

CHAPTER EIGHT

Foundational Values of Discipleship



“The life of faith is represented as receiving—an act which implies the very opposite of anything like merit. It is simply the acceptance of a gift.”

CHARLES SPURGEON

I AM GATHERING MY THINGS TO GET UP TO PREACH when I feel something slipping out of my Bible and I reach to grasp it. Seeing it brings a smile to my face.

It’s a magnet. A small alien, complete with an extra-large head and characteristic neon green color. My colleague and friend gave it to me and I keep it in my Bible to help me remember my calling to preach a living Word each week. A strange symbol perhaps, but a meaningful one. It’s easy to get knowledge-heavy. To get up front and preach or teach focused on what we want people to know and understand. Yet, we don’t want to grow “aliens”—people with heads swollen up with facts alone. We want to grow disciples. We want wholistic, grounded disciples of Jesus, proportionate in their knowledge, identity, and action.

As I slip the little alien back into my Bible, I whisper to myself, “This Word is a Living Word, meant to be lived out in our day-today lives.” This is not head knowledge; this is knowledge that comes by experience—knowing, being, and doing. Let’s not grow aliens. Let’s grow disciples.

Intentional Process

The most radical shift we can make in our understanding of discipleship is to move towards a life-long, intentional, process orientation. Rather than a quick fix or overnight metamorphosis, discipleship is a journey. We grow daily in relationship to God, in community with others, and in understanding our purpose. There will be ebbs and flows to each of these areas in our lives. There are times my soul feels so full of life, health, and strength that I can hardly contain the joy. There are other times my soul feels dry and my spiritual practice feels devoid of meaning. This is what it means to be a disciple. We yoke ourselves to Jesus and keep pressing forward. As Paul did, we remember to press on toward the goal for which Christ is calling us heavenward (Philippians 3:14). I live for this day and the next one. I am not defined by the past, nor do I live in the past. Yesterday’s spirituality and vitality is not life for today.

I want to invite you, once again, to experience grace. To hear the Holy Spirit whisper, “Lay down your heavy burden of guilt and feelings of not-enoughness when it comes to your devotional life or relationship with Me. Many of us struggle with devotions. We struggle with discipleship. We struggle with prayer. We wish there was a “just do this,” so the church will then be what it is called to be. There is no “silver bullet” or “this is the answer,” though we wish there were.

There is *an* answer though. Trust in God’s grace on the journey. Walk with the One who loves us deeply and who won’t let us go. This is not a cliché, but an expression of reality. The answer is not a program but a deeply personal God. The answer is not found in right religious practice, but in a growing relationship.

As people, and especially as leaders, it is tempting to look for “the fix,” to seek that one thing that will solve the problem for ourselves and for

those we serve. Instead of a fix, we are invited to turn again to fix our gaze on Jesus. We are invited on a journey.

Foundational Values

Discipleship is following Jesus. In the process of following, there are three key areas where growth occurs in the life of the disciple: (1) growth in our relationship with God, (2) nurturing relationships with others in community, and (3) developing purpose through witness and service on behalf of others. Three values, as you see here: God (first), Community, and Purpose. These three values serve as the foundation for the growth that happens during the 12-week discipleship course. Each exercise, interaction, and method is meant to facilitate growth in these key areas.

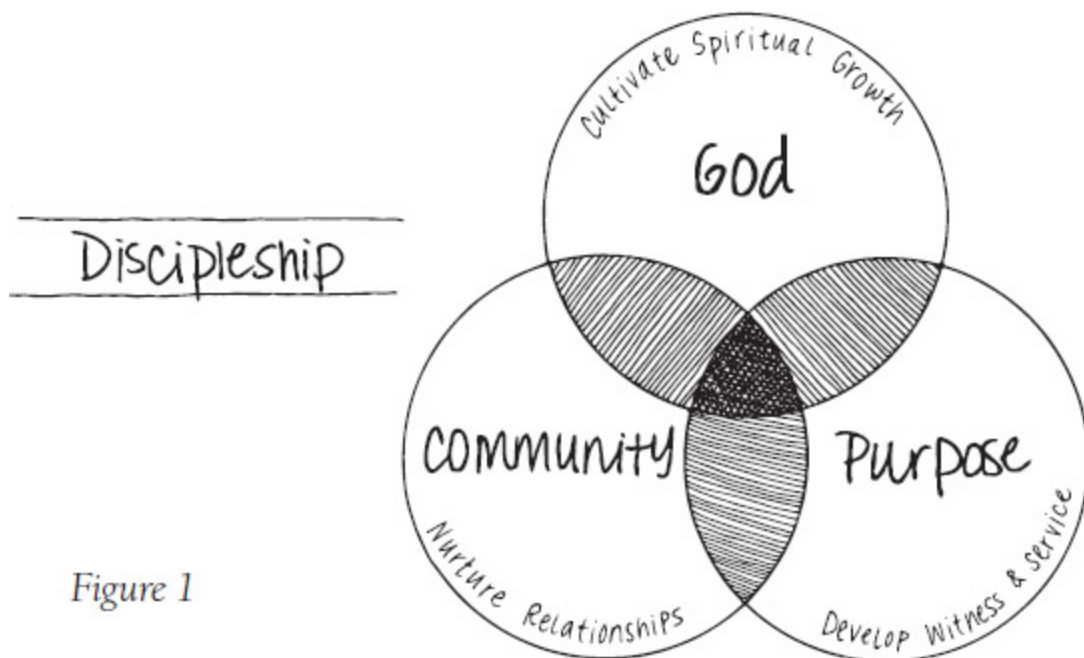


Figure 1

Come Out of Hiding

Jesus has broken the dividing wall between us and God, us and others, and even the divisions inside ourselves, leading to a greater understanding of our purpose. “For He Himself (Jesus) is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall” (Ephesians 2:14, NASB). God wants to bring us back to a place of oneness. Living this story of healing and wholeness in the world is a large part of what it means to be

a disciple. This is evidenced in the discipleship journey in the invitation to the participants to be honest. There is no more separation, condemnation, or judgment because of the grace extended to us in Jesus. Because of this great gift, we can come out of hiding. Discipleship participants are invited to be honest with themselves, God, and others. This nurtures authenticity in sharing and is the fertile ground where growth and transformation can take place in relationship with God, community, and one's own purpose.

How We Grow

Experiential learning models highlight the facets of knowing, being, and doing as inseparable parts of a process that leads to growth. As the learner experiences information (*knowing*), reflects on it (*being*), and applies it to their life (*doing*), the result is a richer integration of change into the life of the learner.

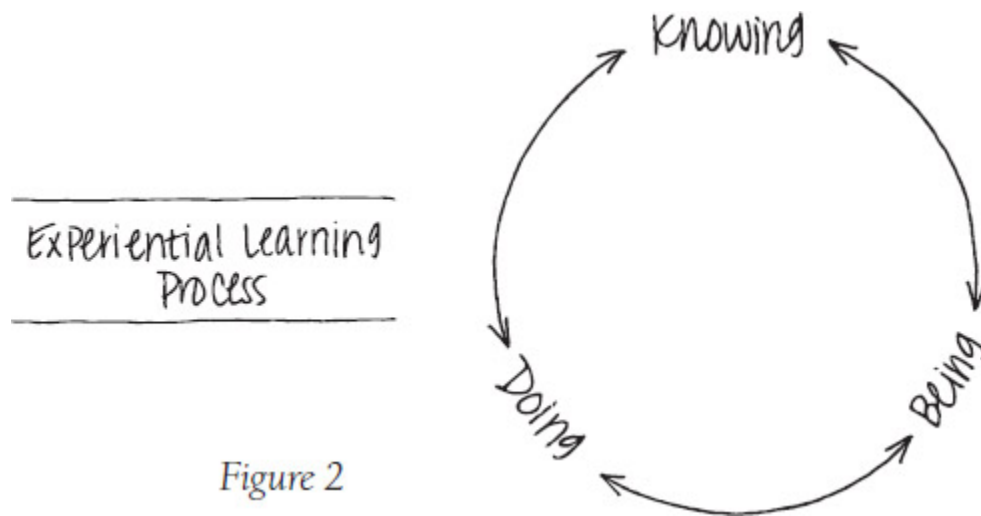


Figure 2

The relationship between the experiential learning process—knowing, being, doing—and discipleship is clear. Jesus' invitation to His disciples was, "Come, follow me" (Matthew 4:19) and "Learn from me" (Matthew 11:28-30). Jesus wanted His disciples to learn through an experience of shared life (Mark 3:14). In this process, they gained experiential knowledge about Jesus' ways (Mark 7:17; Acts 4:13), reflected in a change of heart and attitude (John 6:66-69, 13:1-9), and took action—doing and applying what Jesus taught them (Mark 6:7-13; Luke 10:1-12). The type of learning the disciples engaged in with Jesus was experiential.

Nonetheless, it is easy for humans to focus on knowledge alone. In one interchange with the teachers of the law, Jesus said, “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you possess eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40). Knowledge of the Scriptures is intended to lead to a heart understanding of Jesus and the action of coming to Him which leads to life. Knowledge requires action (James 1:22). Jesus desires that disciples both hear and act on the word. “Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matthew 7:24).

Knowledge of doctrine, that is, biblical information about God, separated from a meaningful relationship with Jesus, produces self-sufficiency, self-righteousness, and self-centeredness (Matthew 23), characteristics seen in the New Testament descriptions of the Pharisees and the Scribes. However, in the context of an experiential relationship with Jesus, knowledge of doctrine becomes robust, leading to application in the context of real life. An experiential relationship with Jesus leads to the gospel in action (2 Peter 1:5-9). As believers learn to practice the ways of Jesus, they are kept from “being ineffective and unproductive in [their] knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:8). Jesus desires that knowledge lead to the experience of producing effective, fruitful action in the life of the believer.

Gabe Lyons urges believers “to recover the Gospel, to relearn and fall in love again with that historic, beautiful, redemptive, faithful, demanding, reconciling, all-powerful, restorative, atoning, grace-abounding, soul-quenching, spiritually fulfilling good news of God’s love.”¹ This falling in love again with Jesus is at the heart of the experience of the disciple. Discipleship, as Jesus modeled it, allows the knowing, being, and doing aspects of Christian faith to find their rightful place in the life of the believer. Discipleship that embraces an experiential learning model recaptures what it means to follow Christ in the world today.

Discipleship is ultimately a work of the heart, the process of becoming more Christlike.² The primary role of the church, according to Jesus’ Great Commission, is to make disciples of all people (Matthew 28:18-20). The

church is to be a nucleus of disciple-making activity—instructing and mentoring believers and unbelievers alike in what it means to follow Jesus. This is best done experientially.

Discipleship is the answer to the questions of unbelievers and the inward need of believers. It offers the disciple purpose and resolves the disconnect between belief and practice. The call to discipleship is the clear invitation of Jesus to each Christian to incarnate the gospel in everyday life. This takes place as a result of being with Christ. Discipleship includes many facets of change in the life of the believer. It is this change the world desires to see. Over time, what takes place in the process of discipleship is a metamorphosis which transforms how individuals relate to themselves, God, others, and their purpose in the created world. This wholistic approach allows for a fuller transformation in the life of the believer.



Experiential Learning

The imperative for all three aspects of experiential learning in the discipleship process is found in the Great Commission. “To make disciples” means to make learners who follow after and experience the pattern of living Jesus set out. This is further clarified by the next part of the text: “to *teach* them to *do* all things I have commanded you” (emphasis added). The act of becoming a disciple of Jesus is, by its very nature, transformational and experiential. It is a complete shift in lifestyle. Experiential learning is what discipleship is all about. As Figure 2 outlines, one aspect of learning naturally leads to the other—knowing to being, being to doing, doing to knowing, and so on. As disciples experience knowing God and being transformed inwardly by the Holy Spirit, they will naturally do as God has commanded.

The goal of a discipleship process is to create space for learning on all three levels—knowing, being, and doing—in order to allow disciples to experience the power and change of God in their whole being. Rather than

compartmentalizing growth, this allows disciples to be transformed by the Holy Spirit in every aspect of their lives through the disciple-making process. As the disciples are changed by Jesus, they are able to more faithfully and fruitfully represent Jesus in the world.

It is my sincere hope that we in the Seventh-day Adventist Church will recapture our focus on being and growing disciples. This emphasis on discipleship is the fulfillment of the Great Commission of Jesus. As we journey with members to embrace growth in their relationship with God, with others in community, and in living their purpose in this world, all three aspects of experiential learning are maximized. Knowledge is integrated into everyday life (knowing), reflection is evidence of greater emotional health and self-awareness (being), and both are lived out in the day-to-day experience and purpose of the disciple (doing). I have seen this growth through the experiential discipleship journey, *Deep Calling*.

Lift Up One Another

In Exodus 17:8-13, we find the Israelites were camped out at Rephidim. They had just left slavery. They were then in a dry and dusty place. They were tormented by thirst until the Lord instructed Moses to strike a rock and they were refreshed. Then, with only God's refreshment sustaining them, the Amalekites attacked.

Before we go any further in this story, something that is immediately clear is that if we are desperate, if we find ourselves dry and thirsty, God will provide for us. Many times, we are praying to leave the desperate place. We come alongside others and pray for God to lead them out of the dry place to safe, green pasture. Instead, in this instance, God offers gushing water *in* the dry place. The refreshment you seek could be exactly in the situation you're in, not by changing locations, but by finding streams in the desert.³ It could be in the difficulty, in the marriage, in the friendship, or in the church you are struggling with.

Now, back to the battle. Joshua gathered men to fight, just as Moses told him to. Moses went to stand up on the hill. In his hand was the very staff

that he had just used to strike the rock as God provided for the needs of the people to satisfy their thirst.

What the people experienced next was shocking. As long as Moses lifted his hands, they won. If he lowered his hands, they lost. Winning, losing, winning, losing. It didn't take long for them to recognize the pattern in what was happening in the battle.

We don't completely know the reason God chose to work this way in response to the raising of Moses' hands, but I can imagine God's delight in this posture of dependence and trust. Moses, with hands uplifted to the sky, was saying in the midst of an attack, "I don't know how this will all work out, but I am choosing to turn towards you in trust." Some of us need to remember this truth. We need to raise up our hands in prayer today and say, "I believe you are fighting for me, God." In our personal lives, our families, our organizations and churches, and in our small groups, we declare that God is at work!

It was working out quite well. With Moses' hands up, the battle was going fine. Then, he grew weary. He couldn't hold up his hands anymore. The enemy started to overpower Joshua and the men. Seeing this, his friends, Aaron and Hur, got him a rock to sit on and came to support Moses. Each one of them took one of his arms and held it up to the sky. Because of this strength and support, Moses' hands were held up the entire day. Joshua and the army defeated the army of Amalek.

The call of God is to live in community. We are not to be the lone person on the hill with our hands raised up, somehow with enough strength to hold steady, come what may. We aren't called to be the lone disciple-maker in our church, the one raising up a new perspective of discipleship in our church or church district. Instead, this story is a poignant visual of what it looks like to receive support. When I get tired, when I get discouraged, when I lose hope, that's when I need those around me. I have friends who stand with me in battle and who hold up my arms. We stay by each other through all of it.

There are times you feel like you're winning. There are other times you're weary and struggling. That's the power of doing life together.

Together we come to raise hands and hearts in faith and in trust. Together we say, “You are God and I believe you are fighting for us.” Together we seek God and press in towards our Maker.

God is the One who provides friends, leaders, and colleagues for us when we cannot hold up our arms anymore. I know you hold up other’s arms. You are a leader—this is your calling. As a pastor, elder, chaplain, friend, spouse, or fellow believer, you come alongside and lift up arms. When overwhelming circumstances gnaw at the edges and anxiety threatens, you hold up others’ arms.

