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Know Truth, Believe Truth, Live Truth: How Walking with Jesus Should Change Your World

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“Know Truth, Believe Truth, Live Truth:
How Walking with Jesus Should Change Your World”**

written by

Casie R. Neal

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for completion of the
Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

(Name) thesis director and honors program director

(Name) second reader

(Name) third reader

April 18, 2011

Honors Thesis Project

Study Outline

- Week 1: God
 - Author of Love (healer of the broken)
 - A God to Be Feared (what love is this)
 - Holy Before a Holy God (washed clean)
 - Freed from Sin (present consequences of salvation)
 - Made Right (God's version of reconciliation)
 - Sons and Daughters (heavenly adoption)
- Week 2: Me
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 - Purpose (what do I do now)
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 - Free to Respond (forgiveness)
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- Week 4: Circumstances
 - Oh Happy Day (a reason to sing)
 - I Hope I Hope I Hope (why hope isn't as shaky as we make it)
 - Peace that Is Beyond Understanding (why we don't worry)
 - Part of the Solution (making a difference)
 - Wisemen from the East, or the West (wisdom from the Holy Spirit)
 - Perspective (how we look at things differently)

Resources

- The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2002 by Crossway Bibles
- Love Beyond Reason by John Ortberg
- How Good Is Good Enough by Andy Stanley
- Who I Am in Christ by Neil T. Anderson
- Crazy Love by Francis Chan
- The Call by Os Guinness
- The Valley of Vision
- Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis
- Experiencing God's Story of Life and Hope: A Workbook for Spiritual Formation by J. Scott Duvall
- True Spirituality by Francis A. Schaeffer
- Your Daily Walk: 365 Daily Devotions to Read through the Bible in a Year by Bruce H. Wilkinson
- <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/everest/>
- <http://www.messianic-prophecy.net/>
- <http://www.biblegateway.com/>
- <http://www.merriam-webster.com>

Casie Neal
Honors Thesis
Dr. Pemberton
Spring 2011

Honors Thesis

I thought I was onto something, but maybe I wasn't. Regardless, it was an idea, and I held it in my fist like a little kid with a kite string. After all, I'd made it through two honors seminars and a directed study. I wasn't about to quit. Neals do not quit, I told myself firmly. So I gathered my wits, my high heels and my little idea and sprinted off to present it to the council.

I paced nervously outside the interrogation room, piecing together the fragments of my courage that had gotten a little jarred in my cross-campus foot race. Within moments I would have to defend my idea before the council, that collective body of wisdom that would decide my fate as an honors student.

When they called me in, I was shaking in my suit jacket. Having a theater background helps in thesis situations. You pull out your confident face, throw your shoulders back and give your best performance. Sure, they asked me questions I fumbled over and didn't really have an answer for. Aside from being scary (note, not mean, just scary), the honors council helped me think about my thesis in ways I had not yet thought through. The most important flaw in my plan that they brought to my attention was a lack of specific audience. Would I be writing to middle class high school girls, rural girls, upperclassmen, lowerclassmen? It was something I hadn't thought about, probably because my writing background consists of writing for professors I know, or writing for myself. Although they had a few questions for me to think

through and aspects of my proposal to reconsider, they bought it! They accepted my little idea, that idea that came to me on the sunbeams floating through my Arizona window.

The idea itself was writing a Bible study for college girls about who we are in Christ as women. So I ran with it, sometimes I walked with it, and sometimes it dragged me along, kicking and screaming. But this was my honor's thesis, and some of my honor was on the line.

Maybe it would have been logical for me to plan this project in my area of study. Science majors do research on cells and strains of bacteria, art students make art, business students study trends and successful economic strategy. It would only make sense for me to plan a project pitting phonics against whole language reading programs or charting the development of the public school in the United States. Before I go any further in this explanation, you should know three things. First, any of my friends can tell you, being logical is not my gift. As my roommate puts it kindly, I'm book smart, I just don't have any common sense. Second and third, two of my greatest aversions are to being bored and wasting my time.

Why do what is expected when what is unexpected is more interesting and useful? Reading programs will continue to change, and the answer to phonics vs. whole language debate is a mixed approach. Charting the development of the public school would only be helpful if it could answer the question of where the public school became a place for students to have fun when they're young and be bored and mentally checked out when they get older. I think the answer to that question lies more in the area of family studies, and psychology interests me, but not that much. This Bible study would meet several criteria on my list of honors thesis requirements. Writing a Bible study would not be a waste of time. Spending time studying great authors and reading the Bible would be a good investment of my life. It would

also be a great resource for working with youth. Although I intend to teach elementary students, I am and plan to be involved in the lives of students of all ages.

Figuring out how to articulate how the Gospel transforms identity to college girls would be a challenge. I would not be bored. How could writing about a God who is so big and who is the author of beauty, laughter, and Belgian draft horses be boring? Maybe it would be boring if He was a Greek myth, but He's not. He designed the world, did not scrap the project and start over when we made the biggest mess in history, and now allows us to call Him father and have a special part in His plan. Please excuse me while I turn a cartwheel.

Another reason this project appeared to be useful was it's proximity to my own passions and experiences. Some biographical background would be helpful here. Growing up, I was the fat kid. All of my friends were rails trying not to blow away, and I was the ox who could carry them all up a mountain. It did not bother them, but it bothered me. I wanted to be the skinny kid who could eat from sun up to sun down and not gain an ounce. I wanted to wear the size clothes that the other girls wore so we could trade clothes at slumber parties or when we played dress up. All of that changed when I got into high school and stretched out into the height I am now. I didn't look like the fat kid anymore, but I still felt like her a lot. I consoled myself that at least I was as strong as an ox and could still probably carry most of my friends up a mountain. Only now am I beginning to realize I'm not that girl any more. I'm healthy and the right size, and I'm not just good for carrying people up mountains, as if that were a real-world need. When I look in the mirror I need to see the present, not the past. This idea of speaking truth to yourself and looking reality straight in the face is something I love to champion, for all people, but especially for girls. I don't drive the self-esteem bandwagon looking for recruits,

but we are made in our Creator's image, and implying He made a huge mistake when He made someone is shortsighted and small minded.

Additional background information that drove this project was the fact that I was born in 1989, and my brothers were born in 1990 and 1995. The dates are insignificant, except for their order. I was born first, and fit the mold perfectly. I was driven to excel. When I failed, I quit. When I succeeded, I pushed harder. This bent appeared most readily in the area of academics. After realizing I could not dribble a basketball within the first day of basketball camp (and no previous experience), and not being willing to take enough risks to be a gymnast, I stuck to dance, where the flipping was minimal. Later I took up volleyball because it was relatively easy and the family sport (carrying on tradition being another first-born trait) and running because although I wasn't fast, I could compete against myself and win.

Early on, my test scores were high enough that my parents pegged me as their little academic. I did love to learn, with curiosity being one of my most annoying young traits. I wanted to know about everything. The subject area was insignificant; I wanted to know about everything. The world was an unfolding origami paper crane of wonder, and I loved it. My parents were not the kind to hinge their approval on academic performance. That would make them jerks, and my parents are not jerks. They did expect my best. I cannot remember how many times I got the "I don't care how well you do, all I ask is that you do your best" talk. Somewhere between reading Little House on the Prairie for the first time and getting my SAT scores back, I realized academics was something I could do. My first brother was much more athletic and musically talented, and my second brother was cute and funny, but hey, academics could be "my thing". This sounds vaguely like my "at least I could carry my friends up a

mountain if we happened to be chased by a herd of rabid kangaroos” speech. Although my parents were so affirming and encouraging, I began to believe that I had value because I could achieve academically. If I couldn’t do anything else, at least I could pass tests.

Because I began to think this way, I began to project that attitude on God. I viewed Him as someone who could not be pleased except by selfless saints, which I was not. I saw Him as forgiving, but in a begrudging way, as if He knew I would always mess up, and somehow I had suckered Him into a contract that required Him to show mercy. I knew He loved me in an academic sense, but I often had a hard time believing that love. Thanks to working two summers at Summit Ministries, four years at Ouachita, and plenty of grace, I’ve grown out of that mindset a little bit.

These parts of my life were partially behind my decision to write the study on this topic. I wanted to share what I had learned with other girls who might be struggling with some of the same things. I also, selfishly, wanted to cement in my own mind what I had learned so I would not have to relearn it.

I started this endeavor by doing some reading and thinking. If I was going to write about who college girls are in Christ as women, I should probably figure out where girls were struggling with that idea. I had some experience in that area, being a girl myself, being an RA at Ouachita, and staffing at Summit Ministries, a Christian camp for high school students.

The first book I read on my topic was called Who I Am in Christ by Neil T. Anderson. The book was helpful in breaking apart the topic. “Who we are in Christ” is pretty nebulous, and I needed to narrow it down. This book was also helpful in providing content and important Scriptural insight.

Over the break, I read another book, How Good Is Good Enough by Andy Stanley. I was hoping it would be about the adequacy that comes from understanding and believing the Gospel. One thing I wanted to focus on was how the Gospel's good news does not stop with salvation and eternal security. It transforms priorities, relationships and dreams. When girls understand the Gospel, they don't have to worry about what will happen, they know they have a unique calling, and boys are brothers to be served instead of objects of obsession. The book was minimally helpful, and focused more on the need for grace in salvation instead of life after conversion.

Some of the other books that I used were old favorites (Orthodoxy by Chesterton, Mere Christianity by Lewis, and The Valley of Vision). These were books that had helped me mature in my faith. The quality and insight of their writing helped me become less self-focused as I began to realize the grandeur of God and the smallness of me. The Valley of Vision, a collection of Puritan prayers, was a gift to me in high school, by my discipleship group leader. The wisdom and humility those prayers have puts me to shame.

One source that was probably the most helpful in format and content was a book I got from our campus ministries director, James Taylor. It's put out by NavPress and is called Becoming Who God Says I Am: Identity. The book was laid out in ten chapters, each full of scripture, space for journaling and reflection, discussion questions and guided prayer. I wanted to write more of a devotional, but I liked the variety of questions, journaling, meditation, etc. this book had. It seemed appropriately geared toward our high-speed, microwave culture. There was plenty to do, eye catching pictures, diagrams, and rarely writing longer than a paragraph. Although I wanted mine to be different, this resource was valuable.

