

F O L L O W



S E R M O N S E R I E S

A N D

S M A L L G R O U P

FOLLOW

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Welcome to Follow!

Perhaps it's the most important question that any human being can ever consider: "What does it mean to be a Christian?"

After all, Jesus made some startling truth claims. He insists that He is the way, the truth, the life. He is the door. The bread of life. The light of the world.

If all these claims are true, and Christians believe that they are, then having clarity about what a Christian is is of vital, eternal importance.

Some believe that they are Christian if they follow a **moral code** for their lives that is more or less in sync with good behavior. But "being Christian" is not just about behavior, there are lots of "good" people who are members of other faiths, or profess no faith at all.

Others think that being Christian simply means regular or occasional **attendance at church services**. But while that's important, it doesn't define a person as a Christian. True faith is about participation, and it's possible to attend religious events entirely as a spectator, or as someone who is simply there because others expect it of us. True faith is about Monday as well as Sunday.

Others view a Christian as someone who holds to a **Christian belief system**, they are willing to embrace a vague adherence to biblical principles, and see faith as primarily being about ideas and doctrines. (But the Bible challenges a vague belief that doesn't produce any fruit.) Confronting the notion that correct ideas are enough to qualify us as truly Christian, James insists that even demons know the truth, but they are hardly examples of Christian behavior!

James 2:19

“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”

Then there are those who point to a moment in their lives when they **prayed a “sinners prayer”** that was the turning point of “conversion,” the moment of decision when they invited Christ into their lives. And while that’s important, at Timberline we give frequent opportunities to make that prayer of commitment, if it just becomes a date in our personal history, and not one that led to any actual change of our priorities, values, and behaviors, then not only does it have little value, but clinging to that moment may give us false assurance.

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard calls out much of contemporary Christianity for being “barcode religion.” This is a popular brand of Christianity where a “decision for Christ” is believed to be all that is needed. Willard rightly insists that God is not interested in just giving us a “barcode.” He wants us to walk in a new life!

So, what is a Christian? We can answer the question with just a few words. **A Christian is a follower of Christ.** Christians are actively engaged in an ongoing journey that will continue throughout eternity. Their primary identity is to be a friend and disciple of Jesus. That identity transcends all other national or political identities. As apprentices of His, they willingly submit to His authority, seek to walk in His footsteps and example, and long for His rule and reign to be furthered in the earth, His Kingdom coming.

It’s been said that one of the most popular songs requested at funerals is Frank Sinatra’s classic, “My Way.”

*And now, the end is near;
And so I face the final curtain.
My friend, I’ll say it clear,
I’ll state my case, of which I’m certain.
I’ve lived a life that’s full.
I’ve traveled each and every highway;
And more, much more than this,
I did it my way.*

But that is not the song of the people of God, who are committed to do life “His way,” as followers of Him.

But what does it mean to follow Him today? For the disciples who first heard His call, this meant trekking the rural trails of Galilee with Him; listening to His stories, watching His miracles unfold, receiving His correction, participating in meals where laughter and questions were shared. We are called to follow, but we don’t follow in the same way, because Jesus is not here now, physically located as a human person to be with.

Of course, the disciples experienced both following Jesus, the man in person, as well as following Him by faith after His ascension into heaven. But remember, for most of their lives as disciples, they practiced their Christianity in exactly the same way we do, by faith, following the Jesus that they could no longer see, empowered by the Holy Spirit!

Over the next eight weeks, we are going to explore what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We’ll do that as we look at the apostle Peter, who is generally a favorite with many, not least because of his many failings, we can certainly and quickly identify with him!

- Peter was called to follow Christ (Mark 4:19), a call that was repeated after 3 years of being together with Jesus (John 21:22).
- The “following” theme appears in both of his letters (1 and 2 Peter) as he calls us to “follow in his (Jesus’) steps” (1 Peter 2:21) and not “wander off to follow the way of Balaam” (2 Peter 2:15).
- So, both in his life, and through his writing, Peter calls us to follow Jesus.

Through our **weekend sermons** at Timberline, we’ll look closely at the **two letters that Peter wrote**. The epistles known as 1st and 2nd Peter were written to a scattered group of believers who were all feeling the pressure of culture, and even the threat of persecution. In today’s uncertain world, these ancient letters have great relevance in restoring our perspective and encouraging us in the way of discipleship.

During our small group gatherings, we will look at episodes from Peter's life that have some parallels with his writings. We will see that Peter learned (sometimes through the hard experience of failure and misunderstanding) what it meant to follow Jesus. There are some fascinating parallels to be discovered!

As we share together, we're praying that our own daily walk with God will be helped and strengthened. For Peter, following Jesus meant incredible joy and horrendous pain. Ultimately, his refusal to turn back from the call to follow Jesus, cost Peter his life. The counsel of his words and example will surely bring great strength to us all.

God bless you, fellow follower!

Pastor Jeff

Here is an **overview** of the journey that we will take together in the coming weeks. Some of the topics we will consider are:

- **Called and Chosen:** Peter’s revolutionary call to become a “fisher of men.”
- **Rocks and Stones:** In following Jesus, we don’t take a way to the Father, we take *the way* to the Father.
- **Standing and Falling:** Followers are called to walk tall, and stand for Christ - but what about when we fall?
- **Suffering and Serving:** Two signs of true greatness - our ability to endure suffering and our willingness to serve others patiently.
- **Heavenly and Earthly Wisdom:** We can walk in either, and both!
- **The God We Follow:** If we’re to follow someone and trust them with our lives, and our eternity, we need to affirm that He is Who He says He is, and follow with confidence.
- **Learning Our Lessons:** We are called to be people who know the truth. But knowing truth is not enough, it must be consistently applied, lest followers end up walking around in circles!
- **Follow Until the End:** After three years with Jesus, Peter was given an invitation to be a follower once more, to walk a pathway that would be painful. We have the opportunity to renew our commitment to following.

BIBLE STUDY TIPS

It is recommended that you make yourself familiar with each week’s Scripture portion by reading it a couple of times before you meet with your group. You may want to take some notes in the Life Application section to help you prepare for the discussion with your small Group.

Remember to pray as you open the Scriptures. Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you and guide you in understanding. The Bible is the inspired Word of God, so the Holy Spirit is the ultimate authority. When you are reading and interpreting meaning in the Bible, be sure to keep context in mind. A little research goes a long way. Background information and understanding of the purpose of the Book’s main focus and the overall message of the Bible will frame a more accurate reading of Scripture. It is helpful to approach the Bible as a single, coherent story. Each verse, chapter, and Book must be studied in light of the overall story.

A common criticism of the Bible is that you can make it say anything you wish. It goes without saying that this is a misuse of Scripture. The goal of any Bible study should be to understand God's revelation. Reading the Bible intelligently requires interpretation. The following questions will help in proper interpretation:

- What does it say?
- What did it mean to the original audience?
- How can we apply it to our life?

Don't be intimidated if you aren't familiar with the Bible. Everyone starts somewhere and a small group is a great place to start! If you would like to become more familiar with the Bible as a whole, a great thing to consider is reading the Bible using a reading plan of some kind. Among other places, you can access these for free online. Regular reading develops your understanding and your appetite for the Word of God.

Enjoy the journey together!

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR SMALL GROUP
- SUGGESTIONS FOR A CHRIST—CENTERED SMALL GROUP

1. Make an investment in your growth and in your community by making a commitment to regularly and actively participate in your small group.
2. Do your part in making sure that everyone gets a chance to share in the discussion. Avoid rabbit trails!
3. Develop Christ-centered relationships with your small group members. Have an attitude of love and acceptance toward them just as Christ has done for you.
4. Be respectful of everyone's journey while keeping in mind that the purpose of Timberline small groups is to seek God as He reveals Himself through His Word, the Bible.
5. Avoid giving advice or your personal opinion on what someone else has shared. Always remember to encourage and pray for a person rather than trying to fix them.
6. Be a part of your church community by being willing to ask for help when you are in need and by being willing to provide help and resources to others when they are in need.
7. Make an effort to allow yourself to be authentic and accountable.
8. Maintain healthy boundaries in life and in your relationships.
9. Have fun and Let Love Live!

SUGGESTED ORDER

- Open with prayer.
- Look at “Connecting With One Another” and “For Your Consideration”. (If time is an issue consider having everyone read “For Your Consideration” prior to class)
- Watch the DVD session.
- Begin the Study and Discussion.
- Close with prayer

WEEK 1 : CALLED AND CHOSEN

John 1: 35-42

“The following day John was again standing with two of his disciples. As Jesus walked by, John looked at him and declared, “Look! There is the Lamb of God!” When John’s two disciples heard this, they followed Jesus. Jesus looked around and saw them following. “What do you want?” he asked them. They replied, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?” “Come and see,” he said. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon when they went with him to the place where he was staying, and they remained with him the rest of the day. Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of these men who heard what John said and then followed Jesus. Andrew went to find his brother, Simon, and told him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means “Christ”^{}). Then Andrew brought Simon to meet Jesus. Looking intently at Simon, Jesus said, “Your name is Simon, son of John, but you will be called Cephas” (which means “Peter”^{**}).”*

Matthew 4:18-20

“One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew, throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. Jesus called out to them, “Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” And they left their nets at once and followed him.”

1 Peter 1:1-2

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.”

CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER

Do you like surprises - or loathe them?

Do you have any fishing, camping or vacation stories to share?

KEY THOUGHT THIS WEEK:

Living as a follower of Jesus calls for daily decisiveness. Being a disciple doesn’t result from a “cruise control,” casual approach to life, but as we choose well each day, we will grow in Christ, and others will be impacted by our lives too. Consider Steve Chalke’s words:

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“We live in the so-called information era. Never has more been known; never has less been required of what is known. Much is known, but all is consequence-free. What we do with what we know has nothing to do with knowing itself. Perhaps all this was summed up by Christopher Isherwood’s famous, but absurd, line in A Berlin Diary, ‘I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking’: Knowledge for the Christian is never non-committal nor consequence-free. It carries responsibility. Knowing means doing. God speaks and human life is essentially answerable and accountable to him.”

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

From Peter’s life and writing:

There are some days where everything changes. We meet someone who becomes our life partner. We navigate a tragedy which alters our priorities and lifestyle. We make a decision about a job, a place to live, and when we look back, we realize how critical that was in our unfolding history. Jewish rabbis have a saying: “If not for that day,” which simply expresses the truth that some days are junctions.

Simon Peter (we’ll call him Peter from now on) had one of those days prior to meeting Jesus. Peter and Andrew had already met Jesus while Andrew was still one of John the Baptist’s disciples. So this call was not as sudden and abrupt as it seems. But it was still a radical call, and one that they immediately responded to.

