

FINDING FREEDOM



FREEDOM
CHURCH

FINDING FREEDOM

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Chapter 1: Freedom and Captivity

Jesus intends for us to live in freedom. Near the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus articulated his mission while in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth.

¹⁶...on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

*¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

²⁰Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Luke 4:16-21

Although freedom was an integral component of Jesus' mission and message, the full realization of this blessing eludes many of us. In fact, we may have become so accustomed to operating with emotional and spiritual burdens that we no longer recognize how we are being affected by them.

Which of the following, if any, characterize how you regularly feel or behave? Explain.

- **Feeling anxious**

- **Hiding your emotions**
- **Distancing yourself from other people**
- **Feeling fearful**
- **Feeling inferior to others**
- **Having angry outbursts**
- **Feeling a strong need to be in control**
- **Feeling unsatisfied and discontent**

Given enough time, all of us can grow accustomed to harmful patterns of thinking or behaving. We may deny our need to find freedom even while those around us see obvious problems. Consider the following interaction between Jesus and a group of Jewish believers.

³¹To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³²Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

³³They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

³⁴Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷I know that you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word. ³⁸I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father."

John 8:31-38

The individuals to whom Jesus was speaking in this passage are described as "Jews who had believed him." In other words, these men and women had some kind of positive response to Jesus, and yet they were blind to

the condition of their own hearts. As far as they were concerned, they were free.

But despite their protestations, Jesus clearly saw the nature of their captivity. They were slaves to sin; there was murder in their hearts; and they were being manipulated by dark forces. We should note that in their cultural context, these men and women appeared to be “good” people; religious people; spiritual people. But they certainly weren’t free. Their example should motivate us to at least consider the possibility that we may have similar afflictions in our own hearts.

The purpose of this study is to lead you into the fulness of freedom that God intends for you to experience in Jesus Christ. To walk in freedom we need to be both emotionally whole and spiritually whole. Because the human mind and the human spirit are both intimately involved in everything we do, the subjects we address in this booklet often have both a spiritual and a psychological component. A lack of health in one area will contribute to a lack of health in the other.

The next five chapters will address subjects that affect us spiritually, emotionally, and sometimes even physically. In chapter 7, we will engage the often neglected topic of demonic oppression. Chapter 8 will combine the material from the first seven chapters into a step-by-step process for walking in freedom and wholeness.

Are you aware of any ways in which you think God wants you to experience greater freedom? Do you have any reservations about engaging a study like this? Are there any specific outcomes you are hoping to experience as a result of this study?

Chapter 2: Voices

For better or for worse, each of us has been profoundly impacted by the voices of the people around us. Sometimes these voices function like invisible chains that keep us from living in the freedom God desires for us. You may be able to relate to my own experience described below.

My parents both love to sing. They were active members in a church choir all throughout my childhood and they often sang around the house. In fact, they sang so frequently that I started to sing some of the songs I heard them sing even though I had personally never heard the original recordings! Years later when I heard the original artists performing some of these songs I felt like I was listening to remakes.

When I was a teenager, someone heard me singing and remarked, "Wow, you really can't sing." I don't remember the exact circumstances, and, who knows, maybe I was in the middle of puberty and my voice was changing. Maybe I was feeling particularly insecure that day, as many teenagers often do. But I remember the comment. And I remember the effect it had on me.

For years after I heard that comment I didn't open up my mouth to sing. I was too embarrassed. This offhand remark made its way into my heart, and changed the way I lived.

As my family members will tell you, I sing all the time now. I think they are more embarrassed by my singing than I am! But it took many years for me to move beyond that one comment.

What voices are impacting your life? Are there any negative messages you have internalized? How are these voices and messages shaping your life in the present?

When we read through the Gospels we discover that Jesus had to manage an incredible number of potentially crippling voices in his life — the same voices that so often affect us.

1. The voice of misguided expectations

Throughout our lives, whether intentionally or unintentionally, people will place misguided expectations on us. Jesus was no exception.

³⁵Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

³⁶Simon and his companions went to look for him, ³⁷and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!”

³⁸Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”

Mark 1:35-38

The people of Capernaum had expectations for Jesus, and the disciples were clearly inclined to persuade Jesus to meet those expectations. Most of us don't want to disappoint other people, and we often feel guilty or ashamed when we don't live up to their expectations. This can be particularly painful when the misguided expectations placed on us come from those who are closest to us. On one occasion John the Baptist sent a few of his disciples to Jesus with the following question:

“Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

Luke 7:19

John the Baptist was the one who prepared the way for Jesus. He was a relative of Jesus. And now John was effectively saying, “You're not living up to what I thought you were going to be. So I'm reconsidering my commitment to you.” If even Jesus could not avoid disappointing people, there is no way we will be able to avoid disappointing people.

Often, the high expectations we place on ourselves were actually initiated by an external voice. It can be difficult to separate our own internal voice

from the external voices that have shaped us. This can lead to great anxiety in our lives.

Do you live under any of the following expectations? Do you think they were internally or externally initiated? Are there any expectations other than these that you think are shaping your life? Explain.

- The need to feel smart or well-educated
- The need to overachieve and be successful
- The need to be attractive and fit
- The need to be a "good" son or daughter
- The need to have successful, popular, or attractive children
- The need to be well-traveled or cultured
- The need to be stylish and trendy
- The need to "have it all together"
- The need to have a beautiful home or expensive car

2. The voice of criticism and accusation

Jesus was bombarded with criticism and accusation throughout his public ministry.

*⁶On another Sabbath [Jesus] went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled.
⁷The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely...*

Luke 6:6-7

The religious leaders were actively looking for a reason to criticize and accuse Jesus. Because they began with a critical posture, it is not surprising that they found fault with nearly everything Jesus did.

"John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking."

Luke 5:33

"If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

Luke 7:39

"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"

Matthew 15:2

"Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy?"

Luke 5:21

Each of us has to deal with voices of criticism. In fact, we are often the critics! It can be enlightening to consider some of the reasons we criticize others.

- We may criticize others as an immature response to our own disappointment, frustration, or pain.
- We may criticize others in an attempt to shame them into the behavior we desire from them.
- We may criticize others as an act of retaliation.
- We may criticize others in order to justify ourselves. We want to be right in our own eyes or the eyes of others, so we criticize those who differ with us.
- We may criticize others because we feel threatened by them. We employ criticism as a defense mechanism.

Most of us have been on both the giving and receiving end of unhelpful criticism. When we are confronted with voices of criticism, it is not unusual for our "fight or flight" instinct to surface. On the one hand, as we described above, we may retaliate with criticism. When we have been wounded, we are prone to wound others in return.

On the other hand, we may just shut down emotionally. When, for example, someone criticizes our intellectual capabilities, we may abandon the development of our minds. When someone tells us we're awkward, we may begin to avoid social gatherings. When we hear that we're underperforming, we may quit our jobs.

When we have been wounded by criticism, it is tempting to reorient our entire lives around overcoming the criticism we have received. "I'll prove I am worth something, that I can achieve, that I am smart." But this is ultimately unhelpful. Instead of listening to the voice of God and his direction, we fixate on the voice of criticism. Even though we are trying to use the voice of criticism to our advantage, we are ultimately being controlled by a toxic voice instead of God's voice.

Can you think of any criticism that you have received that has really stung you? What have you done (or what can you do) to get past it? Are you a critical person? If so, what do you think is motivating your criticism?

3. The voice of rejection

Each of us has a deep need to be accepted, and this need can drive us to expend great energy to avoid the scorn and rejection of others. But it is almost impossible to completely escape the experience of rejection. The Gospels indicate that Jesus regularly experienced rejection.

- The people of his hometown, Nazareth, literally tried to throw Jesus off a cliff.
- The religious leaders plotted to kill Jesus.
- His own family thought he was losing his mind.
- Some of his followers, after listening to one of Jesus' lessons, said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"¹ And then they left.
- When the authorities came to arrest Jesus, his inner circle, the twelve apostles, fled to protect themselves.
- Peter, the leader of the twelve apostles, denied even knowing Jesus.

Rejection from the people around us is one of the most difficult things we will ever experience. Voices of rejection can cut us deeply.

Do you have any experiences of rejection that continue to affect you today? Explain. In addition to the voices of misguided expectations, criticism, and rejection already mentioned, are there other voices that impact you on a regular basis? Do you deal with anxiety or depression? Do you find yourself regularly striving for approval from others? Do you regularly experience fear or intimidation? Explain.

Jesus Our Substitute

Many times voices of criticism and accusation cut us deeply because there is an element of truth in what we're hearing. We recognize that there is something wrong inside of us. Our motives are mixed. We are selfish, lazy, fearful, manipulative, or critical.

The astonishing message of the Gospel is that Jesus absorbed the voices of insult, mockery, rejection, and condemnation on our behalf. And it wasn't just the voices of humans he absorbed. He experienced the rejection of God the Father on our behalf. This is why he cried out on the cross:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Matthew 27:46

God extends complete forgiveness to us through his Son Jesus Christ. When we turn our hearts back to God and receive his forgiveness, we can hear every other word of life, hope, and blessing that God has for us.

Listening to the Voice of God

In order to move past the chorus of negative voices that affect each of our lives, we need to listen closely to the voice of God. Before Jesus faced the misguided expectations of the crowds, the harsh criticism of the Pharisees, or the voices of rejection from nearly everyone around him, Jesus heard the voice of the Father.

