

Write Your Story

A Rite of Passage Guide

By Jessica Bouzianis

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Highest praise to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who cares for each of us and always knows exactly what to say.

BE ENCOURAGED: HOW-TO

Read this together with hearts postured in prayer. Go slow, pause and discuss as personal testimony is sparked. This is a tool to help initiate discussions, so allow yourselves time to be present.

Going through this is not a checkbox activity, but an encouragement to open conversations for lifelong relational growth with each other, and with the Lord. If you are here to learn how to put on a party, then you've got the wrong workbook. We're here for the pursuit of hearts.

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WHAT'S THE POINT OF ALL THIS

*When people do not accept divine guidance, they run wild.
But whoever obeys the law is joyful.*

Proverbs 29:18 NLT

When Steven and I had our first child we had no idea what we were doing. We thought at the time we were well prepared with years of prayer invested, documentaries watched, and piles of books read, but we had reached a point where the knowledge gained couldn't carry us through the practical steps we had to take of the experience of parenting. We had a baby, then two under two, growing to four beautiful kids that each have their own set of needs and desires to be met by us as their parents. Our prep work helped us, the constant prayers encouraged us, and Jesus has carried us in it all.

We had two children before we attended our first rite of passage where we witnessed a son standing with courage and confidence and fatherly blessings as he was presented as a man of Christ by his own father. They had recognized the readiness of the son to step out of childhood, then spent a year with deep preparatory discussions and studies before the ceremony where we sat as witnesses. The idea of how this may look for our own family began to form. We leaned into the testimonies of different families and found the same core source of Jesus guiding parents and children in a vision for living a life of honor. We studied the history of rites of passage from different cultures and found the commonality of character building and a study of faith. This is not a new idea, a rite of passage, but it was very much new to us.

While Steven and I were both raised by parents that love us, we weren't very well prepared for our transition into adulthood. We knew that what was full of questions, awkwardness, and failures for ourselves, didn't have to be repeated in our kids. We have led them well with great intentionality through childhood and absolutely do not want to leave them in a struggle of wondering who they are or when they are "grown up". We certainly don't want the world to define any of this for them. Where we had confusion and doubt, we long to provide confidence, understanding, and blessings. We desire to stand shoulder to shoulder with our children as they define the character foundation for their life to nurture, grow, and build upon. As our family prepares for our first rite of passage, we are putting this guide together to help facilitate conversations that will lead to a confirmation of preparedness to approach life as a continued son or daughter, but also as a brother or sister in Christ.

When we considered the phrase "rite of passage", we had a few different ideas that came to mind from our cultural impressions of the world. There is the Jewish Bar (or Bat) Mitzvah that most people are somewhat familiar with. In America, it's also common to link a high school graduation to a passage into adulthood with big send offs and blessings for the future. Some young teens have saved new grown-up commitments and get their ears pierced, shave their legs, or do some sort of adventure when they have "come of age". Some say the menstrual cycle beginning, or for men, facial hair coming in, is the signal to shift to adulthood. There is a very long, weird list of ideals in the world today, but we are proposing this guide to help the Jesus loving family sort through the confusion to find their own intentional path of affirming, blessing, and engaging with the journey ahead where we are calling our children into adulthood. If done well, this guide will be an assist to an intentional time investment where a personal foundation of identity will be established and built on throughout their life, a composing of a navigational toolchest for the decades ahead.

As we gathered our thoughts and notes on the topic, we opened our Bibles to look for the example of Jesus' life. In Luke, chapter two, we have this interesting progression for Jesus and His parents. They had made the trip to Jerusalem every year for Passover, and every

year Jesus journeyed with them until the age of twelve. On this trip, when his parents were returning home, our sinless Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem to sit in the temple among the teachers.

“And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when his parents 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.’ And he said to them, ‘Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’… And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them… And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.”

Luke 2:47–52

There was a powerful shift that happened here. We could assume that Jesus had become aware of the objective of his heavenly Father’s purpose for his life, though, being God, He may have known it forever. Either way, Jesus had been a child that followed and obeyed the plans of his family, yet here he lingered in the temple in a position of maturing. Though he “remained submissive” in the years ahead, there was a transition that notes He “increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man”.

This example from Scripture is an opportunity to look at our Savior in human form, growing and maturing and understanding that there is a direction in his sites beyond childhood. This part of his life is intentionally shared with us and highlights the significance of the process of growing up. His mother took note of this piece of his life and stored it up in her heart.

There are many other examples from Scripture of a similar pattern of being called out of childhood toward the place of authority in adulthood. David was somewhere between 8–15 years old when he was anointed by Samuel to be the future king, however it wasn’t until he was thirty that he actually took the

throne. Joseph was around fifteen years old when he received the coat of many colors from his father but was thirty when he interpreted Pharaoh's dream and was placed as the second in command of Egypt. Esther was a young teen when her life shifted dramatically for the good of the Kingdom of God. There was a process for each example of being called out of their childhood, and then maturing into the authority of their calling. We are not implying that it will take until the age of 30 for our children to step into their "calling", though it may, but we are saying there is a time for us to help guide them toward it.

As parents, we get to look for the shift of mindset in our children. We've witnessed in our own children the transition from willfully obedient kids to independently processing thoughts and decisions at the cusp of adolescence. They've remained submissive and still require parenting, but they have begun to grow in their personal foundation of wisdom and understanding. This may happen at twelve, or at a different age, but the note here is to seek Holy Spirit for when the time for each child is to begin the process of focused refining toward adulthood, and to help them through it by building a solid foundation of character, faith, and purpose that will be built upon throughout the rest of their life.

To move forward, we need to ask what the Father says of the timing of our culture today and each specific child. We have already recognized that the initial drawing out of childhood isn't an exact age but is rather guided by the Holy Spirit. One child may have a maturity happening much earlier than a sibling or friend. It is our position that we use the biblical examples as our guide, while leaning on Holy Spirit for writing our personal testimony. We, as father and mother to our children, have the authority and obligation to bless our children into their calling as adults. There will of course be maturing that still happens over the course of the next years, and there will still be many moments of continuing the parenting of our new adult children, but the rite of passage is drawing them out of childhood into the calling of their lives to be men and women of God.

In raising our children we've seen so many stages, but there is a much larger shift when they begin to recognize their life beyond the realm of childhood, which is better walked with a Father's blessing, an affirmation of value, and an encouragement that they are prepared. This is what we want to work toward in these next pages. We want to embrace this season together, we father, mother, and child, and build a treasure chest of identity and purpose. They don't have to wander awkwardly, aimlessly, or ashamedly through the next years of their life; we can lead them with the Holy Spirit into the truth of their reflection. The world doesn't need to be defining their identity, we can go with them in prayer to find the foundation of who they are to last throughout their life. While there will of course be continual maturation, challenges, and triumphs over their life, the foundation of their character can actually be a base of strength, instead of our example of many shameful regrets. We can offer guidance, blessings, and encouragement that will move them like nothing else on this earth, and in turn we also will be greatly blessed by the time invested together.

This is a guide intended to take as long as needed for each person, but a general goal is to work through each section over the course of several weeks, navigating the many personal conversations and studies together, and taking somewhere between 12–18 months for its completion. Each section may lead into mindful study, prayer, or contemplation for several weeks before moving on. Be cautioned not to rush, but to instead linger in the conversations together with and in Christ. While the details will look different for each family, and the dialogue that comes will be different for each child, a healthy plan is to set a weekly time together to dig into this guide and follow however the Lord leads. Life can be very busy and time can slip by, but it is important to protect this time of undivided attention together. We will lay an outline of prompts in the next sections to address core questions of character and identity, but you are encouraged to deviate to make this path your own.