The question I want to ask you is, “Who is holding up your arms?”

As you begin this journey of leading others in discipleship, who is holding up your arms? This discipleship journey is powerful, life-changing, and transformative, especially as you, the leader, experience what you are sharing with others. Who are you allowing to join you in your pain, weariness, and struggle?

The power of a community of faith is that we don’t do it alone. There are times we pray and practice our faith and we feel everything; it’s real to us—body, mind, and heart. Then there are other times you feel numb... broken...weary. It’s then that others can hold up your hands and lift up your heart. When you can’t hold up your hands, you need Aaron and Hur to come around you.

It’s said that “we stand on the shoulders of the generations that went before us,” and that’s true. However, in this story, Moses’ shoulders were held up by the people around him. It’s not about the great leader on whose shoulders we are standing. Instead it’s the story of how the arms of the “great person” were held up by the people on either side. This is what it means to live in community. It’s not good that we do life or ministry alone. We are called to life together. We are called to be and grow disciples together.

May you see that God desires to grow you experientially in your relationship with God, community and purpose.

May you experience deep, caring community in your own life, even as you create this space for others.

May you be vulnerable enough to allow someone else to hold up your arms.

Discussion Questions

Which aspect of the experiential learning process—knowing, being, doing—do you need more of right now? What is one thing you can do today to share that experience with Jesus?

Where in your life, relationships, and church do you need God to provide water in dry places?

In what area of your life or ministry are you trying to be the lone person on the hill with your hands raised up? Who is someone like Aaron or Hur whom you can invite to hold up your arms in support?

CHAPTER NINE

Eight Calls to a Deeper Life



“You can’t think your way into new habits. New habits can only emerge as you practice them. This is the most challenging part. Practice is the small ordinary path to transformation.”

JAMES K. A. SMITH

WHEN OUR SON WAS 3 ½ YEARS OLD, he commented on our citrus trees as we were leaving the house. “Mom, look at those two old pomelos that fell down from the tree.” I acknowledged what he saw and he quickly asked a question, as kids do so well.

“Why does the fruit fall from the tree? It’s too yucky and old to eat. Why does it fall down?”

I explained to him that the tree has to let go of the old fruit in order to have room for new fruit to grow. As I said these words, I realized the implications for my life, and for the life of the church.

God’s voice whispered in my heart, “That’s what I want to do in you. You just let go of the old because I want to grow the new fruit of the Spirit in your life.”

Maybe there are things in your life that you want to change. Maybe there are things in the life of your church that weigh heavily on your shoulders and on your heart. Maybe you find yourself with a deep hunger for the new fruit of the Spirit in your life, your church, or your organization. Whatever your experience is now, wherever your church or organization is now, God can grow new fruit in your life and in the life of your church or organization. You and I have to acknowledge the old and let it go. Surrender it, letting it drop to the ground. God is growing new fruit. Like the tree planted by the water that bears fruit in season (Psalm 1), God wants you to have an ever-renewed experience with God, and lead others into the same experience.

How does God develop that experience in us? In my life and ministry, I have seen God work through eight calls—habits we grow in our lives which help us respond to God. These are the eight calls that the discipleship curriculum, *Deep Calling*, is built on.

1. **A Call to Devotion:** living in a daily rhythm of love.
2. **A Call to Prayer:** engaging in conversations with God as a friend.
3. **A Call to Rest:** experiencing Sabbath restoration.
4. **A Call to Community:** entering into life together.
5. **A Call to Healing:** finding wholeness in the midst of our brokenness.
6. **A Call to Witness:** discovering our call to own and tell our story.
7. **A Call to Serve:** joining Jesus in incarnational ministry and mission.
8. **A Call to Bless:** celebrating life with a prophetic voice, speaking what is not, as though it were.

These are the loving invitations of God that meet our deepest hunger and desire. “The heart of God yearns over His earthly children with a love stronger than death,” Ellen White implores.¹ This love of God is what draws us, works within us, and ultimately changes our lives.

Longing for an Experience

James Rutz and the Gallup organization have found that “a significant number of ‘unchurched’ Americans feel there is not enough emphasis on spiritual experiences in the churches...churches have lost the spiritual part of religion.”² There is a hunger for the practice of spirituality. Religion as a practice of the mind has dominated the practice of the heart, leaving people with a longing for connection with God.³ I have seen this firsthand in pastoral ministry over the years. People desire an experience, the real-life practice of spirituality. I have seen in many Adventist church members an inability to move from faith as an informational understanding of a set of beliefs, to a relational practice that integrates truth into daily living. This has left them feeling unfulfilled and is, arguably, the most significant contributor to their restless search for answers and longing for greater depth of spiritual experience.

People have grown exhausted with just *doing church* or *going through the motions*. Religious experience has left church members empty, dry, and hungry for more. A. Allan Martin identifies the resulting dissatisfaction as “sacred discontent.”⁴ He points out that this discontent or hunger for more can be useful, even devotional, if it pushes us past superficial religion towards more of God.



Spiritual Habits

The first practical question that must be addressed is *what makes the difference between someone who is a Christian and someone who is not?* The number one distinction of Christians is that they are individuals who are *with* Christ. Disciples (or apprentices) are those who are with Jesus and who are seeking to become like Him. They live their lives asking this question: If Jesus were living my life, what would He do?⁵ A relationship with Jesus must be maintained as the most important part of the disciple's life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Christian pastor and martyr in Germany

during Nazi rule, distills this truth by saying, “The heart of the disciple must be set upon Christ alone.”⁶

But how? How do we set our heart on Jesus? The most ancient of all recognized ways of transformation takes place through the practice of spiritual devotional habits or disciplines. As we hear the eight calls of God in our lives, we respond by developing habits that nurture space for response to God. **These habits that we can practice in our lives make room for the grace of God. We don’t make the rainstorm,⁷ just as we don’t manufacture God’s grace. Instead, we do something that puts us in the place where we can get wet by the rainstorm.** That’s a spiritual habit: heeding the call of God to practice our faith with action.

The spiritual disciplines are the ways that God works in people’s lives to transform them into who they are meant to be. By spending time in God’s Presence, a person becomes someone with a worldview in line with the Kingdom of God.⁸ The number and names of the spiritual disciplines vary depending on the source, but their purpose remains the same. The goal is to engage believers in a transformational process that allows them to become more like Christ. They are intentional methods used to focus the believers’ attention on Jesus. There are seven practices that are included in most lists: Prayer, Meditation, Study, Fasting, Solitude/Silence, Worship, and Service.⁹ These spiritual disciplines are often called the “classical disciplines” because they are central and foundational to the Christian life.¹⁰

Dallas Willard breaks down the classical disciplines into two categories: disciplines of abstinence (solitude, silence, fasting, etc.) and disciplines of engagement (study, worship, service, prayer, etc.). Seeing the disciplines within these two categories helps the believer to address sins of commission (things they are doing) and omission (things they are not doing)¹¹ Lauren Winner offers contemporary reflections from a Christian perspective on Jewish spiritual practices and disciplines. Her work emphasizes the prevalent desire to develop rhythms and meaning in spiritual practice. Spiritual disciplines fill the need for structure and deepened connection.¹²

In a sermon given in Switzerland in 1885, Ellen White expressed that:

Faith and works go hand in hand; they act harmoniously in the work of overcoming. Works without faith are dead, and faith without works is dead. Works will never save us; it is the merit of Christ that will avail in our behalf. Through faith in Him, Christ will make all our imperfect efforts acceptable to God. The faith we are required to have is not a do-nothing faith; saving faith is that which works by love and purifies the soul.¹³

As disciples put into practice what they can do to connect with Christ and what they can avoid to make space for more of Christ in their life, transformation takes place by the work of the Holy Spirit. The goal is to develop habits and routines that bring ourselves, and other believers, into closer contact with Christ.

The purpose of devotional practices is for believers to experience God and be formed as disciples, alone and in community. These practices of connecting with God meet our deepest longing for spiritual experience and are the means by which we experience transformation.

The Miracle

It's important for us to remember that the power to produce an experience or change in our lives does not come from ourselves. S. Joseph Kidder draws needed attention to the role of the Holy Spirit. He writes, "The shift in the disciples did not result from some seminar they took in leadership or evangelism, or from some sort of self-improvement course, but as a result of the presence of the transformational power of the Holy Spirit."¹⁴

As birth is a miracle, so the discipleship process is a miracle. It is the mystery of God transforming disciples through the Holy Spirit's power.¹⁵ Disciples are not able to control the process any more than babies are able to control their own birth. They do, however, see the effects of the miracle of transformation. The role of believers is to bring themselves to Jesus with the full knowledge that they cannot change themselves.¹⁶ I believe it is in acknowledging this very truth—we as disciples are unable to change ourselves—that we experience our greatest transformation. Giving up control is often the hardest spiritual practice for the disciple.¹⁷

Ellen White says, “While the work of the Spirit is silent and imperceptible, its effects are manifest. If the heart has been renewed by the Spirit of God, the life will bear witness to the fact.”¹⁸ The silent and quiet work of the Spirit is happening in your life and mine as we surrender. “So, we have nothing in ourselves of which to boast. We have no ground for self-exaltation. Our only ground of hope is in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and in that wrought by His Spirit working in and through us.”¹⁹ Transformation is the work of God alone, done in the process of discipleship throughout the believer’s life.

The experience of discipleship must be recaptured as our primary focus—as individuals and as a church. Bill Hull emphasizes this by saying, “Discipleship isn’t just *one* of the things the church does; it *is* what the church does.”²⁰

We are called to live in a devotional rhythm. We are called to prayer as a conversation with God as a friend. We are called to experience the depth of Sabbath rest. We are called to live in community. We are called to healing, miraculously finding repair in the midst of our brokenness. We are called to witness to the power of God by telling our story. We are called to serve others incarnationally, just as Jesus did. We are called to bless—celebrating and calling out life that does not yet exist. These are the eight calls of God on our lives.

I invite you on a journey as we explore these calls and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit through habits we practice in response to the grace of God. It may require a reorientation of our priorities and our focus, individually and collectively as a church community. However, I believe it will be worth it as we witness new fruit of the Spirit in our own lives and the lives of those around us.

Back to What Matters Most

We traveled this past summer, preaching, and then spending time together as a family. We explored beaches and hiked in forests in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California. There was beauty all around us. Bright spots of joy everywhere. Our Maker’s handiwork on full display.

Only a few days into our trip, our 16-month-old daughter Ava took a leap in her language development. She pointed at things around her and said their names with recognition and assurance. Beyond the words she was already using like “Daddy” “Mommy” and “Siah” (her brother), she called out “Jesus,” “baby,” “book,” “water,” “hungry,” “eat.” Everything had a name and she would attempt to say it! She woke up.

One of the moments I hope always to remember is when I coached her at bedtime.

Say, “Jesus,” I said.

“Jesus,” she said.

Say, “loves,” I said.

“Loves,” she said.

Then before I could say the next word, she called out with such joy, her eyes dancing:

“Me!”

It caught me by surprise. She was delighted in her ability to fill in the sentence with the next word! More than that, she seemed delighted by what she was announcing.

“Jesus loves me!” she said slowly, in a sweet baby voice.

Yes, my darling! It’s true.

We repeated this pattern a few times. Each time, she filled in with great joy, “me!” before I was able to say it.

In the stillness of that room, a temporary home away from home, I blessed my daughter. With tears brimming in my eyes for the sheer delight and gift of the moment:

My daughter, may you always know you are deeply loved by Jesus.

May you remember that you bring this same delight to us and to God.

May you know that your presence brings joy and makes the world a better place.

What about you dear friend? Do you need to go back to the basics today? Remember the invitation of God, and God's desire to live life with you. Rediscover what matters most. Delight in the sheer simplicity of the truth: You are deeply loved by Jesus. God delights in you. Your presence brings joy and makes the world a better place.

The invitation of God, these eight calls to a deeper life, all begin here. With the reality of how God feels about each one of us. Discipleship is, after all, a response to the grace of God at work in our lives.

Knowing we are loved and delighted in is the beginning of the new fruit God longs to grow in your life, and in your church. Everything begins with realizing how loved you are. Won't you respond to this call of Love?

May you know you are deeply loved by Jesus. You bring delight to God.

May you know that your presence makes the world a better place.

May you create life-giving spaces where others can respond to the love and call of God in their own lives.

Discussion Questions

What old fruit is God calling you to let go of in order for the new fruit of the Spirit to grow in your life?

Which one or two of the eight calls of God has contributed most to your spiritual growth? Which one do you want to experience more of?

What is one way you've experienced the love of Jesus recently? What is one way your presence makes the world a better place?

CHAPTER TEN

A Call to Devotion: Daily Rhythm of Love



“Attention is the beginning of devotion.”

MARY OLIVER

MANY YEARS AGO, I RECEIVED AN EMAIL advertisement inviting me to turn my old shirts into a quilt. Sending in my shirts would give me the gift of a gorgeous memory quilt and would, at the same time, provide work for a United States war veteran. I sorted and chose a couple dozen shirts for inclusion in the quilt. One of those shirts flooded my mind with memories of the time my husband Caleb and I spent in a long-distance relationship.

We met at Southwestern Adventist University while on a leadership retreat with the chaplain’s office. Caleb was the drama director and I was the student chaplain that year. We were immediately drawn to one another and wanted to talk. Fortunately for us, we were paired off by the head chaplain to be partners throughout the retreat. After a whirlwind school year and beautiful months of dating, I graduated and left to begin ministry in Washington state. Caleb continued in Texas for his last year of undergraduate studies. We didn’t have cell phones so there was no texting or Facetime or calls at any time of the day. There was no social media where

we kept up with each other's day. But we did talk on the phone using calling cards and we wrote letters—yes, real letters with paper and pen.

Throughout these months apart, I was forming a plan to see Caleb and surprise him. I bought a ticket to Texas. Not only that, I talked to the men's dean and asked if I could have a group of our friends join me in Caleb's dorm room so that at the end of the day, he could be completely shocked. The dean agreed. We all snuck up the hallway and hid in his room. Balloons filled the room so when Caleb entered, he thought our friends were surprising him. He smiled and thanked them. Then, I stepped out from behind the door. Surprise!!

The long distance afforded us time to write, talk, and grow in our relationship. It was good. Our love grew and deepened. But there was nothing like that hug, looking into each other's eyes, and seeing each other face-to-face. It was a great weekend—one I will always remember. Before leaving for this trip, I bought a special outfit to wear for the surprise—the shirt of that outfit is now sewn into the memory quilt. This square in my quilt reminds me of what it's like to love from a distance and to experience sweet reunion.

We live in a long-distance relationship with God here on earth. As we live in love with God, we practice a life of devotion by the power of the Holy Spirit. Hope within us loves the One we can't see, even as we wait for the day when we will see face-to-face. We have hope in the present and a hope for what is to come.

The first call of God is to live a life of devotion. A life of devotion recognizes that the life of the follower of Jesus is more the gift of what God has given to you and less what you are doing for God. We must make space for the work of God in our lives; however, we do not do the work ourselves. **Devotion is a rhythm of life that is characterized by love.** The ways that we practice relating to God in love shape our hearts, character, and actions. How do we form a life of devotion as we live in a relationship with God? Consider developing a rule of life, prioritizing time in God's Word, and approaching it all with joy.

Rule of Life

The *Rule of Life* brings together the practice of the spiritual disciplines, the understanding of emotional health, and the knowledge of self into a spiritual rhythm that encourages the process of change. Barton describes:

A rule of life is a way of ordering our life around the values, practices and relationships that keep us open and available to God for the work of spiritual transformation that only God can bring about. Simply put, a rule of life provides structure and space for our growing.¹

Scazzero summarizes the *Rule of Life* as “an intentional, conscious plan to keep God at the center of everything we do. . . . The starting point and foundation of any Rule is a desire to be with God.”² The concept of the *Rule of Life* is a valuable way of reordering one’s life to follow the ways and priorities of Jesus, instead of one’s own, or those given by others. This becomes even more important in the increasingly fast-paced world of today. The focus must be on structuring life around God’s priorities instead of my own, making central a relationship with Jesus amidst the distractions of secular and religious life.

