**Spiritual Growth**

Student Handout

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# Episode 1: Scripture

#### Is Scripture valuable or not?

**Reveals the thoughts of God himself.** The greater the being, the greater the message (Isaiah 55:8-9; Psalm 147:5).

**(Isa. 55:8-9) My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.**

**Breaks peer and cultural conformity.** “In my cultural time and place, I know which parts of the Bible should be believed and which should be rejected.” (see Romans 12:2)

**Corrects false beliefs and self-deception.** Without Scripture, how does God correct your thinking? (Hebrews 4:12; 2 Corinthians 10:5; Proverbs 14:12)

**Stabilizes our unstable feelings.** See Proverbs 28:26; 29:25; Ephesians 4:26-27; Philippians 4:6-7.

#### How did Jesus view the Bible?

Held it to be entirely true (John 10:35; 17:17).

Believed it caused spiritual growth (John 8:31-32).

Used it to debate Satan (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10; Deuteronomy 6:13, 16; 8:3).

Cited it during his interrogation (Matthew 26:64; Daniel 7:13-14).

Quoted it while carrying the Cross (Luke 23:30; Hosea 10:8).

Recited it from the Cross (Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:1).

#### Scripture brings transformation, stability, and happiness

**(Ps. 1:1-2) How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night.**

#### Scripture guides us

**(Ps. 119:105) Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path.**

**(Ps. 25:4-5) Show me the right path, O LORD. Point out the road for me to follow. 5 Lead me by your truth and teach me, for you are the God who saves me. All day long I put my hope in you.**

#### Scripture is powerful

**(Isa. 55:10-11) For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout… 11 So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth. It will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.**

#### Scripture changes our heart

**(Heb. 4:12) The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.**

#### Scripture grows us spiritually

**(Rom. 10:17) So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.**

**(1 Pet. 2:2) Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.**

**(Acts 20:32) Paul said, “Now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”**

**(Rom. 15:4) Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.**

#### Scripture is the key to prayer

**(Jn. 15:7) Jesus said, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”**

#### Scripture is the key to ministry

**(Col. 3:16) Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives.**

**(2 Tim. 3:16-17) All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.**

#### “I don’t have time to read the Bible every day.”

#### Get a Plan

(1) Collect the right resources. All Bible study requires *writing*.

(2) Pick a good place to start. The gospels or epistles.

(3) Slow down and pray (James 1:5; Psalm 119:18).

(4) Slow down when you read (Psalm 1:2).

(5) Interpretation (2 Timothy 2:15).

(6) Application (James 1:22-25; Psalm 139:23-24; Matthew 7:24-27).

#### Conclusions

## Further Reading

Andy Deane, *Learn to Study the Bible* (Xulon Press, 2009).

Dennis McCallum, *Walking in Victory* (Columbus, OH: New Paradigm Publishing, 2002).

Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*.

## Discussion Questions

(1) How would you help someone who was disinterested in regularly studying the Bible? What questions would you ask them? What would you share with them?

(2) What are key attitudes that are necessary to make Bible study effective? What sort of attitudes could stop this process from bringing growth into your life?

(3) What are practical ways to make time for Bible study if you’re busy with practical demands like school, work, family, and children?

(4) What are practical ways to avoid distractions when you’re studying the Bible?

## Collect the Right Resources

Has your time in Bible study grown stale over time? Or do you have difficulty knowing where to even begin when you think about studying the Bible? This week, you are going to explore various methods of Bible study to help give you training, as well as some fresh ideas on how to study Scripture. But before we begin, let’s make sure that you’re setting yourself up for success.

Before you begin a new endeavor, it’s important to collect the right tools for the job. Imagine trying to paint a portrait with just a kid’s paint set, or consider building a house with only a screwdriver, a hammer, and a box of nails. Working from a deficit like this would be a good way to discourage yourself.

The same is true when you begin to study the Bible. Invest in collecting the right resources. Here are a few key resources to get you started:

**Writing tools.** Buy a set of good pens and a nice notebook to take notes. Others prefer to take notes on my laptop. Regardless, you need to learn to go beyond Bible reading to personal Bible study. Reading Scripture daily is great, but if you want to study Scripture, you need to learn to write down your thoughts. One expert on Bible study writes, “Bible study is not something that can be done in our heads. Every study method involves some form of writing.”[[1]](#footnote-2) He’s right. Plan a way to write down your thoughts and take notes—free from distractions.

**Study Bible.** Here is a brief evaluation of Bible translations:

**NASB or ESV.** These are *word-for-word* translations, but they can be too wooden and difficult to read at times. The NASB, for example, repeatedly uses semicolons and commas, rather than using periods. This translation school wants to be as precise as possible. But these translations are sometimes so word-for-word literal that they are hard to interpret the main thought.

**NLT.** This is a *sentence-for-sentence* or *thought-for-thought* translation, and it is very readable—especially for OT poetry and biblical narratives. However, this translation lacks precision, and the translators often give their interpretation in their translation. For instance, identity truths sometimes become moral imperatives (see Romans 6:13; Colossians 3:5) and “worship” is added throughout this translation (see Romans 14:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; 1 Timothy 2:8; Hebrews 12:28; 1 Peter 3:15; Revelation 1:10).

**NIV or NET.** These are *middle-of-the-road* translations. For what it’s worth, we would suggest starting with the NIV or NET.

**Case study.** Consider 1 Corinthians 7:1 as a way to compare these translations. The original Greek text states, “A woman not to touch” (*gynaikos mē haptesthai*). How should this be translated? The NASB renders it in a word-for-word way: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” The NLT translates the concept of what Paul is communicating: “It is good to abstain from sexual relations.” Finally, the NIV translates the concept, but it includes more of the original language: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”

Whatever translation you choose, **buy a new Study Bible** that will help you. The easiest place to purchase a new Study Bible is online. Take your time and buy one that will help you to grow.

**Commentaries.** Here is a brief review of commentaries to purchase:

*Light commentaries*. An excellent place to start is with *The Bible Exposition Commentary* by Warren Wiersbe. His commentary is enjoyable to read, and it contains very helpful outlines and insights. It is also very pastoral and grace-centered. However, his commentary isn’t rigorous in its scholarship (e.g. history, culture, original languages, science, etc.).

Other good beginning commentaries would include *The Bible Speaks Today*, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, and the *Tyndale Commentary*. These offer more rigorous scholarship than someone like Wiersbe, but they are less readable and much longer. To give you an idea, the Expositor’s Commentary on Romans is 170 pages.

*Intermediate commentaries*. The *New American Commentary* series is our personal favorite, but the *Pillar New Testament Commentary* is also quite good. Both give more depth than a beginning commentary series, and they are often classified as a “semi-technical” commentary series. To give you an idea, the *New American Commentary* on Romans is 282 pages.

*Technical commentaries*. These types of commentaries go into exhaustive detail, and scholars typically buy and read these. Technical commentaries quote the Greek text in its original form (without transliterating), and they engage issues germane to academics. Again, just to give you an idea, the commentary on Romans is 940 pages. Do you want that much detail?

We would *not* suggest starting here! But if you want to eventually buy a good technical commentary, we would recommend *Baker Exegetical Commentary* (BEC) or the *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (NICNT).

Of course, a more affordable option is to read online commentaries. Avoid older commentaries like Matthew Henry’s free commentary. Instead, read commentaries from David Guzik, who is a good, well-researched, grace-centered pastor from Calvary Chapel. You can also read commentaries on Evidence Unseen. I don’t know if everything on Evidence Unseen is accurate, but I agree with each and every word!

**Original languages.** If you want a good Greek lexicon, buy BDAG (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich). If you want a good Hebrew lexicon, buy TWOT (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*). Of course, a more affordable option is visiting Blue Letter Bible online.