This is a process that is ideally walked with parents and child together, having a childhood behind them filled with good memories and trust well established. If your relationship has been neglected, now is the time to repent and pause this process to spend time

rebuilding before moving forward. If the parent(s) are not able to provide a safe relationship to guide their child into adulthood or are unwilling to invest the time necessary for this process, it would be better to find a parental figure that is agreed upon to offer the relational investment and blessing of a father and mother, than to leave your child to figure this transition out alone. However, this is not something to hand over lightly; this is a once in a lifetime opportunity with your child.

This is also assumed to be in the hands of a Spirit-filled, Jesus-loving family. If you or your child don't know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, now is also a time to pause and give your life to Him. The prayer is simple and powerful when it comes from the heart, and the eternal reward of God's forgiveness is overwhelming. If you are ready to receive Christ, pray and give yourself over to Him, and find a local pastor to help steward your faith. As an added help, we will include an appendix at the back with other recommended resources. It is our hope and prayer that we are each drawn closer to Christ through this beautiful step of life.

Father, we thank You for the opportunity to have a family. Holy Spirit, lead each of us in the light of Your truth. Help us parents and children to lean together into Your arms, to love each other well, to extend grace and mercy toward each other, and to humbly submit all our plans to You. Lord, have mercy on each of us. Grant us wisdom from heaven, endurance, and patience to run our race well. May Your will, Jesus, be done in us. Amen.

Questions to consider together:

How are you both feeling as this transition begins?

What are your hopes or expectations?

Do you have any concerns?

[illegible]

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

O Lord, you have searched me and known me!

Psalms 139:1

Life is such a gift! It is amazing to witness a baby being formed in the womb, the mother's belly growing and moving with new life. I remember when each of our children were born and the awkwardness of the newborn baby movements in those first days. Newborn snuggles grew to toddler bear hugs, and big kid belly laughs together throughout the day. It is amazing how fast those years went!

While we leaned heavily on prayer, testimony, and Scripture, we still had many failures as parents. We tried our best to try our best, and when we were wrong, we were usually quick to apologize. We worked toward intentionality in our time with each of our kids, craving personal relationships and trust together. However, we still missed it on many occasions.

We long to walk with each of our children through a successful rite of passage, however we first need to spend some time together in prayer, repentance, and forgiveness. With hearts postured in grace, love, empathy, and compassion, let's pray together:

Father in Heaven, Jesus our Savior, Holy Spirit, come and be with us in this tender space. Give us ears to hear the words of each other rightly, and hearts of understanding to receive from each other. Father, where we have not cared well for our children, forgive us. We repent to You, Father, and confess to you, our child, for our sins affecting the life we have had together. As we

sit in this space, we ask You, Jesus, to gently bring to remembrance the places of wounding that have yet to be covered by the Blood of the Cross. Father, come lead us in repentance and bring full healing and restoration. We surrender our mind, will, emotions, and imagination to You and ask You, Yeshua, to protect us in this time of prayer.

To my precious child, your life is a miraculous gift from heaven. We repent for the ways we have not loved you well or left you questioning the value of your place in our family. We repent for the times we hurt you and didn't model the love of Jesus. We pray for the Holy Spirit to come now, to cover you in His love, and to bring healing to every wound that has been inflicted.

Come, Lord, and have Your way in our relationship.

Personal Notes and Prayers:

Continuing in this posture of prayer, Father, lead us together in forgiveness. We thank You, Jesus, for being our Lord and our Savior. We long for pure hearts and a relationship free from bitterness, hurt, or harshness, so we come to You, Father, and ask for help as we forgive. Holy Spirit, come as the watchman over our spirit, soul, body, and mind. We give You our imagination, our thoughts, and our life and ask You, Holy Spirit, to come cleanse, restore, and redeem us. Meet with us, parent and child, and walk us through any hurt so that we can find Your healing and walk without shame. Come, Lord, and have Your way in us.

I choose with my will to forgive myself, and to forgive you (child, mother, father) for the wrongs that have been committed. I ask You, Jesus, to cover us in Your blood and wash us free from the shame of our sins. Come, Holy Spirit, protect our relationship, restore what's been hurt, and help us to love each other well.

Personal Notes and Prayers:

It is important to take this step of repenting and forgiving together and covering it in prayer. This will likely need to be revisited many times together over the course of the rite of passage, and beyond. Be cautioned to allow the Holy Spirit to lead thoughts and memories instead of sulking in our own wandering of self-pity, and to practically offer a safe place and space for having these fragile conversations. There may be a time where we need to seek out additional counseling to be able to move forward, but the ultimate goal is to heal anything from the relationship of child and parent and to practice the process of seeking the Father.

Personal Notes and Prayers:

WHO AM I

Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ.

This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.

Ephesians 1:4–5 (NLT)

It is a wonderful thing to know who we are according to God who created us, and it is wise to know that the enemy wants nothing more than to confuse us about this truth and steal us away from our Father. Jesus faced multiple challenges from the devil in chapter 4 of Matthew, yet He never wavered in His identity. Despite us having the Bible in our hands in the many forms of phones, computers, and paper text, and having access to God in prayer anytime night or day, we can still struggle with this basic assurance of our worth. So, here we are going to spend some time taking hold of the value and worth of our life according to Christ, and find some tools to help us not lose hold of it.

From the beginning to the end of the Bible, we find the love that God has for His creation. After God made mankind, “... *God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.*” (Gen 1:31) Then, skipping to the last book of the Bible: “*They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*” (Rev. 7:16–17) He is our Shepherd, our Savior, our Creator, our Father, our King, and on and on it goes. God loves us!

Spend some time in the Word of God searching for the verses that speak to your own heart about your personal value to God. There

are too many for us to list here, but it is one of the biggest messages of the Bible. Ask the Holy Spirit to be with you as you search the Bible, and then write the verses down here for you to remember.

Bible Verses That Speak of My Value:

In the verses you found, how many say your value comes from your salary, bank account, spouse, friends, appearance, possessions, or accomplishments? One of the temptations of adulthood is to find value in what we do or our circle of influence, not in who we are in the eyes of God. You could end up leading millions of people to Christ, building billion-dollar projects across the world, traveling with the elite, and owning every luxury item you could possibly imagine, however your worth and satisfaction of belonging only comes from your personal relationship with God who loves you. It is good to do well with what you are given and to aim for excellence in whatever you pursue, however, your value is not dependent on the worldly perception of success. This is a point to check your heart on

for the rest of your life. A homeless beggar is as valuable to the Lord as the King of a great country. I'm not saying you should be a beggar, rather to recognize and remember that social status means nothing compared to the heart relationship with God.

Another temptation is to constantly wait for the next something to happen in order to feel accomplished and valuable. There are so many wonderful hopes ahead for life that may include academic accomplishment, perhaps marriage, family, home ownership, maybe owning your very own pet or having some anticipated independence. The next "thing" may be absolutely wonderful and exciting, it may fill your heart with great joy, however "it" does not speak to your value. There is no relationship that has the power to define you except for the beauty of intimacy with Jesus. Be careful who you allow to speak into your heart or worth throughout your life. Listen to the truth of the Word of God and the voice of the Holy Spirit. You are valuable simply because He loves you.

