



# Real. Present. God.

## The Search for My Identity Leader Notes

by Rev. B. Keith Haney

Many factors determine our identity—environment, relationships, and family of origin, among others. In this study we will peel away the layers and get at the heart of God’s divine purpose for our lives and discuss how we live together in a diverse culture. We will discover who we are, how God calls us to serve Him and His Kingdom, and discover what kind of legacy we want to leave behind. And finally, we will learn how to see other races, tribes, and people the way God sees them.

Goals for this study:

For youth to discover who they are in Christ.

To create a safe space and a biblical context to discuss diversity.

To understand that race is not always a black and white issue. This study expands the talk to include any group we struggle to see as God’s divine creation.

This study could be used for Sunday mornings, youth nights, a weekend retreat, and for an intergenerational study.

*Leader’s notes are in red throughout.*

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### LESSON 1: WHO AM I?

*“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” (Matthew 5:14)*

#### Objectives:

*In this lesson we will:*

- *Define our identity.*
- *Explore the outside factors that impact how we view ourselves.*
- *Get a picture of ourselves through God’s eyes.*

### Introduction

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#### ICE BREAKERS

1. *Who gave you your name? Why?*
2. *What is the ethnic origin of your name?*
3. *What are your nicknames, if any?*

*The hope with these opening questions is to discover how the participants got their names. Many nicknames come with a story. This will give participants an opportunity to share. Were those names of family members? Does the family have a tradition of how they name their kids? It can provide valuable insight into their identity.*

#### OPENING QUESTIONS

1. *In the age of social media profiles, how many people know the real you?*

*Research shows that on average this generation spends two or more hours a day on social media. Pew Research estimates 76% of all teens use social media. Facebook is the dominant platform, with 71% of all teens using it. Instagram and Snapchat also have become increasingly important, with 52% of teens using Instagram and 41% using Snapchat.<sup>1</sup>*

*The time we spend on social media is hurting offline relationships. Those online hours make us less able to communicate and build deep, meaningful connections with people. The same research points out: “Even as teens have the opportunity to share parts of themselves on social media that they can’t share in person, those same self-presentations don’t always feel authentic to their peers. Roughly three-quarters (77%) of social media-using teens agree people are less authentic and real on social media than they are offline.”<sup>2</sup>*

2. *How many people do you really know?*

*To spark further discussion: The prevailing theory is that your brain is only really capable of knowing 20 people well; you can be familiar with 150 people and you can recognize 1500.*

*Which explains why military unit sizes for millennia have been roughly those sizes. Platoons are roughly 20, a phalanx is 144-150 and a division is 1000-1500.*

Have you ever felt unsure about your importance in the world or wondered if you matter to God? It is possible you have felt uncertain about your usefulness or whether God finds you acceptable. If this describes you, then I want you to hang with me through the rest of this lesson. We will examine important things about our identity in Christ. It is my prayer that you will gain a

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/06/chapter-4-social-media-and-friendships/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/06/chapter-4-social-media-and-friendships/>



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greater sense of your divine purpose. You were on God's radar from the beginning. The following illustration is a prime example of how much your life matters.

### ILLUSTRATION

A professor in a world-acclaimed medical school once posed this medical situation—and an ethical problem—to his students: “Here’s the family history: The father has syphilis. The mother has TB. They already have had four children. The first is blind. The second has died. The third is deaf. The fourth has TB. Now the mother is pregnant again. The parents come to you for advice. They will have an abortion if you decide they should. What do you say?”

The students gave various individual opinions, and then the professor asked them to break into small groups for “consultation.” All the groups came back to report that they would recommend abortion.

“Congratulations,” the professor said, “You just took the life of Beethoven!”

### For Reflection:

#### 1. As a student in that class, what would your decision be for this family?

*What values will impact your decision to keep or abort this child? Is it a quality of life issue for the child? Is your decision based on the difficult life the parents will have raising so many children with health issues?*

#### 2. Those health issues are labels; what labels have people tried to stick on you?

*Some identities are easily seen (things like race or assumed gender), while others are not always obvious (such as a disability, socioeconomic status or education level). The labels we use to describe each other are the result of unfounded assumptions and stereotypes. We are also guilty of applying labels to people we barely know. Labels that influence our identity are often beyond our control.*

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**Key Point:**  
You were on God's radar from the beginning.

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## Into Scripture

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The Text: Read Ephesians 1:3-10.

### BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT

This text is addressed to all Christians. In this opening to the letter, Paul lays out our relationship to the Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We are “blessed.” In Greek, the word “blessing” refers to every blessing for time and eternity, which the Spirit offers as a gift to the believer.

This applies to our identity in that it shows us the source of our blessings. God our Heavenly Father has made us rich in Jesus Christ. When you were formed and birthed into God's family, you were blessed, you were born rich. Not rich as the world defines riches. We did not come with a silver spoon and servants at our beck and call, in God's eyes. Our wealth came through Christ. We share in the riches of God's grace. “In him, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1:7 ESV). Paul describes the riches of grace in Ephesians 2:7, “so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” And the riches never stop. You see them in God's glory (Ephesians 1:18; 3:16), in God's mercy (Ephesians 2:4), and in “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8). Our Heavenly Father is not poor; His love and riches never fail. And He has given to us this indescribable, most precious gift in His Son, Jesus Christ, as Paul identifies Him in 2 Corinthians 9:15, “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” He has made us rich in His Son.



