



living waters

AbideTM
MINISTRIES

ABIDING IN THE VINE: UNITY

Enjoying Exceptional Marriages/Exceptional Lives

WORKBOOK



Also used as

Small Group Leader Guide

ABIDING IN THE VINE: UNITY
ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL MARRIAGES
AND ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL LIFE

WORKBOOK

RICHARD T. CASE



ABIDING IN THE VINE: UNITY: ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL MARRIAGES AND ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL LIFE WORKBOOK

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TABLE OF CONTENTS



Introductory Session	1
Session One: Abiding in the Vine.	7
Session Two: God’s Design for Our Lives and Marriages	17
Session Three: Christ Provides a Remedy for Humanity’s Fall	29
Session Four: Forgiveness	49
Session Five: Unity.	57
Session Six: Led by the Spirit/Answers to Prayer	73
Session Seven: How Do We Abide? What is the Key to Receiving This Fruit?.	87
Session Eight: Exercise in Abiding— What Does the Father have to Say to You?	101

To my wife, Linda, who has always had the desire and heart to Abide in the Vine! She is an incredible Intercessory prayer warrior, and she has always made it a priority in our marriage—to walk in Unity together with God and walk together with one another underneath God's faithful guidance. This blessing of partnership and dedication to hearing God's words has continually led us to God's best and none better! What a joy and a privilege to have a mate who believes this, lives it out every day, and encourages me to live it out every day. Our life is truly exceptional; and we have continually been on one grand adventure, step by step—in Christ!

We together also wish to honor our children; Michelle, Peter and his wife, Shara; and our grandchildren: Joshua and Aidan. They too have learned to Abide and walk with God and go to unity as they receive and follow God's will. We as a family get to see God at work, and how wonderful it is to experience this process of life together. They are all such an inspiration. Seeing Joshua and Aidan thrive in their walk with God as young adults has been exciting and fun to participate in.

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ABIDING IN THE VINE: UNITY

ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL MARRIAGES
AND ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL LIFE



INTRODUCTORY SESSION



INTRODUCTION



“Throughout our lives we will be confronted with daily decisions. When we abide, God will reveal all His beautiful and wonderful plans through these decisions and will do so in a way that we can fully understand them.”

Most believers tend to fall into one of two categories: those who attempt to spend time in God’s Word or do devotions on a regular basis, and those who think they are too busy to do so. There are always lots of excuses for being too busy. We’ll explore some of the excuses we give for not spending time in God’s Word but will counter that with the abundant life that is available to you once you begin ABIDING. Those of you who do ABIDE and spend regular time in the Word will find this study can help bring you to an even deeper level of study and understanding. The church has taught believers how to study the Bible and learn about God in Christian principles, but rarely has it taught believers how to abide and experience the abundant life that comes through THE FRUIT of abiding.

I will show you what it means to be led by The Holy Spirit, how to let the Spirit be your guide. (John 16: 13-15) He will take you into the depths of personal abiding—an experience you will want to enjoy for the rest of your life. I also will show you that it is possible to fully understand and walk into God’s personal will for you through a beautiful process called unity. This will be especially beneficial both in your married life or with your close personal friends, if you are single.

Throughout our lives we will be confronted with daily decisions. When we abide, God will reveal all His beautiful and wonderful plans through these decisions and will do so in a way that we can fully understand them. We don’t have to guess at them or wonder if we will have to wait and learn from our mistakes. He will show us His perfect will. The good news is that any mistakes or issues that we currently are experiencing can be restored based on His sovereignty. We just have to be willing to abide and follow Him. This course will show you the importance of abiding, how to abide, and how to live out the rest of your life with the joy of abiding and being led by the Spirit. By the way, there is no requirement for prior education or spiritual maturity—it is available for everybody, with the only requirement being a desire to abide. We encourage you to work through each verse and apply it to your personal situations. Stay through the entire course so you can learn to abide fully. Then receive the joy and beauty of this lifestyle throughout the rest of your life. From this point forward, it will dramatically change you as you learn to experience the fullness of God in His plan for abundant life for you.

Let’s start with an exercise.

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 133:1 and 3:
“Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity . . . for there the Lord commands the blessing.”

- Write out any decisions and issues that you are facing. These will provide a context to apply to your own life’s circumstances as you move through the course.

- Write out the big decisions you are facing, as well as current issues and on-going areas of conflict/disagreement in your marriage or personal relationships. What questions do you have regarding God’s will for any of these?

- Now, before we begin the study, perform the following evaluation of your marriage or of your life if you are single. This is to be entirely confidential, not to be shared with the group—only with your spouse or with a trusted friend if you so desire. This will provide context for the study and reveal areas in your life where God may have speak to you as priorities in your life for Him to bring healing, restoration or continued growth.

COUPLES: What is the truth about your marriage currently? Rate the following from 1 to 5

CURRENT EVALUATION OF MARRIAGE: (1 being best and could not be better, 5 being worst).

1. Emotional life (Excited just to be together)	1	2	3	4	5
2. Physical life (Intimacy, sexual enjoyment)	1	2	3	4	5
3. Spiritual life (Growing in Christ, together)	1	2	3	4	5
4. Communications (Listening, talking, connecting)	1	2	3	4	5
5. Caring/compassion (Each best cheerleader)	1	2	3	4	5
6. Sharing life together (A priority)	1	2	3	4	5
7. Exceptionalness of our marriage	1	2	3	4	5

INTRODUCTION

SINGLES: What is the truth about your life currently? Rate the following from 1 to 5 (1 being best and could not be better, 5 being worst).
CURRENT EVALUATION OF LIFE:

1. Emotional life (Excited about daily life)	1	2	3	4	5
2. Physical life (Purity, exercise)	1	2	3	4	5
3. Spiritual life (Growing in Christ)	1	2	3	4	5
4. Communications (Good listener, communicator)	1	2	3	4	5
5. Caring/compassion (Empathy, support for friends)	1	2	3	4	5
6. Sharing life with family/friends (a priority)	1	2	3	4	5
7. Exceptionalness of my life	1	2	3	4	5

- Now, let's perform an evaluation of how well you make decisions at the moment. For couples, evaluate your spouse—how well does he/she work at unity with you as you process things together to deal with issues or make decisions. Again, this is confidential not to be shared with the group. This information will give a context for you and your spouse as you work to process things together. It will also keep you on the same page as you both seek God's will to make decisions and learn to use unity as a wonderful tool in the process.
- If you are single, rate your own ability to process and seek God's will and make decisions with a significant friend, family, or small group. This provides context for your own ability to process things well and seek God's will and make decisions—as you learn to do this with a friend and use unity as a wonderful tool in the process.

COUPLES: Rate the characteristics of unity in your marriage on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being best and could not be better, 5 being awful and could not be worse).

1. Level of unity with spouse:	1	2	3	4	5
2. Spouse's ability to process:					
Ability to listen	1	2	3	4	5
Ability to share emotions/feelings	1	2	3	4	5
Encouraging you to share emotions/feelings	1	2	3	4	5
Not getting defensive during discussion	1	2	3	4	5
Willingness to change position (not be stubborn)	1	2	3	4	5
Ability to discuss calmly versus argue/debate	1	2	3	4	5
Ability to discuss creative solutions	1	2	3	4	5
Ability to still enjoy your day during disagreement/difference of opinion	1	2	3	4	5

INTRODUCTION

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3. Spouse's heart's desire to seek the will of God with you | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Desire/frequency to pray together and seek God's will | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Desire/frequency to be in the Word together as you seek God's will | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

SINGLES: Rate the characteristics of unity in your relationships. On a scale of 1 to 5 rate your close friends, family, significant other (1 being best and couldn't be better, 5 being awful and could not be worse):

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Level of unity with others who are close: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. My ability to process: | | | | | |
| Ability to listen | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Ability to share emotions/feelings | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Encouraging others to share emotions/feelings | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Not getting defensive during discussion | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Willingness to change position (not be stubborn) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Ability to discuss calmly vs. argue/debate | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Ability to discuss creative solutions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Ability to still enjoy your day in middle of disagreement/difference of opinion | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. My heart's desire to seek the will of God with others: | | | | | |
| Desire/frequency to pray together and seek God's will | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Desire/frequency to be in the Word together as you seek God's will | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |



ABIDING IN THE VINE: UNITY

ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL MARRIAGES
AND ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL LIFE



SESSION ONE: ABIDING IN THE VINE



SESSION 1:

ABIDING IN THE VINE



“We have the special privilege of God within us—leading, guiding, communicating, speaking. . .”

Let’s now consider the essence of Jesus’ prime statement on Abiding so that we can understand the basic structure and key principle of Abiding:

On the night that Jesus took His disciples to the upper room and explained the new meaning of Passover/The Last Supper (what we now call Communion— taking His body and His blood as a remembrance of what He did for us at the cross) prior to His battle of self will in the Garden of Gethsemane, He summarized key spiritual truths in what is called the Upper Room Discourse (John 13, 14, 15, 16) and then shared His final prayer to the Father (John 17). Here, He spends much of this time discussing the Holy Spirit and the role He will play in the believer’s life after the resurrection—to be resident with us. We have the special privilege of God within us—leading, guiding, communicating, speaking—as we live our lives out through this special privilege. In John 15, Christ describes this relationship (Abiding) through a spiritual analogy based upon the timeless example of the vineyard, vines, and winemaking. In over 2000 years, vineyards and winemaking have not really changed much. Of course, things are now more sophisticated in measuring and charting in the vineyard, but the process still has yet to become mechanical or automated. Even today, winemaking is an art, and the veracity of the vineyard and winemaking still hold today as they did 2,000 years ago. I believe this is why Jesus used this analogy. (Linda and I took a small group on a tour to Israel and we visited Nazareth and stood at the actual communal winepress where Jesus likely crushed the grapes for his family.) Jesus used this analogy to express beautiful truths about the essence of “Abiding,” which is the basis for the relationship He intended for us: to be in and with HIM.

SESSION 1:

ABIDING IN THE VINE

Read through John 15:1-5 and answer the following questions to understand the depth of this analogy and how critical this is to the our daily Christian life in HIM:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ²Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:1-5, ESV)

ABIDING IN THE VINE: • Who is The Vine?

JOHN 15: 1-5:

- What does a vine do/provide?

- How important is this to our own spiritual growth?

- Who is The Vinedresser?

- What does a vinedresser do?

- How significant is this to the process from grapes growing to maturity and ultimately being transformed into wine?

SESSION 1:

ABIDING IN THE VINE

- Who is The Branch?

- What does a branch do?

- Why do we try to become the Vinedresser and take charge?

- What kind of branches does the Vinedresser prune? What does pruning really mean?

- Why is it necessary to prune?

- Why does the Vinedresser not leave the pruned branches on the ground but rather carry them off and burn them?

- Why is it difficult for us to be pruned back?

- If this whole process works properly, what is the result?

SESSION 1:

ABIDING IN THE VINE

- Who defines the fruit?

- Can the vine produce fruit by itself?

- Why not?

- Can the branch produce fruit by itself?

- Why not?

- What, then, is necessary for fruit to be produced?

- Why?

- What choice do we have to make?

- Does abiding happen automatically just because we are believers? Why or why not?

SESSION 1:

ABIDING IN THE VINE

- Why do you believe Christ puts it on us to make this choice?

As you have seen through processing these verses in John 15, the vine is Jesus. The Vine is the sole source and provider of our “lives”—He provides everything necessary for us to live out what He intends so that our lives can be wonderful and spectacular! The Vinedresser is the Father. He makes all the decisions during the entire process—what grapes to grow, when to water, how much to water, when to prune, how much to prune, when to harvest, how to process into wine, etc. Not a single decision is made by anyone BUT the Vinedresser. This means He makes both, the big decisions AND the everyday decisions, because He is the one who has His plan on producing the fruit that He so desires for our lives. With that in mind, we particularly need to be aware of our role as branches—to be connected to the Vine (abide). We especially aren’t trying to be the Vinedresser and make our own decisions.

“The Vine is the sole source and provider of our “lives”—He provides everything necessary for us to live out what He intends so that our lives can be wonderful and spectacular!”

Usually, though, we operate with our own plans and decisions and want God to bless these plans and decisions. However, we are to let God be the Vinedresser and surrender to his decision-making; just as the branches rely on the vine. But we must choose to abide and stay connected. As we embrace this life (as a branch), we should expect that One of the Vinedresser’s activities in our lives as a branch will be to prune us, which is nothing more than cutting back. If we aren’t pruned and simply left alone, the branches get too big. When this happens, then the sap gets consumed by the branch and never reaches the fruit, and thus there is no fruit. So the vinedresser has to cut back healthy branches so that the life of the vine flows through the branch and reaches the fruit. This is a continual process since the branch is continually growing. In this analogy, the pruning refers to the activities of our lives, which are continually expanding and thus need “cutting back.” We have to continually allow the Vinedresser to give us wisdom and insight to cut back our activities so that we can create margin and space in our lives so that we are able to allow His life to create fruit. This is a real challenge in our busy lifestyles of today.

The result He always wishes to produce in our lives through this spiritual abiding process is fruit! Fruit, more fruit, much fruit! And we cannot produce this by ourselves (although, as Christians, we certainly try). Interestingly though, God by Himself will not produce fruit as a Vine or a Vinedresser—He needs us as branches to be connected to the Vine with the Vinedresser making all the decisions to produce fruit! It’s a interconnecting process. God has set it up that we are bearing His fruit. When we choose to abide in the Vine, He chooses the fruit. No abiding means no fruit. This is why His next statement is so critical.

SESSION 1:

ABIDING IN THE VINE

Look at Christ's very strong statement in John 15:5:

⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5, ESV)

- Apart from Me, you can do _____.
- If you believe this (and since He says it, it is absolutely true), then what should our next question be?

Since He says that this abiding relationship is critical to producing fruit and that apart from Him we can do nothing, then our question is rather simple: "What must we do to learn how to abide?" This course will teach you just that. We will reveal to you the kind of life that will be provided by the vine, the type of fruit He will create, and then how to abide.

