



The Journey

STAGE TWO: *Personal Foundations*

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Stage 2: Personal Foundations

VANTAGEPOINT³ is a ministry committed to fostering depth and empowerment in local churches through Christian leadership formation. It is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that relies, in part, upon the generous contributions of others to fulfill its mission. For further information concerning VANTAGEPOINT³, its process and its materials, contact:

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*Helping you discover who God is, who you are,
and what God wants to do through you.*

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THE JOURNEY

Stage 2: Personal Foundations

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We are grateful for the special permission that has been granted VANTAGEPOINT³ by J. Robert Clinton for the use of his ideas and principles taken from his *Leadership Emergence Theory: A Self-Study Manual For Analyzing the Development of a Christian Leader*, (Altadena, CA: Barnabas Publishing, 1989).

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THE JOURNEY: STAGE TWO

Table of Contents

<i>ii</i>	Preface
1	Session 1: A Lifelong Shaping
19	Session 2: A Narrative Approach
29	Session 3: Our Sovereign Foundations
47	Session 4: Preparation: An Invitation to Growth & Holiness
65	Session 5: Challenges to Growth & Influence
87	Session 6: Writing Our Narratives
97	Session 7: Sharing Our Narratives
103	Appendices
117	Endnotes
123	Bible Reading & Journaling Pages

Preface

At its core, VantagePoint³'s *The Journey* seeks to invite you, along with a group of fellow travelers, into a personal exploration of three primary questions in your life: *Who is God? Who am I? What does God desire to do through me?* These are questions we never grow out of along the way of following Jesus—in reality, we grow *into* them.

Stage 2: Personal Foundations will continue to lead us into an exploration of God's sovereign, shaping work in the world with particular attention upon the stories of our own lives. In essence, we will be using our lives as case studies for discerning and trusting God's gracious work. Emphasis will be placed upon the group cultivating a holy and safe place for developing and sharing our spiritual narratives with one another. (Seven sessions; two to three additional sessions may be needed for the sharing the narratives.)

BIBLE READING & JOURNALING

Throughout *Stage 2: Personal Foundations* we will read each week a chapter of Psalms in preparation for the next session. We will finish up Luke's gospel in *Stage 3: Relational Foundations*. Be sure to utilize the *Bible Reading & Journaling* pages found at the end of the manual as a place for your thoughts and questions and prayers as you meditate upon selected psalms. Our *Bible Reading & Journaling* assignments of the Psalms will begin in Session 1. Our hope is that *beyond reading these psalms* we might find ourselves *praying these psalms* as well.

OUR SUGGESTED STAGE 2 BOOK

In *Stage 2*, David Benner's *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery* (IVP, 2004) will invite reflection, conversation, and prayer around a Christian understanding of the self and its relationship to God. This exploration of Christian identity and maturity will invite and stir each of us to a deeper self-understanding of our uniqueness in God's image. Be open to being challenged, but recognize that good reading does not always imply complete agreement with the author's perspective. Read thoughtfully and with a prayerful spirit.

WE BELIEVE

We have developed *The Journey* believing the following to be true:

- You are ready to be challenged to grow deeper in your faith.
- You possess a high level of motivation as an adult learner.
- You are “the expert” on your own life and the many experiences you already possess.
- Your learning will happen best in a community of other learners.
- You will need guides along the way to help you “connect the dots” of your life.
- You can learn much from the lives of other men and women who have finished their journey faithful to God and others.

In particular, we believe God is already up to something very good in your life and community, something that calls forth from you a response with the whole of your life (Ephesians 2:10).

Blessings on the journey,
The VantagePoint³ Team

In Preparation for Session 1

Part 1 – Bible Reading and Journaling: Psalm 103

Throughout Stage 2 we will be reading and reflecting upon a selected psalm each session. In preparation for Session 1 (1) read the introduction to the Psalms reading on page 124 and (2) read and meditate upon Psalm 103 in particular. Remember to keep journal entries of any insights you are gaining or prayers that are emerging in your heart. Be prepared to share your thoughts and discoveries with your group and/or mentor. You will find space for this journaling at the back of the manual.