I am guilty of occasionally complaining about the reading I am required to do for my classes. Granted, it is not usually extensive, as most of my classes are education classes where we spend our class time watching film of preschools and presenting creative ways to teach economics to second graders. Last semester I had the blessing of taking Spiritual Formation with Dr. Duvall. One of the books that was assigned for that class was Love Beyond Reason by John Ortberg. Reading that book feels like walking through a river of honey on Jupiter, if such things exist on Jupiter. The gravity of God's love that Ortberg writes about makes you feel like you're on Jupiter. It's so penetrating, inescapable. Wading through a river of honey is sweet, but powerfully sticky. Even if you dragged yourself out of the river, you would be trying to scrape off that sweet stuff for days. Put those two experiences together, and that is how Ortberg talks about God's love, sweet, inescapable.

Another book we read for that class was Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster. My friends would probably describe me as disciplined, but I know better. Although my life is not characterized by these traits, I can be a procrastinating, lazy fool. This call to "whipping and spurring", as my dad would say, was challenging, encouraging, and something I definitely wanted to share with the girls I was writing to. How many college girls do you know that fast, meditate, and spend time in silence before God, but what Christians are given a certificate of exemption from practicing those disciplines and others like them? Discipline isn't about earning grace, it's about living like you mean it, and that's what I loved about reading Foster. He reminds us there is so much more to be had than a Sundays only Christian life with a service project thrown in now and then.

Throughout all of this wonderful reading and ruminating, I wanted to quit. It was not a constant desire to quit, but it was intermittent. My tendency to quit if I couldn't win resurfaced many times. It seemed too hard. I had no experience. Honors was above and beyond, so it was not as if I was really slacking. If it were not for that still small voice, I would have quit. I would have thrown in the towel, thrown up my hands and walked away. My genius of a cousin had not finished *his* honors project, so if I did not, it would not be the end of the world. But that voice said I could do it. It said that God's grace is sufficient, and it said giving up was not worth it.

There was a moment in time when I realized something important about this honors project. I think I was floating down the Caddo River in an inner tube, which is not a professional place to think and be an academic, but I cannot help where thoughts choose to appear. What I realized floating the river that day was God wanted to help me write this honors thesis. He was not sitting in Heaven waiting for me to fail, again. He wanted me to succeed. I am not talking about a poorly devised prosperity Gospel designed to help me make good grades. I mean that God knew I was writing about Him and how He loves His people. He knew that I was writing about the way He changes lives when we let Him. He knew that I would not have a lot of expertise in writing devotionals and that I would get discouraged. He knew, and He was not apathetic. He cared! He was interested! My heart almost broke, it was so happy. That was one of the turning points in this project. I began to pray that God would give me the words to write and the fortitude to finish.

He answered that prayer. He gave me analogies and quotes and encouragement to keep going. He put professors in my life that really believed in me. I began to write. It was not

always easy. Some days the words jumped on to the page, and some days there was a twelve foot wall between me and that project. I still wanted to quit sometimes. I still wished I had chosen something easier, like comparing the success of popular reading programs or studying the development of sauces in Italian cooking (another one of my crazy ideas). I still wished I was one of the smart kids who seemed to be turning out pages on something hard like it was a walk down the street. Then that still small voice would turn up again. I would get back to the keyboard and keep typing. Neals don't quit. Neals don't quit. I kept reminding myself. That voice kept reminding me that there was a lot more at stake than family and personal pride. The development of character and the development of a study that could actually be useful to someone was at stake. All of the things that I had learned about perseverance and doing my best were at stake. Did I really want to exercise my "giving up" muscle? If I quit now, what would I quit later?

I did not quit. I kept writing, kept editing, kept reading and praying. God remained so faithful in providing strength to finish and friends to encourage me along the way. Now the day has come for me to turn this project in. While it is officially complete, I have a feeling I will continue to edit and change it to adapt it for future ministry opportunities. In hindsight, I am so glad I chose this topic, as it has forced me to solidify my own beliefs and challenged me to dive deeply into God's Word. I am so grateful to have been granted the opportunity to carry out this project. Thank you.

Introduction

Hi! I'm so glad you decided to pick up this study. Welcome to a project that is a result of several years of work, thought and experience. It has been put together for you with lots of love, and I hope you benefit from reading through it. I designed it for my honor's thesis project as a part of my graduation requirements. I chose it because I wanted to share some of the things God has taught me through walking with Him. When I was little, I always wanted to be a writer, and I guess this was my chance.

I grew up in a wonderful Christian family, and decided to follow Jesus when I was nine. My life was reasonably normal for a church kid. I kept myself out of trouble, went to youth group and got along pretty well with my parents most of the time. As I went through college, I began to realize how much my life should revolve around my identity of being "in Christ". It should affect the way I relate to God, the way I solve problems, and relate to others. I have so much left to learn about this, but here is a compilation of some of the things I have learned along the way.

This study is intended for young women in their college or early career years. It is not limited to these girls, but most of my examples and analogies are geared toward people going through that life experience. I also wrote it for a believing audience having some prior knowledge. If you are brand new to this idea of following Jesus, or haven't figured out what you think of it yet, this might not be the best resource for you. Don't worry about being a Bible scholar to read this study, but the optimum audience has a little experience with God's Word and the ideas behind the Christian faith.

As far as layout is concerned, there are four chapters. Each chapter is built around an area that is affected by God's transforming truth as found in His Word. In every chapter, you'll find six devotional entries with a few questions to think over or a writing exercise at the end. One entry per day is good pacing, allowing you a day to skip during the week or on the weekend. This study can be done in a small group or on your own. If you use it for a small group, you can use the day off to meet and discuss the chapter together.

Thanks again for taking the time to read through this study on the way God's truth changes lives. I hope you will let it begin to change your life and draw you closer to your Redeemer.

Much love,

Casie

Week 1: God

Author of Love (healer of the broken)

From the beginning, you know there's something wrong. As a kid, you notice the presence of tummy aches and shots. As you get older, you begin to see systems that favor certain kinds of people and you see people who are miserable because of the choices they have made. Something, you notice is just not quite right about the world. There are plenty of right things about the world, like the way a newborn foal stands up for the first time on its wobbly legs and begins to walk or the wonderful way water droplets align and separate light into the colors of the rainbow.

As a follower of Jesus, you understand this strange situation a little more clearly than most. The world was made perfect in the beginning. It was a beautiful place, full of life and possibilities. When sin entered the world through the choice of people, there was a curse put on the world. As a consequence for our breaking trust in our relationship with God, the land, our relationships and work itself were cursed (Genesis 3:16-19).

Throughout the years that followed, God the Father was carrying out a process of restoring things to the way they were. He called a group of people to be a blessing to the nations, that the whole world might know Him (Genesis 12:2-3). This group of people, the Israelites, did an OK job of being a blessing sometimes, while most of the time they outright failed. During these years, a promise was given that one day there would be a permanent solution, something God would do to restore the relationship between Himself and the world. This promise is repeated over and over throughout the Old Testament in places like Isaiah 9:1-3, 11:1-4, 61:1-4, Micah 5:2-4, Zechariah 9:9-12.

This great God who decided not to give up on us after we disobeyed Him is the same God who decided to pay for the disaster to be fixed. In the words of C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, “[Christianity] also thinks that a great many things have gone wrong with the world that God made and that God insists, and insists very loudly, on our putting them right again.” He is the creator of the stars and the inventor of electron orbits. He is high and holy and awesome. He is also the creator of baby

giggles and the feeling you get when you're falling in love. He is a God who is good, and His goodness includes a desire to restore what was good about the world and the people He created. He has a desire to heal what was broken and bruised. Although we were the ones who caused the wound, He is the one who desires to heal it.

You probably know the rest of the story. First there was Christmas, which didn't include Christmas trees or fruitcake; then there was Easter, which had nothing to do with eggs or bunnies. In between, Jesus, God's Son, lived on earth without sinning and paid for our freedom with His life. You might know all of these things like a little kid might know about Columbus. It happened, and you believe it's true. When it comes to actually changing your life, you might not see it the same way as the people in Thessalonica did when Paul and Silas came and told them the good news that Jesus was the promised solution. They declared that these men and their message had "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

Has this good news that we are free from sin turned your world upside down? Do you understand this hope that while the work of paying for our sins on the cross is complete, Jesus is coming back to restore the rest of creation? My prayer echoes the words of Paul in his letter to the church at Ephesus "that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power." (Ephesians 1:18-19)

Questions to think about...

How does your view of Christianity compare to the big version of God's story of healing the relationship between Himself and His people? Do you understand the richness of the Old Testament covenant and promise of a Messiah, the promised King who would deliver people from slavery to sin? How does it change your perspective of your own life when you see the work God has begun and will continue until Jesus returns? The Christian life is more than going to Bible studies and witnessing to people on the street, it's about an intimate relationship with a Creator and the work He is doing.

A God to Be Feared (what love is this)

You may have read through the book of Proverbs before. If you have, you've seen the phrase "the fear of the Lord", and you may have wondered what fear had to do with this God who's supposed to be so merciful and loving. What does that even mean, and why is fearing God so closely tied to wisdom and understanding? In the introduction to the book of Proverbs, King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, wrote, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." Later, he said, "Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones."

Have you ever seen a thunderstorm roll through the plains? It sweeps through, black boiling clouds overhead, rain pouring down like it's the end of the world, and lightning bolts spreading their jagged fingers across the sky. It's a powerful force to see, and scary to be in the middle of. Take a look at what kind of God we serve.

Acts 5:1-11

Numbers 16:1-11, 28-33

Matthew 23:37

Matthew 9:18-25

This is the God who has a no-tolerance policy for sin. He takes it so seriously that He sent His Son to die to defeat it. This God created a universe so huge that we're still wondering how big it is, and loved broken people so much He sent His Son on the biggest rescue mission ever to save it. This is not the kind of God to be ignored, be thought of as small, or treated like any old friend.

Can He be trusted? It depends on what you're trusting Him to be. You cannot trust Him to always do things the way you expect, but you can trust Him to do what is best. It reminds me of C.S. Lewis's character Aslan from the Chronicles of Narnia. He was a fierce lion that was the king of kings in Narnia. Lewis writes that Aslan was neither safe, nor tame, but he was good.

Sometimes I think our version of God is a little tame. We see the Jesus who gathered the children or rode on a donkey, but forget that He also calmed a fierce storm and cast out demons as well. The God who made the sun stand still and caused the Great Flood as punishment for sin is the same God who Moses declared in Deuteronomy set His heart in love on the people of Israel. This God we worship is worthy of praise and our highest respect, not a nice grandpa who makes the flowers grow. On the other hand, stay away from thinking our God is mean or an almighty destroyer. He is the one who created sunsets and who allows us to have a close relationship with Him.