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### APPLICATION

When I was a young kid, I was not an athletic stud. When the kids in my neighborhood would get a game together, whether it was basketball or football, the players would line up, and the captains would choose their teams one by one. Inevitably, as the draft took place, I would be one of the last ones standing. After all the other players had been chosen, and the pickings got thinner, the captain who was about to get stuck with me would first look up and down the block, hoping against hope that another potential teammate was approaching, but he eventually had to settle for choosing me. It didn't matter who, someone's younger brother or sister, even someone's aging grandmother. When it was obvious no other help could be found he would point at me and say, "Okay, I'll take Keith." Somehow, that didn't make me feel chosen. I was just the lesser of two evils. In fact, I had the feeling that if it hadn't been my ball we were using, I wouldn't have gotten to play at all.

I think many of us can relate to this feeling in some arena of our lives. It may be in the realm of relationships and dating where it seems we are always the third wheel. Or in our classrooms when new people keep moving pass us academically. We can relate to the feeling of being the fourth or fifth chair in the school band. We are the last chosen and the least talented in at least some area—academically, athletically, musically, or elsewhere. But fear not, there is a field where we never need to feel that way: our relationship with God. Probably all of us have wondered, "If they had it to do all over again, would they choose me? Would they hire me? Would she date me?" Maybe some of you have even thought, "If God had it do over, would He choose me again?" Some of you believe that you have been such a disappointment to God that He would have been better off if He had not created and redeemed you. The message from Ephesians 1 is the exact opposite of that notion. The message of Ephesians is that God invited and welcomed you into the body of Christ not because He had to, but because it was God's heart's desire to do so. You are part of His plan. From the beginning...

- He has wanted you to be a member of his family.  
(Ephesians 1:5) "...he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,"
- You have been part of His plan. From the beginning, it was His idea you would become good. Notice what Paul says,  
(Ephesians 1:4) "...even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him."

Whether you think it's possible for you to become "holy and without the blame," the Bible clarifies that God thinks it is possible. Whether you believe in your potential, God believes in your potential.

You are part of His plan. From the beginning, God has known that you would arrive at this moment.

(Ephesians 1:11-12) "...having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will..."

Long before Genesis 1:1, God knew that you would be where you are today in your job, in your studies, in your relationships, in all areas of your life. He knew that you would be here at this moment. For some, it's been a rough ride. There have been mistakes and disappointments along the way, and you've fallen short of God's glory more times than you want to admit. Many of you have many regrets, and you've wanted to give up many times. But God's love for you has never changed. From the beginning, He has known that your life would bring you to this place today. Even though your past may be littered with failure upon failure, it doesn't change the fact that God loves you, He chose you, and He has a plan for you. You have been on His mind from the very beginning.

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**Key Point:**  
God invited and welcomed you into the body of Christ not because He had to, but because it was God's heart's desire to do so. You are part of His plan.

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### FOR REFLECTION

**Describe how Paul's writings in Ephesians impact your identity.**

*Paul points out we were set apart before we were created for a holy purpose. This gets lost in this throwaway society. Every life matters to God.*

There are so many competing voices in the world today. Worship keeps us connected to the truth and strengthens our faith. Worship is more than just Sunday morning.

### Faith in Practice: Worship

*The Third Commandment.*

*Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.*

*What does this mean?*

*We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.<sup>3</sup>*

True worship is based on a right understanding of the nature of God and coming before God valuing God's worth. We have the honor of coming together with a body of fellow believers to sing praises, offer prayers, hear accounts of God, of the history of God's faithfulness, all to enhance our ability to treasure God above all things. This is true worship at its core, making God our crowning jewel of life, and lifting Jesus as the name above all names.

I love the words of A. W. Tozer in *The Purpose of Man: Designed to Worship*:

*"Everything in God's creation has its purpose. God created the silkworm to make silk; the bird was created to sing; the sheep for their wool. Throughout the Bible, the prophets and apostles all testify that God made us for a purpose and that purpose is to sing His praises before the hushed audience of all creation.*

*The purpose of nature is to lead us to the Creator and to worship Him. The purpose of man's feelings and emotions is to lead to the One who implanted those within the heart of man, to the Creator. Everything in all of creation is to point to the Creator and evoke within adoring wonder and admiration and worship. Wherever we go, we can worship.*

*When God made the human soul in His own image, He did so that we might act according to that Divine nature. He never intended the virus of sin to infect that sacred place within man. Sin, therefore, is the unnatural thing. It is a foreign substance defiling man's heart and life, repelling God's gaze. Because of this [fallen] condition in man, sin is [now] natural, worship is unnatural; and so, few people really do it."*

Worship is a powerful way to connect us with the Creator. However, that worship is not limited to Sunday morning only. Every day our life is an act of worship.

### Psalm Connection: Read Psalm 62:5-8, 11-12.

### MISSION POSSIBLE

Your mission this week is to see your entire life differently. In Romans 12, Paul reminds us, "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (ESV)

**Key Point:**  
Worship is a powerful way to connect us with the Creator. However, that worship is not limited to Sunday morning only. Every day our life is an act of worship.

<sup>3</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism*, "An Explanation of the Small Catechism", 2017 edition



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Our Christian mindset differs greatly from the audience Paul addressed. In Greek philosophy, the thought was that the physical body was evil, which led to the practice of asceticism. Ascetics would treat their bodies harshly for religious purposes, often seeking to atone for the sins committed with their bodies. In addition, Greeks offered sacrifices to their pagan gods just as Jews offered sacrifices to God, seeking favor or forgiveness. But Paul presents a radical shift in thinking as he tells believers of Christ to commit their entire being or person to God (1 Cor. 6:20) as they had previously committed it to sin (cf. Rom. 6). Instead of offering dead sacrifices or punishing the body, Paul urges believers to have an active life of service and Christ-like love. He calls us to be holy, which in this context means “set apart for God’s service.”