"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Mark 1:11

This was not the only time Jesus heard the Father speaking to him. Luke writes:

...Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Luke 5:16

In fact, when Jesus was being pressed by the voice of Satan himself, he responded:

"It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Matthew 4:4

The voice of God is our life! And Jesus indicates here that one of the primary ways we can hear the voice of God is in the Scriptures. We can and should address every destructive voice that we hear with the power of God's words. Consider the following examples.

1. If we feel like we're completely alone in life — that nobody will stand with us or fight for us — we might meditate on the words Moses spoke to Joshua.

The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.

Deuteronomy 31:8

2. If we're living with the sting of rejection by our own family members, we might meditate on the words of the psalmist.

*Though my father and mother forsake me,
the Lord will receive me.*

Psalms 27:10

3. If we feel overwhelmed by all of the expectations that others have placed on us or that we have placed on ourselves, we can recall Jesus' invitation to the crowds.

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

Matthew 11:28-30

4. If we feel like we never seem to win in life, we can take to heart what Paul writes in his letters to the Romans and Corinthians.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Romans 8:37

Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:57

We need to give God's word a greater place in our lives than any other voice.

Are you regularly reading and internalizing what God says in the Scriptures? Do you confess the Scriptures out loud? What can you begin doing this week to replace the harmful voices in your heart and mind with God's voice of love and truth?

¹ John 6:60

Chapter 3: Forgiveness

Freedom was one of the primary themes of Jesus' public ministry. As we observed in the first chapter, Jesus understood his own life and ministry to be a fulfillment of a prophetic hope for freedom.

¹⁸ *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Luke 4:18-19

On one occasion, Jesus told the Pharisees:

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

John 10:10

On another, he told a group of his followers:

³¹...*"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³²Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

John 8:31-32

Central to our experience of freedom is the matter of forgiveness. Matthew records an important interaction between Jesus and Peter on this subject.

²¹*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"*

²²Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Matthew 18:21-22

Of all the principles that Jesus teaches concerning our relationships with one another, few are more important than forgiveness. No substantial relationship can survive without the granting and receiving of forgiveness. This is true in marriage, with our parents, with our children, in our work relationships, and certainly in our relationship with God.

John the Baptist's entire ministry was centered around forgiveness. Mark writes:

⁴...John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

Mark 1:4-5

When John created a space in which people felt they could genuinely receive forgiveness, the people flocked to him.

Like John, Jesus also put a great deal of attention on forgiveness. In fact, one of the primary reasons the religious leaders were angry with Jesus was because he spent time with people in desperate need of forgiveness and because he extended forgiveness to them on behalf of God. It is not an exaggeration to say that the religious leaders led with the law, but Jesus led with forgiveness.

In one of Jesus' most significant sermons, known traditionally as the Sermon on the Mount, the theme of forgiveness surfaces repeatedly.

²¹"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' ²²But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³*"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.*

Matthew 5:21-24

We should note two things in this passage. Firstly, Jesus connects anger and an unwillingness to forgive with murder. These attitudes and actions spring from the same root, and they will eat away at our souls.

Secondly, Jesus teaches that being reconciled with our brother or sister is so important that even worshiping and bringing a gift to the altar should be put on hold until we can make amends with the person we have treated wrongly.

In the following chapter, Matthew records a prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, and which the church has prayed for nearly twenty centuries. Immediately after reciting the prayer, Jesus emphasizes the importance of one of the key components of the prayer: forgiveness.

⁹*"This, then, is how you should pray:*

*"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,*

¹⁰*your kingdom come,
your will be done,*

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹*Give us today our daily bread.*

¹²*And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

¹³*And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.'*

¹⁴*For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

Matthew 6:9-15

Extending forgiveness to other people is so important that Jesus says that failing to do so will actually prevent us from receiving God's forgiveness. There is no greater hypocrisy than to presume to receive forgiveness of our sins from God while withholding forgiveness from those who have wronged us.

The Scriptures, not to mention a great deal of modern research, indicate that unforgiveness can ruin our lives. Prolonged anger and bitterness wreak havoc on our emotional health, our relationships, our spiritual life, and even our physical bodies. If we are going to live in freedom, we have to learn to offer and to seek forgiveness.

How can unforgiveness affect our individual lives, our families, and our culture? Why do you think we often find it so difficult to extend forgiveness to others? Does extending forgiveness imply that others should never be held accountable for their actions? Do you think that true forgiveness should result in reconciliation? Might there be occasions when we are willing to forgive, but full reconciliation is not (or not yet) possible? What should we do in such circumstances?

The Story of Joseph

Joseph's story is recorded in the latter part of the book of Genesis. The narrative begins in Genesis 37 when Joseph is seventeen years old. Joseph's father is a man named Jacob who is married to two sisters, Rachel and Leah. Jacob was enamored with Rachel and he worked for fourteen years to earn her hand in marriage. But Jacob was tricked into marrying Leah, and he never loved her like he did Rachel. This family dynamic was, not surprisingly, a very dysfunctional arrangement.

For a number of years Rachel was unable to have children, and she grew increasingly jealous as Leah bore children for Jacob. But when Jacob was an older man, Rachel did finally give birth — to Joseph. Jacob, very unwisely, made no attempt to hide his obvious preference for Joseph, and this stirred up jealousy in Joseph's brothers.

Joseph didn't help matters when he shared dreams he had of his brothers and even his parents bowing down before him. Eventually, Joseph's

brothers decided to get rid of him. In anger and jealousy Joseph's brothers kidnapped him, made up a story about him being attacked by wild animals, and sold him into slavery. Joseph was taken to Egypt, and, as far as he knew, his life was over.

In Egypt, Joseph was sold again. And then, unbelievably, things took a turn for the worse. Joseph was falsely accused of attempted rape and thrown into prison. As a slave and a foreigner accused of a serious crime, Joseph had nowhere he could turn. By all outward appearances, his circumstances were completely hopeless.

For thirteen years Joseph suffered in slavery and prison, cut off from his family and his homeland. And then God opened a door for Joseph. With God's help, Joseph was able to interpret a significant dream for Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, and, incredibly, Joseph was promoted to become Pharaoh's right-hand man.

After seven years in this role famine struck, and Joseph's brothers came to Egypt looking for grain! When Joseph finally made himself known to his brothers, they were in shock, and they were afraid. If Joseph ever wanted revenge, he had the opportunity and the power to exact it in that moment. To their relief, Joseph treated his brothers and his father, Jacob, with kindness, and invited them all to move to Egypt so he could provide for them.

Eventually, Joseph's father, Jacob, died, and Joseph's brothers were once again anxious. Now that their father was gone, there was no telling what Joseph might do. Perhaps Joseph had been showing his brothers kindness just for the sake of their father. The story continues in the last chapter of Genesis.

¹⁵When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" ¹⁶So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: ¹⁷'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

¹⁸His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

¹⁹But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹ So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children."

Genesis 50:15-21

This remarkable passage shows us several things.

1. Unforgiveness can last a really long time.

By the time Jacob dies, it has been something like 40 years since Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery! And what are his brothers thinking?

"What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"

Genesis 50:15

If we do not address it, unforgiveness can not only last for the entire span of our lives, it can be transferred to the next generation. Our children and their children can hold hatred in their hearts toward people they have never met because of our unforgiveness. We see this reality being played out in families, communities, and nations all over the world.

Have you observed any cases of long-term unforgiveness? What were the effects? Are there any examples of long-term unforgiveness in your own life?

Our next two observations are connected to two incredibly important statements made by Joseph.

2. "Am I in the place of God?"

Joseph tells his brothers:

"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?"

Genesis 50:19

Forgiveness

Joseph is saying, in effect, "I gave up trying to be your judge and jury a long time ago. It is not my place to seek vengeance."

If we try to play the role of God in another person's life, the weight of that burden will destroy us. We were not made for it, and we cannot handle it. James writes:

There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you — who are you to judge your neighbor?

James 4:12

Earlier in the same letter James writes:

*¹⁹My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,
²⁰because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.*

James 1:19-20

When we withhold forgiveness, we are, in effect, deciding that we will be the judge and that we will deliver and execute the sentence. But when we are the offended party, it is impossible for us to do this objectively. And, ultimately, it is just not our prerogative.

King David is a remarkable example in this regard. Saul, the first king in Israel, could not have treated David any worse. Saul felt deeply threatened by David because God was obviously with David, and David had been anointed to become the next king. On multiple occasions Saul attempted to kill David. Saul even sent an army of 3,000 men to track down David and destroy him.

But when David had an opportunity to kill Saul, he would not do it. Instead he said:

*⁹"...Who can lay a hand on the LORD's anointed and be guiltless?
¹⁰As surely as the LORD lives... the LORD himself will strike him, or his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and*

perish. ¹¹But the LORD forbid that I should lay a hand on the LORD's anointed."

1 Samuel 26:9-11

What is David doing here? He is saying, "I will not play the role of God in Saul's life. It is not my place to avenge." In fact, David maintained a posture of forgiveness and reconciliation toward Saul throughout Saul's life.

Reconciliation, of course, is a two-way street, and David never got to experience reconciliation with Saul because of Saul's unwillingness. But David kept his heart clean by maintaining a posture of forgiveness.