Take a look at Mark 15:21-39. This is the God who takes sin seriously. It's a pretty intense thing to picture a Father who loved a people so much. He allowed His Son to die in such a way to pay the penalty of the people. Judging by the details of this account, the payment for the world's sin was the most excruciating, terrifying thing anyone could go through. Jesus had to satisfy with His death, all of God's wrath toward the sin of the world. Now there's a God of love to be feared and respected.

Questions to think about...

Does your view of God lean more toward a harmless God who is kind to everyone or one who is just keeping track of your mistakes so He can zap you? How does seeing a bigger version of God that includes all the stories in His Word affect how you see Him? How do you think we lost sight of the importance of the fear of God? Meditate on the power of God for a few minutes and journal some thoughts or prayers in response.

Holy Before a Holy God (washed clean)

What's the first thing you think of when you hear the word "holy"? Do you associate it with a "holier than you" attitude, or nuns and monks, or just something you say before "cow" when something crazy happens? This word is used all the time in the Bible, usually referring to God. Take a look at these passages and see if you can figure out what the authors mean when they call something "holy".

John 6:68-69

Acts 1:8

1 Peter 2:9-10

Revelation 4:8-9

These passages show us instances of times when God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and believers have been called holy. That rules out the “holy cow” option. A simple way to think about it is to use the idea of being “set apart” to explain the word “holy”. We can use this definition to understand each of the ways it is used in these passages. In John, Jesus is identified as holy, and in Acts it’s the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Peter uses the word to refer to people who follow Jesus. The Revelation passage uses the word to describe God. How are each of these things set apart?

It could be said that God Himself is set apart because He is unlike anything else. He is all powerful, all knowing, and never makes a mistake. He is the Creator, and while He shares some attributes with people because they are made in His image, He is different from them. Jesus and the Holy Spirit share those attributes with God the Father. They do not make mistakes, experience uncertainty, or worry about anything. Our God is unlike any other god, whether it be Ra, the Egyptian sun-god, or Mars, the Roman god of war, or even Prosperity, the Western god of success. God is set apart from these gods.

Peter writes that people who believe Jesus is the Messiah are holy too. Stop and think a second. Why and how would God’s people be set apart or different? Ephesians gives us some insight into this question when Paul writes, “for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light”. The cross made all of that possible. Without Christ’s death, walking in light wouldn’t be an option!

The church in Ephesus was surrounded by people walking in darkness. Ephesus was a big port city, which made it a kind of melting pot of culture, religion and language. Religious pluralism was the trend of the day. It didn’t matter what god or gods you worshipped, there were plenty to choose from. It would have been easy for early followers of Jesus to blend in as followers of just one more religious instead of declaring Jesus as the only way to God.

The command to be holy covers a lot more ground than “don’t do bad stuff”. It means to be completely different from people who walk in darkness. This isn’t license to be a snob, or to be unfriendly to people who don’t follow Jesus. On the contrary, knowing God, you should want other people to be just like Him, too.

When you were little, chances are good that you wanted to be just like your parents. After a while, you grew up and figured out your parents actually had flaws. Then there was the day they couldn’t fix the fact that your dog had died, or you watched them lose their tempers. Suddenly you didn’t want to imitate them quite so closely. Before that realization, though, you probably wanted to be just like them. As new additions to God’s family, we should want to be just like Him. Let me clue you into something. There will never be a moment when you realize God isn’t as awesome as you thought. He will only continue to be perfect, faithful, and holy. Paul sums it up in Ephesians 5 like this, “Therefore, be imitators of God, as dear children.”

Questions to think about...

What tools has God given us to use in our pursuit of holiness? Does He expect us to just pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and be self-made women of God? Write your own definition of holiness. In what areas is God calling you to be more set apart in the way you live? How does being “holy” connect to being “whole”?

Freed from Sin (present consequences of salvation)

Depending on the circumstances you grew up in, your view of salvation may have been very future-oriented. You may have heard things like, “Accept Jesus as your savior so you can go to Heaven!” and “If you ask Jesus to forgive you, you won’t have to go to Hell when you die.” Your experience may have been different, but I heard this a lot when I was growing up in church, VBS and summer camp. While

these things are true, I think we sell the Gospel short if that's where we stop when we talk about salvation. Not only does salvation have wonderful future consequences, it has present ones!

When we take a look at the places in the Bible where God talks about salvation, we see a lot of present and past tense verbs. The New Testament writers say things like, "Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood," "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed," "So you are no longer a slave, but a son," and "having been set free from sin, [you] have become slaves of righteousness".

There are plenty of awesome present consequences of salvation, enough for this study to take four weeks investigating them and barely make a dent. One of these incredible consequences is a freedom from sin's enslavement. It was our master. We lived by its rules and impulses. We sold ourselves into slavery the moment we were born sinful people. Jesus says it like this in the book of John, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." We couldn't escape. The shackles were too tight around our souls, and we couldn't buy our freedom because we possessed no assets. Only the most valuable, costly, precious blood of the Son of God could pay for our freedom. John praises Jesus in his introduction to Revelation, "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood... to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

So we see that Scripture fully supports this idea that we are free (present tense) from our sin that Jesus paid for in full. How does that make a difference in the way we see sin and the way we choose to live? For one thing, it means that sin no longer has a say over our decision-making, reactions or relationships. It can't tell you what to do anymore. You are under no obligation to play by its rules. I am not suggesting that living in a way that is impervious to sin's influence is easy, or that we will master it on this earth. When you begin following Jesus, you are immediately freed from sin, but the effects of this freedom might take a little time to show up. That addiction that had you wrapped around its finger is no longer in charge of your life, but it may take a significant amount of work and counseling before freedom is visible in that area of your life.

The presence of sin will continue until Jesus comes back and God again dwells with His people. Escaping the presence of sin is not realistic for us in this life. It will persist on billboards, in stray

thoughts and behind office doors. Paul offers this exhortation in Galatians 5, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." The Galatians were beginning to slip from their understanding of salvation because of false teachers. Paul is reminding them that they are already free, and freedom has to be something that is exercised, defended and enjoyed.

Salvation's consequences start now! It is my prayer that you experience the freedom from sin that God intends for you to enjoy and walk in. Remember that Jesus is walking this path to freedom with you. He's the one who paid to set you free in the first place, and He wants to see the job through. He knows there may be difficulties or even set-backs, but nothing can stop His love for you and caring support along the way.

Questions to think about...

Do you see yourself as having been freed from sin (past tense) and walking in freedom (present tense)? If not, what is in your way? Are you convinced that Jesus has set you free and is walking with you in your journey to live in freedom? Is there sin in your life that you are struggling to be free from? Seek out a wise woman who loves Jesus deeply and talk to her about it. Ask her about passages in the Bible to encourage you and practical ways that you can live in freedom from sin in this area.

Made Right (God's version of reconciliation)

Sometimes in "churchy" settings we use words that are a little longer than average and carry a heavy historical and social meaning. One of these words is "reconciliation". At a basic level, this word gives the idea of restoring peace between two parties. The "re" part of it implies there was peace to begin with, and something went wrong, so there is a need to bring peace back to the relationship.

This helps us understand the word in the way it is used in the Bible. We understand that before sin entered the world, God and people were at peace. The arrival of sin caused a conflict or relational distance between us and God. While it would only be fair for us to take charge of the process of

reconciliation since we caused the separation, our kind God took the initiative. He sent His only Son on a mission to bring peace again to the relationship between people and God. This mission of peace was not very peaceful itself, and cost the Son His life.

Incredibly, most of the people the Son came to reconcile didn't even recognize what He was accomplishing. The spiritual leaders of God's chosen people, the Jews, were the ones who planned His execution! In Romans 5, Paul describes this strange phenomenon this way,

For one will scarcely die for a righteous person- though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die- but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us... More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

Isn't this a crazy story of reconciliation? People don't just give their lives for anyone, much less people who are in relational conflict with them. God's version of reconciliation involved dying for someone who didn't ask for it, appreciate it, or deserve it! In Colossians, Paul uses even stronger language, "And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him". It wasn't that we were oblivious to this mission of reconciliation; Paul says we were opposed to it and even hostile.

It's kind of like when a little kid is playing barefoot in the yard and gets a thorn in their foot. The moment you try to pull it out, they pull back and beg you not to touch it. Although taking out the thorn will result in the healing of the foot, and you're perfectly capable and willing to pull it out of their foot, they refuse. They oppose you with a five-year-old ferocity that doesn't understand removing the thorn is ultimately for their good. They chose to run around barefoot when they knew there were thorns. It's through no fault of yours they're in this predicament. You don't have to pull it out, but you know that leaving it there will only result in infection and more pain. All the kid knows is their foot is in pain, and they firmly believe that you pulling out the thorn will bring them more pain.

In the same way, God had nothing to do with us getting ourselves into this predicament of sin. He doesn't have to get us out of it, but He had such compassion that He wanted to restore the relationship we had with Him before sin entered the world. We weren't thankful or in awe or even aware that getting us out of trouble had cost Him so much. Before receiving worship or thanks, while we were still quite stuck and hostile, He sent His Son.

Jesus' death removes the relational distance and conflict between us and God. We are forgiven for the way we treated God, and the choices we made that were hurtful and foolish. The crazy thing is, He didn't pursue reconciliation begrudgingly. He wanted to restore the relationship between Himself and an ungrateful, imperfect people. Ephesians even says He did all this "so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us"! He reconciled us to Himself so He could show us *more* kindness!

Questions to think about...

What is your reaction when you think about God paying such a high cost to fix a relationship with people that were ungrateful and even enemies of His? The story of reconciliation doesn't stop there! Check out 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. When it says we, as people who are reconciled to God, are given the "ministry of reconciliation," what does that mean? How do we carry out our calling as "reconcilers" in the world around us, bringing wholeness to relationships that are broken?

Sons and Daughters (heavenly adoption)

Remember when we talked about being free from sin? God paid for our freedom from our former master, sin. In terms of slavery, it would make sense for someone to purchase a slave from their master and use them as a slave. It would be out of the ordinary for a person to buy a slave and set them free. In many situations, the best a slave could hope for was a kinder master than the one they had before. From a

slave's point of view, it would be a step up to move from being a slave of a wicked man, to a slave in the court of a kind king. The slave would gain both improvement in status and situation.

Thinking along these lines, imagine a king purchased a slave, took her back to His palace, and told her that from now on, she would be treated and given full status as a princess. In human experience, this does not happen. It doesn't even make sense. To go from slavery to being given a share in the kingdom could only be granted by a King whose name is Love. "See what kind of love the Father has given to us that we should be called children of God; and so we are." John declares in 1 John 3:1.

Paul writes about this idea of being adopted from slavery into God's family in his letter to the Romans.