In chapter 8 of the book *Steps to Christ*, entitled “Growing Up into Christ,” Ellen White shares her understanding of what it looks like to grow in Christ. She marks the difference between justification and sanctification in the life of the Christian. While justification takes place the moment we receive the gift of God’s grace, sanctification takes a lifetime. “The plants and flowers grow not by their own care or anxiety or effort, but by receiving that which God has furnished to minister to their life. The child cannot, by any anxiety or power of its own, add to its stature. No more can you, by anxiety or effort of yourself, secure spiritual growth.”³

Growth in our lives comes as we “abide in Christ.” What does this abiding in Christ look like in your life? White goes on to say, “You are just as dependent upon Christ, in order to live a holy life, as is the branch upon the parent stock for growth and fruitfulness. Apart from Him you have no life.”⁴ Everything that is lasting comes from remaining connected to Jesus.

The *rule of life* is a way of intentionally abiding in Christ. What does this look like practically? Here are three examples from my *rule of life*. One of the guidelines in my *rule of life* about abiding in Jesus is that I do not check email or social media before time in devotion with God in the morning. It's too easy for me to get caught up in focusing on what I have to do that day, or in other relationships, and my intention is to fix my eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12). Does this mean I do this perfectly every day? No. There are times I miss this and absentmindedly grab my phone after being awakened earlier than I intended (can you tell our kids are young?). Yet, over the course of time, this habit is forming my way of abiding in Christ.

I have made a commitment to be formed and shaped by time in the Word of God each day. This time in the Scriptures has changed my life. What do I read? For the last 15 years, I have read one psalm each day, in addition to reading from the Gospels. These prayers of praise and lament have expressed the words of my heart in different seasons of my life. They have shaped me in profound ways.

Another part of my *rule of life* is a commitment to retreat and to relationship. Each year I take a day in the spring and a day in the fall in silent prayer with God, unplugged from social media and email. In addition, I take one spiritual retreat in community with friends where we intentionally spend time in prayer, the Word, and open up to one another about the work of God in our lives. We've been practicing this commitment to retreat for nine years now. This has shaped the way that I abide in Christ and has been transformational in my life.

We all have ways that we live. Whether thought through intentionally or unintentionally, we develop patterns of living. As you reflect on and create your rule of life, look for ways and rhythms that help you to abide in Christ. Commit to these patterns of devotion.

Even as we develop a rule of life, we must remember that there is no part of this that we do on our own. Ellen White admonishes, "Many have an idea that they must do some part of the work alone. They have trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of sin, but now they seek by their own efforts to live aright. But every such effort must fail."⁵ It is God's call, love, presence, and invitation to partner in mission that shape what it means to be a

follower of Jesus. It is God's work from beginning to end. **Even as we make space for the work God is doing, it will always be the work of God.**

The Word of God

Time in the Scriptures has been a daily part of my devotion to Jesus and has provided an avenue of transformation. Scripture was inspired by God—"God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Spirit who hovered over creation as it was dark, formless, and void (Genesis 1) is the same Spirit who hovered over ordinary people who were moved to write the Holy Scriptures. Even now, that same Spirit hovers over you and me to create something new in us (Romans 12:2). True worship is about giving our whole lives in response to the mercy of God. The logical response, Paul says, is to let our lives be structured and shaped daily by grace. To come to the Word and be changed.

One of the greatest dangers is to separate – bifurcate – our spiritual life from the rest of our lives – the spiritual world from the material world. God wants to renew our minds. The same mind that pays the bills, reads the Scriptures, worships God, and watches TV. God wants us to bring our whole selves to experience the renewing of our minds.

This is a beautiful part of the Adventist message. There is a whole-life focus to our message. All of you is loved. All of you is invited into a relationship. All of you is renewed. Through the power of the Scriptures and the regenerating work of the Spirit, you are in the process of transformation. It doesn't happen automatically. There is no finish line to this. God's Spirit comes to abide and reside in you and that brings a new way of thinking and orienting your life. Day by day, for the rest of your life.

The people of God who were used for the sacred work of writing the Scriptures wrote in their own language, time, and place. They wrote as the Spirit moved them with thoughts. What we hold now in the Bible is incredible work. It has contexts and times, and yet it is timeless. It reflects what the people understood then, and yet it applies to us now. God has always been about incarnation. The Holy Spirit incarnate in these ordinary,

yet sacred, words. Jesus incarnate in the body of a man. Divine and yet human. The Holy Spirit incarnate now in us, the people of God.

This is why we hold onto hope. We firmly believe this radical truth that change is possible. Transformation, becoming something different than we are today, is possible. The Spirit is here. The way you are today is not the way you must be tomorrow. The way the church is now is not the way the church will always be. The hurting, suffering, and pain that exists now is not the way it will always be. This is true of the future promise of God in the coming of Jesus, but also true of the way the people of God are able to relieve the suffering of those around us today.

God invites us to bring our whole selves. Each day, I come to open myself up to God. I come to the Bible and I ask God to speak and move, form and shape my life through this Word by the same Spirit that inspired it. I am humble. Allowing Someone outside of me to master me. Scripture is not something to master, but something to be mastered by.⁶ The grand theme of Scripture is relating the story of redemption; God's revelation to humanity and great rescue plan have been unfolding over thousands of years. I am a part of this story. We are a part of this story. When I read Scripture and let these words, stories, and experiences between God and God's people touch me, I get to respond as a part of this unbroken history of the people of God. I am taught and shaped, informed and transformed by this story, and by the Holy God who meets me here.

As I approach this word, I return to three questions that have shaped my reading of Scripture and my life. ***What does this say? How does it connect with my life? Is there an invitation?***⁷ So many times, I find, like Jacob, that "God was in this place and I didn't even realize it" (Genesis 28:16-19). It is this discovery of God that has brought my heart great joy.

Joy of Devotion

Harvey Cox says, that the modern person has been pressed "so hard toward useful work and rational calculation he has all but forgotten the joy of

ecstatic celebration.”⁸ Even believers in Christ can easily forget that “the joy of the Lord is our strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).

Celebration is at the heart of the way of Christ. Jesus entered the world with a high note of jubilation (Luke 2:10). Jesus’ first miracle was at a wedding feast (John 2). Jesus spoke joy to the disciples, even saying that he would make their joy complete (John 15:11). Jesus inaugurated His ministry, proclaiming the year of Jubilee (Luke 4:18-19), canceling all debts, releasing all slaves, planting no crops (giving the land a rest), and returning property to the original owner. These all celebrated the provision of God!

We fight through physical barriers with sports or physical training, with piano lessons or with learning any new skill, all because we experience joy as a result. People struggle through school to reach their degree or certificate which qualifies them to do what they are called to do. Couples adjust to the first difficult years, looking forward to the gift of the rest of life together. If you don’t experience joy, you won’t keep something going for long.

Without joy and celebration, the spiritual disciplines become lifeless. Joy comes in obedience to Christ, even as discipline and habits are sometimes difficult to develop. Though it is a journey with highs and lows, joy comes through living our best possible life in Christ.

Ellen White says it this way in her classic book on Christian growth, *Steps to Christ*:

Have there not been some bright spots in your experience? Have you not had some precious seasons when your heart throbbed with joy in response to the Spirit of God? When you look back into the chapters of your life experience do you not find some pleasant pages? Are not God’s promises, like the fragrant flowers, growing beside your path on every hand? Will you not let their beauty and sweetness fill your heart with joy?⁹

Our minds and hearts need this focus on joy.

The life of the Christian is a life of joy. The life of Jesus’ disciples is one of celebration. Even though we live in a world full of darkness, of suffering

in which we often participate, we live with the confidence that God has overcome the darkness. Jesus told his disciples, “In this world you will have troubles, but rejoice, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Nouwen writes that we celebrate because “we see that God, not the Evil One, has the last word.”¹⁰

God’s people are those, as Eugene Peterson writes, “whose lives are bordered on one side by a memory of God’s acts and the other by hope in God’s promises, and who along with whatever else is happening, are able to say, at the center, ‘We are one happy people.’”¹¹

Our call to devotion is one of obedience and joy. If you aren’t experiencing joy in Jesus, ask God for this gift of joy. It’s a daily rhythm that we are invited into.

Hope Fulfilled

Our relationship with God is long-distance right now. Though the Spirit is with us and we speak to God daily, we don’t see God face-to-face as we will in the day that is coming. It’s just not the same as it will be then. “I go to prepare a place for you,” Jesus said. I’m making a space for you. There will come a day when we will be fully together (John 14:1-3).

The day is coming when there will be a reunion of epic proportions. When our lives of devotion, love, and trust will see the One whom our hearts desire. Fullness of restoration, healing, and rejoicing is coming. When all things are made right once more. We were made for this. I simply cannot wait. Until then, may our lives be characterized by devotion and transformation, even as we actively live out our hope.

May you rest deeply in the work of Christ in your life.

May you develop a rule of life that guides your living in devotion to God with intentionality.

May you find joy in living a life of devotion, inspiring others to do the same.

Discussion Questions

What is one practice you'd like to add to your rule of life?

In what ways have the Scriptures called you into a whole-life focus?

What is one area of your life in which you'd like more joy? Take a moment to ask God for this gift in Jesus.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Call to Prayer: Conversation with God



“To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.”

MARTIN LUTHER

DO YOU EVER FEEL LIKE YOUR PRAYERS aren't getting above the ceiling and that your prayer life is boring and dead? Maybe it's because your lifestyle is so completely contained that you really don't need God. When you hit a crisis point, you suddenly feel a passion and drive towards prayer, but then other times, you're not even interested. When we realize that in order to live a life that honors God, we need God moment by moment, our prayer life begins to change. When we realize that God desires a loving, open relationship with us, prayer grows to be as natural for us as breathing.

One of our friends was so excited to finally get a new cell phone: the latest iPhone from Apple. He called to ask me some questions about how to use his phone, since he had never owned that kind of phone before. I shared with him a few things and before I could finish my tutorial, he got really excited. He exclaimed, “I didn't even know what I had!” I didn't even know what I had. Isn't that true with us? We don't even realize the gift we have in prayer.

What is Prayer?

In the devotional book *Steps to Christ*, Ellen White says, “Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend.”¹ The gift of prayer is the avenue of connection we have with the Living God. Prayer is looking to the Lord and seeking God’s face and strength (1 Chronicles 16:11). Prayer is about the intention and choice to connect, both talking with and listening to God.

Prayer is the second most referenced spiritual practice in the Bible. The first is praise. The Scriptures are filled with examples of prayer, dialogue about prayer, and imperatives to pray. As Spurgeon points out, we open the Bible and read, “All began to call on the name of the Lord;”² and just as we are about to close the book, we read the “Amen” of the closing prayer. Prayer in the Scriptures is seen from beginning to end.

Throughout the ages, Christ followers have relied on prayer as a way to connect with God and grow deeper in relationship with God. As M. Robert Mulholland Jr. said, “Prayer is the act by which the people of God become incorporated into the presence and action of God in the world.”³ In prayer, I understand more deeply who God is, who I am, and what I am called to be or to do this day that I have been given to live in this world.

As we read and hear prayer stories from others, we may begin to ask questions about our prayer life as leaders and wonder what prayer can look like in our lives today. On day one, we say we will pray for one hour, and after 10 minutes, we’re done. Or you find yourself with the weight of ministry and life on your shoulders and you grow distracted from what you know you need: time with Jesus. When we fall short, we tend to beat ourselves up and just give up.

I believe it can help us immensely when we shift from prayer as something to do, to prayer as a conversation with our Creator. God desires a relationship with you, and prayer is the avenue for communication, ongoing throughout our day and our lives. When we come to God in prayer before running to the demands of life or even in the midst of days full of responsibility, our identity becomes rooted in Love (Ephesians 3:17).

Prayer in the Life of Jesus

How do we respond to those things in our lives which are unplanned and unanticipated?

Throughout the gospels we see that this constantly happened in the life of Christ. A woman came up to Him on His way to raise a dead little girl to life and He stopped and healed her. Two blind men called out, interrupting His journey, and Jesus stopped to heal them. People brought their babies to be blessed by Him, interrupting what He was doing, and He stopped everything to bless them. This happened again and again to Jesus. What kept Jesus grounded, able to answer definitively “yes” or “no” to these opportunities that came His way? One word: prayer.

Mark 1:35 says, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.”

Jesus prayed and sought direction from the Lord. He was guided in those quiet moments and able to discern where God would have Him go. In the next verses, when the disciples came to rush Him off into the activity of those who were seeking Him, His answer was, no, it’s time for us to move on to the nearby villages. How did Jesus know that this interruption was not for Him? From the time He had spent with God.

When we experience God in prayer, we open ourselves up to be guided through the expected and unexpected of our day. In prayer we hear where and when and how to go about living now, giving us perspective to take each moment as what it is: truly a gift from God.

Henri Nouwen had a life-altering interaction with one of his professors. It was from this conversation that he went on to write:

It has been the interruptions to my everyday life that have most revealed to me the divine mystery of which I am a part. All of these interruptions presented themselves as opportunities; invited me to look in a new way at my identity before God. Each interruption took something away from me; each interruption offered something new.⁴

Isn't it like this for us sometimes? The thing which you don't want to do, that which seems to be distracting you, ends up being a step towards your goal, the fulfillment of a dream, or the realization of another piece of God's purpose coming together in your life. Prayer opens the door of connection with God, giving guidance for all that fills our days.

Prayer in Scripture

The Bible contains 650 definite prayers, expressed in many different ways.⁵ In fact, the first thing we observe about prayer in the Bible is the tremendous diversity. We see collective prayers at the temple dedication, while in the midst of crisis, or at gatherings. The book of Acts mentions prayer or praying over 30 times. God moves and works among the people, and the church seems to be growing by prayer.

We see personal prayers. We experience joy and pain as the people of God call out to God. We find Jacob wrestling with God (Genesis 32:22-32). We see Esther requesting everyone to fast (and pray) as she took action on behalf of her people (Esther 4). We hear the heartfelt prayers of David recorded in the Psalms. We experience Hannah's honesty and anguish as she poured out her heart in prayer (1 Samuel 1:10-16). In the New Testament, Mary's prayer of praise fills our hearts with joy (Luke 1:47-50); we celebrate the miracle when God freed Peter from jail in response to the prayers of the people of God (Acts 12); and we lament with Paul who pleaded with God in prayer, but instead of receiving what he asked for, is given grace and strength (2 Corinthians 12).

As we notice the variety in the prayers recorded in Scripture, we can't help but also experience the honesty of these prayers. The openness and vulnerability that characterize the relationships the people shared with their God is grounding. "My God, why have you forsaken me?" is a prayer found in the Psalms and heard later from the mouth of Jesus as He was suffering on the cross.

As Dr. Allan Walshe said during our class discussion one day, "God would rather have us complain honestly instead of praise falsely." God already knows everything. Being honest in God's presence can't hurt us; it

can only help open us to God's healing and love. The invitation from God is to find new ways to pray and connect with God. Pray as much as you can honestly, authentically pray. In these stories of prayer, in the diversity and in the raw honesty, we are compelled towards the sacred call and necessity of prayer.

Ways to Pray

Taking the two observations, variety and honesty, what does it look like to engage with God in prayer in some of the ways recorded in the Bible? Here are several that you can try in your own life of devotion and with your church or organization.

