured that our Father is working in and through us. Indeed, this is the greatest joy of our work: enjoying God’s gracious Presence in the midst of it, his delight in us.

- As you complete this lesson, take a few minutes to invite God to speak over your life and to share with you the ways he has delighted in working in and through you to share his goodness and grace with others (or perhaps just the moments of delight you have shared together). As part of his ongoing creation and as his child, let him proclaim “it is good” over you.



## Chapter 9

# At Home in the Father’s Love—Relationships

Along with our labor, our relationships impact our lives profoundly. Parents, siblings and other family members, friends new and old, neighbors and co-workers, and in a certain sense even books, TV, and movie characters have been intertwined into our lives in one way or another. To be human is to be relational. We are created in the image of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Relationality is embedded in the very nature of God, and therefore, in us as his image bearers. As Genesis 2 declares, “It is not good for man to be alone.” We are meant to be in relationship with one another—loving, generous, faithful, joyful relationships.

- Identify five people who have had a significant impact on you, for good or ill. Write their names below and how they have impacted you.

Name	Impact
------	--------

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Some people are a wonderful gift to us—a source of some of God’s greatest blessings in our lives. They get to know us deeply and love us even amidst our flaws. They encourage us in beautiful ways that draw out the best in us. They enjoy the same activities as us, share in our adventures, create cherished memories with us, and just make us laugh and enjoy life.

But as we all know too well, some people betray us or hurt us with their uncaring or unthoughtful words. At other times, we fail to connect and communicate well. Either way, the disappointment and pain can be immense.

Navigating our relationships well is one of the most important tasks in life because so much of our well-being depends on how we relate to others. As children of God, we are part of a family and are meant to grow up in relationship with our siblings in a way that honors and blesses our Father. This requires trust in God and in one

another—the ability to entrust our well-being to others such that we allow them to influence and impact us to one degree or another. If we refuse to trust, we refuse to open ourselves to others, and as a result, cannot experience all they have to give to us (and we keep ourselves from the joy of giving ourselves to them).

We need both trust and fear in relationships. Trust is like the gas pedal on a car and fear is like the brake. If you never step on the gas, you will never go anywhere, but if you never step on the brake, you are going to crash at some point. Trust is meant to be our primary approach to relationships, since it is the only means to form deep connections with other people. And yet, we live in a fallen, sin-bound world that makes fear a part of our relationships, since people are not always trustworthy.

The dysfunction in our relationships and our inability to trust one another fully and unreservedly leads not just to us keeping a fearful distance from each other at times, but also to patterns of manipulation, shame, co-dependency, unresolved conflicts, enabling, and a host of other relational breakdowns. We need to take the time to recognize our own faults and weaknesses which we bring to our relationships. Many of us read the people around us poorly. As I shared previously, my tendency to think people were merely tolerating me made me either (1) feel the need to be overly responsible for others' feelings and become anxious to please them, or (2) expect them to reject me, and therefore, not really hear what concerns they had in the relationship (they weren't seeing how hard I was trying, so they had to be wrong!).

When should we trust others and open ourselves to deeper relationships, and when should we recognize someone is untrustworthy and hold back? Opening ourselves in trust means we are opening ourselves to all the wonderful possibilities of a good relationship, but it also means opening ourselves to all the possibilities of disappointment and pain. There are toxic people in the world we really should not trust. Sometimes we need to avoid or end an unhealthy relationship.

- Consider your approach to relationships. Do you tend to start from a place of trust or distrust/fear? Do you tend to open yourself to other people quickly or slowly?

We face many **walls** in our relationships. We have learned unhealthy or at least unhelpful ways of relating to others.

- What walls are you facing in your relationships with others? Where are you facing relational struggles with particular people right now? Perhaps with a friend, co-worker, or family member?
  
- What are some general patterns in your thoughts, attitudes, or actions that make relationships challenging at times? Perhaps a lack of confidence, anxiety, manipulation, sloth/apathy, co-dependency, a failure to listen well, etc.?

While we cannot fully avoid being disappointed by people except by closing ourselves off from relationships, closing ourselves off leaves us with a truncated life-- a life that is “safe” but not abundant, not filled with the love, joy, and strength of knowing and being known, of loving and being loved. If we are going to enjoy the wonders of relationships, we have to be open to being disappointed by others at least to some degree. We can be wise, but we cannot prevent all pain without hindering the opportunity to also experience goodness, beauty, and joy.

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable. — C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

So how do we move forward in our relationships in a healthy way? We trust in the gospel. We open the **door** and welcome Jesus in.

Although we cannot always trust people, we can trust God. We can trust that even when people mistreat, disappoint, or hurt us, he will never leave us or forsake us. We are not orphans navigating our relationships on our own. As we welcome Jesus in, he can provide guidance to navigate our relationships (when to go deeper, when to pull back, when to seek forgiveness or offer it, how to listen well, and when and what to say, etc.), and he can provide comfort and strength when things go poorly. He is

always with us, knowing and loving us to the depths of our being. His faithful love (his *hesed*) is enough to sustain us!

