

Hope 2016

A DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

Hope
House

Real hope in Christ

AN INVITATION TO HOPE

The life-changing, eternity-altering news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that no matter what, there is hope.

Hope is something that forms and transforms us because it tells us that there are possibilities for a different kind of a life, a different world and a different kind of us... there is hope that we can be different, and therefore, that we can make a difference. There is hope in a new tomorrow and an eternity full of true life and freedom from pain and fear.

Whatever today looks like and whatever pain we have endured in the past, the message of Christ is that there is always hope.

Scripture describes hope as an anchor for our souls (Hebrews 6:19): something that grounds us and enables us to weather the storms of life. It anchors us so that we can face the waves of uncertainty and winds of adversity and pain and yet be unmoved and unshaken, not because of what we are able to do, but because we serve a God of mercy and grace for whom nothing is impossible. He is the God who holds all our yesterdays, who is with us in the present and is Master of all tomorrows and He offers us a hope that does not disappoint. The hope He offers us in Jesus Christ is one that declares that despite our unworthiness or our circumstances, Jesus died for us because of love – and nothing can ever change that fundamental truth or the eternal, abundant life that accompanies it.

We truly believe that we can have and live in hope. We can find real hope in and through Jesus and when we live in it and allow it to ignite a spark in us, we will become lights in the darkness of the world and be the agents of hope and transformation God intended for us to be.

For the next few weeks, we challenge you to journey through this devotional journal and to use it in your times with God as you study and think about the truths contained in it. As we seek Christ and try to discover

what it means to be true Christ-followers and an authentic Christian community, we believe that there are five fundamental principles that can help us understand how we find hope in Jesus in practical ways that transform our lives. These are the essentials for every Christ-follower and are the values on which we will strive to build Hope House Church as we seek God together and live in the real, eternal hope of Jesus Christ.

With hope & expectation,
Sam, Deline & Crae
The Hope House Team

*“As for me, I will always have hope;
I will praise you more and more.”
Psalm 71:14*

Week 1

Hope in...

WORSHIPPING AUTHENTICALLY

Don't just pitch

What is worship?

The first thing that often springs to mind when we talk about worship is the singing we do on a Sunday at church. We associate it with a time of seeking God through prayer, singing and other acts, but that is a very limited view of something that is in fact, all-encompassing.

Worship is much more about cultivating an authentic relationship with God than it is about specific actions we perform. Worship is the way we orientate our lives and relate to God. As Tom Inglis put it: "Worship is all that we are, reacting to all God is."

"Worship is all that we are, reacting to all God is." – Tom Inglis

Worship, as a way of life and a heart attitude, is responding to Who God is, every moment of every day. It is bringing everything we are and everything we do to Him – living for Him – and it begins with showing up in relationship with Him. In order to worship God authentically, we need to start by just pitching up, but then we have to go beyond that to engaging. God desires relationship with us, and just like any other relationship this one requires cultivation, fostering and growth. It requires that we invest time and effort into it.

Sometimes we shy away from engaging with God because we feel like we're not worthy to relate to Him... and we aren't! But God has bestowed the righteousness of Christ on us precisely so that we can engage with Him (1 Corinthians 1:30). In fact, Scripture tells us to come *boldly* before the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). We hold back sometimes because we're not sure we can be who God wants us to be, or we know we've missed the mark, but grace beckons us to come, just as we are, and be loved.

God calls us and invites us to come closer, to seek Him more intimately, to know Him more deeply and to share every part of our lives with Him. That is the heart of worship: coming as we are to God because we want more of Him in all we do and with all we are.

For Further Reading / Study

Exodus 34:14

Matthew 15:1-11

1 Corinthians 10:31-33

Philippians 3:1-11

Tuesday

Worshipping like David

David gets a very special mention in Acts 13. Of all the people in the Bible, God singles him out and says: “I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after My own heart; he will do everything I want him to do” (Acts 13 vs 22). David was by no means perfect – he had his fair share of pretty serious mess-ups, disasters and times of disobedience, but I think that God says He found Him a man after His own heart because David was a worshipper to his very core and authentic worship was His way of life. We get a glimpse of David’s heart as we read the Psalms, of which he wrote many, and we see that in every season of his life, he brings his joys, his failures, his fears, his desires and his thanks to God. He didn’t always get things right, but he lived his whole life with his heart open before God – with an attitude of worship and seeking deeper relationship with God, no matter His external circumstances.

He also wasn’t afraid to tell God how He was feeling, but engaged in an authentic lifestyle of worship in which he was willing to be raw and honest before God. In many of David’s Psalms we read about his deep anguish and

struggles. For example, he writes in Psalm 13 vs 1-6: *“How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, ‘I have overcome him,’ and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD’s praise, for he has been good to me.”*

The amazing thing about David is that no matter where he found himself, he was willing to come to God and even though he writes about feeling like God is far away – or about drenching his pillow with tears – he always has a sense in the end, that God is good and that He is still worthy of His praise. He continues to invest in the relationship and to seek God more. Worship was part of who he was, whether he found himself in a cave hiding from Saul, reigning in prosperity, dancing before God like a lunatic without a care in the world, or coming before His maker with deep pain, regret and sorrow. He learned the art of delighting Himself in God and bringing all He was – His fears, failures, struggles, triumphs, regrets, hopes and dreams – to God as He lived with an open heart before Him.

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So how, do we, like David, live a lifestyle of worship? It starts with deciding to invest in our relationship with Him, by showing up in relationship with Him and engaging with Him every day and every moment, and choosing to live with an open heart before Him.

With this in mind, we can start to discover that everything we do can be done for the glory of God and every part of our lives can become an act of worship.

For Further Reading / Study

2 Samuel 6:5-23

Psalm 19

Acts 13:21-23

Psalm 51

Wednesday

Worshipping like Mary

Worship is all about living in relationship with God so that we are positioned for purpose by means of surrender. When we engage authentically with God on a continual basis, we are able to respond with a resounding “Yes!” when He calls our names and asks us to join Him in His redemptive work... no matter what He asks us to do.

I love the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus because it is so powerful, so unexpected and so unlikely. An angel appears to this young woman, who is practically just a girl, and tells her that she is to be the mother of a baby Who will be the Son of God and the long awaited and anticipated Messiah and Saviour of the World. Her first response is much more calm attempt to ascertain the possibility of all of this than

I would have managed as she asks, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” but once the angel clears up the practicalities and logistics, her response is nothing short of mind-blowing:

“I am the Lord’s servant”, Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said” (Luke 1:38).

Worship is all about living in relationship with God so that we are positioned for purpose by means of surrender.

Sometimes we gloss over the emotion or the raw reality of what is happening when we read the Bible because we've heard it all before or because the people don't seem real to us, but when we stop to consider Mary – a real, young girl – getting this news, the ramifications are huge. She knew all about the promised Messiah and what it would mean for the whole nation that He was coming. Imagine the pressure of being the mother of the Son of God! She also wasn't married, and so accepting this assignment from God meant that she would have to lay her reputation and all her relationships on the line and yet, her response is simple and clear: she was ready to completely surrender to the will of God no matter what it cost her. That is the height of authentic worship!

When we seek God with all of our lives and authentically engage with Him in relationship, we are enabled and empowered to trust Him more, to surrender ourselves to His purposes, to hear His voice and listen for His promptings. When we draw closer to Him and come to know Him more intimately, we cultivate our trust in His character and our love for Him, making it easier to align our lives with His purposes.