I say all this to lay the groundwork for you, as you journal, video log, or capture in pictures this week how you are being used by God for His purposes. What was your act of worship this week?



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### LESSON 2: YOU WERE CHOSEN

*“For many are called, but few are chosen.” Matthew 22:14*

#### Objectives:

*In this lesson, we will:*

- *Explore God’s calling on our lives.*
- *We have been on God’s heart from before we were born; why?*
- *What did God choose you to accomplish for the kingdom?*
- *Our identity is shaped by our calling.*

### Introduction

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#### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Can you think of a time you struggled to hear God’s voice in your life or see the direction He was leading?*

2. *What was going on in your life, when God seems silent?*

*When that has happened in my life it was not because God stopped trying to communicate with me, it was because, for whatever reason, I stopped listening. I stopped seeking God’s will. My own personal agenda was getting in the way.*

#### ILLUSTRATION: WE HAVE A CALLING FROM GOD.

*The Richmond Times-Dispatch* on June 23, 1982, carried an arresting story. It concerned a humble black woman, Dessaymore Scott. According to the report, she had no family, and she did not remember her parents. Although never married, she raised six children who had been abandoned by their parents. “I was given them,” she said, “the family I didn’t have.” All of her adopted children had gone through high school, four through college and business schools. At the time of the story, Miss Scott was sixty-eight years old and had been the full-time sexton for Fourth Baptist Church in Richmond for twenty years. The newspaper said that she arrives at 7:30 in the morning and often remains at the church until 9 o’clock at night.

Friends described her as a flower:

*There is a garden in her face,  
Where roses and white lilies grow...  
There is a song placed deep in her heart,  
And it’s tune only a few would know.<sup>1</sup>*

### Into Scripture

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The Text: Read 1 Samuel 3:1–10.

#### BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT

Samuel’s mother Hannah was barren when one day she was found by Eli the priest praying fervently to God for a child. Eli mistakenly assumed she was drunk. Upon further investigation, he learned of her story. Hannah prayed to God that He would answer her prayer for a son, promising

<sup>1</sup> Jones, G. C. (1986). 1000 illustrations for preaching and teaching (p. 227). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers

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to dedicate that son to God. God gave her a son, and when Samuel was old enough, she took him to Eli the priest to raise him.

Now Eli had not done a great job rearing his sons. They were unfaithful priests, and because of this God would end their priestly line with Eli and his sons. Samuel would be their replacement. God is an amazing, forgiving God. Even though Eli had messed up with his sons, God gives him a chance at redemption with Samuel. Eli got his second chance, “Now the young man Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and also with man” (2:26). Because of Eli’s sons’ unfaithfulness, sin deafened the Word of the Lord.

In 3:1 we hear that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.” Since Samuel had received no special revelation from the Lord (3:7) and the Lord had not appeared to him in a vision, he would not have expected what happened.

The Lord calls Samuel to service by name. After some coaching from Eli, Samuel responds with a familiar response, “Here I am.” This is a Hebrew idiom but often understood. It is the equivalent of: “Here, at your service, sir!” William Franzmann makes this observation:

*“Samuel’s reception of the Lord’s message, in this case, is an example showing that faith receives God’s Word without reservation or objection, whether that particular word is to one’s liking or not.”<sup>2</sup>*

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**1. Our personal agenda can impede God’s will. How did that play out in the life of Eli the prophet?**

*For Eli, because he refused to correct his sons’ behavior, history remembers them as worthless men. Eli’s sons were “wicked;” they had “no regard for” the Lord nor the people they were called to serve.*

**2. How did God break through the spiritually deaf lives of Israel’s spiritual leaders?**

*God would raise up a new prophet in Samuel to replace the line of Eli. Samuel would provide counsel to King David.*

### THE APPLICATION: WHAT IS GOD CALLING YOU TO DO?

**1. Stop and let God speak to you, through prayer and the study of God’s Word.**

God has a calling for your life to serve Him and His kingdom. Do not ignore the movement of God in your life. He does not give up easily. He will break through all the walls we erect. Like the account in 1 Samuel, God’s voice has a way to speak directly to us. It may be through prayer, the reading of His holy Word, a song, or a hymn, or speaking through faithful believers. However, God reaches you to listen.

Think about this seriously. What is God calling you as a young person, whose whole life is in front of you, to do for Him and His kingdom? How are you responding to Jesus’ call for discipleship, “Come, follow me?” What is God calling you to do?

I wish someone had taken the time to challenge me with this question when I was younger. I think I squandered so much time searching for my purpose. I want to pour truth into your lives. The truth is that you have been gifted. You have talents; you have thoughts; you have ideas; you have time; you are clay jars that contain a valuable treasure. You have the relationships; you have had God’s love and grace lavished upon you with all wisdom and insight! In the first lesson, we introduced this passage of Scripture,

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the

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**Key Point:**  
God has a calling  
for your life to  
serve Him and His  
kingdom.

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<sup>2</sup> Franzmann, W. H. (1980). Bible history commentary: Old Testament (electronic ed., p. 344). Milwaukee, WI: Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod



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world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love, he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” (Ephesians 1:3-10)

We as a church are called into the service of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This calling is to do something beyond the four walls of our church building, something which has a greater impact than we could ever imagine. Our vocation doesn't just impact us but impacts the world for eternity.