Father, thank You for the great love that You have for me. Thank You that my value and my worth is in You and not in any list of things I must do. You love me as I am, right here and now. You love me before I do anything each day. You love me even when I mess up or completely miss what You are saying. You love me and You know me. I am Yours, Father. Help us, Holy Spirit, to live in the wide-open spaces of the truth of who we are and not in the close confines of human definitions. Place people around us that would build us up in this truth, and remove anyone from our path that would try to tear apart the good work You are doing in us. Bless us, Lord Jesus, with confidence in our worth and a community to grow together in these truths. Holy Spirit, help us to never lose the challenge of who we are or why we are loved. Father, be with us in the search and discovery mission of our value and help us to stand strong against any assaults or challenges to come.

Personal Notes and Prayers:

[illegible]

WHAT IS A MAN, WHAT IS A WOMAN

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.*

Jeremiah 1:5

A bizarre question has come up culturally, asking, “what is a woman?” There are documentaries, studies, and all sorts of confusion about definition, identity, rights, and wrongs. The basis of the question is biological gender, however, in this space let’s also look at character identity. Let’s dig into the study of manhood and womanhood in Christ. Looking at your gender, each of you, father, mother, and child: what is our own personal definition of a Godly man or a Godly woman?

We may have some ideas already rolling around, let’s jot them down and press in a bit more together here before we pursue our own studies. This isn’t an etiquette definition of holding doors and conversations properly, it’s a much deeper recognition and respect for God’s intentions in creating us. When God made man and every animal for the earth, He formed them from dust; however, when He formed Eve, He took part of Adam, a rib, as the conception of her formation. (Read this account in Gen. 1–2) They were very different, man and woman, from the very first breath.

An important note before we go any further is that, while men and women have many differences, we are equal in value to Christ. If equality of value is in question in your mind, dig into Scripture. For example, Galatians 3:28–29 reads:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ

Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

This leaves us with the question: what is a godly man, and what is a godly woman? There may be more similarities to our character identity than we realize. Take some time to dive into the Bible with the Holy Spirit and try to form your own definition. As you pull together pieces of your definition, find Scriptural accounts to reinforce your beliefs.

Personal Notes and Prayers:

[illegible]

Personal Definition of a Godly Man or Woman:

Supportive Scriptural References:

EMOTIONAL MATURITY

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

1 Corinthians 13:11

There is great dignity when emotional maturity reflects the love and emotions of our perfect Creator who loves us. Emotions allow us to process what is happening around us, and how to relate to others. They range drastically in effect and volume, but they are certainly not a bad thing. Many people over time have criticized emotions, however, we were created with them in the image of God.

God himself has many emotions expressed throughout Scripture. He created us in His image, and He is perfect. We can find many examples of when God expresses love and compassion, anger and jealousy, yet He is never wrong in His example. When Jesus walked the earth without sin, He expressed compassion for many, He grieved at the death of Lazarus, He loved and laughed with joy, He longed for the little children to come to Him, and He suffered so greatly the approaching crucifixion that His body sweat blood. He was betrayed by His friends, He had concern for His mother, He was mocked by the very ones He was living and dying for. Jesus, God, experienced our humanity without fault or sin while displaying many emotions.

If you have question of whether emotions are wrong or bad, go search through the Scriptures and ask Holy Spirit for help in settling on whatever truth He reveals. Our position is that being an emotional being is the reflection of our Creator, however, while He is always pure and true to His character, we can overreact from our sinful

nature and lack of maturation. The thought in question, of course, is what it means to be emotionally mature.

When a baby is born, it knows instinctually to cry for what it needs. There is no thought or empathy toward the exhausted mother or father that has to meet the needs from the screaming newborn. As the baby grows to be a toddler, they have to be taught how to share with others a toy that they selfishly want for themselves. They have to learn to regulate their extremes that can flip quickly from overflowing love of their parents' hugs to extreme anger toward the sibling that has grabbed for their spot on the sofa or toy across the room. The thoughts of children have to be trained to be less selfish and more aware of the needs of others.

As you begin to step out of childhood, you've continued to grow in training of empathy toward others in reading the room as you enter, engage, and step away. This is definitely part of the maturing process, but there is another step forward into emotional maturity that submits our natural reactions, both internal and external, to the heart of the Father. It's the "*leaving behind of childish ways*" that we are digging into. There will be times that the Father wants you to face a confrontational conversation, and we'll talk more about that soon, but even in those moments you can remain pure before the Lord in both the secret places of your heart and the outward expression of your emotions.

We want you to spend some time processing with the Lord what this means and looks like for you. Consider for yourself, how would you define emotional maturity and what does it look like in practical application. If love is patient, yet internally we are filled with agitation or anxiety when things aren't happening in our desired way, we have room to grow. If love is kind, yet we feel hate toward someone, we have room to grow.

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

The Lord knows the longings and desires of our hearts. As we spend the rest of our lives growing and maturing in our emotional well-being, He loves us through it all. It does, however, take an intentional effort to work towards emotional maturity. We don't have to look far to find that growing old doesn't mean growing in maturity. What a grievance it would be to miss out on the joy of love and life due to an emotionally immature heart in an aging body. So, look within yourself and submit your heart, mind, and emotions to our Father in heaven who loves us. Commit to spending the rest of your life seeking Him.

There will be painful, hurtful, and stressful situations that come up in your life. There will even be times that you inflict pain, hurt, or stress on the ones you love most. We are sinners, and we are bound to make some mess at some point. How will we respond to this? When we are hurt, or someone near us is unjustly harmed, what does it look like to respond well? What about when we are in the wrong? Will we be able to humbly apologize? When we aren't in the thick of these situations it is much easier to think through the healthy emotional response than when we are hurt and need to practically walk them out.

The Bible offers many examples of facing really hard things. Considering emotional maturity, sift through the Scriptures and look for different examples. Imagine the deep pain that Joseph had when his brothers threw him into a pit and sold him. From his story alone we can see the immaturity of his brothers being so overcome with their rage of jealousy that they did an unimaginable sin against their brother, which led to immense guilt, humbling of heart, and an ultimate repentance. Joseph's father and mother had to grieve deeply in their loss. Joseph, of course, had to do a lot of emotional work to come to a place of embrace with his family so many years later. There are layers upon layers to dissect in this example alone. While this is an extreme situation in our culture today, we can still find a way to relate emotionally. Can we forgive ourselves, forgive others, and receive forgiveness?

From Joseph's story we can also ask how the older brothers could have combatted their jealous hearts, which leads us to another point of emotional maturity. The Bethel preacher, Bill Johnson, says

in his message titled *Building with Thanksgiving and Joy*, that “the key to emotional health is rejoicing always.” He has several scriptural references that give a persuasive argument for the influence of thankfulness, hope, faith, and emotions. When we apply Johnson’s theory to Joseph’s life we find an interesting idea. If Joseph’s brothers had been rejoicing in thankfulness for their lives and their family, perhaps they would not have been driven by so much hate. Maybe they would have even loved their brother. They chose instead to be complacent to the power of God in their lives, and self-reliant to their own provision of happiness. We must remember in our lives today, wholly and completely, that it is Jesus that sustains. We must not lean on the wickedness of self-fulfillment.

If we were to lean into the power of rejoicing and thankfulness, we might remember the Bible verses encouraging us to “remember the good things” (Ps. 103) and to “rejoice always” (1 Thess. 5:16). We have the command in Philippians 4:4 to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” Proverbs 17:22 states that “A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.” Scripture is full of these reminders! Clearly, our Father who loves us found it necessary to retell us again and again to carry our hearts in rejoicing and thankfulness!