Pray the Scriptures

There are treasured passages of Scripture that I come back to, not only to say, but also to pray. The 23rd Psalm is one of those. I can go through each verse, imagining the Good Shepherd and how God is speaking into my life through these words. Psalm 91 is another such passage, where I call out to God as my refuge and my rest. There have been seasons of my life where I have prayed the Lord's Prayer every day as a way of connecting with the heart of God and God's intentions for humanity. Finding Scriptures to pray daily can enrich our spiritual lives and broaden our vocabulary in prayer.

Lift Up Your Hands

Have you ever seen someone with their hands raised up in prayer or in worship? What's that all about? This was a common Semitic posture of prayer. Lamentations 3:41 declares, "We lift up our heart and hands toward God in heaven." In the Psalms, there are numerous references to lifting up hands in prayer before God (Psalms 28:2; 63:4; 141:1, 2). Paul instructed Timothy that he desired the "lifting up of holy hands in prayer" (1 Timothy 2:8). What is it about raising up our hands that would aid in our connection to God in prayer or in praise?

I will never forget how my two-year-old daughter, Ava, runs over to me when I get home and stretches out both her hands, raising them up to greet

me. It completely melts my heart. It's the sweetest thing to have a child raise their hands to you, isn't it? What is the child desiring? If you're an uncle or aunt, mom or dad, grandpa or grandma, you might know this means, "Pick me up!" or "I want to be held by you!" Our Ava says, "Hold you?" when she wants to be held, arms stretched up reaching for me.

I think God loves to see our arms outstretched in prayer and in praise. James 4:8 says, "Draw near to God and God will draw near to you!" This is one of the first verses that I memorized when I became a Christian, the promise that God will always draw near.

There are days I stretch up my hands in prayer and say, "God I'm raising my hands up to you, like Ava raises up her hands to be picked up. I need you." I pray in the midst of difficulty with hands raised up. I don't understand what is happening in my life or the lives of those I love. Some days I lift up my hands because my heart is so full of praise because of a victory God has worked. I raise up my hands to celebrate! I hold up my hands, cheering for the goodness of God I have just witnessed! Raising up my hands has opened up new experiences in my prayer and praise of God.

Prayer Cards for Intercession

There is a wonderful suggestion from the book *A Praying Life* by Paul Miller in regards to how to engage in intercessory prayer in a practical way.⁶ I've been blessed as I have used prayer cards over the years. You take index cards and on each one, put the name of a person you want to pray for at the top. Ask God to lead you to a passage for them. Write out the verse and specific prayers for them below. Leave space for when these prayers are answered, along with the date when you saw God working in this area of their lives. You can take these prayer cards with you wherever you go. On my phone, I have prayer lists for intercession in *Slack* and *Evernote*,⁷ which allow me to pray for others in the in-between moments. In my office I have a prayer bulletin board where I have pictures of people I pray for daily, as well as notecards with different requests. It can be affirming to see God work in the lives of people you're praying for and in your prayer time.

When I look at the stack of cards where I've written "answered" and the date God worked, it reaffirms God's presence in my life.

All Your Senses

The first Epistle of John launches with the most earnest of declarations. The energy in the text is palpable. First John 1:1-4 proclaims that we have seen something with our own eyes... with our own hands we have touched it... we have heard it ourselves and it has made all the difference... Eternal life has been revealed. The subject of the passage rips through the text, a ballistic path from the very beginning, through the present and into the future, breaking down any barriers between the tenses. This has made all the difference for the disciples! They have experienced it with all of their senses and the connection has changed them. As we make time to behold God, we are invited into an experience that makes full use of all our senses (seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling).

What can you do this week to put yourself in a place where you can experience God? Hearing, seeing, and touching the Word of Life? Is there a song you can pray? Is there a prayer you can paint, collage, or draw? Is there prayer time that is experienced with candles lit and the smell of incense or oils, reminiscent of the Old Testament sanctuary (Exodus 30:34-38; 37:2). Are there ways you can experience the holiness of God, capturing each scene of the Scriptures with not just your mind, but all your senses?

John invited the gathered crowd to "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). The author of Hebrews declared, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1-2). As we behold and fix our eyes, we are invited to do so with the full range of our sensory experience. This will enliven our prayer life.

Gratitude and Praise

In Philippians 4:11-13, Paul counseled us not to wait until everything is settled in our lives to experience happiness. Don't postpone joy and gladness until your situation changes or until you have acquired a certain thing. If you cannot be happy now, you will not be happy then. Happiness

is not a matter of what you have, or what situation you are in; it's a matter of who you are and how you respond to life. Gratitude generates joy.

To live in gratitude is to acknowledge that, at the core, we are satisfied by God's Presence alone. As the psalmist said, "I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness" (Psalm 17:15). For the followers of Jesus, Thanksgiving is not just a holiday or a season, but a way of life. The same root word for communion (eucharist) is to give thanks. We come to the table to receive the sacrificial death of Jesus and live in His life. This "giving thanks" becomes the way that I live.

Expressing gratitude and praise has changed my prayer life. Almost every day, I take time to thank God for the gifts I see in my life. Often, it's not until I stop to show gratitude that I realize there are gifts I would have missed altogether if it weren't for this regular practice. In addition, I take time to praise God for who God is—the characteristics and qualities of God that I experience: God's love, faithfulness, trustworthiness, and grace. Taking time to see God for who God is lifts my heart up in praise! Psalm 89:15 implores, "Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O Lord." As I learn this habit of acclaiming and finding joy in God during prayer, I am not the same person I was.

Be Still

Most of our prayer is talking to and/or intercessory prayer with God. However, listening is also a key part of prayer. Words are not always necessary for our hearts to pray. "Be still," the psalmist entreats, "Know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

In *Ministry of Healing*, Ellen White beautifully describes where we can find this stillness with God.

All who are under the training of God need the quiet hour for communion with their own hearts, with nature, and with God... We must individually hear Him speaking to the heart. When every other voice is hushed, and in quietness we wait before Him, the silence of the soul makes more distinct the voice of God. He bids us, 'Be still,

and know that I am God' Psalm 46:10. This is the effectual preparation for all labor for God.⁸

Our hearts need that quiet hour for communion. Put your phone on “do not disturb.” Take time outside sitting in a peaceful place. Sit in the sanctuary alone. Linger in your car before moving towards your next meeting. Stop. Let your mind fill with God’s goodness. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to a place of peace. Take a deep breath and let your body relax in the knowledge that “It is well with your soul.” In this way, you will more deeply experience that God is God.

Being still in God’s presence allows us to let go of the expectations that we have for ourselves and others. Being still in God’s presence, we are able to release the persona, the mask, and the protection that we wear to safeguard ourselves. We realize we belong to God alone. We acknowledge that only God is God.

Prayers When We Have No Words

There are times when we have no words. When the loss is too raw and hasn’t yet formed into a clear lament. When anger burns inside us. When God feels far away. In those times when you sit with God in prayer, recall the promise of Romans 8:26-27: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness... interceding for us with wordless groans.” We don’t need words in order to be understood. The whole range of our human experience is understood and known by God. Bring it all. Even if you have no words to yet express or make sense of it, bring it all. It’s been particularly helpful for me to prayer journal in order to open up my mind and heart to God.

When we have no words, we can know this about how God receives us. Ellen White writes that our prayers, “may be inaudible to any human ear, but they cannot die away into silence, nor can they be lost through the activities of business that are going on. Nothing can drown the soul’s desire. It rises above the din of the street, above the confusion of the multitude, to the heavenly courts. It is God to whom we are speaking, and our prayer is heard.”⁹ Know that God hears you and understands more than you can verbalize or make sense of.

The Face of God

Dallas Willard once wrote about a small child who crept into his father's bedroom to sleep. In the dark, knowing his father was present was enough to take away his sense of aloneness. "Is your face turned toward me, Father?" he would ask. "Yes," his father replied. "My face is turned towards you." Only then could he fall asleep.¹⁰

The night falls on us. There are times we don't know what's going on. We are not in control. We don't have the answers. A relationship with God does not take away the uncertainty, but in the darkness, we can ask, "God is your face turned towards me?" God responds to us, "Yes, My child. My face is turned towards you. My eyes are always on you."

God never stops, never quits, never fails to reach out to you, always available for a special, personal relationship. God who refuses to let death, darkness, chaos or pain have the last word in your life, the church, and the world. God is calling you and me to a relationship.

As Adventists, we believe that all life change starts with turning toward God, responding to this God who loves us first. Pray the Scriptures. Lift up your hands. Intercede for others. Use all your senses. Practice gratitude and praise. Be still. Trust that when you have no words, you are still deeply understood. You are invited to grow in a relationship with God.

May you experience the gift of God's presence in prayer, perhaps even trying new ways to pray.

May you be honest and show up with God exactly as you are.

May you know, no matter what, that God's face is turned towards you in love.

Discussion Questions

What insight from the prayer life of Jesus most inspires you?

What is one new way to pray that you'd like to try this week?

What is one thing you can praise God for right now, regardless of your circumstances?

CHAPTER TWELVE

A Call to Rest: Sabbath Restoration



*“It’s not that we don’t love God, it’s that we don’t
know how to sit with God anymore.”*

A. J. SWOBODA

SOME YEARS AGO, the local newspapers in Tacoma, Washington, created a local hero when they reported the story of Tattoo, the basset hound.¹ Tattoo never intended to go for an evening run, but had no choice when his owner shut his leash in the car door and took off for a drive – with Tattoo outside the vehicle.

Police motorcycle officer, Terry Filbert, was driving near North 21st and Adam Street at about 7:25 PM, when he noticed a vehicle that appeared to have something dragging from it. As Filbert passed the vehicle, he saw the basset hound on a leash, “picking them up and putting them down as fast as he could.”

Filbert pursued the car to a stop but not before the dog reached speeds in excess of 25 miles per hour and rolled over several times. The car’s occupants, a man and a woman, jumped out when Filbert told them they

were dragging a dog. The driver was distressed, shouting, “Tattoo, Tattoo!” The dog, eight months old, was uninjured and no citation was issued.

Ever feel like Tattoo—picking them up and putting them down as fast as you can? Racing through life? Yes, we can all relate. We face this challenge—a fixation with speed.

How did it get so late so soon?

It's night before

it's afternoon.

December is here before it's June.

My goodness how the

time has flown.

How did it get so late so soon?

– THEODOR GEISEL [ALSO KNOWN AS DR. SEUSS]

How did it get to this pacing of go, go, go? How did it get so late so soon?

Yet, what we want is more meaning. A deeper and more fulfilling life.

Beyond physical rest. Beyond emotional rest. We are people in need of spiritual rest.

The need for rest—a deep kind of rest—was woven into us from the start. On the sixth day of creation, God made humans—men and women. The very next day was a day like no other. God did not create; instead, God celebrated with rest.

Our very first day as a human race was not about what we did, but who we were with! This tells us something of our purpose and our identity.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that our gracious God gave the gift of Sabbath rest to humanity at Creation. The Sabbath is God's enduring sign of the covenant of love God has made with humanity. The response to our need for deep rest. At our core we believe that God is on the throne and worthy of worship on the Sabbath. As the sun goes down on Friday, we are reminded of who we are and who we are not. We remember the God who loves us, created us, redeems us, and is with us.

In Genesis 2:1-3, right from the start, the cycle is set up. Work six days and rest on the seventh. Work on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, but rest on Saturday, the seventh day of the week.

There is no creation without celebration. Work for six days, then enter into rest. The Sabbath is the highest point of creation. This word for rest isn't about relaxation alone. It has a full, rich meaning of entering into the fullness of life.

The verbs that are used here in the Hebrew are interesting. The format suggests that God was ceasing activity on the seventh day, but not only that. God was settling into the stability of the cosmos that had just been created. Experiencing refreshment by the security of what had been made, God blessed this space in time and extended favor to it.

Structurally, the climax of creation was rest. Communion. Ceasing. Relating. A deep breath and knowing that truly, "All is well." All the work is done, even if it isn't. God invites us to celebrate what has just happened and what continues to happen everyday in the world: the creative, benevolent power of God.

When we set aside time for rest, we acknowledge that all time is God's. As one commentator states, "We set aside the tyranny of the urgent and recapture the equilibrium that God established when he ordered the cosmos."²

Judith Shulemitz from the NY Times asks the question in a column about the Sabbath saying, "Why should God have considered it so important to stop?" For the answer she quotes Rabbi Elijah of Vilna saying, "God stopped to show us that what we create becomes meaningful to us only once we stop creating it and start to think about why we did so." Shulemitz goes on to summarize saying, "We have to remember to stop because we have to stop to remember."³

This is what it means to live aware of our humanity, honoring our Creator. There is a rhythm of work and rest. Work and celebration. Stop. Rest. See what God is doing. Take a day to make peace with what you can't control. Lay down your toiling and your controlling. Enter into rest. Break the spell that everything depends on you.

Ten Commandments

Seventh-day Adventists believe that this gift of Sabbath is a gift from God, given at creation as the birthright of humanity to live as a human being, not a human doing. The Ten Commandments protect every human relationship—with God, with our internal selves, and with each other. The Fourth Commandment says you need rest. You need rhythm. You need this cycle in which you stop and remember who God is and who you are.

I recently finished a book called *Thrive* by Arianna Huffington, founder of the Huffington Post. This book shares the importance of rest, sighting that we must end our delusion that burnout is the price we must pay for success. She advocates for sleep, making a difference, stillness, wholeness—all things needed to thrive. As I was listening to this audiobook, I looked up startled at hearing the Fourth Commandment being read. Arianna is spiritual but not religious, yet from her own life and her story of complete burnout, she discovered the importance of the Sabbath rest.

From Exodus 20:8-11, the command reads:

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

So, God says, one seventh of all your time is to be devoted solely to relationships, with me and with other people. You and I need rest. Just as strongly as God commands that we not murder, or commit adultery or lie, God says Rest. Remember. Stop. Reflect. Maybe you were raised so strictly that all you hear when I mention the commandments is “thou shalt not.” Growing up, that phrase eclipsed the meaning of the Sabbath. Maybe you feel constrained, frustrated, or waves of guilt all over again as you think of it. Or maybe you’ve been so focused on worshipping on the right day that it has been a long time since you let yourself rest in body, mind, and heart.

Remember this context: God gave this command in Exodus when the people were leaving slavery. Rescued from hundreds of years of oppression, God's people didn't know who they were anymore. They were slaves. Their worth was all based on how many bricks they could make. So interwoven all throughout the redemption and freedom story is the Sabbath. God was teaching the people again what it meant to be human, what it meant to be God's children. This is how you live: rest and then work. Back to the way you were designed at creation.

Liberation

God's voice speaks through the Sabbath: your worth and your value don't come from how many bricks you make, but because you are Mine. You are My child, My disciple, My beloved. Your worth and your value are not from what you do, but from the reality that you are Mine. Take one day per week to remind yourself that you are a person, not a machine. Take one day to be re-created. "I will be with you. I will give you rest," God promises.

In Genesis 2:3, it says that God blessed the Sabbath day. God made it holy, or set it aside for a different use. "Within the context of the Law, it means that the day belonged to God; it was for rest from ordinary labor, worship, and spiritual service. The day belonged to God."⁴ This day had a different purpose than all the others.

Pastors are not exempt from this struggle with identity and where our worth comes from. The journey of practicing Sabbath has been an ongoing growth that has become richer and more meaningful for me over the years. For me, the practice of Sabbath means refusing to engage with certain questions or planning details on the Sabbath. It means preparing and then leaning into trust and the moving of the Holy Spirit for what God has prepared for us all. It means not connecting to social media and email for a set period of time in order to connect to God and who I am in God. It means turning off my phone or using "Do Not Disturb" at key times throughout the week. It means being conscientious of how I show up to the love of God and those around me. It means coloring in a coloring book with my son. It means noticing someone's expression and offering a hug. It means taking the time to pray for the people around me as we kneel in

prayer, not just focusing on whatever is coming next. It means entering fully into worship. It means being in spaces and places where I can simply be. It's an ongoing journey.