- When we think of abiding, we tend to think first of spending time in God's Word. Why do we not spend much time in the Word now?
 - too busy
 - find it difficult to understand
 - too boring
 - do a Bible study for my small group/church
 - actually get discouraged (just shows me what I can't live up to)
 - don't believe what it says
 - seems not to be true
 - doesn't seem practical to my everyday life
 - I already do a devotion every day

I disciple several executives and a lot of them do say they do the devotion every day. I then ask, "What did it say to you last week?" Often times, they simply can't remember. Last week, two days ago, yesterday, today? They can't remember. "Maybe it was something about love," they say. "Maybe I am supposed to be more loving?" In other words, they read it, it was interesting,

SESSION 1:

ABIDING IN THE VINE

they enjoyed it at the moment, but they were not abiding, not receiving it in a way that the Word was changing their lives and producing fruit. Bible study or reading the Bible is not abiding. Abiding is relationship and is a privilege we have with God, who wants and enjoys producing fruit in our lives.

As we consider the excuses noted above—all of which are valid—we also must consider the real issue: we have never experienced abiding as valuable. If I could be invisible and follow you around for two weeks, I would find out what has become valuable to you—where you spend your time and where you spend your money. You have sorted out your life where you find things valuable; and abiding in the Word is often just not valuable because you have not learned to experience just how wonderful and essential it can be. It has been difficult, disappointing, overwhelming—and certainly not valuable. Throughout this course, as you learn and experience the value of abiding, you never again will relinquish this special privilege we have and the resultant fruit we receive.

Christ then takes us to another strong statement in John 8—an if/ then statement. In scripture, when we come across this kind of statement, it is conditional; in order to receive the promised result, we must meet the condition; it is not automatic.

“You have sorted out your life where you find things valuable; and abiding in the Word is often just not valuable because you have not learned to experience just how wonderful and essential it can be.”

Re-read John 8:28–32, and 36 and answer the following questions.

²⁸So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. ²⁹And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.” ³⁰As he was saying these things, many believed in him. ³¹So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:28-32, ESV)

³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:36, ESV)

- How did Jesus operate while He functioned as a man in relation to the Father?

SESSION 1:

ABIDING IN THE VINE

- How significant is that to how we are expected to operate or behave?

- Share your thoughts about whether you think it is possible for us to operate this way? Why or why not?

- What is the “if” part of this condition?

- Based upon John 15:1–5, what do you think this means?

- If we meet this condition, what will we know?

- What does the word “know” mean?

- How significant is that to us?

SESSION 1:

ABIDING IN THE VINE

- What will the result be?

- What does this mean to you?

- What does verse 36 mean?

John 8:36:

So if the Son sets you free,
you will be free indeed.
(John 8:36, ESV)

In light of Christ telling us that apart from Him we can do “nothing,” we are called to develop a passion for abiding and a passion for pursuing truth. We are able to develop these passions because we can operate in this life as Christ operated when He lived as a human—fully dependent on hearing and doing only what the Father revealed to Him. We have this capability because we have Christ living in us through the Holy Spirit. This is why He gives us this condition—if we abide in him, we can know the truth, and it will set us free. As we develop this passion for abiding and the passion for pursuing the truth—not just intellectually knowing about the truth but experiencing the truth about all things regarding the personal circumstances of our particular lives—we will be set free. We will have a wonderful perspective of not being burdened by the normal obstacles and difficulties of life, but always knowing that we will be led by the truth into the freedom of His grand plan and larger picture for our lives—along with an abiding trust in Him and His love for us. We also will know that when He sets us free from our burdens or from those areas that affect us negatively (pornography, addictions, etc.), that freedom will not be temporary, nor will it mean that we simply manage these burdens. Instead, we will receive true transformation.

With these two passions, we will be driven to enjoy being with Him as a branch. We will keep pursuing truth and will be excited to learn all that He wishes to reveal to us. We will never be afraid of the truth because we know that His will and His desires for us are for our best—all of which are based upon the condition of abiding in His Word. What a privilege!



ABIDING IN THE VINE: UNITY

ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL MARRIAGES
AND ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL LIFE



SESSION TWO: GOD'S DESIGN FOR OUR LIVES AND MARRIAGES



SESSION 2: GOD'S DESIGN FOR OUR LIVES AND MARRIAGES



Now that we have learned that apart from Christ we can do nothing, and that abiding leads to truth and freedom, and thus, we need to learn abiding, let us turn our attention to God's original design for our lives and marriage. This will help us understand the bigger story of the fruit that He wishes to provide in our lives, since we are now living in a fallen world (which we will explore further in Session 3). God had created heaven and Earth, and man and woman to live in this perfect place with a design and purpose intended to have us enjoy exceptional living with Him eternally. We need to understand the characteristics of this design and purpose, as set forth in Genesis 1 and 2 below, as context for the type of life still available to us today (even though we now live in a fallen world).

Read through Genesis 1:26–31.

²⁶Then God said, "Let us make man^[a] in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

²⁷So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

²⁸And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

²⁹And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (Gen. 1:26-31, ESV)

SESSION 2:

GOD'S DESIGN FOR OUR LIVES AND MARRIAGES

- Who is "Us"?

- Why is it significant that neither Christ nor the Holy Spirit are created, but are eternally God?

- What fellowship have they always enjoyed eternally?

- Man and woman are made in whose image?

- What does that mean, and thus why are man and woman unique over all over creatures?

- If we are in His image, what characteristics do we then have of the Creator?

The "us" spoken of in verse 26 is the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—eternally God, three in one, all completely one God yet three distinct persons. This is difficult for us to comprehend. The key is that Christ, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not created beings, but are fully God and eternal. This will have great significance for us as we learn abiding and our capabilities to remain in the abiding relationship all the time. God created man and woman in his image, which means we were created with His characteristics and were given the privilege of living with intimate relationship with Him. When God looked at man and woman, He saw Himself—the image of Himself. Not God and not functioning as God (though characteristics of God), but created beings to live with God, enjoy God's creation, and to enjoy fellowship with God. Understand that we are comprised of three parts:

SESSION 2:

GOD'S DESIGN FOR OUR LIVES AND MARRIAGES

- Body: physical, to operate in the physical world that God created.
- Soul (in Scripture often defined as heart): the essence of us uniquely—the seat of our emotions, intellect, personality, will. Our soul will last eternally and will define us when we pass into eternity (whether in heaven or hell) and is why we will recognize each other in eternity.
- Spirit: the spiritual nature that allows us to connect with God and have an intimate relationship with Him—since He is Spirit.
 - When Adam and Eve were created, some postulate that they actually received the Holy Spirit as life was breathed into them at creation. (See Genesis 2:7 and John 20:22, which use the same phraseology of God breathing.) Others postulate that their “spiritual” dimension was “alive” with the breathed by God-given ability to have an intimate relationship with God (Genesis 2:7). We do know that when we are born again, the Holy Spirit takes up residence within us. In any event, and the most important thing to understand, is that they did have a spiritual element of their nature that gave them the ability to communicate with God and have intimate relationship with God, who is Spirit. In the garden of Eden, though, God apparently took on physical form. So, did Adam and Eve need a spiritual dimension to relate to God when He walked with them in bodily form in the garden? The key to their relationship was not their spiritual dimension but that they were sinless and so could look directly upon God in His physical form, something even Moses could not do.

His image includes man and woman having a free will, which is key to understanding the test (described below and in Session 3). Free will is not arbitrary or something created to cause us to fail, but rather a profound part of the image of God and deeply rooted in our relationship with Him. He created us to love Him and desires us to have the freedom to choose to love Him or reject Him, which is why abiding is a choice. He will never force us to abide, but always invites us to do so. We will see what a privilege it is.

- What did they, the Trinity, give to man and woman?

SESSION 2:

GOD'S DESIGN FOR OUR LIVES AND MARRIAGES

- What does dominion/authority mean?

- What does it mean to have the dominion/authority over the world?

- What else was provided to man and woman?

- What did that mean for their everyday living?

- Did they have to worry about provision or ever needing resources to farm, create, or build something?

- Why not?

- For us, in this day and age, what does provision look like?

- Does God still want to be our provider?

SESSION 2:

GOD'S DESIGN FOR OUR LIVES AND MARRIAGES

- If so, what must have to happen?

- In verse 31, as He looked at all that He had made and provided, including man and woman, how did He describe it?

- How exceptional is that?

In verse 26, God gave man and woman authority, dominion, and power over the Earth—in other words, He transferred that authority to man and woman for them to be co-creators and have dominion over this Earth that He created. While in this course, we do not go into all of the profound dimensions of this truth or what it means for us now as restored believers, this point will be important when we discuss the fall and the current condition of the world in Session 3.

Another wonderful element of God's exceptional life for Adam and Eve in Genesis 1 is that God gave plants, animals, and every conceivable natural material so that everything was already available for Adam and Eve to live on, to build, to create. They didn't have to provide anything themselves. God was their provider—and He provided everything! Today, that provision comes to us in the form of income (more than our expenses) and also means we can live in freedom. Even today, God still wants to be our provider. As was His original intention, He still wants us to have enough income so that we can live comfortably (which means it is His intention that He provides more than we spend so we can live comfortably and without financial stress. This does NOT mean he has promised each of us material wealth. Instead, it means financial freedom in line with His plan for us).

And, as Genesis 1:31 says, everything He had created was exceptionally good, over-the-top good, superlative, supernaturally good—fantastic.

In Chapter 2, we find even more detail of this exceptional creation that Adam and Eve were given. Chapter 2 is not sequential to Chapter 1 but does go into further detail of that which God created in Chapter 1.

SESSION 2:

GOD'S DESIGN FOR OUR LIVES AND MARRIAGES

Read through Genesis 2:8–25.

⁸And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.

⁹And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.¹¹The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold.

¹²And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat[a] of it you shall surely die."

¹⁸Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for[b] him."¹⁹Now out of the ground the Lord God had formed[c] every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam[d] there was not found a helper fit for him. ²¹So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.²²And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made[e] into a woman and brought her to the man.²³Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."^[f]

²⁴Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2:8-25, ESV)

- How large was the Garden of Eden?

SESSION 2:

GOD'S DESIGN FOR OUR LIVES AND MARRIAGES

- How long were they likely in the Garden?

Note: We have a tendency to think it was a small patch in the backyard, that Adam and Eve were there for about an hour, fell to the temptation of Satan, became sinful, caused the sin nature, and were forced out. Rather, they enjoyed the perfect life of the massive place of paradise (hundreds of miles by hundreds of miles) for likely many, many months, if not years, working it, naming the animals, and having communion with God. They were very active there in this big beautiful place that was the center of the world. They were intended to be fruitful and multiply and take this beautiful place and expand it throughout the entire rest of the world.

- In verse 15, what were they (said to Adam, but implied also for Eve) asked to do?

- Why?

- What does that mean for us?

- Then, God said it is not good for man (also thus, implied for woman) to be what?

- Why?

SESSION 2:

GOD'S DESIGN FOR OUR LIVES AND MARRIAGES

- God thus, created a partner, a mate, for each other, in order for them to become what?

- What does this mean?

- How then are we to live in relationship with our spouse, or a close friend?

- Why?

Think, then, how beautiful life was intended to be lived in God's original design. As humans, we live in a physical world with 24 hours (approximately 16 of which are waking, and eight of which are sleeping). We are to get up and get to work, enjoying occupation; creating, building, using our skills and gifts, and enjoying fellowship with others to make progress and advancement. Then, we are to leave work at a reasonable time (after 8–9 hours) and spend the rest of our waking hours enjoying our spouse, family, and friends in unity of communion. This kind of living fulfills God's purpose and mission for our lives as He directs us to be a joy and full of adventure, rest, and fun. The two are to become one. This is a principle in life—to work together toward unity, agreement, and harmony, so that a married couple or friends would discover God's will together and live in God's best for them. God asks us to seek unity through the Holy Spirit. But in doing so, He doesn't ask us to give up our own perspective and thoughts on issues and decisions for the sake of unity (thus, as we will explore further, it is okay to disagree), but instead to work together in joy to come to unity with Him together. Our lives were created with a privilege—to have occupation and enjoy each other—all within our authority and provision given by God.

SESSION 2:

GOD'S DESIGN FOR OUR LIVES AND MARRIAGES

Note: We do know that, unfortunately, in our day and age, the demarcation between work and family life has become blurred because of technology we carry around in our pocket—cell phones with email access 24/7. Not only can we be contacted 24/7, but we have also trained ourselves to respond 24/7. We allow such interruption to our lives constantly and are having difficulty concentrating on just enjoying each other, having real conversation without interruption, and being able to take rest and sabbath from technology to truly “be” with each other—to listen and process. While technology has given us the freedom to leave our offices and not be tied to a certain location (thus, able to travel with family, etc.), we tend to be so stressed that we are losing more and more margin. As we learn to abide and allow God to prune us, however, we can learn to process and make changes in this area.

- Spend some time processing, on your own or as a group, contemplating or discussing why this now is such a problem. Then come up with a few ideas as to how you have or might better keep this technology from burdening your home life so much.

There are even more wonderful parts of exceptional living that Adam and Eve experienced:

- In the Garden, did Adam and Eve ever get sick or diseased?

- Describe what living like that must have been?

- Did Adam and Eve understand that they were created by God—that they were given all this provision and privilege?

- Did they fully embrace these privileges? Why?

Living as Children of the King—the Creator—is called Identity. Adam and Eve did not reject who or whose they were. They fully understood they were children of the King of the universe, the creator of all things, who had provided them this exceptional place with exceptional things—and given them the opportunity to work and to live together in unity to enjoy all that they were given. Their identity was rooted in who created them—in whose image they were created. They did not consider themselves second class or unworthy of being in God's family. Instead, they enjoyed the privilege of being in God's family.

SESSION 2:

GOD'S DESIGN FOR OUR LIVES AND MARRIAGES

- Who did Adam and Eve have communion with every day?

- Was their communication with God uncertain or fuzzy?

- Why was this one of their more wonderful privileges?

- In addition to the instructions to tend the garden, name the animals, etc., what instructions did they receive about the Tree of Good and Evil?

- Why?

- Was this tree something awful per se?

- Since it is not in God's nature to want us to fail, why did God allow the tree to be put in the garden at all?

- Why did God allow this test?

SESSION 2:

GOD'S DESIGN FOR OUR LIVES AND MARRIAGES

“It was never God’s intention to force His will on us, but rather offer us an intimate relationship with Him, if we so choose.”

Because God would never force us to be obedient, this test in the Garden can be seen as the essence of His desire for us to have free will. Adam and Eve, as part of humanity, had to decide if what we had on our own was a better thing than what God could offer. It was never God’s intention to force His will on us, but rather offer us an intimate relationship with Him, if we so choose.

(We will explore the deep significance of this in the next session and throughout the Abiding course.)