### Homework Assignment: Studying the Bible

When you think about studying the Bible, what comes to mind? Most Christians have only one or possibly two ideas for what it looks like to getting into God’s word.

For homework this week, you’re going to discover far more ideas for enjoying time in God’s word. And by the time you’re done, hopefully this will spark your imagination for other ideas to study Scripture. **This week, engage in Bible study daily, pick at least TWO OF THESE METHODS to try below.**

### Method #1: Biblical Meditation

What is the most important skill you can develop as a student of the Bible? Many would say that learning Greek and Hebrew is the most important skill. Others would say that we need to read commentaries and keep up with scholarship. Finally, some would say that we need to learn many methods of hermeneutics.

All of these skills are important. However, they pale in comparison to developing strong **reading comprehension**. When we read the Bible, we need to *know* what we *see*, rather than *see* what we already *know*. We need to slow down long enough to read the text and understand what it means in its context. If you can develop this crucial skill, you will become a strong interpreter of Scripture. For instance, read this passage below.

**“Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. Don’t be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand” (Isaiah 41:10 NLT).**

It’s very likely that you read this way too fast. Slow down. You’re not skimming an article online. You’re reading the words of God. Try to read this again—only read it 20% slower.

**“Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. Don’t be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand” (Isaiah 41:10 NLT).**

Don’t just run your eyes over the words. Take time to recognize what you’re reading. Slow down 20% more. Focus on each word.

**“Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. Don’t be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand” (Isaiah 41:10 NLT).**

More and more sinks in when you simply *slow down*. Let’s try another passage and another exercise. This time, read this passage out loud.

**(Matthew 11:28-30 NIV) Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.**

Read this passage out loud again. Only this time, emphasize the words that are underlined. For this exercise to work well, you really need to go overboard. In fact, if you feel like you’re being too energetic or dramatic in how you’re reading… you probably aren’t even half of where you need to be! As you emphasize certain words, ask yourself, “How does emphasizing these words change the meaning of the passage?”

**(Matthew 11:28-30) Come to ME, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take MY yoke upon you and learn from ME, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For MY yoke is easy and MY burden is light.**

How does emphasizing these words change the meaning of the passage?

**(Matthew 11:28-30) Come to me, all you who are WEARY and BURDENED, and I will give you REST. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find REST FOR YOUR SOULS. 30 For my yoke is EASY and my burden is LIGHT.**

How did emphasizing these words change the meaning of the passage?

**(Matthew 11:28-30) Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 TAKE MY YOKE UPON YOU and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For MY YOKE is easy and MY BURDEN is light.**

How did emphasizing these words change the meaning of the passage?

#### Squeezing Scripture Dry

Here is another way to grow in your ability to meditate on a passage. Consider this famous passage below.

**(Matthew 4:19 NASB) Jesus said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”**

This passage is only 14 words long. However, the longer you meditate on Jesus’ words, the more insights you will grasp. For this exercise, write down 20 insights that you see in this text. Don’t quit until you record 20 insights.

(1)

(2)

(3)

(4)

(5)

(6)

(7)

(8)

(9)

(10)

(11)

(12)

(13)

(14)

(15)

(16)

(17)

(18)

(19)

(20)

What were some of the insights that you learned through this exercise that you didn’t see at first glance?

### Method #2: Biblical Paraphrase

Take a short passage and rewrite it in your own words as though God was writing it directly to you. Based on what you’re reading, imagine that God wrote this directly to you. What would it say? Consider our paraphrase below:

**(Ephesians 1:17-19 NIV) I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. 18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe.**

(MY PARAPHRASE) “James, I want to open up your mind and heart so that you can know Me better. I want you to know my love deep in your heart. I want to open your heart so that you can anticipate the great hope of heaven, the spiritual riches of your new identity in Christ, and the spiritual power that I have for you when you trust in Me.”

Now it’s your turn. Paraphrase these passages below, as though God was writing directly to you.

**(Philippians 4:4-9 NIV) Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. 9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.**

(YOUR PARAPHRASE)

**(Colossians 3:1-4 NIV) Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.**

(YOUR PARAPHRASE)

**(Romans 8:31-39 NLT) What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? 32 Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won’t he also give us everything else? 33 Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. 34 Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God’s right hand, pleading for us. 35 Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? 36 (As the Scriptures say, “For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.”) 37 No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. 38 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. 39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

(YOUR PARAPHRASE)

### Method #3: Studying How Jesus Interacts with Different People

Jesus is the most dynamic person to ever live. Just when you think you understand him, he breaks the mold. In this study, look at how Jesus responds to different people in different ways. Answer these key questions:

(1) What sort of person is interacting with Jesus?

(2) What is Jesus’ reaction to him or her?

(3) What do we learn about Jesus from this interaction?

**Little Children (Mark 10:13-16)**

(1) What sort of person is interacting with Jesus?

(2) What is Jesus’ reaction to him or her?

(3) What do we learn about Jesus from this interaction?

**The Rich Young Ruler (Mark 10:17-27)**

(1) What sort of person is interacting with Jesus?

(2) What is Jesus’ reaction to him or her?

(3) What do we learn about Jesus from this interaction?

**Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42)**

(1) What sort of person is interacting with Jesus?

(2) What is Jesus’ reaction to him or her?

(3) What do we learn about Jesus from this interaction?

**Nicodemus (John 3:1-21)**

(1) What sort of person is interacting with Jesus?

(2) What is Jesus’ reaction to him or her?

(3) What do we learn about Jesus from this interaction?

(1) What sort of person is interacting with Jesus?

(2) What is Jesus’ reaction to him or her?

(3) What do we learn about Jesus from this interaction?

**The Woman at the Well (John 4:1-42)**

(1) What sort of person is interacting with Jesus?

(2) What is Jesus’ reaction to him or her?

(3) What do we learn about Jesus from this interaction?

**Zacchaeus the Tax Collector (Luke 19:1-10)**

(1) What sort of person is interacting with Jesus?

(2) What is Jesus’ reaction to him or her?

(3) What do we learn about Jesus from this interaction?

**The Restoration of Peter (John 21:1-22)**

(1) What sort of person is interacting with Jesus?

(2) What is Jesus’ reaction to him or her?

(3) What do we learn about Jesus from this interaction?

### Method #4: Study Themes

Sometimes, all you need is a little direction and structure to read the Bible. Consider using one of these prompts below:

**How does Jesus respond to different people in the Gospel According to John?** Write down what you observe about the person or group of people. Are they curious, stubborn, self-righteous, wildly sinful, or something else entirely? How does Jesus choose to interact with this person? How does the person interact with Jesus?

**What does the Holy Spirit do in the Book of Acts?** Write down every instance where the Holy Spirit appears in Acts, and record what he does.

**What do we learn about spiritual growth in Romans 5-8?** Write down your observations about spiritual growth as you read through these chapters.

**How does Paul lead the Corinthians?** The letters to the Corinthians demonstrate a wild and sinful church. What lessons can we learn about leadership from how Paul interacts with them?

**What do we learn about truth from Galatians?** Record your observations about Paul’s loyalty to the truth of the gospel in Galatians. What do you find challenging?

**What is the significance of being “in Christ” according to Ephesians?** Read Ephesians and write down every time that Paul uses the expression “in Christ,” “in Him,” “in the Beloved,” etc. What can you learn about what it means to be “in Christ” from this letter?

**What do you learn about joy from Philippians?** Write down every use of “joy” or “rejoice” in Philippians. What can you learn about how to experience joy from this letter?

**What do you learn about leadership from 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus?** In the Pastoral Epistles, Paul helps two younger leaders to lead in tough circumstances. As you read these letters, write down what you learn about leadership from Paul’s writings.

**What does it look like to persuade someone under grace according to Philemon?** How does Paul persuade Philemon to accept Onesimus? What lessons can you learn from his example?