I challenge you today to look at the life of Mary and her simple response to the invitation of God, at huge personal cost, to do whatever He asked of her. *"I am the Lord's servant... May it be to me as you have said."*

May we all learn to live lives of worship like that, responding to all God is with all we are.

For Further Reading / Study

Luke 1:26-56

John 14:15-21

Luke 9:23-27

1 John 2:1-17

Worshipping like Paul & Silas

The account of Paul and Silas worshipping in their prison cell (Acts 16:23-25) is one that is often quoted when talking about worship and how we, like they, should worship no matter what our circumstances may be. If we're going to be really honest however, I think there's a part of us (or of me anyway!) that reads this passage and thinks, "Really? Is this really realistic?" Singing songs of praise to God when you've been imprisoned for trying to do His work sounds just slightly super-spiritual to me. And yet, that is exactly what Paul and Silas did. I'm pretty sure that as they sat there in the dark, bruised and battered from their beating with their fate rather uncertain, none of us would have blamed them if they responded with anger or disappointment in God who could have prevented their difficult situation. As we've seen with David and many Psalms he wrote, God would also not have been afraid of or offended by them pouring out their honest emotions of fear, distress or anger to Him. However, Paul and Silas responded with praise and with declaring the goodness and faithfulness of God.

I believe that they were perhaps able to do this because worship was not something they did – it was who they were. It wasn't an act they performed, but rather it was a mind set with which they lived their lives. They understood that despite our external circumstances, God is always worthy of praise and worship, and they knew that the only way to get through their difficulties was to fix their minds on Who God was, and His power, rather than focusing on their problems.

Worship is ultimately ascribing worth to something – setting our hearts and minds on something and giving it value in our lives. When we focus on our problems and turn them over and over in our minds, giving all our energy and focus to them, in some ways, we end up worshipping our problems. Like

Paul and Silas, we need to learn the art of rather focusing on God and setting our hearts on Him.

When we think about Paul's life, we see that he suffered more than most but yet, when he once again finds himself in a different jail cell, he writes this in Philippians 4 vs 4: "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice!" I don't think this is a call to superficial happiness or glossing over hurt or difficulty and plastering on a fake smile. This is a call to rejoice in the knowledge that though the mountains crumble into the sea, our God is

there, unchanged and eternal.

Paul had learned to orientate Himself around who God is rather than his circumstances, rooting himself in the promises of God and holding onto the truth that God's victory is a reality – maybe not today or tomorrow – but eternally, and therefore, there is always hope and God is always worthy of worship.

"Praise is a declaration, a victory cry, proclaiming faith to stand firm in the place God has given you. Praise is a proclamation that the enemy's intent to plunder you will not rock you. Praise declares that you will not be moved by the enemy's attempt to snatch you away." - Darlene Zschech

For Further Reading / Study

Acts 16:16-40

Romans 5:1-7

Philippians 4:1-14

Job 1:20-22

Worshipping like Hagar

The story of Hagar (Genesis 16) is one of such deep pain, rejection and desperation, and in the midst of all of that, it is one of redemption and grace. Hagar was Sarai's maidservant, and when Sarai got tired of waiting on God's promise of a son, she gave her servant to her husband Abram so that he could produce an heir. Hagar had no choices or options in this whole twisted scenario and then, things get even worse – she does conceive a child and then, her mistress begins to loath her and treat her badly. Eventually, Sarai can't handle the jealousy and anguish brought about by a situation she created herself and treats Hagar so badly that Hagar runs away... and here, an encounter with grace interrupts the story. Hagar encounters the angel of the Lord who comes and speaks to her about her situation and offers her hope. He tells her to go back to her difficult circumstances and doesn't magically fix everything, but he assures her that there is a destiny and a plan for her life and the life of her child and that above all, she is seen and noticed by the Almighty God of all.

Hagar is so surprised and moved by this encounter that she names the place where she encountered the angel, "El Roi" which means, "The God who sees me" (Genesis 16:13). Hagar was used and abused by others – overlooked by the world with no station in life, no options and no potential. She was virtually invisible to others, but God saw her. He knew her deepest needs and the anguish of her soul – just as He knows yours.

What is beautiful about this encounter of worship is that it was not Hagar who sought God out. She had run away and was wondering aimlessly into the desert and into a terrifyingly harsh world, but God sought her out. Our God is so gracious that He comes looking for us and goes to extreme lengths to pursue authentic engagement and relationship with us. He finds us in our places of deepest pain and despair and offers us hope because He is the God Who sees us.

God knew Hagar's deepest needs and the anguish of her soul – just as He knows yours. He is *El Roi*: The God Who Sees.

Hagar’s worship consisted of simply responding to the invitation of God and acknowledging Him, and sometimes, we need to do the same. Our most authentic worship can consist of simply responding to what God is doing and the ways in which He has sought us out.

For Further Reading / Study

Genesis 16

Psalm 139

Matthew 6:5-7

Matthew 10:26-31

Saturday

Worshipping like Jesus

Perhaps the most striking image of what real worship is, is the picture painted for us of Jesus struggling through His anguish and fear in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-50). It doesn’t get much more real, raw or authentic than this excruciating encounter. Jesus knew what was going to happen and how things must play out for Him, but His human nature was struggling with the reality of the sacrifice it would take. He was desperately afraid and there was part of Him that didn’t think He had it in Him to do what God had asked.

Often, when we find ourselves in places like this – places of confusion, uncertainty and fear – our response is to avoid engaging with God, but Jesus chooses worship. He comes to God with all His fear and anxiety and He cries out to Him. He brings Him all the struggles of His frail humanity and pleads with God to make another plan, to do things a different way – but in the end He says those words that ring out through the ages and define for us the heart of true worship: “Yet, not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39).

True worship always leads us to a place of absolute surrender to God because when we authentically engage with Him, set our hearts on Him and

discover Who He really is through relationship with Him, we cannot but come to the realisation that His way, however painful or difficult or nonsensical it may seem to us right now, is the best way and the only way that leads to true life. When I really engage with a God who gave everything for me, I can only give all of myself to Him.

The very essence of worship is bringing all we are to God, including all our doubts, frailties, fears, questions and pain, and surrendering it all to Him, and then surrendering our lives in obedience to what He has asked us to do. Obedience is the outward expression of true worship, and true worship flows from a heart that has chosen, despite emotions or circumstances, to surrender to God.

Obedience is the outward expression of worship.

For Further Reading / Study

Matthew 26:36-50

Mark 14:32-42

1 Samuel 15:22

Questions for personal reflection or group discussion

1. How would you define worship?
2. What do you think *authentic* worship involves?
3. What are the things you think sometimes keep us from engaging with God authentically? How can we overcome these things?
4. What is the one thing that stood out for you most about the different people discussed and how they worshipped?
5. What is one way in which you can practically put into practice the discipline of worshipping authentically?

Week 2

Hope in...

LOVING SINCERELY

Hope in love

1 John 4:8 makes the incredible statement that: “God is love.” It is a mind-boggling declaration because it sums up the eternal, infinite, omniscient and omnipotent God in one word. It is a big word – a defining word – and yet, one that is easily misunderstood and misused in our world: love. God is LOVE.

“Never was a more important declaration made than this; never was more meaning crowded into a few words than this short sentence: ‘God is love’”. – Albert Barnes

The story of Scripture, at its core, is a love story that tells the epic tale of how a God, Who is love at the very core of His being, seeks a love-relationship with those He created. The narrative of the Bible is one that reveals how He goes about doing that: pursuing humankind, despite their continual rejection or dismissal of Him. The coming of Jesus Christ is the

centre-point of the story as He, once and for all, sacrificially gives Himself to us in order to close the divide between God and people.