In his book, Imagine the God of Heaven, John Burke shares testimonies of the power of joy that are quite powerful. Find a copy of this book and read “Chapter 14: The Joy and Laughter of God” for yourself. The point to it all is not to wear a plastered smile on your face, but to instead cultivate a real, raw, relationship with God where true joy is found. When we can connect with Him about all the real things we are facing, He is not surprised or overwhelmed. He is a Father that longs to talk through our everything. He longs for our hearts and our love. We, in turn, reap the reward of the joy of our Lord. Regarding emotional maturity, this is a step that puts many of our immature tendencies to rest.

Spend some time together discussing your own personal challenges and victories. What testimonies do you have about your emotional development? Whatever areas of growth are highlighted to you, write them out and find Scripture to help support you overcoming. In a gentle heart of grace and mercy, check in on each

other over the next months and years. Pray for each other and encourage each other to live this out well. What a privilege it is to walk this out in a safe place!

Father, we thank You for the wonderful way that You made us. Thank You for the gift of having emotions, thoughts, and reactions. Thank You for the freedom You have given us in our very existence. Thank You that You, also, have emotions great and strong. You are our good, good Father, and You love us so well.

We ask that as we process this topic of emotional maturity, You would be near. Give us loving ears to hear each other well and guide our communication that we would give responses that are pure and gentle and kind. Come, Father, and in Your mercy show us where and how we need to grow. Help us to protect the time that we are spending together in vulnerable discussion and prayer.

Father, help us to be honest with ourselves, with You, and with each other. You know our every thought, even the ones that we are trying to hide in the depths of ourselves. We thank You that You are our safe place of refuge. Come, help us to unlock our hearts and minds. Help us to learn the practice of rejoicing and communion with You. Help us to live in the joy of Your presence.

We need You, Lord. Come, have Your way in us. Amen.

[illegible]

INTIMACY WITH GOD

I 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

In the beginning, in the very, very beginning, God spoke into existence all of creation. He made a place for man and woman to live, to breathe, and to commune with Him. God, Alpha and Omega, THE Creator of ALL Things, the One in whose image we were made, the King of all, the One that is love and mercy and justice...He still longs and desires to live intimately with us just as He did with Adam and Eve before the disruption from sin. The world may be at war with corruption, but that doesn't mean that the story of creation is dead. Living with Him, living in intimacy and personal relationship with God, is in fact living a piece of the original design.

This invitation to intimacy has been extended from the very beginning and is offered until we each breathe our last. God, our all-knowing Father, is quick to acknowledge that we have our own passions at war within us, this constant wrestle of the pleasures of the world and leaning into Him (James 4). In this same chapter of James, He offers an answer to our personal battles, which is to *"submit ourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."* (James 4:7-8). It's important for our own mental and spiritual health to acknowledge that this is, in fact, a real battle we are in. It's also important to acknowledge that we are not helpless, that the most powerful King, Jesus, who loves you and is longing for you to look to Him for help, is ready to move the mountain you are facing. Resist the devil, look to Jesus, and trust Him with all of your everything.

The verse that opens this section is from John 15, where Jesus is sharing the wonderful news and parable that He is *the true vine and we are the branches*. If you've ever grown a plant, you know the patience and nurturing that is involved in watching it grow. There is so much eagerness after a new seed is in the ground, waiting for the shoot to sprout, watering gently, watching the sun, and smiling with joy when the fruit of the seed begins to show. Jesus is the true vine, at work growing and producing in His perfect time, at His perfect pace, and Father God is the vinedresser who is patiently attending to us, celebrating our growth and our fruit. In His goodness, He also removes from the Bride of Christ the dead branches that would hinder the love of Jesus at work. Take a moment to read John 15:1-11, looking at the continued picture of the living verses the dead. There is this notable repeated pattern of living vines, producing fruit, and abiding in Him. If abiding in Him is living, and living is the point of life, then that leaves us wondering what this intimacy looks like for us in a practical way. God is not rushed or pressured for time; He actually holds all things in His hand. He's known our end before we ever had a beginning. Abiding in Him is an invitation to win our battles, to bear fruit for our King, and to know personally the vine and the vinedresser. Abiding in Him is like the sun, always present in every season. Abiding in Him, living in intimacy with our Creator, is how it was always meant to be.

We can look to the Bible to find so many personal accounts of men and women in the wrestle of leaning into God or trusting the strength of their own flesh. Paul is one of my favorite stories of Scripture. In him we see a man that wanted the justice of what he thought was right and good, but when he hit the ground blinded, he fell into an intimate relationship with God that was real and reliant, a relationship that changed the course of the rest of his life. Paul learned how much he needed HIM, and God led him, forgave him, and brought him truth. As Paul moved and spoke and fought the judicial system, he allowed God to lead. Sometimes the promises of God's word and timing can feel off to our fleshy brains, and being human, Paul must have felt this at times, but when we are abiding in Him our spirit knows truth. To overcome the brokenness of our flesh, lean into Him.

When we jump back further in time to the Old Testament, we find Moses guiding a people that depended on his intimacy with God to lead them because Holy Spirit had not been released yet. For Moses, intimacy with God was going away to dedicate his life in every way, submitted completely to Him. He did this when he saw the burning bush and left his home to follow God's plan, when he went up the mountain to seek God, and during the long journey toward the Promised Land. His story reminds us of the weakness of our humanity, and the disobedience of our flesh. Even though he had performed so many miracles and witnessed the great power of God repeatedly, he still chose to disobey when he struck a rock for water that God had said to speak to. It sounds a bit menial, and the result was still water for a thirsty people, but he acted when he needed to obey. We can learn from this, that to overcome the confusion of the world is to be with Him: Father, Son, Spirit. We are weak, but He is and always will be, strong. Moses could have done better for himself and God's people by simply obeying when the pressure was mounting, but God makes it right always. Moses was still loved and embraced by God, and Israel still entered the Promised Land. We can learn from Moses that we can live without anxiety of messing up or confusion of what is right, if we live in daily intimacy with God.

When we look to another pivotal Bible character, Abraham, we find a man that lived in the waiting room of the promises of God. Most all of us know what it's like to be in a waiting room, be it real or spiritual. For Abraham, in the anticipation he chose to reach for fulfillment with his own flesh and became the heart of divided world religions. In the heart of this book is the heart of the whole message that we learn from our forefather: lean not on your own thoughts or desires, but only on the Son who makes the way.

Elijah was another man who knew God and performed amazing miracles that we look at in awe today. He knew the weight of the message God had for him to share, yet there came a time where he still ran. From Elijah we can learn the importance of living the message God puts in us, intimately with Him and for Him and in Him. Despite running, God still loved Elijah fiercely; there is no need to fill ourselves with fear or anxiety or performance. However, we can take his example and choose to boldly live in intimacy with God and not in fear of man.

Without intimacy with God comes shame, confusion, and anxious performance driven tasks. Living with Him, living in intimacy with personal relationship, is living the original plan. The world may be fallen with sin, but that doesn't mean that the story of creation isn't still here in part. We can find it in communion with Him. Like Adam and Eve before the fall, we can walk with Holy Spirit together daily, in pure delight, joy, and rest. He's not afraid of our battles, He's actually ready to meet us in them. There's hope for peace from the original design by living with intimacy.

As you look at these accounts and others from the Bible or your life, consider what you can learn in a practical way and ask the Father how to set your heart toward Him. You have this whole world on the inside where thoughts and hopes and desires live. In this place is where your intimacy grows. It can overflow to outward expressions, but it's also possible to have lifeless outward expressions without any real heart relationship with God. He knows the fruit He is longing for in you. Take some time together to face the raw reality of what your heart is set on. What are the desires of your heart? How do you connect with Him? Where do you feel most connected or disconnected with God? What battles are you facing? How do you abide in Him? Look over the examples above, search the scriptures, and highlight anything that points to the description of abiding. Each of the above accounts had personal walks that relied on their own heart posture, not on the strength of their parents or friends. This is the most important piece for you to learn as you prepare to step into adulthood: your personal, intimate walk with God is dependent on you. You've been invited in, and He's ready for you; you get to choose how to respond.