We should pause briefly to make sure we avoid a common misconception associated with forgiveness. Choosing to forgive another person is in no way a denial of the other person's wrongdoing. In fact, our choice to forgive implies that there is an actual wrong that needs to be forgiven. Forgiveness is not about minimizing what others have done to us. Rather, it is an act of the will in which we release another person from the debt that we feel they owe us. It is a choice not to retaliate or "even the score" in word or deed. It is a decision to no longer play the movie in our minds of how awful they are, how they should have behaved, or what they need to do to make it up to us.

We cannot control what other people do. But we can control what we do. And we can decide not to try to put ourselves in the place of God.

The apostle Paul writes:

¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil. ... ¹⁹Do not take revenge... but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰On the contrary:

*"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*

²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:17, 19-21

Explain how we are “putting ourselves in the place of God” when we are unwilling to forgive others. Why is this a dangerous practice?

3. “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good...”

Joseph told his brothers:

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

Genesis 50:20

Joseph here recognizes a profound reality: God is in control. To live in freedom and forgiveness, we need to understand that no human being can ultimately ruin our lives. God holds the keys to our future.

Jesus himself demonstrated his understanding of this reality under the most extreme of circumstances. Jesus’ calm under the threat of crucifixion astonished Pilate.

¹⁰“Do you refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”

¹¹Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.”

John 19:10-11

Everything about the circumstances suggested that Jesus’ destiny lay in the hands of this pagan ruler. But Jesus knew better. And Jesus’ knowledge affected his response to Pilate.

When we think that other people have the power to determine our identity, success, and ultimate well-being, we will find it very difficult to extend forgiveness to them. Paradoxically, it is the very act of withholding forgiveness that continues to give them power in our lives.

But when we recognize that God is in control, it is much easier to forgive. As much pain, frustration, and disappointment we feel others may have caused us, God’s plan will ultimately prevail, and we can be confident that in all things God is working for our good and his glory.

Are there any people you need to forgive? What barriers, if any, are standing in the way of your decision to forgive them? What can you do to overcome these obstacles?

Chapter 4: The Seduction of Sin

Consider again the following passage in the Gospel of John.

³¹To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³²Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

³³They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

³⁴Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

John 8:31-36

In this interaction, Jesus elucidates a remarkable reality. Sin is not merely some unfortunate, but otherwise isolated action or decision. It is a power that enslaves us.

Jesus' statement is all the more striking considering that he was speaking to a group of people who appeared to be "good" people. They were open to Jesus. The text goes so far as to say that they had "believed" him. In other words, Jesus was talking to people who were probably like many of us, and he told them, "The sin in your life has made you a slave."

The apostle Paul makes a similar point about sin's power to enslave in his letter to Christians living in Rome.

¹¹...count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

¹²Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. ¹³Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every

part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. ¹⁴For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law (i.e. the Law of Moses), but under grace.

¹⁵What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?

Romans 6:11-16

It is very interesting how Paul puts things here. Either we will freely choose to be slaves to obedience, which leads to righteousness and life, or we will remain slaves to sin, which leads to death. There are no other options.

Many of us live under the illusion that we are free, and that we will always be free. Even when we engage in some behavior that God condemns, we assume that our actions will not have a serious impact on how we live and function in the future. We never imagine that our sin will enslave us. But sin is surprisingly deceptive. It gains entrance into our lives and slowly builds a prison around us.

Explain the difference between viewing sin as 1) an unfortunate, but relatively isolated, collection of acts and 2) an enslaving power. Have you consciously experienced the enslaving power of sin in your own life? Explain.

Greed

In the Sermon on the Mount (the traditional name for Jesus' teaching recorded in Matthew 5-7) Jesus speaks about greed through the metaphor of healthy and unhealthy eyes.

²²"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. ²³But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

Matthew 6:22-23

In Jesus' ancient context, the language of "healthy" and "unhealthy" eyes carried the connotation of generosity and greed, respectively. Jesus' surprising conclusion, then, is that the sin of greed doesn't just affect what we do with money. It affects *everything*.

This reality is exemplified in a very famous story recorded in the Gospels.

17...a man ran up to [Jesus] and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

... 19"You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

20"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

21Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

22At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

23Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

Mark 10:17, 19-23

Given our preoccupation with possessions and the security most of us find in money, this is a very challenging passage.

Note first that the man who is talking to Jesus seems like the kind of person most of us would want to be. He's moral. He's successful. He's asking the right questions. And he took the initiative with Jesus. Jesus, in turn, gives him the greatest opportunity of his life: An invitation to be his disciple.

And in that pivotal moment, the man cannot accept Jesus' offer. Why? He's enslaved by his attachment to possessions. The sin of greed, which most people around him may never even have noticed, didn't just affect

how he spent his money. It affected his ability to walk in God's purpose for his life.

The Life of Solomon

Solomon's life provides another tragic but important example. Solomon was the most powerful king in Israel's history. His father David was deeply devoted to God, and he left Solomon an incredible legacy.

Early in his reign, Solomon cried out to God for wisdom, and God gave it to him. The kingdom was exceedingly prosperous under Solomon's reign, and Solomon built a magnificent temple for the Lord that served as the focal point of worship in Israel for centuries. The prayer that Solomon offered at the dedication of the temple is one of the most powerful in all of the Bible.

But we read the following in 1 Kings 11.

¹King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter — Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. ²They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. ³He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. ⁴As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. ⁵He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites. ⁶So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done.

1 Kings 11:1-6

Solomon was an amazing man and an incredible leader. But he violated a boundary that God had given to him and the people of Israel. And the result was not just that he created relational complications in his personal life. He was drawn away from God. Even more significantly, kingship in Israel went in a direction from which the nation was never able to recover.

Sin is seductive. It doesn't just stand alone as an isolated event in our lives. Sin enslaves us.

What are some ways that sin can affect areas of our lives that we might think are disconnected from the specific offense? Have you experienced this reality in your own life? Explain.

The Church in Corinth

In the apostle Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul addresses a number of pressing issues that the Corinthians had been asking about. Beginning in chapter 8, Paul engages at length the somewhat complicated subject of eating food associated with idols.

In Corinth, like everywhere else in the Roman Empire, the worship of pagan gods permeated society. Roman citizens didn't really go out to eat at a restaurant, as we might. Instead, they went to cultic meals at temples. As part of the preparation for these meals, a sacrifice would be made to a god. And then the food was divided into three parts: One part would be burned before the god; one part would be eaten by the worshipers in attendance; and a third part would be placed on the table of the god.

These cultic meals took place not just on specifically religious occasions, but at official state festivals, at social gatherings, and at all manner of private celebrations. In a place like Corinth, participation in these events and meals was how a person stayed socially connected. If you were an artist or philosopher, for example, and you needed to build relationships with wealthy people who might be able to serve as sponsoring patrons, making connections at these cultic meals was indispensable.

So what did the Christians in Corinth do? Surely they couldn't in good conscience participate in such meals. Participation in a cultic meal was effectively idolatry, one of the most serious offenses in the Scriptures. Regrettably, Paul's letter implies that, in fact, many Corinthian believers *did* attend these meals. It is enlightening to piece together how the Corinthians convinced themselves that these cultic meals were no big deal. Their example is a powerful illustration of how the deceptiveness of sin often operates in our lives.

1. The Corinthians embraced a slogan, or life principle, that was *almost* right.

One of the primary slogans the Corinthians embraced to justify their actions sounded a little like something Paul would teach, but actually had closer associations with the Greek philosophy of their day.

"All things are lawful for me..."

1 Corinthians 6:12 (ESV)

Or, as the NIV puts it:

"I have the right to do anything..."

1 Corinthians 6:12 (NIV)

Paul quotes this Corinthian slogan four times in this letter. On the surface, this slogan looks similar to an important verse we read earlier in Romans 6:

...sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

Romans 6:14

"We're not under law," the Corinthians might have said to themselves. "As truly spiritual people now, we're free to live however we desire." In fact, this is the sort of thing ancient Greek philosophers said. For example, Dio Chrysostom, a philosopher in the 1st century, wrote:

"[t]he wise ... are permitted to do anything they wish."

Dio Chrysostom

Like the Corinthians, we may land on an idea that sounds reasonable to us. In some cases, the principle might even have some relation to a genuine biblical teaching. But often we latch on to some such "pseudo-biblical" idea and run off in a direction that God never intended.

As an example, consider the thought: "God wants me to be happy." In some sense, this is clearly true. After one of his teachings, Jesus said to his disciples:

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

John 15:11

The problem is that it is easy to use this principle to make terrible decisions.

- “I feel happy when I smoke marijuana, and so I’m sure God is okay with it.”
- “I’m not happy being alone, so I should start a relationship, even if it is with someone who is not following Jesus.”
- “I’m not happy in this marriage, so I’m going to end it.”
- “I’m not happy when people challenge the way I’m living, so I’m going to avoid difficult conversations.”

As another example, consider the idea: “I need to maximize my gifts and talents.” That seems like a very reasonable pursuit. But it is important to keep in mind that when the Scriptures talk about employing spiritual gifts or stewarding resources that have been entrusted to us, the focus is squarely on bringing glory to God, accomplishing God’s mission, and bringing about good for other people. We, however, often turn the discussion of gifts and talents into a self-centered conversation primarily concerned with how we can feel better about ourselves.

Many times we are not really serving people, organizations, or causes with our gifts and talents. We’re just serving ourselves. When we feel like our interests are no longer being served, we tell ourselves and others that we need to “find a better use of our gifts and talents.”