Many people, in their attempt to seek God, get stuck in religion or fail to understand this central concept that God is love. Sometimes, when we look at the world around us and the things that happen, it is hard to understand how a loving and gracious God is in control, but at those times, we have to look at the cross that stands for all of eternity as a definitive statement of God’s unfailing love in the midst of the world’s brokenness.

The foundation for love – the love that the world so desperately needs and strives and looks for – often in all the wrong places – is God’s unchangeable, all-encompassing, wildly undeserved and sacrificial love for us. We don’t deserve it, and we cannot earn it. It is simply bestowed on us because it is Who God is. And what’s more, God doesn’t love us with just a cold, distant, condescending kind of love – He delights in us. He is so glad He made you.

The prophet Zephaniah (3:17) tells us that He rejoices over us with singing. He wants what is best for you. You are the apple of His eye. You are deeply, eternally loved by the infinite God of all that was, is and will be.

For Further Reading / Study

1 John 4:1-21

Psalm 86

Psalm 103

Ephesians 2:1-10

Tuesday

The foundation for love

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him.”

– John 3:16-17

If we’re honest, we have to concede that sometimes when we look at the world and the state of things, or the things that happen in our lives, it is hard to believe that God is, at the core, a God of love. That is why John 3:16 is such an important and defining Scripture. It reminds us that no matter what circumstances we are facing, or how things may look, or how we may be struggling to see any good in the world or others, we have to see everything through the filter of the cross of Jesus Christ. That is why the cross has become the defining symbol of our faith. It is the central point on which everything else hinges, and despite the terrible atrocity to which it points, it is ultimately a symbol of unending, everlasting, relentless love.

We have to see everything through the filter of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes, when we struggle to understand why things happen, or why God has allowed us to experience pain – sometimes more pain than we think we can bare – we have to see our reality through the lens of the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ displayed on the cross. Whatever else is true, this is the ultimate truth: that there are no lengths to which God would and did not go for you. There is no pain He was unwilling to endure. There is no price He wouldn't pay. All because of love. The foundation for love – for all love – is that Christ first loved us and that God gave Him to us so that we could be in relationship with Him.

Below is an excerpt from *From the Father's Heart*, a book by Charles Slagle in which he writes letters from God to his reader. This letter, entitled, "Remember", reminds us that no matter what, we need to remember to cross and the eternal love it displays:

"Worried Child,

I AM just, pure and holy. My love is limitless and seeks not its own. When those dark thoughts cloud your mind, causing you to question my love, I ask that you do one thing: remember the cross.

See it now. See the One crucified. See the humiliation, the horror of Innocence disrobed, mutilated and bleeding. Pain racks His every atom. Each gasp of air is agony untold. His every nerve is a conduit of fire. Can you hear Him cry? No one else can either, but I can. I hear it forever – how could I forget it? It's almost the cry of a boy – a stifled, intermittent cry it is...

Please, don't turn away. Not yet, please. Do you see the thorns piercing His brow? The disfigurement of His face? The spikes splitting His hands and feet? The jeering crowds at the foot of the cross? They didn't kill him. They would have if they could have – but they could not. He gave His life. He shielded His enemies who were worthy of death by dying Himself in their stead. He suffered murder to save His murderers. He suffered shame to save His

mockers. And He would do it again. And so would I. Is this not the destiny of Perfect Love in a fallen world? This is the way love is, and this is the way I AM. Never forget it.

*Entreatingly,
Father.”*

For Further Reading / Study

John 3:1-21

Romans 8:31-39

Colossians 1:20-29

Wednesday

The response to love

How do we respond to the eternal, sacrificial love of God that goes to any lengths to redeem us? The response God requires is summed up in the Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and all your mind, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

Jesus boiled down all the intimidating truth and laws of Jewish teaching to one thing: love God with everything in you and then, love others as you love yourself.

In order to understand the significance of this response, we need to understand that the people to whom Jesus originally gave this command were people whose lives revolved around keeping commandments set out for them in the law. The response God required of them was determined by 613 commandments known as “mitzvot” that the Jews had to

keep in order to be righteous and attempt to be in right standing with God. So, when Jesus is asked what the most significant thing is and what must be done in order to receive eternal life, it is a big and loaded question. How do you boil down all the, fairly intimidating truth and laws to one most important thing? And yet, Jesus does: Love God, with everything in you (which goes back to worshipping authentically and showing up in relationship with Him honestly and genuinely) and then, love your neighbour as yourself. The response to God's love for us is that He wants to be loved in return, not out of a sense of duty or fear, but He wants to be loved sincerely out of relationship. God's primary request of us is: "Develop and cultivate a love-relationship with Me." And then, when we love Him and learn to love Him more and more, He wants our lives to be marked with love for ourselves and for others.

For Further Reading / Study

Matthew 22:24-36

Romans 3:19-31

James 2:8-26

Thursday

An uncomfortable command

The commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves is not an easy one. In fact, it is such an uncomfortable command that the person to whom Jesus was originally speaking tried to find a loophole. His response when Jesus gave the command was to ask, "Who is my neighbour?" He was probably looking for a nice, neat answer like, "Other people who also obey my law and love me" or "Other good Jewish, law-abiding people". The Jews had lots of rules and regulations about the kinds of people with whom they could and could not associate and about the clean and unclean, so I doubt the

man was expecting Jesus' response in the form of the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritans were hated by the Jews and regarded as half-breeds who had sold out and failed to remain pure and holy and yet, in Jesus' story, it is a Samaritan, and not the religious people, who get it right in terms of loving their neighbours. Jesus was making the hugely uncomfortable point that loving sincerely, means loving like God loves, and loving not just those who are easy to love, but especially those who are not.

Our response to the love of God has to be that, as Christ followers, we get better and better at loving like Jesus loves... and we know that His love was and is, undeserved and unconditional. He didn't just die for the "good people" or the Jews. He died for His enemies. He loved and sought out especially those who didn't deserve it. The Gospels are filled with accounts of how Jesus sought out the misfits and went to the extreme in terms of showing love to the most unlikely people. He sought out and befriended the outcasts and the sinners, the lowly and the sinful, the disregarded and the scandalous.

Our response to the love of God has to be that we get better and better at loving like Jesus loves.

Jesus could have healed people from a distance with a single word, but most often, He choose to touch them – even the lepers who were contagious and considered unclean and defiled and whose shadow falling on you could make you ceremonially unclean. He didn't have to touch them, but He choose to because in doing so, He revealed their value and their dignity and He revealed that there are no lengths to which His grace and love is not willing to go.

Hans Küng captures how the religious people of the day felt about Jesus' ministry and life when he writes: *"The absolutely unpardonable thing was not his concern for the sick, the cripples, the lepers, the possessed; not the way he put up with women and children around him, nor even his partisanship for the poor, humble people. The real trouble was that he got involved with the moral failures, with obviously irreligious and immoral*

people: people morally and politically suspect, so many dubious, obscure, abandoned, hopeless types existing as in ineradicable evil on the fringe of every society. This was the real scandal. Did he really have to go so far?"

Jesus went to incredible lengths to extend love to the unworthy and loving our neighbours – really, sincerely loving them – means that He asks us to do the same.