The church is not a building, but is made up of living stones, individuals, each receiving a call like Samuel. A call to service to the glory of God. A call to go into the world and proclaim God's grace, forgiveness, and mercy to an unconnected, disengaged and hopeless world. As you seek to discover God's calling on your life be ready to respond, "Here Am I, Send me, Sir!"

### **2. Be Open to His Leading.**

God makes it clear that our response to His leading is to give up control of our agenda. What a difficult thing to do! Our agenda gives us the impression we have control, but God is the one directing our path. Let Him lead.

These verses speak to this:

*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11 )*

*Commit your work to the LORD,  
and your plans will be established. (Proverbs 16:3)*

### **3. When God Calls, Be Willing to Go!**

*Many are the plans in the mind of a man,  
but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand. Proverbs 19:21*

*Larry Walters - A Story of Reckless Abandon*

Larry used to spend his weekend in his backyard sitting in his favorite lawn chair with a six-pack and some peanut butter sandwiches.

One day, looking at all the fences in his neighborhood, he got an idea. He would buy some weather balloons, fill them with helium and tie them to his lawn chair. He figured they would allow him to float 100 or so feet up in the air so he could visit with his neighbors, who lived behind all those fences, while he floated along.

He got 30-40 weather balloons, tied them to his lawn chair, which he anchored to his car. He filled the balloons with helium, and they lifted the chair nicely off the ground. Grabbing his BB gun (so he could shoot out the balloons if he started to get too high), he sat down in his lawn chair, tied himself in (for safety), and cut the rope. It wasn't a nice lazy float up to 100 feet; it was more like getting shot out of a cannon. And he didn't stop at 100, 200, or even 500 feet. He went to 11,000 feet. He literally shot straight up in the air.

He floated into the landing pattern for the Los Angeles International Airport. A pilot reported seeing a lawn chair floating by. Larry was holding on for dear life, too afraid to use the BB gun. They sent helicopters up, and stopped all takeoffs and landings while they convinced Larry to shoot out two balloons.

When he was finally on the ground, a huge crowd of reporters surrounded him.

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One reporter stuck a microphone in his face and said, "I have three questions to ask you. Were you scared?"

"What kind of question is that? Wouldn't you be scared if you were floating around in a lawn chair at 11,000 feet?"

Then the reporter asked, "Are you going to do it again?"

To which he got a strong, "NO!"

Finally, he asked, "What in the world made you do it the first time?"

To that Larry said, "Well, you can't just sit there."

[Compiled from multiple sources]

There will be times when God's plans will scare you because they appear bigger than our abilities. They are supposed to be. He plans will take you higher than you planned; they are designed this way so God gets the glory.

Could God's plan seem crazy to those around you? Yes.

Will this calling on your life seem scary? Yes.

But what are your options? Follow God's leading or just sit there?

#### 4. Trust His Plans

*I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself,  
that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps. (Jeremiah 10:23)*

*The heart of man plans his way,  
but the LORD establishes his steps. (Proverbs 16:9)*

When God calls you to something for Him and His kingdom, not only does He call, He also equips and gives you the power to accomplish it. I love this quote: Dr. Carl Bates, former president of the SBC, says "With plans no larger than yours, you do not need my power." Hobbs, H. H. (1990). My favorite illustrations (p. 120). Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.

You can trust that God will can you to carry out His divine purpose in the world. With that divine purpose God also provides us with His almighty power to fulfill His will.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

##### 1. What impact do you want your life to make on the world?

*The hope is that this question will lead the participants to see that their life matters and to think about how they can use their God-given gifts and abilities to make a positive difference in the world.*

##### 2. How is God calling you to serve Him and His Kingdom?

*This question leads into the discussion for the lesson on what is God's calling in our life as disciples. We want the participants to start searching for their place in God's kingdom.*

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**Key Point:**  
There will be times when God's plans will scare you because they appear bigger than our abilities. They are supposed to be. He plans will take you higher than you planned; they are designed this way so God gets the glory.

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### Faith in Practice: Prayer and Meditation: Praying the Scripture

*“No one can believe how powerful prayer is and what it can effect, except those who have learned it by experience. Whenever I have prayed earnestly, I have been heard and have obtained more than I prayed for. God sometimes delays, but He always comes.” – Rev. Dr. Martin Luther*

When we struggle to hear the voice of God in our life, it is a good practice to stop talking and do more meditation. We need to spend more time in prayer. Prayer does not come naturally for most of us. One way to enhance our prayer life is to pray the Word of God.

Why would we want to pray God’s Word? There are just those moments in life where we just can’t find the right phrase. It is possible in those moments that we are hurting. We can be so beaten down by the world that there is nothing in our heart to bring before God. There are no words, only pain. In those moments we know we need His strength, His healing, but we are emotionally and spiritually empty. We need God to speak to us. We need to hear a word of hope. Our soul needs to be reminded of His majesty. That broken spirit needs to be still and know that He is almighty and sitting on the throne. In those moments, why not read the words of the Author of creation?

Your prayers are never stronger than when you are praying the Scriptures. The writer of Hebrews in chapter 4, verse 12 says, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” God’s words are powerful. Whether we are reading them or using them as our basis for prayer, why not tap into the powerful promises of God?