At the cusp of entering adulthood, we are here with you, acknowledging and affirming that the internal battles you have are very real, more real even than the physical wrestling of a maturing body. However, the invitation from God is also real. You have the invitation to live loving Him daily, to live walking with Him daily, and to live knowing Him daily. What better life mission, what better life goal? Jesus literally died, and lives to know and love you in a personal way. He fights for you, he moves mountains for you, he loves you fiercely...but he still longs for your heart. You don't have to struggle to know how to walk with Him intimately, but you do have to

shape your heart to be living with Him again. Our hearts echo the prayer cries of scripture: *"We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."* (2 Cor. 5:20). The Vinedresser, Father God, Christ Jesus, Holy Spirit, the most amazing Holy Trinity, longs to know you and be known in you. And the most wonderful news: He is worth it!

Your life will have many different phases with different paces and rhythms. This is not at all a bad thing, it is a simple part of our humanity. Young and unmarried is a much different season than married with children and grandchildren. However, the heartbeat of your walk with God that you are taking hold of right now can remain a steady source of life and love and spiritual nourishment throughout anything that comes your way. Because of God's immense mercy, He is always eager to help us if we struggle or stray, but it would be wise to find healthy habits now to seek Him. If you don't know how to find Him, start with that very question in prayer. Find a pocket in your day to close your eyes, calm your mind, and ask for His help. We can appreciate having a favorite pen and journal, a Bible, a quiet corner in a favorite chair, the windows open to the perfect gentle breeze coming across your own private beach, a personal chef filling all the snacky desires you may have...we can drum up some perfect ideal, but the truth is the only thing we need is a heart and mind set on Him. In the middle of any battle, He is with you. In the loudest days or the darkest nights, God is there longing for you to simply look up at Him. It's good to read the Word of God and love it, it's good to journal and recall the good things He's done, but the truth is your relationship with Him is dependent on you. He is always and forever longing to hear your voice call on Him. This is your King.

Personal Notes:

[illegible]

CONFLICT, CORRECTION, AND CONFRONTATION

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

James 1:19–20

In the beginning, God saw. God created. God knew. The Bible begins in this powerful way to explain the beautiful pride of our existence; we are of The Creator's mighty hand! As the story goes, Adam and Eve were created and lived in the Garden of Eden until they had the first recorded human confrontation with the deceiver. They chose to delight themselves in what was forbidden, and then what did Adam and Eve do? They hid. God quite literally formed them and knew their bodies from the inside out, yet they deliberately hid from Him. This developed the first conflict with God and man, and the response was typical for a human heart: self-preservation instead of humility, and shame in their existence instead of honest repentance. How foolish our sinful nature is!

Have you ever tried to hide your sin? Have you ever tried to metaphorically cover yourself to hide your shame? It can be easy to look back to Adam and Eve and judge them. They could have eaten from any other tree, and in judging them we can think that we would have been able to avoid that apple. In pride, we can assume that we would have been able to avoid that blasted snake altogether. The tempter is always ready to deceive us! We are descendants of the first man and woman ever made, and we suffer their same weakness. We are sinners. We may or may not have avoided the tree, but the only one that was able to avoid sin is God himself. Jesus is the only perfect one. Acknowledging that we are guilty of conflict with God not only when we do wrong but also when we hide our sin, this is the first step towards receiving His forgiveness.

I wonder how it would have gone for Adam and Eve if they had instead run toward the Father. What if they had quickly confessed? The punishment may have been the same of course, but my goodness would the example have been different for you and me today! We can look back on our own lives and quickly find situations where we would love to go back and do things differently. Shame has a sneaky language. When we feel that internal challenge and want to hide, it is so important to bring that very thing to God. This may mean facing some consequences, but it's so much more important to make ourselves right with the Father who loves us. He knows it all anyway, why is it we still try to hide?

When we jump ahead in Scripture to the baptism of Jesus we find our friend, John, who was radical in his life's devotion. It's said that he was preaching in the wilderness and calling people to prepare the way for the Lord. His clothing, his diet, his whole lifestyle was extreme. But even with John's testimony of devotion to God we find a confrontation with Jesus. In Matthew 3 Jesus arrived at the Jordan to be baptized by John. This was an intentional effort, a journey of around sixty miles by foot. Jesus didn't just cross the street to go find John; He purposed to come to him. How did John respond when Jesus approached for baptism?

John clearly knew that Jesus was God, the One he had been preparing the way for, the One *"whose sandals I am not worthy to carry."* (Matt. 3:11) Jesus was the One whom he loved and lived for. John desperately knew his place before Jesus and of course wanted the will of the Father. However, John only saw in part. His part was knowing that Jesus was the One he had prepared the way for. Jesus loved John, and John loved Jesus. Yet, Jesus had to confront John to do the will of the Father with His baptism. He had to give context for John to get out of his idea of how the day should go. Despite his devotion, John still had to be encouraged to find and do the will of the Father. Confrontation is multifaceted, coming not only in rebellion but also in devotion that has not yet known the full truth.

It is impossible to live a life without confrontation. We can try to avoid it, but even that causes confrontation within ourselves. From these two examples alone, we can see the wonderful nature of God to care for us and nurture us. Adam and Eve were confronted by God due to their sin, and John was confronted to do the will of the

Lord. Both situations required challenging conversations, yet both boiled down to the purposes of the Kingdom. A third example to turn to is the confrontation the woman at the well had with Jesus.

Take the time right now to read John 4 and look at all the confrontations that take place. Jesus spoke with a woman, a Samaritan at that. He asked for a drink; to receive from someone the Jews of the day saw as detestable. He opened to her the reality of who he was. He already knew her story but made her aware of the conflict of her sin. Meanwhile, the disciples' concern was of the constant temporal eagerness for their bellies. There is so much here to consider, but look at this story again and find the correction of the Lord. His rebuke is in love.

Correction at the well, confrontation at the baptism, and conflict in the garden are only three of many scenes you can unpack from the Scriptures. These stories are being highlighted here because they each reflect the way conflict and confrontation can be done well. And they are done well because God was doing the confrontation. Men have messed it up, either in words, heart, action, or a brutal combination of the sorts. God has not responded wrong, is not failing, and will not ever mess up. The hope for each of us today is that we can look to God for help, and He can offer perspective for every situation we ever find ourselves.

One of the most frustrating parts of life is that we will have conflict. We'll have it with God, with ourselves, and with others. It's a given, unfortunately. How we respond in each situation is a matter of our maturing in Christ. Take some time to discuss how it feels to be corrected, and how it feels to correct. How does it feel to be in conflict with someone, or to be confrontational? While it may sometimes be tempting to avoid confrontation, to be a passive peace-keeper, this isn't necessarily the peace-making that Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount. The only constant for approaching any conflict rightly is to first seek God for perspective and guidance in how to love well.

God, our Father, loves each of us so much. He longs for our hearts and minds. He desires us. When you feel the weight of correction, quickly turn to Him. Seek His help. Lay down every burden you ever have and pick up the peace of the Lord. He is eager to help us! We do each have free will, which means that there could be

relational conflict that remains unresolved due to anger, bitterness, selfishness...sin. In this, also, the answer is Jesus. He knows, He sees, and He longs to draw us all close.