**What can you learn about how to suffer well from 1 Peter?** Write down Peter’s insights about suffering from this letter?

### Method #5: Inductive Bible Study (The Epistles)

Inductive Bible Study is a method where you gather observations, interpret the meaning, and apply the insights from the passage. This approach begins with specific observations and leads to a broader interpretation of the text. Many variations of Inductive Bible Study exist. We will present one approach below:

#### (1) Historical setting

The Bible was written *for* us, but it wasn’t written *to* us. The New Testament authors wrote 2,000 years ago to specific churches. So, before we can interpret what a passage means to *us*, we need to understand what it meant to *them*. Here are some good questions to answer:

(1) Who wrote this letter? What prompted him to write to this church?

(2) When did he write it?

(3) What was this church like? What was going on in this church that they received a letter from an apostle?

Good study Bibles will have short introductions to each book that will answer most of these questions above. As you read through the letter, you’ll discover many of the answers to these questions for yourself.

#### (2) Paraphrase: Put it into your own words

Read short sections of the chapter and paraphrase what you think was being said. Don’t worry about being right or wrong—just take your best shot.

Avoid using Christianese words. Instead, put what you read into your own words. Imagine trying to explain what you read to a 12-year-old. How would you explain it in a way that would make sense?

#### (3) Observation

In general, you want curiosity to guide you as you study. Here are some good questions to ask:

(1) What does the plain sense of the passage seem to be saying?

(2) Are there any terms that you don’t understand?

(3) Is this a difficult passage? For example, is it confusing, offensive, or difficult to harmonize with another passage of Scripture?

(4) Does the author cite the Old Testament? Why does he cite it to support his point? What significance does this have?

(5) Look up cross-references in your Study Bible. How do these other passages help you to understand what you’re reading?

Keep a list of your questions. Once you’re done with the chapter, go back and answer each one to the best of your ability.

#### (4) Interpretation

By now, you have a lot of data to sift through. But what is the big picture? What is the passage communicating to you? Here are some key questions to help you to interpret what you’re reading.

**What is the immediate context?** Context can radically alter our interpretation. Imagine if someone told you, “I saw your wife kissing another man in bed this week.” I’m sure this would immediately make your pulse rise! But what if you discovered that your wife was actually kissing her elderly father on the forehead in his hospital bed? The context of this statement would mean the difference between adultery and empathy! Look at what the author wrote before and after the passage you’re trying to understand.

**What is the greater context?** Does this author write about this subject in his other writings? Do other biblical authors address this issue? Does my interpretation contradict any clear teaching in Scripture?

**Are there any key words that keep appearing in this passage?** Is there a main theme that is clear in this passage?

**What is the main argument of the author?** What was the author arguing for? What was he arguing against? Was he offering encouragement, correction, instruction, reminders, or something else entirely?

**Is there a broad principle that I can apply from this passage?** Make sure your principle connects to the main point of the narrative?

#### (5) Application

Take a minute to pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal a personal application for you as you think about your passage (Psalm 119:18; 139:23-24). You’ll be amazed what he will bring to mind during these times. These questions can help you to personalize what you just read in Scripture:

What would happen if I never grasped this biblical concept? What effects would this have on me—or on others around me?

What would motivate me to not trust this biblical teaching? What false beliefs do I have concerning this portion of God’s truth?

How has this truth been impacting me lately?

Why did God want me to read this today?

What does God promise me in this passage? How does this promise relate to his instructions or imperatives?

Is God prompting me to take a step of faith based on what I read? Pray that you have the faith not to minimize convictions that you gain from Scripture.

What is a small step of faith that I could take based on this passage? What is a big step? Which do I want to take?

#### Assignment

Study Galatians 1-2 using this inductive method above.

### Method #6: Inductive Bible Study (The Narratives)

How does Inductive Bible Study apply to biblical narratives? While the same concept still applies, the methods need to be modified in order to help the narratives come to life. We will present our approach below:

#### (1) Historical setting

Once again, the careful interpreter needs to know about the general background of the biblical narrative. Here are some good questions to answer:

(1) When did these events take place?

(2) Where did these events take place?

(3) What was the culture like during this time?

Good Study Bibles, Bible handbooks, or Bible commentaries will help answer these historical questions. For instance, the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds* (edited by Clinton Arnold) is a good resource for understanding the historical background.

#### (2) Paraphrase: Put it into your own words

Picture what it would’ve been like to witness these events firsthand. Imagine being a bystander in the crowd as these events took place. What would you be thinking or feeling as you watched these events unfold?

Tell the story over and over. After each attempt, go back and read the text and see if you got it right. Do this until you’re able to explain this story fluidly.

#### (3) Observation

In general, you want curiosity to guide you as you study. Here are some good questions to ask:

(1) Who are the main characters in the narrative? What do you learn about them from what you read?

(2) What is the central conflict? Was the conflict resolved? If so, how was it resolved?

(3) What are small details in the story that might have bigger implications? (e.g. interpretive clues, foreshadowing, reoccurring words or themes, etc.)

(4) What did you learn about God from this narrative?

Keep a list of your questions. Once you’re done with the chapter, go back and answer each one to the best of your ability.

#### (4) Interpretation

All good stories *describe* the events in question, but they don’t necessarily *prescribe* the moral or lesson that we should take away. At this point, you need to discover what the narrative is teaching you about God, about humanity, and about yourself. Here are some key questions to help you to interpret what you’re reading.

**Is this a difficult passage?** Is it confusing, offensive, or difficult to harmonize with another passage of Scripture? Take your time to resolve the key difficulties that you might see in the text.

**What is the immediate context?** Does an earlier or later narrative affect what you’re reading?

**What is the greater context?** How does this passage fit into the book as a whole? How does the book influence your understanding of this passage?

**Why did God choose to include this narrative in the Bible?** This question will help you to grasp what you should take away from the text.

**Is there a broad principle that I can apply from this passage?** Make sure your principle connects to the main point of the narrative?

#### (5) Application

Take a minute to pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal a personal application for you as you think about your passage (Psalm 119:18; 139:23-24). You’ll be amazed what he will bring to mind during these times. These questions can help you to personalize what you just read in Scripture:

What would happen if I never grasped the meaning and importance of this biblical narrative? What effects would this have on me—or on others around me?

What would motivate me to not trust in the truth of this passage? What false beliefs might I have?

How has this truth been impacting me lately?

Why did God want me to read this today?

What does God promise me in this passage? How does this promise relate to his instructions or commands?

Is God prompting me to take a step of faith based on what I read? Pray that you have the faith not to minimize convictions that you gain from Scripture.

What is a small step of faith that I could take based on this passage? What is a big step? Which do I want to take?

#### Assignment

Study Matthew 14:22-36 using this inductive method above.

### Other Methods

**Study a topic or a word.** What does the New Testament say about joy? What does it say about perseverance? What does the Bible say about anger? Pick a topic that you’re interested in. Then, use a concordance and study every use of that word or topic. Summarize your observations at the end of the study.

**Read the same epistle for a month straight.** The letter to the Philippians takes 16 minutes to read aloud. Read this letter every day. Read this letter in different translations. Write down insights that you get in your journal.

**Write a biography of a biblical figure.** Pick someone like one of the apostles or an OT figure. Look for every reference to them in the Bible, and write what you find. Write what you think this person would’ve been like: What sort of personality do you think he had? What were his strengths and weaknesses? What similarities do you have with this person?

# Episode 2: Prayer

#### How important is prayer?

Jesus placed a high premium on prayer (Luke 5:16; 6:12-13; Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35; 6:46).

Prayer is our most important activity (James 4:2; 5:16).

God guides us through prayer (James 1:5; Colossians 1:9).