It is very easy to embrace a slogan that sounds meaningful or even biblical, but in reality is just a reflection of our culture’s values. Such deceptive mottos can be used to justify actions that God clearly condemns. For this reason, every time Paul quotes the Corinthian slogan, he qualifies it.

"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything.

1 Corinthians 6:12

We need to engage the Scriptures until we really know the living God who inspired them. Otherwise we are prone to embrace an idea that sounds reasonable to us and use it to justify our sin.

In addition to their slogan, "All things are lawful for me," the Corinthians claimed that "an idol is nothing." Is this true? In one sense, yes. But the Corinthians' understanding was incomplete. Paul writes:

¹⁸Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? ¹⁹Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. ²²Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

1 Corinthians 10:18-22

Here Paul modifies the claims of the Corinthians. There is a sense in which idols are nothing. They are certainly not gods like the God whom we serve. But it is also not the case that there is nothing significant going on behind these cultic meals. Participating in these meals, Paul argues, is participating with demons. For this reason Paul gives an extremely strong warning.

²¹You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. ²²Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

1 Corinthians 10:21-22

We often use partial truths to justify wrong behaviors.

Consider the following statements. In each case, explain how incomplete or inaccurate knowledge has led to a false conclusion.

- “Love is the most important thing in any relationship. As long as we love each other, it doesn’t matter whether or not we actually get married.”
- “Pornography doesn’t hurt anyone else, so it’s fine if I watch it.”
- “The festivals in the Bible involved drinking, music, and dancing, so surely drinking and partying on the weekends is not a big deal.”
- “I can worship God wherever I am, so it is not important that I commit to a local church.”

What are some other examples of incomplete knowledge leading to false conclusions? What does Romans 12:1-2 teach about discerning God’s will?

2. The Corinthians valued knowledge over love.

The Corinthians made the following arguments:

“We all possess knowledge.”

“An idol is nothing at all in the world”

“There is no God but one.”

1 Corinthians 8:1, 4

Basically they were saying, “We know that these idols are not real gods, so what does it matter if we participate in meals at which these gods are being invoked? They are nothing.”

Paul responds with the following.

“...not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ...

⁹Be careful... that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

1 Corinthians 8:7, 9

In other words, participating in cultic meals surely communicates the (false) idea that a person can legitimately worship Jesus and other gods at the same time. The Corinthians' so-called "knowledge" is going to mislead, and ultimately harm, others.

Knowledge without love will lead us into sin. This was the case with the Pharisees. Jesus actually disagreed with the Pharisees on very few theological points. In fact, on one occasion Jesus commented:

²"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."

Matthew 23:2-3

It is possible for us to be "right," and yet completely wrong. Biblically, truth is not just a matter of being factually correct. Rather, living in truth means reflecting God's character.

What are some ways we can be "right," and yet completely wrong (in the sense described above)? Describe how the Pharisees sinned in this manner. How can we unmask this deceptive form of sin in our own lives?

3. The Corinthians distanced themselves from the very person God had provided to give them direction.

In the middle of this discussion on idolatry, Paul seems to digress to defend his apostleship. He writes:

¹...Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? ²Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 9:1-2

These are not offhand remarks that have no connection with the surrounding context. Rather, because some of the Corinthians did not like what Paul was telling them, they began to question the legitimacy of his authority and were distancing themselves from him.

Unfortunately, this pattern is quite common. A person doesn't like what he's hearing. So he begins pulling back from the very relationships that God has provided to help him walk in freedom. Without those godly influences, the person begins to sink deeper into sin, and soon he's enslaved.

Sometimes it's in the moments we have the greatest disagreements that we most benefit from the relationships God has given us. We need to lean into our relationships and continue to communicate. We may eventually find ourselves thinking differently on the matter.

Do you have people in your life to whom you have given permission to challenge you on your attitudes and behaviors? Why is it important for us to have such people in our lives?

Turning from Sin

Sin is seductive. We cannot live in sin and live in freedom at the same time.

So what should we do when our eyes are opened and we are able to see our sin?

1. Be quick to repent. Don't put it off until later.
2. "Name" your sin. Don't settle for a vague admission such as, "I need to do better." Clearly identify the sinful attitude or action.
3. Confess your sin openly and honestly to God.
4. Turn from your sin. Make it your intention to never engage in the sinful behavior again.
5. Tell another person about it. Don't allow the matter to stay in the shadows by keeping it to yourself.

6. Look to the cross. Recognize that, because of Jesus' sacrifice, we can receive full forgiveness. When we genuinely repent, our sin is wiped away, and we are forgiven.
7. Look to the resurrection. Jesus conquered sin and death once for all and now we can be empowered to live in a new way moving forward.

Are there any areas of sin you need to acknowledge and turn from? Take some time to go through the above steps with a trusted group or individual.

Chapter 5: The Wrong Gods

As he neared the end of his life, the great prophet Moses spoke to the people of Israel as they renewed their covenant with God.

¹⁵See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁶For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

¹⁹This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

This is a profound passage, and we should take a moment to reflect on its historical significance. God has engaged the Israelites — the descendants of a man named Abraham — in order to deliver them from slavery in Egypt. After rescuing them from their Egyptian oppressors, the Lord made a binding commitment to them — a covenant — to be their God. The Israelites would be God's treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, his holy nation.

In other words, God came near to the Israelites, he made himself known to them, he communicated his love for them, and he gave them a

purpose. They would know God and make him known. This is the greatest thing any human being can experience. This is what we were made for. And God was giving this to the Israelites.

So how were the Israelites to respond to God? And how should we respond to God when we recognize that he is present and that he is engaging us? Moses tells us in this passage: we should love God, we should trust God, and we should obey God.

This, Moses says, is the path to life. But Moses also identifies one major obstacle.

¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.

Deuteronomy 30:17-18

Devotion to other gods will lead to destruction. This important reality requires translation into our cultural context. Most people raised in the western world do not have small carved objects that they believe are actually inhabited by divine beings. For many of us, polytheism feels like a relic from the unenlightened past. We live in an age of science and rationalism.

But in an important sense we are not so different from ancient peoples. Just like men and women of every era, we are going to love something, we are going to trust something, and we are going to obey something. And even ancient peoples saw that this devotion could extend to things that were not directly identified as gods. Consider the message of the prophet Habakkuk regarding the Babylonians:

*⁶ "I am raising up the Babylonians,
that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth
to seize dwellings not their own.*

*¹⁰ They mock kings
and scoff at rulers.*

*They laugh at all fortified cities;
by building earthen ramps they capture them.*

*¹¹ Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—
guilty people, whose own strength is their god.”*

*¹⁶ Therefore he (i.e. the Babylonian) sacrifices to his net
and burns incense to his dragnet,
for by his net he lives in luxury
and enjoys the choicest food.*

Habakkuk 1:6, 10-11, 16

Each of us is going to make something ultimate in our lives. Each of us is going to love something, to trust something, and to obey something. Moses recognized this. And if this “something” isn’t the one true God, we will not experience freedom and life.

**How would you define idolatry in the context of our modern culture?
What are some common things that serve as idols in our own lives?
How can we recognize the idols in our lives?**

Israel’s history provides us an interesting case study of the universal human struggle with idolatry. (By “idolatry” we mean here the substitution of some lesser created thing for the transcendent and uncreated God.) In the following sections we will take a brief look at three moments from Israel’s story in order to shed some light on our own experience with idolatry.

Loving Other Gods

The book of Hosea begins this way.

¹The word of the Lord that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel:

²When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, “Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her,

for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD."

Hosea 1:1-2

Wow! That's quite the beginning to a prophetic career. God's instructions to Hosea are arresting, to say the least. What is going on here?

Ancient Israel, which split into a southern kingdom called Judah and a northern kingdom which retained the name Israel, was a tiny country on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. Because of the strategic location of their nation, the Israelites were frequently attacked by much more powerful kingdoms like Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon.

At the beginning of Hosea's prophetic career, sometime around 755 BC, Assyria was the dominant superpower. Assyria was a war machine. But for the roughly 50 or 60 years leading up to Hosea's ministry, Assyria had a series of weak leaders who were preoccupied with various internal struggles. So Israel and Judah enjoyed several decades of relative peace and prosperity.

The book of Hosea tells us that, during this time, the people of Israel fell in love with other gods. It was not that they "needed" these gods for protection or that these gods were forced upon them. Rather, their hearts delighted in them.

The Israelites saw the cultic celebrations, the temple prostitution, and the way of life of the peoples around them and said in their hearts, "That's what I want." It's possible that the surrounding peoples were experiencing even greater prosperity than the Israelites. Perhaps their parties looked better. Perhaps their homes were nicer.

It is often the case that a little success, a little money, or a little attention doesn't lead to greater contentment. Instead, it stirs up the desire for more. We want more success, more money, and more power.

Whatever it was that the Israelites began to see, to taste, and to touch powerfully affected their hearts. Soon they were in love with other gods and what they thought those gods could do for them.

Hosea's wife became a symbol for the people of Israel.

⁵ ... She said, 'I will go after my lovers,
who give me my food and my water,
my wool and my linen, my olive oil and my drink.'

⁶ Therefore I will block her path with thornbushes;
I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way.

⁷ She will chase after her lovers but not catch them;
she will look for them but not find them.

Then she will say,

'I will go back to my husband as at first,
for then I was better off than now.'