Again, this is why our relationships need to be rooted in our identity in Christ. If I allow what other people say about me or do to me to define who I am, then I will be battered back and forth by other people and their opinions/actions. That is a stormy, unsettled place from which to live.

God, however, is unchanging in his love for us. As we have seen, he has placed the value of our soul extremely high: the blood of Jesus. This is the door upon which Jesus is constantly knocking—reminding us that we are children of God, beloved and not forsaken. When we open our hearts to this truth, we have the lens we need to read our relationships and to respond to others well. Their attacks may still sting, but they do not sink as deep into our hearts because the truth of God is a breastplate to protect us. Their betrayals may hurt our trust, but they need not keep us from trusting the next person because we know that while people may betray us, God never will. We can live with confidence rather than fear.

- As you look at the relational challenges you identified above, ask Jesus to enter into them with you and to remind you of truths that will help you navigate relationships more effectively (with greater kindness, patience, love, and peace). Write down whatever he gives you below:

Although it is important to be honest about our challenges in relationships and not deny the problems we face, it is just as important to celebrate the goodness. In fact, one of the most helpful things we can do in our relationships is to ponder and celebrate all the good attributes we see in others and the good times we have enjoyed with them. This gives us a more generous lens through which to read their words and actions, which generally reduces conflicts and misunderstandings.

God gives us many **tables** to enjoy with other people. Take a moment to reflect upon the tables God has set for you in the past and more recently:

- What do you generally find great joy doing/experiencing with other people? When do you really enjoy other people?
  
- Look back at the relationships you are struggling with right now. Ponder the ways you admire these people, the ways they have blessed you, and the ways your life is better because of them. Write out whatever comes to mind:

Relationships are filled with promise and peril. They can bring about our greatest joys and our greatest sorrows. In the end, the potential for heartache is worth the glories of love and life that come through other people. We were created to know and be known, to love and be loved, to share in the gift of life with others. Growing in the likeness of Christ means growing in his love for people, his joy in people, and his patience with people.

In other words, the gospel invites us to become people of courage. This is true in all areas of life, as we allow the hope and promise of the gospel—that God is working all things together for good even when we cannot see it now—to strengthen us to walk through every disappointment. But this is especially true in our relationships. Through our trust in the gospel, we find the courage to be vulnerable, to share our weaknesses, to invite people to truly know us, to forgive others when they hurt us, and to love deeply and generously, knowing we may be betrayed. The gospel gives us the courage to enter relationships as *gift*, not demanding what we want from others, but joyfully giving and receiving.

The great temptation in life is to treat it as a zero-sum game, where whatever you gain is at my expense, or vice versa. However, the infinite nature of God is such that his resources of love can never be depleted—giving met with more giving, love met with more love expands and multiplies, and soon five loaves feed 5,000. We are meant to live out of love, generously and courageously. As we look to Jesus and allow his Spirit to empower us, we can share in this joy, this abundant life as children of God more and more.

- Have you seen a generous word or deed turn a conflict into deeper connection? When has a demonstration of grace in a relationship turned things in a better direction for you?

We all will face many walls in our relationships with others, but God will use these difficulties to draw us closer to his heart as we welcome Jesus in and discover ever more deeply what it means to belong to him.

The importance of relationships for our well-being as the children of God points to the importance of the Church more generally. It is the family of God, the place where we grow in relationship with our siblings, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Weekly worship—gathering at the Table of our Father—is key, and so is developing meaningful relationships outside of Sunday mornings.

One helpful discipline for developing healthier relationships with other people is to find a few people you can really trust and go deep in the gospel with. These “Gospel Friendships” are most powerful when we stick with each other over time. As we share what is going on in our lives week-to-week, ask each other questions that open up the deeper significance of our reactions to the events of our lives (what lenses are we interpreting things through?), and offer each other a safe space to consider the truth of the gospel together, amazing things take shape. The depth of sharing and connection you have experienced in this RD curriculum can be an ongoing reality that helps you navigate life, and particularly your relationships, with a much better lens—a lens of trust in the gospel and of joy in its fruit, as you recognize and delight in the gifts of God that far outweigh your disappointments.

Although groups like these can happen informally, it often requires intentionality—an invitation to a few to get together regularly. Gospel Friendship Groups usually need to be limited to five (since it is hard to have everyone share if there are more than five, and larger numbers can cause a loss of intimacy), and can begin with just two. 3-4 is typically a good number, however, since it provides space for intimacy, but a variety of perspectives as well.

- Take a moment and brainstorm who you might invite to join you in this kind of relational depth. If you feel stuck thinking of people at church, consider approaching someone on the pastoral team to help you make connections or find out who else is looking to be part of a Gospel Friendship Group.

## Chapter 10

# Growing as God’s Children in His Love—Developing Life-Giving Rhythms

This final chapter is both an ending and a beginning. It provides space to reflect on what God has done through your readings and reflections over the past few months, and invites you to consider what God may want to do in and through you in the months and years ahead, through all you have learned.