We can now see that there are seven characteristics that represent all that God had intended for us prior to the fall:

1. **Authority**
2. **Provision**
3. **Work**
4. **Relationships**
5. **Health/Healing**
6. **Identity**
7. **Communion with God**



ABIDING IN THE VINE: UNITY

ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL MARRIAGES
AND ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL LIFE



SESSION THREE: CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL



SESSION 3: CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL



The exceptional living given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was offered by God and was His original plan for all of mankind. Not only were they given authority over all the Earth, but they also were asked to be fruitful and multiply so that all the Earth beyond the original Garden of Eden would provide the perfect place for all of mankind to experience the exceptional living (the exceptional characteristics described in Session 2) planned by God. However, Satan came to the Garden of Eden and tempted Adam and Eve, according to the test of the free will (using the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil).

There is a lot to consider when discussing man's fall in the Garden. First, where did Satan come from? We know he was a fallen angel. Originally named Lucifer, he was an angel of light who was one of the original created angels and part of the host who enjoyed life with God in heaven. He was a leader in heaven and had great stature. But as an angel created by God, we must note that Satan is not God and does not possess the qualities of God. This is one of the myths for most believers: that Satan and God tend to be somehow equivalent in power and scope, especially in today's world. Satan is not omnipresent, omniscient, or omnipotent. Rather, he is finite and only has the characteristics and the powers of a spiritual created being.

As a leader in heaven, and also having a free will, Lucifer decided to attempt to become equal to God and achieve dominance in heaven. Of course, not being God, he had no power to achieve his overthrow bid and was cast out of heaven. Since all the angels had free will, God turned to them all to ask who they wished to follow. God or Lucifer? We know that one-third followed Satan (Revelation 12:4) and are now operating with Satan in what is called the spiritual realm as demons. Thus, two-thirds remained with God in heaven and are now operating in the spiritual realm as angels. In Revelation 5:11, it says that 10,000 x 10,000 are now worshipping God, so that number would equal 100,000,000 if taken literally. So, whether it is literal or just representing a massive number of angels, the good news is that there are twice as many angels as demons; and that an angel's purpose in our lives is to minister to us! (Hebrews 2:14) We will explore further the role of the demonic so that we can understand how it impacts this broken world and us specifically.

Satan, then, taking the form of a serpent, appeals to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to bring about this test of the free will.

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

Read Genesis 3:1-7.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You^[a] shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'"² And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden,³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die.⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise,^[b] she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (Genesis 3:1-7, ESV)

Answer the following questions:

- What were the tricks of the enemy that he used to deceive Adam and Eve?

- How did Adam and Eve respond to these tricks?

- What was God's original instruction to Adam and Eve?

- What was the consequence if they disobeyed this instruction?

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

- Knowing that they did fail the test, and that they lost direct access to God, what was the real mistake that they actually made?

- What died?

When Adam and Eve fell, they did so by making the pure mistake of not using their privilege of access and communion with God. Instead of asking Him to reiterate His instruction about the tree and the consequence of eating from it (since they were being confused by Satan), they exercised their free will— their self will (the flesh)—and “died.” What died? Their spiritual connectivity to God was destroyed so they were no longer “pure” or in a state of perfection necessary to continue their spiritual and holy relationship with God. Their nature changed and thus, the nature of every offspring of Adam and Eve changed. All of mankind since, because of this sin of nature, has been separated from God and all stand condemned because of this separation by nature (John 3:18). They still were functioning humans with a body and soul but now could only enter eternity with God if they accepted a remedy to restore what had died.

The remedy to re-establish a relationship with God because of this nature is perfection. God’s holy nature required perfection for such relationship. Since no one with this sinful, fallen nature could reach perfection, only God himself could offer a remedy—to take the penalty required to establish a way for us to have relationship through believing what He did at the cross and then being resurrected for us. When we believe and receive Christ we are “born again.” His Holy Spirit enters us and makes us again alive, thus, returning us to the spiritual place that died when Adam and Eve exercised their free will and “sinned.”

Read John 10:10:

¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. (John 10:10, ESV)

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

- Describe the characteristics of the nature of the enemy.

- Think about these characteristics as they apply to the world, and describe the impact to the world we are now living under.

This force that now operates in our world under the nature of the enemy is called “entropy”—where everything left alone is moving toward destruction. We are living in a world that is characterized by steal, kill, and destroy. This destruction is the very nature of the enemy, a consequence of the fall in the Garden. With entropy, everything declines into disorder, falls apart, or is destroyed. This applies to physical things (even steel and iron bridges), organizations, governments, businesses, relationships, and marriages. (According to Christianity Today, February 14, 2014, currently 30 percent of all marriages—Christian and non-Christian alike—in the U.S. wind up in divorce.) Many more Christian marriages are in a state of separation and many families are in a state of dysfunctional dynamics. Everything around us is moving toward not working and becoming more difficult. This is ironic in that technology is supposedly exploding to make things easier for us, but that, too, is because of steal, kill, and destroy (anyone heard of hacking and viruses), which also is contributing to destruction and falling apart. We live in a world of entropy, and none of us can escape it, which is why Paul says we are not just dealing with flesh and blood but powers and principalities.

- How does the enemy use his demons to impact your life and personal world?

Remember, the enemy is finite and is not omniscient, omnipotent, nor omnipresent. So how does he and the demonic work? Satan’s system operates in a hierarchy. The demonic at your personal level is particularly interested in thwarting God’s will in your life by having you exercise your self will and not follow God’s will. (Same as with Adam and Eve.) They do this through wiles or schemes (Ephesians 6:11). They are developing these strategies by observing you and your life. Because of our sinful nature, we already are geared toward

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

making poor choices, living in the self, begin away from God and His will for our lives, and being easily drawn to sin and the nature of the world. Our propensity is to follow our selfish desires and thus, we are enticed to the things of the world that lead to destruction and the consequences of sin. Further, as we follow our selfish, sinful behavior, the enemy notices cause and effect (i.e., which things cause you to avoid spending time with God; which things get you angry; which things lead you to worry or be anxious; which things bring you fear; who you choose not to forgive; what causes you to over-react; what drives you to look at pornography or to drink, etc.).

As these demons observe these cause and effect relationships, they work to create more of the causes so that the effects get deeper and more often—developing what are called patterns, or what psychologists call wounds. Interestingly, the harder you try to overcome these patterns and wounds on your own (self will), the more you fail, and the deeper they get. Eventually, you resign yourself to these behaviors, and the enemy takes you farther into other areas of new patterns, like guilt and failure. This is all out of his nature of steal, kill, and destroy – creating a world of entropy and a work of thwarting your life.

Read Luke 4:5–8 for further Biblical evidence of this:

⁵And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, ⁶and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸And Jesus answered him, "It is written,

"You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve." (Luke 4:5-8, ESV)

- Was this a real temptation of Jesus?

- If they weren't real, what would Jesus have said?

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

- What did Satan have to offer Jesus?

- Satan stated that he was given the kingdoms of the world. Who gave him these kingdoms?

- Understanding that the kingdoms of the world are under the nature of Satan (steal, kill, and destroy), how did Jesus respond to this real temptation?

This was a real temptation; Satan did have the kingdoms to offer Christ (otherwise, He would have just said, "This is nothing, you have nothing to offer"); the kingdom of Earth was handed over to him by Adam and Eve, since it was given to them by God (we will explore this more later). The world is under the influence of Satan, which is known as entropy.

In 1 John 5:18-20, which takes place about 60 years after the resurrection and after Christ has established His Kingdom (A Spiritual Kingdom) on Earth, the world continued to function under the kingdom of the enemy. So now there are dual kingdoms.

¹⁸We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.

¹⁹We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

²⁰And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. (1 John 5:18-20, ESV)

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

- What does John say about whose authority is controlling the world?

- What does that mean to us?

So, after the resurrection, and after Christ's Spiritual Kingdom has begun operating on Earth, the material world is still under the control, the dominion, the authority of Satan—our natural place that we live in is still under entropy, and we are subject to its nature of steal, kill, and destroy (i.e., total disorder). We will explore the good news of Christ's Kingdom in sessions ahead, but we need to understand that we still are subject to the forces of this world that affect all of us, including believers.

In our lives, one of the enemy's biggest tactics in marriages and/or in our friendships or relationships is division/separation. Read Proverbs 6:16-19.

¹⁶There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him:

¹⁷haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
and hands that shed innocent blood,

¹⁸a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil,

¹⁹a false witness who breathes out lies,
and one who sows discord among brothers. (Proverbs 6:16-19, ESV)

- Sowing discord, causing strife (being in constant disagreement) is amongst this list of the enemy's tactics. What does God say about things on this list?

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

- How strong is this attitude of God toward us when we are in constant disagreement?

- Therefore, are we to take this lightly or continue to live this way? Why?

God says He hates division and those who sow discord (those who continually argue and are not willing to work toward resolution and agreement) and considers discord an abomination—an atrocity, a disgrace, a disgust, an abhorrence— something truly distasteful to God. We need to receive the severity of His view toward continual discord and division (which the enemy will work overtime to create and keep active). Thus, we are not called to live this way, and understand it is not of God but a wile, or scheme, of the enemy. (We will explore later that normal disagreement is healthy and part of a how we together discover God's will. Be clear that this is not the same as continual strife and discord.)

To understand why and how the enemy keeps us in discord and strife, read Romans 8:5–8.

⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Romans 8:5-8, ESV)

The enemy uses the same deception that he used with Adam and Eve to keep us in conflict: He appeals to us living in the "flesh" or to our "self-will," which we use to make our own decisions without considering God, and particularly not considering our spouse or others in decisions.

- There are three consequences when we operate this way. What are they?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

In essence, we go back to the position of Adam and Eve when they sinned. We put to death the Spirit (even though we have the Spirit, we operate as though we do not), we are at enmity against God, and cannot please God. This is why we are continually in disagreement and at odds with each other. We are actually working against God as He attempts to resolve our differences and conflict, and thus, go deeper into discord. As noted earlier, this is something He hates and finds an abomination. This is why Satan works so hard to keep us in the flesh: to deepen our pattern of discord, which, in the flesh, we have no ability to resolve.

Read James 4:11 to understand the work of the enemy better.

¹¹Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.^[a] The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. (James 4:11, ESV)

- When we judge each other, what actually are we setting ourselves up as?

- Who do we tend to judge the most?

- Why?

- In what ways do we judge them?

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

When we judge others, and especially those close to us (like our spouse or close friends), we are setting ourselves up as their judge, instead of letting God be the judge. We are saying, "I am right, and either you are wrong or I don't care what you think, and I expect you to do what I want you to do, because I have 'decided' (judged) what is right, and you have no say in this 'case.' I have not gone through 'due process' (working together to come to a resolution or seek God's answer—His judgment), but have become the judge myself." (The decision has been made, and I am right.)

Read James 5:9 to see what this really means.

⁹Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. (James 5:9, ESV)

- When I judge another person in this way, what then actually happens to me?

Even though I have set myself up as judge, I am the one who is actually judged. My judgment then becomes my own condemnation, because I am then separated from the fellowship of God. I have put to death the Spirit and am at enmity against God and therefore, cannot please God. The enemy uses the tool of judgment to enable you to operate in the flesh. When we decide for ourselves that we are right, we are then unwilling to go through the process of resolving conflict and disagreement or work together to seek God's will.

The consequences of setting yourself up as judge (I am right, and you are wrong, or I don't care what you think) is further defined in Galatians 5:1-4.

¹For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

²Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified^[a] by the law; you have fallen away from grace. (Galatians 5:1-4, ESV)

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

- As I set up one law or rule (I am right, and my decision is right, and I do not care), I then am required to keep the entire law, which we know is impossible. Once I am back under the law, there are two consequences. What are they?

1. _____

2. _____

This issue of judging, particularly in normal conflicts and disagreements, can easily be turned by the enemy to discord and division—a serious issue of life. As noted earlier, God hates this abomination, as it is created by us living in the flesh under self will where we put to death the Spirit (allowing our life in the Spirit to die), are at enmity against God and ultimately, cannot please God. We ourselves are then judged and condemned—separated from the fellowship of Christ and fallen from grace/the favor of God. This is why the enemy is working overtime in the lives of believers to create this discord so that we are not living the wonderful life that God has planned—and why abiding is so critical to us. When abiding, we learn how to overcome this wile, this strategy of the enemy who is so very active in this world of entropy.

So, we see that the enemy's plan is to steal, kill, and destroy, especially to divide and separate us as couples or from friendships. By having us operate in the flesh, the enemy uses our own self determination to separate us from the power of God. The dynamics of living in this world mean that entropy is everywhere and everything is moving toward destruction. We will face this constantly throughout this life where things are normally going to be difficult— unless we learn that we have a better way with God. We should not be surprised at the destructive nature of the world, however these difficult things should not discourage us from living out the grand life of God.

We will begin to explore what this means in our next sessions.

THE FATHER HAS ANOTHER PLAN TO RESTORE THE ORIGINAL PLAN: CHRIST, OUR REDEEMER, OUR RESTORER.

Read John 10:10.

¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. (John 10:10, ESV)

- What does Christ say He has come to do?

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

- Exactly how does He describe this life?

- When?

This promise uses exactly the same words that were used when God looked at His creation in Genesis 1:31 and said that all that He created was exceptionally, super-abundantly good—this is what Christ has come, to restore His children. This will not mirror the perfection Adam and Eve experienced since they lived without entropy in a perfect place of creation, without a sinful nature that had to struggle with the flesh and issues of the self; but we can experience what He will give us super abundantly.

Let's look at the detail of how Christ defines this super abundance. Read Luke 4:16–21 for Christ's first public statement of His ministry, His purpose of why He has come.

¹⁶And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

(Luke 4:16-21, ESV)

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

- He was handed Isaiah 61, and He read verses 1–4. He read these and then sat down. When He sat down, what did He say?

- Why is this significant to us today?

We know that Christ has come to give us super-abundant life. He received this scroll from Isaiah 61 and read verses 1-4. He then applied the truths to Himself saying that He has come to restore this super-abundant life to us now through the good news, the Gospel! When He sat down, He stated that this has now been fulfilled; that what He had come to do had actually begun, and that it now applies to us personally since He lives within us. The super-abundant life is available to us as we learn to abide and receive it.

Let's go through this phrase by phrase. Read Isaiah 61:1–4.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;^[a]
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;^[b]
²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.^[c]
⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins;
they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations. (Isaiah 61:1-4, ESV)

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

- The good news (Gospel) means what?