#### MISSION POSSIBLE

This week spend time in prayer and discovery. I believe that God is calling you. Not only did God call Samuel, but God is calling you—that’s why I believe you’re taking part in this Bible study on this day, in this church. What is God calling you to courageously do for Him and His kingdom? Come back next week and share your findings with the group.

Practice praying these Scripture readings to get you started.

Hebrews 4:16

Psalms 119:18

Psalms 24:1

Romans 8:26-27

**Key Point:**  
When we struggle to hear the voice of God in our life, it is a good practice to stop talking and do more meditation. We need to spend more time in prayer.

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### LESSON 3: MY IDENTITY INFLUENCES MY VIEW OF OTHERS

*“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.” (Psalm 139:14)*

#### Objectives:

*In this lesson we will:*

- *Explore how our view of ourselves determines how we welcome outsiders into our lives.*
- *Discuss how God opened Peter’s eyes to expand his mission work to Gentiles.*
- *Identify the people God is placing in your life for you to share the message of the gospel.*

### Introduction

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Mohandas K. Gandhi was the leader of the Indian nationalist movement against British rule and considered the father of his country. He is internationally esteemed for his doctrine of nonviolence to achieve political and social progress.

Gandhi says in his autobiography that in his student days he was truly interested in the Bible. Deeply touched by reading the Gospels, he seriously considered becoming a convert, since Christianity seemed to offer the real solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. One Sunday, he went to a nearby church to attend services. He decided to see the minister and ask for instruction in the way of salvation and enlightenment on other doctrines. But when he entered the sanctuary, the ushers refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go and worship with his own people. Gandhi left and never came back. “If Christians have caste differences also,” he said to himself, “I might as well remain a Hindu.”

#### FOR DISCUSSION

**1. How did the closed minds of the ushers impact Gandhi’s view of Christianity? What if their attitudes would have been more welcoming? What impact could this have had on religion in India?**

*The magnitude of Gandhi’s influence on the people of India and the world is far-reaching. Imagine how different India would be today had Gandhi converted to Christianity. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr once remarked, “Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale.” A section of the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta deals with Gandhi.*

**2. Describe attitudes members of your family or your friends in school have toward people with a different nationality?**

*Our environment, family of origin, friends and culture can shape our views of other races and people. It is good to address how those outside views have impacted our views of people different than ourselves. Previous views led to segregation of black Americans. They had to use special subpar bathrooms, attend inferior schools, and were denied the right to vote among many other separations. Now you see attitudes shifting to immigrants and Muslims, just to name a view.*

**3. How might those attitudes hinder sharing the Gospel?**

*Like in our text for today, Peter’s attitudes about Gentiles affected his ability to share the gospel with them. He was taught that “those people,” those outsiders, were not included in God’s plan of*



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*salvation. God had to radically shift Peter's understanding of what is clean (a part of God's plan) and unclean (those outside of God's grace.)*

### Into Scripture

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The Text: Read Acts 10:9-49.

#### BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT

Caesarea was a Roman city, the Roman capital of Palestine. Cornelius was a good, God-fearing, well-respected man who did not know the truth and power of the Gospel. Which shows us there are good people with a good heart who are outside of the saving grace of God. It is possible to be spiritual and still not be a part of God's family. In John 7:17 we read, "If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority." We see the heart of God in this text from Acts. God sends an angel to speak to Cornelius and told him to send for Peter. You may wonder if the work of God would be accomplished more effectively if God used angels instead of us flawed, easily distracted human beings? Probably, but God has not given the task to share the Gospel to angels. The ministry of sharing the Gospel to the unconnected is given to the saints; it's our privilege. Peter was thirty miles away at Joppa, but with unwavering obedience, Cornelius called for two servants and a guard and sent them on this important mission.

Peter was not quite ready for the mission God was sending him on. God had to lead Peter over a few hurdles first. Peter, like many Jewish Christians, clung to the regulations of the old covenant which separated them from the Gentiles.

And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. (Acts 10:28)

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." (Acts 11:2-3)

In order for them to fulfill the Great Commission, Jewish disciples had to bring the gospel to the outermost parts of the earth. For that to happen a change in the heart of Peter had to happen that only God could bring about. It is the challenge we as Christians face today. There are people, groups, and tribes today the Christian church still struggles to reach. Like Peter, we need God to bring about a change in our heart.

#### DISCUSSION

***Who are the people you struggle to share the gospel with?***

*Depending on the area in which you live this may or may not be race related. Be sensitive to the answers and if needed take time here to pray for those struggling to see people through God's eyes.*

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**Key Point: There are people, groups, and tribes today the Christian church still struggles to reach. Like Peter, we need God to bring about a change in our heart.**

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### Application

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Dr. Wayne Dehoney's *The Dragon and the Lamb* is the story of the persecuted churches in China. In a simple yet profound style, the book intermingles ancient and modern Chinese history with the Christian movement in this most populous nation on earth.



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With the Communist takeover, Christian missionaries were barred from China. Christianity largely went underground in the form of “house churches.” A few years ago, the Chinese government implemented more of an open-door policy toward the outside world. Companion to this was more tolerance toward religion, including Christianity. Church buildings, once confiscated for other purposes, were returned to the churches. Public worship was permitted, and despite long years of persecution, Christianity was found to be “alive and well” in China.

Nevertheless, the Chinese government remained wary of foreign missionaries. While Dr. Dehoney did not see a door opening for missionaries in the foreseeable future, he added, “The door to individual Christian involvement is not closed. China gladly welcomes individuals who have a skill or technical training that China needs and are willing to come and help the Chinese people.” He mentioned “agricultural experts, public health and social workers, teachers (especially English), business experts, doctors, etc.”

