



Walking with Others

Walking with Others **Stage 2: A Lifelong Perspective**

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

WALKING WITH OTHERS

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Developed by the VANTAGEPOINT³ Team

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WALKING WITH OTHERS: STAGE TWO

Table of Contents

<i>ii</i>	Preface
1	Session 1: A Vision of Christian Maturity
25	Session 2: Life Story
47	Session 3: <i>Spiritual Friendship Triad</i>
53	Session 4: Life Rhythms
75	Session 5: Life Transitions
95	Session 6: <i>Spiritual Friendship Triad</i>
101	Session 7: Retreat
115	Appendices
125	Endnotes
131	Notes

Preface

VantagePoint3's *Walking with Others* invites you along with a group of fellow travelers to learn to guide other adults toward a deeper maturity in Christ. Building on your discoveries from *The Journey* and *A Way of Life* you will be challenged to take a next step in your development—*helping others grow up in every way into Christ* (Ephesians 4:15).

Stage 2: A Lifelong Perspective will encourage and equip participants to pay attention and discern the already present and shaping work of God's Spirit in others' lives. Developing others in Jesus' name requires us to adopt a lifelong and holistic perspective on each person's maturity into Christ, learning to pay attention to developmental cues along the way.

SUPPLEMENTAL STAGE 2 BOOK

By walking with the Israelites and Moses through their wilderness wanderings, Jeff Manion's *The Land Between: Finding God in Difficult Transitions* (Zondervan, 2012) invites us into an exploration of the soul shaping potential of painful and confusing transitions in our lives. We will have two opportunities to discuss the book: Session 5 (*Complaint, Meltdown, Provision*; pages 1–120) and Session 7 (*Discipline, Growth*; pages 123–199).

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP TRIADS

We will continue to foster attention to our apprenticeship with Jesus through the same spiritual friendship triads in Sessions 3 and 6.

BIBLE READING: *The Psalms of Ascent*

We will continue reading, meditating upon, and praying through one psalm a week from the psalms of ascent (Psalm 120–134), along with the accompanying chapter from Peterson's *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Allow these psalms to lead you to prayer, not just to think or talk about prayer.

PEER FACILITATION

Continue to share in the facilitation of the *Walking with Others* process. We suggest that the group lead 50–75 percent of the sessions (individual or co-lead). Your facilitator can help organize this.

A VANTAGEPOINT3 PATHWAY

Beginning with *The Journey*, VantagePoint3 offers a pathway for adult development to deepen and ignite people in your church. The processes have been designed to help the adults in your community mature toward greater kingdom life and influence.



VantagePoint3 hopes to see:

- Ordinary people deepened and ignited toward kingdom life and influence.
- Walking alongside others becoming a way of life and ministry for Christian leaders.
- Churches becoming vibrant places of learning—that is, communities where people are consistently mentored into a life of apprenticeship with Jesus.

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



A mark of Christian maturity is becoming more convinced and intentional at investing in the growth and maturity of those around us. It has become one of the more significant needs within our culture and with the church today.

Randy Reese
VantagePoint3, Founder/President

In Preparation for Session One

Part 1 – Psalm 125 & A Long Obedience in the Same Direction

For next week, meditate and pray with Psalm 125. Read and reflect upon Eugene Peterson's meditations on Psalm 125 in Chapter 7: *Security in A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Be prepared to share your thoughts and discoveries with your group.

Part 2 – Read and Prepare for Session 1: A Vision of Christian Maturity

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

SESSION ONE:

A Vision of Christian Maturity

Invitation & Prayer

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.
He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.
Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.
You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.
Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine,
neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.
Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,
because apart from me you can do nothing.

Jesus (John 15:1-5)

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above,
where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.
Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,
for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.
When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Colossians 3:1-4

Now mature, in my book does not mean the "churchly,"
those who have mastered the vocabulary and the litany of church life,
who come alive only when the church doors open.
Rather, I have in mind those who walk through all the corridors of the larger life
—the marketplace, the home and community, the playing fields—
and do it in such a way that, sooner or later,
it is concluded that Jesus' fingerprints are all over them.¹

Gordon MacDonald

Overview

This session will help us think more clearly about Christian maturity so that we may be able to walk more thoughtfully and prayerfully with others.

- I. An Invitation To Invest
- II. The Goal of Christian Maturity—*Friendship with God*
- III. Four Hallmarks of a Mature Christian Life
- IV. Transformation from the Inside Out

Focusing Question

- What are the defining characteristics of a mature Christian?

Instruction & Reflection

I. An Invitation To Invest

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”
As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother,
casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen.

And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”
Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers,
James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets,
and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Matthew 4:17–22

It is several decades later. After a family reunion Peter and Andrew decide to walk to one of their favorite spots on the beach of Galilee. As brothers are prone to do they begin daring each other to see who can skip a

stone farther. Andrew wins. Peter comes up with a few excuses for the shape of his stones, and tries to hide his surfacing competitive edge with a few rounds of teasing Andrew. As the giggles subside they stare out at the sea in silence, with waves and a slight breeze coming toward them from the East.