In Jesus’ day, it was common for students (often from the age of 15) to travel with, and learn from, their teacher. These students were called talmidim (singular talmid) in Hebrew, which we translate as “disciple,” or more accurately an “apprentice.”

The talmid’s goal was to become like their rabbi by learning and applying the wisdom of the Torah and oral tradition to daily situations. Finally, after three years of learning alongside a rabbi, and then spending more years applying their learning through working within their chosen vocation, a talmid was ready to become a rabbi and take on disciples of his own.

A talmid followed his rabbi everywhere, every day, every hour of the day, often without knowing or asking where he was going, with one purpose, to imitate him.

Many Jewish scholars believe this best explains Peter’s brief walk on water: When he

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saw his rabbi (Jesus) walking on the lake, the talmid (Peter) felt the need to imitate him (Matthew 14:22-33). A talmid rarely left his rabbi's side for fear that he would miss a teachable moment. He watched the rabbi's every move, noting how he acted and thought in every situation. Talmidim trusted their rabbi completely, working passionately to incorporate his actions and attitudes, as well as his words, into their lives. A disciple's deepest desire was to follow his rabbi so closely that he would start to think and act just like him. When the rabbi finally believed his talmidim were ready, he would commission them as disciple makers themselves.

Peter was called to as a follower, a talmid, of Jesus. Ancient etiquette insisted that a rabbi's disciple walk literally "behind" his teacher, so the idea was familiar. In those days, would-be disciples usually chose their rabbi, but here, rabbi Jesus chooses them.

Not only that, but Jesus does not just invite them, but demands that they follow Him. One translation of the call is "Here, after me!"

Jesus calls them, not just to a life of learning and teaching, but one of action, they will "fish for men." The Christian life is not just about understanding truth, but applying truth in our lives each day.

And let's see that Jesus is disruptive. He broke into Peter and Andrew's everyday lives, and called them away from what they had been so used to doing. In their response, Peter and Andrew were decisive, even though they had no idea where this calling would lead them. Peter didn't know that, within three years, he'd be the spokesman chosen to preach on the Day of Pentecost. He had no idea that, one day, a huge church would be named in his honor in Rome.

Tom Wright:

"They saw neither the glory nor the pain, that day when a young man walked by the sea in their little town of Capernaum, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. They only saw him; and that was enough."

The decision was immediate. Matthew focuses on the immediacy of their response on

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this occasion - Peter and Andrew leave their nets “at once,” and later James and John leave everything “immediately.”

The decision was also risky. Fishermen had more income than was average in Galilee. Because fish were plentiful, in the bustling community that was Galilee, fish were always in demand, so Peter left a good job behind to follow Jesus. In walking away from the nets, they created potential for conflict in the family and community; in leaving behind their father and the family business, their decision could be viewed as a betrayal.

The call to follow would be repeated to others. James and John would hear it. Jesus issues a “follow me” call to an unnamed disciple who is seeking permission to go off and bury his father, (Matthew 8:21-22), Matthew was called to walk away from his tax business (Matthew 9:9), and a young man with many possessions hears the same call. Sadly, he doesn’t respond positively (Matthew 19:21-22).

The decision of Peter and his friends to follow Jesus would have world-changing implications. Now they would “fish for men,” a statement that sounds a little strange. But there’s nothing seductive, deceitful, or harmful implied here. Jesus was simply using a metaphor, contrasting their current occupation with what they would now do for the rest of their lives. It also had biblical echoes. Jeremiah 16:16 speaks of fishing for men, but this was to catch them for judgment, but now Jesus’ “fishermen” will rescue people from judgment through grace.

One commentator puts it like this:

“It is no longer a question of taking fish from the lake, but of drawing men up out of the abyss of sin and death, catching them in the great net of God.”

While we are not all evangelists, we are all called to live and speak as witnesses of Christ. And we’re promised that we will be equipped and shaped by God for this.

As professional fishermen, Peter and his friends were naturally equipped for the gospel mission.

Michael Green:

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“A good fisherman in those waters needs courage, for dangerous squalls erupt on that treacherous lake. He needs perseverance, patience and flexibility in the use of different methods (three types of fishing-nets were used). He must keep himself unobtrusive so as not to frighten the fish away, and he must have a sense of timing. All these qualities were essential in the new kind of fishing to which this landsman introduced them.”

But the invitation was accompanied by the promise that Jesus will equip or “be made” for the new work to which he calls them. Evangelism is not our work for God, but God’s work through us. It is called the “missio dei” - the mission of God. Peter was chosen for that mission.

In his writing, Peter begins his first letter with the idea of being chosen, as he uses the word “elect”:

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God’s elect.” (1 Peter 1:1)

Peter uses a term that theologians have argued about for centuries, calling his Christian audience the “elect”, a word that means “chosen.” An election is about the population choosing candidates. Now, we are called God’s elect, a term that echoes back to the Old Testament, because, as Ezekiel shows, God elected or chose Israel for His purposes, not at the expense of the rest of the world, but because He wanted to use them as a beacon nation to benefit the rest of the world. Some argue that “election” means that some are predestined, chosen before time by God, for salvation, while others are not, which means that some are “picked” for judgement. Others are convinced that we all become part of the elect as we freely choose Christ - just as election in the Old Testament was not about individuals being selected, but a people, Israel, so election now is corporate rather than personal. When we become part of God’s church, we become part of the bride of Christ, the one He has chosen. But despite the controversy about the word, let’s not lose sight of the truth: God has chosen His people for the privilege of fulfilling His purposes. Let’s not live for lesser ambitions today.

And just as Peter was called to make a response of obedience, so he emphasizes obedience as he begins his letters, reminding his readers that we are called, “to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.” (1 Peter 1:2)

The wonder of being chosen also comes up later in the first letter:

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“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9)

In Christ, we too are chosen!

WATCH DVD WEEK ONE

STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. “Jesus is disruptive”. Can you think of a time when God’s prompting conflicted with what you were doing, or even wanted? What happened?
2. Although they’d met Jesus before, Peter and Andrew’s decision to abandon a secure life to follow Him was quick. Why do you think they did it?
3. How might we be “fishers of human beings”?
4. Can you think of a “hinge” day in your life, a junction when everything changed from that point? Did you see it coming?
5. What are some activities we do as followers to imitate Jesus?

THIS WEEK’S CHALLENGE

When Peter heard the call of Jesus, and later realized that he had been chosen to be an apostle, he responded. It’s possible for us to give our lives to Jesus, but then take them back, gradually, almost unconsciously. Are we living decisively as followers, in this current season of our lives?

MEMORY VERSE

John 15:16

“You didn’t choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name.”

LIFE APPLICATION

Why not spend some time looking at what matters to you - your vocation, your family, your finances, your time and consciously, thoughtfully offer it all to the Lord once more. He wants us to be available.

WEEK 1: CALLED AND CHOSEN

TWO ANCIENT PRAYERS :

Teresa of Avila, 1515-82

*Let us make our way together, Lord;
Wherever you go I must go:
And through whatever you pass,
There too I will pass. Amen.*

St. Patrick, 389-461

*May the strength of God pilot us,
May the power of God preserve us,
May the wisdom of God instruct us,
May the hand of God protect us,
May the way of God direct us,
May the shield of God defend us,
May the host of God guard us against the snares of evil
and the temptations of the world.*

A contemporary prayer (based on Jesus turning over the tables in the temple courts, an act of holy disruption!)

Mighty God,

We come before you, and offer ourselves to you.

Step freely, Lord, into the courts of our lives, not as a surprising invader, but as our welcomed Lord.

Bring your loving disruption, your all-wise revelation, and where necessary, your acts of holy demolition.

Scatter the chattels of mere religion that only serve to blind our world to your light and bar so many to your loving kindness.

Turn the tables on us, and be Lord where we have set up our stalls of rebellion and selfishness.

Kindle the fire of your love in our hearts again; grant us the gift to imagine. Dream your dreams through us.

Show us your ways, and be Lord of our journeying. In the name of Christ. Amen.

WEEK 2 : ROCKS AND STONES

Matthew 16:13-20

“When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ ‘Well,’ they replied, ‘some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.’ Then he asked them, ‘But who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means ‘rock’),* and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.’ Then he sternly warned the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.”*

1 Peter 2:4-10

“As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,’ and, ‘A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.’

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

1 Peter 2:21

“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”

WEEK 2 : ROCKS AND STONES

CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER

This week, there's a lot of talk about building, foundations, and stones. Are you practical? Share your greatest DIY triumph - or disaster!

KEY THOUGHT THIS WEEK

If we're to follow someone, we need to know that they are going the right way! Peter affirms that Jesus is truly Messiah and Son of God. Through this episode, (and Peter's writing) we see that the normal Christian life is one of gradual growth, as we affirm the uniqueness of Jesus, walk in relationship with Him, are shaped by the Spirit, and live as people of the light, then we live as "stones" of God's new temple, a sign and a wonder for the world to see.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

From Peter's life and writing:

It was a place of horrors. Originally called Paneas, (for reasons we'll see in a moment), somehow the name got corrupted, and it became known as Banias. In the New Testament, the place sits in an area called Caesarea Philippi. Here, a sprawling place of worship was set up, primarily to the god Pan, hence that name Paneas. Pan was believed to be the god of desolate places, a fearsome, grossly immoral character who terrified people with his scream, which gives us the word panic, and describes the reaction of people when they heard that horrible sound. But it was not just Pan that was worshiped at this place. Some have described it as a "supermarket of gods," a place where you could pick whatever god you wanted and make an offering there. There was a cave with a flowing stream, believed by the locals to be the entrance or the gate of hell. It is still there today. Some say human sacrifices were offered there.

Here Jesus brought Peter, together with the other disciples, and asked the question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Matthew 16:13)

Simon Peter often acted as spokesperson for the rest of the disciples (as he would do later on the Day of Pentecost), and his response prompted Jesus to affirm his new name - Peter - which means rock, and he would have a foundational role in the life of the church. But Peter, in his writings, would later point back to Jesus as the solid rock or "stone," the most important, and the unique stone in the new "temple" of God, the church. This episode, together with Peter's words in 1 Peter 2, point us to a number of vital truths for us as we continue to follow Jesus.

WEEK 2 : ROCKS AND STONES

Christianity is centered around the core truth that Christ is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one and only way.