God gives us power through prayer. Prayer calls down fire from heaven (1 Kin. 18:38), it makes demons flee (Mark 9:27), and it raises the dead (Acts 9:40).

Prayer changes you and others.

Prayer defeats Satan and demons.

#### Does God really answer prayer?

**Many people have reported miraculous answers to prayer.** Though, by definition, miracles are not regular occurrences.

**Some miracles have abundant evidence.**

Greg Spencer (Macular degeneration)

Duane Miller (Pastor with nerve damage to his vocal cords)

Barbara Cummiskey Snyder (Multiple Sclerosis for 16 years—ages 15-31)

**What about when God says, No?**

You’re in good company (Matthew 26:36-46)

What would you do if you saw a boy with a genie’s lamp? No one should be allowed to hold that much power!

How do you know that your prayers are ultimately good?

#### Conclusions

## Further Reading

Wesley L. Duewel, *Touch the World Through Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986).

Chuck Smith, *Effective Prayer Life* (Costa Mesa, CA: Word For Today, 1980).

Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Penguin Random House Publishing, 2014).

Craig S. Keener, *Miracles Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021).

J.P. Moreland, *A Simple Guide to Experience Miracles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021).

## Discussion Questions

(1) How would you help someone who was disinterested in prayer? What questions would you ask them? What would you share with them?

(2) What are key attitudes that are necessary when you pray? What sort of attitudes could block prayer from leading to closeness with God?

(3) What are practical ways to make time for prayer if you’re busy with practical demands like school, work, family, and children?

(4) What are practical ways to avoid distractions or mental chatter when you’re trying to pray?

### Homework

**Each day this week, try one of these methods of prayer.** Of course, many of these methods can be combined. You might enjoy going for a prayer walk while also incorporating a prayer list or gratitude list. Or you might journal and also practice silent prayer. You get the idea. These methods can be combined.

Once you find a method that you enjoy, use it as a new way to relate to God. If it starts to feel stale, you can always try something new.

### Method #1: Pray through a Passage

When you apply this method, you are using the words of Scripture as a way to generate prayer. After each verse, express what you think about what God says back to Him. This is a proven way to jumpstart your time with God, and you have an endless reservoir of material to pray through. To give you an idea of how this works, we’ll demonstrate this method below with Romans 8:31-39 (NLT).

**(Romans 8:31) What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us?**

“God, first of all, you have said wonderful things to me in this chapter. Thank you that your words for me are wonderful. Today, I was struck by what you said in…”

“God, I know that you are always for me. Who in my life am I thinking about whose opinion is more important to me than yours? Even if they don’t like me, I’m so grateful that you are always for me.”

**(Romans 8:32) Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won’t he also give us everything else?**

“God, I keep thinking about whether you are going to come through with my recent health issue. But if you gave me the most valuable gift you could give, I’ve got no reason to think you’re going to hold out on answering my prayers about my health. Even if the answer is, No, this must be for my ultimate good and your plans for eternity. Since you gave me the gift of Christ, I have no reason to doubt your goodness.”

**(Romans 8:33) Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself.**

“Satan has been accusing me about my recent moral failure. I’m choosing to refuse to listen to him right now. I’m consciously turning my attention to you and the divine fact that you’ve declared me NOT GUILTY! I’m choosing to trust your words more than my guilty feelings.”

**(Romans 8:34) Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God’s right hand, pleading for us.**

“There is no condemnation for me because I’m ‘in Christ.’ I’m not living for the approval of people. They are just as flawed and broken as me. Why am I living for their verdict about me? Help me to live out of the verdict that you’ve already given me: NOT GUILTY!”

**(Romans 8:35) Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?**

“God, I’ve been suffering with a broken down car. I’m not sure how I’m going to get to work this week. But I’m glad that the most important issue in my life is solved. I’m never going to be separated from you. Ever! And I know that these bad circumstances have nothing to do with a lack of love on your part. Help me to cherish your love more than I focus on my lousy circumstances.”

**(Romans 8:36) As the Scriptures say, “For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.”**

“Thanks that I’m not suffering to the point of death!”

**(Romans 8:37) No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.**

“I don’t have overwhelming victory in my life. But I want it! I know that the key to this is Christ’s love. Fill my heart with a new understanding of his love today. Help me to conquer my suffering by accessing the peace and happiness that come from knowing that you love me.”

**(Romans 8:38-39) And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. 39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

“God, my life is filled with a lot of insecurity. Thanks that the most important issues in my life are eternally secure. I’m grateful that I’ll never have to worry about you rejecting me or walking out on me.”

**YOUR TURN:** Pick a passage to pray through. Here are some suggestions (Ephesians 3:14-21; Philippians 4:6-13; Matthew 6:9-13; Isaiah 40:28-31; Psalms).

### Method #2: Pray through a Number of Passages

Pick a topic that you’d like God to speak to you about—an area where it’s hard to grow or connect with Him. Collect all of the passages you can about this topic. Just like in the previous exercise, pray through these passages. Ask God to speak to you as you speak to Him (Psalm 119:18).

Here is a prepared study on the topic of **man-pleasing**. Take time to pray through each of the passages listed below.

**“No wonder you can’t believe! For you gladly honor each other, but you don’t care about the honor that comes from the one who alone is God” (John 5:44 NLT).**

**“Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10 NIV).**

**“Fearing people is a dangerous trap, but trusting the LORD means safety” (Proverbs 29:25 NLT).**

**“We speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. 5 You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. 6 We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority” (1 Thessalonians 2:4-6 NIV).**

**“The LORD is for me, so I will have no fear. What can mere people do to me?” (Psalm 118:6 NLT).**

**“I praise God for what he has promised. I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me?” (Psalm 56:4 NLT).**

### Method #3: Prayer Journaling

Writing helps us organize our thoughts. Think about writing an email to someone—it often goes through multiple revisions. Sometimes, you may write a fiery message, only to erase it and start from scratch. In a word, writing helps you think harder about what you’re really trying to express.

The same is true when talking with God. Writing our prayers allows us to slow down and carefully consider what we’re saying. It also makes our prayers more tangible when we see them on the page. Additionally, it’s rewarding to look back at prayer journals years later.

For this method, spend time writing out your thoughts to God in your journal. Combine this method with the other methods you’ll study.

### Method #4: Silent Prayer

We need times in prayer when we simply sit in silence and listen. The psalmist writes, “My soul waits in silence for God only… My soul, wait in silence for God only, for my hope is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be shaken… Trust in Him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before Him” (Psalm 62:1, 5-6, 8 NASB).

Modern people have a natural impulse to act and react under stress. This is exactly the time we need to sit in silence before God: “Be still in the presence of the LORD, and wait patiently for him to act. Don’t worry about evil people who prosper or fret about their wicked schemes. Stop being angry! Turn from your rage! Do not lose your temper—it only leads to harm” (Psalm 37:7-8 NLT). Elsewhere, the psalmist writes, “Cease striving and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10 NASB).

Driven and hurried people often dislike silent prayer: “I’m not getting anything done by just sitting here in silence,” they might say. “So, what’s the point?”

This attitude reveals “the point.” We need time to slow down and rest from our works. The author of Hebrews writes, “Since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it” (Hebrews 4:1 NIV). This presents quite a paradox: If resting from our works were easy, why would we need to “be careful” to do it? According to Scripture, most of us would rather busy ourselves with hurried activity than sit and rest with God (Luke 10:38-42). However, after times of silence and rest, you’ll find that you’re a far better worker for the Lord.

#### Can God inaudibly speak to us?

Theologians debate this question, but I do believe God speaks directly to our minds. For one, we have every reason to believe that Satan can put thoughts directly in our minds. Are we to believe that Satan can do this, but God cannot?