After a while Andrew breaks the silence. “Peter, do you remember the first time Jesus came near? Do you remember when Jesus first asked us to follow? I was scared to death back then ... and many times since then. And yet, it has been a journey beyond our wildest imaginations.”

Peter’s response is one of few words. With reverent gratitude, tears begin to fill his sunken eyes and eventually make their way through the hairs of his beard. “He has made me someone I never dreamed I would become. I wouldn’t have chosen me. One thing is sure, Andrew, I know he is still near and invites me to still follow, to still serve, to still love.”

The kingdom of heaven came near that day and invited Andrew, Simon Peter, and two other brothers, James and John to follow. One can’t help but imagine what they thought of and talked about as they reflected back on their own narratives of God’s faithfulness. No doubt, there were many stories of how their lives had been changed and used by the Spirit of the Lord. And no doubt, many plans and hopes were shared of what they anticipated was yet to come.

When the kingdom of heaven comes near it invites a response—a response which brings with it an opportunity to enter a journey of a lifetime. If one has eyes to see, the journey is nothing short of being made up of award-winning material for the next beyond-your-wildest-imaginations story.

Randy Reese recalls his own faith journey:

Thirty six years ago I was a teenager looking for love in all the wrong places. With my family falling apart, and living with a childhood fear of an impending divorce of my parents, the thought of a lasting love and a God who really cared seemed beyond reach.

While working for my step-father’s electrical company after school I got to know Don, one of the electricians at Dad’s shop. He was someone near hero status in my life at the time. His life reflected something I longed to have, yet I couldn’t put my finger on what it was. The other guys at work encouraged me to be careful around Don because he was a bit of a religious guy, whose life had dramatically changed a few years earlier from a religious “encounter” of some kind. Could it be that that was the difference I was recognizing?

In the winter of 1979 I had the opportunity to visit with Don and his wife Leila, who was due to have their second child any day. *That day* came a few days later while Don was at work. Leila called Don to come home to

get her to go to the hospital—it was time. Unfortunately, Don never made it home *that day*. On his way to get Leila he was tragically killed in a car crash.

That day became for me the point in time when the “kingdom of heaven came near.” It was for me the point in time when Jesus set before me an invitation to follow him, and I chose to follow.

When I take the time to think back on the journey over the years since that time, it is usually accompanied with a reverent silence, tears which eventually make their way through the hairs of my moustache, and almost a sense of joyful disbelief that the story turned out this way.

One of the first verses in the Bible I read was 2 Corinthians 5:17: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” Since the decision to follow, the journey for me has been a series of old things passing away ... and a series of things becoming new. This is not to say for a moment the journey has been easy, or without pain and disappointment. Yet even in the dark nights I am learning what it means to trust the One who still calls me to follow, still calls me to serve, still calls me to love.

And on this journey, I am living the life I’ve always wanted.

Imagine for a moment God’s life is family life. He is introducing us into the way of his family.
We come along like orphans, without siblings or parents, without direction, without guidance,
but with a desperate need to be “familied.” We are invited to be members of his family.
The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is “re-parenting” us by the Spirit. Jesus is “re-brothering” us by the Spirit.
We are learning to be sons and daughters of God.²

A Way of Life, Stage 1: Friendship with God

No matter how poorly or how well our parents raised us, *when the kingdom of heaven comes near*—when we say “yes” to Jesus—we are saying yes to our deep need to be “re-parented” by God. We, on our own, cannot figure out or guess, let alone live this good life—the way God designed us to live. God’s life and way brings with it a radically new set of attitudes, values, and priorities. It may take years on the journey with Jesus to realize the breadth and depth of the Spirit’s shaping this new life in our lives. Embracing a life *rooted and grounded in God’s love* takes much grace and truth and time (Ephesians 3:17). Thankfully we find ourselves in good company. The church has always been a fellowship of slow learners.

Christian maturity is not a pipe dream. There is a tangible reality when we encounter it. There are people who do learn and mature and take on a “family resemblance” to God’s loving family; people who forgive and persevere and exercise courage and grace.

However, many Christians have no clear direction, or even more tragically, no personal expectation of maturing in Christ beyond first steps in the faith. In their minds the gospel goes only as far as fire insurance to get them into heaven when they die; it speaks only vaguely of kingdom living in the here and now. For a variety of reasons, many churches and long standing Christians find themselves uncomfortable with the question of maturity and leave it ambiguously defined or even unanswered. For them there is an unreality to this whole conversation of the gospel’s power to change lives—it is simply not their first-hand experience. It does seem that we all face the temptation at one point or another on our journey, to settle for a faith of borrowed convictions and second-hand experiences.

If we are to become good developers of others, if we are to become churches that faithfully mentor people into a life of apprenticeship with Jesus, then we are going to need to think more clearly about a life of growing toward Christian maturity. What was Jesus envisioning when he said he came that we might “have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10)? What kind of life might the Apostle Paul have been conceiving of when he said that all his efforts were “so that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28)? What do mature Christians look like?