Worship

The Pharisees not only focused on external behaviors such as Sabbath-keeping, but also seemed to trust in them, as if doing activities somehow made them holy (rather than God's making them holy). For Jesus, such practices were a means to an end: a way of connecting with God. For the Pharisees, the tools were the "end." Doing them was the point!⁵

In the Gospel accounts, we see that Jesus lived a life with His eyes fixed on the right priorities. Jesus lived a life of Sabbath—work, then rest, work, then rest. Throughout His life, Jesus spent Sabbaths in the synagogue instructing people in the Scriptures; He spent time with His community—His friends; He spent time outdoors; and He spent time doing acts of mercy for others. These four things are activities that Jesus invites us to join in with Him.

Worship is the engagement of one's entire being with the greatness of the God who is. Worship is a life of conversation with God. God speaks, we respond, God responds, we respond again. Worship involves listening, looking, tasting, feeling, and smelling. We breathe in the presence of God wherever we are. We inhale the memories of faithful acts in the past and promises of love in the future. Just as we suffocate for lack of air, worship suffocates for lack of attentiveness to God's presence and faithfulness.

On the Sabbath, we are invited to the rest and restoration that comes as God's gift in worship. The gift of worship is our invitation every day as individual believers. Yet on the Sabbath day, the worshipping community gathers to worship God communally—truly a high day!

Dallas Willard wrote, "We dishonor God as much by fearing and avoiding pleasure as we do by dependence upon it or living for it."⁶ (Of course, we are talking about godly, wholesome and healthy pleasure). What do children do when they celebrate? They make noise, lots of noise. There's nothing wrong with this, in the appropriate context and setting. Miriam the

prophetess led the people in a great celebration dance. David went leaping and dancing before the Lord with all his might. You and I are invited to join in the celebration that comes as we experience rest.

Revelation 4 and 5 contain my favorite worship scenes in the Scriptures—the ultimate worship. God is good and the life God gives us is good. The gathered host joins together to sing, bow down, and celebrate Jesus in their midst. This is true for us today. There is beauty to celebrate. There is love to celebrate. There are answers to prayer to celebrate. There are victories to celebrate. There are changed lives to celebrate. There is a wonderful future to celebrate. The Sabbath is a special time to celebrate and worship God.

A Called-Out People

We are called to be different. A people who stand out and who inspire others in the pacing of our lives. It is possible to be busy and not to be in a hurry. Busyness is a full life and can be lived with an attentiveness and dependence on God for each part. Hurrying crowds out our availability to God, giving our souls the sense of always rushing.

Perhaps what it looks like to live as called-out people is that we stop answering the question, “How are you?” with the word “busy.” Perhaps we practice trust and letting go by stopping when Sabbath comes. At sundown, whether or not our work is done, we sit and enter into God’s rest. Perhaps we lay down our worry, surrender our anxiety, and enter into worship. Perhaps we intentionally build in Sabbath practices that Jesus did: worship, community, rest, acts of mercy, and service.

What does this look like for you?

In music, the notes have meaning because of the rests, the pauses that allow us to be able to recognize the melody. In our lives, our activity has meaning because of the rest that we take. It is only through rest that what we do has any meaning at all. God offers us the greatest rest because it’s not only physical rest; it’s rest from trying to be all and do all in life. So often we leave our days feeling incomplete, inadequate, and run down. Sabbath reminds us that it’s not about what we do, but who we are and who made us. “It’s not how many bricks you make, My daughter, My son; it’s because

you're Mine," God says. It reminds me that it's not by what I do as a disciple of Jesus that I am made right with God or have meaning in my life. It's because of what Jesus has done.

God, the Creator of all, set up the Sabbath for us to be in a relationship—with God, with each other, and with all of creation. When we stop and honor this Sabbath that God made holy—set it aside as different than the other six days—we are acknowledging God as our Creator, as Master, and as the one who knows what is best for us.

In Matthew 11:28, 29, Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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."

This is what you were made for. Do you want to accept the Sabbath rest and all the beauty it holds? "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1). You were made for freedom! The Sabbath is a special date every week that God has set aside for you. You are invited into rest. You are invited to worship. You are invited to celebrate.

The Sabbath is inclusive (for all of us!), liberating (we are set free!), and healing (we remember who we are).

May you know that your worth and your value are not from what you do, but because you are God's child.

May you take one day per week to remind yourself you are a human being, not a human doing.

May you learn to practice the gift of Sabbath rest in your daily life as a disciple of Jesus.

Discussion Questions

What is one area of your life where you feel like you're just "picking them up and putting them down as fast as you can"?

What is one practical way you can enter more deeply into Sabbath rest?

What does it look like in your church to "set aside the tyranny of the urgent" and dedicate yourselves to living in the spirit of Sabbath?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Call to Community: Life Together



“Encourage the expression of love toward God and toward one another. The reason why there are so many hardhearted men and women in the world is that true affection has been regarded as weakness, and has been discouraged and repressed.”

ELLEN WHITE

RESEARCH SHOWS that deep and lasting loneliness has dire consequences for mental and physical health, increasing blood pressure and causing cardiovascular damage. Prolonged loneliness carries a higher morbidity risk than obesity, and some research indicates that it is as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.¹

University of Chicago professor John Cacioppo says that the feeling of loneliness in the United States has doubled from 20% in the 1980s to 40% today.² Apparently, this uber-connected generation is . . . disconnected. Strange, isn't it, that our isolation is increasing in the time when we are more networked and connected than ever before.

At a horse-pull in Canada, one horse pulled 9,000 pounds, and another pulled 8,000 pounds. Together, we might assume that they could pull

17,000 pounds. However, when harnessed together these mighty steeds pulled 30,000 pounds, over three times what either could pull separately! ³

Similarly, God's power through the community of the church is greater than the sum of God's power in our lives individually. It's time to reconnect to the power of life lived in community.

For many years the church has encouraged believers to operate as if they were isolated from the world around them. Gallup states that "Americans are among the loneliest people in the world."⁴ If we're honest, we find that the loneliness "out there" is also the loneliness inside the walls of the church, and inside us too.

Christianity has been plagued by years of individualizing the faith experience. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has not remained untouched by this focus. In recent decades, there has been a reawakening to the necessity of community in the discipleship process. Mega church pastor Keith Meyer has seen the power of spiritual transformation through seeking God in community. As studies began to show that mega churches were failing to produce changed lives, Meyer was one of those leaders who was willing to take the difficult challenge of assessing their approach and making corresponding changes to their church culture. They began the journey of connecting people in lasting community in new ways.⁵

Change that takes place in community is one of the most powerful and lasting. Henry Cloud and John Townsend point out that since humanity is wounded in community, God uses community to play a key part in healing those wounds.⁶ The goal of the discipleship process in the local church is to experience transformation and healing together, experiencing mutuality in our shared journey.

Many people feel a hunger for something more in their church interactions.⁷ Discipleship in community is a response to this need to *do life* together. Intentional discipleship brings "a layer of structure and intentionality to our otherwise random and unstructured friendships."⁸ In the Adventist Church, during the formation of our denomination, small groups in homes, prayer bands, and more intimate sharing circles were common. These gave opportunity for deeper connection and depth among

the believers. In addition, they made space for accountability and mentoring.



Accountability

An important aspect of discipleship and transformation through community is accountability. Accountability is often misunderstood. Cloud and Townsend assert that it is far more than just reporting your progress to others or having the experience of confessing to others that helps you bring about change in your personal life.⁹ Healthy accountability is about disciples bringing their whole selves into the group (or community) and allowing the community to help with the growth and repair process that God is working in their individual lives. The group not only helps members to look at the external behavior, but also helps them plunge deeper into understanding the reasons behind what they are doing.

In the discipleship process, accountability is woven into the fabric of the process. It begins with the shared commitment to show up in each other's lives throughout the course of the discipleship journey (in the case of *Deep Calling*, a 12-week time period). Agreeing to ground rules for relationship and transparency in sharing, both set the stage for mutual accountability.

Mentoring

Walking with someone down a path that you have already been down and aiding in their journey is an apt metaphor for mentoring. Mentoring can be a useful tool for experiencing transformation through community. It can be done in the group setting or with just one individual and is the process of opening oneself to the input and wisdom of someone outside of oneself.¹⁰

We see this in the natural world. Cats don't know how to kill mice until they see it done. There are skills animals will not learn unless there is a more experienced adult to teach them. In the same way, there are things in our spiritual life that cannot be learned by reading or an online search.

Spiritual maturity must be witnessed. As Paul said, follow my example (Philippians 3:17).

Mentoring in the discipleship process takes place primarily on the peer-to-peer level. The leader must not assume a mentor or “master” role with the group, but instead, facilitate space for the mutual mentoring that will take place within the group. Where one is strong, another may be weaker and vice versa. God knows how to match partners and groups in order to grow participants. The role of leaders is vital, and certainly they do serve as mentors in key moments; however, the weight of mentoring for the entire group does not rest on them.

The story is told of a man who was walking down the street when he fell into a pit in the ground. The walls were so steep that he couldn't get out. A doctor passed by and the guy shouted up, “Hey you. Can you help me out?” The doctor wrote a prescription, threw it down in the hole, and moved on. Then a pastor came along, and the man shouted up, “Pastor, I'm down in this hole. Can you help me out?” The pastor wrote out a prayer, threw it down in the hole, and moved on.

Then a friend walked by. “Hey, Joe, it's me, can you help me out?” The friend jumped in the hole. Our guy said, “Are you stupid? Now we're both down here.” The friend said, “Yeah, but I've been down here before and I know the way out.”

The strength of community is that we each have experience, strength, and hope that we can lend to one another to lead the way out of wherever we've gotten stuck.

Community meets the needs of individual loneliness and isolation in this connection-deprived society, helping to restore the biblical paradigm for discipleship. Jesus set up an example in the way He called the first disciples to be with Him and with each other. It is this model that Jesus desires for the church. As Jesus stated in John 13:34-35, disciples are identified by the love they have for each other. People are able to see this love as disciples live in biblical community. In this complex world, biblical community in discipleship answers the longing of the human heart for companionship with God and fellow travelers.



Mission and Growth

A remarkable sense of community develops among disciples who are following Jesus together in mission. What binds the community of disciples together? First of all, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out, each disciple has experienced the forgiveness of their sins in Jesus Christ. It is this understanding of who they were before encountering Jesus, and who they are now in Jesus that characterizes the relationships between believers. All those gathered to Jesus know that without God, they are without hope. Together they stand on common ground as they recognize that they are sinners saved by grace (Ephesians 2:4-6; 1 Peter 2:9). Second, it is the shared commission to do Jesus' work in the world that unifies His people together (Matthew 28:18-20). God lives in the church (Ephesians 2:19-22) and is reconciling the world through God's people (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). This binds believers even more closely together as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12).

For the disciple, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus changes how they interact with others. Notice that after Pentecost, the group of original disciples allowed Jesus to form their lives around their relationships with God and the people around them. Acts 2:46-47 describes, "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." As they were united together with Jesus and each other, God was able to continue to add people to the church. Church growth is spoken of in relational terms—between God and the believer, as well as among the believers themselves.

As the church met, ate, praised, and enjoyed favor together, God was able to bring about growth. They met with glad and sincere hearts—an openhearted attitude, no performance. There was a generosity and devotion that characterized their time together. This kind of fellowship led to praise

and to favor with others. The community they experienced led to expansion of the community.

Notice that there's not a single part of the life following Christ that you are meant to do alone. The entire Christian life is meant to be done in community. Meeting. Eating. Serving. Struggling. Growth. Unfortunately, we often miss the plural "you" in Greek. In our English Bibles, it looks like it's on us, "you," when we should understand it's all of us together. Maybe we need to use the Texan "y'all" or "all of you" in our Bibles. The life of devotion to Christ is meant to be lived out in community.



Not Without Challenges

This does not mean that community comes easily or quickly. Genuine community comes about as people follow Christ together, and it is not something that humans can fabricate themselves. Not unlike the salvation experience, community is a gift that only God can give.¹¹

It is God who drives all aspects of authentic Christian community. The disciple's ongoing experience with Jesus' extravagant forgiveness slowly transforms them into a person who forgives others (Ephesians 4:31-32). The disciple's experience with God's consistent love changes them into a person who shares love with others (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). The way the disciple treats others is evidence of God's work in them. The outward fruit testifies to the inward transformation (Luke 6:43-45).

Why will spiritual transformation through an emphasis on discipleship make a more vibrant church culture? Disciples who have a living relationship with Jesus through which they are experiencing God's love, mercy, and joy bear this same fruit in their relationships with others. For example, many of the spiritual disciplines center around listening to God. By learning to listen to God, disciples learn to listen to those around them—both within and outside of the church. By listening more deeply to those around them, they are better able to reach them with the good news of

Jesus and God's love for them. In communicating the love of Christ, disciples are accomplishing the mission.

It is the expression of Jesus' love in the life of the community that works to draw others into a relationship with Him (John 17:20-23). Jesus said that it is by love expressed to one another that people would be able to recognize the disciples of Jesus (John 13:34-35).

It is the love of Jesus that binds disciples together and prepares them for their work with Jesus in the world. Ellen White shares the winsome nature of this love in the following way:

The knowledge of the Saviour's matchless love for them was to *bind them heart to heart*, preparing the way for the Lord to anoint them with his Spirit. United by this love, they were to go forth to witness with convincing power to the divinity of their Leader. And their Christlike love for one another was to be the sign of their discipleship.¹² (emphasis mine)

The Savior's love, unity in the church, and power in witnessing are all realized in the lives of the believers as they follow Jesus together on God's mission in the world. Out of this fusion comes the divine gift of community and sense of belonging for the believers.

Together

I got an unsolicited magazine in the mail. Paging through it before tossing it in the recycle bin, my eyes landed on this news, reported in May 2019.¹³ The Scripps National Spelling Bee ran out of difficult words, and declared the final eight contestants co-champions, the most extraordinary ending in the event's 92-year history! The contestants all calmly went through the 20 final rounds, with words like:

sphaeriid – sense organ found on the exterior of most sea urchins

huanglongbing – a disease that prevents citrus fruit from ripening

Then, in a remarkable surprise, they were all declared the winners, the prestigious competition's first "octo-champions." This cost the organization

\$400,000 vs. \$50,000 if there had been one winner!

We are living in an individualistic age—a time where we focus on what you as an individual can accomplish. This idea of more than one winner is so foreign. They've had a handful of other times where a tie between two winners occurred, but never more than two. Think of the investment these kids made. The kids have coaches, they practiced on a rigorous schedule, they invested their time, and sacrificed other sports and hobbies. And at the end of it all, there were eight winners. Some outsiders were upset, wondering how the organization could have failed to declare a winner. This flies in the face of the individualism we are so accustomed to.

The reaction of the kids? They were full of joy. Instead of representing the organization solo, they now got to travel and represent with other kids and they were elated.

Albert Schweitzer said, “In everyone’s life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit.”¹⁴

They did it together. Not one winner, but eight. That’s what I pray our life is like.

Beyond sharing the title at the spelling bee, the truth is we cannot do it alone. We weren’t designed to do it alone. My prayer is that when the confetti falls at the end of life, you’re surrounded, not by strangers you’re competing against, but by friends who are supporting you.

I want to remind you that you aren’t made to do life alone. Who are your people? How are you experiencing support from others? The best way you can make space for others to experience community and do life together in a discipleship group is if you are experiencing community in your own life.

Maybe for you that radical life lived in community will begin small today. Opening up to a friend about what you’re really facing. Being vulnerable with a colleague. Forgiving someone who hurt you and caused you to shut down part of your heart to relationships with others.