Personal Notes:

[illegible]

MY BODY IS A TEMPLE

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

1 Corinthians 6:19–20

Isn't it amazing to look at the parallel of the temple in the Old Testament and the New Testament?! Paul writes the declaration that our bodies are now the temple of the Holy Spirit!?! It is absolutely astonishing to realize the power in this statement. Your body was bought with a price, that is Jesus, for the Holy Spirit to live within you, for you to be forgiven, for the plans of God to be made right. We are so unworthy of such a high honor, that the King of all would want to be with us, yet He longs for us. He not only likes us, He loves us so much that His temple is within us. What an incredible gift! We've done nothing to earn this love or honor, yet God's Word remains true. Looking at ourselves through this lens of truth, we gain understanding of what is happening when the enemy of God tries to get us to hate who we are, to hate our bodies, to hate the very temple of God.

Shame creeps along, a lurking liar. Shame says that we, the temple of God, are disgusting. Shame holds on to our sin and shakes us violently, trying to break the very temple of God through thoughts of self-hatred, self-destruction, and self-sabotage. Shame would say we can be worthy of forgiveness only after some physical penance, but that is hell's lie to destroy the Bride. We cannot love ourselves while rubbing sand in our eyes because of shame from looking at some thing, or by filling our mouth with stones because we have eaten some thing, or by lashing ourselves because we have done some thing. There truthfully is no physical payment we could ever make that can come close to earning the forgiveness we need to be free from the shame of our sin. The question is, how do we forgive ourselves and find freedom

from the lies of destruction. The answer is, we can't. Only God can forgive.

Self-denial doesn't work to pay for the removal of our shame. It may feel like we are in some sort of control as we try to will ourselves to whatever good we hope to achieve. It may even feel like we have achieved the relief of shamelessness for a moment, but shame is deceptive. For it to be removed, we need Jesus. To have Him, we need to draw near to Him. This is vital for the function of our entire well-being, that is, the temple of God. Shame creates wounds within us that look painful, because they are. Shame is destructive and murders the Body. Drawing near to Jesus is the only place that we can lay down our shame because He has paid the cost. In His infinite mercy and love for us, He is faithful to dress our wounds with care, healing, and truth as he exchanges our filthy shame with a crown of knowledge of who we are. Freedom and truth only come through Jesus.

Before Jesus had gone to the cross, while He walked the earth, He was performing many miracles of healing. We don't have to look very hard to find examples of shame being removed through Him. The first we are going to draw our attention to is found in Luke 8:42-48:

As Jesus went, the people pressed around him. And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all her living on physicians, she could not be healed by anyone. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her discharge of blood ceased. And Jesus said, "Who was it that touched me?" When all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and are pressing in on you!" But Jesus said, "Someone touched me, for I perceive that power has gone out from me." And when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

The woman had so much shame. She carried the weight of it not only from herself, but also her community towards her. According to Leviticus 15, this long-term bleeding made her, everything she

touched, and anyone she touched, unclean. Imagine the harsh words spoken to her, like salt in a very painful wound. She was isolated, and twelve years is a very long time.

This woman had drained herself trying to find help, but her money could not buy healing, and the most trained doctors could find no cure. She was desperate to find relief from it all, but still she bled. We can imagine the hope reignited when she heard the rumors of this man, Jesus, a healer, THE Healer. We can picture her trying to barely touch His robe, hoping that perhaps that would not bring defilement upon this man. We can realize the trembling she felt as she was called out before her entire community to come forward. Before all these people that she had likely received so much shame and hurt, she had to confess that she had touched the fringe of the garment in hope. You can feel the mounting tension within her, and within the crowd, of what was to be said of her now.

"Daughter.." Jesus affirms her place before Him. *"...your faith has made you well..."* Before all the crowds that all longed to hear this Teacher, in these few short words, He removed the entire weight from her. Shame, gone like a breath. She was physically healed when she touched his robe. She was radically healed and redeemed when He removed her shame. *"...go in peace."* What powerful words to be known.

Jesus knew her presence, her story, her desperation, her shame, her hurt, her thread of hope, and her growing faith as she engaged with him in the quiet reach for his robe. He knew her. Because He knew her, He stopped everything to find her. He wasn't angry in the least, though that was the initial fear of the onlookers. She was so full of all the pain of shame, His heart broke for her. She was worth all the suffering that He would face on the cross to be able to pay for the cost of her healing and our healing. Shame forced her to hide away for years, her only companion were thoughts of disgust, yet she was never too far beyond the healing power, or the love, of Jesus.

While this woman had shame upon her because of her physical disposition, there's another example to turn to where shame crept in through a weakness in character. Open your Bible and read Matthew 26, looking at Peter's decisions. Notice how Peter's fear, pride, and self-preservation created a pit in his character for shame. Now turn to John 21 and read, focusing some attention on Peter.

From these chapters we can see the pain of the shame that Peter had as he denied ever knowing Jesus, and the overflow of hope when he ran to see the empty tomb. When did Peter decide he didn't need to be ashamed of living his life as a sacrifice for the ministry of Christ? Was it when the rooster crowed? Was it at the tomb? Was it when he saw Jesus eating after the resurrection? Imagine Peter's face when he looked in the wounds of our Savior. He knew then, it was really worth it.

It's ok that it takes time for each of us to have our moment of finding Jesus, of knowing He is worthy of living for, of knowing our faith is nothing to be ashamed of. God is not concerned with time, He's just so eager for our hearts. When Peter saw Jesus, his shame came to the surface and was washed away with the water of Spirit and the love of His blood. Jesus so loves and longs for His Bride! Where shame causes us to come into agreement with Satan's lies of worthlessness, God's love forgives, restores, and reveals truth. He knows us, and He knows what we need. We are His temple.

We've discussed the importance of knowing your worth without the destruction of shame. Unfortunately, we can comprehend in our minds but still struggle in our hearts. Discuss together how this fits into the story of your life. Take some time together to discuss other practical steps to loving the temple of God, that is your body.

Personal Notes:

[illegible]

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

...“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”
Luke 10:27–29

As Jesus walked and talked, he shared his life example of loving your neighbor. Still, the story goes that he had to teach even more plainly than his living example. Before we get into this discussion, read the whole of Luke 10 looking for the answer to the famous question...who is my neighbor.

This chapter has so many points to dive into about loving our neighbor well. It's easy to pass by those we feel no obligation to. It's easy to swell with pride in our own steps. It's easy to become consumed in our own work and forget to love as we serve. Self-serving, however, is not the footprint of Jesus that we are following. To live as He teaches, we must get our hearts aligned with the value of acknowledging those around us.

This is the challenge extended in the three examples from Luke 10: to love those around us. The seventy-two laborers that went out and returned were tempted to be consumed by their own pride and power, instead of love. The record shares the awe of their own strength and is lacking any account of the very neighbors they were sent to serve. The parable shared with the lawyer plainly shows the difficulty of being willing to acknowledge the ones around us that need help. Even more difficult is it to serve without fanfare of our sacrifice. Our nature is quite prideful! We can so often desire worldly affirmation instead of quiet thanks in the secret place of prayer.

Martha and Mary further this point when push comes to shove, and Martha's duties destroy the available love and peace within her service. Surely Mary felt the disapproval of her sister's heart, yet she chose to remain seated with Jesus. The timing of this story, the placement of this within the whole of the Bible, it's intriguing. The chapter's teaching just told us to love our neighbors. Was Mary loving her sister? Was Martha loving either Mary or Jesus?