By asking these questions, we are not suggesting we can pull back the veil and see everything God is doing or desires to do in a person’s life; that would be hubris and a denial of the mystery of God’s salvation in our lives and in the world. Admittedly, there is so much we do not understand. What we are saying, though, is that the Scriptures, church history, and perhaps even our experience to a degree, have much to say about God’s life-shaping purposes and work in an individual’s life. Yet we can humbly provide presence, perspective, and guidance to people’s faith journeys.

Throughout *Stage 2: A Lifelong Perspective* we will explore the dynamics of *life story*, *life rhythms*, and *life transitions* in order to pay attention and discern the presence and purposes of the Spirit in people’s lives. Walking with others in Jesus’ name requires us to adopt a lifelong and holistic perspective on each person’s maturity into Christ, learning to pay attention to developmental cues along the way.

We would like to begin in this first session by providing a conversation about *Christian maturity*. Thinking more clearly about the purpose or goal of Christian maturity will help set a horizon for the sort of life the Spirit is inviting people to enter into and move toward. A better understanding of the mature Christian life will help sharpen our attention and discernment of what God is up to in a person’s life.

In his excellent book *Called To Be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity* (InterVarsity Press, 2014), Gordon Smith argues that if we are to be faithful as the church today, then we are going to need a better understanding of what “growing up into Christ in every way” is about. Smith writes,

While there are no doubt diverse descriptions of spiritual maturity, I am working with the understanding that, first and foremost, spiritual maturity is defined as union with Christ and, in and through him, it is a dynamic participation in the life of the triune God. Second, spiritual maturity has four particular expressions, each distinct but interdependent on the others:

- Wisdom: a mature Christian has a heart and mind informed by the truth, largely through the witness of the Scriptures.
- Good work: a mature Christian has clarity about his or her calling—with the courage and humility and capacity to fulfill this vocation.
- Ability to love others: a mature Christian knows how to love others in Christ as Christ has loved us.
- Joy: a mature Christian lives with a deep and resilient joy, even in the midst of a fragmented world.³

While we may not agree with every last detail in Smith’s book, his two-part description will provide a framework for the rest of our reflection and conversation: (i) the goal of Christian maturity and (ii) four hallmarks to a mature Christian life. We will conclude this session with additional reflection upon the inside-out nature of our transformation in Christ. Through all of this may we become more attuned to Jesus’ voice speaking into men and women’s lives today with the good news—*the kingdom of God has come near to you*.

Reflect & Respond:

- What stands out to you from this first section?

II. The Goal of Christian Maturity—*Friendship with God*

In the eighth century, Christian theologians began describing the relationship among the persons of the Trinity as a dynamic communion, a dance of three persons. God's triune and dynamic presence creates space within that presence, a space into which we can be drawn. The Son, who is both God and human, reaches out to us, taking hold of our hand and welcoming us into this dance, this perfect love of God.⁴

Debra Rienstra

Throughout *The Journey* and *A Way of Life* we have been underscoring a deeply relational view of Christian maturity. From all eternity the triune God has been in a relationship of mutual self-giving love—Father, Son, and Spirit—each person for and with the other, composing a dance of sorts. And because of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, we have, astoundingly, been called to enter this dance, to share in God's life (John 17:20–26). Jesus prayed for his followers, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, *may they also be in us*, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21; *italics added*). God relentlessly draws near to us in a way that draws us into his fellowship. Friendship or communion with God is the goal of Christian maturity.

The Apostle Paul expresses this reality when he points out that we have been made for adoption into God's triune family.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Galatians 4:4–6)

God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. (Ephesians 1:5, *NLT*)

As we internalize our adoption into God's family, our entire lives take on more of a relational orientation. Our motivations and actions, our past, present, and future, our failings and successes, everything becomes more centered around this God-with-us reality. Because of God's faithfulness to us and with us, we learn to trust and love God and others.

At every level, the Christian gospel begins with God's initiating love: creation, incarnation, redemption, and consummation. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God takes the first step over and again inviting us into his dance, his loving life. Jesus reaches out to us by his Spirit, speaking and sharing his stunning life with us. He moves toward us freely and graciously and with full knowledge of our particular frailties, resistances, indifferences, vices, and virtues. And he makes space for us to share in, and participate with, this Trinitarian community of perfect love.

Jesus describes our relational responsibility when he implores his disciples to "Abide in me as I abide in you" (John 15:4). *The Message* translates his invitation—"Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you." As we said earlier in the process, Christian maturity is not a technique or program or formula, but it is a life of learning to keep company with Jesus. Gordon Smith writes,

Without an emphasis on union with Christ, spiritual formation will be a frustrated effort to become like Christ. It will eventually become nothing more than self-development. The grace we seek is not so much to be like Christ as to live in dynamic union with Christ, abiding in him as he abides in us (John 15:4).⁵

Might some of us be trying to live the Christian life without actually involving ourselves with God? It is foolishness and frustration to strive after an ideal life of Christlikeness without opening ourselves to God's gracious friendship. God intends to transform our lives—yes—but more fundamentally, God desires to share his very life with us. Our transformation then becomes a by-product of immersing ourselves in this relationship with Jesus. The Spirit of Jesus confides deep in our hearts the possibility of the Christian life, a fully human life, found only in *dynamic union with Christ*.