Recommitting to the living Word of God with a friend. This life together is compelling. This life together matters.

Remember, we saw in Acts 2 that it was the way they shared life which caused others to come their way and commit to Jesus. The numerical growth of the church was all from community, the quality of their fellowship. Imagine that! I believe it's the same vision of community that will meet the needs of the world we live in today.

May you experience the care and compassion, growth and guidance of God through community.

May you have courage to show up, vulnerable and honest.

May you relentlessly pursue structuring space for others to do life together.

Discussion Questions

What is your church doing to be intentional about community outside of Sabbath mornings?

What is your church doing to encourage an atmosphere where everyone can win and celebrate together, not just individuals?

Who are the people who support you? How can you reach out to them and thank them?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A Call to Healing: Wholeness in Brokenness



*“How sweet the name of Jesus sounds, in a
believer’s ear! It soothes his sorrows, heals his
wounds, and drives away his fear.”*

JOHN NEWTON

SOMETIMES WE THINK what keeps us from fellowship with God and with each other is our pain and brokenness. We think of the things that we still do, say, and hold that we can’t seem to get over. We think of the dreams and longings that we have that have gone unfulfilled. The words, actions, and circumstances of the past that prevent us from experiencing the forgiveness, healing, and mutual support of community.

Well, according to the follower and friend of Jesus who wrote the letter we are about to read in part, what keeps us from the light of God (i.e. in our darkness) is our unwillingness to admit the truth. It’s our claiming what is not, instead of owning the truth.

“This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But

if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:5-7).

Lying to ourselves, to God, and to each other keeps us in the darkness and out of the light. It’s not our brokenness or our pain; it’s our resistance to being honest about that pain. Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines lying as “to create a false or misleading impression.” In the words of John, we are claiming something, yet doing another thing all together.

The truth is that we sometimes don’t like who or what we are so we try to make it seem that we’re something we’re not. It is this game of charades, costumes, and cover that keeps us from experiencing the beauty, the joy, the freedom that comes from walking in the light of God’s healing. As Kathleen Norris says, “We want life to have meaning, and want to be fulfilled, and it is hard to accept that we find these things by starting where we are, not where we would like to be.”¹

This call of God to healing is an invitation to start where we are—right in our mess, in our unwillingness to forgive... in our bitterness... in our jealousy... in our pain... in our unbelief... in the way we just can’t seem to move on. In this place of honesty, we find that Jesus whispers, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). We hear, “By His wounds, we are healed” (1 Peter 2:24). This promised healing is for all of us, for you and for me.

Come into the light of authenticity. I believe we will find that healing, freedom, forgiveness, fellowship, and grace all begin with being honest with God, ourselves, and others about where we are right now. There is a newness of life for us. By walking in the light of God, we are willing to say what areas of our lives need healing and to reach after God who desires to make us whole. Like the man at the pool, Jesus asks us, “Do you want to be healed?” (John 5:6, ESV). God desires to make you whole in body, mind, and heart (Psalm 147:3).

Discipleship and Healing

The discipleship journey must, by necessity, involve growing in emotional and spiritual health. We are whole beings. As the disciple grows up in God, wounds of the heart and mind are exposed, faced, and healed. God brings a fuller life to the followers, and rather than this spiritual growth disconnecting the disciples from life, the disciples become healthier in their connection with all of life. Benner exhorts that becoming “more spiritual” must be grounded in becoming “more human.” He continues, “If embracing humanness was good enough for Jesus, how can we despise it? To become like Jesus and take on his character, we must—like Him—embrace our humanity and work out our spirituality within it.”²

The emphasis on transformation through emotional healing developed in Christian culture during the last few decades. David Seamands was one of the key pioneers in connecting emotions and the spiritual life, as were Henry Cloud and John Townsend.³ As a minister, Seamands describes his experience of working with people with problems that were not being healed by prayer and faithful practice of the spiritual disciplines alone.⁴ I’ve observed this in my own ministry, and other authors have written on the same theme.⁵ Pete Scazzero hit a wall in his own life and ministry and came to the realization that “emotional health and spiritual maturity are inseparable.”⁶

My journey has been strengthened by Scazzero, Seamands, and Cloud and Townsend, as they have shown their personal experiences with emotional healing and the value of the interior work in that process. We do not need to choose God or counseling. There is a role for counselors, psychologists, and other therapists in the work of healing. Some find themselves resistant to supportive therapies that would benefit them, especially when coupled with healing work done in and through the body of Christ. Healing in community is one of the gifts God works through with God’s people.

In the dozens of times I have gone through the discipleship journey *Deep Calling* with groups, I have witnessed how God has worked miracles of emotional healing in participants’ lives in the process of seeking God in a community of believers. I have observed that both the supernatural work of

God and human psychological support (through peers) are essential for emotional healing. There have been times when issues were raised in the discipleship journey that allowed participants to be freed from a burden of guilt, pain, or shame they had been carrying since childhood. There were other times when the discipleship journey led a participant to seek a referral for deeper work with a Christian counselor.

As a leader, it is essential to take a wholistic approach to discipleship. God desires to grow the disciple spiritually, emotionally, physically, mentally, and socially. While we may be unaware of the areas where God desires to work with a participant, we can pray for and support them on the journey on which God is leading them. We can encourage them towards greater emotional health because spiritual and emotional health are intrinsically connected. This support means that we stay open to the healing God may choose to work in a participant's life during the discipleship process, knowing that the Holy Spirit moves in the community and in the leader. This support also means we encourage ongoing work and stand ready with a Christian counselor referral, should one be desired.

In the discipleship journey, participants commit to focusing on Christ. In the midst is a parallel call to honesty and transparency with Christ and the community of believers. Emotional health and healing can only take place when believers approach Christ as they are. Instead of compartmentalizing faith into one of the categories of life, discipleship is a call to surrender the entire life to Jesus, even emotional healing, and to face that process with honesty. This surrender is best done with the support of Christian community.

Discipleship and Suffering

Many times, believers are not taught that part of the spiritual journey is accepting conflict and suffering in life. Consciously or unconsciously, when people accept Christ, many expect that everything will get easy for them. The stories in the Bible contradict this expectation. As we see in the Scriptures, challenges and trials came *because* individuals were making the decision to follow Christ. As Russell Burrill shares, "One who becomes a disciple of Jesus can be expected to be treated as Jesus was treated—

misunderstood and persecuted.”⁸ It is a challenge to face even the everyday troubles that are simply a part of being alive, let alone the direct hardships that come as a result of commitment to following Jesus.⁹

Far from becoming easier upon accepting Christ, life can get harder. Pete Scazzero points out that “Job was innocent. There was no connection between his sin and the amount of pain he experienced. This seems terribly unfair.”¹⁰ Unfair and difficult to accept, but true. Scazzero again emphasizes, “The heart of Christianity is that the way to life is through death, the pathway to resurrection is through crucifixion.”¹¹ He also adds a word of caution: “Remember, resurrection only comes out of death—real death. Our losses are real.”¹² Disciples must humbly come face to face with struggle, loss, and hardship—to die—before they can experience resurrection. This is one of the paradoxes of the Christian life: to find your life you must first lose it.

As a person who went through suffering in the name of God and because of his convictions, Bonhoeffer appeals to us:

If we refuse to take up our cross and submit to suffering and rejection . . . we forfeit our fellowship with Christ and have ceased to follow Him. But if we lose our lives in His service and carry our cross, we shall find our lives. . . . Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ.¹³

Discipleship is a calling to experience a wide-ranging connection with Christ—participating in Jesus’ resurrection and abundant life, as well as His sufferings. Part of the discipleship journey must develop a maturity in participants that is able to bear the weight of disappointment, loss, and pain. Disappointment with “the church” and fellow Christians, loss that life brings, and pain over things they cannot control. When heartache comes and persecution brings anxiety, is there a relationship with God and the disciple that is able to withstand the weight of real experience?

Grasping the relationship between discipleship and suffering requires a serious paradigm shift. It comes down to understanding the reality that God uses suffering in the discipleship process. Bonhoeffer affirms that there is a cost—spiritually, mentally, physically, and emotionally—to following Christ completely. It means that Jesus takes center stage and first priority in

everything, which can sometimes cause hardship.¹⁴ Jim Cymbala adds perspective: “Trouble is one of God’s great servants because it reminds us how much we continually need the Lord. Otherwise, we tend to forget about entreating him.”¹⁵

We are to center on Jesus, looking for God in any and every situation and realizing, as Reggie McNeal maintains, that discipleship is “heart-shaping” which sometimes happens by trial.¹⁶ As disciples are shaped by God through any and all circumstances, they seek to develop awareness of the mysterious ways God is forming them, especially through suffering. In the midst of this suffering, disciples continue to seek God who desires their healing.

Healing the World

Jewish tradition understands our job in this world as *Tikkun olam*. The common understanding of *Tikkun olam* is that we share in partnership with God in the repairing of the world.¹⁷ With God and each other, we boldly take steps to help one another and bring honor to God. This Jewish concept encapsulates the understanding that we aren’t just here for ourselves, but for the healing of one another and this earth. God is Healer. As children of the Creator, we are also healers.

Aware of the anguish facing those in our communities and our world, we set about our work of kindness, affirming the dignity of each human being. We set about our work of love, building bridges and connections between people. We set about our work of justice, righting wrongs and giving voice to the voiceless. As Bishop Leontine Kelly said, “healing has twin aspects; restoration now and empowerment for the future.”¹⁸ Our role in *Tikkun olam* is on behalf of one another, working for individuals as well as facing systems that threaten to overtake those most vulnerable.

People often ask me, why doesn’t God just ditch this old earth, give up on humanity, start over? My answer is this: our God is Healer, a God of redemption, restoration, and wholeness. Our God delights in taking brokenness, misery and the wounded and transforming all to joy.

In Matthew 21:12-17, Jesus drove the moneychangers and salespeople out of the temple. To all those trying to make a profit off of the spiritual seekers, Jesus said, “My house is to be a house of prayer.” Notice that immediately after Jesus clears out those who were distracting from worship, then the lame, the blind, the weak, and the wounded flock to Him, and He heals them. As soon as the religious distractions are driven away, healing takes place.

There are people around us carrying unspeakable pain—physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional pain that threatens to overcome them. Those bearing scars of abuse and injustice, depression and suicidal thoughts, hopelessness and isolation are invited to come and be near Jesus. This passage gives me great courage. As I am willing to allow Jesus to clear space in my life and my spiritual experience, it is there I find healing. As I own my own feebleness, blindness, and weakness, and come to Jesus, in that place I am made whole.

Driving out the distractions makes way for worship from children and healing for those who desperately need a Savior. Could the same be true today? Will we be a part of making space for the healing of God today? We are called to take up the burden of *Tikkun olam* and join God in the healing of the world around us.

Avenues of Healing

In what ways have you experienced the healing touch of God in your own life? The primary avenue of healing God has used in my life has been relationships. In timely conversations, heartfelt prayer sessions, and even during an anointing, I have experienced a healing balm for my soul.

Dianne Nue, Co-Director for the Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual encourages us to expand our view of how we receive healing from God:

Healing takes many forms – from swallowing grandma’s home remedies to having your scalp massaged and shampooed, from receiving a reconciling embrace to sobbing alone. We find healing through a sympathetic listener, a forgiving hug, a crying spell, a belly

laugh, an herbal bath, a quiet time with nature, a moving sermon, a powerful Eucharist or a deeply meaningful ritual.¹⁹

Yes, it's all healing. All avenues for the grace of God in your life and in mine.

In God We Trust

As I sit, composing sentences for this chapter on healing, I receive a text from a friend that the cancer we had hoped was contained has indeed spread. It's a grounding reality. Even as we pray, we have no guarantee. Even as we seek healing, we don't know how or in what form that healing will come.

I've been a part of many anointings where the person received complete and total physical healing. I've been a part of numerous anointings where the healing was not physical and the answer we sought didn't come in the way we desired. I've been shaped by my time at the bedside. As we have buried beloved church members, as we lost my dad and my husband's mom to cancer, and as my own body ached in miscarriage, I have learned something about the sacred, healing power of God.

Dear friends, in light of all that we bring and all the healing we need, let us join in prayer at the close of this chapter. Bring whatever burdens your heart and the healing you long for. Let's pray:

God of all Healing, we trust in you.

We don't trust in having it all figured out.

We don't trust in knowing what to do.

We don't trust in having answers to our deepest questions.

We realize that...

Even as we know God honors our faith, someone else finds out their child has cancer.

Even as one person starts work in their dream job, someone else goes through bankruptcy.

Even as someone feels healthier than they've ever been, someone else suffers a debilitating heart attack.

Even as one person feels connected in meaningful community, someone else feels isolated and all alone.

We can pray, but someone will still learn their loved one died in a car accident.

We can learn to right wrongs, but someone will still be treated unfairly based on their gender, race, or sexuality.

We can give, but we know it will never be enough.

We do not hope in what we can do, but in the power of God's love and healing to restore the world, both now, and in the blessed day that is coming. We bring everything that is hurting, all that is unfinished, all that grieves our hearts. We hear your words, to press near to the throne of grace. "Draw near and find help in your time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Oh God, this is our time of need.

When we are honest about the pain... When we are honest about our brokenness and the brokenness that is around us, it threatens to overwhelm us.

We turn to you, healing God.

Help us to hold tenaciously to hope, and when we cannot hope, may we realize Hope is holding onto us.

Heal us, Oh God, and may we be a part of bringing healing in this world.

Remind us that we live not by certainty, but by trust.

In the blessed and healing name of Jesus, Amen.

May you have courage to face the brokenness and pain in you and bring it to God and safe friends in honesty.

May you trust God's healing and pay attention to the avenues of healing God uses in your life.

May you be a channel of healing in this world.

Discussion Questions

In your journey towards healing, what is one area of brokenness God is inviting you to be more honest about?

Where in your church is there a need to see the connection between emotional and spiritual health?

What can you do to join God in the healing of the world around us?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A Call to Witness: Tell Your Story



“My prayer is that the Holy Spirit would sweep into our lives with holy disruption, upending our assumptions and privileges, our greed and selfishness, our pride and our stupor. To empower our work and our witness. Like Zechariah 4:6 tells us, not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.”

SARAH BESSEY

AS A CHILD, I READ BOOKS about Pippi Longstocking, a red-haired, freckle-faced fictitious girl who was spunky and strong. In the book, *Pippi Goes Aboard*, author Astrid Lindgren spins a tale that starts at the perfume shop window. In the shop window was a large jar of freckle salve, and beside the jar was a sign, which read: DO YOU SUFFER FROM FRECKLES?

“What does the sign say?” asked Pippi Longstocking. She couldn’t read very well because she didn’t want to go to school as other children did.

“It says, ‘Do you suffer from freckles?’” said Annika.

“Does it indeed?” said Pippi thoughtfully. “Well, a civil question deserves a civil answer. Let’s go in.” She opened the door and entered the shop, closely followed by Tommy and Annika. An elderly lady stood back of the counter. Pippi went right up to her. “No!” she said decidedly.

“What is it you want?” asked the lady.

“No,” said Pippi once more.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” said the lady.

“No, I don’t suffer from freckles,” said Pippi.

Then the lady understood, but she took one look at Pippi and burst out, “But, my dear child, your whole face is covered with freckles!”

“I know it,” said Pippi, “but I don’t suffer from them. I love them. Good morning.”

She turned to leave, but when she got to the door she looked back and cried, “But if you should happen to get in any salve that gives people more freckles, then you can send me seven or eight jars.”

If only we could be more like Pippi as we come into greater acceptance of who we are and the witness that we are called to have in the world.