⁸ She has not acknowledged that I was the one
who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil,
who lavished on her the silver and gold—
which they used for Baal.

Hosea 2:5-8

What a powerful reality. Our hearts love other things, but God is the only one who can really provide what we want.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with loving our families and enjoying our jobs, good music, sports, food, or a hundred other things. The problem, rather, is when these things become life for us; when they are all we can think about; when not having them makes life not even worth living.

The following questions can help us identify things that may be functioning as idols in our lives.

- What do you dream about? What fuels your imagination?
- What do you greatly admire?
- What do you find it easy to talk about?
- When you imagine a happier life, where do your daydreams consistently turn?

Do you think that any of these things will really be able to deliver what you are longing for?

Trusting Other Gods

Our second example comes from the prophet Isaiah. The relative peace and prosperity that Israel and Judah enjoyed leading up to the beginning of Hosea's prophetic career did not last. Around 745 BC a new king came to power in Assyria, and his heart was set on expansion and domination. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed. By 701 BC, Judah was in a desperate spot with Assyria ready to pounce.

In response, the people of Judah formed an alliance with Egypt in an attempt to protect themselves from Assyria. From our vantage point, that may seem like a perfectly reasonable course of action. But in the ancient world, such alliances were always religious as well as political. To make a pact with Egypt was to make a pact with her gods. And so Isaiah declares:

*¹Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help,
who rely on horses,
who trust in the multitude of their chariots
and in the great strength of their horsemen,
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel,
or seek help from the Lord.*

*³...the Egyptians are mere mortals and not God;
their horses are flesh and not spirit.*

*⁶Return, you Israelites, to the One you have so greatly revolted
against. ⁷For in that day every one of you will reject the idols of
silver and gold your sinful hands have made.*

Isaiah 31:1, 3, 6-7

When the pressure is on, what will we trust? Judah was no longer living in days of relative comfort and prosperity. The people were just trying to survive. Assyria was threatening to wipe them off the map. Moments like that expose where our trust lies.

Our idols provide us with a sense of security, confidence and control. We think they will save us, protect us, or provide for us.

The following questions related to trust are helpful for exposing our idols.

- What do you feel that you must absolutely have in life?
- What, if you lost it, would make life feel virtually unlivable?
- What gives you a sense of confidence and security?
- What makes you uncontrollably angry, or anxious, or overwhelmed with despair?

Obeying Other Gods

By the close of the 8th century BC, the Babylonians had gained the upper hand in the near east, and, with the help of the Medes and Persians, they had conquered Assyria. In 605 BC the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem and Judah, and Daniel, a young noble in Judah, was taken into exile in Babylon.

Daniel was now in a very different place than the people Hosea and Isaiah had addressed. He was an exile living in a culture permeated by the worship of pagan gods and he was expected to conform. Everything around him would have suggested that worshiping the gods of Babylon was the most rational thing to do. The Babylonians had decimated Jerusalem, which seemed to clearly demonstrate the superiority of their gods. The city of Babylon itself was impressive and imposing; far more spectacular than Jerusalem, from which Daniel had come. And the food Daniel was offered from the king's table in Babylon would have strongly suggested that the path to prosperity and success was with Babylon's gods.

Repeatedly, Daniel and the other young men from Jerusalem who were with him were pressed to conform and obey.

- They were expected to eat the king's food and drink — food and drink which had probably been sacrificed to idols.
- They were given new names which were associated with pagan gods.

- They were educated in the arts of the Babylonian magicians and enchanters.
- They were expected to worship the image of gold created by the king.
- They were expected to follow an edict declaring that no one was to pray to any god except the king for 30 days.

When we are in contexts in which the successful people around us are all serving the same idols, we will feel pressure to conform and obey. It is easy to think: "That's just what successful people do, or happy people do, or well-connected people do, or the people with influence do."

This is why the example of Daniel and his friends is so remarkable. Everything was pressing them to conform and to worship the gods of the Babylonians. When Daniel's friends were threatened with being burned alive for not bowing to an image of gold, here was their response.

¹⁶... "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. ¹⁸But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

Daniel 3:16-18

Our idols demand that we obey and conform.

- **Whom are you trying to please?**
- **What are you giving your time, energy, and money to?**
- **Whose unwritten rules are you following?**
- **Whose values are you embracing?**
- **Whom do you fear disappointing?**

Moses told the Israelites:

¹⁹... Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Deuteronomy 30:19-20

Only one God will bring us freedom. Any other thing that we make ultimate is an idol that will eventually bring destruction to our lives.

Living for the True God

Most of us are not intentionally devoting ourselves to some idol or substitute god. It happens unconsciously. How do we then abandon these false idols and faithfully love, trust, and obey the true God?

1. We must deliberately choose to fix our eyes on God.

There are some ways in which our hearts are not nearly as mysterious as we think. Suppose you were to keep your favorite snack on your desk right next to your computer. How long do you think it would be before you ate it? 20 minutes? 10 minutes? Marketers know this. That's why they spend significant money to get their product before our eyes.

Ancient people also recognized this. This is one of the reasons they fashioned idols. They wanted something physical on which to focus their worship. We can strengthen our desire for something just by regularly putting our attention on it.

This is why we see the command to put our attention on God all throughout the Scriptures. The apostle Paul writes:

¹Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Colossians 3:1-3

Attending Sunday services is important. We need to come together with a body of people to put our attention on God in worship and to let his word fill our hearts. We need to regularly “taste and see that the Lord is good.”¹ Privately, we need to turn your attention to God in worship and prayer every day.

2. We need to engage the Scriptures more deeply.

Knowledge and faith are not opposed to one another; they are connected. If we have only a superficial knowledge of the Scriptures, our trust in God will wither over time. It is very difficult for our hearts to hold on to something that our minds do not really believe. Understanding deepens faith.

3. We need to walk in community.

Even the great prophet Elijah began to despair when he thought no one else around him was living for God. (See 1 Kings 19.) If we try to live for God by ourselves in the midst of a culture that worships money, power, image, and sex, we will find it very difficult. God did not intend for us to live this way. Freedom is not something we can maintain by ourselves. Isolated people are vulnerable people. But community brings strength.

Have you been able to identify anything that might be functioning as an idol in your life? What is your plan to demolish this idol and replace it with devotion to God alone?

¹ Psalm 34:8

Chapter 6: Redeeming Sex

The subject of human sexuality is addressed throughout the Scriptures, beginning in the opening chapters of Genesis, the first book in the Bible.

¹⁸The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

²²Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

²³The man said,

*"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."*

²⁴That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

²⁵Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Genesis 2:18, 22-25

This is a remarkable passage. It's an ancient text — thousands of years old — but it still speaks to some of the most significant aspects of our human experience.

- It addresses our deep desire to share life with another human being — to really know another, and to be known.
- It alludes to the similarity yet distinctiveness of men and women — both created by God, for one another, but complementary.
- It speaks to marriage as the ultimate human relationship, surpassing even that between parent and child.

- It speaks to the possibility of being completely exposed before another person, and yet feeling no shame.
- And it speaks to sex, not merely as the fulfillment of a bodily desire, but as the uniting of two persons in a powerful bond.

Sex is a central component in marriage, the most profound of human relationships. Sex, like marriage, is God's idea. At different times in the history of the church, this very basic reality has been forgotten. But an obvious corollary of the biblical doctrine of creation is that it is God who ultimately designed our bodies, our brains, our nervous system, and our hormones.

The Scriptures also indicate that God created sex not just for procreation, but as a gift to human beings. God wants married couples to have sex. He is not down on sex, or even neutral about sex. He encourages it. Consider, for example, Proverbs 5.

*¹⁸ May your fountain be blessed,
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.*

*¹⁹ A loving doe, a graceful deer—
may her breasts satisfy you always,
may you ever be intoxicated with her love.*

Proverbs 5:18-19

Unfortunately, the church has lost sight of this reality at various times. Consider this summary of some of the church's missteps with regards to sex.

In the succeeding centuries church authorities issued edicts forbidding sex on Thursdays, the day of Christ's arrest; on Fridays, the day of his death; on Saturdays, in honor of the Blessed Virgin; and on Sundays in honor of the departed saints. Wednesdays sometimes made the list too, as did the 40-day fast periods before Easter, Christmas, and Pentecost, and also feast days and days of the Apostles, as well as the days of female impurity. The list

escalated until, as John Boswell has estimated, only 44 days a year remained available for marital sex.

Philip Yancey, Rumors of Another World¹

Some of these errors cropped up within the first few decades of the church's existence. At the church in Corinth, for example, some people embraced the idea that a truly spiritual person should abstain from sex, even if married. Since God created sex to be a central component of the marriage relationship, this led to a variety of problems and prompted Paul to give the following instructions.

³The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. ⁵Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

1 Corinthians 7:3-5

God has provided an entire book of the Bible devoted to the subject of physical intimacy and romance: the Song of Songs. Over the centuries, some people in the church have attempted some rather amusing allegorical interpretations of this book in an effort to avoid reading this text for what it is: a celebration of love, marriage, sex, and romance. The church should not be embarrassed about what God is clearly not embarrassed about.

When we don't understand sex to be a gift from God and when we don't engage what the Scriptures have to say on the subject, it is very easy for us to lose our way. Because sex is such a powerful act, wrong perspectives and practices can quickly take us to a place of deep pain and darkness. The Scriptures address two important flawed perspectives on sex.