Darrell Johnson rightly points out that we must also see the church in its essential tasks through this Trinitarian lens. He writes,

You can see that the three great disciplines of discipleship—worship, community, mission—cannot be separated, because they are grounded in the Trinity. We are Co-lovers with God of God—worship. Co-lovers with God of one another—community. Co-lovers with God of the world—mission.⁶

Learning to love God, love one another, and love the world flows out of our dynamic participation within the life of the triune God. Friendship with God (or "co-lovers with God") in worship, community, and mission is where discipleship begins, matures, and comes to completion.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:4–5)



It is being included in the eternal life of God that heals all wounds and allows us to stop demanding satisfaction. What really matters, of a personal nature, once it is clear that *you are included*? You have been chosen. God chooses you. This is the message of the kingdom.⁸

Dallas Willard

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away." (Revelation 21:3–4)

Life with God describes both our ongoing journey (John 15:4–5) and our ultimate destination (Revelation 21:3–4). We discover this life not by striving, but by embracing Jesus' astonishing hospitality—"dwell with me, abide in me, make your home in me." This is the grace we seek. As C. S. Lewis concludes, "The whole purpose for which we live is to be thus taken into the life of God."⁷

Reflect & Respond

- "It is foolishness and frustration to strive after an ideal life of Christlikeness without opening ourselves to God's friendship."
 - How have you experienced or witnessed this to be true?

- Are there any stages of life in which this Christian life as self-development is a more prevalent temptation?

III. Four Hallmarks of a Mature Christian Life

Our friendship with God empowers a lifelong transformation toward maturity. We are created and redeemed to be with God, to share in his life, and thereby over time to take on a family resemblance—to become like Christ. Gordon Smith points out four interrelated expressions of Christian maturity: a life of wisdom, of calling, of loving others, and of deep joy.⁹ As we briefly walk through these dimensions think of men and women who embody this vision of maturity. Reflect on their lives. These are our leaders in the sense the writer of Hebrews must have had in mind when he wrote, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:7–8). Who comes to mind as you read through these four dimensions?

A. Wisdom

A mature person is someone who is able to connect truth with everyday life; they are wise. Truth is understanding things the way God understands them. Thus, we seek to know things as God knows them, that is, we are seeking “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). Obviously, we will never know things as fully as God knows them, so we must be modest in our claims of knowing the truth. But by God’s grace in creation and redemption, truth is available to us. Beyond mere Bible knowledge, a mature person is able to integrate truth into the whole of their lives—work, relationships, money, personal history, inner life, hopes and aspirations, disappointment and suffering. J. I. Packer points out that,

In Scripture, wisdom is a moral as well as an intellectual quality, more than mere intelligence or knowledge, just as it is more than cleverness or cunning. For us to be truly wise, in the Bible sense, our intelligence and cleverness must be harnessed to a right end. Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it. Wisdom is, in fact, the practical side of moral goodness.¹⁰

We mature in our capacity to see and choose well through our ongoing apprenticeship with Jesus. In particular, our minds must be renewed along the way. Paul implores the church in Rome,

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)

Consistently immersing ourselves in the Scriptures—studying, meditating upon, praying with—over the long haul helps us become discerning people, able to see and trust God’s faithful character and purposes.



These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock.

But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don't work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards.

Jesus
Matthew 7:24–27 (*The Message*)

James underscores the importance of praying for wisdom. “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you” (James 1:5). Proverbs connects wisdom with the fear of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. (Proverbs 9:10)

Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body. (Proverbs 3:7-8)

Mature disciples are grounded with an attitude of deep reverence and respect for God. The book of Proverbs also connects our maturity with the company we keep.

Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools suffers harm. (Proverbs 13:20)

So much of living wisely is caught more than taught. We learn wisdom by keeping company with others who are wise. David Ford elaborates,

One lesson is that wisdom is best learned face to face by apprenticeship to those who have themselves learned it the same way. Perhaps the ultimate privilege is to have wise parents, teachers, and friends—a wise community of the heart. Because wisdom is so much a matter of making the deep connections in the midst of the complexities of life, there is no substitute for seeing how someone does it. But, more than just seeing, it is a matter of being seen. The wise see us in our potential. They listen with the “inner ear.” They open us, inspire us, energize us, allow us to blossom, and give us a sense that there is always more.¹¹

Growth in wisdom is foundational to every other dimension of our maturing in Christ: sense of calling, loving others, and deep joy. So as we seek to intentionally walk with others, we must embody for them Paul's invitation—“Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (Ephesians 5:15–17).