For Further Reading / Study

Luke 10:25-37

Matthew 5:43-48

Romans 13:8-14

1 John 3:16-24

Friday

The necessity of love

A Scripture we hear very often when it comes to love is 1 Corinthians 13 which is known as the “love chapter.” It’s a favourite at weddings, but the context in which it appears actually has to do with the use of spiritual gifts in the church and being a community of Christ. The passage speaks clearly about the necessity of love and about how, regardless of everything we can achieve or accomplish, love is the most necessary and important thing of all. We have the foundation of love in Christ’s death for us, we have the response in our loving God and others, and this passage puts forward the necessity for love, without which all is lost.

It is not enough just to do the right things – even things that appear very Christian or spiritual. If we don’t do them with the right motivation of real, sacrificial love, they are all pointless. Whatever the deepest dreams and aspirations of your heart are, even if you manage to reach them and see

them realised, but you don't do it with love, you still have nothing. If we say all the right things without love, our words are just noise. If we do all the right things and know all the right stuff, but don't have love, we have nothing. Even if we serve others, give generously and live sacrificially, displaying great and miraculous faith and breath-taking selflessness, but don't have love, it is all meaningless.

Without love, nothing has any real significance, but with love, all things are possible. There is hope in loving sincerely, because when we do, God's transforming love can work miracles. Love changes us and it can change the world through Jesus. As Paul puts it, "These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

**Without love,
nothing has any
real significance,
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For Further Reading / Study

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

John 13:33-35

Galatians 5:13-22

Saturday

"Like" versus "love"

There is a tendency in our world, where it's easy to be superficial and non-committal in many ways, to be inclined towards shallow love. We confuse like with love. People seem to fall in and out of love all the time, and we use the same word to describe how we feel about ice cream or a new TV series as we do to refer to our feelings about our spouse, children, friends or God.

The word “love” doesn’t seem to convey the true meaning of what it’s all about.

The truth is that love, real love, is something that costs us, just like it cost God. Real love, is sacrificial, and that’s why I believe it is pretty rare. Our natural state is not one of self-sacrifice and the world promotes a brand of love that is good for me as long as it gets me what I want, but in fact, that is not love at all. Love, by its very nature, is sacrificial. It is putting others first. It is giving up something for someone else. In its purest sense, it is giving up self and laying down our lives for the benefit of others.

Real love, by its very nature, is sacrificial.

We know that we are all capable of this kind of love in some ways when it comes to our nearest and dearest. Most of us can be very sacrificial - and quite easily actually - when it comes to our families and closest friends. The challenge then, is: how do I translate this kind of sacrificial love to others; those who are not closest to me, those who are not like me and those I don’t particularly like?

As Christ-followers, we have to keep striving to love better – more fully, more broadly, more sincerely and more like Jesus... to shy away from superficial affection and to really love, like Jesus did and does.

For Further Reading / Study

John 15:9-21

John 10:9-18

Romans 5:6-8

Questions for personal reflection or group discussion

1. What does the statement “God is love” (1 John 4:8) mean to you and for your life? Does this translate into your current perception of Who God is? Why or why not?
2. How do you think we can practically interpret the world through the filter of the cross of Christ?
3. How do you think you are doing in terms of loving God with:
 - a. All your heart?
 - b. All your soul?
 - c. All your mind?
 - d. All your strength?
4. 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us that without love, anything we can do is meaningless. How do you think you can ensure you do all that you do with love?
5. In what one way can you be more loving? What aspect of love do you need to cultivate?

Week 3

Hope in...

CONNECTING PURPOSEFULLY

Not just Facebook Friends

Our world is more connected than ever with our ability to be in touch and in communication with others all the time. We have every conceivable means of connection at our disposal, from cell phones to Facetime, Skype, social media, email and much more. And yet, amidst our hyper-connectedness, people are more and more isolated and lonely. Sometimes our virtual connections and engagement keep us from forming genuine relationships and connections. God calls those who follow Him, however, to be connected, purposefully and meaningfully. He invites us to find authentic connection with Him and then, to be purposefully connected to those around us.

Especially when it comes to matters of faith and spiritual growth, we were not meant to be alone. There is something significant that happens in community because together, we can accomplish what isn't even conceivable for us on our own. Together, we can find strength, purpose and support. Together, we discern God's will. Together and interdependently, we were created to function as the Body of Christ, each with a unique function that brings purpose and life to a community that does God's work.

Any real connection requires vulnerability and faith.

In order to join with others as the Body of Christ and effectively bring His Kingdom to earth in practical ways, we have to be willing to connect purposefully with others. Any real connection – one that goes beyond just the superficial realm of a “Facebook friend” – requires vulnerability and faith. It requires that we put ourselves “out there” and risk being hurt as we share our lives with others – and not just the good things and achievements, but our deepest struggles and insecurities as well. It requires that we are brave enough to speak the truth in love and it have hard truths spoken to us too. It requires that we are willing to “sharpen”

each other (Proverbs 27:17), smoothing off the rough edges of each other's characters, sometimes in ways that hurt as we go through the refining processes of growth and development.

God designed us to be interdependent and to need one another. He didn't create us to journey alone. Being part of an authentic community and engaging with people in real and meaningful ways is never easy, but it is always worth it. There is hope in connecting purposefully because together, more is possible than we could ever be or do on our own.

For Further Reading / Study

John 15:9-21

John 10:9-18

Romans 5:6-8

1 Corinthians 12:1-31

Tuesday

Stronger together

The author of Ecclesiastes writes some profound truths about connection and togetherness. He notes that isolation and separation lead to meaninglessness, but together, there is purpose and strength. In Ecclesiastes 4 he gives several reasons why we need each others:

Firstly, he notes that we can work more effectively together (Ecclesiastes 4:9). There is synergy that happens when we partner with each other and collective effort is greater than the sum of its individual parts. My effort and your effort don't just add up to twice as much

Isolation and separation lead to meaninglessness, but together, there is purpose and strength.

productivity and potential, but often, exponentially more. This is especially true of accomplishing God's work as He empowers us corporately and we are enabled to use the spiritual and natural gifts He's given us to bring our individual contributions to a far bigger and exponential eternal vision.

The second reason we need each other is because, "if one falls down, the other can help him up" (Ecclesiastes 4:10). We all need support because the truth is, we all fall down from time to time. Sometimes circumstances rip the carpet out from under us and we end up flat on our faces, unsure about how to get up, and at other times, we allow ourselves to get tangled up in sin and trip over our own pride and issues, but either way, we all end up with our faces in the dirt now and then, and then we need others to help us up again. If we have a helping hand when we are stumbling, we can perhaps prevent falling over completely and if we are flattened by life, when there are others around us who love and care for us, they can help us up, dust us off and encourage us to keep going. The journey of life is far too difficult and treacherous to face alone.

A third reason we need each other is because we can keep each other warm (Ecclesiastes 4:11). Our connection with others protects us from exposure to the elements of the world. We can learn from others' mistakes, we can warn one another of impending danger and we can get perspective on our situations. From a spiritual perspective, our connection with others also helps us to "fan the flame" of our love for God and our devotion and to keep the fire burning, so that even when things aren't going well and we're stuck in a place of struggle and doubt, we can lean on the faith and passion of others for a season.

We are also safer together (Ecclesiastes 4:12). In any physical battle, two are always better off than one, and the same is true of the spiritual battles we fight. We shouldn't try to face the enemy of our souls alone. Community

allows us to know that in prayer and in practical ways, there are people who have our backs and that we don't fight the fight of faith alone.