For example, in 1987 Mrs. Baker James Cauthen taught English at a Chinese university. Born in China of missionary parents, she was a former missionary in China and wife of the late, longtime president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. However, she served not under the auspices of a mission board, but as an individual on a mission.

To bear witness for Christ calls for individuals who are willing to adapt to existing circumstances and go on the mission for Him.

In the illustration above we see that God works His divine will to reach those outside His grace. We need to look for open windows when a door closes. We see that with God working through Peter and Cornelius.

### DISCUSSION

**Describe a time when you experienced God opening a door for you to share the Gospel.**

*Sharing the gospel is never easy. There will be times when doors will close. A prayer is that we look for how God opens other avenues to plant the seeds of faith. Help the students process if there is another opening God is creating for them to utilize. This would be a great opportunity for the leader to share a personal story of an experience they have had.*

Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon’s house, stood at the gate and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. (Acts 10:17-18)

In the vision to Peter, God had only given a piece of His divine puzzle. God is about to provide another piece with the arrival of the men from Cornelius. What we learn from this: God is divinely at work bringing Peter and Cornelius together in order to fulfill His purpose of breaking down the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles. “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” (Ephesians 2:14-16)

God is working to bring the gospel to Cornelius so that he will believe and be saved. He is also moving in the lives of the Jewish church leaders and members to embrace the Gentiles as fellow heirs to the gifts of God accomplished through Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. Apart from faith in the work of Christ, Cornelius would have remained a devout, god-fearing, honest man lost in his sins forever. Peter would have continued to maintain his separation mindset, living in ignorance of the true heart of God about the Gentiles. And the Jewish church would have continued to restrict access to the church to those Gentiles based on an outdated system of ceremonial laws in the Old Covenant.

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**Key Point:**  
Sharing the gospel is never easy. There will be times when doors will close. A prayer is that we look for how God opens other avenues to plant the seeds of faith.

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So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (Acts 10:34-35)

Peter finally accepted the reality that through the death and resurrection of Christ, God had removed everything that had separated the Jews from the Gentiles before Christ when only those who converted to Judaism were numbered with God’s people. With Christ’s redemptive work then, there is a new commandment, and we have an inclusive Savior. God is not willing that any should perish. This desire applies to every single individual, tribe, people and nationality.

### Faith Challenge: The Place of Good Works and Witnessing

*“The forgiveness of sins happens freely for Christ’s sake, that Christ, and not our works, is the Atoning Sacrifice for sins, as Peter says, ‘To Him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins’ (Acts 10:43)?- Article XX: of the Augsburg Confession*

**Key Point:**  
The gospel is intended for all races, tribes, and nations.

I also want to add a word of caution. We don’t encourage Christians to share the gospel to merit some favor from God. Good works, as the Confessions point out, do not merit forgiveness of sins. Christ has already won that for us through His work on Calvary’s cross. We share this gift out of a sense of love for Jesus and humanity.

#### MISSION POSSIBLE:

Christian love is twofold: love the Lord Your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39). Out of knowledge of God’s love for us, and our neighbor, Christians are given the opportunity and desire to proclaim the gospel to the world.

The gospel is intended for all races, tribes, and nations.

“Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.” (Revelation 14:6)

While the Bible does not contain any clear definition of race, it instead talks about nations, tribes, tongues, and peoples. One thing still running rampant in the church is racial tension. Our prejudices are in direct conflict with the nature of God. We saw in the text that God will move heaven and earth to reshape our thinking about those different from ourselves. Our text was just one example of how racial prejudice is out of line with God’s heart. Other examples in Scripture: God showed His displeasure by disciplining Miriam for her criticism of Moses’ Ethiopian wife (Numbers 12:1–15). God taught Jonah a valuable lesson when he refused to take his ministry to those of another culture (Jonah 1:12). Peter was disciplined again for not opening the “door of faith to the Gentiles,” his behavior did not exemplify God’s inclusive grace (Acts 10:15; Galatians 2:11–18). So, here is your mission challenge this week. It is in the form of a letter.

Dear Christian Church,

As I look at the racial pain all around and the way it is portrayed in the national media, it saddens me. The tone is so negative, and it is feeding into the darkness that is already out there in our sin-sick world. I don’t expect the world to have real solutions. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”

Dear Followers of Christ, especially the youth, the Church of today and tomorrow, you have a pivotal role to play. You have the Light. You don’t hold the history of the past. You can lead us forward with a clean slate. You know the only real Love. The world is lost



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without your voice, without your direction. It is time to stand and lead. Now is the time to speak out.

Sincerely,

Those Looking for Answers.

The writer of Ecclesiastes shares these words of wisdom:

*“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:*

*a time to keep, and a time to cast away;*

*a time to tear, and a time to sew;*

*a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;*

*a time to love, and a time to hate;*

*a time for war, and a time for peace.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1,6-8)*

Pray:

God, you have given us Jesus as the Light of the world. As Paul reminds the children of light,

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. (2 Corinthians 4:5-7)

May the light that has shone in our hearts burst forth in the world so we may reflect the Light in the lives of those around us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

The mission is simple yet complex. Lord, help Your church lead in a movement toward racial reconciliation. Help us remind people that You do not judge people by their outward appearance but by their heart.





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### LESSON 4: CAN WE BE ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE?