- How important is this in our lives today? Why?

No matter what has happened to us or what situation we are in currently, or what kind of difficulty we are in currently, or what kind of adversity or pressure we are in currently, the good news means that God can help us now. God can restore things now. God can provide His promised super-abundant life now and bring resolution to the things we are facing now! Nothing is too difficult for Him, and we are not relegated to second, third or hundredth best. He can make all things work together for good for His very best now; the good news is that the super-abundant life is available NOW, not later, or as many of us think, after this lifetime.

He speaks specifically to the conditions that tend to characterize our lives from things we have experienced or are experiencing now—for these He brings the good news of the super-abundant life that He promises.

Let's go through these one by one from Isaiah 61:1-4:

- Broken hearted: What causes people to be broken hearted?

- What does that do to our hearts, particularly, over time?

- What does Christ promise to do? What does that mean for us?

SESSION 3: CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

The reason that people become broken hearted is that their expectations for the life they had expected have not been met. They have drifted into mediocrity or, even worse, are resigned to a life of difficulty or failure. Remember that this is common as we live in a world of entropy where things don't work out as we had planned. However, Christ says that He wishes to heal and restore us into the exciting life that He has planned, where we will be full of hope and encouragement and will no longer live in broken heartedness.

- Captive/Bound: What causes people to be held captive or bound up?

- What does Christ promise to do? What does that mean to us?

"Christ says that He wishes to heal and restore us into the exciting life that He has planned, where we will be full of hope and encouragement and will no longer live in broken heartedness."

Over time, we become captive to the patterns we develop that we have tried to overcome but have failed. These patterns have been developing since childhood and are caused by our responses to situations and events. When something happens, we automatically move to fear, anger, anxiety, addictions, etc. When we try to overcome these patterns on our own and we fail, those patterns actually only deepen, and only serve to place us in a captivity from which we cannot escape. Christ promises to bring us freedom from such captivity by releasing us from these patterns and transforming our nature. He will not have us "manage" the pattern but rather will eliminate it. This is true freedom, as there is no more captivity to it.

- Mourn/mourning: What causes us to mourn?

- What do we tend to believe about what we have lost?

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

- What does Christ promise to do? What does that mean to us?

We mourn because we have lost somebody or something. And when we lose something our belief is that it is gone and unrecoverable, so we mourn. As we consider our current lives, it is likely that we have lost much and are mourning what we have lost because we are believing that it cannot be restored. Christ, however, promises that He can restore it and will bring us comfort by bringing hope and excitement again.

- Ashes: What do we do with ashes?

- What does Christ do with ashes?

- Consider how powerful that is. What does that mean to us?

“Christ said that He is so sovereign and so powerful that He can turn ashes into beauty. So those things that have been ruined can be restored to beautiful things”

We throw ashes out because they are worthless. They have no value. In this stage of our lives, oftentimes we have ruined things and made things worthless, like ashes. We typically have discarded them and considered that there's no way we can restore anything from what we've ruined. However, Christ said that He is so sovereign and so powerful that He can turn ashes into beauty. So those things that have been ruined can be restored to beautiful things. This is an amazing truth that brings us an exciting proposition: The future is full of wonder and excitement; and it doesn't matter what has happened in the past, particularly things that we have ruined ourselves.

SESSION 3:

CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

- Spirit of Heaviness: What causes us to live in a spirit of heaviness?

- Why?

- What does Christ promise to do for us in this state?

- What does that mean to us?

The spirit of heaviness is caused by things that currently are pressing us but seem to be without solutions. No matter how we consider working ourselves out of this situation, it feels impossible. We feel stuck. As a result, we have heaviness, discouragement, oppression, pessimism, and little hope. We keep working, and nothing changes. This is when we must remember that our hope rests in Christ, because He not only will bring solutions but also will bring the spirit of praise. You will find that things will work because He will make them work! Hallelujah!

Jesus summarizes this by stating His promise regarding rebuilding:

- He will rebuild old ruins/former desolations/ruined cities. In light of all that He has promised, what does this summary mean to us?

SESSION 3: CHRIST PROVIDES A REMEDY FOR HUMANITY'S FALL

His promises are very specific. He ensures us that He will deal with the issues of life that are resultant of the world of entropy and the work of the enemy. The super-abundant life is not a life of helping us manage these issues better or experiencing victory only once in a while but failure other times. He is instead offering true transformation: healing, liberty, beauty, joy, praise, true rebuilding—everything that characterizes the entirety of life. It will take time, but we will be transformed and will live the super-abundant life that He has come to give us. This is His promise to us. Our role is to learn how to abide in the Vine and receive His fruit, more fruit, much fruit. What a privilege!

The key issue is that we face a battle in life either to live out our lives in the enemy's plan of destruction, mediocrity, and division OR to live out God's plan of redemption and exceptional abundance. The choice we have to make is to abide or not. Let's see what this means in the next sessions.

EXCEPTIONAL LIFE IS A FRUIT. WHAT EXACTLY IS THIS FRUIT?



ABIDING IN THE VINE: UNITY

ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL MARRIAGES
AND ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL LIFE



SESSION FOUR: FORGIVENESS



SESSION 4: FORGIVENESS



The first fruit we wish to explore is Forgiveness. This is critical to any child of God wanting to live the exceptional life. Because we live in a fallen world, with self-centered, sinful people, we will always be in relationships that will encounter conflict, hurts, and opposition where others deserve our anger and natural unforgiveness. Yet God calls us to live a life of forgiveness all the time toward everyone. We can't do this on our own, but can receive this as a fruit of abiding.

Let's explore this by reading Romans 8:1-2.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.^[a] ²For the law of the Spirit of life has set you^[b] free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.
(Romans 8:1-2, ESV)

- What does the word *condemnation* mean?

- What does that look like for us if we are living in condemnation?

- For those who are in Christ Jesus, what does He promise?

- What does that mean to us?

SESSION 4: FORGIVENESS

- If the Bible says that Christ does not condemn us, who else would that leave to condemn us?

- Why do others tend to condemn us, and why do we tend to condemn others?

- Why does this lead us to stay in un-forgiveness toward others?

- What are the key reasons we confuse forgiveness with reconciliation?

- Why?

Condemnation means punishment, to receive what is deserved—a sentence due to judgment. The recipient of this judgment stands guilty and thus is condemned. For those who are in Christ, there is no condemnation because we have been forgiven. We have been released from our deserved punishment, not because we did something to earn it, but rather because Christ stood in our place and received the punishment Himself. He forgave us based upon his own nature, one of love and forgiveness. He is forgiveness. His nature of forgiveness is a beautiful fruit to receive as a primary way of living in the exceptional life He has planned for us. It states that in Christ, there is no condemnation. What it does not say is that Christ does not condemn us so that others can. It says in Christ that there is no condemnation, which means that Christ does not condemn us and that others do not have the right to condemn us, and certainly, we do not have the right to condemn others. We are to live

SESSION 4: FORGIVENESS

“Forgiveness is not to be confused with reconciliation. Forgiveness is the place where, with the nature of Christ, we release the carrying of bitterness and condemnation toward another person, based on what Christ has done for us.”

in forgiveness toward others—every time and all the time, regardless of what they have done to anger and hurt us.

This is what tends to trap us, since what other people do to us means that they deserve our anger and thus, our condemnation. This is also why we tend to confuse forgiveness with reconciliation. We who are believers have received Christ’s forgiveness and are reconciled with him regarding our eternal destiny. Thus, we have no condemnation. This required two parties: Christ with His forgiveness, based on His nature, which we did not deserve, and us, who had to process that truth that He stood in our place and took on the punishment that we deserved. He who was standing in our place did nothing to deserve it. We need to process and believe that He died in our place and was resurrected. Then, we must receive Him as our Lord and Savior. We, at that moment, are reconciled to Him and are forever released from condemnation.

When others hurt, oppose, or come against us, they deserve our anger and condemnation. However, as a believer, we are called not to live in condemnation but rather to live in forgiveness always.

Forgiveness is not to be confused with reconciliation. Forgiveness is the place where, with the nature of Christ, we release the carrying of bitterness and condemnation toward another person, based on what Christ has done for us. This is between me and God only. It frees my heart from carrying the burden of heaviness and being trapped by unforgiveness.

Let’s work to understand this profound concept further so it is clear.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are different through Christ’s eyes. Has He offered up His own life so that we might be forgiven? Yes. When? At the cross when He said: “It is finished,” and as He sat down at the right hand of the Father, never to repeat this again.

You can review this entire discussion in Hebrews, chapters 8–10. His nature is forgiveness and He already has forgiven everyone, including you and me. The confusion comes because not everyone has experienced this forgiveness, and thus, not everyone is truly forgiven—not because Christ hasn’t forgiven them, but because they chose not to receive this forgiveness. So understand it as follows:

Is Christ reconciled with everyone? No. How come? Because Christ requires that for someone to be reconciled with Him, a person must believe that God so loved the world that He gave His only beloved son, and whoever believes that Christ died for him and was resurrected shall be reconciled and receive this forgiveness, and not be condemned (John 3:16–18); and that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). If a person does not believe this, he stands condemned and passes into eternity (though as shown in 2 Peter 3:9, it is not God’s will) separated from Christ and will live in hell permanently. God will not alter the truth for the sake

SESSION 4: FORGIVENESS

of reconciliation. So even though Christ has forgiven everyone, we must be reconciled of our own will. Why? Because, truth supersedes will and cannot be altered for the sake of reconciliation, even though forgiveness is completed.

Thus, He wants us to operate as He does and calls us to forgive everyone, 100 percent of the time, all the time, and then be available to process the truth toward reconciliation, if the other party is willing to engage in that process. If they are not willing to process truth, we still can live as Christ does without reconciliation. If we are living in forgiveness, we are willing to process the truth, even if it takes weeks, months or years. We also can live in the freedom of whatever level the other party is willing to set toward reconciliation, although it is Jesus' hope, as noted in Matthew 5:23, that we all should "Be reconciled."

Being "in forgiveness" means we are always willing to process the truth and also can live with someone who is not. Of course, one relationship that requires our devotion toward reconciliation is with our spouse. We will cover this in our next session regarding unity.

Some keys in processing reconciliation are as follows:

1. Read Matthew 5:21–26.

²¹"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²²But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother[a] will be liable to judgment; whoever insults[b] his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell^[c] of fire. ²³So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. (Matthew 5:21-26, ESV)

- When we realize we have hurt, angered, or come against someone in a harsh way, what are we to do?

SESSION 4: FORGIVENESS

To live in forgiveness means that we always have to be willing to ask others to forgive us when we have hurt them and immediately become reconciled back to them when we have caused them offense. Never be too proud to immediately get things resolved. The longer we wait, the more difficult it becomes to bring relationships back to wholeness.

2. Read 2 Corinthians 5:12-21.

¹²We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. ¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. ^[a] The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling^[b] the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:12-21, ESV).

- What is our primary role toward others?

As we live in forgiveness, our primary role is to be ambassadors. We are to continually offer reconciliation toward those who are not living in wholeness and the full life of Christ, particularly those who have angered, hurt, or opposed us. Remember that reconciliation takes two parties so our role is strictly to offer the opportunity to process truth out of our heart of forgiveness on the same

SESSION 4: FORGIVENESS

“Work hard not to engage in their unhealthy behavior for short periods of time and not be drawn into their anger or unhealthy behavior that causes us to be hurt or respond in unhealthy ways ourselves.”

basis that we been forgiven (Christ’s nature). If the other party does not wish to reconcile or process the truth, we must live with this or try to. Our first role is to have forgiveness in our heart so that none of their offense toward us traps us in a life of hardness, wrath, bitterness, or obsession as these destroy our lives of freedom in Christ.

Admittedly, this sometimes can be difficult in family situations where we have attempted reconciliation, but our close relatives (mothers and fathers, for example) will not process the truth or continue to keep hurting us or attempt to keep controlling us with unhealthy schemes (called dysfunctional family dynamics). The question is how best to handle this since we are not called to reject them (especially to honor our father and mother), yet not to be trapped by them while we live in forgiveness. This really can be tricky. In these scenarios, we may be called by God to establish boundaries that are prudent for us not to allow them to continue to hurt us while we honor them in healthy ways.

Remember, we are always called first to live in forgiveness (on the same basis we have been forgiven—through Christ’s nature, not on what they deserve). Work hard not to engage in their unhealthy behavior for short periods of time and not be drawn into their anger or unhealthy behavior that causes us to be hurt or respond in unhealthy ways ourselves. Decide how often and when you can get together; and then, when you do get together, pray for strength, and power in the Holy Spirit not to be drawn into the games being played. Pray that your heart will look at your time together as a positive time and pray for ways you can bring goodness to this time, regardless of how the family is acting.

Further, pray that your heart will not receive the arrows that hurt you during this time together. When you leave, let it all go, and do not allow unforgiveness to creep in, but focus on your wonderful life and what is next for you. Stay true to your boundaries and realize that this is the most healthy way to live. It also is God’s prescription for you to enable a semblance of reconciliation to occur when the other parties are not really willing to process truth.

Another key element of not living in condemnation is to forgive ourselves. We often tend to remain living in guilt because of our past mistakes. We keep living in the past because of this burden. Christ says there is no condemnation, and He has fully released us from these mistakes.

SESSION 4: FORGIVENESS

3. Read Philippians 3:11–15:

¹¹that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. (Philippians 3:11-15, ESV)

- What key principle of life does this state for us to live out? Why?

Paul, in his wisdom, states one very important principle that is critical in living the exceptional life in Christ: that we are to forget the past and move on to the high calling of Christ Jesus. This may be an area where God may be calling you to abide and receive the fruit of forgiving yourself so that you can release yourself from past mistakes and fully move forward into the freedom of His plans for you. This is an important part of living without condemnation.

To summarize:

One of the key fruits of abiding is forgiveness—realizing that Christ is forgiveness completely in the past, present, and future. He is the God who is asking us to grab his hand to move forward and to let go of Satan and the past so that He can deliver to you the abundant life. We are to forgive everyone who has hurt us or is hurting us 100 percent of the time, all the time, on the same basis we have been forgiven.

If those who have hurt us are willing to deal with the truth by processing the truth, then we can reconcile either fully or partially. If they are not, then we are to live with not being reconciled and move on.