Finally, we are stronger together. A rope of three cords can't easily be broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12). When we are willing to allow our stories to be intertwined and our lives to be interwoven with others, we form a cord of many fibres that is strong and can resist incredible tension and pressure. We are hard to break when we're together.

For Further Reading / Study

Ecclesiastes 4:1-12

Proverbs 24:6

Ephesians 4:1-13

Wednesday

Connecting by being present

The first step in connecting is being present. In the world in which we live it is often easy to be physically present but to be anything but engaged and emotionally, mentally or spiritual present. We have a nasty habit of being absent, from even our most significant encounters and relationships because we're so preoccupied or so busy trying to capture the moment that we're not really in it! No real connection can happen unless we first determine to be present and to give our attention, time and focus to our relationships.

Psalm 46:10 invites us to do something that is so simple and yet, so profound, and it's a really important place to start in order to practice being present: "Be still and know that I am God." If we are going to be able to really stay connected in the

**"Be still and know
that I am God..." –
Psalm 46:10**

hustle, bustle and business of our everyday lives, we have to make sure that we are making time to be still, to reflect, to feel how we really feel, to bring our anxieties and worries, as well as our thanks and praise to God, to focus our attention and priorities on the right things and to be reminded that who we are is not wrapped up in what we do, but in who we are at the core of our beings.

True connection with others first requires that we are able to be still and connect with God and ourselves. Are you making the time for this? Are you being intentional about eking out times of stillness and reflection?

For Further Reading / Study

Psalm 46

Psalm 91

Isaiah 32:15-20

Matthew 6:6-34

Thursday

Connecting on purpose

I love the story in Scripture (Mark 2:1-12) of the man on the mat whose friends bring him to Jesus to be healed. We don't have any background. All we know is that this man was paralysed and probably had a pretty sad existence, sitting on a mat day after day, most likely begging or watching the world go by. This man didn't have a lot going for him, *but* he had faithful and faith-filled friends... and that made all the difference. There were four people that cared enough about him to get him to Jesus, no matter what it took. They carried him, we don't know how far, and when they got to the house where Jesus was teaching, they were not deterred by the small logistical details of lack of access or

He had faithful & faith-filled friends, and that made all the difference.

solid structures that stood in their way. They had obviously determined that nothing was going to keep them from getting their friend to Jesus so that he could be healed. Not seeing any other alternative, they climbed up on the roof and dug a hole in it, lowering their, probably slightly sheepish friend down through the ceiling. I always wonder what the owner of the house thought about the hole in his roof, but the point of the story is that the man did meet Jesus and found what he was looking for. He was carried into that place, but he walked out of it.

Community is a powerful thing because it helps us connect with Jesus. Sometimes we are like the man on the mat and we desperately need others who are willing to carry us and help us, at any cost, find our way to Jesus. At other times, we need to be like the friends who are willing to carry others and help them find grace, healing and newness in an encounter with Christ. There is give and take – times when we are those who can offer help and times when we need to be willing to receive it – but there is always potential for healing and change in a community of care.

It is interesting to note that the Gospel of Mark tells us about Jesus' state of mind when this miracle occurs and says: "Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the man, 'Take heart, you have forgiveness for your sins'" (Mark 9:2). Jesus was moved, not by the faith of the man seeking healing, but by the faith of his friends. They are the ones who made the miracle possible, not only by their physical actions in terms of bringing their friend to Jesus, but also by their faith in Him. Perhaps our corporate faith can accomplish impossibilities we never imagined? Maybe our combined faith can bring healing to those who are incapable of seeking it for themselves? When we choose to connect, on purpose, and for a purpose, I truly believe that miracles happen.

For Further Reading / Study

Mark 2:1-12

Romans 15:1-14

Galatians 6:1-10

Inward, upward and outward

If we consider the example of Jesus, it is interesting to note how He went about connecting with others. Throughout Jesus' ministry, He did a few things in terms of His engagement with people:

1. He surrounded Himself with a small group of intimate companions. There were three disciples (Peter, James and John) with whom Jesus seemed to share a closer bond than the others. He shared some of His most personal and spiritually profound experiences with them (like the transfiguration – Mark 9:2-13). We too, should ensure that there are a few people with whom we deeply share our faith experiences and our lives – people who can speak truth to us, encourage us, admonish us and keep us accountable.
2. Jesus surrounded Himself with 12 disciples who did life with Him. We need a small group of people with whom we can share things, with whom we can learn and discover and with whom we can seek to serve God. We should also ensure that there is always someone we're learning from and someone we are mentoring and teaching.
3. Jesus continually withdrew from the crowds to connect with God (see Matthew 14:23). There was incredible pressure on Jesus and everyone wanted something from Him. Crowds of people came to Him, needing Him to meet their needs, but He understood that He could not connect effectively with others if He had not first taken the time to connect with God. We too, need to make sure that we make the time (because it won't happen by accident) to connect with God so that we are able to connect with others in more meaningful and redemptive ways.

He could not connect effectively with others if He had not first taken the time to connect with God.

Often the demands on us seem overwhelming and our default is to rush headlong into our massive to-do lists instead of first taking time to seek God and getting our priorities right. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, is quoted as saying that the more he had to get done, the more time he would devote to prayer in the day, because he understood that effectiveness does not come from our own efforts and ability, but from the power of God.

We all need connections: inward, with ourselves and to our own emotions and hearts, upward, towards God, and then outwards with both the intimate relationships we foster and the broad relational networks we build. Which are the ones you need to intentionally foster? What purposeful connecting do you need to do?

For Further Reading / Study

John 6:15-17

Matthew 6:5-6

Mark 1:33-39

Saturday

Unlikely connections

If we are to imitate Jesus in terms of the way He connected with those around Him, we have to seek out unlikely connections. The Gospels are full of stories of how Jesus purposefully connected with all the “wrong” kinds of people. He was accused of being a friend of sinners who caused great scandal and was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard – and even worse than that – a friend of tax collectors and other outcasts! (Luke 7:34). The religious people of the day couldn’t stand it. He associated – not accidentally, but purposefully – with the most questionable characters He

could find because Jesus' mission was to reveal the class-crushing, boundary-breaking, anti-marginalising revolution called GRACE. He invited Himself to dinner at the house of a crooked tax collector up a tree called Zacchaeus. He called uneducated and uncouth fisherman to be His followers. He had a meaningful conversation with a Samaritan woman. He touched lepers. It seems wherever He went, He sought to connect with unlikely people in the eyes of the world.

At the start of Jesus' ministry He said that He had come to bind up the broken hearted, set the captives free and bring good news to the poor. A deeper study of meaning of this passage (Luke 4:18-20) and of the Gospel of Luke, in particular, reveals that "the poor" to whom Jesus were referring and for Whom He brought good news were not simply the economically disadvantaged, but rather those who were excluded from community for any reason – those who have a low ascribed status and find themselves, usually for reasons beyond their control, living as outcasts.

Jesus presented a radical new way of thinking about community. He had a vision for a new kind of society in which people would be known by their love for one another (John 13:34-35) and in which the cultural and social barriers that separated people would be broken down and ruthlessly eradicated. He continually

He continually sought out those on the periphery of society... and extended them grace and the invitation to inclusion.

sought out those on the periphery of society... the marginalised, the outcast, the hated, the forgotten, the bullied, the unvalued, the voiceless and the unloved... and He extended them grace and the invitation to inclusion. And He asks us to do the same. He asks us to connect, not only with those in our immediate sphere and social circles, but also with those who are on the

“outside”. He calls us to make unlikely connections that are evidence and channels of His grace and love.