- 1. Sex is just another appetite that we should fulfill however we see fit.**

Paul writes the following to the church in Corinth.

¹²"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything. ¹³You say, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both." The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. ¹⁵Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." ¹⁷But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

¹⁸Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. ¹⁹Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

The Corinthians, along with many others influenced by Greek philosophy, downplayed the significance of the human body. They embraced a dualism that viewed the spiritual world as superior and eternal, and the physical world as inferior, destined for destruction, and ultimately unimportant.

"What does it matter what I do with my body?" the Corinthians reasoned. "When I get hungry, I eat some food. There's nothing significant about that, especially since food and the body are ultimately going to be done away with anyway."

They applied this same logic to sex. "It's just another bodily appetite. If I visit a prostitute, what's the big deal? It's just like eating a meal."

A similar perspective permeates our culture today. "Sex is no big deal. If you desire it, and it looks appealing, go for it." Casual sex is commonplace.

In their book *Superfreakonomics*,² Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner argue that prostitution has decreased over the past century at least in part because there is a much greater supply of unpaid sex. And if engaging another human seems intimidating, there is a boundless supply of internet pornography.

Some thinkers push the envelope even further. Peter Singer of Princeton University argues that since humans are just animals, we should not even take a negative view of bestiality.

"...sex across the species barrier ceases to be an offense to our status and dignity as human beings..."

*Peter Singer, "Heavy Petting"*³

We're just animals. Sex is just an appetite. Do whatever you want.

The apostle Paul argues strongly against this perspective, making the following points in the passage from 1 Corinthians 6 referenced above.

- Firstly, our bodies are not just an insignificant and temporary aspect of our personhood. They were given to us by God to serve his purposes. In fact, Jesus died so that our bodies can be redeemed. And God will raise our bodies again after we have died, just as he raised Christ's body.
- Secondly, when we become followers of Jesus Christ, we, in our bodies, are joined with Christ himself. We become temples of the Holy Spirit. What we join our bodies to, we join Christ to.
- Thirdly, sex is not just an external, physical act. It is a profound joining of two persons. Therefore, sexual acts are not just like any other act. What we do sexually affects us deeply.

It's interesting to note what recent research has been revealing about sex and the brain. The chemical activities in our brains during sexual activity

are extremely powerful, and they can produce very powerful bonds. Psychologist Douglas Weiss, speaking to men, comments:

"Whatever you're beholding at the point of sexual release you literally glue to, attach to, hunger for, and will crave again."

Douglas Weiss, Conquer Series⁴

Some men experience this so strongly through pornography that they lose or have trouble developing desire for their wives. They've bonded to images on a screen.

Similarly, when a woman has skin-to-skin contact with a man during voluntary sexual activity, the hormone-induced bonding she experiences with her partner is similar to the bonding a nursing mother experiences with her child. Sex produces a powerful emotional connection. This is part of the reason why women sometimes return to men who have treated them poorly. They have bonded with them emotionally through sexual activity.

In 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul argues that even more is going on. The bonds formed with our bodies are not just physical and chemical. They can be spiritual. It is interesting how frequently sexual activity is associated with idolatry in the Old Testament. The great king Solomon, as he grew older, turned his heart to other gods. What was his path to idolatry? The women he bonded with sexually.

An earlier episode is recorded in the book of Numbers.

¹While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, ²who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. ³So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them.

Numbers 25:1-3

Notice the key components of what's going on here: The men are engaging in sexual immorality connected with idolatry and the end result is that Israel is "yoked" to some demonically inspired false god.

Sexual immorality affects us spiritually. In fact, the use of pornography correlates with an increase in religious doubts. Sex is not just about fulfilling a bodily appetite. There is much more going on.

Why are sexual acts so significant? What boundaries has God established for sexual activity? What consequences can follow from violating these boundaries?

2. Sex will save us.

A second false perspective on sex goes somewhat in the opposite direction. This is the idea that sex will save us. It will give our lives meaning. It will provide what we most long for. Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, wrote:

"Remove the constraints and prohibitions which now hinder the release of inner energies (i.e. sexual energies), [and] most of the larger evils of society will perish."

"Through sex, mankind will attain the great spiritual illumination which will transform the world, and light up the only path to an earthly paradise."

Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*⁵

It has been almost 100 years since Sanger wrote those words, and it is abundantly clear that greater sexual "freedom" has not ushered in an earthly paradise. Sex is a central component of the marriage relationship, but sex and romance will not save us.

In a Pulitzer prize winning book, author Ernest Becker writes:

The failure of romantic love as a solution to human problems is so much a part of modern man's frustration. . . . No human relationship can bear the burden of godhood. . . . However much we may idealize and idolize him [the love partner], he inevitably reflects earthly decay and imperfection. . . . After all, what is it that we want when we elevate the love partner to this position? We want to be rid of our faults, of our feeling of nothingness. We want to be justified, to know our existence has not been in vain. We

want redemption—nothing less. Needless to say, human partners cannot give this.

Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*⁶

How, practically, do people look for sex and romance to “save” them? Why is this problematic?

Sex as a Signpost

The Scriptures teach that sex, romance, and marriage, as great as these gifts are, are actually signposts to something greater. The apostle Paul writes:

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... ²⁸In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰for we are members of his body. ³¹“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³²This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:25, 28-32

The intimacy we experience with another human being through sex and marriage is not how we will “find” ourselves, experience enlightenment, or be set free. But that intimacy is a signpost to the relationship that can accomplish those things — a relationship with Jesus Christ.

On one occasion Jesus discussed marriage and the afterlife with a group of religious leaders. In the middle of this discussion Jesus declared:

At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

Matthew 22:30

Sometimes engaged couples hear these words of Jesus and are a little bothered. “What do you mean we won’t be married forever? We love each other. All I want is to be married to him (or to her).” But marriage is not the ultimate experience. Romance is not the ultimate experience. Sex is not the ultimate experience. The joy, excitement, and intimacy we experience through the marriage relationship is a foretaste of the relationship we will experience with Christ and all of his people.

In a passage concerning marriage and, more specifically, whether or not two people should get married, the apostle Paul rather suddenly zooms out to give us a broader perspective on life in the era in which we are now living.

²⁹What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; ³⁰those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; ³¹those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

This life is not the end. Sex, romance, and marriage are not the final goals. Marriage is a signpost.

And because marriage is a signpost, it can play a greater role than our personal happiness. All of us who marry hope that our marriages will be full of love, delight, and true partnership. But sometimes God calls us to demonstrate the love and sacrifice of Christ toward a spouse that has become unresponsive, difficult, or unkind. Sometimes we are called to imitate our God who has often loved a wayward people.

Sex will not save us. But in the context of the marriage relationship, it can point us toward the one who can.

Only Jesus can set us free. If you have been living in sexual or relational dysfunction, you can find forgiveness, healing, and wholeness in Christ.

Are there any practices or perspectives on sex that you need to change? Explain.

¹ Yancey, Philip, *Rumors of Another World*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

² Levitt, Steven D., and Dubner, Stephen J., *Superfreakonomics* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009).

³ Singer, Peter, "Heavy Petting", *Prospect Magazine* (April 2001).

⁴ *Conquer Series*, Volume 1, KingdomWorks Studios.

⁵ Sanger, Margaret, *The Pivot of Civilization*, (New York: Brentano's Publishers, 1922).

⁶ Becker, Ernest, *The Denial of Death*, (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1973).

Chapter 7: Defeating Darkness

So far in this study we have examined five obstacles to freedom.

- Voices from our past
- Unforgiveness toward others
- Sinful behaviors
- Wrong gods
- A disordered sexual life

In this chapter we are going to examine a subject that is often neglected or even completely disregarded in our cultural context: the influence of demonic spirits. Passages like the following are typical in the New Testament Gospels.

²¹[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²²The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. ²³Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, ²⁴"What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

²⁵"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" ²⁶The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

²⁷The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him." ²⁸News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Mark 1:21-28

The Fascinating History of the Cure for Scurvy

The story of the discovery, loss, and re-discovery of the cure for the deadly disease of scurvy is a powerful example of how very real remedies to human conditions (such as deliverance from demonic spirits) can sometimes slip out of view.

Scurvy is an extremely painful disease that begins with swelling of the gums, swelling of the arms and legs, and pain and discoloration throughout the body. If untreated, scurvy can lead to death. At different moments in human history, this disease has wiped out large numbers of explorers, sailors, and, perhaps surprisingly, the infants of upper class families.

Scurvy is actually very easy to cure. It is caused by a lack of Vitamin C in the diet. As soon as a person's Vitamin C is restored to a normal level, the disease subsides. Human beings, however, don't naturally produce Vitamin C, so we have to get this nutrient from the foods that we consume. Eating a moderate amount of fresh foods, particularly oranges or lemons, will provide more than enough Vitamin C to prevent scurvy. Although people living in the late 15th century were not aware of Vitamin C, some sailors and explorers had already discovered this cure for scurvy. But over the following two centuries, this remedy was often forgotten or ignored.

In 1747, Scottish physician James Lind was the first to perform careful experiments that clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of citrus in dealing with scurvy. But it was still another 40 years before the Royal Navy in Britain fully integrated this cure into the diets of their sailors. By 1799, a daily allotment of lemon juice was required for all sailors out at sea longer than two weeks. Scurvy was effectively eradicated.