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

What a story! We were slaves under a cruel master, and now, by the grace given to us, we are daughters of the high king. There is no room for pride here. As Ephesians 2:8, Romans 5:8 and Titus 3:5 affirm, we didn't earn or deserve to be rescued. We were not only slaves, but enemies of this king. Now that He has taken us into His family and shown us how to live, we ought to be just like Him. Being just like Him includes extending the family invitation graciously to those still in slavery. Our new Father delights in setting people free and bringing them into His family.

I don't know about your family experiences, but this new family isn't perfect. They are still in the process of becoming more and more like the Father. They make mistakes. Life in this family, though, means sharing that process of growing to be more like Him. It means encouraging each other to keep walking in truth and showing others a way out of slavery. That way is by the first born Son of the family, Jesus, John 14:6.

This family is forever. There are no divorces, and if there is death, we know it is only temporary separation. In this family, you fit. You have a purpose that you have been gifted for. You are wanted. John Ortberg writes about the transforming magic of being wanted in his book *Love Beyond Reason*.

To be loved means to be chosen. The sense of being chosen is one of the very best gifts love bestows on the beloved. It means someone has seen me as a unique person, and that someone desires to come closer to me, to be on the same side as I'm on. Someone believes I have a significant contribution to make... There is no gift like being chosen, no pain like rejection. And when a reject is chosen by someone, a life gets changed.

We were the rejects, and now we are the beloved. Congratulations, daughter, you have been set free and welcomed into a royal family where the king's name is Love.

Questions to think about...

Do you see where you've come from, what you were before your adoption? How does it make you feel to know that when you were in the squalor of slavery, unable to rescue yourself, the King paid the price for your release and adopted you into His family? Do you view God as a kind Father who wants you to be in His family? How could your family experience influence the extent to which you are able to see God in this way?

Week 2: Me

The Gifted and the Talented (welcome to the body)

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. 1 Corinthians 12:14-20

I have a friend. She's gifted. I'm annoyed. You know what I'm talking about. You have that friend, or you know that person at church. They're just the most _____. I don't know what it is for you. Maybe they're the most insightful speaker, best counselor, kindest servant's heart, talented musician, eager evangelist. Whatever it is, they have it and you don't. You think, "Bah, if I just had *that* gift, I'd be so useful to God! I would be a much more influential part of His kingdom!"

It's funny to me how we think early Christians were so reverent and holy, *always*. It seems like they were always writing creeds, having secret house churches, copying Scripture or being persecuted. A look at the Bible gives us a little further insight on what early Christians struggled with. In the city of Corinth, it seems like the church was struggling with their GT (gifted and talented) friends. Paul addresses it using the analogy of the body of Christ. He tries to explain to them how ridiculous it is for one part of the body to envy the job of another part. What good are five hearts and no eyes? Each part of the body has a very specific purpose! This passage is sandwiched in between an explanation of the spiritual gifts and a reminder that love should accompany any action we take. There was a little dispute in Corinth about which spiritual gifts were more important. Paul rebukes them and tries to remind them that it doesn't matter whose gift is cooler, because gifts are for building up the body, not winning a popularity contest.

Let me continue with the story about my friend and I. Many times I just waste moments of my day wishing I wasn't me. I'd much rather be her. I'd rather have her gifts, her attitude, her skills. God must have been a little stingy when He was giving me gifts because I don't really like the ones I got. That thinking is just a waste of time. So what if I'm a kidney instead of a brain! The body needs kidneys too! My job is to be the very best of what I am and not worry about how I don't have the gifts my friends have. It's not just a waste of time; it's a lack of faith in God's providence. Wishing you weren't you implies God didn't know what He was doing and that His plan isn't really best.

Questions to think about...

What gifts do you have? (Are you great with kids, can you fix things, are you skilled at planning and administrating, are you an encourager?) Check out 1 Corinthians 12 for a list of some gifts you may have. Are you making the very best use of those at church, school, home, work? You were made for a purpose and God has so many ways He wants to use you. Meditate on that for a minute or two. When you know that you were made for a reason and have been gifted to live out that reason, how does that change the way you view yourself?

The Sin of Sins (high pride and low pride)

There is none holy like the LORD;

there is none besides you;

there is no rock like our God.

Talk no more so very proudly,

let not arrogance come from your mouth;

for the LORD is a God of knowledge,

and by his actions are weighed.

The bows of the mighty are broken,

but the feeble bind on strength.

1 Samuel 2:2-4

And his mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

he has brought down the mighty from their thrones

and exalted those of humble estate;

Luke 1:50-52

If you grew up around church at all, you've probably heard about pride. If not, you're probably more familiar with the idea of being conceited or arrogant. We kind of blow it off as something that's annoying when we see it in other people, but not such a big deal when we see it in ourselves. That's a problem. Any time we look at sin and think it's not a big deal, that's a problem. It drives us away from the heart of the Gospel. This sin that we take lightly is the sin that drove the nails into the hands of the innocent Son of God. The sin of pride, it has been argued, is at the center of every other sin. Pride says, "I know best, and God does not".

C.S. Lewis says this about the heart of pride,

Now what you need to get clear is that Pride is *essentially* competitive – is competitive by its very nature... Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others... It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest.

This kind of pride is easy enough to see. Boys who strut around their cars making sure there are no bugs on the front grill, girls who dole out looks of contempt to anyone who doesn't have hair as awesome as theirs. The thing you'll discover as you grow is pride is a two sided coin. The kind of pride we've talked about so far has been termed "high pride". The other side of the coin is low pride. Low pride sounds like this, "God couldn't use me now after what I've done," "I don't really have any talents or gifts," "It's not a big deal, I'm not really that good at _____."

Have you heard yourself say or think that? I have. I used to think I was just being modest, but that wasn't the case. I usually was either denying the gifts God had given me, denying His power in using me, or denying the fruit the Spirit was bearing in my life. It suddenly didn't sound so admirable. High pride says, "I know better than God, don't need God, and am in charge of my life" and low pride says "God, you are not big enough to change my life, use me or overcome my past."

God hates pride because it alienates us from Him. It elevates us to a position we don't belong in, and it denies the power of God. Think about that. The way you think affects the way you live. If you're thinking the God who calls the stars by name, invented platypuses and allows light to make rainbows is not big enough to rule your life, you're going to be living like there is a God, but He's not worth having as your Savior, your Lord or your King. Take a few minutes to look at your life, your heart and your attitudes before answering the questions below.

Questions to think about...

Which side of pride do you find yourself struggling with more? In what ways are you denying God's power to be king, to save you from whatever you're stuck in, or use you for His glory? Check out 2 Timothy 3:1-5. Do you fall into the trap of having an appearance of godliness but not letting it work in your life? Spend a few minutes meditating on the mighty God we serve and ask Him to let you see Him that way always and protect you from making Him smaller than He is.

Who Am I (a change in identity)

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.” Those words were penned by a slave ship captain who became a follower of Jesus. The man’s name was John Newton, and he penned the words to one of the most famous Christian hymns ever written, “Amazing Grace”.

Sometimes I think “but” is one of the most wonderful words in the English language. Listen to this:

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. ***But*** now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. Romans 3:20-22a (emphasis mine)

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ***But*** God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:1-7 (emphasis mine)

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. ***But*** when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of

works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit... Titus 3:3-5 (emphasis mine)

Thankfully, it follows the line of a good story – there’s an introduction of characters, then you have a crisis, things are looking bad, ***BUT*** then the hero comes in and fixes the problem. We *were* sunk, children of wrath, sons of disobedience, malicious, ***BUT*** God made us alive, saved us, made a way for us to be justified apart from the law. Wherever you happen to be reading this, please celebrate the awesome existence of the word “but” in the Bible!

This series of “buts” is accompanied by a series of changes. If we let God bring us out of darkness, exchange our grime for His glory, and become a part of the family, we change. In an instant, we become God’s children, saints, part of a holy nation, a royal priesthood. We are adopted into God’s family. How preposterous would it be if a kind king adopted a little orphan girl from the streets of his city and the little girl walked around the palace dressed in her dirty ragged clothes? The king has chosen to make her a princess. He didn’t have to, but he did. The idea wasn’t forced upon him, and she will be of no political or economical gain. He had compassion on her. For her to still act like a street orphan is both ridiculous and offensive. You have been adopted by a king. Don’t walk around like you aren’t sure of your identity. God came personally to declare that you are wanted, and He paid for your adoption with His life.

Questions to think about...

Read these passages and think about what they say about *you* in the context of the family of God.

1 Peter 2:9-10

Romans 8:15

Romans 9:25-26

Colossians 1:11-14

How would this truth show up in your life? What would it change about the way you see yourself, act around others and set/meet goals? Think about this – if who you are depends less on you and more on a God who doesn't change and is infinitely strong – how much more secure is your identity? Spend some time in prayer just talking with God about who you are. Meditate on who you are now in Him and how much He loves you.

Saved from and Saved to (the other half of the story)

I like gardens. I like cows. I like playing pretend, and quilts, and baking biscuits, and running pell mell (whatever that means), and wearing heels. I'm good at being loud, plunging toilets, killing bugs, and singing jazz. Left to my own devices, I'm selfish, greedy, rude, proud, mean, and spitefully sarcastic. I'm good at excluding people, making them feel un-special, using my time for myself instead of for others and keeping my hard earned money to myself. Quite a positive start to the day, eh?

In my experience, people, churchy and unchurchy alike, have this impression that following Jesus is all about trying to quit doing and being the second half of that list. Once you come to Jesus, you have to quit watching those kinds of movies, saying those kinds of words, being selfish, etc., etc. So, pretty much, as soon as you start following Jesus, you have to work at soup kitchens in your off time, put money in the offering plate, and not do anything you really like to do.

Let me tell you, if that was all being a Christian was, I'd probably quit. Who wants to be part of a club that's all about not doing bad stuff and not doing fun stuff? What are you supposed to do, sit around and be bored all day waiting for Jesus to arrive with a huge evacuation bus and take us all to Heaven?

Yes, Christ has saved us from things, some huge things that we never could have conquered on our own. He has also saved us TO things. Take a look at this:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the

ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:17-19

The old has passed away. The end? No! The old has passed away and the new has come! If you know anything about English grammar, you know that the verb “has” is in the past tense. The new has already come! So what is that new life? It’s taking on this mission of reconciliation. (Reconciliation is just a snazzy word for putting things back the way they were supposed to be – particularly in the sense of relationships.)