While we are called to love the ones around us, our first duty is to Christ. Through Mary's submission to His presence, Martha was triggered. Anxiety and frustration overflowed. The emotional accounts are often left to the readers to fill in; perhaps she was crying, her face may have been flushed with anger, her tone has so many varying possibilities. It is wonderful how quickly Martha went to Jesus with her offense, and generous how He responded in loving correction. Perhaps Mary's decision to love Jesus was in fact loving Martha after all, because it brought her closer to Him.

Mary's posture of love to Christ caused Martha to face the truth of her own heart. Loving your neighbor isn't always simple, in fact it is often not so, and sometimes the decisions we are asked to make will be quite challenging to walk out. Like Mary, our obedience to God may hurt the ones we love. Like Martha, we will absolutely find ourselves needing to run, or stomp, directly to Jesus and boldly confess our feelings. You will find yourself in both positions throughout life, but the encouragement is that God loves to love you, He longs to give you His perspective, and He desires a humble, confident Bride that functions in love. We have hope in Him!

Jesus is so kind to carefully encourage, prepare, and correct. From the very beginning of this chapter, we have a promise that He is sending us out "*...as lambs in the midst of wolves.*" (Luke 10:3) He doesn't say, *the world is scary so go hide*, or, *go with a mighty force to break the head of the enemy*. Quite the contrary! He plainly warns us that we are going out as lambs in the midst of wolves. As lambs, we are dependent and we are vulnerable. God doesn't recognize our defenselessness and ask us to hide under a rock, to self-protect, or to bury the gifts He has given us. He tells us to go out into the world and love the people around us. It's hard. It's very hard. The enemy is in the world that we are going into, and the enemy hates with passion.

This work of loving the ones you find around you, this is the work of the Kingdom on earth.

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The next question to consider is how to love others as you love yourself, and how to love yourself as you love others. Seeing both of these perspectives clearly and purely is important for the way your heart functions. Let's look again at the Samaritan woman from John 4. The water at the well could not satisfy, nor could the many different men she was with. This woman's thirst was great, her temptations unwavering. Still, Jesus longed to fill this troubled woman with the only love that satisfies the soul. He didn't blanket her with shame, He covered her with love. It is an exercise of our heart to be able to love ourselves and others as Jesus loved this woman.

We can look at this example and recognize that there will absolutely be temptations for you to drink from the wells of the world to seek satisfaction. This could be in the form of sex, lust, money, status, platforms, possessions, skills, performance... the human heart will try many means of self-indulging. Loving others as yourself, however, is to instead drink from the water that only Jesus can offer, and to then share your cup with others. We could have easily looked to a man of the Bible who bore these same urges, because this is a matter of the heart without gender bias. King David, for example, is a blatant illustration of giving into his own sexual desires. The struggle of the generations, for both men and women, is satisfying ourselves outside of Christ.

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This leads us to a discussion about pursuing dating relationships. There's actually a great joy when Jesus brings families together as He intended, which is the real intention He has for marriages. The dating culture of today is a cesspool, and people keep wading in it, laying around it, and manifesting unfulfilled hope like a perversion of the Pool of Bethesda. Like Bethesda, the dating culture can feel competitive, overpopulated, and a breeding ground for disappointment. However, God desires to lead and guide, to connect and to bring forth. God's design for dating is not at all what we have

made it today. Like at the Pool of Bethesda, we can turn our focus to Jesus and allow Him to lead us to all He has.

How can you love others as yourself, when your heart is running wild? An unrestrained heart is dangerous to all parties. Dating is intended to ignite a fiery passion between a man and woman to become lovers in marriage. What if the Lord suggested an abstinence of cultural dating? What if we instead postured our hearts in an intentional pursuit of the joy of a life together with a spouse? Dating with purpose of purity in heart, mind, body, and spirit would be a radical change.

Countless relationships have become a perverted mess, and many marriages have become sexless and dry of Spirit. It's all backwards, and it's a problem from the ages. This discussion is not simply how to love your neighbor, or how to date, but to consider a foundation for your heart for marriage. There's a joy God has for marriages that we have yet to taste, a joy for living purely before one another without shame. Pornography and self-loathing will crush this. There is no way to love your neighbor while watching their perversions. The lust and dopamine surges are gripping, so be warned to avoid these pitfalls altogether.

While it is important to acknowledge the reality of what the world has to offer today and of the cultural expectations regarding dating, you are absolutely not without hope or expectation of great, incredible, overwhelming joy and fun as you begin to search for a partner for your life. God greatly desires to join man and woman together in marriage, and to by extension also unite the bigger families into functioning units of support, encouragement, praise, and love. His desire is to unlock a joy that the world hasn't fully known within marriages and families, and it is so wonderful to think that you will experience such ecstasy in the years to come. This, right now, is a time to acknowledge your inclination to see and pursue what God has for you in time, and to build an understanding of how to carry your heart.

Other families may have different perspectives on the purpose of dating, but it is our position that the purest way to love as Jesus teaches is to date with the purpose of marriage when your heart has

matured to honor both yourself and the one you are pursuing. Until the time has come to give away your heart, we encourage exercising self-restraint as you love your neighbor as yourself. There will likely be more than one person you will date, but imagine the integrity of knowing each boyfriend or girlfriend was held with respect for the one they will come to marry. Imagine a culture where purity of heart is the focus...where we are each looking for Jesus around the pool, and focusing on Him to lead us to whatever He has. Imagine a life where loving your neighbor as yourself isn't just a t-shirt slogan, but an actual way of living. Imagine a community where men are raised up to be strong men, and women are allowed to be strong women, where we each walk in honor of who we were created to and carry no more and no less than the portion God has for us. Loving your neighbor as yourself, this is not only possible but it is imperative to a healthy life.

Questions to Consider Together:

What are some challenges you've felt with loving your neighbor?

This section discussed seeing your neighbor, loving your neighbor, and honoring your neighbor through dating. What would you like your testimony of dating to look like?

What does it look like in our family to love purely and pursue an intimate relationship?

Plainly, how do we feel led by God within our family in the realm of dating?

Personal Notes:

[illegible]

THE POWER OF TESTIMONY

*Let all that I am praise the Lord;
may I never forget the good things he does for me.
Psalm 103:2 NLT*

In the beginning.... what powerful words to speak forth our entire lineage, our history from before all time. Most all believers know these words from Genesis 1:1, but our fickle hearts have forgotten how we got to today. We may be able to recall a generation or two back for our physical inheritance, but five generations is a stretch and the spiritual history is nearly always lost. The Scriptures often say, this is somebody, who was born of somebody, and on and on. Why did God do this? Why is it important to know the line of descendants? It's important to know who you are, and to remember whose you are; to stay tethered to the strength of your truth that you were created to be loved by God and not be torn by the defining of the world's deceiver. Do you know your testimony?

When we consider a father-child definition, from Biblical examples we can find this to mean a biological parent-child relationship, an ancestral relationship, or a spiritual mentorship relationship. In Genesis 21:3, we find Abraham naming his biological son, Isaac. This is pretty direct and obvious, but it gets interesting when we turn to the ancestral relationship. Hezekiah and Josiah were both biological sons of wicked men, but they chose to live their lives differently and are called sons of David. They found an anchor in their biological family line and they clung to it. The spiritual mentorship definition for a father gets even more interesting, and an easy example is when Timothy is called a son of Paul. There was zero biological relationship, but the spiritual connection was that of a father-son.