*The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek him shall praise the Lord!  
May your hearts live forever!  
All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the Lord,  
and he rules over the nations. Psalm 22:26-28 (ESV)*

#### Objectives:

*In this lesson we will:*

- *Understand the mission God has given to the church to be His witnesses to all the ends of the earth.*
- *Know that, while we are not all trained to be evangelists, we can all be seed planters.*

#### Introduction

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The Times-Reporter of New Philadelphia, Ohio, reported in September 1985 a celebration of a New Orleans municipal pool. The party around the pool was held to celebrate the first summer in memory without a drowning at the New Orleans city pool. In honor of the occasion, 200 people gathered, including 100 certified lifeguards. As the party was breaking up and the four lifeguards on duty began to clear the pool, they found a fully dressed body in the deep end. They tried to revive Jerome Moody, 31, but it was too late. He had drowned surrounded by lifeguards celebrating their successful season.

#### DISCUSSION

**Talk some time to share how the opening illustration applies to the church today.**

*At times the church can get so focused on being about the work of God, that it can lose sight of the people in crisis right outside their doors.*

#### Into Scripture

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The Text: Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

#### BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT

The foundational teaching of this section of 1 Corinthians is the call to be a servant. We often see this section of Scripture as giving permission to exercise freedom in the Gospel. Paul is not saying we can go to any extreme to reach unconnected people. Instead, he says that the gospel sweetly invites disciples to be servants to all people in order to share the gospel. That concept is a monumental shift in how the world operates. We are not trying to trick or mislead people, but through authentic relationships we share the saving message of the gospel of Jesus Christ with them.

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Paul had the privilege of sharing the gospel with Jews and other religious people, with those who had no religion and those who were despised by society and considered weak. They all had their different convictions. No matter at what personal cost, so long as the gospel was not compromised, Paul did his best to adapt to them and to serve them so that he might win them to faith in the Lord Jesus, knowing that then everything else would fall into place in their lives.

Paul's goal as a follower of Jesus Christ was to put himself in the place of the person far from God. He sought to get into their souls, to clothe himself with their feelings and argue life from their perspective. Imagine taking that posture in our sharing of the gospel with people. What approach does the gospel need to take to be most effective for the hearer? For example, for the Jews who were under the burden of the law, Paul preached freedom from the law. "Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." (Romans 6:14)

### **What is evangelism?**

We can't save anyone. As Luther points out in the Third Article explanation of the Creed, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in which Christian Church He forgives daily and richly all sins to me and all believers, and at the last day will raise up me and all the dead, and will give to me and to all believers in Christ everlasting life. This is most certainly true."

Evangelism in its basic form is the believer sowing spiritual seeds of the gospel. "If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?" (1 Corinthians 9:11). This spiritual seed of the gospel is sown as the Word of God is taught and preached. "Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together." (John 4:36.)

Evangelism is sharing the gospel to share in the participation in the conversion of souls for the Lord Jesus Christ through the gospel.

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**Key Point:**  
Evangelism is sharing the gospel to share in the participation in the conversion of souls for the Lord Jesus Christ through the gospel.

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## Application

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I am passionate about Christians sharing their faith with those outside of the family of God. What I am not a big fan of is doing that without forming a relationship with people. I am not a fan of individuals pushing Jesus on those outside of God's grace because I think that turns people off to Jesus and paints Jesus and Christians in a negative light. And believe me, we do not need any more negative impressions.

Let me share a real-life story with you. I am standing in line with a friend in Glendale, AZ, when a person whom I have never met, who never took the time to strike up a conversation with me, hands me a pamphlet. The question on the form in size 24 font reads: "Are you 100% sure you will go to heaven?" No soft shoe approach here. Let's just get right to the heart of the issue. Skip the niceties and shock most people at their most vulnerable core. "How sure are you that you are going to heaven?"

Honestly, it depends on the day. Some days God and I are rocking and rolling. We are gelling at times. It is like I know exactly what God is thinking and I feel God's presence clearly. Other days not so much. There are times when God feels distant. It is usually those days when sin gets in the way, and I am wrestling with something I have done to offend Him. Maybe I was rude to my kids because a major decision coming up stressed me and there are no clear answers. Or it was just one of those days where everything that could go wrong did and that was all before noon. Things just went downhill from that point on. So, the heaven question just bugged me. Why would you



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start there? Why plan on my vulnerability? Why not ease into a profound spiritual conversation? Are you trying to scare me with Hell? That is what the question is all about—how afraid of Hell are you? Enough to follow the seven easy steps to welcome Jesus into your heart on the following pages? Evangelism is not that “easy.” If it were, I would encourage every Christian to go to Office Depot and print out thousands of these magical pamphlets, and we can change the world.

Generally, sharing your faith starts with a relationship, which this man never wanted to engage in with me. He sat next to me for lunch and never stopped to come over and ask, “Do you have any questions about what I gave you?” Just suppose this was a divine appointment set up by the Almighty Himself and I was ready to take that leap of faith. There was no one there to help me jump and provide a soft landing. All I could think in this moment was, what about me looked lost? What about me looked like I needed Jesus? Am I giving off an aura that says, please help me I am lost? As I stepped back from this experience, I realized how angry the entire encounter made me. Upon further review, as I drilled down deeper on that emotion, what hit me was that he knew nothing about me and he was making assumptions, all of which were erroneous. Why didn’t he start a conversation with me? We could have shared a meaningful moment. Instead, he just made sure by passing out a flyer with his church name and address on it that I will never darken the doors of that building.