That can sound a little confusing without any application. Let’s return to my list, above. I have a natural penchant for talking. On my own, I would use this to be sarcastic and snotty. After I started following Jesus, that part of me had to go. That didn’t mean taking a vow of eternal silence, it just meant I had to let go of what I was saved from and figure out what I was saved to. As it turns out, I was saved to encourage people and help them find what they’re saved to. On my own, I would keep all those golden brown biscuits to myself, but after Jesus got a hold of my heart, He taught me to use my gifts to share with others.

It’s not automatic, and it takes a considerable amount of practice, but Jesus is in the business of turning you into someone who represents Him well by taking things that are broken in you and setting out to make them right again in His name.

Questions to think about...

Check out Ephesians 2:10. You’ll notice it doesn’t say that being a Christian is only about running as fast as you can away from sin. It says, you were saved from something awful, and you were saved to something wonderful! Think about what that might mean for your life. What kinds of good works might God have set up for you to “walk in” today? Meditate on Philippians 2:12-13 and what it means to let God work in you for His good pleasure.

Purpose (what do I do now)

What should I do with my life? What is God's will? How do I know I'm choosing what God has for me?

As humans, we want to have God's will laid out for us – take this class, go on this date, work at this summer camp, and turn down this job. Ha, if only things were that easy... well, they aren't. They're easier. I'm not lying to you. God's will is so much simpler than we usually make it.

God's will can be divided into two parts, the implicit part and the explicit part. Let's start with the explicit part. Let me start with a little quiz to see what you already know.

- | | | |
|---|------|-------|
| 1. God's will for you is to be involved in taking care of the poor. | True | False |
| 2. God's will for you is to tell others about Him. | True | False |
| 3. God's will for you is to have sex with your boyfriend. | True | False |
| 4. God's will for you is to complain about your circumstances. | True | False |
| 5. God's will for you is to work together with His church. | True | False |

You should have answered True to 1, 2, 5 and False to 3, 4. These are things that are a part of God's explicit will for your life according to 1 John 3:16-18, Matthew 28:18-20 and Hebrews 10:24-25. These are things that God clearly tells us should be part of our lives. There are plenty of other things. Look through your Bible and make note of some of them now.

That's not usually the part of life that we get stomach ulcers over. We know we're supposed to be patient and that the things coming out of our mouths should be encouraging. It's the other things that we worry about, the specific things. Just in case you haven't figured this out already, I'll save you some time. The Bible does not contain the name of the man you should date or marry. It does not have the name of the major you should choose in college or the job you should accept. It does not give specific

directions on whether you should go hiking or shopping this weekend. I may have just popped your “will of God” bubble, but don’t worry.

There is another part of God’s will, the implicit part. Implicit means it’s not laid out in black and white between the covers of the Bible, but it can be reasonably concluded using the principles in the text. I’ll give you an example to help this make more sense. Right now I am looking for elementary teaching jobs. Let’s say I get offers from three different schools. The School #1 looks like a great place to work. When I go in for the interview, they say something about reporting test scores to the state. If my students don’t score above a 70% on a standardized test, the school protocol is to change the numbers so that all student score reports are above 85%. Right then, I know I cannot take that job. I know it doesn’t say anywhere in the Bible “thou shalt not take a job that requires you to fudge test scores”. But I do know that because I stand for Jesus, I stand for what is true, and taking a job that requires me to lie isn’t going to work.

Let’s continue this hypothetical scenario. I get calls from School #2 and School #3. They both seem to have quality administrations and strong mission statements about setting high academic and behavioral standards for students. The interviews both go really well, however, I run into the same problem I did with the first school. Nowhere in the Bible does it say “the job at School #3 will be blessed, and the job at School #2 is just not for you”. What do I do? There are no conflicts of interest that would prevent me from accepting either job. If I took the job at School #3, I would be close to hiking, rock climbing, some great ministry epicenters and friends I worked with at camp. If I took the job at School #2, I would be close to family and friends, I already know I like the weather, and I could live at home until I found an apartment. What should I do?

Easy answer: whatever I want. Here’s the deal. When we have to make decisions, there are several tools we have to make sure we are making the best decision. Start with the Bible. Is there anything in the Bible about situations like this that would speak to the value of one good school over another? No. Ok, we move on to the second tool. I hope you have some wise people in your life. If you don’t, find some.

You need some older, wiser people who have walked with Jesus for a while and have a track record of making good decisions. Get their input on the situation. Is there a part of the decision making process you're overlooking that experience would help you see? Hopefully they'll be able to cover your blind spot. If your trusted advisors see both options as good, do a little personal preference weighing.

Hypothetically, I have talked to my parents and close friends about these jobs, they seem to think they both look good. I have to now weigh my personal preferences. How important is being close to the mountains? Is it important that School #2 helps pay for graduate school? Do I want to live by myself?

In the end, when we use the tools that God has placed in our grasp to make decisions and two choices come up even, we get to choose! It's ok to do what you want when what you want is within the guidelines of what God says is good! I hope this demystifies the process a little bit for you. Sometimes making the choice is still difficult, but know that God wants you to be in His will. He's not going to try to trick you into doing the wrong thing if you are seeking Him and using the tools He has given you.

Questions to think about...

What does "whatever" mean in Philippians 4:8? How does that open up your options for "doing God's will"? Who do you have in your life that you can trust for sound, godly advice? If you don't have very many, think about ways you could add these people to your life. Why do you think God gives us choices?

A Word to the Wise (taking God's love seriously)

Have you ever heard yourself think, "Yes, God loves the world, but I don't really know if He loves me personally. I have messed up a lot, and I think He is probably just frustrated with me most of the time"?

We're going to tackle this lie that God doesn't love you, (insert your name here) personally and intensely. I struggle with this idea a lot, even though it's kind of ridiculous. What do I want, for Him to write it in the sky? Wait, He already did when He gave us the rainbow. Do I want Him to come tell me personally? He already did when He sent His Son and His Holy Spirit. Look at this.

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:32-39

Listen to this. Read it and take it to heart. Believe it with everything you've got. I know you might have some objections like I don't know who you are or what you've done or what's been done to you. Somewhere I think you have this idea that God's love is unfair. It doesn't make sense. Well, you're right, but just because you in your human brain can't understand the love of the God who made the stars doesn't nullify that love. Don't worry, He didn't get suckered into loving you. He didn't lose a bet. It

wasn't some cosmic trick. He chose it. He wanted to love you in this way. He still does. Sure, you are an exceptional person, but these verses have no room for exceptions. Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of our God. "Nothing" leaves no room for "but I..." Take a minute and just sit on that.

Love is a terrifying thing sometimes. It gets closer to us than we'd like sometimes. It knows things about us that we'd rather hide. It sticks it out when more superficial things are torn away. It delights in the one loved. Love changes people. Is that what you're worried about? That maybe, if you let God love you, and maybe even let people love you, that you'll be changed? You'll be vulnerable and dependent on people and that makes you nervous? It doesn't matter that the whole world was supposed to be like that, I suppose, or that you were created to live in relationships full of the stuff? Maybe you should start small. Open up that heart and let Him love you. Listen to what He says in His Word! Read it! Believe it! It's truer than anything in the world.

Questions to think about...

What keeps you from fully living in the light of God's love? Check out these passages – Isaiah 30:18-21, Isaiah 43, Deuteronomy 10:14-18, Matthew 23:37. What is the tone of these passages? Write a letter to God about how you understand His love now. Ask Him to transform it into a love so overwhelming, it sticks out all over, for His glory.

Week 3: Relationships

Seeing People Truly (intrinsic value)

In his book, *Love Beyond Reason*, John Ortberg tells a story about his sister's favorite doll, Pandy. She took Pandy everywhere with her, family vacations, the bathtub, to bed. With that kind of life, Pandy soon became a little rough looking. It did not matter, though, because Pandy was her favorite, and she loved her just the same. Even after his sister moved out, Pandy stayed around. The Ortberg family loved her too much to throw her away. When his sister had children of her own, Pandy was sent to a doll hospital and made over for a new generation of children to love.

Ortberg draws connections between the way his sister loved Pandy and the way God loves us.

We were not created ragged. From the beginning there was a wonder about human beings that caused God himself to say "Very Good" as he looked at them in the department store window... There is a wonder about human beings still that even all our fallenness cannot utterly erase.

There is a wonder about you. Raggedness is not your identity. Raggedness is not your destiny, nor is it mine. We may be unlovely, yet we are not unloved.

And we cannot be loved without being changed. When people experience love (and here I don't mean simply having warm feelings toward others, I mean love that is sometimes stern and challenging and may even be painful), they begin to grow lovely.

We all know people who are a little like Pandy. For some reason or another, they're a little ragged. Now look in the mirror. What's ragged about you? Are you short-tempered or lazy or insensitive? I know when I look in the mirror, I see a girl who doesn't always fight for the underdog, who gets impatient with people who live at a different pace or see the world in a different way. Whatever your

raggedness looks like, God sees straight through it to who you are becoming and how far you've come already.

When we look at others, we tend to evaluate them. Things like whether their shirt fits wells, whether they are confident, whether they smell nice or speak well or are having a good day all get evaluated, usually unconsciously. How often do we see people and our first thought is, "Wow, there's someone made in God's image, I wonder what adventures He has in store for their life!" I don't know about you, but it doesn't happen very often for me.

Living in a world that says you must look great, live outside your means, and live for yourself to have meaning makes remembering the value of people a little difficult sometimes. Even when Jesus was on earth, He was constantly reminding people to look at each other as people who bore the image of God. We have value because we were created by God, not because of anything we've won, earned, or put on. Jesus spent time with the sick, the hurt, and the poor because He considered them to have just as much value as the rich and successful.

Questions to think about...

Check out these passages where Jesus reminds people His way of valuing people: Matthew 12:9-14, 19:13-15, Mark 5:25-34, Luke 7:36-50. Think about who you undervalue or write off as having less worth. What criteria are you using to evaluate someone's worth? How did Jesus decide who was worthy of His time and energy?

Move Over, Prince Charming (realistic expectations)

I love princess movies. I don't care if you think I'm a sentimental sap. I love their dresses, I love how they twirl and sing all the time. I love how they have hair that always looks awesome and their lives, though sometimes marked with significant crisis, always turn out alright. I especially love the part where, through no real fault of their own, they find themselves lost, captured, under a spell, etc. They are

despairing for life itself when, without a smudge or a hair out of place, the hero makes his grand entrance. He swashbuckles his way through briar and villain, scoops the princess in his arms and leaps onto his horse. He gallops down the mountain, finds the nearest village priest/pastor/preacher and marries the princess. You could quote the last line by heart: and they lived happily ever after.