For Further Reading / Study

Luke 5:12-25

Luke 19:1-10

Luke 7:37-50

James 2:1-9

Questions for personal reflection or group discussion

1. How would you describe your connectedness at present? What connections do you need to foster and cultivate?
2. Why do you think God designed us to be interdependent and to work together as the Body of Christ? Do you feel like you’ve found your place in the Body of Christ and are operating effectively in it?
3. Which image from Ecclesiastes 4:1-12 stands out for you most about our needing each other? Why?
4. Why do you think purposeful connection with others is only possible when we first connect purposefully and authentically with God? How are you doing in terms of drawing aside and spending time connecting with God?
5. God asks us to make unlikely and uncomfortable connections. Who are the “outsiders” in your world with whom you think God might want you to connect?

Week 4

Hope in...

GROWING PURPOSEFULLY

Realistic Resolutions – Hope in growing up

We have to grow up. In the natural world, people grow and mature – and if they don't, we know something is very wrong. It is no different in the spiritual world. We should all be moving toward greater spiritual maturity and growing up in our faith, but all too often, many people who have accepted Jesus and profess to follow Him, get stuck in spiritual infancy and never do the – sometimes painful and effortful – work of ensuring that they grow to their full potential and to real maturity in Christ.

Ephesians 4 (11-16) makes it clear that we all need to grow up to “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (vs 13). There is an expectation that every Christian is slowly but surely becoming more and more like Jesus. Prolonged spiritual infancy is dangerous, because as Paul warns in this passage, when we have not matured, we are in danger of being tossed to and fro by different ideas, doctrines and teachings. Our faith is unstable when it isn't grounded by solid understanding and tested truths.

There is an expectation that every Christian is slowly but surely becoming more like Jesus.

The world is full of schemers and lies and those who have failed to grow up in their faith can easily be taken in and led astray. But that is not God's intention for us. His intention is that we all, together, in love, unity and truth will grow and be built up in love as we work together.

There is an incredible promise in Philippians 1:6 that God will complete the good work He has begun in us. It is His desire and intention that we should grow to our full potential and become all He has destined us to be. He is working towards that glorious goal, shaping and forming us by the power of the Spirit, but we have to do our part and make sure that we are putting things in place in our lives in order to grow intentionally. It is something

we have to choose and resolve to do, but often, our efforts are thwarted because we don't make realistic resolutions about spiritual growth. We all know we need to grow, but sometimes don't have clear ideas about how to attain this growth, or aren't realistic about the disciplines we put into place in our lives. Another problem is simply not being disciplined or practical enough about making disciplines required for growth a priority in our schedules.

If we are to grow and become who God has really destined us to be, if we are to be more like Jesus and discover new depths of love for and relationship with Christ, we will have to make realistic resolutions about our spiritual growth and then ensure that we stick to them. Have you ever noticed that the word "disciple" has the same root as the word "discipline"? There's a reason for that! Growth doesn't happen by accident, but when we choose to pursue it intentionally and do our part, God does His miraculous part and we have incredible hope and abundant life in the truth that God is forming us, transforming us and taking us to new heights with Him.

For Further Reading / Study

Ephesians 4:11-16

Philippians 1:2-7

Hebrews 5:1-14

2 Peter 3:13-18

The right soil for growth

When it comes to growth there are several things we need to practically do to ensure that we are developing and cultivating our faith and spiritual lives. One of the foundational things we can and must do is to cultivate the right heart conditions for growth. In Mark 4, Jesus tells the parable of the sower and says that just like soil, our hearts have the capacity to receive God's

One of the foundational things we can and must do is to cultivate the right heart conditions for growth.

Word and produce an abundant harvest of fruitfulness. However, just like soil can be compromised in terms of their fertility, so can our hearts.

Jesus said that some people's hearts are hard and unreceptive to the Word of God so that nothing can take root in them.

There are many things that can harden our hearts, but primarily, they are hardened by pride and by pain. Pride hardens us because when we think we have it all together, we aren't all that open to input and correction. Growth requires introspection and acknowledging areas in which we need growth. Sometimes these admissions are painful and unpleasant – and so, if we decide to be prideful, instead of open to correction and development – we will not grow. Sometimes, our hearts are hardened by pain we have experienced and as a coping mechanism, we harden ourselves and become closed off. We need to ensure that we allow God to bring His healing and truth to us and to soften and restore the places in our hearts that have become calloused because of fear or hurt. He is the great Healer and, in slow seasons of loving and grace, He can heal even our deepest hurts.

Jesus said that other people's hearts (or parts of our hearts) are like stony ground, where little plants start to grow, but cannot shoot any roots down because of the stones and eventually, when the sun burns too hot, they wither and die because they can't get enough water. This refers to hearts have inauthentic faith and can't stand the test of trials. When struggles

come along, people whose hearts don't have truths settled deeply in them and whose faith is based on just emotion, cannot provide the right conditions for growth. Authentic faith is developed through obedience – through doing what God requires even you don't feel like it. It is developed through the discipline of perseverance and not relying on your emotions, but learning to set your heart and mind on the truth of God, no matter your external circumstances may be.

The third kind of soil Jesus spoke about in His parable was soil that was full of weeds. The Word of God took root and grew well in it, but the young plants were strangled by the weeds. The weeds, Jesus said, are worldly things: worries and cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches and skewed priorities. If we are going to grow, we have to ruthlessly root out the things in our lives that are not of God. We have to make sure that He is our first priority and that nothing else has the primary position in our hearts.

Finally, Jesus said that some soil is good and when the Word of God is planted in it, it produces an abundant and exponential harvest. This soil represents people who are ready and waiting, listening for the Word of God, who have already determined that they have orientated their lives towards it and then, when it comes, act on it and obey.

If we are going to grow and be fruitful in and for Christ, we must ensure that we are cultivating the right soil conditions in our hearts. God plants the seeds of His Word, but we have to be ready and willing to receive them.

For Further Reading / Study

Mark 4:1-20

1 Thessalonians 4:1-18

Rooted & grounded

One of my favourite Scriptures is Ephesians 3:17-19. Just hear the promise, grace and hope in this short passage:

“And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. – Ephesians 3:17-19

God desires that we would be rooted and grounded, firmly established, in His love so that, individually and collectively, we can know the unknowable depths of God’s love for us and live abundantly, with true fullness and fulfilment.

When I read this I always picture roots that have grown deep and strong so that they become pretty much unshakable and immovable. A little plant with little roots is a bit vulnerable because it can easily be plucked out and destroyed or fail to reach the water and nourishment from the soil, but an old, tall tree with a massive root system that goes metres and metres down is steadfast and secure. That’s what God wants for us. He wants us to ensure that our hearts are continually receptive to His Word so that we can be rooted and grounded firmly in the knowledge and experience of His love.

So what makes us send down roots? What roots and grounds us? We are rooted by our spiritual disciplines: by reading and delving into the Word, by spending time with God, by praying – in old and new ways, out loud and quietly, in dedicated times and all the time – by studying the Word alone and with others, by

We are rooted by our spiritual disciplines.

fasting, giving, engaging in community and serving. We get rooted when we share our stories and our struggles with others and wrestle with the things we don't understand. We root ourselves when we step out in faith and follow where God leads, outside of our comfort zones.