Part 2 – Read Session 1: A Lifelong Shaping

Read and complete the questions in Stage 2, Session 1. Be prepared to share your discoveries with the group.

SESSION ONE:

A Lifelong Shaping

Invitation & Prayer

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord.

“Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.”
So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel.
But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands;
so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?...
Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.”

Jeremiah 18:1–6 (NIV)

We must learn to see our lives as far more than a compilation of facts, otherwise we are in danger of regarding a person merely as a biological machine. Even in the seemingly most humdrum life a story is being created that, seen from an eternal perspective, would be breathtaking. You may think your life is boring and routine, but if you are a Christian then the sovereign God is at work, weaving every fact into a story. Don’t get caught up, I beg you, with the world’s ideas to such an extent that you forget...that “your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:2). Any life that is in Christ has a meaning that extends far beyond what is obvious from the happenings down here on earth.¹

Selwyn Hughes
(1928–2006)

God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

Westminster Confession of Faith (V., i)

Overview

This session will explore God's shaping role in our personal formation, including a focus upon three interweaving aspects of our development. We will consider the importance of coming to know both God and ourselves, and we will introduce the narrative process of Stage 2.

- I. What Is God's Role in Our Formation?
- II. How Does This Shaping Occur?
- III. Faithfulness to God Requires a *Double Knowledge*
- IV. The Narrative Process

Focusing Question

- Describe a period in your life when you were keenly aware of God being at work, giving shape to your life.

Instruction & Reflection

An invitation to discover

The gospel of John records that just after washing the disciples' feet, Jesus looked around the Passover table and asked them, "*Do you know what I have done to you?*" (John 13:12). This was a profoundly important question for a group who had followed him for three years, who would within hours face the tragedy of his crucifixion, and who, in short time, would encounter the initial burdens of the early church leadership.

"Do you know what I have done to you?" For this group, who would influence their world in ways unfathomable to them that evening, Jesus offered an explanation of his startling act of service.

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” John 13:12–17

Jesus had come to serve them. Jesus had come to spread a certain sort of life in the world. It was God’s life he had been offering to these men and women who had surrounded him for some three years. And God’s life would be extended that evening in a remarkable way. A slave’s task of washing filthy feet before a meal expressed God’s way in the world.

“Do you know what I have done to you?”

A group of undoubtedly bewildered men heard Jesus’ question. Their confusion would only be intensified hours later in the turn of events precipitated by a fellow disciple’s act of betrayal. Jesus offered an example and a way of life that they would spend their lives responding to and imitating and growing into by the Spirit’s shaping work. *“If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”*

And this “blessed” work continues today. Jesus’ question has resonated through the history of the Church. For as long as God’s Word has been heard, Jesus encounters us in varied forms, seated around some very different tables, and he asks us by the Spirit, *“Do you know what I have done to you?”*

This question presses each of us to pay attention to what God has been up to in our lives. And we must pay attention because we are so forgetful. We need one another’s encouragement and listening ears so that we will remember what God has done and is doing in our unique lives. There is a tremendous need today for people who will consider Jesus’ gracious service in their lives. We must continually ask one another, *“How is the Spirit of Jesus cultivating servant-communities in our world today? How is God’s Spirit prompting such servant-character in our lives?”*

Over the course of the next several weeks we are going to consider deeply these questions within the context of our own personal narratives. Foundational to this stage is the biblical assumption that God has been up to something good, is up to something good, and will be up to something good in our lives and in our communities. God is shaping servant-character in our hearts and servant-communities in our world. May we slow down, pay attention, and consider how God’s Spirit has been offering and prompting this kind of life in our unique personal history of relationships, circumstances, and places.

I. What Is God's Role in Our Formation?

Now the Lord said to Abram,
"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.
I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great,
so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you,
and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."
So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.
Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Genesis 12:1–4

A. God *chooses* us for Kingdom purposes

Choosing, a critical concept in the Old Testament, emphasizes the primacy of God's action (as in, "I have chosen you"). The response of the person chosen, while important, seems much more secondary. God chose Abram, and his promise to Abram was irrevocable (see Genesis 15). The covenant didn't depend on Abram's perfect obedience. Even after he fathered a child with Hagar in his impatience, the promise remained.