Remember my first statement. I love these movies. They're sweet and predictable. The girl is wonderful, but she gets herself in a predicament; the boy is brave and strong and rescues her from the predicament. They are obviously in love, so they get married and live, well, you know. Although all these things are wonderful, I can't help but wonder if the stories are a little deficient. There's no mention of the prince's habit of leaving his swords all over the house, no mention of the princess's habit of being entirely too cheerful and loud in the early morning, and no mention of the Great War, which involved deciding which family palace to spend Christmas at.

Take a look at your expectations. Are you hoping for a man (or think you have one already) who comes to your rescue at the drop of a handkerchief, one who has no bad habits, never a hair out of place? Once you marry him, do you expect to love him with all your heart forever? Of course, *you'd* never be one of *those* couples who fight over silly things like paint colors or how much salt to put in the soup.

On the other hand, have you given up on the male population entirely, relinquishing your dreams of ever finding a guy worth having? Or have you settled for dating someone who is closer to the villain side of the story than the dashing hero? Have you heard women talking about the demise of men, how they're boorish, lustful slobs who eat a lot and don't pick up after themselves?

The tricky thing about men, and people in general, is that both of those things are true, sort of. Remember when we talked about the glorious word, "but"? People who are in Christ, or men who are in Christ are in a funny place some people call already not yet. They have already been changed into a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) but they are not completely finished with the transformation. The completion of this transformation will be when Jesus comes back and establishes His kingdom with a New Heaven and a New Earth.

What does this have to do with our expectations of Christian men? (We're only talking about men who follow Jesus because that's the only kind you should be dating.*) To begin with, we know where our boys are coming from. They're coming from being "sons of disobedience" and "the kingdom of darkness". Before you get stuck up, just remember you were there too. Now that they've been rescued by the blood of Christ on the cross, they are a part of the "kingdom of light". They went from following the villain to following the hero. Now that they're following the hero, Jesus, they should be taking on characteristics of the hero. If Jesus is patient and cares about all kinds of people, shouldn't that start to show up in this man's life too? If Jesus considers it important to use money wisely, shouldn't this guy handle his money wisely too?

Here's where the not yet part of the story comes in. We are already in Christ, justified in the eyes of God, but we are not yet living in a world without the presence or power of sin. After all, if our men were perfect, there would have been no need for a cross, no resurrection. We, as the church, are in the business of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). We, as women, need to be in this business for our men and for ourselves. This means being in prayer, being in the Word, and being in healthy relationships that are moving toward wholeness in Christ.

Questions to think about...

What sorts of expectations do you have of men (in the workplace, as a friend, as a husband, etc.)? Make a list of them and look over them carefully. Are they realistic, Biblical expectations? Do they reflect an already/not yet kind of mindset? How about expectations for yourself? Are they actually attainable? Are they reflective of a woman who is being perfected into the image of Christ? Tweak your list of expectations so that they reflect a perspective that understands the past but also looks to our calling as believers.

Be at Peace with Each Other (the outworkings of the Gospel)

Did you know Jesus prayed for you? I'm not talking about the disciples, or His family, or the people who were following Him. He prayed for you. Check out John 17. This is the part of the story just before Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane, where He is arrested. He has just finished explaining to the disciples at the Last Supper that He is about to leave them but He will send the Holy Spirit. In chapter 17, He prays, and in verse 20-23, He prays for you.

Do you know what He prays for? He does not ask that you be mighty in the faith and always do the right thing. He does not ask that you be great evangelists or always wake up early enough for church on Sundays. He asks that you be unified with His body, the people who follow Him. If we are one, Jesus says that the world will know God's love and that Jesus was sent from God. That must be a pretty big deal, if it's what Jesus asked the Father for the night before He died on the cross.

Think about it in terms of a team. In one situation or another, we have all worked in a team context. It may have been a soccer team, math project team, or a business management presentation team. No one likes the teams that rely on one person to get everything done, especially when that someone is you. People don't gain from freeloading. They fail to meet the objective of the team (improved communication skills, contribute to scoring goals, etc.). Sometimes teams are so divided that nothing really gets done. There may be a few strong personalities involved, or differing opinions. Now think about teams that work the way they're supposed to. People are working their best in a place that fits their gifts. You wouldn't ask the fastest girl on the team to be a goalie, and you wouldn't ask me to run sound and video for a group project! When teams are at their best, they are working towards a common goal wholeheartedly.

Take this example to the context of the church. What Jesus prayed for was for us to be a strong team, working toward a goal with all our hearts. This doesn't mean just civilly co-existing. It means depending on each other's gifts, cooperating, getting over egos, and keeping the kingdom in focus. Imagine the things that could be accomplished if the whole church worked together as a team. I don't just mean Grace Church of Little Town's building committee. I mean the WHOLE church. I mean believers in Belize, Egypt, Norway, and the U.S. Think there would be much poverty? Think there would be such

a high divorce rate in the church? Think the church would be growing because of the effective way it could show love to the world? Think we would have church splits over what kind of music was sung or what color the carpet in the youth room was?

Maybe we should start seeing each other as part of a team. If you see your teammates as people who can help you accomplish your goal, you might start working with them and valuing them as gifts in your life. Think about the magnified importance of this team in your life. They aren't helping you finish a project; they're helping you carry out your life calling and meet the goal of the church. This isn't just about other people working hard and using their gifts, it's about you too. It's about you contributing when you can do to the work of the church and the relationships inside it.

Questions to think about...

Do some digging using your concordance. Where else in the Bible does it talk about working together as the body, being members of each other, and unity? What would it take for you to start living like your church is your team? Where could you jump in and get involved in the mission of the church in the world?

Free from Responding (we don't have to look like the world)

When Jesus came to earth and began His ministry, He had a lot of explaining to do. He had to explain that God's messiah wasn't the political hero the Jews were looking for. He had to explain that He had come to call everyone to repentance, the poor, the unpopular, the religious, the wealthy, the sick. He also had to explain that the reason He was calling people to repentance because they were enslaved to sin. John's gospel records one of these incidents in chapter 8.

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You

will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

The Jews were descended from Abraham. They were under the impression that this and following the law were enough to be at peace with God. They didn't understand their own spiritual poverty that Jesus had come to rescue them from. They were under the impression that they were just a part of the family by virtue of being descendants to Abraham. Jesus set them straight when He said anyone who sins is a slave to it, but to really be a part of the family, the Son has to set you free. And by golly, if the Son sets you free, you are really free!

This idea of being free from sin is all over the New Testament. In Romans 6, Paul writes about being slaves to sin no longer, but slaves to righteousness. In Galatians, he encourages the church to stand strong and not go back to slavery in sin because Christ has set us free! He has certainly set us free from lots of things, but today I want to focus on being free from responding like the world in the area of relationships.

I love my family. They are my favorite people in the world, but like every family, they aren't perfect. When one of my brothers is making fun of me for doing something ditzy, the old slave to sin self would have loved to snap right back with something they had done wrong or a mistake they had made. When my parents are trying to give me good advice on important decisions, that old self would have loved to toss my sassy little ponytail and let them know just how independent I am. It's like I was stuck in a rut of being rude, a slave to the world's way of responding to people who get on your nerves. Now that I follow Jesus, I'm free to be respectful and kind to my family. With the help of the Holy Spirit, I can listen to my parents and take their good advice, and I can hold my tongue when my brothers are making jokes at my expense, when I know they really love me.

I'm also free from playing the one-up game. I'm sure you've played before. Someone gets a new something. They bring this new something to show you. All of a sudden, you think you feel the need to come up with something to show off, or you at least put in an order for the newer version of what they

got. It could be anything, boyfriends, spring break trips, phones, wallets, ministry leadership positions. When you walk with Jesus, you become not so competitive in the one-up game. With the Holy Spirit's help, I don't have to respond with jealousy anymore, or pride when I have a story to top someone else's. I can be happy for them, as if it happened to me, instead of looking at everything as a competition.

Note that in both of those cases, I mentioned the Holy Spirit. Doing this on your own is impossible. There's no breaking out of this prison on your own. Jesus has to bust you out of slavery, and the Holy Spirit has to patiently teach you how to behave less like a slave and more like a daughter of the King. Walking with the Spirit is the key to these transformed attitudes and living like you're really free from responding to people and situations like the world.

Questions to think about...

What are some other situations you might find yourself in where the world's response and the freed-by-Jesus response are opposites? Where is your area of weakness in responding to others in the way a slave would? (Good looking boys, annoying people, rude people?) You are free from responding like the world! Sit and think about that, thanking God that He has set you free to respond the way He would!

Free to Respond (forgiveness)

If you are in Christ, then you are free. Your sin has been paid for and you no longer bear the weight of responsibility for the bad things you've done. You have been forgiven. How does being forgiven change the way you live? If you really believed God had forgiven you, would you view Him differently than you do now? Scripture is full of passages about being freed from sin. It talks about sin as slavery, and when we accept Jesus' payment for our sin, we are freed from that slavery and forgiven. It also uses the metaphor of a debt. We owed God so much that we could never pay back. He gave us life, a world to

live in, and relationships, and we took it all and walked away from Him. Think of what it meant for God to chase us down, come to earth and save us. It was a costly trip.

Now think of forgiveness between people. When people wrong you, they can't fix it. They may be able to pay you back for something they broke, or say they're sorry for the words they said, but that doesn't undo what they did. It hurts when people treat us badly. Forgiving them, paying their debt for them, is a hard thing to do. It's much easier to be mad or stay sad or dream of ways to ruin their reputation and make them pay for what they did to you.

This method of living hurts four kinds of people. First, it hurts the heart of God. After setting an example of what forgiveness looks like in its more glorious form, He expects you to imitate that example. It also hurts the person you're not forgiving. After being entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, we should be restoring relationships, not straining them by refusing to forgive. As you might have guessed, it hurts *you*. Holding that unforgiveness in your heart can make you bitter and angry, and holding on to pent up hurt makes it hard to have healthy relationships with God and others. Finally, it hurts the people who are watching you. Don't think no one is watching you. Once people know you claim to follow Jesus, they watch you closely. They watch how you respond to annoying people, how you respond to hard situations, and how you respond when someone hurts you.

Before you say, "But you don't know what they *did*", I'm going to ask you to zoom out for a second. Look at the big picture. God has called you, redeemed you, rescued you, reconciled you to Himself and called you to a completely new way of living. This way of living includes being like Him. Remember what I just said – reconciled you to Himself. He wants us to be like Him. He has given us the ministry of reconciliation. Ok, maybe you get it.