Second, Paul also extols the gift of prophecy for all believers (1 Corinthians 14:1). The word “prophecy” (*prophēteia*) means to “speak a word forth.” It refers to “the act of interpreting [the] divine will or purpose” or “the utterance of one who interprets [the] divine will or purpose” (BDAG, p. 889). This type of insight surely comes to us in times of prayer.

Third, the Bible gives examples of people experiencing direct leading from God. For example, when Nehemiah called together the leaders of Jerusalem, he attributed the idea to God. He said, “God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles” (Nehemiah 7:5 NASB; cf. 2:12). Likewise, Jesus received such impressions from the Holy Spirit. When He encountered the Pharisees, we read, “Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them…” (Mark 2:8 NASB). The word “aware” (*epiginōskō*) means to “perceive,” “ascertain,” or “connect present information or awareness with what was known before” (BDAG, p. 369). Paul uses this term when he prays that God would give believers “spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge (*epiginōskō*) of God” (Ephesians 1:17 NLT).

#### Ideas on praying silently

**Slow down your breathing.** This does not refer to the New Age, mystical practice of “breathing in the good energy” and “breathing out the bad energy.” That’s unbiblical and unscientific nonsense. Instead, when you slow down your breathing, your body communicates to your brain that everything is fine. The adrenaline and cortisol stop firing. Your body calms down. Some people like to use a “physiological sigh,” which involves two sharp breaths in and a very slow exhale.

**Reflect and meditate on God.** Affirm to God that He’s there and that you know He’s listening. Tell God that you want to be aware of His presence and that you’re listening for anything He may have for you.

**Reflect on Scripture.** Let your mind wander through biblical passages about God and who He is. Praise Him, thank Him, and speak your heart to Him. This is a good time to share your emotions with Him (Psalm 31:10; 42-43). Then, leave periods of silence to see if He has anything for you to hear.

**Ask questions.** When you ask God questions, sit in silence afterward. Sometimes, he will speak to you through impressions on your mind. Of course, we need to be discerning during these times. Satan and our own sinful imagination can fill these silences (1 John 4:1-2). Moreover, even if God is speaking, we could *misinterpret these impressions* in the same way we sometimes *misinterpret His words* in Scripture. Therefore, any impressions gained from God need to be tested against Scripture (1 Corinthians 14:29).

**Summarize.** If God gives you a word of encouragement, a question to ponder, or an idea for something you’ve been wondering, summarize this and write it down. This will help to solidify your thoughts.

**Conclusion.** Silent prayer can be difficult for the first minute or two. But soon, you’ll find yourself drawing closer to God. These experiences are refreshing and rejuvenating. When you miss out on time with God like this for a while, you’ll find yourself wondering why you ever stopped.

### Method #5: Intercessory Prayer and Prayer Lists

**Start by writing down a list of people you’d like to pray for.** Next to each name, jot down one or two specific prayer requests. Some people even like to include a picture of their friend or loved one to help focus their prayers.

**Make a list of your own needs.** Include immediate needs for your day and long-term goals for your spiritual growth. God promises to grow you spiritually, so you can trust that He will answer these prayers—though, of course, in His timing (1 Thessalonians 4:3; 5:23-24).

**Be specific with your prayers, not vague.** A good way to check this is to ask yourself: If this prayer were answered, would you be able to know?

**Keep your prayers concise.** Many people feel overwhelmed by long prayer lists because they spend too much time on each request. But consider how Paul managed to pray for so many people—he must’ve kept his intercessions brief and moved through the list.

**Finally, record answers to your prayers.** This practice will help strengthen your faith over time.

### Method #6: Prayer Walks

Going for a walk while you pray can be a helpful practice. Sometimes, the calming nature of prayer can lead us to feel sleepy (Matthew 26:40-41), but walking can help keep you "alert" during prayer (Colossians 4:2; Ephesians 6:18; 1 Peter 4:7). Physical movement encourages focus, making it easier to stay engaged in your conversation with God.

In addition, stepping outside to enjoy nature can be refreshing and grounding (Psalm 8:3-4; 19:1-4; 104:24). If you can, consider driving to a local park to fully immerse yourself in God’s creation. However, even walking around your neighborhood or taking a walk on your lunch break can provide the same benefits of prayer walks.

Some people like to combine walking with other prayer practices. For example, they may carry a prayer list and work through it during their walk, or dedicate part of their walk to giving thanks. These methods can complement each other. Others prefer to walk and pray without any specific agenda, simply letting their mind wander freely as they connect with God and enjoy the fresh air.

### Method #7: Pray with Others

Jesus implied that group prayer can be especially powerful, likely because it aligns us with God’s will as we support and guide one another. He said, "If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:19-20 NLT).

Praying together fosters unity, vulnerability, and a sense of camaraderie (Acts 1:14; 2:42). Additionally, while praying alone for an extended time might be challenging, it’s often easier when you are praying in a small group.

**Consider making it a goal to pray with at least one other person each day—whether it’s a roommate, friend, or spouse.** Keeping this goal in mind will open your eyes to new opportunities for prayer that you may not have noticed before.

### Method #8: Gratitude

Gratitude is integral to healthy prayer, as well as a healthy lifestyle. Before we’re ready to request more from God, we need to reflect on what God has already given us. Paul writes,

“Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2).

“First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men” (1 Timothy 2:1).

“Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Biblical gratitude includes giving thanks for “*all* things” (Ephesians 5:20), not just our spiritual blessings. After all, the Bible teaches that “*every* perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). Seen in this light, believers in Christ should thank God for all of the blessings he gives us.

#### Ideas on developing gratitude

**Keep a gratitude journal.** This is simply a list of people and things you're grateful for. But it’s not just about listing them—it’s about reflecting on why you're thankful for them today. Gratitude can easily become routine if we don’t stop to truly appreciate it. So, when you give thanks, pause and ask yourself, "Why am I grateful for this today?" Ask God to help you recognize the deep blessings He has given you.

**Imagine a wise friend pointing out areas of your life to be thankful for, or envision identifying these blessings in a friend's life.** You'll likely find that many ideas come to mind. As you do this, remind yourself of similar blessings in your own life.

**What if blessings were taken away?** Imagine a scenario where you're in a serious accident and are paralyzed from the neck down. Now, look at your arms and legs—wiggle your fingers and toes. Then, say, "Thank you, God, that my arms and legs work!" It’s okay to acknowledge the aches and pains in your body, but remember to thank God for giving you a body at all.

This exercise can be applied to every aspect of life. Think about what your life would be like if tragedy took away key blessings. Then, thank God for what you have. Here are some questions to guide your reflection:

What if I lost my job?

What if my car broke down?

What if God never sent my best friend into my life? How would my life have changed?

What if God never brought my spouse or kids into my life? How would my life have changed?

What if I thought I was going to die and wake up in hell?

How would I be different if I never got involved in Christian community?

If I stopped following Christ, what would I miss the most?

What were the great moments in my life?

Each of these questions can lead to meaningful time in prayer. When the blessings in our lives are taken away, we begin to understand how much we truly value them. This gratitude exercise helps us realize just how richly blessed we are.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

# Episode 3: Fellowship

#### What is fellowship?

(Acts 2:42) They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer… 46 Every day they continued to meet together.

(Heb. 10:24-25) Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some.

#### Why should we meet together?

God’s nature is essentially relational, and so is ours! (John 17:24; Genesis 2:18)

The mystical union of believers (Galatians 3:27-28; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Romans 12:4-5; e.g. long-lost siblings reuniting).