God chose Israel, and his promise to Israel remained regardless of its rebellion against God. God chose Moses as a leader, the Levites as priests, Saul and David as kings, and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel to be like his signet ring. In the Old Testament, being chosen by God for some great purpose was a very special occurrence.

And God's choosing is certainly not a concept limited to the Old Testament world. Most noteworthy are Paul's introductory words in his beautiful letter to the Ephesians:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. Ephesians 1:3–4 (NIV)

With this notion of choosing, we get a picture of God's initiating movement in our lives for his Kingdom purposes. May we be attentive and responsive to this gracious movement of God.



Because God loves us and wants us to fulfill his ardent plans for us, he invites us to broaden our horizons. He longs to expose us to riches we never dreamed of, to realms we've only guessed at. There are barriers to be broken down. They fill us with apprehension at our profound inadequacy. But as we face our fears and trust his love, we can welcome the opportunities and dare the risks.

If I fear failure and the possibility of looking foolish, I cut myself off from reward. Paul wouldn't have pressed "toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14 KJV) if he'd been afraid of looking foolish. But if God is calling me into his service, I will be acting under his authority. My obedience to him makes him responsible for my destiny.²

Luci Shaw

B. God *destines* us for Kingdom purposes

God doesn't end the process by simply choosing us. God also destines us for his Kingdom purposes. The Scriptures tell us that in choosing us, God already had in mind what sort of persons we would become. Paul tells the believers in Ephesus:

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. Ephesians 1:11–12

Paul then further proceeds to paint a picture of what God has done and is doing with his people. God destines us to a certain kind of life in this world “to the praise of his glory.” He writes:

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. Ephesians 2:10

Sometimes we have a hard time truly believing this. We wonder, “*Could God really have something specific in mind for us?*” After all, we are influenced by the world to spend our lives trying to “*be all that we can be,*” attempting to create a niche in the world for ourselves, producing an image or a career or an achievement of our own that will somehow dish out lasting significance. We are offered the image of the “self-made” woman or man as the primary measure of significance and success. As we buy into this, we mistakenly assume that “getting noticed” is the same thing as “living a significant life.” Moreover, we too easily presume we are on our own to work out a life of our own choosing and making.

This is quite a distance from the portrait of significance that God paints. We are thankfully not alone. We have been “created in Christ Jesus for good works.” God doesn't expect us to “invent” ourselves. Instead, the Spirit's desire and intent is that we would discover what God is up to in our lives and community. God destines us to a certain way of life, a way in which we participate in what God is already up to.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:20–21

C. God *shapes* every area of our life for Kingdom purposes

In our development and destiny we are not self-shaping, self-forming, self-made individuals. Rather we are God-responsive, Spirit-formed persons. Instead of striving and posturing in some self-improvement-project



"A LITTLE CHRIST"

Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ. If we do, we shall then be sharing a life which was begotten, not made, which always has existed and always will exist. Christ is the Son of God. If we share in this kind of life we also shall be sons of God. We shall love the Father as He does and the Holy Ghost will arise in us. He came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has—by what I call 'good infection.' Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.³

C.S. Lewis
(1898–1963)

way, we must learn to pay attention and respond to what God is already forming in, with, and through us. For the Spirit is seeking to form us into "little Christs," whose purposes in life are to discover the work, relationships, and contexts that God has prepared and destined for us. And this is not a short-term process. God's shaping process takes a lifetime. Consider again the words of Paul:

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6

And later on in the same letter to the believers in Philippi, Paul exhorts them:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work to his good pleasure. Philippians 2:12b–13

It is an already and an ongoing work that God is up to in shaping our lives. We must learn to see and trust God with this work over the long haul. This is our responsibility in God's work, a cooperative work of response, trust and courage.

Reflect & Respond

All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.

Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in us and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.

God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son.

Romans 8:22–29 (*The Message*)

- What do these words of the Apostle Paul tell us about God's formation of our lives?