He is not just an option, someone to add to other gods or idols. He is the only route to the Father. When Peter declared, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” he probably wasn’t understanding the full weight and breadth of his own statement at this point. He most likely saw Jesus as the Messiah, or rescuer of Israel, and all messianic figures were thought of as “sons of God.” But he affirmed the truth that we now celebrate, that Christ is the only rescuer, the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God. But this is not just a theological idea, there is also a practical challenge for us as believers. Do we “worship” other “idols” in a culture which is a “supermarket” with plenty of idols offered?

We’re also challenged to gently, quietly, but confidently, stand for the truth that will probably ultimately get us into trouble, if Jesus is the **only** way, then all other religious pathways do not lead to God. Pluralism, the idea that all roads lead to God, is not compatible with authentic Christian faith. In a culture of liberal fundamentalism, where any sense of intolerance will not be tolerated, this could be a challenge for us in the future. Michael Green writes about the danger of syncretism, the idea that we can mix and blend religions in our quest for spiritual insight:

“Today, when the world is a global village, and when the multiplicity of faiths is regarded as a fatal objection to the Christian claim of the uniqueness of Jesus, it is easy to forget that the seductions of syncretism in religion were every bit as attractive in the world where Christianity was born, and they were steadily and consistently resisted. Millions died for their quiet conviction that in the world of the relative the Absolute had arrived. Christianity cannot renege on that claim without a total denial of her Lord. Willem Visser’t Hooft, the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, was once asked what he thought would be the greatest peril facing the church in the near future. And he replied with prophetic insight: ‘Syncretism. It is a far more dangerous challenge to the Christian church than atheism is ever likely to be.’”

Peter also affirmed that Jesus was the son of the living God, a statement that seems strange at first glance - a god that is not alive is no God at all! But remember, this was said at a “supermarket” where gods were chosen, or rejected because they were written off as dead and useless. In 1 Peter 2, Peter reaffirms that God is the “living stone” (1 Peter 2:4). Christianity is not just a moral code, or the celebration of a historic teacher, but a daily faith-relationship with the living God!

WEEK 2 : ROCKS AND STONES

And then Jesus affirmed that Peter knew all this because of the activity of God in his heart and mind:

“You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being.”

God had been at work in Peter’s life. And in 1 Peter 2 we see the same handiwork of God, shaping us as living stones:

“...you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house.”

Being a follower is not just about copying Jesus, but being changed gradually by the work of God’s Spirit in our lives. We can be different. Addictions can be beaten. Relationships can be healed. The living God will work in us.

Peter also needed to know that he had authority over dark powers, authority that even the gates of hell could not stand against, a poignant statement when we remember that Jesus spoke these words standing close to the dark, dingy place of pagan sacrifice that was known as “the gates of hell.” And in 1 Peter 2, we hear that we have been called “out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). Now we are called to live in such a way that demonstrates the light and truth of Christ, and the primary way that we will do that is through healthy relationships.

In 1 Peter 2, Peter wants the scattered gentile converts to whom he wrote to know that they were now part of a new “building” that has replaced the fabulous temple in Jerusalem. Christ made that construction obsolete. As he describes that privilege, he points to Jesus as the precious, vital foundation, the cornerstone. As Peter uses this idea of a stone to represent Christ, he picks up on a metaphor that had frequently been used in Jewish history to speak of the Messiah and His kingdom. Daniel had a vision of that stone, and Isaiah had a vision of a “precious cornerstone” (Isaiah 28:16). Paul also speaks of Christ as the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). Peter would later use this imagery when he addressed the Sanhedrin in the early part of Acts.

Once again we see that the church has become God’s people, replacing the temple, God’s “place” in the world. The church exists, not just for us, to meet our needs, but for Christ, to fulfill His plans and purposes. It is not for our comfort, to pander to our

WEEK 2 : ROCKS AND STONES

preferences, or designed to do things our way. How often we forget this, especially when we've been part of a church for a while, we call it ours. But it's always His, and His alone.

Also, as Peter talks about imitating Christ, he points us to a truth that is repeated in the New Testament. Christ's sufferings were not just an act of rescue for us, but also an example to us. We are to "follow God's example" (Ephesians 5:1) and "be imitators of the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 1:6). The phrasing that Peter uses here is unique, and refers to a pattern that a child needs to follow and trace when learning to write. Using another analogy, once again Peter is calling us to follow in His footsteps. Jesus used Himself as an example, calling us to "take his yoke upon us" (Matthew 11:29). The word "yoke" was used to describe a rabbi's particular interpretation of the law. Jesus is saying, "Do life my way, the way I did it, and the way I taught it."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*:

"Jesus is the only 'pattern' we must follow. And because he really lives his life in us, we too can 'walk even as he walked' (1 John 2:6), and 'do as he has done' (John 13:15) and 'love as he has loved' (Ephesians 5:2; John 13:34; 15:12), 'forgive as he forgave' (Colossians 3:13), 'have this mind, which was also in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 2:5), and therefore we are able to follow the example he left us (1 Peter 2:21), lay down our lives for the brethren as he did (1 John 3:16). It is only because he became like us that we can become like him."

One author shares this view

"If the rabbi calls you to be his disciple, then he believes you can actually be like him. As we read the stories of Jesus' life with his talmidim, his disciples, what do we find that frustrates him to no end? When his disciples lose faith in themselves. He even says to them at one point, 'You did not choose me, but I chose you.' ... But what they are learning is that God has faith in them. The rabbi thinks we can be like him."

It's a theme that we will return to, but we affirm this: we follow the Lord Jesus with confidence in Who He is!

WEEK 2 : ROCKS AND STONES

AN ANCIENT PRAYER: ST AUGUSTINE

*Look upon us, O Lord,
and let all the darkness of our souls
vanish before the beams of thy brightness.
Fill us with holy love,
and open to us the treasures of thy wisdom.
All our desire is known unto thee,
therefore perfect what thou has begun,
and what thy Spirit has awakened us to ask in prayer.
We seek thy face,
turn thy face unto us and show us thy glory.
Then shall our longing be satisfied,
and our peace shall be perfect. AMEN*

For the past few years, Timberline Small Groups have joined forces with SERVE 6.8 to care for local families who are in need at Christmas time. This effort is called Adopt-A-Family. I would like to invite your small group to come serve together on the evening of either Mon., Nov. 6th, or Thr., Nov. 9th. You will be packing presents, making ornaments, or helping families sign up for the Christmas Family Festival. All this will take place at SERVE 6.8's new location at Christ Center Community Church (Drake & Lemay).

I can't encourage you enough to make this serving opportunity a priority for your group. I can guarantee that while your Jesus-motivated service will be transformational in the lives of many local families in need, it will also be highly catalytic to your own individual spiritual growth, and your connection as a small group. Contact SERVE 6.8 and sign up your group.

I look forward to seeing you there!
Pastor Brent Cunningham

SERVE 6.8

1239 E Drake Rd, Fort Collins, CO 80525 | (970) 449-5401

Mon., Nov. 6th

Thr., Nov. 9th

* We will email groups the volunteer times when they become available.

WEEK 3 : STANDING AND FALLING

Luke 22:31-34

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift each of you like wheat. But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen your brothers.’ Peter said, ‘Lord, I am ready to go to prison with you, and even to die with you.’ But Jesus said, ‘Peter, let me tell you something. Before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will deny three times that you even know me.’”

Luke 22:54-62

“So they arrested him and led him to the high priest’s home. And Peter followed at a distance. The guards lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat around it, and Peter joined them there. A servant girl noticed him in the firelight and began staring at him. Finally she said, ‘This man was one of Jesus’ followers!’ But Peter denied it. ‘Woman,’ he said, ‘I don’t even know him!’ After a while someone else looked at him and said, ‘You must be one of them!’ ‘No, man, I’m not!’ Peter retorted. About an hour later someone else insisted, ‘This must be one of them, because he is a Galilean, too.’ But Peter said, ‘Man, I don’t know what you are talking about.’ And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. At that moment the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Suddenly, the Lord’s words flashed through Peter’s mind: ‘Before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will deny three times that you even know me.’ And Peter left the courtyard, weeping bitterly.”

John 21:19

“When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.”

1 Peter 3:14-17

“But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened. But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.”

CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER

Can you share a social situation that was terribly embarrassing - you felt foolish because of what you said or did?

WEEK 3 : STANDING AND FALLING

KEY THOUGHT THIS WEEK

We are called to stand strong for Christ. But we follow Jesus in a fallen world, and we still have a sinful nature. While that doesn't give us a license to sin, there will be times when we stumble and fail. But our failures don't need to define or confine us. We can get up when we fall, and follow again.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

From Peter's life and writings:

All this talk of following can give the impression that journeying with Jesus is just about progress, gained ground, a straightforward and consistent march to maturity.

But that's not the way it is. A broad look at the life of the disciples shows that, even with Jesus personally right there with them, they frequently failed.

- They fell into the trap of believing that children are not important, and sent them and their parents away, earning them a strong rebuke
- Peter tried to deter Jesus from going to the cross
- Thomas famously had doubts
- They argued about who was the greatest among them
- They failed to grasp opportunities to perform miracles that Jesus offered them
- James and John offered to call down fire and brimstone from heaven on a Samaritan village
- Judas betrayed

The story of the disciples is a story littered with mess, misunderstanding, and failure.

Mike Yaconelli:

“For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a godly person. Yet when I look at the yesterdays of my life, what I see, mostly, is a broken, irregular path littered with mistakes and failure. I have had temporary successes and isolated moments of closeness to God, but I long for the continuing presence of Jesus. Most of the moments of my life seem hopelessly tangled in a web of obligations and distractions. I want to be a good person. I don't want to fail. I want to learn from my mistakes, rid myself of distractions, and run into the arms of Jesus. Most of the time, however, I feel like I am running away from Jesus into the arms of my own clutteredness. I want desperately to know God better. I want to be consistent. Right now the only consistency in my life is my

WEEK 3 : STANDING AND FALLING

inconsistency. Who I want to be and who I am are not very close together. I am not doing well at the 'living-a-consistent-life' thing. I don't want to be St. John of the Cross or Billy Graham. I just want to be remembered as a person who loved God, who served others more than he served himself, who was trying to grow in maturity and stability. I want to have more victories than defeats, yet here I am, almost 60, and I fail on a regular basis. If I were to die today, I would be nervous about what people would say at my funeral. I would be happy if they said things like 'He was a nice guy' or 'He was occasionally decent' or 'Mike wasn't as bad as a lot of people.' Unfortunately, eulogies are delivered by people who know the deceased. I know what the consensus would be. 'Mike was a mess.' You might say Christianity has a tradition of messy spirituality; messy prophets, messy kings, messy disciples, messy apostles. From God's people getting in one mess after another in the Old Testament, to most of the New Testament being written to straighten out messes in the church, the Bible presents a glorious story of a very messy faith. Sounds like you and I are in good company."