Sending down deep, strong roots takes time and effort, but when we are rooted in God's love, we become unshakable and we can experience and live in the eternal dimensions and depths of His unfailing love.

For Further Reading / Study

Ephesians 3:14-21

1 Timothy 4:7-16

Thursday

Abiding

When it comes to growth, there is a part we need to play – actively and intentionally – in terms of making time, ordering our priorities and practicing our spiritual disciplines, but there is also a part God does by and because of His grace. John 15 paints a beautiful picture for us of how, if we simply do the work of remaining connected to Jesus, He will do the work of producing fruit in our lives. Jesus said to His disciples: *"I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5).

Apart from Him we can do NOTHING.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say that apart from Him we won't be able to accomplish as much or do as much good. He says that apart from Him we can do NOTHING. Everything that comes out of self-effort alone and does not flow out of relationship with God and an intimate connection with Him amounts to nothing.

The Amplified Bible translates concept of “abiding” as “staying connected in vital union” with God. When we fail to live lives of authentic worship in which we live orientated towards God and in which we actively seek Him in love, community and growth, we do not abide and therefore, we do not bear fruit. But when we do bear fruit, Jesus tells us it glorifies the Father. I think it’s safe to say that we all want to lead fruitful lives that glorify God. If we will do the work of remaining connected to Him, He will do the miraculous work of producing truly significant fruitfulness in us.

For Further Reading / Study

John 15:1-27

1 John 2:24-28

Friday

Pruning

In the image Jesus gave us of the vine and the branches, He also revealed that God is like the vinedresser who ensures that the vine produces the most abundant harvest possible. In order to achieve this, if there is a branch that’s not yielding fruit, He cuts “takes it away” and He prunes the fruitful ones to make them even more fruitful.

... He prunes the fruitful ones to make them even more fruitful.

What does this mean? The words translated “takes away” for branches that don’t bear fruit would be more correctly translated “lifts up”. Vinedressers don’t simply cut off the branches that aren’t producing fruit – they are too valuable for that. They look for branches that are wilting and lying in the dirt, carefully wash them off, cut away dead pieces and they tie them up so that they can get enough

sunshine and become fruitful again. What a beautiful image of grace! There are sometimes seasons in which we don't bear fruit – in which we become stuck or stagnant, and when we do, God intervenes. He washes us off and gives us new opportunities to grow in the light of the Son. But, there is some painful pruning involved in this process. When we fail to bear fruit, God brings discipline to our lives to root out the things that are preventing us from growing and becoming more like Jesus. This is often a painful process, but one done in love, to bring about health, growth and abundance.

John 15:2 tells us that those who do bear fruit also get pruned so that they will bear more fruit.

Bruce Wilkinson describes it in his books *Secrets of the Vine* like this: *“God’s strategy for coaxing a greater harvest out of His branches is not the one you and I would prefer. His plan is to prune, which means to thin, reduce, cut off. As unthinkable as it sounds – as contradictory as it is – the Vinedresser’s secret for more is... less... His purpose is for you to cut away immature commitments and lesser priorities to make room for even greater abundance for His glory.”*

Another image in Scripture of how God “prunes” and shapes us is the image of a silversmith purifying his silver (Malachi 3:2-3). In order for it to be refined, it has to be placed in the fire. In order for us to develop and move forward in our faith, refining is necessary. Sometimes God uses the fires of adversity and pain to remove the impurities in our lives. This doesn't mean that God sends or plans painful experiences for us, but there is so much grace and hope in knowing that even when we find ourselves in the fire, God can use our pain to make us more like Jesus if we let Him.

For Further Reading / Study

John 15:1-8

Malachi 3:2-3

Isaiah 43:1-5

Romans 8:28-30

Intentional next steps

There is always a next step you can take when it comes to spiritual growth. We have to guard against becoming complacent with where we are and sliding into a comfortable Christianity. We must be intentional about growing all the time.

There is always a next step you can take when it comes to spiritual growth.

So what is the next step for you?

If you have never engaged actively with Scripture, perhaps it is time to start by following a Bible reading programme. There are great apps you can download and online programmes you can use as a guide. Maybe you need to look at listening to Scripture while you drive or doing a more formal Bible study? Perhaps your next step is that you should be leading a Bible study or small group. If you are a novice at prayer, maybe your next step is to just start with 5 minutes a day, bringing your concerns and cares to God and thanking Him for what He's done. If you're not so new at prayer, perhaps you could start journaling or consider a day's silent retreat or other meditative practice. Perhaps you and your spouse or a friend could put a discipline in place of praying together regularly? Where do you need to be serving? How can you take the next step in giving of yourself, your time, talents and treasures? How can you take the discipline of community and meeting in a group, or accountability with another Christian, to a new level?

Below is a table that lists some spiritual disciplines. We challenge you to think about what you will practically do this next year to grow in each area. Remember to make your goals realistic – we have to train ourselves in our

spiritual lives step by step and not simply try harder if we are going to get where we want to go.

Scripture	
Prayer & times of silence	
Community / small groups / accountability	
Serving	
Giving	
Fasting	

For Further Reading / Study

Philippians 2:12-18

Philippians 3:12-21

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Hebrews 12:1-29

Questions for personal reflection or group discussion

1. What practical things are you going to put in place in your life in terms of spiritual disciplines in order to grow intentionally?
2. In what season of the soul would you say you are right now and why? Are you in Winter, in which you don't see and feel much fruitfulness, and there is a season of dormancy? Spring, in which you see things coming to fruition? Autumn, in which growth is perhaps waning, or taking place in hidden places beneath the surface, or a Summer season in which solid growth and development is occurring?
3. What is the one thing that has helped you grow most in your spiritual journey in the past? Why do you think this was so significant?
4. What stands out for you most about the passage in John 15 about the vine and branches? Why?
5. What is your strongest spiritual discipline at the moment and which is your weakest?

Week 5

Hope in...

LIVING SACRIFICIALLY

It's not about me

Our lives are not about us. As hard as it is for us minds to grasp, this life is not about our comfort, achievement or happiness. It is not about getting what we want. It's all about Jesus. That's why Jesus tells those who wish to follow Him the difficult and yet, simple, truth: *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"* (Matthew 16:24).

This is not an easy truth to accept and it is even harder to practice. We are self-centred creatures and the journey of Christianity and of worshipping authentically, loving sincerely, connecting purposefully and growing intentionally, culminates in this: learning to live sacrificially. Slowly but surely letting go of self and living a life that matters on a much grander scale... a life marked by surrender and sacrifice.

Mark Gungor once said, "You can't study Scripture without coming the conclusion that God is trying to kill you!" He's right! Scripture is filled with calls for us to "die to self" or "put to death" the sin in our lives (Colossians 3:5), to be "crucified with Christ" (Galatians 2:20) and to offer ourselves as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1). The call of the Christ-follower is to learn to die – to let go, to hold all we have and all we are loosely, to live for something beyond ourselves – and in doing so, find that we might truly live.

**... only those who
live sacrificially
can live at all.**

In the paradoxical Kingdom of God, only those who are willing to deny themselves can find themselves. Only those who are willing to die can really live and only those who live sacrificially can live at all.

Living sacrificially is a big concept that is enacted in many small and big ways each day, but it starts with a mind-set that says that we don't belong to ourselves or live for our pleasure or glory, but for the One who made us and is worthy of all the honour and glory we can offer.