B. Called to Good Work

A mature Christian has clarity and courage about his or her calling. Our culture mentors us to take charge of our lives, to be self-starters, to be self-sufficient people. In contrast, biblical calling refers to a way of living one's whole life as a *response to God* rather than an initiation of the self. Throughout *The Journey* and

A Way of Life we have underscored three different dimensions of being called: (1) God calls us to himself in love, to follow Jesus, to love God and neighbor (primary calling), (2) God invites us to live and serve out of who we are, a vocation or way of life unique to who we have been created and are being redeemed to be (specific calling), and (3) God invites us to be responsible with the present demands and tasks of our lives (immediate calling).¹²

All Christians—not just missionaries and pastors and folks in paid ministry—must patiently grow to see their lives with this sort of lens and possibility. Along the process, we have sought to encourage you to become more aware and responsive to how God desires to express his life through your particular set of gifts, capacities, experiences, and circumstances. Becoming aware of our calling obviously requires much time, reflection, prayer, and friendship. And not everyone's sense of specific calling will be experienced or expressed in the same way. In this regard, Debra Rienstra writes,

Some people's passions are obvious, and God leads them through those passions into a single path of service. Mother Teresa, for example, or the lifelong kindergarten teacher, or the musician who offers his skillful playing every day for God's glory and other people's joy. Others, like me, have less obvious passions: what gives them energy develops over time or remains partially hidden or blooms suddenly in response to new situations. As a result such people offer an assortment of odds and ends as service: a regular job done with integrity, some volunteer work, a career decision that seeks service over money and prestige, kindness to neighbors, maybe a late-life passion for going on mission trips or teaching teenagers appliance repair. Their lives may not have the clean simplicity of vocation, but at the center of everything they do is a deep love for God—and that is everyone's true vocation.

I've learned that God treasures the lives made of a single piece of cloth, cut in the shape of service. But God also values the lives that look more like a bag of fabric scraps, some big pieces, some tiny pieces, different colors and weaves. At each stage in my life, with each piece of it, I try to ask God, "How can I offer this to you?" I have to trust that if I offer all the odds and ends of my life, God will stitch together the pieces in some lovely pattern and receive it as my gift.¹³

As you have discovered in your VantagePoint3 groups, we are each "stitched together" differently, in terms of capacities and perspective and passions, and our journeys in discovering God's calling will reflect these differences.

A mature Christian reflects a greater understanding and confidence in what he or she is to be about for God's kingdom purposes. As they face different life stages and seasons they ask God, *How can I offer this life of mine to you?*

Spiritually mature men and women, rooted in a dynamic friendship with God, come to reject any sort of spectator mindset on their life. They have encountered the Spirit's call to engage in the world, to be participants with him, to step out of the stands and get onto the playing field. "This much is certain," writes John Stott, "if we are Christians we must spend our lives in the service of God and man. The only difference between us lies in the nature of the service we are called to render."¹⁴ Mature Christians have come to trust God's wisdom in sending each of us into our spheres of influence—down the street, across the board table, at the soup kitchen, on the construction site, in the classroom—to be his servant people, to be salt and light in the world. God has called us to good work.

C. Capacity to love others

Mature or holy men and women mirror God's loving community. Their relationships reflect the truth of 1 John 4:9–11. The Apostle John writes,

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. As we have been exploring throughout *Walking with Others*, love is to be our defining task as the church: love of God, love of one another, love of the world.

If there was any doubt to how central love is to a life of mature faithfulness, Paul's poetic words in 1 Corinthians 13 erased any doubts.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast [or be burned], but do not have love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)

If we don't have love, here's how Paul sees it: (1) we are *a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal*, (2) *we are nothing*, or (3) *we gain nothing*. Paul offers a startling bottom line. Especially when you consider his other competing variables: tongues of mortals and angels, prophetic powers, understanding mysteries and all knowledge, faith to move mountains, all our possessions given away, our bodies surrendered. These variables compose quite a résumé, but none of these things count without love.



So we come with our knowledge, we come with our skills, we come with our personalities, and we come with all our gifts, and Paul offers us no wiggle room—this is not maturity. We must come with love. *Why?* Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 13,

Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always "me first,"
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end. (*The Message*)

Dallas Willard suggests that we must ponder these words, pray these words, memorize these words because Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13 must reflect the starting point for all discussions, admonitions, strategies, and efforts of *Christian* leadership and ministry. *Love*.

In writing to spiritual directors and counselors about the importance of listening, Thomas Hart reflects upon the power of love.

The most helpful thing one human being can do for another is to love him or her.... It is unlove that makes people unwell, and it is love and love alone that can make them well again (Karl Menninger).... In my own years of receiving spiritual direction from various directors, it is clear to me that those that helped me most were not the eldest of them, the holiest, or the best schooled in counseling or spiritual direction; it was those who loved me the most. How did it work? They enabled me to believe in myself, to rejoice in my own being and gifts, to accept the mystery of my life in hope, and to make the most of it.... Consider the effectiveness of Jesus, that great healer of the human spirit. He was not a trained therapist, nor even a trained priest or rabbi. He worked

From many standpoints the Bible looks at our spiritual life. Sometimes it is as a life of faith, again as a life of holiness, evermore as a life of service, deepest of all as a life of patience and victorious suffering; but the highest and divinest view of it is a life of love. Nor is it love in any ordinary sense, but the tenderest and most intimate forms, and the most exquisite figures of human affection and friendship are used to describe the unspeakable bond which links the heart of God with the souls He calls to be His own.¹⁵

A. B. Simpson



We have a rising (I daresay, a life-threatening) problem in the modern church. Older people—above 50, let's say—don't want to be tutors or mentors. Too busy, too distracted, too secretive, too afraid. So a younger generation of spiritual infants is really struggling because an older generation doesn't want to tell its stories, doesn't want to get involved. They prefer Christian cruises, Christian golf tournaments, and more Bible studies where information can be piled upon information.