One of the most famous failures in history occurs when Peter denies that he even knew Jesus. He wasn't alone in his desertion, all the disciples abandoned Jesus when He was arrested (Mark 14:50). But perhaps Peter's shameful moment of denial is highlighted because he was the one who had pledged loyalty to the death, but his resolve crumbled immediately when challenged. We've already seen that Jesus gave Simon a new name, Peter, meaning "rock." But in warning Peter about the battle to come, Jesus reverts to addressing him as Simon. The inference is clear. Will the headstrong fisherman live in his old identity, or his new one? Will he be Simon, or Peter? The same challenge is ours: will we go back to lifestyles that were ours before we found Christ, or walk in "the newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

Warned about the failure to come, Peter was incredulous, and insists that he is willing to go to prison or even die for Jesus, which is ironic, because both would happen, Peter would go to prison three times (Acts 4:3; 5:17-20; 12:3-11) and even face death (Acts 5:33; 12:1-4).

But before all that came the infamous denial. At that stage, Peter did not have the self-awareness to consider that he might not be as strong as he thought. We all need to have a sober assessment of our strengths and weaknesses. But let's also be encouraged by the truth that Jesus called Peter with full knowledge of his fragility. And in warning Peter about the failure to come, Jesus reveals who is behind the failure,

WEEK 3 : STANDING AND FALLING

Satan, who “asks permission” to test Peter, like he did with Job (Job 1:11). Jesus also shows how we can help each other to faithfully follow, praying for one another, and by strengthening and encouraging one another in the journey. The prediction of failure comes with the promise that Peter will ultimately strengthen others. We can bless others, not just by sharing our successes, but also the lessons learned from our struggles and failures.

Clarence Macartney: 9

“His impulsive deeds, his frequent questions, his eager exclamations and confessions, the praise and honor and rebukes that were bestowed upon him, his sometimes manly and sometimes cowardly acts, his oaths, his bitter tears—all this makes Peter the great companion and the great instructor of his fellow men and his fellow Christians.”

Peter denied Jesus after following him “at a distance”. While, they may simply describe his physical proximity to Jesus, perhaps they are laced with deeper meaning. The Psalmist speaks of being abandoned by those he thought of as friends:

“My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbors stay far away.” (Psalm 38:11)

The threefold denial, and the way that it’s described, including the chronological details like “after a while” and “about an hour later” show that Peter’s denial was not just an impulsive moment, but was deliberate and considered.

So why did Peter fail so badly? We’re not told, but perhaps:

- He was exhausted and bewildered, having spent a restless night in the Garden of Gethsemane
- He was in shock. After three years of companionship, his friend and mentor, Jesus, who had always seemed so in control of everything, was now under arrest.
- He was feeling dejected, because he had bravely tried to defend Jesus when the arrest happened, and had wildly swung a sword, which led to someone losing an ear, and Jesus having to heal it!

Failure and embarrassment can make us feel hopeless, and less able to stand firm when another temptation comes along.

WEEK 3 : STANDING AND FALLING

- He was prayerless. Earlier, in Gethsemane, Jesus had told his friends that they should “watch and pray, that they might not enter into temptation” (Matthew 26:41). But they repeatedly fell asleep.
- He was just afraid. Fear hijacked Peter when he walked on the water, and perhaps it was simple fear that caused him to panic.
- Lies beget lies. Once he denied once, he felt he had to continue the lie.

Whatever the cause of the failure, restoration came. Peter denied Jesus while warming his hands at a fire. Later, after the resurrection, when Jesus cooked breakfast for his friends on the beach, Peter found himself sitting at a fire - the same Greek word is used (John 21). Rather than taunting Peter with the memory of his denial, perhaps Jesus was offering Peter the chance to affirm love for Him again, even in the light of his failure. God’s forgiveness does not deny the reality or minimize our failures. They are real, but grace is real too. One way that we can “turn back” and begin following once more, as Peter did, is to face up to the reality of our failure, and accept God’s grace for it.

We will return to that breakfast episode later in our journey together.

For Peter, failure was not the end. He changed, and so can we. Peter stood fearlessly on the Day of Pentecost, and then faced considerable opposition, enduring beatings, bouts in prison and death threats, as we’ve already seen.

And failure does not have to define us. Some of us define ourselves by our worst moments. But as Peter writes to his readers about suffering for doing what is right, and not being afraid in the face of threats, he doesn’t feel the need to mention his own episode of trying to avoid suffering and being fearful. Perhaps his failure was sufficiently well known, but he doesn’t seek to qualify or explain his own failure when exhorting others. He has moved on from that season of shame. And when we fall, we should get up and move forward too.

WEEK 3 : STANDING AND FALLING

Peter, painfully aware that Satan had actively sought his downfall, warns his readers about the reality of spiritual warfare too:

1 Peter 5:8-9

“Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.”

As a follower of Jesus, Peter discovered that there was one who wanted to trip him up. We'd do well to remember that Satan would love to accomplish the very same in our lives. We'll come back to this vital theme later.

WATCH DVD WEEK THREE

STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What might “following Jesus at a distance” look like?
2. Have you ever had an experience when you felt like you “denied” Jesus by what you said, did, or didn't say or do?
3. Is there an episode of failure - and turning back from it - that you could share to encourage others?
4. Have you ever been ostracized or threatened because of your faith?
5. Can you describe a time or situation where you felt God's grace?

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE

For all of us, there will be moments of testing and temptation. Consider this, if Satan was “asking permission” to try to hijack you as a follower of Jesus, what strategy might he use. What weaknesses in you might he capitalize on?

MEMORY VERSE:

1 John 1:9

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

LIFE APPLICATION

Are there people in your life that you pray for and actively seek to encourage? List them here:

WEEK 3 : STANDING AND FALLING

PRAYER:

Share this liturgy: (ADAPTED FROM THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND PRAYER WEBSITE)

Facilitator: Lord Jesus Christ, we confess we have failed you as did your first disciples. We ask for your mercy and your help. Our selfishness betrays you: Lord, forgive us.

All: Christ have mercy.

Facilitator: We fail to share the pain of your suffering: Lord, forgive us.

All: Christ have mercy.

Facilitator: We run away from those who abuse you: Lord, forgive us.

All: Christ have mercy.

Facilitator: We are afraid of being known to belong to you: Lord, forgive us.

All: Christ have mercy.

Facilitator: May the Father forgive us by the death of his Son and strengthen us to live in the power of the Spirit all our days.

All: Amen.

Facilitator: The Lord enrich you with his grace, and nourish you with his blessing; the Lord defend you in trouble and keep you from all evil; the Lord accept your prayers, and absolve you from your offenses, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

All: Amen.

WEEK 4 : SUFFERING AND SERVING

Luke 9:46

“An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest.”

Luke 22:24-34

“A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.’ But he replied, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.’”

1 Peter 4:10-11

“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.”

1 Peter 4:12-13

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”

CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER

What’s the greatest award, accolade or complement that you’ve ever received? What are you most proud of as you look back on your life?

KEY THOUGHT THIS WEEK

As we follow Jesus, we experience His work in shaping our character. Two signs of maturity, true greatness, are found as we respond to suffering (especially persecution) with patience, and as we use our gifts to serve others. Greatness is found in suffering

WEEK 4 : SUFFERING AND SERVING

and serving. We especially remember our brothers and sisters in Christ who are persecuted for their faith around the world today.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

From Peter's life and writings:

It's been said that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Perhaps that's one reason why the disciples repeatedly argued about who was the greatest among them - Luke records two separate occasions when conflict broke out over this issue. They were in the presence of the raw power of Jesus, who had authority over weather, an ability to perform stunning miracles, even raising a stinking corpse like Lazarus to life - it must have been a heady experience to be with Him. They started to believe in themselves. James and John even offered to call down fire upon a Samaritan village. Their offer was misguided, but just being around Jesus inspired them to believe that they could do it! But their arguing over status and recognition is a sad sight:

Michael Wilcock:

"It seems incredible that a band of grown men, still more of Christian disciples, could argue openly over their own relative importance. It is shown up for the childishness that it is when Jesus takes an actual child and places him before them as a standing rebuke to their lack of humility. It is quite clear that they have scarcely begun to learn what it means to follow either the Servant on the path of self-denial or the King in his concern for the welfare of others."

Whatever the reasons for their petty discussions about who was the greatest, Jesus responded by pointing them to two areas where we can be truly great, suffering and serving.

During the second argument that Luke records, Jesus directly addressed Peter (suggesting that he might have been acting a spokesman again and a leading contributor to the conflict) and confronted him with his own fragility, prophesying that he will deny and collapse under the slightest threat of suffering, as we saw in our last study. In turn, Peter points to patient suffering in his writings, and sees nobility in suffering well, especially when we suffer for the cause of Christ.

WEEK 4 : SUFFERING AND SERVING

Tragically, Christians, members of our family, are suffering persecution on almost every continent in the world today. Their property is confiscated or destroyed. They are thrown into prison and tortured. Many are martyred.

As we note the following, we must remind ourselves that there have been too many occasions in history when the Christian church was guilty of denying religious liberty.

In some expressions of Islam, people are only free to be Muslims. In some countries, leaving Islam (apostasy) is a capital offense.

- As the Church grows in Hindu and Buddhist majority nations, Hindu and Buddhist religious leaders who fear that their influence may be threatened are in the forefront of the persecution against the Church. Citing religious nationalism as their justification, they claim Christianity will destroy national unity and identity which, they claim, is rooted in a common “culture”. The reality is the Christians they are persecuting are indigenous believers from indigenous churches with indigenous missions and a deep desire to bring blessing to their nation.
- In the Indian states governed by Hindu nationalists, and in Buddhist Sri Lanka, religious nationalist zealots are calling for anti-conversion laws that would effectively ban Christian witness, and bar conversion to anything but the majority religion. Religious militants persistently persecute Christians. Unfortunately, many government officials, police and judges would rather appease the persecutors than defend the rights of minority Christians.
- The situation is similar in many former Soviet states where religious nationalism is being used to promote and justify the hegemony of politically powerful “traditional” religions which have a long history of co-operative relationships with the ruling authorities. The trend in some former Soviet states is to replace the previously all state sanctioned atheistic ideology with another all state sanctioned ideology, only this time a “traditional” religious ideology: either traditional Russian Orthodox as in Russia and Belarus, or traditional Islam as in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan.
- It is common today for Communist states to present a facade of religious liberty for the purpose of maintaining good economic and trade relations with the West. China, Vietnam and North Korea have established official “Patriotic”

WEEK 4 : SUFFERING AND SERVING

denominations that practice a Communist Party-approved religion within Party-set rules. To avoid compromising their faith, some 100 million East Asian Christians risk criminal charges, imprisonment and even death by worshipping in unregistered (illegal) “house-churches.” These house-churches face intense systematic persecution, despite government rhetoric and an appearance of religious liberty.