Understanding of Self

As Christians center our lives on a relationship with Jesus through practice of the eight calls (the devotional practices) as a way of connecting with God, weaknesses and strengths will become apparent in ways not experienced before. We may discover that we have difficulty practicing one of the devotional habits, or that one habit comes far more easily and is desired more deeply than the rest. In the process of coming closer to Christ, disciples understand ourselves more deeply, and as we understand ourselves more deeply, we find a deeper understanding of Christ.

In his work using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Malcolm Goldsmith asserts that the better you understand yourself, specifically through the use of the personality types, the deeper your understanding of

God. He uses the MBTI personality test to help individuals make sense of who they are and how to relate to God by way of the spiritual disciplines.

Dan R. Dick and Barbara Miller also make use of a Spiritual Gifts Inventory, which helps identify primary and secondary gifts from a list of 20 spiritual gifts derived from Scripture and early Christian writings. Through this process of knowing ourselves and how God wants to use us in the church and in the world, we disciples of Jesus are better able to grasp where to serve, how to work, and our unique way of responding to others, which depends on our relationship with God.

A commitment to honesty in coming to God is essential. Harri Kuhalampi shares his perspective on Ellen White's view of the wholistic nature of spirituality and sheds light onto the interplay between one's relationship with God and awareness of oneself. While defining prayer as "the opening of the heart to God as to a friend" she, White, expresses in a revealing way the essence of what Christian spirituality is all about:

Being undisguised in the presence of God, facing him openly and candidly. Whatever is within is confronted with the full awareness that God sees all: feelings, memories, ideas, intentions, motive, attitudes, relationships, experiences, etc. A person of this attitude must also be honest to the self and face all aspects of one's experience and inner life as well as every feature of one's personality and character.

To pursue Christ with "all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength," as God invites believers in Deuteronomy 6:5, necessitates increasing awareness of all aspects of the self, including personality, spiritual gifts, and learning style. It is this increased understanding that profoundly influences how people relate to God, mission, community, and suffering. Our life's witness comes from the depth of our understanding of who we are and our story.

What happens after Jesus is the center of our lives as believers? J.P. Moreland notes that the problem of contemporary culture and the contemporary church is boredom. The remedy he suggests is a call for disciples to live in the drama—the "historic struggle between God's kingdom and all who oppose it." God's people are called for a purpose and

it is in living out that purpose that we find ultimate fulfillment. In his classic, *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren adds that great purpose is discovered when we realize that this life, ultimately, is not about us.

Seth Godin simply states, “People seek meaning. Will you offer it to them?” We realize the emptiness of what we are involved in and long to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. People are asking the question Rick Warren frames, “What on Earth am I here for?” In other words, we want a mission and purpose beyond ourselves. We perceive the self-serving emphasis of our lives, and sense that true happiness only comes from living out our God-given purpose. People not only want a mission, but have been hard-wired for a mission (see Ephesians 2:10).

The life of a disciple stands in stark contrast to the self-serving life to which the secular world calls people. This life centers on the individual’s goals, ambitions, dreams, and future. Instead, disciples of Jesus are compelled to live for the sake of others. Dallas Willard says, “We also need to keep in mind the multitudes of people (surrounded by churches) who will *not* be in heaven because they have never, to their knowledge, seen the reality of Christ in a living human being.” In a similar vein, Rick Stearns, former President of World Vision shares, “It is not our fault that people are poor, but it is our responsibility to do something about it. God says that we are guilty if we allow people to remain deprived when we have the means to help them.”

Some readers may challenge this viewpoint, insisting that the thing that makes Christians unique is their belief in God, and not the action they take in the world. Others insist that the emphasis be placed on the way that Christians live—the outward changes of behavior that make them different from the rest of the world. Jan Paulsen calls this a tension between “cerebral” and “practical” Christianity. Christianity has become divided over which emphasis should have primacy: belief or what is done based on that belief. This is true in the Adventist Church as well.

We are called to reintegrate faith and works in the practice of our faith. In other words, the *being* and the *doing* of Christianity cannot be divided. Rick Stearns says it well: “This does not mean we are saved by piling up enough good works to satisfy God. No, it means that any authentic and

genuine commitment to Christ will be accompanied by demonstrable evidence of a transformed life.” Beliefs and actions are inseparable in discipleship. The good news of the gospel must be shared in word *and* deed, that is, our witness.

Most often, this expression of the gospel in word and deed is called evangelism and service. Foster, in outlining the six traditions of the Christian faith, refers to these as the Evangelical Tradition and the Social Justice Tradition. In this chapter, we will look at the call to witness through our lives, sharing the good news through evangelism. In the next chapter, we will look at the call to service. These aspects of the mission of Christ are those which captivate the heart’s longing to make a difference in the world. First, our witness.



Evangelism

When it comes to evangelism, many think of big auditoriums, long appeal songs, and polished speakers. Humphrey and Humphrey challenge this picture and affirm that all are called to present the gospel through their everyday lives. In what is often called the faith chapter, Hebrews 11 shares a list of several of God’s servants throughout time who utilized faith to make a difference in the world. The authors point out that of the names on that list, all but two were laypeople, not *professional* ministers. God’s calling, they emphasize, is for *every* disciple of Christ to share the good news. McLaren defines evangelism by saying, “God’s people are blessed *instrumentally* – blessed in order to be a blessing to *others* . . . *evangelism* means ‘spreading good news.’”

Russell Burrill takes it one step further: “The Christian who is not reproducing by creating other disciples is not really a disciple. It is impossible . . . to be a follower of Jesus and not share Jesus.” There is a clear imperative in Scripture for disciples to allow God to use them to make other disciples. The process of discipleship must emphasize the necessity of

sharing the good news through everyday living, as well as partnering with God in the formation of other disciples. Imagine what it would be like if every disciple (each member) understood the importance of their role in the ministry and mission of Christ to bring the gospel to the world and lived out that mission? Jesus is waiting to do this through His disciples now.

Through our witness, our story, and our very lives, God wants to make the invisible Kingdom of God visible in the world today.

What does witness to the Kingdom of God look like? How is evangelism—sharing the good news—evidenced in our day-to-day lives?

Giving witness to the Kingdom is seen in the small decisions we make each day. It's when you stop to genuinely thank the people bagging your groceries, opening the door for you, or swiping your credit card. When you look them in the eye and wish them a good day. It's when your child interrupts you for the 10th time and you take a deep breath, stop, give them your full attention, and hear what they have to say, showing genuine interest, love, and care. It's when you are coming into church and you see a neighbor or passer-by on the street and you stop to say hello, ask them how they are doing, and wish them a good day. It's when you're in a hurry and you could just toss the glass jars of mostly used-up spaghetti sauce in the garbage, but instead, you choose to rinse them out and recycle them. It's when you're in the store and you see what you want there before you. You don't need it, but you want it. Instead of getting it, you walk away, knowing your happiness is not caught up in what you own and instead, you decide to give your money to ministry.

Giving witness to the Kingdom is seen in the larger decisions, the ones that take more sacrifice and intentionality with our time. It's when someone opens up to you about their struggles and you stop to hear their story. It's when you offer to give someone a Bible study and commit to meeting with them most every week, spending time together in the Word of God. It's when you courageously, bravely share your story, even the hard parts. When you share this testimony, you give others hope for what God can do in their lives. It's when you notice the people who are always silently working, never asking for much. You decide to pay attention to them and let them know you care to invest in their success. It's when you go to the assisted-

living home, sing hymns and invite the staff to join you in choosing their favorites. It's when you share a spiritual book with your neighbor that talks about the very thing they mentioned they are going through. It's when you have the courage and relationship built to invite your co-worker to your church for a special program. Knowing they've been looking for a deeper experience with God, you serve as a bridge to connect them with the community of Christ.

In the Kingdom of God, we realize how short our lives are here, but that this isn't all there is. We want our lives and our witness to matter in the areas that will last for eternity. So, we invest, give, and prayerfully discern what matters and give all that we have to it in the witness of our lives. The truth is that the people of God, the church, is the plan of the Holy Spirit to make God's Kingdom visible. We give witness to the already inaugurated kingdom of God that began in Jesus Christ and now continues with each one of us.

God-Given Vision

Acts 9 begins with drama and intensity. Saul was breathing murderous threats against the followers of "the Way." So hot was his rage, that he requested permission to travel outside of Jerusalem to find those believers who may have fled. On the way, Jesus Himself spoke to him. In a flash of light from heaven, everything changed for Saul. He heard the voice, and as he discovered it was Jesus who was speaking to him, he also found out he was blind.

His companions led him into the city, where he fasted for 3 days in complete darkness. Why did God need to blind Saul for these days before he could receive his mission? Verse 15 declares God's purposes for Saul when it says, "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel." So, why did Saul sit in darkness? Sometimes in order to gain a new view of the future—a new calling, a new mission, a new witness—we need to sit in the dark for awhile. We need to have everything else removed from our sight. We must come to realize our need for direction, for guidance.

Into this void in Saul's life, God sent His servant Ananias to speak His plan and Saul received vision—physically and spiritually. Verse 18 says, “Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized.”

Whether you're joyfully fulfilling God's purpose for you each day, or waiting in the darkness for God's plan to be spoken into your life, or somewhere in between, know that God's desire is to direct you to make a difference for God's Kingdom, to live as a witness of God's goodness in the world. Sometimes that means we sit in darkness awhile before we receive our sight. These times can be hard, even challenging and confusing, but they also strengthen and grow us. Sit with the darkness. Trust God, who is constantly being revealed to you, for God will give you your sight. **The longing of God's heart is to give you and me vision and purpose, empowering us to witness to God's presence in the world with our very lives.**

Seek to discover more of who you are—your gifts, temperament, and personality. Understand your own story and how God has worked for your redemption. Openly share your story, bearing witness to the presence of God in your life. Reflect God in your decisions, both small and great. As you do, trust that God will give you an unfolding vision and a purpose beyond yourself.

May you realize God delights in who you are and designed you to be a unique witness in the world.

May you witness to the Kingdom of God in our present lives by how you share with vulnerability, courage, and love.

May you set out on the life-long quest, discovering more of who you are and God's purpose for your life.

Discussion Questions

In what ways has understanding yourself more deeply helped you understand God more deeply?

What small decision can you make today to give witness to the Kingdom of God?

What part of Saul's story do you relate to the most? How can you share that part of your story with someone this week?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A Call to Serve: Incarnation



“A kind, courteous Christian is the most powerful argument that can be produced in favor of Christianity.”

ELLEN WHITE

AS A TEENAGER, I loved “Magic Eye” books. Have you ever seen these books or posters? The books feature autostereograms, images which allow some people to see 3D images by focusing on the 2D pattern. For many people, bringing the book or image close to their eyes relaxes their vision enough so that when they pull it back, they are able to see the hidden picture. Something that was invisible moments before, suddenly becomes visible.

Disciples of Jesus make visible the invisible Kingdom of God through our witness and our service. Miraculously, something that was not visible—love, hope, or courage—is made visible through the life of the disciple. As Jesus did, the love of God is incarnate in our lives, being expressed day by day. As a church, we tend to separate the call to witness and the call to serve, as if some believers are called to evangelism, and others are called to service. While we all have different gifts, the calling of God to every disciple

is both to witness through our life story and to serve those in need. The previous chapter focused on our witness. This chapter will focus on the call to service.

In his paraphrase of Matthew 25, Stearns encapsulates the call of Christ to serve the least of these.

For I was hungry, while you had all you needed. I was thirsty, but you drank bottled water. I was a stranger, and you wanted me deported. I needed clothes, but you needed more clothes. I was sick, and you pointed out the behaviors that led to my sickness. I was in prison, and you said I was getting what I deserved.¹

As our hearts are being transformed by a relationship with Christ, we can no longer view the world, or the suffering ones of the world, in the same way. Shane Claiborne is a leader of an intentional community re-imagining how Christians can respond to those with the greatest needs. He says they are creating “a community of people who have fallen desperately in love with God and with suffering people, and who allow those relationships to disturb and transform them.”² It is this service, no matter how disturbing and difficult, that is the mission given to believers by Christ. Stearns calls this tenacious focus on service “The Whole Gospel,” good news for the world that is wholistic in its reach.³

It is important for individual Christians, and the Christian community, to be aware of the hardship, poverty, and sickness that plagues the world, and to join together to make a difference. This is an essential part of spiritual life and growth. By serving, the disciple takes on the heart of Christ. Ellen White says that as servants of God become more like Jesus, they receive “the Spirit of Christ—the Spirit of unselfish love and labor for others.” She concludes, “Your love [will] be made perfect. More and more you will reflect the likeness of Christ in all that is pure, noble, and lovely.”⁴ Transformation happens in the disciple as they pray for their heart to break for the people and issues that break the heart of God. Through service and prayer, the disciple is changed by the Jesus seen in the suffering ones.



A Divine-Human Partnership

Central to the message and mission of Jesus is the idea that God desires humans to partner in the redemptive work of God to the whole world. Matthew 28:18-20 shares the final words of Jesus to the disciples before He ascended into heaven. Jesus said:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

These authoritative words from Jesus commission the disciples to go, make disciples, baptize, and teach all people to follow the way Jesus had taught them. The original disciples' willingness to heed these words is the reason there are disciples of Jesus today. At the heart of discipleship is following Jesus (Luke 9:23) and showing others what it looks like to follow Him (Acts 1:8), thereby having an active role in making new disciples of Jesus.

This same invitation has been a part of God's plan for humanity from the very beginning. From the creation of the world, God designed the human pair to cultivate and care for the world—land and animals alike. God brought humans into the process of tending what had been made, thus making them partners with Divinity. They fell, but through the sacrifice of Jesus, humanity has been made right with God again. "For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness *reign* in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!" (Romans 5:17, emphasis added). Through the gift of grace in Jesus Christ, humans are once again able to be partners with Divinity. God invites each

person to be a disciple, to be a part of this amazing, redemptive work in the world.

God never intended to stop being incarnate in the flesh – God just passed it on to the disciples, and now to us. God is now incarnate in you and me. To be incarnate is to touch and be touchable, to serve and to be served. This is what is modeled in the life of Jesus. The picture of God incarnate in us is compelling. God wants to do beyond what we are asking or yet imagining to make a difference in the world through us—the people of God. God wants to do something beautiful with the church, dwelling in us as we are reachable, touchable, and vulnerable to serve those around us.

In her book *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles shares that serving “doesn’t promise to solve or erase suffering but to transform it, pledging that by loving one another, even through pain, we will find more life. And it insists that by opening ourselves to strangers, the despised or frightening or unintelligible other, we will see more and more of the holy, since, without exception, all people are one body: God’s.”⁵ All of us are God’s children.

In everything Jesus did, He was giving a living illustration to His followers so that they would learn how to do what He was doing. After Jesus washed the disciple’s feet in service and humility, He said, “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:15). Disciples are called to do the same: inviting people to surrender to the Lordship of Christ as expressed in the Scriptures and showing them what that looks like with their own lives, just as Jesus did (Mark 10:35-45; John 13:35).

Learned Helplessness

Martin Seligman experimented at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1960’s and first observed learned helplessness when he was doing experiments on dogs. Learned helplessness occurs when people or animals feel helpless to avoid negative situations. He noticed that the dogs didn’t try to escape the shocks if they had been conditioned to believe that they couldn’t escape.⁶

What does this mean for us? We can look at the darkness, look at the challenge, hear the bad news and actually believe that there is nothing we can do about it. We can look at homelessness, poverty, young people without mentors, hungry children, the effects of natural disasters, depressed friends, and struggling relationships and we can mistakenly believe that there is nothing we can do about it. We can begin to subconsciously live out the lie that the darkness overcomes the light, that the kingdom of this world is more powerful than the Kingdom of God.

We must reverse learned helplessness. God's Kingdom has come near. Right here, right now, even in the midst of these challenges, our compassionate actions on behalf of someone else is what makes the invisible kingdom visible. As Dale Carnegie said, "Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all."⁷ We, the disciples of Jesus, of all people should be the ones who persist in hope with the problems facing our neighbors.