If, however, they are a relative or someone we need to continue to see, then we are to set healthy boundaries. We are to completely let ourselves off the hook and release our guilt once and for all, and never again living in that guilt. Freedom.



ABIDING IN THE VINE: UNITY

ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL MARRIAGES
AND ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL LIFE



SESSION FIVE:

UNITY



SESSION 5: UNITY



In today's "me" culture, with the emphasis on self, the concept of unity seems to become more and more foreign. We have little interest in considering the perspectives of other groups or people, as our minds oftentimes have already decided. However, the spiritual strength of unity has become even more significant as a way of living out the exceptional life that God has planned for us. While it might not be typical, it can be received as the beautiful fruit of abiding.

Read Psalm 133.

Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!^[a]

²It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!

³It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the Lord has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore. (Psalm 133, ESV)

- What does the Psalm say about dwelling in unity?

- What does unity mean?

- When you reach unity "there," what does God promise?

SESSION 5: UNITY

- How strong is the word “command”? What does that mean to us?

If we come to unity with our spouse, or with others close to us (as this also does apply to leadership, elders, etc.) who are helping us with decisions, and “there” to a place we want to be, and God commands blessing (He doesn’t suggest, He doesn’t say perhaps or maybe, but guarantees He will make things happen to bring us blessing. . . what He has planned for restoring to us the exceptional life), why would we not always live there? And thus, receive the fruit of unity?

Read Ecclesiastes 4:9–12.

⁹Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! ¹¹Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? ¹²And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, ESV)

- Ecclesiastes says two are better than one and lists the reasons why. What are they?
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
- As you consider these reasons, what perspective should you then have toward your spouse or significant other regarding being for them instead of working against them? Why?

Instead of focusing on changing our spouse or friend by asking them to do what we want based on our desires, we are to serve them by assisting them when they are hurting, having difficulty, or struggling. Our perspective is to completely change. As we understand further abiding, we know that we cannot fix them but rather, we are to bring them back to the abiding and

SESSION 5: UNITY

reconnect them to the life of the vine where Christ can do the restoring and bring them the healing they might need. We are to be their encouragers and helpers, to be on their side, their best cheerleaders. Two are better than one.

- These verses also state that a three-cord strand cannot be broken. Who is the third cord?

- What does this say in terms of who are you to be in unity with? Why is this so important?

The third cord is actually God himself and thus, our unity is going to be with God. As we gain that unity together, our strength will not be broken, and our lives will be able to stand all that the world, with its entropy and the wiles of the enemy, will throw at us. Nothing will defeat us.

Read Ephesians 4:1–6.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6, ESV)

- What do these verses say about who you are to be in unity with?

SESSION 5:

UNITY

- What kind of effort does it take to ensure your unity with the Spirit? Why?

- What is the difference between being in unity with the Spirit and just negotiating with your spouse or significant other?

- On what basis can you get to unity with your spouse or significant other every time, all the time?

- So, is it okay that the two of you, when processing things, can be in disagreement?

- Is it important to respect that the other party disagrees and has not yet come to agreement with you in the Spirit? Why?

- What are the three possibilities for the Spirit to bring you to agreement when you disagree?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

SESSION 5:

UNITY

Unity is actually not between the two of us but the two of us combined with the Holy Spirit. We are not to negotiate settlements and reach agreement in the flesh but rather to discover God's will together, and come to unity with God. The wonderful thing about this process is that we can reach unity 100 percent, all the time, because of the promise given to us by God. He will always reveal His will to us. The same Spirit is within me and my spouse or another believing friend. Thus, if we have a willingness to work through the process, He will reveal to both of us His will. That is why He asked us to make every effort (work hard at this) to get to unity with the Spirit. Another beautiful thing about this process is that this agreement is normal and expected.

We are to embrace and honor disagreement, to understand that neither of us knows God's will and that together, through the disagreement, we are now to pursue and work hard to receive God's will. Three possibilities for Him to bring resolution will be:

1. for Him to change my heart and see that what my spouse or friend is seeing is in line with God's will.
2. for Him to change my spouse's or my friend's heart to see that what I am seeing is in line with God's will.
3. that neither one of us is seeing what is in line with God's will and more is to be known before we know God's will. We need to keep asking, seeking, and knocking. Instead of arguing and manipulating disagreements, our heart is to work toward unity as we seek God's will together. Remember that God commands blessing. Why would we not work toward that blessing?

Read Philippians 2:1–6.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ²complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ^{6a}who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped . . .
(Philippians 2:1-6, ESV)

SESSION 5:

UNITY

- What does it mean to be like-minded, being of one accord and one mind?

- As verse 4 ponders the potential for disagreement, two important points are revealed to us. What are they?

1. _____

2. _____

- Why are they both important?

Because you are seeking to go to unity in the Spirit with your spouse or significant other, it is important for you to want your spouse or significant other to want to maintain with integrity their position (their interest) until you both see what the Spirit will show you is His will. You do not want them to “cave” or give in to your solution if they are truly disagreeing with the solution. The key, of course, is that both of you must have forgiveness in your heart toward each other, as well as a willingness to be “neutral” (not stubborn in your interest and not care what God’s will is, but being open to hearing God’s will, even if it is different than your position or desired solution) until you hear what God has to say as He leads you to His will. Then, together, you work through your disagreement to seek God’s will with honor and respect. To do that, you will need to create a safe place that allows for a positive discussion about the issues, facts, and perspectives. God’s will will be revealed as you continue to process.

Let’s look specifically at how to handle disagreements and differences of opinions.

First, remember that it is always okay to disagree and is a part of God’s process as you work to reach unity.

SESSION 5:

UNITY

Read Acts 15:1–6.

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.³ So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.⁵ But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

⁶The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. (Acts 15:1-6, ESV)

- When Paul had a very sharp disagreement with Jewish Christians who believed, according to their understanding of new life in Christ, that they must be circumcised in addition to receiving Christ as Savior to be considered saved, the two came to a crossroads. Wasn't circumcision critical as a sign of the Covenant and thus, needed to be followed per the Old Testament prescription, or was just a relationship with Christ Himself enough? The two could not decide. With this disagreement (which was termed as “rather sharp”), what did they do?

- As they, who were in disagreement, walked together in fellowship to Jerusalem what did they do?

- After the apostles heard both sides of the disagreement, in verse 6, what did they do?

SESSION 5:

UNITY

Once they realized that they weren't going to agree, they decided to head to Jerusalem to find others to help them. Because they knew it was okay to disagree, while they walked together to Jerusalem, they did not stop enjoying their life—the disagreement did not ruin their day, their night, their weekend. They were okay with the disagreement as they knew they could get it resolved and viewed it as we all are to view disagreements—as a time to wait to hear God's will.

In any disagreement, the key is not only what the apostles did with the disagreement, but what they needed to do to solve it. They got together to “consider the matter” and seek God's will together. They would not prejudice the answer, they would not make up their own mind, and they would not determine on their own who is right and who is wrong, or disregard the other's position. They sat together to “consider the matter” as God took them to unity to hear and receive His will.

Now, how do we consider the matter?

Read Ephesians 4:15–16 and 25–32.

¹⁵Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:15-16, ESV)

²⁵Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4: 25-32, ESV)

SESSION 5:

UNITY

Let's review the steps:

- In verse 32, what is always to be in our heart?

- On what basis are we to forgive?

- Though we usually do not overtly lie to each other, how do we subtly lie to each other? Why?

- Why do we remain silent about what we think or simply give into the other's solution even though we disagree?

- Since it is important to reach unity while still allowing for the other party's disagreement, why is it important that we create a safe space for the other party to speak up?

- When it says to speak the truth in love, what truth are we to speak?

- Why is it important for both parties to be able to speak this truth?

SESSION 5:

UNITY

“In most relationships we find it easier to just be quiet and “cave” in to the other to avoid the conflict, as this saves the harshness, the rising anger, and the resultant consequences. This is why it’s so important to create a safe place for each to be able to work through the process in a healthy way.”

As we process our disagreements, God reminds us in Ephesians 4:32 that we always are to process with forgiveness, on the same basis that Christ has forgiven us, which is His nature. It then is critical to actually process the disagreement together. This should be done without telling lies or falsehoods, but instead while remaining silent (not telling what we actually think, feel and believe because we disagree) while the other speaks.

In most relationships we find it easier to just be quiet and “cave” in to the other to avoid the conflict, as this saves the harshness, the rising anger, and the resultant consequences. This is why it’s so important to create a safe place for each to be able to work through the process in a healthy way. This begins with speaking the truth in love with respect and honor; truth here refers to the truth that we know, which is the only truth we can speak. It does not mean absolute truth but rather what we ourselves know or believe to be true so that together we are able to discover God’s will, which will be the ultimate truth. We are not to let any unwholesome words come out of our mouths (which grieves the Holy Spirit), but instead process with honor, respect, and consideration for the other. This means active listening and being willing to consider the other party’s perspective, interest, and what they may contribute to the process as you work together to seek God’s will.

- Utilize the following process with your spouse or friend in speaking the truth and listening to the truth as you work toward unity with God. Recall one of the issues you noted in the first session and then practice this before the next session.
 1. Discuss with each other the true desires of your heart—your dreams—how can each of you assist in fulfilling these for one another?
 2. Take a decision or issue identified last night and begin processing (start with one that has not proved to be highly contentious in the past).
 - a. Take one issue at a time.
 - b. One of you starts and the other listens:
 - i. What do you think, feel, and believe about this?
 - ii. When done sharing, the other who has been listening repeats back what he/she heard.
 1. Did I get it right? Did I get it all?
 2. If not, go back and repeat the process until the one speaking can say that you got it right and you got it all.
 - iii. Repeat the process for the one who listened until he/she can also say that yes, you got it right, and you got it all.
 3. Based upon what you have understood together, one of you then offers a solution to the decision or issue. Explain why. The other then

SESSION 5: UNITY

responds with agreement or a different perspective on the answer. Keep it as long as needed until you reach unity or realize with integrity that you still disagree. Say to each other: We just do not know God's will and we will continue to seek God until He shows us His answer. Keep asking for wisdom (James 1:5–8). Do not argue or debate, but instead allow it to sit and not ruin your afternoon.

4. If time allows, move on to another decision or issue.

When we are still in disagreement and have not come to agreement in the Spirit, we then keep going. Do not give up, do not just decide or “cave,” but together go to a process of prayer and ask, seek, and knock to understand God's will—His answer.

Read 1 Kings 3:5–9.

⁵At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, “Ask what I shall give you.”⁶And Solomon said, “You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you. And you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day. ⁷And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. ⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?” (1 Kings 3:5-9, ESV)

- Even though Solomon was quite skilled and educated, how did he say he would approach every decision?

- For our decisions, why should we approach everything in the same way?

SESSION 5: UNITY

- As we are seeking answers from God, what kind of heart are we to ask for? Why?

Even though we consider ourselves capable of making decisions, we need to approach every decision as Solomon did: as a little kid needing God to show us the way. Why? Because there is something we do not know about every decision we are to make. We do not know the future or all the dimensions of our decisions. But God does, so we need Him to reveal His will to us. In hearing His will, we need His discernment. We get that by having a sincere heart, which in the Hebrew means a hearing heart, one that is able to hear Him so that we can see the differences between good and evil (things that are God's best and things that will cause us difficulty and hardship down the road) and that we cannot discern with our own logic based on what is known presently. Particularly since we are in disagreement, we are not to rely on our own limited perspective but rather to keep hearing what He will reveal to us as His will—what He will show us together as we have “hearing” hearts.

Read Proverbs 8:32–35.

³²“And now, O sons, listen to me:

blessed are those who keep my ways.

³³Hear instruction and be wise and do not neglect it.

³⁴Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates,
waiting beside my doors

³⁵For whoever finds me finds life

and obtains favor from the Lord . . . (Proverbs: 8:32-35, ESV)

- As we then seek more information on this decision, there are three things we are to do:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

SESSION 5:

UNITY

- As we are seeking answers, practically, how do we do this?

This refers to our part of further due diligence and observation. With our spouse or significant other we are to continue to process what we are receiving and observing. Listen further to what God will say to you, either directly or through others. Watch for the next things that happen or new information that is given. Keep talking through the things that God is showing and how they impact how He reveals His new information and answers to your questions. Wait until you see His answers and do not get impatient or act on your own. Keep going through the process until you are certain of His answer together in the unity of the Spirit. The key is to be truthful, to be open to any new information, and to be willing to surrender your will to His.

Read Proverbs 11:14 and 15:22.

¹⁴Where there is no guidance, a people falls,
but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. (Proverbs 11:14, ESV)

²²Without counsel plans fail,
but with many advisers they succeed. (Proverbs 15:22, ESV)

- What does it say about the significance of receiving help? Why?

If you still believe you need new information or are still feeling stuck or know that others can be helpful, do not be afraid to bring in outside advisers who can help you in the process of seeking God's will. Remember, these advisers are not to tell you what to do but rather to assist you in reaching unity with God in receiving and confirming God's will. There are basically two types of advisers to consider:

SESSION 5: UNITY

1. Godly advisers: ones who are not just going to give you their personal human advice based on their own experiences, but rather are willing to walk with you and seek God's answers and confirm in the Spirit in unity with Him. They will ask you good questions, help you process in prayer, seek God's word, and receive revelation along with you.
2. Technical advisers: ones who are proficient and competent in their field and can offer you expert advice on a particular subject. They must be completely neutral and impartial and have no vested interest in the outcome. They even can be unbelievers as long as they are the best in their field. Usually they are paid for their time.

With either of these advisers, you are asking for outside input to assist you in helping you receive truth, insight, and assistance. These advisers should help provide direction from the Father as another step in the process toward hearing His answer.

As discussed above, it is important that no unwholesome talk come out of your mouth. As you are practicing healthy disagreement, then, it is important not to drift back into unwholesome arguments. Most couples have learned many bad habits in attacking each other, many having arguments that let their emotions turn into hurtful attacks. The Scriptures gives us a prescription for how to handle these situations.

Read Psalm 4:4–5.

⁴Be angry,^[a] and do not sin;
ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Selah
⁵Offer right sacrifices,
and put your trust in the Lord. (Psalm 4:4-5, ESV)

- In these verses, is anger sin? Why or Why not?

- When would it become sin?

SESSION 5:

UNITY

- When it is about to become sin, what are we called to do?