Forgive my generalizations, my edgy sarcasm. But I'm prompted to let some of my thoughts hang out because I'm meeting too many infant Christians who tell me that they're looking for fathers and mothers in the faith to help them grow up. And they're not finding them. And many churches aren't cultivating them.

Result: we could lose a large part of a new generation of Christians who couldn't get past spiritual infancy and went somewhere else.¹⁸

Gordon MacDonald

transformations in the lives of people because he loved them.... Love is creative and transformative power, coming into our lives always as the great surprise, filling our sails with a fresh breeze.¹⁶

Are we willing to love? Will we extend ourselves for the purpose of nurturing another's growth?¹⁷ Whether expressed through a commitment to the poor or a family member or a coworker or investing in another's development, loving others is a signature of the mature Christian life. As Jesus put it, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

D. Deep Joy

"A mature Christian lives with a deep and resilient joy, even in the midst of a fragmented world," writes Gordon Smith.¹⁹ As the songwriter of Psalm 16 concludes the psalm, "You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures evermore." Delight and deep gladness are found in God's presence. Perhaps Jesus' words to his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion echo these Psalm 16 realities.

I have said these things to you so that *my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.* (John 15:11)

Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, *so that your joy may be complete.* (John 16:20–24)

But now I am coming to you [Holy Father], and I speak these things in the world so that *they may have my joy made complete in themselves.* (John 17:13)

God desires to share his joy-ful life with his disciples. We encounter this deep joy in mature Christians. It is not a cheery optimism or shallow happiness that is grounded in one's personality or fortunate circumstances or even denial about the problems of the world. This joy is far more resilient and enduring in the face of sorrow and brokenness. We find such joyfulness in those persons overwhelmed by God's salvation; their whole lives are received and lived as gift. It is a consequence of divine friendship, learning to *abide in the One who abides in us* (John 15:1–11). Gordon Smith writes,

We will experience both sorrow and joy; that is the given. To not get angry means we are not truly present to our world.... This is a world of deep wrongs. But the question remains: where is our emotional center? Where will we live emotionally? How will we begin each day and go to bed? Will the emotional contours of our lives be shaped by the fragmentation of the world, or will the fundamental reality of the universe and of our hearts be that Christ is on the throne of the universe—the risen and ascended Christ—and that Christ will one day make all things well?²⁰

The Spirit shares God's life with us in a way that both renews our minds and reforms our emotions over time; a new affection—God's particularizing love—has the power to reorder the very center of our hearts so that we become men and women who live gratefully, truthfully, and hospitably. In his explorations of living out of this joy, David Ford writes,

God does not coerce into joy, but there is always more on offer than we can take. There are as many ways into Christian joy as there are people, and the variety of testimonies is endless. Some begin in a burst of joy; others are far more hesitant and only very slowly wake up to the intense joy at the core of faith. There are also different qualities of joy through life, culminating in the matured peacefulness of those who have been through great suffering and have had their capacity for joy expanded and deepened in the process. But whatever our experience, if the background for the ups and downs of our lives includes the Psalms, the hymns of many Christian traditions, and the New Testament, then we can never forget that joy is the accompanying and ultimate note of faith in the God of creation and resurrection. We are created for joy, and salvation is inseparable from it....

We are therefore constantly stretched to accommodate more joy, and this affects not only the tone of our lives but its very shape. Celebration and praise of the God of joy become a *cantus firmus* ["a fixed song" or preexistent melody], with accompanying counterpoints of rejoicing in other people, rejoicing in truth and goodness, rejoicing in creation, and in all sorts of creativity, play, and work. It is a constant, gentle, and sometimes vigorous testing, inviting us to be more appreciatively open to God, people, and the world, expanding our capacity to cope with the infinite joy that God desires to share with us.²¹

A joyful life, in the holistic way we are describing it here, is lived in the ethos and economy of grace, celebrating like the shepherd, the woman, and the father of Jesus' Luke 15 stories, entreating the whole community to "Rejoice with me!" because what was once lost is now found. "Joyfulness gives off a health-imparting fragrance that enlivens others," writes James Houston.²² A life of deep joy amidst the world's fragmentation and waywardness is a hallmark of the mature Christian life.

Reflect & Respond

- Reflect on the four hallmarks of a mature Christian—wise, called to good work, loving others, and deep joy— (i) how have you seen in yourself movement or growth toward maturity over the past 5–8 years? And (ii) where is there a need for much more growth? (iii) Could you rank yourself? For instance, 1 – for joyful, 2 – wise, 3 – know my calling, and 4 – loving; what does this kind of review of yourself seem to reveal?
- How can a better understanding of these four dimensions of Christian maturity help you as a developer of others?