What are the biggest problems facing the church? What are the biggest problems facing our community?

What can we do about these problems that face our churches and communities? How can light show up in small ways through us? How can the Kingdom of God come close? Let me tell you, I long for justice. I long for healing. I long for a world where there is no more death, sorrow, tears, or mourning. I long for things to be made whole again. What I find again and again is that the Spirit of God takes my longing and moves me to take action on behalf of someone else. To bring hope in seemingly hopeless situations. It never feels like enough, but it is something. I may not be able to visit everyone, but I can visit one. I may not be able to feed everyone, but I can feed this one. I may not be able to give to all, but I can give to this one.

The Spirit uses our longing and moves through us to take tangible actions which makes the hope in the ultimate fulfillment of our longing feel even closer. Even as the King is coming, the Kingdom of heaven is near (Matthew 4:17). As Dallas Willard said, "The gospel is less about how to get into the Kingdom of Heaven after you die, and more about how to live in

the Kingdom of Heaven before you die.”⁸ Many small acts make the kingdom of God visible. Imagine a world where everyone said, I’m going to bring the kingdom near in my life. I’m going to make the invisible kingdom visible in what I say and do. Imagine if everyone said, “I’m going to invest in the wellbeing of another—bringing light to the darkness right here, right now.”

“Far more than getting it right, is living it right,” Eugene Peterson said. He goes on, “Christians don’t simply learn or study or use Scripture, we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus’ name, hands raised in adoration to the Father, feet washed in the company of the Son.”⁹ We see the Kingdom made visible.

So how? I offer you a series of questions that may help you discover where you are to be involved.

1. What are those things that most make you come alive?
2. Who are the people that you are most burdened for?
3. If we were to each lunch together today, what would you talk about that would make your eyes light up and make you lean in to tell me more?
4. What do you see that makes you so angry you can hardly stand it?
5. What do you do that makes you so weary and spent but that just feels so worth it?

Continue to pray for God to lead you to those you are called to serve in this world.

Consider what Brad Lomenick shared at a recent Catalyst Conference: “God’s calling for our life isn’t a pot of gold to be found at the end of a rainbow. He wants us to simply use our gifts and passions, and He’s placed them in plain sight.”¹⁰ What are the things you could easily pass over because God has placed them in plain sight?

Everyday Heroes

Among the heroes of Hurricane Harvey were the hundreds of volunteer boaters, including members of the “Cajun Navy,” as they’ve been called, and other similar groups. These volunteers have patrolled the flooded streets of Houston in their own boats, pulling stranded families out and bringing them to safety.

“We’re trying to do what we can,” said Ben Theriot, an engineer whose house was flooded in last year’s storms. “I had people that I barely knew showing up to help me. The best way you can thank somebody for helping you is to go help somebody else.”

“You’ve got to try to repay the favor when someone else is in need,” said one.

In Rockland, Texas, some 250 residents took shelter in an elementary school. According to ABC News, the operation was powered mostly by young people who slept in shifts and handled everything from leaks in the ceiling to making sure everyone in the building was comfortable and safe.

“At the end of the day, we’re family, you know, because it brings everyone together,” high school student Josh Campbell told ABC News.¹¹

God wants to live through your life—you who are an everyday hero. The kingdom of God will be better for your life, stories, experiences, and skills. You can go where I cannot go. You are blessed so you can be a blessing. We are blessed so we can be a blessing (Genesis 12). The best way you can thank Someone for helping you is to go help someone else. When you give yourself for the well-being of another, your actions make the invisible Kingdom of God visible. God’s Kingdom has come near.

Clare Boothe Luce was the first American woman appointed to a major ambassadorial post abroad. She said this: “There are no hopeless situations; there are only people who have grown hopeless about them.”¹² We have to come to grips with this simple truth: God works through people. Not through systems, machines, computers, nations, or even organizations, words, and ideas if they are disconnected from real people. God does God’s primary work through people. People like us. It changes everything when you and I put things into practice.

The first temple King Solomon built was fabulous architecturally. Exquisite gold brought glory and fame to Jerusalem, as others came to witness this achievement. However, after the exile, when the Israelites returned to rebuild the temple, everything was different. The city laid in ruins. People were sad and lacked motivation because everything they did looked insignificant. They mourned. God said, “**Do not despise the small beginnings. For the LORD rejoices to see the work begin**” (Zechariah 4:10, NLT).

Choose one thing. What one thing is the Holy Spirit leading you to put into practice? Is there one way God is leading you to serve and to lean into the problems you see in the world. Consider who you are and the gifts and passions you’ve been given. Your gifts aren’t given in vain. God calls us to use them for the sake of others: “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58). God wants to live the promises in and through our lives as a rich blessing to those around us. God wants to be incarnate in us.

May you know that your life and actions make visible the invisible Kingdom of God.

May you leave learned helplessness, knowing that God desires to be incarnate in you.

May you come alive in service, blessing those around you.

Discussion Questions:

What are the biggest problems facing your community? How can you live incarnationally into those challenges?

Review the five questions that can help you discover where to be involved in service. Which two offer the most clarity, and what is God inviting you to do in response?

What is one thing the Holy Spirit is leading you to put into practice from this chapter?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A Call to Bless: The Prophetic Voice



“To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer.”

HENRI NOUWEN

WORDS HAVE TREMENDOUS POWER. Although many people have heard or said the childhood rhyme, “Sticks and stones may break our bones but words will never hurt us,” we know that words *do* hurt us. Those who have suffered from verbal abuse especially know that words can be as damaging to the mind and heart as physical blows are to the body. Can you remember words that were said to you that tore you down? These words stay with us.

Words have the power to hurt and they also have the power to heal. Can you remember words that have built you up? Right now, can you think of a time when someone said something to you that made you feel known, seen, and loved? Through our words, we put one another in close proximity to God.

Beloved

I overheard a conversation with our then 3-year-old son and an adult he was meeting for the first time. “Can I call you Siah – that’s short for Josiah,” the adult asked. Josiah considered the question and then said thoughtfully, “No. You can call me beloved. That’s what my mom calls me.” I smiled with delight, happy he was getting one of the most important ways I view him: as beloved to God and to me.

We all need a reminder that we are the beloved of God. As we remind one another of our belovedness, we extend a blessing to those around us. As leaders we speak into people’s lives and make space in our churches for people to remember they are beloved of God. As I live my life, my ordinary, everyday life, I want those around me to know they are beloved. In the deepest sense, I believe our calling is to remind one another of who we really are. In spite of and in the midst of the pain or challenge, you are beloved.

One of the people who does this so well is Pastor Salim Elias. Azure Hills Church has had the gift of having him here since 1976 and his consistent presence has shaped this church. As a full-time pastor, part-time pastor, and now in his retirement years as a member, Pastor Elias has spoken blessing and love into countless lives. For these last four years, I’ve experienced this personally. He calls us “beloved” and says, “I love you” freely and openly. He’s now 96 years old and represents the tender love and nurture of God for so many of us. He offers a hand on the shoulder and a tender word, the blessing embodied in his words and the light in his eyes.

The Blessing

In Genesis 12:1-3, God tells the couple who will later become Abraham and Sarah (then Abram and Sarai), “I will bless you, so you can be a blessing.” God declares, “All the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.” As we read this passage, we note that the form of this verb expresses that Abraham and Sarah will be the channel of blessing from God to all the people around them.

This is a covenant with them, yes, but unlike some of the other biblical covenantal blessings, the favor that God is extending to them doesn't stay with them alone. The way that God reveals love to them extends to those who are not in their family, and to those who don't even worship their God. Everyone who comes in contact with Abraham and Sarah will witness this love and experience this blessing! The blessing will be shared even with future generations through the success God promised to them.

In their book, *The Blessing*, Gary Smalley and John Trent talk about the importance of the blessing we have the opportunity to give to those around us, particularly those we are in a close relationship with. There are five components of a blessing that they outline, which are as follows: (1) meaningful touch, (2) a spoken message, (3) attaching high value to the one being blessed, (4) picturing a special future, and (5) an active commitment to fulfill the blessing.¹

To bless another is to truly see them, to affirm the gift that they are, and to speak to their potential. Imagine how revolutionary it would be if every friend spoke words of blessing, if family members gave voice to what they see in one another, and if parents blessed their children each night. Imagine if church members stopped to affirm each other, sharing in gratitude the difference that the individual makes in their lives and the life of the community. Imagine if pastoral colleagues blessed each other, noticing the gifting and uniqueness in each pastor's life.

There is power in reminding one another of who we are: the beloved of God, uniquely called to a purpose here on this earth.

The Prophetic Voice

At the core of our Adventist movement is a prophetic voice that is characterized by hope. We have an optimistic outlook of both the future and the now. We hold onto this hope because Jesus has entered our hearts in the here and now and because of the promised return of our Jesus at the Second Coming. We lift our voice in hope—blessing and benefiting others we come in contact with. In people's lives we are able to see what is not yet and help them to live into that vision, because that is what we do every day.

As Adventists, we wait in hope and live in a vision that is not yet. We speak hope, teach life-giving truth, and speak affirmation.

What is hope, really? **Hope is being able to see the way from where you are now to a future that is good.** It is a belief that there can be a better experience than whatever is happening in the present. It's a picture of something further than what you can see right in front of you.

Courageous hope is tenaciously calling those things that are not, as if they were. This means that in our own lives, in our church, and in the world, we believe that there is reason to expect good things. We believe this is not the end of the story for the individuals we interact with or for our church. Great things have happened. Good work is being done here. Still the prophetic voice of hope speaks to the greater days that are coming. "The best is yet to come," is the blessing we share in the midst of challenge.

If, or rather when, things feel small, futile, or hopeless for you, I pray you don't give up. **Our ministry is often in the space between—standing in the gap between what is and what will come.** It's not an easy place to be. You and I have been commissioned for the work of the gospel, the good news, that comes in this place. We are part of the redemptive movement of God in the world. It's a call to bless, not to curse. A call to affirm life wherever we find it. A call to build up others and to lean into what is not yet. To speak of things which are not as though they were (Romans 4:17).

Find Your Posse

I've been inspired by an organization called the Posse Foundation.² To date, nearly 10,000 students have completed college or university education while receiving full-tuition scholarships. Posse believes we must broaden the demographic representation at institutions of higher education to include students with tremendous capacity for learning who may be overlooked because of structural inequities.

Rather than traditional methods of individually awarding scholarships, Posse awards scholarships and places students in cohorts or "a posse." They meet, support, and encourage one another in this posse for all the years they are at their college or university. Due to this, and other systems of

support, 90% of the students who enroll with the Posse Foundation graduate. They do it together. In the midst of challenging struggles or disadvantages, they are able to rise to be who they are called to be, even as the peers they are supporting rise alongside them. They speak hope into one another's lives.

Children of Light

In this world, it's easy to lose sight of the future and of hope. We need our lives to be shaped and framed by the hope we have in Jesus. When you and I live out the ways of God's Kingdom in our actions, words, and thoughtfulness, when we rise up to bless one another, this makes the invisible visible in the here and now. When you give yourself for the well-being of another, your actions make the invisible Kingdom of God visible, and this brings hope in what is to come.

Isaiah 9:1-2 is a prophecy. Isaiah speaks to our experience of darkness and our deepest longings. The Spirit spoke through the prophet using the symbol of Light because God knows how dark this world can be. Isaiah says to the people who were in the midst of their suffering,

“You live in darkness, but take hope, for a light is shining. I know things are dismal, but your despair will become joy. The enemy has killed people you loved and taken your land, but your oppressors will be driven away. A child will be born that will make things right....”

The darkness is real in our own lives and our world. Even though many times we get so accustomed to it that we tune out the suffering—homelessness, mental illness, cancer, divorce, heartache all around us. We, too, are “the people who sit in darkness.” The darkness we see goes beyond the circle of concern for those around us; it includes the systems of injustice, suffering, and brokenness that we don't know what to do with. We sit in the darkness of fear, conflict, confusion, worry, anxiety, sadness, and hopelessness.

John 1:4 declares that Jesus is the light who comes to give us life. Jesus himself said that His disciples “will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). In 1 Thessalonians 5:5, Paul calls the followers

of God “children of light.” References to light and good news are too numerous to recount here. The power of the good news is that it comes in the midst of the bad news. The power of the light is that it comes in the bleak time when we feel settled into despair. We wake up when we are blessed, affirmed, and reminded of who we are by those who come alongside us. The Kingdom that looked invisible suddenly became visible again.

Bless, Affirm, Celebrate

During the discipleship process, we make intentional time for affirmation and blessing. The words that we speak, the observations we share, and the meaningful time we take to truly see one another matters. Just as words can wound, words can heal. Words can bring out the best in us, reminding us of our belovedness. We need our “posse” who will help us to understand more of who we are.

We are not called to ignore or dismiss the reality of darkness—the pain, despair or discouragement we face. We are called rather to “repent” of it, which means “to turn” our back on it. To repent, or turn our backs on the bad news and darkness means that it no longer has the power to control our lives. Instead, we trust the power of God to bring healing and redemption, salvation and wholeness into our lives and the lives of the people around us.

We are called to bless, instead of curse. We are called to proclaim the good news in the midst of bad news. We are called to build up, instead of tear down. With our words and actions, yes, even our very lives, we bless. We face the growing fear, cynicism, death, and hopelessness and put flesh on the good news of hope, peace, and life.

We are to repent of the simple path of simply denouncing the bad. Calling attention to the darkness and letting others know you don’t agree is not enough. Instead, we are to be proactive about sharing the blessing, and trust God in living the message of the Kingdom right here and now.



I Want That Kind of Blessing

Henri Nouwen was a respected professor, author, and beloved pastor. He taught at Harvard, Yale, and Notre Dame. As he was becoming dissatisfied with the life of a professor, he was called to join L'Arche Daybreak near Toronto, Canada, a community founded for people with developmental disabilities. This is where he lived until his death in 1996.

In talking about his time at L'Arche, Henri said he was suddenly with a group of people who couldn't care less about what he had taught or written or how much he knew. This experience profoundly changed his life. In various sermons and in his book, *Life of the Beloved*, Henri described this experience with one of his friends there who was "quite handicapped, but a wonderful, wonderful lady." Here is the exchange that took place between them.

She said to me, "Henri, can you bless me?"

I remember walking up to her and giving her a little cross on her forehead.

She said, "Henri, it doesn't work. No, that is not what I mean."

I was embarrassed and said, "I gave you a blessing."

She said, "No, I want to be blessed."

I kept thinking, "What does she mean?"

We had a little prayer service and all these people were sitting there. After the service I said, "Janet wants a blessing." I had an alb on and a long robe with long sleeves.

Janet walked up to me and said, “I want to be blessed.” She put her head against my chest and I spontaneously put my arms around her, held her, and looked right into her eyes and said, “Janet, you are beautiful. We love you so much. I know you’re feeling a little low right now and you need to hear again that you are beloved.”

She looked at me and said, “Yes, yes, yes, I know.” I suddenly saw all sorts of energy coming back to her. She seemed to be relieved from the feeling of depression because suddenly she realized again that she was blessed. She went back to her place and immediately other people said, “I want a blessing, too.”³

Yes. I want that kind of blessing. To be reminded that I am beloved. To be seen, known, and blessed is one of the greatest gifts we can offer one another.

May you remember you are the beloved of God and live daily from your belovedness.

May you find your prophetic voice of hope, as you speak into the lives of others and allow them to speak into your life as well.

May you affirm, bless, and celebrate all those you come in contact with.

Discussion Questions

When was a time when someone said something to you that made you feel known, seen, and loved?

Who is one person you can bless this week? How will you convey this blessing?

Take a moment to listen to the voice of God. What blessing is God speaking over you right now?