We must:

- Commit to pray for the persecuted church. This is the first thing persecuted Christians always ask for, our prayers. Pray also for those who persecute Christians that God will change their hearts and draw them to Him.
- Support ministries that champion the cause of the persecuted church.
- Participate in advocacy campaigns.
- Stay informed.
- Where appropriate (and following clear direction) write to encourage those who are suffering.

Irina Ratushinskaya, raised in cold war, atheistic Russia, was converted to Christ through her experience of the beauty of snow and reading Russian classics. Through the writings of Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Turgenev, and Tolstoy, she found a real sense of a loving God. She did not see a Bible until she was 23 years old. As a Christian poet, she was marked out as an enemy of the state, and sentenced to seven years hard labor and seven years in internal exile and sent to Barashevo camp in Mordavia, in the Soviet’s notorious Gulag. After her release, she found that thousands of Christians worldwide had been praying for her, and related the effects of those prayers in her book, *Pencil Letter*:

*Believe me, it was often thus
In solitary cells, on winter nights
A sudden sense of joy and warmth
And a resounding note of love. And then, unsleeping, I would know
A-huddled by an icy wall:
Someone is thinking of me now,
Petitioning the Lord for me.
My dear ones, thank you all*

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*Who did not falter, who believed in us!
In the most fearful prison hour
We probably would not have passed
Through everything-from end to end,
Our heads held high, unbowed –
Without your valiant hearts to light our path.*

Jesus also calls his followers to display greatness, not in ruling and exercising power, but as willing servants. Peter does the same, calling for a serving attitude as we speak, offer hospitality, and employ whatever gifts we have in the service of others. This was contrary to the cultural thinking of the day:

C S Keener:

“Jewish people were well familiar with the Gentile model of authority: ancient Near Eastern kings had long claimed to be gods and had ruled tyrannically; Greek rulers had adopted the same posture through much of the eastern Mediterranean. Jewish people would view the Roman emperor and his provincial agents (who often showed little concern for Jewish sensitivities) in much the same light. Rulers and others who doled out favors from the vantage point of power were called ‘benefactors’; the practice of benefaction was widely praised in Greek circles. Jesus’ reminding the disciples that seeking power is a Gentile (i.e., pagan) practice is tantamount to telling them they should not be doing it.”

Serving is about:

Attitude: the posture we adopt when we are offended or wronged.

Action and working: serving in church, in community.

Prioritizing: placing the needs of others before our own.

Availability: a servant stands open, ready to be employed in whatever task is demanded of them.

Realizing that in our serving, we can make a difference.

WEEK 4 : SUFFERING AND SERVING

Mother Teresa:

“Prayer in action is love, and love in action is service. Try to give unconditionally whatever a person needs in the moment. The point is to do something, however small, and show you care through your actions by giving your time ... We are all God’s children so it is important to share His gifts. Do not worry about why problems exist in the world – just respond to people’s needs ... We feel what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean, but that ocean would be less without that drop.”

We come back to the person of Jesus, the “suffering Servant” whom we follow.

Chuck Colson:

“Jesus Christ...served others first; He spoke to those to whom no one spoke; He dined with the lowest members of society; He touched the untouchables. He had no throne, no crown, no bevy of servants or armored guards. A borrowed manger and a borrowed tomb framed His earthly life.

Kings and presidents and prime ministers surround themselves with minions who rush ahead, swing the doors wide, and stand at attention as they wait for the great to pass. Jesus said that He Himself stands at the door and knocks, patiently waiting to enter our lives.”

WATCH DVD WEEK FOUR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Persecution is something we tend to think happens elsewhere, but increasingly Christians in the USA feel marginalized. How should we respond when we are criticized for our convictions?
2. We’ve seen that, in other countries, the rationale for persecution is often that national unity is threatened by Christian faith. What rationale or excuse might be given for persecution of Christians living in the USA?
3. Pastor Dary has said that “you can always tell if you are a servant by the way you react when people treat you like one”. Have you ever been treated like a servant? How did you respond?
4. Can you describe a situation where you saw someone truly demonstrating a servant’s heart? What did that look like?

WEEK 4 : SUFFERING AND SERVING

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE

Take time to pray for those who suffer for Christ. Consider how we are using our own current freedom to serve others, and serve Jesus as we do so.

MEMORY VERSE

Hebrews 13:3

“Remember those in prison and those who are suffering as if you yourself were suffering.”

LIFE APPLICATION

What opportunities do you have to have an attitude or take action to be a servant right now? What practical way could you serve someone, or group of people, this week?

Prayer:

We give thanks to you, Father of the One Family of God.

Once, we were dead, but now have been made alive with Christ, your new creation people.

Once we were outcasts, but now we sit at the top table of your grace.

Once we were alone, but we have come in from the cold, to sit at the fireside of your love; joined with you, and joined together.

Through us, may love's call reach those still frozen in fear, and draw them in.

Through us, may unity and mercy be modeled, a winsome demonstration of how life was always meant to be.

Help us to truly honor each other.

Help us celebrate our differences, and not fear them or be threatened by them.

Help us gather around what we truly share.

Strengthen those who suffer simply because they love your Name; bring comfort, hope, justice, and freedom.

Reveal yourself to those who cruelly persecute: show them that as they hurt Your people, they hurt You. Turn them from their evil ways.

In the Name of Christ we pray.

Amen.

WEEK 5 : HEAVENLY AND EARTHLY WISDOM

Matthew 4:10-11

“Jesus said to him, ‘Away from me, Satan! For it is written:

“Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.” Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.”

Matthew 16:13-17

“When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ They replied, ‘Some say, John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ ‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.”

Matthew 16:21-23

“From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’ Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

1 Peter 5:2

“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be.”

1 Peter 5:6-8

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER

Can you share a “wise thought” that has been helpful to you personally through your life journey? It doesn’t have to be a biblical thought. (Example: “always leave things in better order than you find them”).

KEY THOUGHT THIS WEEK

As we follow Jesus, we should be aware that we can operate either in godly or worldly wisdom, sometimes both on the same day. Behind worldly wisdom sits Satan.

WEEK 5 : HEAVENLY AND EARTHLY WISDOM

Following Jesus is not just a casual stroll, it involves warfare. And if we are the fight in that war, we need each other, the flock, or family of God, the church.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

From Peter's life and writings:

Perhaps in just a matter of seconds, Peter went from uttering one of the most profound statements ever made by a human - and, as we've seen, made possible because of the work of God in his life - to making another comment that earned him one of the strongest rebukes that Jesus ever issued, because Satan himself was hiding behind Peter's words. We're back at Caesarea Philippi - the "supermarket of the gods" where we began a few weeks ago. Peter has just affirmed Jesus' identity, and has been congratulated by Jesus and even given a new name because of his insight. But now, as Jesus reveals that the cross and death are ahead, Peter reacts, taking Jesus aside, rebuking Him, trying to manage Him. The word rebuke here is the same word used to describe Jesus "rebuking" bad weather and demons! Peter was certainly strident.

In fairness, Peter was acting out of love and concern for his rabbi, Jesus. And he was also operating within the popular thinking of the day - the idea that Messiah would head for Jerusalem, overthrow the hated Roman occupiers, and set up his throne there, ruling over a newly triumphant Israel. A conquering Messiah was what Peter expected, a crucified Messiah was simply unthinkable!

Jesus responded using words even stronger than Peter's rebuke: "Get behind me, Satan!" This language to another human being is unparalleled in Jesus' ministry. Jesus saw that behind Peter's well-intentioned words of care sat a sinister force, the same tempter that had tried to divert him from the cross back in the wilderness of temptation (Luke 4). Back then, Jesus dealt with the temptation swiftly and decisively, and he does so again now, telling Peter that he has become a "stone of stumbling" to Him. Does that sound familiar? Remember, when we shared our "Rocks and Stones" session, we saw that:

- Jesus declared that Peter was a rock
- Peter declared that Jesus was a chief cornerstone, and a rock that righteously makes humans stumble.
- Here Jesus declares that Peter has unrighteously become a "stumbling block" to Him.

WEEK 5 : HEAVENLY AND EARTHLY WISDOM

R. T. France:

“For Peter to be addressed by this obnoxious name must have been deeply wounding, especially after the (earlier) accolade. There is no parallel to such an address to a human being. But this is not merely extravagant abuse; the choice of this epithet suggests rather that behind the ‘human thoughts’ of Peter, Jesus discerns an attempt to divert him from his chosen course similar to that which Satan himself had made in 4:1–11. The same Peter who had just spoken what God had revealed to him (v. 17) is now speaking for Satan. Just as the third temptation in 4:8–9 had been to achieve worldly power by accommodating himself to Satan rather than attacking him, so now Peter’s vision of Messiahship represents the easier way to power and authority, the gains without the pains. As long as he holds such a view, the ‘rock’ on which the church is to be built proves instead to be a stumbling-block. The image goes neatly with the demand ‘get behind me:’ as long as Peter stands in front of Jesus he is in his way, stopping him getting on with his mission. He gets in the way of God’s purpose for Jesus by his unthinking acceptance of ‘human thoughts.’ Peter has expressed only what comes naturally to the human mind when presented with the idea of power and authority which the title ‘Messiah’ suggests. But human thoughts are not God’s thoughts (Isa 55:8–9), and if they are not questioned they can stand in the way of God’s purpose and derail it. In much of the rest of this section of the gospel Jesus will be seen persistently trying to undermine the ‘human thoughts’ of the disciples so as to get them to see things from the perspective of the kingdom of heaven....”

A number of lessons emerge from this episode.

Firstly, let’s avoid the temptation to try to manage God. This was not the only time that Peter and his fellow disciples tried to choreograph Jesus. Some parents brought their children to Jesus for blessing, but the disciples tried to send them away, showing that they had imbibed the popular wisdom of the day that said that children were not important. When Lazarus died, his sisters were upset that Jesus had not intervened according to their anticipated timescale. In his groundbreaking book, *The Trivialization of God: the Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity*, Donald McCullough says that attempting to manage God is one of the primary temptations of our time.

In a sense, those who try to manage Jesus will always be disappointed, and we must allow Him to disappoint us, because He won’t always act in a way that we want. Followers have to learn to navigate disappointment with God as they trust Him. Peter did, and the same challenge will be ours.

WEEK 5 : HEAVENLY AND EARTHLY WISDOM

Let's realize that there are two types of wisdom. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter operated in both in the span of a few minutes!