Let me remind you of something. The way that God forgives us takes away the eternal penalty of sin and frees us from the bonds of sin. This forgiveness does not always take away the consequences of sin. If part of your life before Jesus involved doing drugs, your life after you start following Jesus might have some medical consequences from those drugs. If you were involved in cheating in school in your life before Jesus, you will probably have some consequences for your actions. It works the same

way with people. If someone verbally abuses you every time you hang out with them, you are called to forgive them, but a consequence of that behavior might be some space or distance between you and this person. Forgiveness isn't saying what the person did was OK. Forgiveness is saying that you no longer hold that person's sin over their head; they are no longer in debt to you for what they did.

Questions to think about...

Sketch out a short definition of forgiveness. Does it hinge on anything? (*If they respond this way, or if they apologize...*) Read Psalm 103, Matthew 6:14-15, 18:21-35. Does your definition change at all? Spend some time asking God to forgive you for the ways you have not acted like His follower, and ask Him to help you forgive the people in your life who have wronged you.

Bear Much Fruit (the fruit of the Spirit)

I love fruit. I could tell you all about the different kinds of apples at the grocery store, how to tell if a cantaloupe is ripe, and the easiest way to peel an orange. I also love to garden. My family always had a big garden while I was growing up in Texas and Colorado. My dad would till up the soil and my mom and I would plant the seeds and water them carefully so they would sprout. Those sentences just set up some credibility for what I am about to say.

I have never seen a pear tree produce strawberries. Pears grow on deciduous trees in areas that get a significant amount of cold weather. They produce fruit in the fall after blooming and being pollinated in the spring. Strawberries grow on bushes. Depending on the type, you could have one strawberry crop a year or several.

It's interesting because I could probably get most reasonable people to agree with me when I say that pears do not grow on strawberry bushes, and strawberries do not grow on pear trees. That pear tree does its job. It makes pears. These pears are usually sweet, juicy and life-giving. It's the same way with the strawberry bush. Let's see if you can follow my analogy. A pear tree produces pears. A strawberry

bush produces strawberries. A grapevine produces grapes. A chip company produces chips. A computer company produces computers. A Christian produces...? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control!

This idea of "bearing fruit" is found several places in the New Testament. John writes about it in the 15th chapter of his gospel when he quotes Jesus as saying,

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

In Galatians 5, Paul explains the Holy Spirit's work in our lives in this way,

But I saw, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

James talks about the way that the Holy Spirit should influence the way we speak in James 3.

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

What these writes are trying to get across is if we are now a part of this vine (Christ), the most natural thing for us to do would be to produce fruit. What doesn't make sense would be for us to claim we are transformed people who take the Bible seriously and then live as though it didn't matter or wasn't true. They aren't saying that it will be easy (note the animosity between the desires Paul lists in Galatians), but that it will happen, through the work of the Holy Spirit in us and our continual abiding in Christ.

So what does this look like? It would make sense for people who love Jesus to love the people He has created and placed around them. It would make sense for people who have their hope set on Christ's return and beginning of His kingdom to live with joy and have peace in difficult circumstances. I think you get the idea. Our lives should be characterized by these things because of the change that the Holy Spirit has brought about in our lives

Questions to think about...

Take a look at Paul's list of character qualities. They aren't the exhaustive list of things a disciple of Christ should be. What other things should mark a life that loves Jesus? Where do you struggle with this list? What's getting in your way of living this way? What are some ways that you can "walk by the Spirit" and abide in Christ? Sometimes just spending time with Jesus meditating on who He is and what He has done can help you draw closer to Him. Do that now, asking Him to help you rest and abide in Him.

Week 4: Circumstances

Oh Happy Day (a reason to sing)

For the past four weeks, we've been figuring out how who we are and what we think about the big questions of life shape how we make choices and view the world. This last week we are going to spend talking about circumstances, the stuff happening in your life right now.

I can only imagine the enormous range of circumstances that are going on in your life right now. You just got a raise at work, you're in the middle of a family feud, your best friend just got engaged, your mom was just diagnosed with breast cancer, calculus finally clicked and you're on your way to an A in the class... Welcome to life. Depending on what your list looks like, this idea of joy may be something that is like tying your shoes, or it could be like riding a porcupine across the Gobi desert. Regardless of what your list looks like, joy is a big deal, and it has been for a long time. Check out these passages in the Old Testament on the idea of joy...

1 Kings 1:39-40 Solomon anointed, the people rejoiced and split the earth with the noise

1 Chronicles 16:23-27 The Ark brought home to Jerusalem, thanks to God, "joy is in His place"

2 Chronicles 30:20-27 Israelites healed, sang with all their might, celebrated Feast of Unleavened Bread

Job 33:22-30 Man is weak and sinful, but great joy comes when God forgives him

Job 38:1-7 Joy was from the beginning, when God created the world

Psalms 4:7-8 God is our source of joy

Psalms 16:8-11 In God's presence is fullness of joy

Psalms 63:4-7 His protection makes us sing for joy

Proverbs 17:22 A joyful heart does good like medicine

Isaiah 12:1-6 We rejoice in God's salvation

Isaiah 35 The ransomed will return to Zion

Isaiah 51:11-16 God brings joy and salvation, man is not to be feared

Habakkuk 3:17-19 Even though my world is a mess, I will rejoice in God

Zephaniah 3:14-20 God will be your savior and strength and put things to right

Sometimes Israel's list looked pretty good – national peace, a new king who loved God, and economic prosperity. When this was the case, they were thankful, and they rejoiced because the LORD had blessed them in these ways. They sang, they danced, and made a general ruckus. Sometimes, however, the list didn't look so good. They were prisoners of war, their enemies were chasing them down, God seemed distant and justice wasn't an everyday reality. In times like these, Israel was to rejoice in God Himself and to anticipate His coming restoration of the whole world. This kind of joy was an expression of faith in who God was, is and will always be and in the promise of making all things like they were intended to be.

This is kind of annoying and tricky because this idea of being joyful is a command that doesn't hinge on legitimate excuses. When my list seems a mile long and crammed full of all things miserable, I don't get an exemption from being joyful. Admit it, when your list includes things that are hard, maybe so hard you wonder if you'll even survive them, this command seems a little unreasonable, even unfair. How can God expect us to be the singing-est, dancing-est, couldn't-get-me-down-if-you-tried kind of happy people when our lists include things like breakups, not *quite* enough money to pay the rent, or people we love who are sick?

Remember what we learned in week one? God is the greatest, grandest, most beautiful good. He is the creator of everything wonderful, and He loves us with a love we can't even begin to understand. The Bible tells us to rejoice "in the Lord", or have joy in God Himself. Let me explain it this way. You probably know a little kid; you have a niece or nephew, or you babysit for someone with little kids. If you don't like kids, just think of something you really like (Christmas, playing guitar, your pet iguana...). When you think about this thing, just the thought of it makes you happy. You love the way that little kid (or your pet iguana) smiles, the way Christmas seems to help people see what's important, or the way that Dsus chord sounds when you play it just right. When you're having a crummy day, just a thought of that

thing brightens your day. You rejoice in that thing. Sometimes that kid is fussy, or your guitar is out of tune, so the illustration isn't perfect. Imagine if there was something you loved that never fussed or broke or went out of tune. When you thought about it, it just made you smile and made you a little more able to face the world for another day. Well, hey, guess what, you have that thing. That perfect, doesn't change, never lets you down thing? That's God. We can rejoice in Him because He's worth it. He's worth it every moment of every day. We can think of Him and what He's done and be glad. Thinking about this great and good God can make us just a little more able to face the world for another day.

Questions to think about...

Who is the happiest person you know? What makes them that way? Do you think they'd still be so happy if their list of circumstances was a bunch of hard things? Choose something that makes you happy and write a list of things about it that make you feel that way. Now make a list for God. What are the differences between the lists? What's one practical thing you can do to choose joy, whatever your list looks like?

I Hope I Hope I Hope (why hope isn't as shaky as we make it)

It's Christmas morning. You're sitting there by the fireplace with your family gathered around the Christmas tree. The lights on the tree are all twinkly, and your mom is wielding the video camera like a Hollywood director. Your dad is wearing that blue plaid flannel robe your mom got him last year for Christmas, and is trying to prevent any head injuries between your brothers who are wrestling on the floor. Regardless of whether this was your house at Christmas or not, at the forefront of your little five year old mind was hope. It probably wasn't a deeply theological hope based on the character of God and

laced with footnotes from N.T. Wright. The extent of your thoughts on hope probably looked something like this... "I hope, I hope, I hope that (insert the gift you wanted with all your heart, soul and bone marrow at age 5) is sitting under that tree right now!"

If you translate that to your life now, it probably looks something like you sitting in black dress pants in a reception area hoping, hoping, hoping you got the job, raise, promotion etc. or you sitting on the quad in your jeans with your Mac hoping, hoping, hoping you got the grade you wanted in that class that was eating your lunch. In all these situations, there is a wide variety of uncertainty. You may know that you have the promotion in the bag, it's just a matter of hearing the words from the boss's mouth. You may be reasonably confident that your coach is going to let you start the next game. You may have no clue what your parents are going to say when you tell them you rear ended your biology professor in your haste to get to lunch (but you're sure hoping it's, "Well honey, everyone makes mistakes, we'll help you pay for it.").

My dear friend, Merriam-Webster.com says that hope is a "desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment". It's this "expectation of or belief in fulfillment" I want to focus on right now. If we really believe that our God is as big as He says in His word, and if He really has promised us things like peace that goes beyond understanding and a huge awesome reunion with Him one day... I'd say our expectation of our hope being fulfilled is pretty reasonable, more than that, it's more secure than the best bank in Switzerland. Don't just forget about this hope that we have. That's like opening that present on Christmas morning and forgetting about it the next day. That's not just ungrateful, it's crazy! We have so many promises from our big trustworthy God. It would be crazy to live like they didn't exist.

Questions to think about...

How do you usually think about the idea of hope? Is hope in reality as firm and unshakable and you think of it as being? What are things that take the place of your hope in our strong God? (Career, academics, good looks) What exactly has God promised us? Make a list of these and others you find and put it where you will be reminded often. Matt. 5:3-11, Matt. 6:25-34, Matt. 7:24-27, Matt. 10:28-33,

Matt. 11:28-30, John 10:7-11, John 14:1-3, John 16:7-13, John 16:22-24, John 17:20-24, Acts 1:8,
Romans 8:18-25, Romans 8:31-39, Hebrews 10:19-23

Peace that Is Beyond Understanding (why we don't worry)

Have you ever seen one of those secret agent movies where the sniper is perched on an urban rooftop peering through his high powered scope? He pulls the trigger and just takes the guy out before he knew what hit him. Occasionally these movie scenes will take place at night and the sniper gun will have a laser mounted to the scope. In this case, sometimes the target will know he's the target before he gets taken out. I imagine his heart probably goes zero to sixty the second he sees that red laser dot flitting around the heart locale of his Armani suit. Sometimes the sniper gets his man, sometimes he doesn't.