Then followed an interesting series of developments. Firstly, steam ships began replacing traditional sailing vessels, and so travel times were considerably shortened, making the concern over scurvy less serious. Secondly, in 1860, the British navy began using West Indian limes rather than lemons from the Mediterranean. These limes do not have nearly as much Vitamin C as lemons have. Thirdly, the lime juice the navy was serving was pumped through copper tubing and was stored in open air

tanks. As it turns out, Vitamin C breaks down quickly when it is exposed to light, heat, air, and, especially, copper. Fourthly, scientists were beginning to experience a paradigm shift in their understanding of the causes of disease. They were discovering that many sicknesses were caused by the presence of some form of bacteria.

So what resulted? In a growing number of cases, the lime juice on British ships was proving ineffective in preventing scurvy, and the newer scientific paradigms were suggesting a different underlying cause for the disease. Although citrus had earlier proved to be completely effective in dealing with the disease, the evidence now seemed to be pointing in a different direction. And so sailors and explorers stopped using citrus. And on several famous expeditions in the 1900s, scores of explorers once again died from scurvy.

Then, almost by accident, the cure for scurvy was rediscovered during some experiments on guinea pigs, which happen to be one of the few mammals that don't naturally produce Vitamin C. In 1930, Vitamin C was definitively proven to be the key factor in preventing scurvy.

This is a particularly interesting story because it reminds us that, on occasion, a unique combination of factors can produce a climate in which causes and cures of particular conditions can be lost or ignored. This is the case regarding the modern attitude toward demonic spirits. We know so much more about the causes of disease and psychological disorders that we think an older method of dealing with certain human experiences is either irrelevant or completely misguided. But we should not be so quick to dismiss the reality and relevance of the spiritual world.

Demonic Activity in the New Testament

Jesus drew huge crowds in Galilee and Judea, in part, because of his effectiveness in dealing with demonic spirits. Jesus' disciples also confronted demonic spirits and helped people who were experiencing spiritual oppression. This engagement of demonic spirits continued well after the time of Jesus and his disciples into the life of the early church.

Tertullian, a leader in the church around 200 AD, provides an interesting example. In his defense of the Christian faith to the Roman rulers he writes very boldly about the ability of Christians in his day to take authority over demons. He goes so far as to say:

...if they (i.e. the demons) would not confess, in their fear of lying to a Christian, that they were demons, then and there shed the blood of that most impudent follower of Christ.

Tertullian, Apology

That's quite the test for genuine faith! If demons don't confess their true identity in a Christian's presence, that person is not a genuine Christian and might as well be killed on the spot! Tertullian, of course, is just trying to make a point. He wasn't actually suggesting that these people be killed. But what we should note is that Tertullian considered confrontation with demonic spirits to be commonplace for the Christian. In fact, exorcism became a regular part of the preparation for baptism in the early centuries of the church.

Is it possible that we're neglecting a reality that affects all of our lives? The New Testament speaks regularly to our conflict with dark spirits. James writes:

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

James 4:7

Jesus concludes the prayer he taught his disciples with these words:

*And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.*

Matthew 6:13

What Are Demons?

Demons are spiritual beings who are in rebellion against God. They have cut themselves off from the ultimate source of goodness, truth, joy, love,

and life. As a result, demons generally work to oppose the will of God, to separate people from God and from one another, and to bring about destruction and death. We find examples of this sort of demonic behavior throughout the New Testament. Some of these examples are fairly extreme. Consider the following passage in the Gospel of Mark.

¹They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. ²When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. ⁴For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

Mark 5:1-5

Because this man's case is so acute, his example clarifies some of the ways demons influence people. Observe the following.

- The man lived away from community in a place associated with death.
- He didn't sleep much, but was restless and tormented.
- He engaged in self-destructive behavior, literally cutting himself with stones.
- And he possessed extraordinary physical strength, which he used in his confrontations with other people.

Most examples of demonic influence are not so severe, but we often see the same effects:

- Isolation
- Restlessness and torment
- Self-loathing
- Resistance toward other people.

Sometimes demons work much more subtly. We find a very interesting example in the life of Peter. Matthew writes:

²¹From 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.

²²Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

²³Jesus 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."

Matthew 16:21-23

What's going on here? Jesus is explaining the course that the Father has charted for him — a course marked with suffering and death — which will ultimately lead to salvation for human beings. This is completely at odds with the path Peter has been imagining. Peter cannot accept that sort of destiny for the Messiah. In his understanding, the Messiah is supposed to be a conqueror, and, if necessary, Peter is ready to bear the sword to help usher in the Messiah's kingdom. Peter is so angered by what Jesus says that he pulls Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him.

Jesus responds by indicating that Peter's thoughts and actions are not from God, they are demonic.

"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."

Matthew 16:23

Notice something very important here. The path that Peter wanted was one that would obviously appeal to many of our human concerns.

- Peter wanted a victorious Messiah.
- He wanted a path without suffering and death.

- He wanted to reign with Jesus over Israel's enemies.
- He wanted the acclaim and acceptance of the people.

The devil will often attempt to gain influence in our lives by coaxing us to put our own will and desires above the will of God.

This was how the devil initially tempted Jesus in the wilderness. (See Matthew 4.) The Spirit of God led Jesus into a time of fasting, and the devil met him there, saying (in effect), "Oh, you look hungry, Jesus. You can do something about that. Turn this stone into bread. Take care of yourself. Satisfy your desires."

The devil whispers those same thoughts to us.

You can be successful like those other people. Why should they get all the attention? Nobody will notice if you fabricate those numbers.

You don't have to be alone. I have a relationship for you.

Don't you want to feel good? You deserve it.

There is nothing inherently wrong with success, the desire for relationship, or feeling good. But demons work to manipulate these desires so that we will make them ultimate and act contrary to God's purpose and will. And when we set ourselves in opposition to God, we invite destruction into our lives. This is what demons desire.

Once demons get access into our lives they can cause physical maladies. They can torment us mentally and emotionally. They can cause relational discord. They can induce fear or paranoia. Demons want to bring about total devastation.

Describe some of the ways demons may attempt to influence us. Can you think of any times in your life when you suspect you were being harassed or manipulated by demonic activity?

How Do Demons Gain Access Into Our Lives?

This is an important question. The Scriptures make it clear that demons try to persuade our thinking and gain influence in our lives on a regular basis. It's not unlike the bombardment of advertisements intended to grab our attention and influence our spending habits. At any given time there are many voices trying to influence our perspective and behavior.

There are several primary avenues through which demons can gain significant access into our lives. Many of these access points have already been examined in this booklet, so we will just touch on them briefly here.

1. Devotion to a false idol

Judas Iscariot infamously betrayed Jesus. It's interesting to note that his love for money played a role. In Matthew we read:

¹⁴Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests ¹⁵and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Matthew 26:14-16

Consider also how Satan tempted Jesus.

⁸...the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹“All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

Matthew 4:8-9

Demons can gain influence in our lives when we devote ourselves to money, power, fame, or any other false idol.

2. Unforgiveness and relational discord

The apostle Paul writes:

²⁶“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷and do not give the devil a foothold.

Ephesians 4:26-27

Unforgiveness is no trivial matter. Paul tells us that when we do not resolve conflict with our brothers and sisters we give room for the devil to operate.

3. Participation in the occult

Some years ago a young woman reached out to me because of several terrifying experiences she had. This young woman was a very matter-of-fact sort of person, not at all prone to imaginative story-telling.

She relayed to me that in the night, while sleeping, she felt a terrifying presence in her room that caused her to wake up suddenly. When she opened her eyes she saw what looked like a female face hovering a few feet above her bed. This entity spoke to her, frightening her deeply. After this happened a second time, she reached out to me.

I asked her several questions to try to find out what might have created an opening for this sort of demonic harassment. When I asked her about her experience with the occult she said, “Well, this past week I began a new job. I mentioned to my new boss that I had a date lined up and she told me, ‘Oh, let me give you a tarot reading to see how it’s going to go.’ I didn’t want to rock the boat with this new boss, so I agreed. That was a couple of days before these experiences began.”

I led her in a prayer renouncing her participation in this activity, we addressed a few other things in her life, and she didn’t experience the problem again.

The apostle Paul warned the Corinthians against participating in the cultic meals at pagan temples saying:

...the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.

1 Corinthians 10:20

Participation in the occult can open up a person to the influence of demons. So, too, can the practice of other religions. Many religions explicitly embrace the worship of other deities or one's ancestors. These activities are often associated with demons in the Scriptures.

4. Illicit sexual activity

In his book *Surprised by the Voice of God*,¹ Old Testament scholar and pastor Jack Deere describes an interaction he had with a young woman who came to him suffering from chronic nightmares. As it turns out, three months earlier the young woman had become intoxicated and had sex with a man she later discovered was deeply involved in the occult. Her nightmares began the next day.

Sex is not a trivial matter. It affects our bodies, our minds, and our spirits.

5. Habitual sin

The apostle Paul writes:

Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?

Romans 6:16

6. False teaching or the acceptance of falsehoods concerning our own identity

Jesus said:

When [the devil] lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

John 8:44

If a demonic spirit can deceive us into believing things that are not true about reality or about ourselves, he can manipulate our behavior.

7. Traumatic experiences

The devil does not play fair. He will take advantage of traumatic experiences in our lives to paralyze us with fear, shame, paranoia, or a host of other dark emotions.