- His revelation about Christ's identity was inspired by God the Father.
- His rebuking Jesus, insisting that death and the cross were not the way, were inspired by Satan.

In James 3:15–16, we see that there are two kinds of wisdom, godly wisdom, and earthly wisdom, which is unspiritual, and demonic.

Let's also affirm the privilege of being in the flock - the community - of God.

- When Peter realizes who Jesus is, he immediately hears about Jesus building His church, God's community.
- Peter is called in John 21 to be a shepherd of God's sheep, a leader in that community.
- Peter uses analogies of a flock and a roaring lion, once again pointing us to the power of community in standing against Satan.

Being together matters. Lone sheep get picked off easily by roaming wolves.

When we get together with our church family, we are galvanized and energized for living for Christ in a hostile world. As we sing our songs, open the Book, hear truth taught, declare our faith, perhaps in liturgy, and have our memories and imaginations stirred through the drama that is the Eucharist, communion, the breaking of bread, so the muscle of faith is strengthened. And that, in turn, enables us to fight the good fight. As Peter uses similar language to James in his call to "resist" the devil, we see that this resisting happens as we stand firm in our faith - faith that is nurtured and built up in our togetherness as well as in our personal spirituality. Being firm in faith is not just having a good grasp of doctrine, but a firm grasp of the hand of God, and the hands of God's people as we trust Him. So, don't neglect those gatherings. They should not just bless and encourage you, but strengthen you for the war.

Sometimes we neglect "God's flock" because of arrogance. We can follow Jesus as solo-explorers, we insist. In *God in the Dock*, C.S. Lewis speaks to "solitary conceit."

WEEK 5 : HEAVENLY AND EARTHLY WISDOM

“When I first became Christian 14 years ago I thought I could do it on my own, by retiring to my rooms and reading theology, and I wouldn’t go to the churches. I very much disliked their hymns, which I consider to be fifth rate poems set to sixth rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth rate music) were nevertheless being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic sided boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize you aren’t fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit.”

Let’s allow God to be God, walk in His wisdom, and stay together in His family!

WATCH DVD WEEK FIVE

STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What are some ways we might “manage” God in our lives?
2. How might the temptation to “manage God” be expressed in our lives?
3. How can we grow in godly wisdom?
4. When rebuking Jesus, Peter spoke out of kindness and caring, but he was still wrong. Can you think of an example where we might employ the wrong wisdom for the best motives?
5. How does the church community help us in our stand against dark powers and false wisdom?
6. What are some examples of worldly wisdom in today’s culture?

THIS WEEK’S CHALLENGE

Consider your commitment to the “flock of God,” the church. Is being together a priority, or something that happens when it’s convenient?

WEEK 5 : HEAVENLY AND EARTHLY WISDOM

MEMORY VERSE

James 3:15

“Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.”

LIFE APPLICATION

Reflect on these two questions:

Are there any areas in your life where you are tempted to try to manage God?

Are there any areas of disappointment because He has not done what you wanted Him to do?

A PRAYER FOR WOULD-BE “GOD MANAGERS”:

Dear Jesus,

You are Lord. Be Lord in me. When I bring my hopes to You, help me to have faith to anticipate Your response, but trust when You don’t respond in the way that I want.

When I’m tempted to try to manage You, remind me of the way our relationship works. You lead. I follow.

May I grow in grace and wisdom.

And bless Your church, the people, the flock of God. Strengthen those who are shepherds of the flock, that together, we might be strong in the fight of faith.

Amen.

WEEK 6 : THE GOD WE FOLLOW

Mark 9: 2-9

“After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: ‘This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!’ Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”

Matthew 17:1-9

“When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. ‘Get up,’ he said. ‘Don’t be afraid.”

2 Peter 1:16-18

“For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.”

Exodus 24:15-18

“When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.”

Deuteronomy 18:15

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.”

WEEK 6 : THE GOD WE FOLLOW

CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER

What's the most amazing view that you have ever seen? It can be places, people... whatever was beautiful in your eyes!

KEY THOUGHT THIS WEEK

Peter and his friends followed Jesus, all the way to martyrdom, because they knew Who He really was. The transfiguration of Christ was designed to help their confidence. He was and is the King of Glory!

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

From Peter's life and writings:

Jesus had pledged and prophesied that some of His disciples were going to see a glorious vision of Him, and of His kingdom.

"Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (Matthew 16:28)

Now, just six days later, that prophecy is fulfilled, as He takes His inner circle of Peter, James and John to a high mountain, probably Mount Hermon, which was just a few miles away from Caesarea Philippi.

The true glory of Christ was about to be revealed to them, as He was transfigured. A better description was that he experienced metamorphosis before their eyes. Just as Moses had encountered the glory of God on a mountain, (Exodus 19) so now the trio get a staggering glimpse of who their friend Jesus really is. The transfiguration may also link to Exodus 24:12-18, where Moses sees the glory of Yahweh on the mountain and on the seventh day hears the voice of God. Jesus took with him the inner circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John. Moses had taken three close co-workers with him, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu.

So, what is going on here?

The emphasis of the text, together with Peter's recounting of the experience in 2 Peter 1, shows that this experience was primarily designed, not to encourage Jesus, but to strengthen the disciples in their faith. The emphasis on the disciples' participation in this event makes that clear. Jesus "took them with him" and "took them up" (rather

WEEK 6 : THE GOD WE FOLLOW

than he went and they followed); he was changed “before them”; Moses and Elijah “appeared to them.”

Jesus took them up the mountain specifically to facilitate this experience.

He wanted them to remember this, because there were horrors ahead, both immediately as Jesus would experience trial and execution, and then later, as these men would be persecuted for their faith in Him. James, one of the three, would be the first apostolic martyr. Even though Peter had received a revelation of Jesus’ Messiahship, the three needed to know for sure that Jesus was not just Israel’s rescuing Messiah. And He was not just an itinerant rabbi, a clever sage, a socio-political provocateur, a subversive wisdom teacher, an ascetic, or an apocalyptic troublemaker. The transfiguration portrays Jesus as the Cosmic Lord of all human history. He is God’s beloved and specially anointed Son.

Peter in turn assures his readers that the gospel is not a collection of “cleverly devised stories” but that he and his friends had been “eyewitnesses of his majesty” on the mountain. If we are to follow someone, possibly into pain and death, we need to be assured that he is authentic! The experience didn’t mean that there was never any further room for doubt and failure. Peter was on that mountain, but still denied Jesus. But the experience was intended to strengthen Peter and the other followers.

Jesus’ clothes radiated blinding light. Matthew compares this radiance to the brilliance of the sun, and Luke to “a flash of lightning” but Mark to super-bleached laundry. Again, these descriptions evoke comparisons to Moses on Mount Sinai when Yahweh appeared to him in a cloud and consuming fire (Exodus 24).

Elijah and Moses appear, representing the law and the prophets. Jesus is seen as acting in complete continuity with all that God had previously done. The big story of God was continuing to unfold.

And there’s even prophetic insight in the rebuke that Peter received when he suggested building tents for the three. Back in Deuteronomy, it was predicted that a prophet like Moses would arise in the last days, and the Israelites were instructed: “You must listen to him”—a phrase picked up here in the final words of the voice from heaven, “Listen to him!”

WEEK 6 : THE GOD WE FOLLOW

What a contrast to the cross, but what a vital preparation for the three as Jesus neared the cross.

Tom Wright:

“Here, on a mountain, is Jesus, revealed in glory; there, on a hill outside Jerusalem, is Jesus, revealed in shame. Here his clothes are shining white; there, they have been stripped off, and soldiers have gambled for them. Here he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two of Israel’s greatest heroes, representing the law and the prophets; there, he is flanked by two brigands, representing the level to which Israel had sunk in rebellion against God. Here, a bright cloud overshadows the scene; there, darkness comes upon the land. Here Peter blurts out how wonderful it all is; there, he is hiding in shame after denying he even knows Jesus. Here a voice from God himself declares that this is his wonderful son; there, a pagan soldier declares, in surprise, that this really was God’s son.”

The mountain top experience also shows us that both solitude and community are important. The four initially went to the mountain to pray, a practice that was common with Jesus, who frequently got away from the crowds in order to spend time with the Father. This is the only time when Jesus takes some of His disciples with Him for this. Solitude and retreat are important if we are to follow God.

The story is also a mingling of wondrous glory and human ineptitude, and we learn that our good ideas are sometimes not that great. In offering to build tents for Moses, Elijah and Jesus, once again Peter was acting with the best intentions. Mediterranean nomads traditionally erected tents for honored guests. And it’s possible that Peter thought that just as Moses had met with God in the encounter God in the “tent of meeting,” (Exodus 33:7–11; Numbers 12:5–9.), so now Peter presumed - wrongly - that tents would be appropriate.

R T France:

“When Peter says, ‘It is good that we are here’ he is not saying we are glad/privileged to be here but rather it is a good thing that we are here, because we are available to do what needs to be done. Peter intends to be not just a spectator but a useful contributor to the event. A bare mountain-top is no place to entertain such august visitors: Peter, as a practical man, will provide them with accommodation befitting their dignity, using the best materials the mountain-top affords.”

WEEK 6 : THE GOD WE FOLLOW

Heaven has to tell Peter to be quiet! But even in the midst of the glory and the rebuke, the tenderness of Jesus is shown too. They are face-down, utterly traumatized by the whole experience, but Matthew notes that Jesus “touched them,” reassuring them and encouraging them to not be afraid. The glorious, mighty Christ is also caring and tender.

Soon, of course the mountain top experience has to end, and they came down the hill, only to encounter a situation of demon-possession that the other disciples had not been able to help with.

In the Vatican Gallery hangs Raphael’s last painting, which some think to be his greatest. It is entitled, *The Transfiguration*. The uppermost part pictures the transfigured form of Jesus, with Moses on the left and Elijah on his right. On the next level down are the three disciples, Peter, James, and John, recently awakened and shielding their eyes from Jesus’ blinding brilliance. Then, on the ground level is a poor demon-possessed boy, his mouth hideously gaping with wild ravings. At his side is his desperate father. Surrounding them are the rest of the disciples, some of whom are pointing upward to the glowing figure of Christ—who will be the boy’s only answer. Raphael has brilliantly captured something of the overwhelming contrast between the glorious Mount of Transfiguration and the troubled world waiting below.

We learn that faith confessed on Sundays must be applied on Mondays.

WATCH DVD WEEK SIX

STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Are there experiences of God, answers to prayer, that you can look back on and find strength as you do so? What would you say to a follower of Jesus who does not have any of those experiences?
2. Can you think of a time when a “good idea” turned out to not be a “God idea”?
3. How are you with retreat and solitude? Does solitude have a place in your life?