(Gal. 3:27) All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

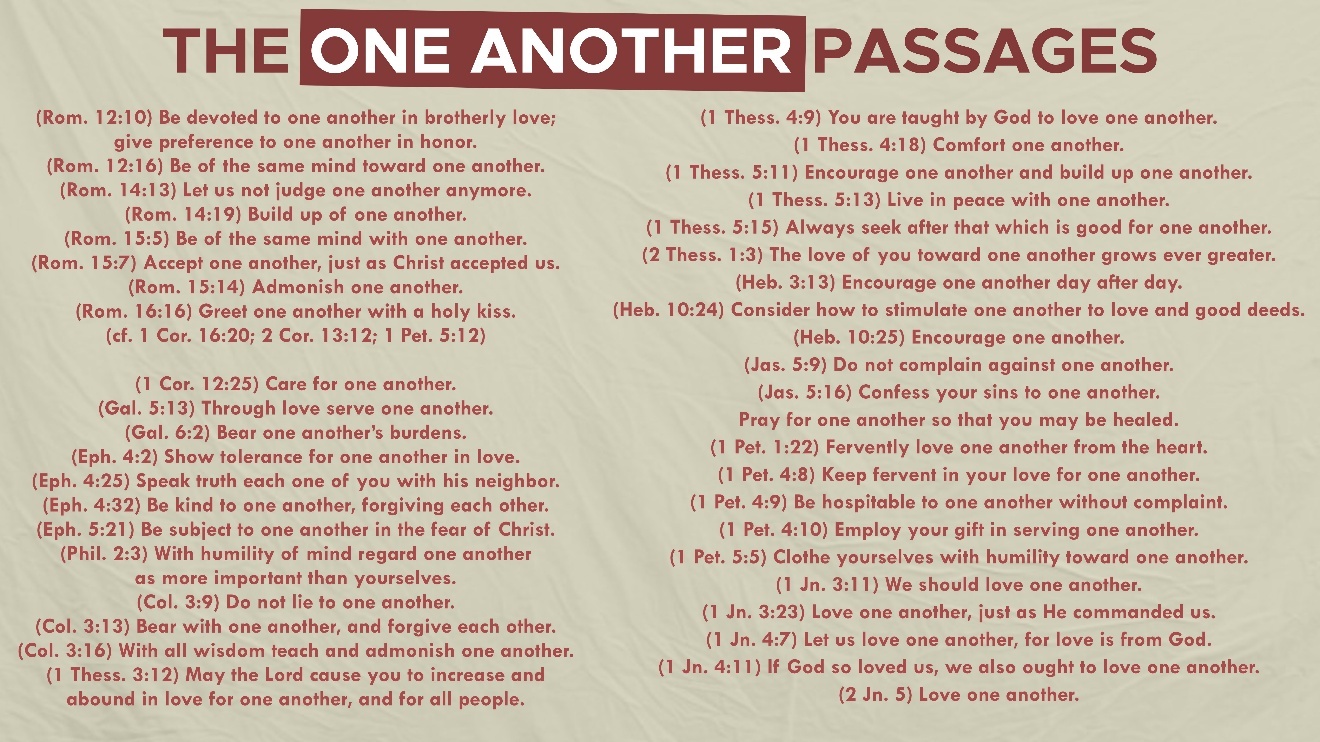
(Gal. 3:28) There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.

(Rom. 12:4-5) Just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

The church is the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-21).

(1 Cor. 12:12, 19-21) The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. How strange a body would be if it had only one part! Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you.’ The head can’t say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you.’

The “one another” passages (roughly 50 passages: universal, moral imperatives).



Isn’t this strange, though? Define strange!



#### Conclusions

## Further Reading

Dennis McCallum, *Members of One Another* (Columbus, OH: New Paradigm Publishing, 2015).

Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL: 2006).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015).

Ray C. Stedman, *Body Life: The Book That Inspired a Return to the Church’s Real Meaning and Mission* (Discovery House Publishers, 1995).

## Discussion Questions

(1) Imagine someone said, “I love Jesus, but I don’t like going to church.” How would you respond? What questions would you ask them? What would you share with them?

(2) What advice would you offer a friend who has encountered a lot of hypocrisy in churches in the past?

(3) How would you support a friend who is extremely shy and struggles to be around large groups of people?

(4) What are ways that you find helpful to prepare for fellowship with other believers?

(5) What are key ways that you can contribute before, during, and after a Bible study?

### Homework: Why do you come to fellowship?

In your journal, write a one-page persuasive essay on why you personally think that fellowship is important. As you write, reflect on the following questions:

What do you enjoy most about fellowship?

What could happen in your life if you don't develop convictions to love Christ’s church?

How can you contribute to your local church community? What are ways that you can fill a need at your local church?

If you stopped going to fellowship, what would you miss the most?

This exercise is designed to help you to reflect, clarify, and strengthen your values. By writing out your thoughts, you will gain a deeper understanding of what truly matters to you.

### Homework: Anticipation versus Reality

**This week, write down how you felt before you decided to show up to fellowship—whether this was a Bible study or a gathering of Christian friends.**

(1) How did you feel before you showed up?

(2) What thoughts were going through your head?

(3) On a scale of 1-10, how much did you predict you would enjoy your time in fellowship?

**Immediately afterwards, answer the same questions retroactively:**

(1) How did you feel *after* you showed up?

(2) What thoughts were going through your head when you were headed home?

(3) On a scale of 1-10, how much did you enjoy your time in fellowship?

**What did you learn from this exercise?**

### Homework: False Beliefs about Fellowship

Respond to these false beliefs about fellowship below.

**#1. “I’m really tired, and I feel like getting some rest. I’m going to relax and get to bed early (or sleep in late).”**

(1) In what areas might you agree or empathize with this thought?

(2) What Scripture comes to mind that could offer guidance on this thought?

(3) Does this thought reflect any distorted thinking or assumptions?

(4) If a close friend shared this with you, how would you respond? What questions might you ask them?

**#2. “I’m not going to talk to him. I tried before and it was uncomfortable and awkward. Our personalities clash. We aren’t compatible.”**

(1) In what areas might you agree or empathize with this thought?

(2) What Scripture comes to mind that could offer guidance on this thought?

(3) Does this thought reflect any distorted thinking or assumptions?

(4) If a close friend shared this with you, how would you respond? What questions might you ask them?

**#3. “Lately, nothing much has been going on in our group. Plus, it’s not like I’m as gifted as \_\_\_\_\_\_. So, I’m probably not essential, and no one will even notice if I’m not around.”**

(1) In what areas might you agree or empathize with this thought?

(2) What Scripture comes to mind that could offer guidance on this thought?

(3) Does this thought reflect any distorted thinking or assumptions?

(4) If a close friend shared this with you, how would you respond? What questions might you ask them?

**#4. “I don’t feel like I belong here. I think I have closer friendships at work or school. I’d feel better if I was somewhere else.”**

(1) In what areas might you agree or empathize with this thought?

(2) What Scripture comes to mind that could offer guidance on this thought?

(3) Does this thought reflect any distorted thinking or assumptions?

(4) If a close friend shared this with you, how would you respond? What questions might you ask them?

**#5. “Fellowship just isn’t the way that it used to be. I remember it being a lot better in the past. Something must be wrong with this group.”**

(1) In what areas might you agree or empathize with this thought?

(2) What Scripture comes to mind that could offer guidance on this thought?

(3) Does this thought reflect any distorted thinking or assumptions?

(4) If a close friend shared this with you, how would you respond? What questions might you ask them?

# Episode 4: Ministry

#### “Ministry” (*diakonia*) refers to various forms of service

Giving our money (2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:12-13).

Building up the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12).

Teaching the Bible (Acts 6:4).

Leading others for Christ (1 Timothy 1:12; Acts 1:17).

Sharing our faith (Acts 20:24; 21:19; Romans 11:13; 2 Corinthians 4:1; 5:18; 6:3; Colossians 4:17; 2 Timothy 4:5).

#### Sacrificial love is at the core of true spirituality

(Phil. 2:3-5) Don’t be selfish. Don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. 4 Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others. 5 You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

#### God energizes us to serve

(Jn. 4:34) Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.”