- Describe a time in your life of faith when you felt like you were waiting. How do you view this time, in retrospect? What did you learn about yourself from this experience? What did you learn about God?

II. How Does This Shaping Occur?

It was a few decades ago when Dr. J. Robert Clinton was first grabbed by Hebrews 13:7: "Remember your leaders, those who spoke the Word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." In light of the many contemporary leadership examples of failure around him, these words deeply concerned him. They drew him into a comprehensive study of the life stories of thousands of men and women who influenced a group of people toward God's purposes for that group. Clinton's studies drew on biblical examples, historical figures, and contemporary lives. In his research he *remembered* their unique stories and *considered the outcome of their way of life*. Why did some finish well and others not so well? What was God's role in their development? What was their responsibility in their flourishing? What can we learn from their many life stories that we can apply to our lives? These questions and more led Clinton to many discoveries of how God creatively shapes people of integrity and influence for his kingdom and glory.⁴

Foundational to these discoveries is that there are three elements that compose Christian leadership development: (1) God's processing or shaping activity in a person's life, (2) over time, and (3) a person's response to God's shaping action. Or put another way:

$$\text{Christian leadership development} = f(\text{P, T, R})$$

f = a function of

P = God's **processing** events (or shaping events) in the person's life

T = God's development of the person over **time**

R = the person's **response** to God's shaping action

The implications of Clinton's observations resonate far beyond what is typically coined "leadership development." Let's briefly explore these three components in order to see how they can guide our reflections throughout Stage 2: *Personal Foundations*.

A. God's *processing* events in a person's life (P)

When we talk about the *processing* or *shaping* that God does in our lives, we are primarily referring to God's sovereign role in our development. There are critical incidents in our lives through which God shapes us. These incidents can be any key relationship or circumstance or event that has had significant influence in our shaping. Perhaps it was a gift given, a promise broken, a skill imparted, the loving attention of an adult, a trip to another part of the world, and on and on. These events can be either positive or negative. God is sovereign, creative, and utterly good. He is able to form and reform our lives even out of the most unlikely and painful circumstances and events we experience. God wants to lovingly work both *in* and *through* us for good (Romans 8:28–29). And it is "the stuff" of our lives through which he crafts our person and destiny. Paying attention to some of this stuff in our lives opens us to a deeper discovery of God's good workmanship in and through us. Artist Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890) described it this way: "Christ...is more of an artist than the artists; he works in the living spirit and the living flesh; he makes men instead of statues."⁵

B. God's development over *time* (T)

We can learn so much from the narratives of others who sought to faithfully serve the Lord over the long haul. God's wise and timely faithfulness is far clearer in retrospect. One thing that jumps off the pages of people's lives is that God's shaping is a *lifelong process*. In a world exploding with technological gadgets, from microwaves to snow blowers, iPods to air conditioners, that are designed to make life easier and more efficient, we are inclined to see our growth and maturity through a similar lens. But there is no character-



It seems that most believers have difficulty in realizing and facing the inexorable fact that God does not hurry in his development of the Christian life. He is working from and for eternity! So many feel they are not making progress unless they are swiftly and constantly forging ahead. Now it is true that the new convert often begins and continues for some time at a fast rate. But this will not continue if there is to be healthy growth and ultimate maturity. God Himself will modify the pace. This is important to see, since in most instances when seeming declension begins to set in, it is not, as so many think, a matter of backsliding.⁷

Miles J. Stanford
(1914–1999)

shaping equivalent to laser eye surgery. Any sort of development as persons or leaders is a process over time. To fail to take this into account limits ourselves to a very shallow understanding of who we are and who we might become as people. We too often become very impatient, ignoring or minimizing the critical element of time in God's shaping work and in our response to God's shaping. As Ernest Hemmingway noted, "There are some things which cannot be learned quickly, and time...must be paid heavily for their acquiring."⁶

C. A person's *response* to God's shaping (R)

We are not simply passive recipients of God's shaping in our lives. We have a part to play. The apostle Paul tells the believers in Philippi, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12b–13). God does not impose his formation upon us. Our formation is a deeply *shared* process in which we play a responsive role. Eugene Peterson underscores the priority of God's shaping work in this process, but he also alerts us to the importance of our response. He suggests that our response to God's shaping can either "assist or impair" our development. He writes:

Growth, both biological and spiritual (and the spiritual encompasses the biological) is a mystery, a huge mystery, intricate and complex—a work of the Holy Spirit. Most of what takes place we know very little about. Most of what goes on we can do very little about. Our part in spiritual formation is necessarily a very modest affair. We must never assume that we can manage or control it. If we try we will almost certainly be a party to deformation rather than formation.