THIS WEEK’S CHALLENGE

Peter and his friends were firmly told to “listen to Him (Jesus).” Can we make time in our busy lives to specifically listen for anything God might be wanting to say to us? Do we talk and act too much, like Peter did?

WEEK 6 : THE GOD WE FOLLOW

MEMORY VERSE

Matthew 3:17

Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

LIFE APPLICATION

How can I make time for solitude and intentional listening to God?

Lay out the current plans in your life before the Lord, and ask Him, are these good ideas, or "God ideas?"

Prayer/liturgy

Facilitator: When Christ appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. As he is pure, all who have grasped this hope make themselves pure. So, let us confess our sins that mar his image in us.

(Silence)

Facilitator: Your unfailing kindness, O Lord, is in the heavens, and your faithfulness reaches to the clouds: Lord, have mercy.

All: Lord, have mercy.

Facilitator: Your righteousness is like the strong mountain and your justice as the great deep:
Christ, have mercy.

All: Christ, have mercy.

WEEK 6 : THE GOD WE FOLLOW

Facilitator: For with you is the well of life and in your light, shall we see light: Lord, have mercy.

All: Lord, have mercy. Father in heaven, whose Son Jesus Christ was wonderfully transfigured before chosen witnesses upon the holy mountain, and spoke of the exodus he would accomplish at Jerusalem: give us strength so to hear his voice and bear our cross that in the world to come we may see him as he is; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

WEEK 7 : LEARNING OUR LESSONS

Acts 10:1-23

“At Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, ‘Cornelius!’ Cornelius stared at him in fear. ‘What is it, Lord?’ he asked. The angel answered, ‘Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner whose house is by the sea.’ When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa. About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’ ‘Surely not, Lord!’ Peter replied. ‘I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.’ The voice spoke to him a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Simon, three men are looking for you. So, get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.’ Peter went down and said to the men, ‘I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?’ The men replied, ‘We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.’ Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.”

Galatians 2:11-14

“When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they

WEEK 7 : LEARNING OUR LESSONS

were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, 'You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?'"

2 Peter 2:1

"But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves."

CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER

Is there a life skill that you've struggled to learn; driving, riding a cycle, skiing, cooking, etc ?

KEY THOUGHT THIS WEEK

Followers are called to be lifelong learners. But there are some lessons that we never get around to properly learning, and applying...and when that happens, we go around in circles.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

From Peter's life and writings:

"You show me your truth, and I'll show you mine..." - The Manic Street Preachers (a band, not a group of enthusiastic Christians!)

For the follower of Jesus, the journey of life is not one without direction or definition, an ambling, wandering experience of discovery. We have decided to live for God's purposes, and live under His direction, as people who walk in the truth. We are not relativists (who believe that truth is relative, so everyone can choose their own truth), but rather people of revelation - the revelation of God's word inspired by God's Spirit.

Truth matters. Truth sets us free (John 8:32) and Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would guide us into all truth (John 16:13).

Peter needed to be schooled in the truth, especially regarding God's gift of salvation being available to all, including Gentiles. In Jesus' day, Gentiles (non-Jews) were called "wild dogs".

So-called ethnic purity was very important in Jesus' day – a clean "pedigree" was required to engage in court or hold a public office; a "pure" family tree was a ticket to

WEEK 7 : LEARNING OUR LESSONS

power and influence.

The “pecking order” was as follows:

1. Priests, Levites, and others of “pure” lineage
2. Slightly blemished Jews, like illegitimate offspring of priests, and proselytized Jews.
3. The illegitimate, the eunuchs, and persons without known fathers
4. Circumcised Gentiles’ slaves
5. Samaritans and Gentiles

John Stott:

“It is difficult for us to grasp the impassable gulf which yawned in those days between the Jews on the one hand and the Gentiles (including even the ‘God-fearers’) on the other. Not that the Old Testament itself countenanced such a divide. On the contrary, alongside its oracles against the hostile nations, it affirmed that God had a purpose for them. By choosing and blessing one family, he intended to bless all the families of the earth. So, psalmists and prophets foretold the day when God’s Messiah would inherit the nations, the Lord’s servant would be their light, all nations would ‘flow’ to the Lord’s house, and God would pour out his Spirit on all human kind. The tragedy was that Israel twisted the doctrine of election into one of favoritism, became filled with racial pride and hatred, despised Gentiles as ‘dogs,’ and developed traditions which kept them apart. No orthodox Jew would ever enter the home of a Gentile, even a God-fearer, or invite such into his home. On the contrary, ‘all familiar interaction with Gentiles was forbidden’ and ‘no pious Jew would of course have sat down at the table of a Gentile.’”

But Jesus displayed a staggering, revolutionary openness to Gentiles. He operates in their territory, healing the sick, casting out demons and feeding the 4,000. A Gentile woman affirms that Jesus is the Lord. In contrast to the blindness of the Jewish, “Hebrew of Hebrew” Pharisees, Jesus finds faith among the Gentiles, even in the heart of a Roman centurion. And even in Matthew’s gospel, the staggering picture of a Gentile who “gets it” about Jesus, in contrast to the blindness of the Jewish audience, is clear:

“Truly I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” (Matthew 8:10)

WEEK 7 : LEARNING OUR LESSONS

This Gentile faith prompts Jesus to prophesy:

“I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 8:11-12)

The Gerasene demoniac was a Gentile, who ended up worshipping Jesus and calling him, “Son of the Most High God,” (Mark 5:7) and Jesus instructs the healed demoniac to tell his friends, obviously Gentiles, what God had done for him.

The followers of Jesus were to be the “light of the world” and not just of Israel. The kingdom was breaking through the Jewish/Gentile barrier.

But the crunch came when Gentiles started coming to faith in the life of the early church. Centuries of social, religious and cultural division had to be overcome. Peter needed another revelation from God. This time it came in the form of a vision.

God speaks by His Spirit. As a church, we believe that the power of the Holy Spirit is still available to us today through gifts of healing, discernment, prophecy, words of wisdom and knowledge. All of these can operate in our lives as followers, and wonderfully help us in our following.

When we sense that God is speaking through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, what is said will be consistent with Scripture. God doesn’t contradict Himself, and it will often be a confirmation of something that we are already sensing. In Peter’s life, the choreographing of his vision and the visit of Cornelius was no coincidence, but convinced him that the radical message of including the Gentiles was truly from the Lord.

John Stott again:

“We note how perfectly God dovetailed his working in Cornelius and in Peter. For while Peter was praying and seeing his vision, the men from Cornelius were approaching the city (9–16); while Peter was perplexed about the meaning of what he had seen, they

WEEK 7 : LEARNING OUR LESSONS

arrived at his house (17–18); while Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit told him that the men were looking for him and he must not hesitate to go with them (19–20); and when Peter went down and introduced himself to them, they explained to him the purpose of their visit (21–23).”

So, God had spoken, the Gentiles are in, and that should have been the end of the matter. But the early church continued to struggle with integrating Gentiles into what was initially a branch of Jewish faith, especially when false teachers repeatedly called for a return to the old Jewish laws and ceremonies, and separation from Gentiles, even Gentile converts to Christ.

One of the most scandalous examples of this struggle, and one that Peter was shamefully involved in, is buried in Galatians 2.

Paul and Barnabas had led the church in Antioch, where there was a huge influx of Gentile converts. While Paul was out of town, Peter (called Cephas in Galatians) came to visit, and about that time, some false teachers arrived as well. They were obsessed with the idea that Jewish rules and regulations had to be maintained in church. Shockingly, Barnabas, together with Peter, who had experienced that amazing rooftop vision, withdrew from fellowship with the Gentile converts, a terrible act that undermined the central truth of the gospel and must have caused so much hurt, rightly earning them the strongest rebuke from Paul when he returned. **Peter had learned radical truth, but he had not learned enough to apply it when under pressure.** False teaching had temporarily seduced him, drawing him away from the truth.

Little wonder that in Peter’s two letters, truth is a strong theme. He calls us to “purify ourselves by obeying the truth” (1 Peter 1:22), wants us to be “firmly established in the truth”, and then, in 2 Peter 2 he goes to great length to rebuke and expose the false teachings who had crept into the churches and were seducing people away from the purity and the truth of the gospel. The false teachers that Peter confronts in his letter were promoting licentiousness rather than legalism, but nevertheless false teaching was still the core issue.

In warning his readers about false teachers, Peter (like Jude) speaks about their stealth. The word that he uses to describe their teaching means “to smuggle.” And

WEEK 7 : LEARNING OUR LESSONS

Jude talks about those who have “secretly slipped in among you.” That means that false teachers will not be terribly obvious, because of their furtive behavior. But Peter also shows us that “Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute” (2 Peter 2:2–3), showing us once again that false teachers don’t just err in doctrine, but in disgraceful living. Peter is telling us that just because these teachers are popular, it doesn’t make them right. On the contrary. The crowd can be wrong.

We need to be cautious and aware, because obviously those who bring destructive ideas into the church don’t advertise that they are doing so. But there’s a word of caution needed. There are some Christians who live constantly on the attack, heresy hunters who seem to relish the opportunity to point out the smallest element of teaching that they don’t agree with, giving the opportunity to attack the teacher. Entire websites have been set up by people who insist that they are the untainted guardians of orthodoxy. Good, godly leaders who have done tremendous work for Christ are regularly smeared, sometimes because their every word is scrutinized and analyzed - and often wrenched out of context to make it sound like they’re saying something that they’re not. So, let’s tread the pathway of discipleship with care and discernment, but not with obsessive paranoia.

Let’s know the truth of God’s Word, and be open to the work and gifts of God’s Spirit. And once we’ve learned a lesson, let’s not go back on what we’ve learned.

WEEK 7 : LEARNING OUR LESSONS

WATCH DVD WEEK SEVEN

STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Why did Peter abandon what he had learned on the rooftop (and from meeting Cornelius) when those false teachers showed up in Antioch?
2. Are there people in your life that you might be unconsciously be treating as “Gentiles?” What might you do differently in socializing with them?
3. Have you experienced using one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit?
4. Are there lessons that you have learned lately that you wish you’d known in earlier years?

THIS WEEK’S CHALLENGE

Is there a lesson that you never seem to learn?

MEMORY VERSE

2 Timothy 3:7

“(They are) always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.”

LIFE APPLICATION

Do you have a habit of studying the Bible? If not, what might be a healthy approach?

Is there a lesson that you’ve learned in your journey that you really need to apply to a situation today?