In particular, we have provided you with language and ideas to help you navigate your relationship with God, particularly: (1) what it means to be a child of God rather than an orphan/prodigal, (2) the images of walls, doors, tables, and home, (3) helping you recognize what is going on in your soul/identity, in your relationships, and in your labor, (4) the call to welcome Jesus into whatever you are enjoying or struggling with as a basic element of life and growth, and above all, (5) what it means to “be at home in the Father’s love.”

There’s a lot to ponder and pray over, so take your time. Review your thoughts through the weeks. What stands out to you as some of the more profound things God has done in you through this time?

- What difficulties or challenges have been highlighted?
- What truths or gifts have been opened up to you?
- How do you view your life story differently?
- How do you view God and his purposes differently?
- If someone were to ask you what you are taking away from this experience, what 1 or 2 things would you tell them?

With all this in mind, what do you think it means for you to “invite Jesus in” more fully in the coming year or so?

- How does Jesus want to re-define your identity? What **walls**/lies does he want to remove? What **doors**/gospel truths does he desire you to open yourself to more fully? How does he want you to delight (sit at **table**) in who you are in him?
  
- What does he want to adjust in your approach to your labor/work? What **walls** (frustration/confusion/sin) are you facing? What gospel truths/**doors** is he calling you to open? What **tables**/goodness/joy is he inviting you to delight in more fully?

Are there new goals or steps he would have you take towards the call/purpose he has placed upon your life?

- How does he want to reorient your approach to your relationships? What **walls** (difficulties or sins) do you find yourself running into? What **doors**/gospel truths is he placing before you to change your perspectives and read your relationships better? What **tables**/sources of joy and thanksgiving is he setting before you—how can you take notice of the good that is already present in your relationships?
  
- In other words, what will it look like for you to embrace your identity as a child of God, at home in the Father’s love?



Our growth in Christ is God’s work. We do not need to strive or strain to become something we are not. This does not mean we are passive, however. God works in us and through us. We *participate* in his work. One component of our participation in God’s work involves spiritual disciplines—various means of engaging God intentionally and purposefully.

Unfortunately, spiritual disciplines are often abused. They can become another way of trying to prove our spirituality, “get things” from God, or escape from real life into a spiritual sanctuary. Despite the pitfalls, I have found that it has been indispensable to have some idea of how I was going to connect with Jesus intentionally. Spiritual disciplines can provide healthy, life-giving rhythms for engaging with God and the gospel day-by-day. For me, this has taken many forms, from daily reading of scripture and journaling, to listening to worship music, to monthly half-day retreats for solitude. There is no formula. Spiritual disciplines are simply a means for listening to Jesus knocking and letting him in. We read scripture, pray, fast, and enjoy solitude so we can pay attention, hear him, and enjoy him. And the real purpose of such times is to learn to listen to and enjoy Jesus at all other times—to know him well enough that we can pray throughout the day, recall gospel truths at any time, or simply recognized his presence to and love for us. There is no need to prove ourselves. It is all gift. Spiritual disciplines are merely a means of unwrapping and enjoying the gift! So there is a lot of freedom in how we pursue them.

In any close relationship, there is a need for spontaneity and simple enjoyment, and there is need for intentionality in making time to be together, focused on each other. I hope this curriculum has made you more eager to know and be known by the Father and that this will encourage you to be intentional in seeking time to be with him. I hope there will be no condemnation from the past creeping in when you fall short of your plans—just a readiness to jump in and delight in the Father’s love again.

- On the next page is a list of various spiritual disciplines. Which have you practiced? Which have you enjoyed? Which are you interested in trying?

Discipline

Practiced   Enjoyed   Want to try

Fasting (abstaining from food/media for a set time)

Meditation (pondering a truth/scripture deeply)

Gratitude (writing down what we are thankful for)

Solitude (intentional times away from others)

Silence (not speaking for a period of time)

Simplicity (reducing the “stuff” in our lives)

Journaling (recording events/thoughts)

Serving (meeting others’ physical needs)

Giving (sharing our resources with others)

- Having pondered what Jesus wants to do in and through you in the coming months/year, how might some of these disciplines help you stay closely connected/working with him? Which jump out as opportunities to embrace? Write these ideas down in the form of a plan. This is not to bind you, but to provide intentionality. Later, you can change your plans based on how things have gone and perhaps prompts from Jesus to try new things.

**God’s Invitation to New Life**

(What you believe he is wanting to do in and through you to bring you the confidence and joy of being a child at home in his love)

---

**Discipline**                      **Pattern** (How it might fit into your life-rhythms over the coming months)

1.

2.

3.

- Why are you engaging in these specific disciplines? How do you hope to encounter Jesus through them?

As you ponder and discuss these things, may you be filled with joyful anticipation that the God who was, and is, and is to come is even now preparing to make himself

known to you. Oh, the depths and wonders of God's grace revealed in Jesus! Oh, the multitude of reasons we have to live our lives with joy, peace, and overflowing love! Above them all is the towering truth of the gospel:

**We are not orphans making our way through life by our own devices.  
Rather, we are beloved children whose Father is generous and faithful.**

I hope this truth has captivated your heart and mind and continues to shape the way you look at everything in your life for years to come! May the freedom of the gospel—the wonder of being at home in the Father's love—remain with you always.