It is normal to be angry in a disagreement, especially if the disagreements are considered sharp. In these situations in the past, you may have developed unhealthy patterns where you attacked each other and let unwholesome words come out of your mouths. This is where we let anger, which is not sin, *per se*, become sin. These verses give us a prescription for how to deal with high emotion. We are to separate for the moment into different locations so that we can each get our hearts right with God. This stops the escalation, lowers the high energy, and refocuses us back onto the healthy process of seeking God's will together instead of speaking against each other because of our own defensiveness, hurt, etc. When we do first separate (which we are called to do), remember that we are to go to forgiveness on the same basis we have been forgiven, through Christ's nature. Then ask God to help resettle your heart so that you are back in peace and able to speak the truth in love about the issue at hand. When we are in forgiveness, and have our hearts right with God, we then can come back together and say to each other: "Are we okay to talk?"; and, if so, then go back to the beginning of the process—let's consider, let's speak the truth in love, etc.

As you fully understand the beautiful fruit of unity, your life will truly begin to discover God's will as He leads you into His plan for your exceptional life. Remember that the unity is not a negotiation of two people to reach a settlement, but unity with the Spirit to discover God's will—and this is something to work hard at all the time. Remember the process begins by speaking the truth in love, listening to the truth, wanting to hear and process the truth, and never letting any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth.

Use advisers if you think they can help, and do not short circuit the process out of convenience. Stay true to your hearts. Keep practicing! And remember it is okay to be in disagreement during the process. The more you practice this, the more comfortable you will feel with disagreeing because you know that you are simply waiting to hear or understand God's will, that God will lead you to unity as you discover His will, that there it will be best and none better, and that He will command His blessing. In the meantime, this disagreement will not ruin your night, your weekend, your week, etc. Why would you not live here!



ABIDING IN THE VINE: UNITY

ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL MARRIAGES
AND ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL LIFE

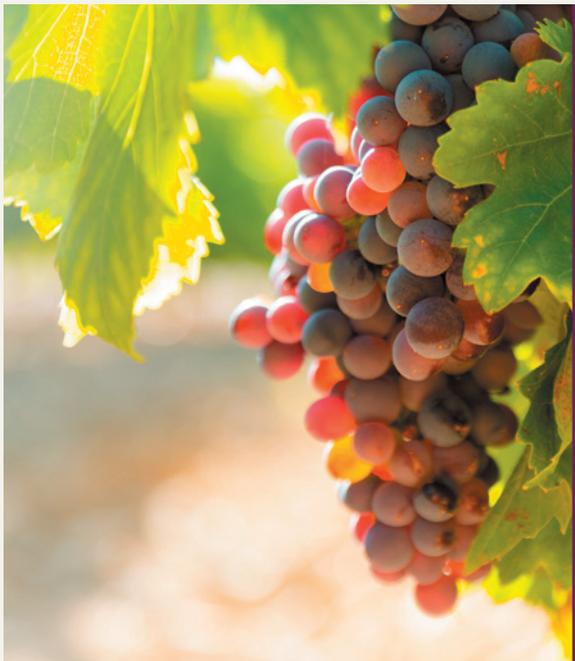


SESSION SIX: LED BY THE SPIRIT/ ANSWERS TO PRAYER



SESSION 6:

LED BY THE SPIRIT/ANSWERS TO PRAYER



One of the wonderful fruits of abiding is being led by the Spirit.

Read Romans 8:12–17.

¹²So then, brothers,^[a] we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons^[b] of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:12-17, ESV)

- What does it mean that we are not indebted or obligated to live by the flesh any longer?

- Why is that significant to our view of how we live?

- As a child of God, what is our privilege?

SESSION 6:

LED BY THE SPIRIT/ANSWERS TO PRAYER

- If the Spirit is leading, what are we to be doing? In what way?

We should never believe it normal to live in the flesh (self), or to live a life of failure and struggle instead of living a life being led by the Spirit, a life of victory and promised abundant living. We are to switch our thinking from believing that a once-in-awhile victory is plenty since we usually are struggling with the flesh and failing to be a child of God being led by the Spirit. We must believe that we are to live instead in abundant victory. To do so, though, means we mustn't go back to the flesh (self). We must go to the remedy, which is repentance so that we can instantly be restored back into fellowship where there is no condemnation, and where we can continue our vibrant life in the Spirit (1 John 1:9; Romans 8:1-2).

- In verse 16, what is one of the Spirit's primary roles?

- As a child, whose child are we?

- And since we are His, we do not carry the spirit of fear to bondage but the Spirit of what? And, by which, we cry out what?

- What does that truly mean to us?

SESSION 6:

LED BY THE SPIRIT/ANSWERS TO PRAYER

- What kind of life does a toddler (who says “Daddy”) live?

- How are we to live the same kind of life? Why?

As we are led by the Spirit, one of His primary roles is to bear witness that we are His child, a child of the King, one who has come to give us the abundant life and restore to us exceptional living. He wants us to fully understand our identity as a child of the King and not live under a bondage of fear or worry, but rather to live the life of a toddler—a child who is excited about everyday life and the adventure that our Father has planned for us. We are not to be so concerned about the things of the future but rather to enjoy the beauty of how the Spirit leads us day by day.

Let’s look at how the Spirit leads us into this life. Read John 16:13–15.

¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

(John 16:13-15, ESV)

- What are the roles of the Spirit in our lives?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

- Practically, how does He do these for us?

SESSION 6:

LED BY THE SPIRIT/ANSWERS TO PRAYER

The Spirit is consistently leading us, and He fulfills this role in three specific ways:

1. He guides us into all truth. The word *truth* here does not refer just to theological truth but to all truth relating to the issues of your life that the Spirit needs to reveal to you. As you are able to receive all the truth about your heart, circumstances, principalities, and powers, as well as other people's motives, etc., you are then able to understand God's will, which is always based on truth. The Spirit guides us and does not leave it up to us to figure things out on our own. Similar to a guide in an art museum, He does not just hand us an art Bible and tell us to find the art and understand the truths of the art on our own. Rather, we walk with the guide to each painting as he explains the deeper information, and then, as we are curious, we ask questions that the guide willingly answers, so, eventually, we understand more and more. Being guided by the Holy Spirit is wonderful, because we are not on a quick "one-hour" tour. There is no pressure to keep moving to get to the next thing; and since He wrote the book (the Bible from which He primarily guides us) He knows all truth. We will explore further in the next session how this works in our personal life.
2. He tells us of things to come. Since He knows what is ahead for us in our lives, He will alert us of things to come so we are paying attention to the important things He will reveal to us. His revelations may lack detail, but for good reason. If He is too detailed, we likely would either be too passive and think it will just happen (so we then feel it's not necessary to join Him in the process), or we would try to make things happen on our own and get ahead of His timing and His work of bringing about the plan regarding the future path for us. How He does this is to alert us to pay attention to something so that we begin to look for further revelation and input as He guides us into what is to come. For example, if someone you trusted told you that a woman in a bright yellow dress was going to come by your table at a restaurant you were visiting and has something important to say to you, you would look for that woman and listen to what she had to say—all because you were alerted to pay attention. If not alerted, that same woman could stop by, say something, and it would mean nothing to you. As He alerts you, He will then guide you further—step by step—until what He is telling you about the future is fulfilled. All along, He will keep you in an abiding, intimate relationship with Him. This is the very definition of abiding: Stay in a relationship with Him to keep hearing Him and keep being led by Him.

SESSION 6:

LED BY THE SPIRIT/ANSWERS TO PRAYER

3. He transfers all that is Christ's to you. A beautiful role of the Holy Spirit is to transfer all that is Christ's to you. This includes His nature, His wisdom, His power, His authority, His truth, His love, etc.—all that is His. And the Spirit is to transfer all that to you. As you are being led and following Him, abiding in the Vine, receiving His Word, experiencing Him, and walking in His will for you, one of the beautiful benefits is that all that is Christ's is transferred to you. This is why it is so important to realize you are a child of the King and to be led by the Spirit and not the flesh.

As He guides us into His will, He answers prayers.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:18-22.

¹⁸As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. ¹⁹For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. ²⁰For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. ²¹And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, ²²and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. (2 Corinthians 1:18-22, ESV)

- What does it mean that all the promises are yes in Christ Jesus?

- Who does this apply to? Is anyone left out of this?

- What is to be our response?

- What does Amen truly mean?

SESSION 6:

LED BY THE SPIRIT/ANSWERS TO PRAYER

All the promises of Scriptures are yes in Christ. There are over 7,000 promises throughout Scripture; and are all available to us as absolutely yes. This means that all followers of Christ, those being led by the Spirit, are to be the recipient of these promises. There is no partiality. Further, the promises never come with a *perhaps* and *maybe* (or yes and no); but are all yes in Christ. The key is that we are receiving these promises from Christ as we are being led by the Spirit. We cannot just decide on our own what we want since they are His promises to give. Even though all 7,000 are yes, they are to be given and received as He so chooses according to His will and His timing. But, as He gives them (and He will), we are to receive them and respond with AMEN, which means, I have heard the Promise of God, I understand it is applied to me personally, and I now agree with God and can say with confidence, "SO BE IT. AMEN." We then are to pray that promise with faith, believing it will be fulfilled as He has spoken it to us.

As we understand He will provide promises, how do we then access these promises through the power of answered prayer? Read John 15:7-8.

⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. (John 15:7-8, ESV)

- What are the two concurrent conditions to answered prayer?

1. _____

2. _____

- If we meet these conditions, what is promised?

- How does this then change our prayer lives?

SESSION 6:

LED BY THE SPIRIT/ANSWERS TO PRAYER

As we pray, understanding that He has spoken a promise to us, we must meet the two conditions to have Him fulfill the promise:

1. We must abide in Him (continue in the intimate relationship of abiding).
2. We must have His Rhema words abide in us (what promises and Scripture He has spoken specifically to me, personally, regarding my circumstances and life situations).

This means I am engaged in Scripture memory, journaling, spending time processing, etc., until we believe it and can pray it with confidence and know both that it is God's will and that God will fulfill it.

We will spend more time in the next session learning how we have His words abide in us. This then alters dramatically how we pray as we then realize an if/then scenario: If we abide in Him and His words abide in us, we can pray what we wish, and it will happen to glorify Him. He will fulfill His wonderful promises supernaturally in ways that we on our own cannot, and we will bear witness that it was God and not us. So, our prayer life is not giving God a list of things we want Him to do for us or give us; but rather we are seeing His will, and His promises regarding our circumstances and life situations so that we then receive what He has to speak about these. As we hear and understand, we abide in those, pray those, and then see things change in our lives!

One of the wonderful answered prayers arising from the abundant life is God fulfilling the desires of our hearts. Read Psalm 37:3–8.

³Trust in the Lord, and do good;
dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.^[a]

⁴Delight yourself in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

⁵Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him, and he will act.

⁶He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,
and your justice as the noonday.

⁷Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him;
fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way,
over the man who carries out evil devices!

⁸Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath!
Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. (Psalm 37:3-8, ESV)

SESSION 6:

LED BY THE SPIRIT/ANSWERS TO PRAYER

- What do these verses say that delights God?

- If we delight God, what does He promise?

- Where are these desires?

As we delight in Him (He is delighted by us abiding in Him, spending time with Him, being led by Him, loving Him, trusting Him), He will give us the desires of our hearts. The Father enjoys syncing circumstances in our lives with the desires that are in our souls (part of the essence of us and part of our make up as He created us). They are truly in our hearts so we do not have to try to separate these between “holy and secular.” They all are part of the abundant life that He is giving us; and He will refine these desires to reveal what they truly are as we seek to understand them and allow Him to show us what is pure and God honoring versus anything that is self-centered. But let Him show you that, and do not censor those desires since they are in your heart. Remember, this is a life-long “giving” as part of the abundant life for us. We are not to put a timeline on any of it or pursue it on our own, but instead realize that over our lifetime, His heart is to give us the desires of our hearts that thrill us, provide adventure, give us hope and excitement. One of our couples that went through an exercise described below at a retreat in 2007, reports the following experience to give you an example of how it has worked for them:

The Desires of Our Hearts for Marriage John and Michelle Santaferro:

When our marriage hit rock bottom and verged on break up, we knew we had to do everything we could to save it. We decided to attend a marriage retreat. There, Rich and Linda Case taught us about “abiding in Christ” for the good of our marriage and, importantly, they taught us how to do it. Abiding in Christ made sense to us, but we were skeptical about the idea that God would speak to us through His Word and that He would have a special passage for us that could help our marriage.

SESSION 6: LED BY THE SPIRIT/ANSWERS TO PRAYER

Despite our skepticism, we decided to give it a try. One verse in the Bible that caught my (John) attention was Psalm 37:4, “Delight yourselves in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart.” I decided I should try to unpack this verse further.

On my road toward abiding, I began studying the meaning of the word “delight.” I thought it would have something to do with celebration and excitement. But I learned that it actually meant delicate morsels, tender moments, beautiful experiences. This was exactly what I had been wanting in my marriage.

With some of my skepticism behind me, I continued. I wanted to know what the word “desires” meant. When I found the Hebrew definition, it included the word, MISH’ALAH. My wife is Michelle, but I call her Michy [pronounced mishee]. It was as if my wife’s name was somehow hidden in the “special word” God had given me. His promise to me was that He would give me the wife of my heart, along with the desires of my heart.

Rich then gave us a challenge. He suggested that Michelle do as I did and ask God to reveal the desires of her heart. We prayed, asked God, and we both started to think about what an exceptional, beautiful marriage might look like.

God answered our prayer. Separately, we each created a list of desires for our marriage. We even wrote down items that excited our hearts personally. Then we came together to journal about these desires, such as making our home together more intimate, and that our marriage would be a beacon of light and hope to those around us. There were 13 total.

I spoke with Rich again, and he instructed me to continue my abiding in Psalm 37. His suggestion was to look at the next verse. If God had given me this passage in the Bible, as Rhema, then He would continue to guide me further through the passage.

The answer to me was clear. Psalm 37:5 says, “Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it.” My instruction from God was to continue abiding, “Delight yourself in the LORD.” Then, regarding the desires of our heart, we were supposed to let God give them to us, “Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it.”

For the next several months, Michy and I met regularly to pray through the desires of our hearts, and shared with each other anything we had seen God do to bring these things into our marriage.

After about six months, God had done some part of everything that was on our list. God has continued to pour into our relationship the beauty that He designed for our marriage. And, He has continued to build on these desires to take us to deeper, more beautiful experiences for our marriage. We rewarded our abiding in ways neither of us could have imagined.