PRAYER:

O GOD, give me a teachable spirit, reminding me that to be a true disciple is to adopt literally the spirit of a learner. Show me how much I have yet to learn, not to discourage but to inspire me to be a person who passionately pursues whatever you want me to know. Save me from ever convincing myself that I have “arrived” and that I can now rest and take my ease — which is to settle for the false security of pseudo-competence. Amen.

WEEK 8 : FOLLOW, UNTIL THE END

John 21: 1-23

“Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ‘I’m going out to fish,’ Simon Peter told them, and they said, ‘We’ll go with you.’ So, they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, ‘Friends, haven’t you any fish?’ ‘No,’ they answered. He said, ‘Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.’ When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, ‘It is the Lord,’ he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish you have just caught.’ So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ None of the disciples dared ask him, ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’ Again Jesus said, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Take care of my sheep.’ The third time he said to him, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ He said, ‘Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.’ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, ‘Follow me!’ Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, ‘Lord, who is going to betray you?’). When Peter saw him, he asked, ‘Lord, what about him?’ Jesus answered, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.’”

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2 Peter 3:18

“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.”

CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER

What’s the most memorable meal you’ve ever shared? What made it so special?

KEY THOUGHT THIS WEEK

As followers of Jesus, commitment needs renewal. We’ve already seen that having given our lives to Jesus, we are apt to take them back, gradually. Peter spent three years with Jesus, and having received the first call to follow, now that call was reaffirmed - with a sobering prediction about the future.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

From Peter’s life and writings:

After the resurrection, the disciples of Jesus experienced a mixture of joy and confusion. Consider some of the words that are used to describe their emotional condition after the resurrection.

They were startled. Frightened. They thought they’d seen a ghost (Luke 24:37).

They were troubled. Doubting. There was joy mingled with amazement (Luke 24:41).

They needed to have their minds “opened” to understand (Luke 24:35).

They were afraid yet filled with joy (Matthew 28:8).

They worshipped, but some doubted (Matthew 28:17).

They were trembling, bewildered, and afraid (Mark 16:8).

They did not believe. They stubbornly refused to believe (Mark 16:14).

They gathered fearfully, behind locked doors (John 20:19).

They were overjoyed (John 20:20).

The disciples experienced confusion and disorientation. Sometimes we feel the same, and struggle to admit it.

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Keith Miller:

Our churches are filled with people who outwardly look contented and at peace but inwardly are crying out for someone to love them...just as they are...confused, frustrated, often frightened, guilty, and often unable to communicate even within their own families. But the other people in the church look so happy and contented that one seldom has the courage to admit his own deep needs before such a self-sufficient group as the average church meeting appears to be.

And what about Peter specifically?

He and Jesus met privately once. The meeting is mentioned twice in Scripture, but was obviously highly confidential, because absolutely nothing is known about it, apart from the timing: it took place on Easter Day.

Now, about a week had passed since the disciples had last seen Jesus. And they are in a different location, back in Galilee. The last time they saw Him, it was 68 miles away, in Jerusalem.

Where had He gone?

A long night's fishing, night was a favored time for fishing the Sea of Galilee, produced nothing. Peter and his friends must have felt weary, confused, and perhaps even abandoned.

There may be times in following Jesus that we will feel the same.

But they were not abandoned. He appeared again, and cooked breakfast for them on that beach. These days it is called Tabgha in Galilee. Predictably, a beachside church marks the spot.

That shared breakfast prepared them as followers of the long road ahead. Let's distill a few principles that can help us:

There's nothing like following. The disciples got the catch of their lives when they cast their nets at Jesus' command. We're even told how many fish they caught,

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153. There has been much speculation about the significance of the number 153. But perhaps what is most obvious is that they were learning that a huge catch of fish, success for them in their business arena, would not be enough. Peter had been called to fish for men, and now was receiving a call to shepherd God's sheep. This doesn't in any way diminish the value of so called "secular work." We are all called to significance, whatever our career or vocation, but it does show that living outside of God's purposes will not satisfy. We followers are not called to mere survival.

Loving Jesus is at the heart of following. Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" no less than three times. Loving Jesus is at the heart of following. But loving Him is not always about feelings, and is not about being "in love" with Him.

Regent College professor John Stackhouse expresses this:

"One of the blights upon the hymnological landscape today is the continued presence of what we can fairly call the 'love song to Jesus' genre. It's been around as long as there has been Christian pop music—and even earlier, depending on what you make of sentimental gospel songs in the nineteenth century, eighteenth-century revivalist hymns, and especially a lot of the mystical poetry-cum-lyrics of certain medieval saints. Today our congregation was asked to sing, 'Jesus, I'm in love with you,' a line that shows up, in one permutation or another, in several songs that occur frequently in our worship leaders' rotation.

Well, I didn't sing it. It's wrong, and I try not to sing wrong lyrics.

First, I'm not in love with Jesus. The locution 'in love with' is one I reserve for one person only: my wife. I love my sons, I love my siblings and parents, I love my friends, I love my country, I love my brothers and sisters in Christ, and I love God. But I'm not 'in love' with any of them. And I daresay most of the rest of us use this phrase in exactly the same, highly-restrictive way.

Jesus is not your boyfriend, not your fiancé, and not your eventual husband.

By God's grace, Christians get to enjoy a wide range of relationships with Jesus. We are described in the New Testament variously as Jesus' slaves, Jesus' servants, Jesus' co-workers, Jesus' friends, and even Jesus' brothers and sisters. Since the plural form

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of each of these is used, it is correct then for me to say, 'I am Jesus' slave, servant, co-worker,' etc.

But the New Testament never calls Christians Jesus' fiancées or his brides. Instead, it is the Church collectively, and only the Church as a whole, that relates to Jesus this way—just as individual Israelites did not relate to Yahweh as so many spouses, but only the nation of Israel as a nation was his beloved bride.

So I'm not singing to Jesus that I'm in love with him, because I'm not. I love him, and I aspire to loving him with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. But I do not aspire to being in love with him, and I'm sure he understands."

Be real about the cost. As we've seen, for some Christians around the world right now, being a follower is extremely costly. And it was to be the same for Peter and his friends. Those who shared breakfast that day with Jesus would all die as martyrs, with the exception of John, who did experience horrible torture and exile.

Jesus told Peter that martyrdom was ahead. And Peter knew all too well that a prediction from Jesus was authentic - the "rooster crowing three times" prophecy was proof enough of that. But once he knew what was to come, Peter was invited once again to renew his commitment as a follower.

And he was not alone in facing pain. Consider the "beachside- breakfast" guest list, seven of the disciples attended, five of whom are named.

- **Simon Peter** - tradition has it that Peter literally "stretched out his hands" and was crucified, probably during the Emperor Nero's reign in about AD64.
- **Thomas** - tradition says that he was executed by spears on the command of an Indian king.

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- **Nathanael from Cana in Galilee** - tradition says that he was crucified upside down in Albania.

- **Sons of Zebedee**

James - was beheaded by Herod Agrippa (Acts 12).

John - his persecutors attempted to boil him alive, but he survived. He was exiled to the island of Patmos.

- Two unnamed disciples.

Anyone who suggests that followers of Jesus can avoid suffering only needs to consider that guest list...

Perhaps we live in a world where pain is often wonderfully prevented, and so it's difficult for us to relate to the way those first apprentices of Jesus were called to embrace it willingly for His Name's sake.

C.S. Lewis:

"All the great religions of the world were first preached, and long practiced, in a world without chloroform."

We follow, but the road is often sought and steep. Christina Rossetti reminds us of this in "Up-Hill":

Does the road wind uphill all the way?

Yes, to the very end.

Will the day's journey take the whole long day?

From morn to night, my friend.

Don't get distracted. Having been told that he would face a martyr's death, Peter (perhaps understandably) wants to know what the fate of the "beloved disciple" John, will be. The question earns him yet another rebuke from Jesus, and the command to focus instead on simply being a follower. Let's beware the distraction of being focused on what others do, what their failings are, or when life seems unfair. Sometimes we get sidelined by disappointment with others.

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Flattery O'Connor:

“All your dissatisfaction with the Church seems to me to come from an incomplete understanding of sin...the Church is founded on Peter who denied Christ three times and couldn't walk on water by himself. You are expecting his successors to walk on water. All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful. Priests resist it as well as others. To have the church be what you want it to be would require the miraculous meddling of God in human affairs...”

Six weeks later, another event took place.

By now Jesus had ascended. Peter knew that Jesus was the glorious, eternal One. He wrote about that Jesus as he concluded his second letter.

The disciples were back in Jerusalem which was teeming with pilgrims, gathered for the Pentecost celebrations.

Peter was stronger after their epic experience, when 120 of them had gathered in an upper room. Suddenly they'd heard a strange, unearthly sound, and then fire flickered. Mysteriously, they were speaking in languages they'd never learned. Jesus didn't walk in on them again. He had gone away—gone up—just like he'd said. But somehow, when the wind blew, it felt like it was him in a way that they couldn't explain. More than power, this power had personality. The Spirit of Christ. The Holy Spirit.

There was nothing discreet or contained about this experience they'd had. The noise of it summoned a crowd, some intrigued, others mocking. The air was thick with jeers about them being nothing more than a bunch of drunks, a gang of ignorant fishermen from the Galilee and their friends, boisterous in their celebrations, too long at the wine. That's them. The gawping, giggling crowd was waiting, demanding to know.

What does all this mean?

It was time.

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It was Peter's moment, and the disciples' moment together. Quickly, he looked around at the others, and their eyes, their nods silently confirmed what he already knew was true: they were with him.

Bring it on.

All was ready.

Slowly, deliberately, he rose to his feet.

He'd been called to follow, and follow He did, all the way to mission, all the way to prison, all the way to death. Whatever is ahead of us, may we be found faithful in our following Jesus too.

WATCH DVD WEEK EIGHT

STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to truly "love Jesus?" Does it involve emotion at times?
2. What can distract us as followers?
3. How can we be more "approachable" in relationships with those people in the church?
4. What has your Christian faith cost you?

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE:

At the end of this curriculum, "The Methodist Covenant," a prayer of recommitment that is offered annually, is printed. Spend some time each day pondering the words of the covenant, and praying it thoughtfully and carefully.

MEMORY VERSE

1 Peter 1:8-9

"Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

LIFE APPLICATION

What is your greatest source of distraction as a follower of Jesus?

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PRAYER:

I am no longer my own but yours.

Put me to what you will,

rank me with whom you will;

put me to doing, put me to suffering;

let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,

exalted for you or brought low for you;

let me be full, let me be empty,

let me have all things, let me have nothing;

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

you are mine and I am yours.

So be it.

And the covenant made on earth,

let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.



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