Witnessing is all about opportunities. Those may lead to relationships which take time to nurture and develop. I love the story of Philip in Acts. As an angel of God moved him, Philip went out from Jerusalem to Gaza and ran into an Ethiopian, eunuch. Read Acts 8:27-31, 35-36.

Philip shows us that sharing your faith is about opportunity and a willingness to share the hope we have in Christ Jesus. It is about being willing to walk alongside, to answer tough questions and being open to the Holy Spirit’s leading. My encounter was an opportunity missed. Pray for the chance to be used by God to plant seeds of faith. This may lead to a deeper relationship. Or you may be the first seed planer like Philip.

### DISCUSSION

**1. How in your life is God asking you to be a Philip?**

**2. Have there been opportunities in your life when you missed the chance to have a faith conversation with someone seeking answers?**

*We want the participants to recognize those moments in life where God affords us the opportunities to have faith conversations with people. It is about raising awareness that God can use us at any time, in any situation if we are open to having those conversations. Recognize the importance of relationships God is forming in your life now. These could be opportunities to begin a faith dialogue. Your relationships are authentic ways to develop deeper developed trust with those still outside of God’s grace.*

## Faith in Practice: You are God’s Sent Ones

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The word “mission” means “a specific task with which a person or group is charged.” It has also been used to mean “sending.”

The term “missionary” means “one sent.”

The church has been charged with the task of spreading the gospel message to the ends of the earth. This is the church’s mission. Within the church, there are those who are given the specific role of being sent to the ends of the earth to proclaim the gospel. We call these people missionaries, as they are the “sent ones” of the Lord to specific places. But all believers are part of



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the church, and we are sent out from the church building to be the church in our neighborhoods, schools, homes, workplaces, etc. to share God's love and the message of His salvation. In this sense, we, too, are missionaries.

Another way of looking at it is that we are ambassadors of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:20). An ambassador is someone who is an authorized representative or messenger. We are God's representatives to the world around us, and His messengers of grace to the people in our lives.

### THE GREAT COMMISSION

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

He said to them, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:15)

You can see the words are different, but the meaning is the same. Here is a recap of Jesus' missionary command:

"I the Lord, Jesus Christ, who has been given all authority in heaven and on Earth, command you, my devoted disciples, in every age to go to the ends of the earth, to teach all people of every tribe and nation my gospel. Make all people my disciples who will produce other disciples to expand my kingdom to the ends of the earth."

What a bold, majestic command of our Lord and Savior!. No one else would dare make such a decree. Not only does Jesus command we "go out," but this same Jesus also backs up that order with all the authority of heaven and seals it with the promise of salvation in His precious blood shed on Calvary's cross and verified with the empty tomb.

Jesus sends out missionaries and ambassadors to the ends of the earth. He is given this authority and power from the Father. The mission is clear to proclaim to all the peoples of the land that this final King of the Jews is calling all people to Him. He invites the world to live under His merciful kingship for all eternity. Our mission manifesto is that we are sent with the promise of Jesus' presence and the backing of His almighty power. All the authority of heaven and earth supports this mission manifesto.

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**Key Point:**  
Our mission manifesto is that we are sent with the promise of Jesus' presence and the backing of His almighty power.

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### Mission Possible: Engage in a Faith Conversation.

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With this mission manifesto in mind, here is your final mission possible assignment. This one, like the rest, is a lifetime assignment. Let us begin with a quote from Doug Pollock in a book entitled "God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally."

He quotes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "The good news is that most of our failures can be reclaimed. There's no statute of limitations." He also suggests we commit this verse to memory, "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time because the days are evil." Ephesians 5:15-16.

*"So, if you have someone in your life that you feel you blew it with them, don't give up. We serve a God who is great at giving second, heck third, fourth and fifth chances. If you feel you have blown it here are a couple of questions to ponder if you get that second chance to share the gospel."*



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### **SOME THINGS TO PONDER AS YOU ENGAGE IN THIS FAITH CONVERSATION**

What do you do when the person you are talking to is so resistant, hurt, or turned off to talk about God? When there is nothing you say that appears to make a difference?

Practice patience. Respect their real pain. Acknowledge the hurts they have experienced in life. Realize your conversations may be triggering some deep-seated emotions that they have long buried. If that is the case, your only path at this point may be to pray with them and pray for their circumstances. Pray intentionally for the emotional turmoil they are facing. That could be the method God uses to open the door to that deeper spiritual conversation.

What do you do if you have someone who is not open to these kinds of spiritual conversations? Does their lack of openness mean you should just leave them alone?

Maybe. If your conversations are causing damage to the relationship, be willing to take a step back and give the person some space. What you don't want to do is push the person away from you. Give them some time and keep the relationship intact. Maybe this is not the time for this conversation. Perhaps, down the road, the right opportunity may present itself. In the meantime, keep the lines of communication open. Be willing to apologize if your conversation has caused offense. Say, "I sense that I might have said something in our last conversation that caused you to shut down. If so, could you help me understand what I said or how you interpreted my message? I value our friendship. I enjoy our conversations, so if I've offended you, I'd like to make things right."

You never know where and when the opportunity to share the gospel will present itself. Be always ready to share the hope that you have in Christ Jesus. You may be the vehicle God uses to share the gospel with someone outside of God's grace. Realize that when that happens God will give you the words to say. God is the one who waters the seed and makes the seed grow. We are just called to spread the seed. Your lifelong challenge is to be seed spreaders.