Do you suspect that demons have gained influence in your life through any of the above avenues? Explain. If so, have you done anything to address these “open doors” for demonic activity?

How Do We Walk In Freedom From Demonic Spirits?

We walk in freedom by aligning ourselves with Jesus Christ. Paul unpacks this in his letter to the Ephesians. The ancient city of Ephesus was a center for the worship of the pagan goddess Artemis. Ephesus housed a massive temple (four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens!) dedicated to the goddess Artemis. This temple was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The city of Ephesus also had a strong association with magic and sorcery.

Not surprisingly, then, the apostle Paul addresses the issue of demonic powers in several places in his letter to the church in Ephesus. In the first chapter he writes about the power available to believers through Jesus Christ saying:

¹⁹ ... That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰[God] exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²²And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Ephesians 1:18-23

Jesus has authority over all things. Therefore, when an individual aligns himself with Jesus Christ and invokes his name, demons have to flee. We can speak to demons and command them to go in the name of Jesus Christ.

To the ancients, this was one of the most striking things about Jesus — that his name could be used to subdue evil spirits. After Jesus sent out a group of disciples to minister in nearby towns and villages, Luke writes:

The seventy-two [disciples] returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."

Luke 10:17

In the last chapter of Ephesians, the apostle Paul explains in more detail how we can align ourselves with Jesus and win the battle with demons. He writes:

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

Ephesians 6:10-18

Note several key elements of this "spiritual armor."

- **A complete dependence upon Christ.** We are to be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Our authority over demons is found in Christ, and *only* in Christ.

- **Truth.** The devil is the father of lies. We confront lies with a commitment to truth and the Word of God.
- **Righteousness.** When we sin, we make ourselves vulnerable to the influence of demons. But the Lord protects the righteous.
- **The Gospel.** The Gospel (or “Good News”) is the message that we are reconciled with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Embracing the Gospel changes our posture toward God and other people. We are accepted. Our weapons are love and forgiveness. We engage others not as enemies, but with a message of hope and reconciliation.
- **Faith.** We trust God in the middle of every conflict. We will not look to false gods to save us or protect us because we know the Lord will fight for us.
- **Salvation.** We have a new identity now. We belong to God. He has saved us and we will live with him forever. Even death cannot take this from us, and this assurance gives us confidence.
- **Prayer.** God listens to the prayers of his people. He will respond when we cry out to him.

Whether we like it or not, we are in a spiritual battle. We have a very real, but unseen, enemy who wants to take us captive and destroy us.

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:57

How can we practically employ the “spiritual armor” described above in our conflict with demonic spirits?

¹ Deere, Jack S., *Surprised by the Voice of God*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996).

Chapter 8: Walking In Freedom

In this final chapter, we will outline eight practical steps to freedom. You may have already taken some of these steps in earlier chapters, or at other times in your life. There is no harm in reaffirming steps you have taken in the past, and, often, there is great benefit to renewing our commitments. You will find this process to be much more effective if you take these steps with the assistance of other mature followers of Christ. God does not intend for us to follow Christ in isolation.

Step 1: Repent from Sin

Take out a sheet of paper or a journal and prepare to write down your thoughts. After you have done so, pray the following prayer from Psalm 139.

- ²³ *Search me, God, and know my heart;
 test me and know my anxious thoughts.*
- ²⁴ *See if there is any offensive way in me,
 and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Psalm 139:23-24

As you maintain a posture of prayer, ask the Lord to reveal your sin. Write down specific sins or areas of sin as the Holy Spirit brings them to your mind. Be as specific as possible. As each sin or area of sin comes to light, take time to verbally repent and ask the Lord for forgiveness. If you are not sure what sort of things the Lord considers sinful, you might reflect on passages like Matthew 5-7, Romans 1:18-32, and Galatians 5:13-26.

When you have finished repenting from the sins that the Holy Spirit has brought to your attention, pray slowly through Psalm 51, a psalm of repentance.

Step 2: Renounce Participation in Other Religions and Idolatrous Practices

The Scriptures associate the practice of other religions and participation in the occult with demonic spirits. As we seek to worship the true God and completely dissociate ourselves from demonic influences, it is helpful to specifically renounce all previous participation in other religions and unbiblical spiritual practices.

Take a moment to pray and ask the Lord to remind you of previous experiences with other religions or the occult. Then take a few minutes to verbally renounce your participation in these religions or activities.

Step 3: Receive Forgiveness and Salvation Through Jesus Christ

The Gospel of John tells us:

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

John 3:16-17

The night before he was crucified, while celebrating Passover with his disciples, Jesus took a cup in his hands, gave thanks, and told his disciples:

²⁷ ...“Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Matthew 26:27-28

Jesus gave his life on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. When we repent of our sins and place our trust in Jesus, God forgives us, cleanses us, and raises us to new life with Jesus. He no longer associates us with our sins. He considers us completely righteous and pure in his sight.

⁸ *The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
 slow to anger, abounding in love.*
⁹ *He will not always accuse,
 nor will he harbor his anger forever;*
¹⁰ *he does not treat us as our sins deserve
 or repay us according to our iniquities.*
¹¹ *For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
 so great is his love for those who fear him;*
¹² *as far as the east is from the west,
 so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*
¹³ *As a father has compassion on his children,
 so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him...*

Psalms 103:8-13

¹Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ²because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.

Romans 8:1-2

Take a moment to receive God's forgiveness, and to give thanks for what Jesus has done for you on the cross.

Step 4: Be Filled with the Holy Spirit

God does not intend for us to live as disciples of Jesus Christ out of our own strength. He has provided his Holy Spirit to sanctify us, to comfort us, and to empower us to fulfill God's mission.

In Ephesians Paul writes:

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit...

Ephesians 5:18

Ask God to freshly fill you with his Holy Spirit. If you have never experienced the empowering presence of God's Spirit, ask a Spirit-filled believer to pray for you.

Step 5: Embrace Your New Identity

Jesus accepts everyone who sincerely comes to him. But he does not leave us as we are. He changes some fundamental aspects of our identity and status, and he initiates a process of transformation that will continue throughout our lives. Take some time to reflect on the following important passages. Read them out loud, slowly, but with conviction. Read them again, putting some of the key verses in the first person. For example, 1 John 3:1 would become, "What great love the Father has lavished on me, that I should be called a child of God! And that is what I am!"

- 1 John 3:1-3
- Romans 6
- Romans 8:28-39
- 1 Peter 2:9-10
- Ephesians 1-2

Step 6: Extend Forgiveness to Other People

Paul writes:

²⁶"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷and do not give the devil a foothold.

Ephesians 4:26-27

Harboring anger, unforgiveness, or bitterness can create opportunities for demonic spirits to influence our lives.

Take a moment to pray, asking God to reveal to you anyone you need to forgive. Being as specific as you can, verbally forgive these individuals as you pray. If you are aware of anyone who has unsuccessfully sought your forgiveness in the past, you may need to seek out that individual to extend forgiveness to him or her in person.

Also take note of anyone from whom you may need to ask forgiveness. Pursue reconciliation at the first available opportunity.

If you find this step difficult, you may find it helpful to review the material in chapter 2.

Step 7: Identify Wrong Beliefs and Confront Them with the Truth

Often we do not recognize that some of our thoughts concerning ourselves, other people, the past, or the future are actually demonic in origin. After rebuking Jesus when Jesus predicted his suffering and rejection, Peter was certainly surprised to hear Jesus tell him:

“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.”

Matthew 16:23

We have to address demonically inspired beliefs with the truth of God's Word. For each of the categories below, ask God to reveal to you any wrong beliefs you may be entertaining. Then, write down specific verses from the Bible that refute these incorrect beliefs. Confess and meditate on the verses you have identified.

- Self-identity
- The future
- The past
- Relationships with other people
- God's disposition toward you
- Fears of various kinds

Step 8: Receive Healing from Traumatic Experiences

As Jesus was beginning his public ministry, he used these words of the prophet Isaiah to describe his mission.

- ¹⁸ *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,*
¹⁹ *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Luke 4:18-19

Jesus does not abandon us in our brokenness and pain. In fact, the Scriptures specifically say that he is near to the brokenhearted. Though we may not understand why God would allow the traumatic things we have experienced, he was actually present with us in the middle of our suffering, even if we did not perceive it.

Ask God to bring to mind any traumatic experiences that may still be influencing your life. These might include intense moments of sadness, shame, fear, loneliness, or rage. As you pray, ask God to help you receive his healing from these painful experiences. Ask him to fill your heart and mind with his perspective, his love, and his truth.

You will greatly benefit by taking this step with the support, prayer, and counsel of a mature follower of Jesus. Ask God to lead you to someone whom you can trust and who can come alongside of you as you take this step.

Step 9: Command Demonic Spirits to Leave in the Name of Jesus Christ

As a regular part of his public ministry, Jesus commanded demonic spirits to depart from those suffering under their influence. Jesus' followers also invoked his name to cure people from demonic oppression. If you had unusual difficulty completing any of the previous steps, you may be experiencing demonic oppression.

Talk with a mature follower of Jesus Christ about what you are experiencing. Ask him or her to help you gain freedom from the presence of demonic spirits by commanding them to depart in the name of Jesus.

Walking In Freedom

In Luke 11:24-26, Jesus warned that demonic spirits can return to those who have previously been set free. But if we stay aligned with Christ through faith, obedience, and love, we have nothing to fear.

"...if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

John 8:36