For Further Reading / Study

Matthew 16:24-28

Romans 12:1-21

Galatians 2:17-21

Colossians 3:1-25

Tuesday

The commission of mission

Living sacrificially is the doorway to mission and commissioning. When we lay down our own agendas, God begins to enlist us in accomplishing His. When we decide that our lives won't just be about us, God can use them in ways we never imagined to impact the world. This is where new dreams are birthed and calling happens. This is where we become part of what God is doing in the world as we are invited into His great story of love in which He is reconciling the world to Himself.

There are several very harsh and jarring passages of Scripture in which God severely reprimands his people for religiosity: an appearance of worship and purity without any impact on the world in terms of justice and love. In Isaiah 1 (11-18) God tells the Israelites that He hates their religious gatherings and is weary of their worship. He cannot bear the pretence of them coming to lift up their hands to Him in praise when those same hands are tainted with the blood of their fellow people because of the injustices they commit. In Amos (5:23-24) God says: *“Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness*

like a never-failing stream!” Jesus berated the Pharisees for the same thing – outward acts of worship that didn’t lead to living in a way that brought about justice and made the world better: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practised the latter, without neglecting the former.” (Matthew 23:23)

Worship and engaging with God and His people must flow into service and mission. When we love God, we must be moved by His love for the world. We have to be willing to live sacrificially enough that we allow the things that move and break God’s heart to inflict pain on us as well and to be willing to do whatever it takes to bring God’s justice, healing and love to our broken world. There is immeasurable hope in living sacrificially. It is where true abundant life begins for each soul that surrenders self, and it is the place from which God’s grace and healing flow to change the world.

Worship and engaging with God and His people must flow into service and mission.

For Further Reading / Study

Isaiah 1:11-18

Isaiah 6:1-8

Amos 5:21-27

Matthew 5:13-16

Matthew 23:23-39

Swimming upstream

The world in which we live is not sacrificial by nature. In Romans 12:1, Paul implores his readers to offer themselves as living sacrifices so that they will be able to know and do the will of God. Why do we do this? “In view of God’s mercy...” (Romans 12:1). In other words, in light of all that God has done for us, the only appropriate response is to give all we are to Him.

The next verse in this passage is also very telling: “Do not conform to the pattern of the this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” (Romans 12:2). Our world, in many subtle and not so subtle ways, is continually trying to squeeze us into a mould or pattern. Marketing dictates what we should have in order to be successful. The rampant plague of materialism makes us all want more and more and more. Customs and norms dictate what’s acceptable and we compromise without even realising it. It is very easy to go with the flow and be swept away in the current of the prevailing culture, but that is not what we are called to do. We are called to be counter-cultural; to swim upstream. We are called to be hopeful when the world is hopeless, to be sacrificial where it is selfish, to be generous where it is stingy and loving where it is filled with hatred and bitterness.

Sacrificial living is not easy and it’s counter-cultural. It is costly and it is often painful, but it is the way in which the Kingdom of God breaks through into our everyday realities and transforms us and those around us.

Sacrificial living is the way in which the Kingdom of God breaks through into our everyday realities.

“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.”

– Romans 12:1-2, *The Message*

For Further Reading / Study

Romans 6:1-18

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Thursday

Living with open hearts & hands

It is said that if you really want to know where your priorities lie, you should look at your calendar and your bank account. In other words, you can tell where your focus is and what’s important to you based on how you invest the resources of your time and your money. The concept of living sacrificially might sound nice in a super-spiritual kind of way, but it becomes very real when it starts to touch our resources. It is easy to think about being sacrificial in an abstract way, but it’s not all that easy to actually BE sacrificial when it comes to giving up or giving away the things that are important to us.

Living sacrificially means that we have to live with the perspective that what we have does not belong to us...”

Living sacrificially means that we have to live with the perspective that what we have does not belong to us, but that we are stewards of what we’ve been given in terms of our time, our talents, abilities and giftedness and our treasures or physical resources. God calls us to hold them all loosely, as guardians rather than owners.

He asks us to be generous with all that we have, from our love, compassion and skills, to our money.

Jesus told His followers that there would be a cost involved in following Him and He told them to consider it carefully (Luke 14:27. -33). Following Jesus is sacrificial and it does involve letting go all that we hold, even our very selves and lives, and saying “God, this is yours to do with what you will.”

For Further Reading / Study

Luke 12:15-34

1 Chronicles 21:22-25

Luke 14:27-35

Matthew 19:16-22

Friday

Living faith

The author of the book of James was writing to Jewish converts to Christianity about how to live out their faith. What did it mean to be a Christ-follower? How should they – and we – put their faith into practice in their daily lives? James is pretty clear about the fact that, although we can only be saved by grace and not by anything we can do, if our faith isn’t having an

impact on us and on the world around us, it is dead. Faith that is living and vital is a faith that changes the world. It is faith that, as the saying goes, is not so heavenly minded and that it is of no earthly good. Living faith comes from sacrifice that goes beyond talk or philosophy to practical action.

James 2:14-17, in *The Message* translation states it like this:

“Dear friends, do you think you’ll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, “Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!” and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?”

Our faith becomes real when it requires sacrifice in everyday situations: What will I do about this hungry beggar? How will I respond to this injustice? Will I do what’s practically required and let go of my security to follow where I believe God is leading? How will I engage with my leaders and pray for my country? How will I respond to the person who hurt me, or the one I just don’t like? Will I take time out of my busy day to serve?

We have to keep asking ourselves the tough questions about whether or not we are putting our faith into action. Are we just convincing talkers, or can those around us see, feel and experience the impact of our love for Jesus? Surrender is the fuel that keeps the fire of living faith burning.

“True surrender will always go beyond natural devotion. If we will only give up, God will surrender Himself to embrace all those around us and will meet their needs, which were created by our surrender. Beware of stopping anywhere short of total surrender to God. Most of us have only a vision of what this really means, but have never truly experienced it.”

– Oswald Chambers

Saturday

For Further Reading / Study

James 2:14-26

Matthew 25:35-46

The world has yet to see...

Dwight L. Moody once said, “The world has yet to see what God can do with a man fully consecrated to him. By God’s help, I aim to be that man.”

God can do exceedingly, abundantly more than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20) with the humble offering of our lives when we surrender them to Him. When an abandoned and victimised young boy surrendered himself to God, God used Joseph, via the most unlikely circumstances, to save an entire nation. When a runaway murderer surrendered to the call of God, He used Moses to liberate a people and countless miracles ensued. When a refugee turned queen surrendered her life and fate to God, God used Esther to help save her people from certain annihilation. When an unwilling prophet finally, begrudgingly surrendered after a fishy ordeal, God used Jonah to orchestrate that a whole pagan city repented and was saved. When an ordinary young woman said a surrendered “Yes” to God, she brought the Saviour incarnate into the world. When a proud Pharisee

surrendered to God, Saul became Paul and kings, emperors and ordinary people heard about Jesus and the church was established. When the Son of God surrendered His life, everything changed for all of eternity and salvation was made possible for anyone who would accept His gift of grace.

What will God do with your surrendered life?

For Further Reading / Study

Mark 10:27-31

John 14:11-14

Ephesians 3:20-21

Isaiah 50:2-5

Questions for personal reflection or group discussion

1. What does it mean to you to live sacrificially?
2. In what one area do you feel like God is asking you to sacrifice right now?
3. Why do you think Jesus said that it's only in laying down our lives or denying ourselves that we can find life?
4. What has your relationship with God really cost you? What has been the most difficult thing for you to surrender?
5. What impact do you want to make on the world? How would you like God to use the offering of your surrendered life?

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