IV. Transformation from the Inside Out

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely;
and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

1 Thessalonians 5:23–24

Christian maturity is not first or foremost the virtuous life, but rather it is the faithful life, a faithfulness cultivated and nurtured from the inside out by the Spirit. Rob Loane writes,

In the late 1980s I recall seeing a video series based on the book *Inside Out*, in which author and psychologist Larry Crabb argued, if we are going to take seriously the person and claims of Jesus Christ, then we need to move below the surface, go beyond the appearances of character, the pretenses of behavior, and pay attention to the deep and unwieldy currents of our hearts. Dr. Crabb challenged me to consider the primacy of the inner life as an apprentice of Jesus.

On that Sunday evening, my heart was stirred. I remember being gripped by Dr. Crabb's words. I longed to live out what he spoke. His emphasis seemed faithful to the thrust of the Bible. After all, wasn't this the intent of Jesus' challenge to the Pharisee who invited him to dinner?

While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table. The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner. Then the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you (Luke 11:37–41).

You fools! Over and again in the gospels, Jesus confronted those for whom the righteous life was defined by only a part of their life (e.g. behavior, right thoughts, religious experiences). Jesus asks poignantly, *Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?*

The whole of our lives must be taken seriously. And for most of us that means attending to our neglected inner lives. That summer I was beginning to suspect that knowing the "right" thing and then simply doing it was not going to endure as a fruitful strategy. Who I was—my character—kept on getting in the way of wise choices and good behavior. Rumblings and resistances within my heart persistently frustrated the connection between



God's Spirit is continually challenging, changing, and maturing us. Although we may be able to point to a single and decisive conversion experience, remaining faithful always involves a journey of continual conversion. It can never be said in our lifetime that we have "arrived." The spiritual life invites a process of transformation in the life of a believer. It is a process of growing in gratitude, trust, obedience, humility, compassion, service, joy. As we deepen our relationship with God, we begin to choose God's ways and purposes as our own.... Spiritual growth is essentially a work of divine grace with which we are called to cooperate.²³

Marjorie J. Thompson

my belief and my behavior. Knowing something and doing something would not simply connect from dot to dot. Knowing that I should be patient in a situation or should be forgiving or should be courageous did not necessarily lead to being patient or forgiving or courageous. Good character refused to be put on like a coat. Inner transformation was necessary.

That summer a prayer began to emerge from within: *God, let me not live my life by borrowed convictions and second hand experiences.* I longed to live honestly and faithfully from the inside out. I did not want my life with God to rest solely on the spiritual heroics and insights of others: a missionary's amazing story of God's faithfulness and power or a writer's insight into the work of forgiveness or a friend's blessing in my life. These were all gifts to me for which I was thankful, but they could not substitute for personal trust in God amidst the everydayness of my life. I needed deeply what only his gracious presence could provide.

In retrospect, I now realize Dr. Crabb's *Inside Out* video series was an invitation to a more whole life: a life in which behavior reflects a transformed heart. Thankfully, God's discerning and gracious Spirit continues to invite me to a deeper level of honesty and faithfulness, nurtured from the inside out.


Among the perennial challenges to women and men who seek to mature in Christ is the temptation to substitute image for substance, appearance for reality. We prefer dealing with outward appearances rather than dealing with our hearts. And unless disrupted or confronted, we remain on the surface of our lives more often than not. It is the frustrations of our heart that drive us below the surface to those deeper places that are so unmanageable and mysterious.

As developers of others, we must not be afraid of the frustrations that emerge in their lives. Confusion, frustration, loneliness, and discontent are fertile soil for deep growth. As poet/musician Leonard Cohen puts it, "There is a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in." These struggles are the cracks in which the light is able to get in. The way of Christian maturity is difficult and costly, but is also full of joy and startling surprise—"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). As wise friends or mentors we must learn to provide a safe space where others' struggles and confusions can be converted into prayer; a holding space in which frustrations can be reframed and re-imagined as invitations by God's Spirit to discover more deeply a life held together, shaped, and nourished by God's fierce and tender mercy.

God is a developmental God and we are his developmental people. We are never finished products, but we are in process. Those we care about and seek to walk with in our communities are also in process. God is profoundly concerned that all his children grow up in his triune family. And growth is always a matter of the heart, maturity formed from the *inside out*.

Reflect & Respond

- How have you witnessed frustration or discontent or disruption in someone's life become an invitation to go deeper in their walk with the Lord?
- Allow the Spirit's inside out movement in your life to personalize Rob Loane's prayer: Let me not live my life by borrowed convictions and second hand experiences. Reflect upon a time in more recent weeks or months when your faith was strengthened personally, or from the inside out. What is coming to mind? Write or share your experience.