But the alternative must not be neglect. It is necessary that we give careful attention to what we can appropriately do that will assist and not impair the formation of a mature life of Christ in ourselves and our friends. The little we can do, often makes an enormous difference.⁸

Have we responded in faith or have we resisted God's shaping action over time? Reflecting upon our narratives can uncover patterns of response to God's shaping action. Such discoveries from our past will prayerfully prepare us for the growth challenges we will face down the road—*Will we respond in faith or in resistance?*



Thus the more we are shaped by the Word of God, the less we are merely psychological beings—closed to the transcendent and guided by flat subjectivity. In the latter state we are not sufficiently aware of the historical and spiritual dealings of God with his people, nor can we explore deeply our own emotional life. Our human relations tend to inflate or inspire our identity, indeed to destroy or transform it. Seeing ourselves from our own point of view becomes a prison. In contrast, seeing ourselves from a biblical perspective enlarges our horizons to the solemn grandeur of eternity. Only when we glimpse the eternal can we begin to gain the “double knowledge” spoken of by the early church fathers: entering into a true knowledge of ourselves along with a growing knowledge of God.¹⁰

James M. Houston

III. Faithfulness to God Requires a *Double Knowledge*

John Calvin began his *Institutes* some 400 years ago with the assertion that the Christian life fundamentally consists of these two things—knowledge of God and knowledge of self. Five hundred years prior to him, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, “Without knowledge of self, we have no knowledge of God.” Both of these men expressed a dynamic that some refer to as a *double knowledge* in the life of faithfulness to God. That is, true knowledge of God and true knowledge of ourselves are *inextricably linked together* in our journeys. We get in profound trouble when we separate the one from the other.

There are many people stuck or floundering in their Christian lives today because they have, in one form or another, detached self-knowledge from knowledge of God. Either they have falsely equated Christian maturity with a sort of self-actualizing journey; or on the other extreme, they have reduced their “growing up into Christ” into a “heady” exercise that equates biblical I.Q. with genuine sanctification.

We can learn much from those who have walked with the Lord before us. *And one of the realities that emerges from their testimony is that a heart to know God more intimately requires an openness to discover oneself more truthfully.* It is most often at their greatest awareness of personal need that they discovered God’s loving and liberating presence. Such understanding is obviously a work of God’s grace. Today, while we consider this sampling of thoughts on double knowledge from some wise people, ask the question: *How is knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves being integrated in the lives of your church community?*

Know yourself and you will have a wholesome fear of God.

Know God and you will also love God. You must avoid both types of ignorance, because without fear and love, salvation is not possible. Without knowledge of self, we have no knowledge of God.¹¹

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves. But as these two are connected by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes, and which gives birth to the other.... Man never attains to a self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God.... The knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are bound together by a mutual tie.¹²

John Calvin (1509–1564)

As I see it, we shall never succeed in knowing ourselves unless we seek to know God:
let us think of His greatness and then come back to our own baseness;
by looking at His purity we shall see our foulness;
by meditating upon His humility, we shall see how far we are from being humble.¹³

Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)

To know God and yet know nothing of our own wretched state breeds pride;
to realize our misery and know nothing of God is mere despair; but if we come to the knowledge of Jesus Christ
we find our true equilibrium, for there we find both human misery and God.¹⁴

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662)

The man who has come to know himself is never fooled into reaching what is beyond him.
He keeps his feet henceforth on the blessed path of humility.¹⁵

John Climacus (c. 570–c. 649)

For our soul is so deeply grounded in God and so endlessly treasured that we cannot come to knowledge of it,
until we first have knowledge of God, who is the Creator to whom it is united.... And all of this notwithstanding,
we can never come to the full knowledge of God until we first clearly know our own soul.¹⁶

Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–c. 1416)

Help me know Thee, O God, help me know myself, that is all!¹⁷

Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

Reflect & Respond

- What stands out to you from these Christian voices of wisdom?