(Jn. 6:5) When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” 7 Philip answered him, “It would take more than half a year’s wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”

(Jn. 6:8) Andrew said, 9 “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?” 10 Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there).

(Jn. 6:11) Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. 12 When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.”

(Jn. 6:13) So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

(1 Peter 4:11) Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies.

#### Sacrificial love speaks powerfully to our culture

(Jn. 13:34-35) Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

#### Sacrificial love is the key to good fellowship

(Hebrews 10:24-25) Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

#### Serving others brings happiness

(Jn. 13:17) Jesus said, “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

Jesus washed the disciples’ feet on the night before he was crucified (John 13:1-16).

Foot washing was reserved for slaves (1 Samuel 25:41; Mekhilta on Exod 21:2; Kethub 96a).

“Blessed” (*makarios*) means “fortunate, happy, or privileged.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

(Acts 20:35) Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

(Lk. 9:24) Jesus said, “Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.”

How much do you love yourself?

#### Does Love Make Us Happy?

Helping others helps anxiety, depression, guilt, and even PTSD.

Helping others helps those with chronic pain.

Helping others reduces the risk of premature death.

Helping others financially brings further happiness.

#### Conclusions

## Further Reading

Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Los Angeles: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1957).

Watchman Nee, *The Release of the Spirit* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1990).

Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate* (Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing, 2004).

Kelly McGonigal, *The Upside of Stress* (New York, NY: Avery Publishers, 2015).

## Discussion Questions

(1) What might be the impact on a Christian who has never learned to live a life of sacrificial love? How do you think this would affect their relationships and spiritual growth?

(2) A friend from your church tells you that they’d rather stay home than attend fellowship. While at fellowship, they seem disengaged, frequently checking the clock. What questions would you ask to understand their feelings? What thoughts or encouragement would you offer them?

(3) Imagine a regular attendee at your church says, “The people here irritate and annoy me. I just don’t feel like I connect with anyone.” How would you approach this situation? What questions would you ask them? What would you share to help?

(4) A friend expresses feeling too apathetic to invest in building a ministry. How would you help them navigate this? What questions could help uncover the root of their apathy? What would you say to encourage them to find purpose in serving?

### Homework: Learning to Wash Feet

**Read John 13.** Answer these questions below by only appealing to the passage.

What is servant love? Where do you see this in the passage?

(1)

(2)

(3)

Why should I live a life of sacrificial love? Where do you see this in the passage?

(1)

(2)

(3)

With this in mind, consider several excuses that we use to avoid serving others in love. At first glance, these seem to make sense, but these are truly bankrupt when examined closely. How would you use John 13 to respond to these excuses?

**(1) “I’ve tried serving before, but it was awkward and not really all that enjoyable.”**

How would you use John 13 to respond to this excuse to not serve?

**(2) “Nobody ever initiates with me.”**

How would you use John 13 to respond to this excuse to not serve?

**(3) “I’m hurt or annoyed by people around me.”**

How would you use John 13 to respond to this excuse to not serve?

**(4) “I’m having a bad day. I don’t feel up to serving others.”**

How would you use John 13 to respond to this excuse to not serve?

**(5) “I’d like to serve others… But I don’t know what to do or say. It might be awkward if I try. I’m afraid of failure and looking stupid”**

How would you use John 13 to respond to this excuse to not serve?

### Homework: Ways to Love Others

People express love and feel loved in different ways.[[3]](#footnote-4) To jumpstart your ability to love others, try these different methods of biblical love.

#### #1. Words of Encouragement

Write the name of a friend in your local church?

Write down two reasons that you’re grateful for this person.

What is one quality you admire about this person.

What is one challenge or vision that you could give this person that would spur them on?

How do you plan to share your thoughts with this person? (e.g. face-to-face, a letter, an email, a text message, etc.)

After you spur them on, reflect back on how it went. Who else could use a good word of encouragement? Repeat the process until you run out of people who need encouraged.

#### #2. Practical Service

When people serve you, a unique bond of love begins to form. It’s hard to look at them the same way ever again. I remember throwing out my back as a young man. I was laying on the couch in my apartment when I heard a knock at the door. I ignored it, but they wouldn’t stop knocking. I grumbled as I pulled myself off the couch, but not out of my gloomy state.

When I open the door, two women from my home church greeted me with smiles, medicine, popsicles, and the first season of a show I was looking forward to watch. My back still hurt, but my spirit was lifted. That was in 2007, and I still remember how much that cheered me up.

What needs have you heard from people around you? (e.g. moving apartments, broken car, computer virus, clogged drain, etc.) Can you watch a YouTube video to help them with their needs? Can you volunteer your time in some way? Do you know a good specialist who can reliably help? List three people that have needs and brainstorm some ideas on how you can help. Consider enlisting others to help you.

(1)

(2)

(3)

#### #3. Giving Gifts

When giving gifts to others, start small. Jesus liked to give people food (John 6) and wine (John 2). So, we’re probably not too far off the mark if we start here. Holidays are times to remember gifts. For some people, their birthdays are especially important.

Are the holidays near? Or does someone have a birthday coming up? Write down three people you could give a small and thoughtful gift to.

(1)

(2)

(3)

#### #4. Quality Time

Some people feel valued when you spend quality time together. For them, the more time you spend together, the more you love them. You might not feel this way, but that’s not the point. The bigger question is how the person feels.

Pick someone in your life who might enjoy more quality time with you. What activity would they enjoy the most?

Going out for food or a drink?

Going to the gym together?

Going for a walk?

Learning to play a sport that they enjoy?

Learning about a hobby they enjoy? (Ask them to teach you their hobbies.)

Working on projects around the house? (Ask them to teach you how to be handy.) As you work together on a project, you’ll discover that this gives you time to talk and bond.

Planning a vacation together?

#### #5. Physical Touch

Some people feel loved by a hug or an arm around the shoulder. Others do not. And you will be able to tell who is who in no time!

This form of love is biblical. However, it’s difficult in our culture where most people are not used to physical touch. How do you know if someone feels loved by this? You might want to wait to *reciprocate* physical touch, rather than *initiate* it.

# Episode 5: Suffering

In what ways do we commonly suffer?

#### The Purification Process of Gold

(1 Pet. 1:7) The proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

How does God use this testing?

Who receives the praise, glory, and honor?

#### The Exhaustion of our Natural Strength

(2 Cor. 1:8) We do not want you to be uninformed about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself.

(2 Cor. 1:9) Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

(2 Cor. 1:10) He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers.

#### The Life out of Death Process

(Jn. 12:23) Jesus said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

(Jn. 12:24) “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

(Jn. 12:25) “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.”

#### The Breaking of the Outer Self

(2 Cor. 4:6) For God, who said, “Let there be light in the darkness,” has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.

(2 Cor. 4:7) But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.

#### Fatherly Discipline

(Heb. 12:5-6) You have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord …For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.’

(Heb. 12:7-8) It is for discipline that you endure. God deals with you as with sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

(Heb. 12:9-10) Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them. Shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.

(Heb. 12:11) All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful. Yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

Never trade what you don’t know for what you do know.

#### Conclusions

(1)

(2)

(3)

## Further Reading

Randy Alcorn, *If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2009).

Amy Moreno and Lee Campbell, *Constructive Suffering: Building a Biblical Perspective for Your Pain* (New Paradigm Publishing, 2016).

C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (HarperOne, 1961).

Norman Geisler, *If God, Why Evil? A New Way to Think About the Question* (Bethany House Publishers, 2001).

Clay Jones, *Why Does God Allow Evil?* (Harvest House Publishers, 2017).

Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Los Angeles: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1957).

Watchman Nee, *The Release of the Spirit* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1990).