SESSION 6:

LED BY THE SPIRIT/ANSWERS TO PRAYER

- As an exercise in the next week or so, write down the desires of your heart—do not censor them by qualifying whether you think they are holy enough—just note whatever you have within your heart (they are there). Then, discuss with your spouse or significant other and let your dreams expand as God gives you the desires of your heart. Remember, He is the one who gives you these, not you chasing them.

To confirm these promises as you pray, remember that we have the privilege of confirmation with others through the Spirit. Read Matthew 18:18–20.

¹⁸Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed^[a] in heaven. ¹⁹Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (Matthew 18:18-20, ESV)

When you go to another party to confirm, the Spirit will show you agreement. Do we have confirmation in our spirit that we have God’s will? If so, He will show it. When you both receive confirmation in the Spirit (through peace, strength of conviction, and when both see what God is showing you), unity is then achieved.

- As you gather together in prayer, how are you to gather?

- What does this truly mean?

- As you seek His will, two of you are then to come to what?

SESSION 6:

LED BY THE SPIRIT/ANSWERS TO PRAYER

- What does that mean?

- When you understand and receive His will, what does God promise?

- What power do you then receive?

- What does it mean to bind and loose?

- How powerful is that? What dimension are you then operating in?

As we pray, God has given us a wonderful and very practical way of understanding what to pray as we seek His will or His promises (what is He speaking to us about our circumstances, situations, etc.). We are to gather in His Name as we seek His will and His promises, ask what He wants to speak to us, and then together, with our spouse or other believer(s), go to Unity with the Spirit until we fully and clearly understand His will. This will be confirmed in our spirit through peace and further will be confirmed by the Spirit as we enter into unity that we are hearing and understanding with clarity together. This is where most of your time in prayer is spent—processing until you understand His will. When we do, we then shift to asking God to fulfill what He has spoken as His will—since He promises to deliver it. Further, He gives us the spiritual power to bind the principalities and powers who are opposing God’s work and will in our lives (to cause them to cease coming against us); and to loose the mighty power of heaven to fulfill God’s promises and bring freedom

SESSION 6:

LED BY THE SPIRIT/ANSWERS TO PRAYER

to our situations. Again, this gives a different paradigm of prayer: not giving God a list, but seeking His will and then, as we understand His will, praying for that will and believing that He will fulfill His will.

When needing further insight from God, we are to continue to pray. Read James 1:5–8.

⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:5-8, ESV)

- When you lack wisdom, what do you do?

- Why do you always lack wisdom?

- What does God promise?

- What, though, is the condition?

- What must we believe?

Note: we cannot see the future, but God knows the future, so no matter how much we think we know what to do, we always lack wisdom since what is ahead may impact the decisions that God wants us to make in accordance with His will.

SESSION 6:

LED BY THE SPIRIT/ANSWERS TO PRAYER

- If we do not believe it, He will not give it to us. Why not? What is the practical reason for this?

All we have to do when we seek wisdom is to ask for it. There is no condition for how mature we are in our walk with God. He promises to get us the answer in a way we can understand it. He will take on the burden of communicating the answer in ways that are geared toward our ability to receive the answers. Just as you would adjust your communication to a three year old versus a 10 year old, you deliver the answer as they need to hear it. However, there is one important condition to all this: that you believe He will get you the answer. It is not necessary to believe at first what you hear (remember He is the author and finisher of faith, so though what He says may be too lofty or something beyond us, He just says then to stay with Him as He reveals to us that what He says is true).

Keep in mind that it is conditional that you get settled that He will speak and get you the answer. If you aren't settled, then you won't know where the answer comes from: God, the enemy, or yourself. Even if He revealed the answer to you, you wouldn't be confident in it and would still be trying to figure things on your own. Once you truly believe He will get you the answer, you must then look for, trust, and receive the answer that He gives. Only at that point will it be clear and knowable by you.



ABIDING IN THE VINE: UNITY

ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL MARRIAGES
AND ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL LIFE



SESSION SEVEN: HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?



SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?



Now that we understand that abiding leads to receiving fruit—more fruit, much fruit—we are to learn to enjoy fully Abiding in the Vine—our relationship in God. Let’s explore how to abide. Remember abiding in the Vine is being connected to Christ—in a relationship with Him—through the Spirit. This occurs through the entirety of your life, 24/7, and you will be engaged in this relationship all the time (not just during Bible study or attending church or spiritual functions). It is centered on the Word, since He has written to us His truths and speaks His promises through the Word. Abiding is a relationship and not tasks, and thus, to be enjoyed, to be intimate, to be a wonder, to be growing and loving.

Read Luke 10:38–42.

³⁸Now as they went on their way, Jesus^[a] entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things,⁴²but one thing is necessary.

^[b] Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:38-42, ESV)

- If we were to ask Martha what she was doing, what would she say?

SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?

- From her perspective, would she consider what she was doing to be the very best thing possible? Why?

- She thought it so important that she asked Mary to help her. Mary stayed put, so what did she ask Jesus to say to Mary? Why?

- How did Jesus respond to her? Why?

- What was Mary doing?

- What key word did Jesus use about what Mary had done?

- Why is this significant for us?

- Would there have been a time later for Mary, Martha, and Jesus to join in fellowship and assist Martha with some of her tasks? Why is this also important to understand?

SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?

- When you put all this together, what is the key point of the story regarding abiding?

- How, then, should we personally respond to this?

Jesus had become good friends with Martha and Mary (and their brother, Lazarus) and often stopped by on His way to Jerusalem from Galilee. (He would attend the feasts in Jerusalem, but spent most of His ministry in Galilee.) Martha and Mary understood Him as Messiah in their limited view of who that was. During this particular visit, Martha was busy serving Christ. From her perspective, she was doing a wonderful thing—serving the Messiah. She thought these tasks were so important that she asked Mary to help, but Mary stayed put. So, she asked Christ to ask Mary to get up and help. Christ responded by saying, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things.” The construct of Jesus’ words here reveal that Martha believed she was serving Jesus. Actually, though, she was serving herself. She was working for God but forgot the most important question to God, which was, “What would you wish me to do?”

So, even when we decide to do tasks for the church, this may or may not be serving God if we haven’t asked Him first what our priorities might be. We are to sit at God’s feet, just as Mary had done. When it says that Mary was sitting at His feet, it doesn’t mean that Jesus was standing on Mary as He preached, but rather they both were reclining with Mary’s feet at Jesus’s feet, and they were in dialogue together face-to-face. Jesus was revealing truth to Mary and Mary was receiving that truth as she was asking questions, responding, and processing what Jesus was speaking to her. She was abiding. She was in relationship with Him, having wonderful fellowship with Him, and willingly and gladly receiving all that Christ was revealing to—and taking it into her heart. It was her choice—she chose to do the better thing. In other words, this is not automatic or forced, but is something that we must choose for ourselves, in our own lives. There will be time for tasks and serving, but when He so directs, our first priority is to sit at His feet in abiding—our first love.

SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?

Read Proverbs 4:1–7 and 20–23.

Hear, O sons, a father's instruction,
and be attentive, that you may gain^[a] insight,
²for I give you good precepts; do not forsake my teaching.
³When I was a son with my father,
tender, the only one in the sight of my mother,
⁴he taught me and said to me,
"Let your heart hold fast my words;
keep my commandments, and live.
⁵Get wisdom; get insight;
do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth.
⁶Do not forsake her, and she will keep you;
love her, and she will guard you.
⁷The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,
and whatever you get, get insight. (Proverbs 4:1-7, ESV)
²⁰My son, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
²¹Let them not escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.
²²For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their^[a] flesh.
²³Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life. (Proverbs 4:20-23, ESV)

- What do these verses say over and over again to pay attention to?

- Where do these words have to be kept?

SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?

- How do you do this?

- As you accept the words into your heart, how do you then receive understanding and wisdom (application to your personal life circumstances)?

- What is the difference between doing a daily devotion of different verses day after day versus staying in a section of Scripture for a period of time until an application of those words sink into your heart?

Remember that abiding is not Bible study or just doing daily devotions. It is not a simple tasklist to be checked off, one that says, “Yes, I spend a few minutes in the Bible.” Rather it is paying attention to what the Lord is speaking to you. Where He wants you to “camp out”—where He wants you to spend days, weeks, even months in the Word so that you can process the power of the living Word until it fulfills its work in your life and transforms you and changes your circumstances through promises given. This means it has to get into your heart, your soul—and this takes time—time to memorize these verses (not a memory program but where the Lord has you abiding), journaling out what the verses are saying and what they mean to you; and how you are responding to what you understand and struggle with about these verses; ask questions, dialogue with God about these truths, seek further understanding about things that seem complex and difficult or hard to believe, and continue to process with these words through insight and revelation from the Spirit until you do believe it, experience it, and the Spirit releases you from it—because it has become part of you. Remember, there is no rush, or no timeline—it may take weeks and even months—but that is okay since He is directing our lives according to His plan for what He wants us to receive.

SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?

Read Proverbs 22:17–21.

¹⁷Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to my knowledge,

¹⁸for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, if all of them are ready on your lips.

¹⁹That your trust may be in the Lord,
I have made them known to you today, even to you.

²⁰Have I not written for you thirty sayings
of counsel and knowledge,

²¹to make you know what is right and true,
that you may give a true answer to those who sent you?

(Proverbs 22:17- 21, ESV)

- These verses reiterate that the words have to get where?

- They add an indicator that you will know they are within your heart when you can do what?

As you are abiding, again you are receiving into your heart (your soul) the depth of the word that He is sending. As mentioned, this takes time. There is no rush, but requires much meditation, pondering, and processing as you dialogue with Him daily and throughout the day as He reveals things to you. Further, you can be assured that God will bring other people along the path so you can share what you are receiving. This is an indicator that you are getting this into your heart, that you can speak it out (without having to go to your notes or even to the Bible). You need not have fully received all the wisdom or understanding of the word that God is giving you, but rather to share whatever it is you have received so far. This is God's way of reinforcing what you are receiving and deepening it within your heart. As you speak it out, what you are learning will actually be being received by you and will give you further insight as to what it means to you and your particular situation.

SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?

Let's work through another set of instructions to understand further how to go deeper as you are abiding in the Word.

ABIDING IN THE WORD

1. Pursue your interest. What interesting Word or thought has the Spirit used to pique your interest; what do you already know God is laying on your heart?
2. Write out the specific Scriptures using a good Cross Reference Study Bible with helps and concordance: NKJV (Spirit Filled Life Bible is particularly good, as it includes translations of Greek and Hebrew words); NASB; NEV; Amplified. Do not use a paraphrased work as a primary Bible, only as some additional help. Go to www.biblegateway.com or www.crosswalk.com for different translations. Spend some time understanding the context of the specific Bible Book from which the verse is taken. Also, do not read just the specific verse, but read the entire paragraph for context.
3. Cross reference specific verses by using your Cross Reference Study Bible, which will take you to other truths about that particular revelation; and perform Word studies using the concordance at back of your Bible or www.biblegateway.com or www.crosswalk.com. As you spend time in the cross-referenced or Word study verses, let the "quickening" of the Spirit lead you regarding whether this is something He is speaking to you; and only then spend time further processing. If it does not strike your heart much, do not spend any further time on it and continue to cross reference other verses that strike your heart or go to another verse from your Word study.
4. Write out your thoughts about:
 - a. What this says about the character of God?
 - b. What God has done, is doing, or promises to do?
 - c. Are there any conditions to what God promises? (If...then)
 - d. What are my responsibilities or responses?
5. Go deeper into Hebrew and Greek meanings of the Words He is speaking to you. At www.studylight.org go to: Study the Interlinear Bible. Put in your Bible Book and then Chapter; then click on Study. The chapter will come up, and then you click on the word you wish to know. On the next screen, all of the Greek and Hebrew word definitions for your word will be displayed. If you wish to go deeper, you can go to Word origins and click on that number and further definitions will be offered.
6. Memorize the verses (word for word)—carry 3x5 cards with you.

SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?

7. Journal your thoughts:
 - a. Do I believe this in my heart (is it settled)? Why or why not? (What do I struggle with, and what experiences in my life work against what I am receiving in the Word?)
 - b. How do these words apply to my situation and me?
 - c. How is God calling me to adjust my life to Him and His will?
 - d. What thoughts come to me about all this?
 - e. Dialogue with the Father your thoughts. Ask for clarity, understanding, wisdom, faith.
8. Pray the promises: Ask God to fulfill what He has said to you.
9. Commit time with friends of accountability or your spouse and share your journal. What is God saying to you?
 - a. Discuss feelings, reactions, and insights. Process why this is important to you.
 - b. Study specific verses that each is sharing.
 - c. Pray verses together.

As you review this set of instructions, consider some key points:

1. Write out the Scriptures long hand instead of just reading or copying/pasting from a computer, as this will help you see all the words in the Scripture—the verbs, the if/then statements, each phrase, etc. It will open up your heart to see what the Lord wishes to speak to you.
2. As you are abiding and maturing in your abiding, do not use a paraphrased version of the Bible because, in this case, you are not reading the Bible, but a person's interpretation of the Bible. This is okay for a brand new believer who is getting used to reading the Bible for the first time, but as you move into abiding, you need to go to a word-for-word or a thought-for-thought translation that stayed true to the original languages.
3. As you are abiding, you will receive life, a high interest in, or a desire to look further into certain verses that strike your heart. Do the cross-referencing, as described in the instruction sheet. It will lead you to further insight and truth about the very thing the Lord is speaking to you. Continue to journal about what you are led to in the cross referencing and further cross reference from there. You also may wish to do a word study on a particular word that strikes you and see where else in Scripture this word is spoken and if there is life for you there as well. If you cross reference and there is no life or particular meaning for you, then just pass on it, and do not try to force something. Remember,

SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?

this is God speaking to you and not a book study or a report, so let it always be life to you.