- In your experience, how has discovering God led to a deeper discovery of yourself? And how has self-discovery led to a growing knowledge of God in your life?

IV. The Narrative Process

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well....

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139:14, 24 (ESV)

A. From time-line to narrative

The central task of Stage 2: *Personal Foundations* will be writing and then sharing one's life story with the group. Most of the exercises throughout the first six sessions are designed with this end in mind. The central tool that will facilitate writing and the sharing of one's narrative will be a personal timeline. We will each be developing a timeline that serves to outline much of our development over the course of our lives. This will be an ongoing project from Sessions 2 to 6. We will move from brainstorming critical incidents in our lives to plotting them on a timeline to considering their significance through a number of perspectives. We will be reflecting upon the elements of God's processing, time, and our response throughout the whole of our lives. These perspectives are ways we will prayerfully seek to get a clearer and more honest vision of God shaping us as persons. It is important to keep this big picture in mind when we get bogged down or frustrated with some of the process. The goal of this process is not to make a perfect timeline or to compose a riveting narrative or to "figure ourselves out," but rather to seriously, honestly, and courageously seek God's gracious and active presence in the story of our lives.

B. A note on listening to each other

One wonders if there is anything more honoring of our neighbors in our contemporary world than listening to them. In his wonderful little book entitled *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasized the practice of listening as critical to a flourishing Christian community. He wrote:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as the love of God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them.... Many are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it amongst Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening, but he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon no longer be listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God, too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point, and be never really speaking to others, albeit he not be conscious of it.¹⁸

Bonhoeffer's words offer much to ponder and practice. As we go through this narrative process with our group, let's be mindful and attentive to the lives of other participants. When another person shares honestly from her heart or her life experience, we are treading on sacred ground. Let us be quick to listen and slow to speak in our journeys with one another.

C. Prayerfulness together

Assumption: *God is up to something good in this world, in our communities, and in our lives.* In essence we will be prayerfully looking at our lives over the next few weeks as a case study for God's gracious activity in the world. Some hard questions will be asked in the coming weeks, questions that may not have obvious answers. We may find that the pat answers we used to give to the questions being asked will not satisfy anymore. We want something more—a deeper honesty and faith. Don't be afraid of this. Instead, let's allow our reflection, conversation, and prayer together to probe deeply. We walk together. Ask God for eyes and hearts to see things not noticed before. Ask God to help you pay attention. As Thomas Kelly prays, *"Open thou my life. Guide my thoughts where I dare not let them go. But Thou daarest. Thy will be done."*¹⁹ Be patient with the process, and the Spirit will use it for God's glory and our good.

Prayer

*God, giver of life
you alone know
how our life can truly succeed....
Show us how to let go
of whatever hinders us
from meeting you,
from letting ourselves be touched by your Word.
Help us to welcome and accept
whatever in us yearns to come alive
in the image and likeness
you have dreamed for us today
and every day for ever and ever.²⁰*

Peter van Breeman

In Preparation for Session 2

Part 1 – Bible Reading and Journaling: Psalm 46

Read and meditate upon Psalm 46. Remember to keep journal entries of any insights you are gaining or prayers that are emerging in your heart. Be prepared to share your thoughts and discoveries with your group and/or mentor. You will find space for this journaling at the back of the manual.

Part 2 – The Gift of Being Yourself

Read the Preface and Chapter 1 of David Benner's *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery* in preparation for the next session.

Consider the following questions in light of your reading: *How is your understanding of the interdependence of knowing God and knowing self further developed through these chapters? What do you understand transformational knowing to be?*

Part 3 – Take a Break from the Stage Manual

There is no assigned homework for the manuals in preparation for Session 2: *A Narrative Approach*. Preparation should focus upon Bible Reading and *The Gift of Being Yourself*.