## Discussion Questions

(1) Atheist Friedrich Nietzsche said, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”[[4]](#footnote-5) Do you agree with this statement?

(2) What would be some signs that suffering was leading to spiritual growth? How could you recognize if suffering was making you worse off than before?

(3) What sort of lessons do you learn through suffering that you can’t learn through Bible study or prayer? What sort of lessons have you learned through suffering?

### Homework

Suffering leads to a feeling of spiritual vertigo. It’s hard to focus on what you’re thinking or even feeling. These questions are designed to help you to get a grasp on your suffering.

**What emotions are you feeling right now?** Google the “emotion wheel.” List some of the emotions that you’re experiencing:

(1)

(2)

(3)

**What is making you feel confused?** Paul wrote that he was “perplexed,” but not in “despair” (2 Corinthians 4:8). As limited human beings, it’s perfectly natural and biblical to experience perplexity and confusion. What is making you feel confused right now?

(1)

(2)

(3)

**What thoughts are you experiencing right now?** False beliefs can be like mushrooms—they thrive best in the dark. But not every thought you have is a false belief. The key is to bring all of your thoughts into the light so you can examine them more clearly. Rather than keeping your thoughts bottled up, let them out with complete honesty. If you wish, write them down as a prayer to God. Read Psalm 10 for help.

**What would help?** Unfortunately, you’re not able to “fix” your suffering in a single moment. But you can take steps that will “help” your suffering. Instead of thinking of solutions like a “toggle switch” that will turn your suffering “on” or “off,” think of them more like a “dimmer switch.” Brainstorm some ideas that could help you through this suffering. What are choices that are in your control that will help?

(1)

(2)

(3)

**What would make things worse?** What choices are you currently making that are adding to your suffering? You don’t need to make vows to change—nor do you need to think of ways to justify what you’re doing. Simply list out how you’re handling your suffering, and how it’s affecting you negatively:

(1)

(2)

(3)

**Are you thinking about making any major decisions?** For example, are you thinking about quitting your job, selling your house, travelling across the country, etc. Before you make any big decision, wait a while. Now is not the right time to make big, life-altering decisions.

**Do you need education or application?** What truths do you already know that you’re unwilling to believe? Are there any areas in your life that the Bible speaks about that you’re adamantly unwilling to do?

**Who can you get involved to hear about what you’re going through?** Who are two mature Christian friends whom you can regularly involve and share about your suffering? These people should be same-sex friends, and people whom you could read this exercise with. What are the names of two people who are coming to mind?

(1)

(2)

What would you want from these friends right now, and how would that make you feel? Write these insights below and share them when you meet together:

**What are the burdens and loads in your life right now?** Paul writes, “Carry each other’s *burdens*, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2 NIV). Then, later, he writes, “Each one should carry their own load” (Galatians 6:5 NIV).

A “burden” (*baros*) refers to “something that is particularly oppressive.”[[5]](#footnote-6) This is something that we cannot carry on our own. However, a “load” (*phortion*) refers to something that you are responsible to carry on your own shoulders.[[6]](#footnote-7)

List different areas of your suffering that are “burdens” that you cannot carry and “loads” that you need to carry:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Burdens** | **Loads** |
| (1)  (2)  (3) | (1)  (2)  (3) |

**Lean on the other means of growth now more than ever!** It might feel hard to read Scripture, pray, or spend time with others. That’s understandable. But that doesn’t mean you should withdraw during this time. Your time with God may look *different*, but it should not look *non-existent*. Keep drawing near to God and his people, knowing that he will draw near to you (James 4:8).

# Scripture Memorization

(Isa. 55:8-9) My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.

(Isa. 55:10-11) For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout… 11 So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth. It will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

(Ps. 119:105) Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path.

(Heb. 4:12) The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

(Rom. 10:17) So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

(Jn. 15:7) Jesus said, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

(Jas. 5:16) The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

(Acts 2:42) They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer… 46 Every day they continued to meet together.

(Heb. 10:24-25) Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some.

(Gal. 3:27) All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

(Rom. 12:4-5) Just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

(Phil. 2:3-5) Don’t be selfish. Don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. 4 Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others. 5 You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

(Jn. 4:34) Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.”

(Jn. 13:34-35) Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

(Jn. 13:17) Jesus said, “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

(Lk. 9:24) Jesus said, “Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.”

(1 Pet. 1:7) The proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

(2 Cor. 1:8-10) We do not want you to be uninformed about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers.

(Jn. 12:24) “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

(2 Cor. 4:7) But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.

(Heb. 12:11) All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful. Yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

# Study Guide

This class is not ideally suited for a final exam, as its focus was on teaching skills and convictions rather than memorizing facts. However, if you’d like, you are welcome to use this study guide to create your own final exam.

**What are reasons that Scripture is valuable?**

(1) The Bible reveals the thoughts of God himself.

(2) Breaks peer and cultural conformity.

(3) Corrects false beliefs and self-deception.

(4) Stabilizes our unstable feelings.

**What does Scripture do for us?**

Scripture brings transformation, stability, and happiness.

Scripture guides us.

Scripture is powerful.

Scripture changes our heart.

Scripture grows us spiritually.

Scripture is the key to prayer.

Scripture is the key to ministry.

**How would you respond to someone who said this? “I don’t have time to read the Bible every day.”**

Start small. Your mind is a muscle that will grow.

You can read the Bible from cover-to-cover in 70-80 hours. 30 minutes a day = reading the Bible twice in a year.

You have time to read, but you need to make time to read.

You will never regret time spent reading God’s word!

**How would you respond to someone who is minimizing prayer?**

Jesus placed a high premium on prayer.

Prayer is our most important activity.

God guides us through prayer.

God gives us power through prayer.

Prayer changes you and others.

Prayer defeats Satan and demons.

**How would you help someone who is struggling with God saying, No, in prayer?**

You’re in good company (Matthew 26:36-46).

What would you do if you saw a boy with a genie’s lamp? No one should be allowed to hold that much power!

How do you know that your prayers are ultimately good?

**Give reasons why we should meet together for fellowship.**

(1) God’s nature is essentially relational, and so is ours! (John 17:24; Genesis 2:18)

(2) The mystical union of believers.

(3) The church is the Body of Christ.

(4) The “one another” passages (roughly 50 passages: universal, moral imperatives).

**What is ministry? And what are different forms of ministry?**

“Ministry” (*diakonia*) refers to various forms of service.

(1) Giving our money (2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:12-13).

(2) Building up the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12).

(3) Teaching the Bible (Acts 6:4).

(4) Leading others for Christ (1 Timothy 1:12; Acts 1:17).

(5) Sharing our faith (Acts 20:24; 21:19; Romans 11:13; 2 Corinthians 4:1; 5:18; 6:3; Colossians 4:17; 2 Timothy 4:5).

**What does the word “blessed” mean?** The word “blessed” (*makarios*) means “fortunate, happy, or privileged.”[[7]](#footnote-8)

**In class, we argued that we should never trade what we *do* know for what we *don’t* know. What does this mean?** This means that we should hold to biblical revelation, rather than engaging in philosophical speculation about why we are going through suffering.

**What are key truths that we can cling to during suffering?**

(1) God will use it for the good (Romans 8:28).

(2) God will comfort us (2 Corinthians 1:4).

(3) God will right every wrong (Romans 12:19).

(4) God grieves with us (John 11:35).

(5) God will never forsake us (2 Corinthians 4:9).

**What are healthy ways to respond to suffering?**

(1) Recognize God’s sovereignty

(2) Give thanks

(3) Don’t be a runner!

1. Andy Deane, *Learn to Study the Bible* (Xulon Press, 2009), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. William Arndt et al., A *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 610. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate* (Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (1888). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1064. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. William Arndt et al., A *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 610. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)