A Psalm of Ascent

Psalm 125

*Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.*

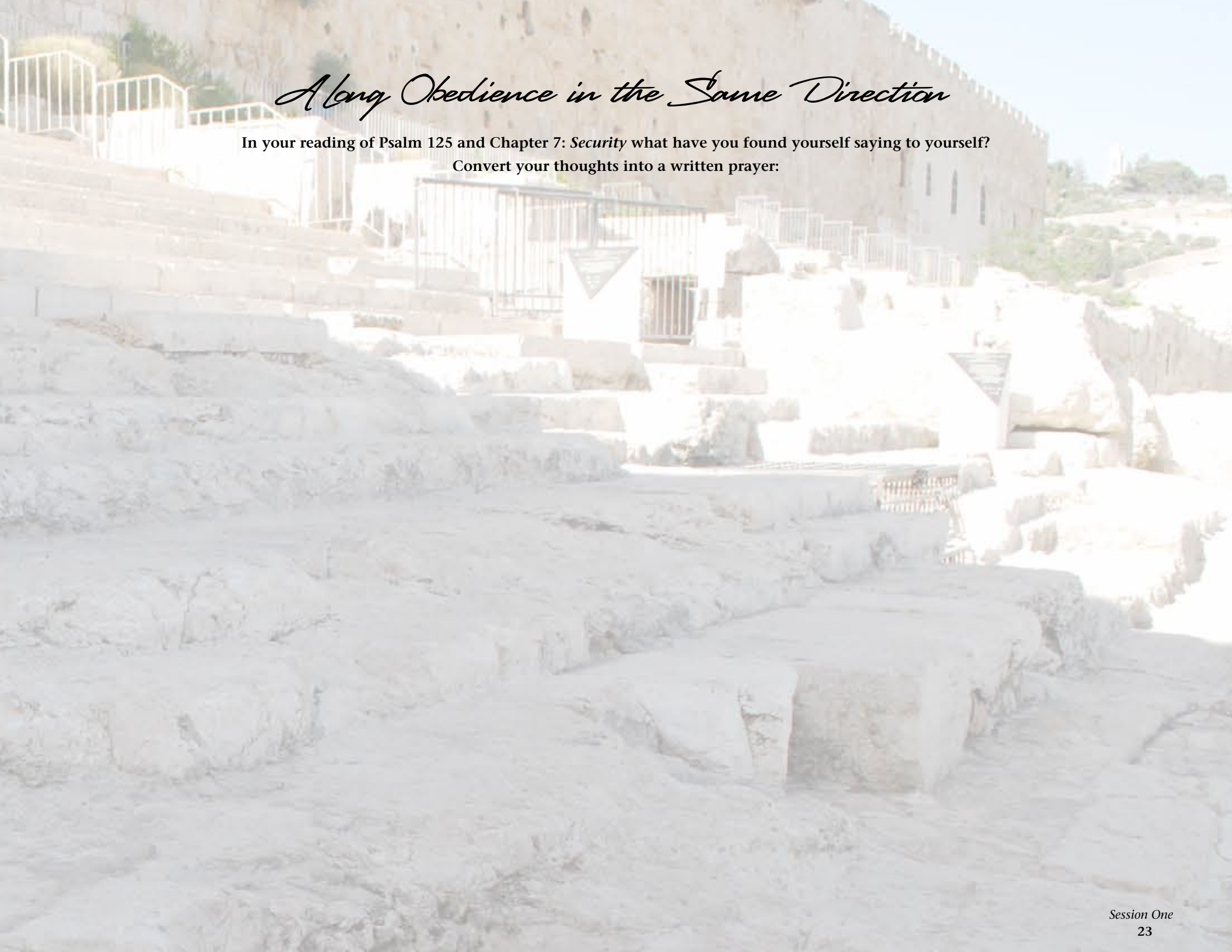
*As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people,
from this time on and forevermore.*

*For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest
on the land allotted to the righteous,
so that the righteous might not stretch out
their hands to do wrong.*

*Do good, O Lord, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts.*

*But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways
the Lord will lead away with evildoers.*

Peace be upon Israel!

The background of the slide is a photograph of ancient stone ruins. In the upper right, a large, light-colored stone wall with a crenelated top edge rises. Below and to the left of this wall are several terraced levels of stone masonry, some with metal railings. In the foreground, there are large, rough-hewn stone blocks and a more complex structure with a triangular pediment. The overall scene is arid and historical.

Along Obedience in the Same Direction

In your reading of Psalm 125 and Chapter 7: *Security* what have you found yourself saying to yourself?
Convert your thoughts into a written prayer:

In Preparation for Session 2

Part 1 – Psalm 126 & A Long Obedience in the Same Direction

For next week, meditate and pray with Psalm 126. Read and reflect upon Eugene Peterson's meditations on Psalm 126 in Chapter 8: *Joy in A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Be prepared to share your thoughts and discoveries with your group.

Part 2 – The Land Between: Finding God in Difficult Transitions

By walking with the Israelites and Moses through their wilderness wanderings, Jeff Manion's *The Land Between* (Zondervan, 2012) invites us into an exploration of the *soul-shaping potential* of these painful and confusing transitions in our lives. By Session 5: *Life Transitions* you will need to have read pages 1–120; we encourage you to schedule some time over the next four weeks to begin reading *The Land Between*.

Part 3 – Read and Prepare for Session 2: Life Story

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