4. It is good to write out what the verses actually say so you do not read into the verses but let them speak to you. Follow #4 in the instruction sheet to outline what the verses say.
5. You can use computer software programs to go to the Greek and Hebrew word meanings, which are quite a bit more precise than English. As you write out the verses, you will see certain words that wish to know exactly what they mean (and will have great impact on what you receive), so circle those, and then in your abiding time, go to the Greek and Hebrew and learn all that they mean. As you learn this, you will find it to be great fun and very insightful.
6. Memorize the verses in which you are abiding. Again, no rush, take your time, and just work on memorizing these so they get into your heart.
7. A key to abiding is your personal journaling—your authentic dialoguing with God about your processing of the truths He is revealing to you. This is not a sanitized version, as if you were going to read it in front of church, but rather just between you and God and what is really going on, including all your frustrations, lack of belief, all of your struggles, etc. This is then a back and forth dialogue as He moves you to His desire to transform your heart and bring changes in your circumstances according to His wonderful plan for you. The journal is only to be between you and God and no one else, including a spouse. You never hand it to another person (certainly you can share certain things with your significant other, but don't let them read it. This keeps it safe for your authentic heart to be shared with God).
8. You are to pray the promises and the verses He is giving you. See the section on prayer to understand this further.
9. At least once a week, you are to share with your spouse what God is speaking to you. This will help you understand what God is speaking, and be each other's best cheerleader as you pray for each other and ask God to fulfill what He is speaking.

SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?

THOUGHTS ON JOURNALING

Reasons for Journaling:

- What God speaks to you is important to record—write it down for further processing
- You can then continue to review for insight and further revelation—and see where God is leading you; this will also provide spiritual markers and direction that will become clearer and clearer.
- God will often speak to you ahead of what is coming and prepare you today for what He knows you will face down the road.
- Journaling holds you accountable. If God gives you instruction, He is calling you to obey follow. It is ok to struggle through it, but He wants you to stay with it to receive clarity and then for you to make your commitment of obedience. When you write these in your journal you can go back to see what you promised God you would do.
- Journaling helps you see patterns in your walk with God. He will bring these to your understanding as He wishes to bring healing or further understanding as to the impact on the freedom and joy these are having on your life.
- Journaling helps you measure your spiritual maturity. Is God still telling you the same things He was telling you two years ago? Is there a greater depth to your walk with God? Is He bringing you new revelation and a new level of excitement to your walk with Him?
- Writing all what you are hearing and understanding will bring clarity and answers—you will be amazed at what you write and then receive as He continues to lead and guide you into His best. His words to you is life and it will be joy—always exciting as you receive this life and enjoy the wonderful relationship that this brings to you.

SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?

Tips for Journaling:

- Always have your journal ready when you are abiding and spending time with HIM.
- When you journal, write down what you say to God. You need to be able to review both what God said to you as well as what you say to God—this should include your authentic thoughts and feelings, and particularly all the questions that you will have and need answers to. Let it always be a dialogue as you enjoy the relationship of receiving from the God of the Universe who deeply cares about and enjoys being with you—and wants to provide the covenant life—His will—best and none better.
- Make sure you do not let writing in your journal become more important than hearing from God—it is not a program but a relationship – always enjoy the dialogue.
- Develop a simple method to review and find things in your journal. It can be a helpful resource to you if you can go back and find things.
- Make your journal personal. It is not a religious exercise. It is a means for you to enhance your personal relationship with Christ. Write in the first person. This is YOUR relationship and journey. It further is not be openly shared so you can be deeply authentic and real. You can share “out of it” with your spouse or friend, but do not give it to another so you are never on guard to be careful what you write. It is your heart with God.
- Regularly review your journal to make sure you followed through on everything God told you. It would be tragic to forget or neglect a word God spoke to you. Keep writing what you understand and what He “dots” He is connecting for you as you grow. He will ask you to believe by living out what He reveals so that you experience Him fully—this is not Bible study or an intellectual exercise, but a way of living that is exciting, a joy, a wonder.

As we abide in the ways we learned above, there are other key elements to the process. Even though Jeremiah’s message was most difficult for him to receive and then proclaim to the nation of Israel, consider how he still enjoyed the abiding he had with God.

SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?

Read Jeremiah 15:16.

¹⁶Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts. (Jeremiah 15:16, ESV)

- What did Jeremiah do with the words he received?

- This is a picture of rumination. What does that mean?

- As he ate these words, ruminated on them, and processed them, what did he experience? Why?

- What does this speak to you regarding what we are to experience, as Jeremiah did, as we abide with God, and as we receive His words for us?

This reminds us that we are to “eat” His words—to ruminate, to ponder, to mediate—not just read or take one pass at His words, but to spend sufficient time in these Words, so that we absorb them into us (i.e., eat them). Then, as you abide, and as you help your spouse or significant other abide, you should also ask, “Am I enjoying my abiding?” If not, then you have drifted back to the intellect or trying to do something on your own instead of paying attention to where the Father is speaking to you and giving you life, which is always a joy. We are to enjoy the words—even when they are challenging, convicting, asking us to repent, etc. because they are leading us to life, and to God’s will,

SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?

which is best. There is none better. If we are not enjoying our abiding, then go back to when you were, restart again with receiving, and not striving, and remembering that abiding is a relationship and not just a study.

Read Luke 2:41–52.

⁴¹Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. ⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. ⁴³And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, ⁴⁴but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, ⁴⁵and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸And when his parents[a] saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." ⁴⁹And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"^[b] ⁵⁰And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. ⁵¹And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.

⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature[c] and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:41-52, ESV)

- As Jesus was sitting with the teachers, He was in a learning mode (abiding). What three things was He doing?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

- How might we do the same in our abiding time with Him?

SESSION 7:

HOW DO WE ABIDE? WHAT IS THE KEY TO RECEIVING THIS FRUIT?

As you abide, you are to be listening to what He is speaking to you. So always journal and write down what you are hearing. Second, your journaling should include as many questions as you are receiving. Many of the truths you come across should raise up things that you do not understand, or “if that is true, then how does this work?” This will draw you further into deeper abiding to discover the answer to the questions. You also will be writing down what you do understand. This is progressive, so as you gain understanding, you will be building truth upon truth and this will be reinforced as you write down what you do understand. This also will reveal what He wants you to understand so you can eventually go deeper into things you don’t yet understand. It is a beautiful process: listen, ask questions, write what you know. Keep the process going throughout your journaling.

Note: The next session is going to include an exercise that requires each person to have a center cross reference Bible. (Cross reference Bibles are essential for the exercise to work well. If you do not have this kind of Bible, please purchase one of the following from a Christian book distributor):

<https://www.christianbook.com/esv-reference-bible/9781433561917/pd/561917?event=ESRCG>

<https://www.christianbook.com/esv-reference-bible/9781433561924/pd/561924?event=Bibles|1001356>

<https://www.christianbook.com/nkjv-comfort-reference-center-column-leather/9780785217565/pd/217566?event=EBRN>

<https://www.christianbook.com/nkjv-ultrathin-reference-bible-brown-leathertouch/9781433615054/pd/615054?event=EBRN>



ABIDING IN THE VINE: UNITY

ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL MARRIAGES
AND ENJOYING EXCEPTIONAL LIFE



SESSION EIGHT: EXERCISE IN ABIDING:

WHAT DOES THE FATHER
HAVE TO SAY TO YOU?



SESSION 8:

EXERCISE IN ABIDING: WHAT DOES THE FATHER HAVE TO SAY TO YOU?



For this last session, you will need to schedule a total time of two-and-a-half hours for the entire group to complete together.

PART 1:

INDIVIDUAL TIME IN THE WORD:

Now that each of you has learned the wonder, the life, and the joy of Abiding in the Vine—in the vital relationship of Christ through the Spirit as you serve as a Branch and allow the Vinedresser to direct the steps of your life—we wish to end this curriculum by offering a personal experience of abiding. This will be a time of personally hearing from God that will launch you into where the Father wishes you to begin in the Word—your own deep abiding. Remember, this will be a commitment to daily time with Him. It isn't something to rush through or some must-do activity, but a time to receive what He wishes to produce in your life (fruit!). We have been blessed to discover this wonderful process using a place in Scripture. This Scripture is one He uses to speak to each of us personally so that He might reveal all that He has planned for us. Please turn to Ezekial 34, verse 11 in your center cross reference Bible, which is critical for this exercise, for this work.

In Ezekiel 34, God is speaking to the nation of Israel, His beloved children. The leaders of Israel have not been faithful in shepherding His people—they have been misleading them, not teaching them truth, and leading them astray—away from following God. He tells the leaders to step aside so that He Himself could shepherd the people directly. He would lead them and be their provider, their teacher, and fulfiller of Covenant promises. In verses 11-30, there are 22 "I wills" where God expresses the promises that He is making directly to His children with no conditions. The only implied condition as is always true in Scripture is that we are to hear what He is speaking to us, to receive what He is speaking to us personally, and then believe what He is speaking. (This has proven to be a wonderful place to experience God speaking to us about His promises. Over the years, we have had over 2,000 people go through this exercise. What is truly remarkable is that every single person has received a personal Word from God.)

SESSION 8:

EXERCISE IN ABIDING: WHAT DOES THE FATHER HAVE TO SAY TO YOU?

Now, each of you should go through each of the 22 verses of “I will” and choose as many as strike your heart. Pay attention to your heart as something that God wants to speak through, and skip over any that do not have this quickening of the spirit. Do not over analyze or try to figure it out intellectually; or worry about whether or not it or they are the “right one(s).” Simply notice which one(s) strike you. Then go back through all the ones you have checked and choose one that particularly strikes your heart at the moment—something that you believe God wishes to speak to you today.

Based on the one you chose, write out that verse longhand. Then write what you believe it means to you personally in the context of your life. Do not look it up on the internet, or read what a theologian has written in a commentary about it, or even the notes at the bottom of your Bible. The key is to ask what the verse says to you, in your heart? This is about what you are receiving and understanding—the key to abiding—not about being “right.” It should be the beginning of a dialogue with the Father and receiving what you see and perceive (realize this is just the beginning).

Then go to the cross references in the center column from that verse. See where that takes you elsewhere in the Scripture and read the entire paragraph of that cross reference. As you read that entire paragraph, you again choose a verse that is speaking to you. It may or not be the exact verse that was listed in the cross reference, but one that strikes your heart. Write out that verse longhand; and then again, as you did with the first verse, write what it means to you personally in the context of your life.

Then go to a third cross reference in the center column from the second verse that you received. Go to where that takes you in the Scripture and read the entire paragraph of that cross reference. As you read that entire paragraph, you again choose a verse that is speaking to you. It may or not be the exact verse that was listed in the cross reference, but one that strikes your heart. Write out that verse longhand; and then again, as you did with the first verse, write what it means to you personally in the context of your life.

You will return to the group with three verses that you have written out longhand, along with what you wrote about how each verse spoke to you personally in the context of your life.

Now, each privately, begin the exercise.

PART 2: **Now that you have done this exercise individually, come into the group to interpret what God is saying to you. The group should break into small groups of 4–6 (no more). Allow 60–80 minutes for this exercise.**

GROUP HELPS INTERPRET WHAT GOD IS SPEAKING:

Once the groups are gathered, each of the 4-6 people should read what they have written. Since each of you has the Holy Spirit, the group is equipped 105

SESSION 8:

EXERCISE IN ABIDING: WHAT DOES THE FATHER HAVE TO SAY TO YOU?

to help interpret what the Spirit is speaking to the person who is sharing. First, what does the person sharing believe the Spirit is speaking? How does he/she interpret, in context of their life, how these three Words from God are speaking to his/her life right now. Have them talk freely about anything that is on their heart and what is speaking to them.

As you go through this, relax and pay attention to the leading of the Spirit. Be prepared for the unexpected where the Father brings to mind a person, a situation, or event in your life that He wants to deal with. For example, unforgiveness (self and others), past unresolved hurt He wants to heal, a promise for your current situation, your family or someone in your family such as your children. This is an exciting time where anything can happen (we even have experienced supernatural events such as a gust of wind dropping a bird's nest outside a sliding door that was a message for someone in the room) and is a chance to experience the beginning of a lifetime of hearing from the Father and experiencing the branch life. Understand that the Father is wanting to launch you into where He wishes to bring fruit (His fruit) into your life. He has much to say and promises to be clear in speaking to you.

The rest of the group should pay attention to which words are repeated in the verses or in what the person is speaking. What insight does the Spirit give anyone in the group? Everyone in the group should feel free to ask questions, probe further, give insight where revelation is received from God, and help him/her understand what promise, what encouragement, what instruction, what area the Father is speaking. Remember, this is a launching place where God would have you camp out next as you go home and begin to abide in the Word further. This may mean additional word study, additional cross referencing, or deeper study in the verses you already have received. Perhaps someone in the group has other verses that you can write down that will act as the starting point to spend time in as you abide further through journaling or further cross referencing, etc.

Before moving onto the next person, ask the person sharing if they have clarity regarding what the Father has spoken to them today and if they now know where to begin their abiding in the Word. Here, they should renew their commitment to spend at least 20 minutes each day camping out journaling, in prayer, in the Word in this area. The Father has spoken to them to receive this truth, so they should remain in this truth until it has been fully received (not to intellectually study it and move on but to stay with it until it is experienced in their hearts and incorporated into their lives).

SESSION 8:

EXERCISE IN ABIDING: WHAT DOES THE FATHER HAVE TO SAY TO YOU?

- CONCLUSION:**
1. Now that you understand and have experienced hearing from God on a personal level, continue abiding in the Word that God has spoken to you a minimum of 20 minutes a day, every day. Continue to journal, and cross reference, always writing down what you are hearing, what questions and issues you have about this specific issue in your real-life circumstances, or how you are experiencing the truth of what HE is showing you and what you understanding/discern, etc. Stay with it! Do this day after day, step by step until you fully experience this beautiful promise that He has spoken to you. Remember, He does not want you to just learn intellectually about this but to be transformed fully or to realize in the circumstances of your life the promise that He has given you. Do not move on to something else or only do a devotion each day. Instead, “camp” out, even if just 20 minutes a day, abiding with Him as you experience life with HIM. You will see Him working, begin experiencing peace, joy, and freedom along the way. It will feel truly remarkable as He fulfills what He has personally spoken to you.
 2. Also, since you learned how wonderful and blessed it is to live in “Unity” (for there He commands blessing and because there you discover His will, which is best and none better) continue to practice seeking God’s will together with your spouse or another trusted, Godly friend (if you are single) as you begin to seek God’s will for all your decisions and issues of life. You will learn not to go to selfishness, debating, and arguing (division), but to enjoy processing together (even when you disagree, which is normal and good) until you reach unity and see clearly how to confirm God’s will. Enjoy your adventure to the fullest!
 3. If you ever have a question or something you need some help on, please free to contact us and we will get back to you with some assistance on your personal questions.
 4. May you fully enjoy living as branches abiding in the Vine!