Life is the same way, minus the Armani suit. You'll find yourself scrubbing away at that baked on lasagna in your favorite casserole dish, checking the mail for a letter from your pen pal in Idaho, just minding your own business, when, shazaaam! Laser. Pointed right at your heart. While you're scrubbing the sauce off that pan, your phone rings and it's your mom. She says your dad was having trouble breathing, and they're going in for some tests that afternoon. While you're checking the mail for that letter from your pen pal, you get an electric bill that's quite a bit more than you were expecting. There's the laser. Your blood pressure goes up, you start craving chocolate and you start worrying. The laser. The laser. The laser. It's all you can think about. What if it takes you out? What if it leaves you permanently brain damaged? What if your dad has had a heart attack and needs surgery? What if you can't come up with the money to pay that bill? As women, it seems we are particularly susceptible to this what if syndrome.

I've noticed that worrying has come into style lately. After all, if you have lots of things to worry about, it means there are a lot of interesting things going on in your life, you're busy, and you're handling

it all so well... at least, that's what you're telling people. If you looked at dead on, faced that sniper, you'd realize at the heart of that worry is fear. Fear of being hurt, fear of not being in charge, whatever it is, you're scared. Maybe God isn't big enough to handle *this*. Maybe He's busy helping orphans in Sudan. Sure you can trust Him to save you, but can you trust Him to help you wade through the tidal wave of emotions about your dad's doctor's visit?

The fact of the matter is, that laser very well may have a bullet behind it. You may not scrape up the money to pay that electric bill. Your dad may not just have a cold. Remember when we talked about joy in or despite circumstances? One side effect of putting your joy completely in the Lord who loves you is a peace that doesn't make sense. When your hope and security are firmly anchored in the person and promises of Christ, the things that happen in your life will affect you but can't shake you. Peace doesn't mean pain-free living. Peace doesn't mean no questioning. Peace means trusting. Trusting that the God who designed you and the universe has your best interests in mind. Trusting that He won't leave you hanging, won't let go of you when you don't even have the strength to cling to Him.

To the world, you might look like a giraffe at a parakeet convention. What? You have all these terrifying circumstances in your life, but you aren't freaking out? You aren't trying your best to hold it all together and keep your problems hidden neatly under the rug of your life? You aren't paralyzed with fear of what's going to happen tomorrow? The world doesn't get this because the world doesn't have a big God. The world depends on human effort to manage problems, keep things together and create its own sense of security.

Questions to think about...

Where's the safest place in the world to you? How do you feel when you're there? Is that how you feel knowing that God has you in His hands? Make a list of the things in your life the world would worry about. Journal about why you don't need to worry about them.

From one of the Puritan believers, "I do not need signs and wonders to believe, for thy Word is sure truth. I have cast my anchor in the port of peace, knowing that present and future are in nail-pierced hands."

(The Valley of Vision)

Part of the Solution (making a difference)

My daddy had a saying when we were growing up. Any time we went over to a friend's house, he'd say "Make sure you're a part of the solution, not the problem." He knew we could cause some pretty big messes if left to our natural selves. We are hardly different. In our natural state, we are prone to making all kinds of messes. You know this. In your before Christ state, leaving poverty to take care of itself was pretty easy. Joining in the gossip wasn't a big deal. Soaking up the spotlight was fun, and there were no spiritual implications.

Then you joined the family. Jesus took your sin and cast it away. He also cast away any excuse you may have had for leaving the world to its own messes. Now let me say this, we aren't called to jump into cleaning up these huge worldly mud puddles for the sake of having no more mud in the world. Yes, mud is dirty stuff, but there are bigger things at stake. Let me explain. We are called to fight against human trafficking because people making other people work in unthinkable conditions and have sex for money is offensive and cruel. Even more than these things, we are called to fight against it because we are called to loose the chains of sin that has bound the hearts of people everywhere.

Paul says it this way in Ephesians 2:1-3, 8-10

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons

of disobedience—³among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind...⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

He saved us because He loved us and chose to pour out His grace on us. He rescued us, took away our sin, reconciled us, made us alive. Whichever way you like to say it, God took us back. Now that we are His, He has work for us to do. It is likely that you'll know the sort of work He has for you by the way He made you. Can you design websites? Make costumes? Teach scripture? Those are your tools for fulfilling this calling to good works. Be on the lookout for those good works like a person jumping rope. They watch for the rope, hear the rhythm and then jump! They're so in tune with the people turning the rope and the rope itself that they know exactly when they need to jump. Think about what the world would look like if everyone in the church was "jumping" at every good work they were created to walk in. Hunger wouldn't be a worldwide crisis, the lonely wouldn't be lonely anymore, and fewer people would be dead in the darkness because the light would be so hard to miss!

Questions to think about...

Are you an active, aggressive part of the solution? What does this look like in your life? What are some tools that God has gifted you with to be a part of His solution for the world? What's keeping you from being the most effective part of the solution you can be? How does "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand" following "we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath" change the way you look at doing what is good?

Wisemen from the East, or the West (wisdom from the Holy Spirit)

When someone says the word “Dalmatian”, there are a few things that automatically come to mind. Probably the first thing that flashed through your mind was spots, because a defining characteristic of Dalmatians is their spots. Another obvious thing about Dalmatians is that they’re dogs. Dogs have four legs and a tail, two eyes, two ears, a nose, and a very wet, licky tongue.

When someone says the words “follower of Jesus”, what comes to mind? We’ve looked at several characteristics that should be automatic when people think of Christians. We handle our circumstances differently, we have hope for something bigger than the next awesome sale, we don’t worry, and we make a difference. A word I want to add to that list now is “wise”. When people who know you think of you, do they think, “Wow, she’s just really wise.”? The word wisdom isn’t thrown around a whole lot anymore, except when speaking of old men who usually have beards and 65 years under their belts. Let’s take a look at what it means. (Warning: be careful doing word studies in English when your text was originally written in another language.)

1 a : accumulated philosophic or scientific learning : KNOWLEDGE**b** : ability to discern inner qualities and relationships : INSIGHT**c** : good sense : JUDGMENT**d** : generally accepted beliefs

2 : a wise attitude, belief, or course of action

3 : the teachings of the ancient wise men

In other words, your life isn’t characterized by stupidity and bad choices. It looks more like this:

“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”

Or this:

“I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints...”

Wisdom isn't just for people who have lived a long time or people who are really smart. It's for Christians. Paul says that Christians have wisdom from the Holy Spirit, and that when we have that wisdom, we will understand a little better the awesome thing God has done for us by making us His. He also says we'll be able to understand what God's will is, not in a mysterious knowing the future way, just in a knowing how to use our gifts for the kingdom way.

Questions to think about...

Is wisdom something you ask God for? Is it even something you consider yourself needing? Check out James 3:13-18. Is your life characterized by that kind of wisdom? What are some fruit that would show wisdom is at work in someone's life? Where should you go to get wisdom? Check out the book of Proverbs for starters. (Hint: there are 31 chapters in Proverbs, perfect for reading one every day of the month!)

Perspective (how we look at things differently)

Everyone has a life perspective. It's sometimes called a worldview. It influences the way we shop, vote, see people, read, watch the news, choose a job, everything. If we really believe there is a God who loves us, and gave us a second chance at a relationship with Him after we messed everything up and now has big plans for us, I'd say we look at things differently than most people. In speaking of the idea of calling, Os Guinness says this:

...calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service. (p. 4)

That means life isn't just "whatever" or "not a big deal". The way you dress matters, the way you talk to other people matters, the way you spend your time matters. Now that Jesus has changed your life, you are a part of this huge redemptive story that has been going on since the beginning, and a huge family that God is calling back to Himself. You will never be alone again. Ever. Getting that perfect A doesn't matter quite as much any more. All people now have intrinsic value. Your purpose extends beyond your small corner of the world.

Several chapters ago when we talked about being freed from the slavery of sin, we caught a glimpse of those contrasting perspectives. To a slave, the object of life is survival. If progress can be made and happiness achieved, all the better. To a princess, adopted into the royal family, the object of life is pleasing and becoming more like the great King. Identity is secure, and love is a promise being kept each moment. After meeting and spending time with such a Father, the desire grows to free other captives and let them experience this love and transformation.

In Luke 4, Jesus stands up to read a scroll at a synagogue. The passage He chooses is from Isaiah, and is a prophecy that He Himself is fulfilling.

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

This change in status results in a complete change in seeing things. Seeing truth should result in

thinking truth, believing truth, and living truth. It may take some time, but it is impossible to believe something without it affecting the way you live. If I believe myself to be a slave, I will behave like a slave. If I believe myself to be a child of the high King, I will behave like a princess. I will see the world as a place that is fallen but being redeemed, reconciled and renewed by God's Spirit through His people.

As people living in a world not yet fully restored, it is critical that we check our perspectives often. We are daughters of the King and have believed truth, but there is a battle being fought for right perspective. Nothing would delight the enemy's cause more than to distort our perspective, suggesting subtle half-truths that affect the way we live. These half-truths might sound like, "Yes, of course the King says He loves you, but what He really means is He will love you when you are made perfect" or "Yes, of course you've been given a calling, but you'll probably screw it up. It's probably too hard for you."

This underscores the importance of knowing truth. My dad loves to cook outdoors on the BBQ grill during the summers. He is a master at grilled chicken breast. Hours before he starts cooking the chicken, he soaks them in a bag of marinade. The chicken just sits in the refrigerator all afternoon, soaking in the seasonings and spices of that marinade. A little before dinner time, he pulls out the chicken and throws it on the grill. After it's done, my family gathers around the table and devours that grilled chicken. One reason we love Dad's grilled chicken so much is the seasoning. The marinade doesn't drip off or cook out on the grill. It has soaked into the chicken so deeply that the flavor is stuck there for good.

There should be a likeness between the chicken and marinade and us and the truth. Time spent in God's Word, hearing God's Word and with God's people should permeate our hearts with truth. We should be so seasoned with truth that the way we see things can't help but be true.

Questions to think about...

What cultural/social/religious experiences or traditions affect your perspective? What steps can you take to ensure you see truly and "marinate" in God's Word on a regular basis? Write out a few

perspective statements to remind yourself that there is a drastic difference in perspective between the world and God's truth. (The world sees success as _____, God sees success as _____) Pray and ask God to show you areas where your perspective might be tainted by the world's ideas.