There can be a strong pull for control and authority over biological children, and this is a boundary for each believer to wrestle out with God. We know the command to honor your father and

your mother (Ex. 20:12), but Jesus teaches in Matthew 10:37: *"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."* When we move forward two chapters, we find Jesus again sharing: *"Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?...Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."* (Matthew 12:48-50) Jesus wasn't rejecting his mother, He was expanding the definition of family. In Galatians 3:7, believers are called sons of Abraham because they share his faith. In Matthew 5:9, peacemakers are called sons of God because they reflect His character. Romans 8:14 says, *"For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."* Take a moment to read the whole of John 8, looking at the different testimonies and lineages being challenged. Control is powerful, and Jesus teaches that our heart and our actions prove who our real Father is.

What does this all mean for you today? We can see that from the beginning of all time, humanity was granted free will, and free will allows anyone to wander, to sin, and to fall away. Free will also allows anyone to take hold of our testimony, cling to the good, and write new beauty, power, and strength with God. We are not bound to the testimony of our parents or grandparents, we are free to follow God however He leads us. Even before God formed the world, He knew each of us, He knew you. (Eph. 1:4) He called you, His. He longed for you. This is part of the testimony of every single person! So, those of us with lost lines of descendants can do like Josiah, Hezekiah, or Timothy, and search what we know while clinging to the solid truth: we are HIS Beloved!

Now the journey begins for each of us to write out how we've known God's love for us. Let's write our personal testimony, cling to it, and remember the good. Our brains are so fickle and thoughtless, and in a moment this life is over. It is imperative for you to recall and remember whose you are...you are HIS!!! There will be twisted manipulators that will try to get you to turn your back on your truth, to control you, but as God said when He called His disciples, *let the dead bury their own dead.* (Luke 9:60) You are living in HIM and for HIM! You are free in Christ from all bondage. For some, writing out testimony will be acknowledging the truth and turning to God for the first in many generations. This is hard, weighty work. God grieves for

the lost generations, while also warring and fighting and longing for the ones turning to Him. You are desired!

Do you know your testimony? Each testimony, in some way or another, begins by learning God's voice calling for you. You don't have to search hard to find grand stories of overcoming hardships, addiction, abuse, and pain, but these grand histories are no more and no less powerful than the story of the little girl or little boy who grew up always knowing Him, loving Him, and following Him closely. No matter your history, the greatest testimony you will ever know is your own. Your life is the most beautiful love story of God longing for His Bride. How did He find you? How did you come to love and know your Maker? Your testimony is beautiful. You are valuable. Remember who you are.

Questions to Consider Together:

When did you know God loves you?

How did He find you?

How have you had to lay down your own desire to follow Him?

Who is your father?

Personal Notes:

[illegible]

WHICH WAY IS NORTH

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
Proverbs 3:5-6*

It's fascinating how fast a newborn grows into a toddler, then a big kid, and suddenly those baby faces morph into young adults that have to bear the many awkward questions of life slung from every angle. What do you want to be? What will you do with your life? What are you doing after high school? Where will you go to college? How many kids do you want to have? When are you moving out? It can feel abrasive because it is. Our culture has become naïve to the process of navigating this phase of life, and blind to the fact that most adults are still figuring out what they want to do when they grow up. Before we go any further, let's acknowledge that these are big questions, you may not know any of your answers, and God is still good. He has been with you and for you in all of the growing up and is absolutely ready to help you process everything without shame, fear, or anxiety. This is an exciting time in your life! Let's lean into Him for wisdom while carrying great joy, peace, and confidence!

Let's turn to Scripture and look for the strong leaders to see how God helped navigate their lives. Moses had no clue what he was doing until the burning bush, and at that he was quite fearful of what God asked of him. Abraham's purposed journey didn't begin until he was 75, and he was a ripe 100 years old when Isaac was born. Elizabeth had years of disappointment before becoming pregnant with John. They each had a long period of growing in their faith and obedience to the Lord's plan. Sometimes there's a promise but it takes a very long time to come forth, and the waiting is quiet.

There are other Biblical examples to explore, such as Mary and Joseph, David, and Esther. They each in some way knew part of their

calling at a young age but did not know the fullness of their purpose, aside from loving God and being loved by God, until much later. Mary and Joseph had no idea what it would mean to conceive the Messiah, David had no idea how he would come to be king, and Esther had no idea why she was made Queen until a national crisis. The dominant theme for all of these examples is not, *God showed me the entire, detailed journey ahead for my life*, but rather, *I know enough for the next step*.

The goal of this portion of time together is to lean into the Lord to help navigate the next step for your life. In Matthew 2 we read how the wise men were led by the light of a star to baby Jesus, and once there they had dreams that gave their next steps. Living our lives in this way can feel incredibly frustrating and irresponsible. Our culture loves the idea of a 5, 10, 15, 20-year plan for your life, a retirement plan, a family plan for this, another plan for that. While planning isn't wrong, while being responsible with your time and resources is not a bad thing, your heart's posture is what is most important. Can you have peace when you don't know what all you will have to do? Can you say yes to the one step ahead God gives you, and not be frustrated that the details may not be clear? Can you wait on Him to show you the way? Can you allow your heart to accept the love of God even when life is frustrating?

This will be a conversation you will get to replay frequently throughout your life. Through dating, schooling, marriage, family, work, daily tasks, assignments...change, uncertainty, and lack of clarity for your next few steps will challenge peace. Take some time together to seek the Lord, to focus on His guidance for how to pray and for what the next step is for your life. Pray for wisdom to know what path to follow, and courage to do it.

Questions to Consider Together:

What is the Lord asking of me? How can I prepare for this?

Is there a specific word, verse, or experience to hold as an anchor of promise as I take this step?

Are there any resources He would have to help me prepare?

Do I have the peace of the Lord? What am I afraid of?

[illegible]

HERE AM I

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.

Isaiah 6:8 (KJV)

It is no easy thing to truly submit your life to God, to grow up, push out of the cocoon of childhood, and soar as an adult. It is no easy thing to have peace in the storms, to be calm when everything around you is raging with loud urgency. It is no easy thing to walk on the water, to do what your mind says is impossible when He calls to you. Life is not easy. Yet, life is full of opportunity for wonder that builds faith, faith that builds character, and character that shapes lives. We've spent time together focusing on building a foundation to stand on, and now we are prepared to bless you in your surrender to God the Father as an independent brother or sister in Christ.

As you take step after step in life, it's so good to look to Jesus and His example. In Matthew 3 we read how Jesus journeyed for days with purpose to be baptized by John before beginning His ministry, and the Father blessed Him.

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:16–17)

We began this workbook with you because we felt in our hearts it was time to begin preparing you for adulthood. We've watched as you've searched out truth in hard discussions and how you have learned to journey to find Him in your own wilderness. We've watched you find Him and follow Him. Your next step is more of a moment between you and the Father than anything else, a pause like Jesus took when He was baptized and went into the water in surrender. We are here to

bear witness to your surrender, to bless you, to affirm you, and to encourage you in who you are.

In the years of your childhood, you've been under our umbrella of parenting, protection, and dependency. We are still here as your parents who love you. In the next years you will still need us as your parents, and there is no shame in that! You may need to be disciplined and directed, but as naturally as a baby knows to learn to walk and talk will you also begin to walk in your own direction. For the rest of our lives, we are committed to loving you, that has not changed! You are one of our most favorite people in the entire world, and we long and desire for a closeness in our relationship forever. Today, we are calling you out of childhood and into the hope of your calling as an adult: to love God and be loved by God. We are so glad to say well done, we are proud of you, we love you, and we love who you are becoming.

Let's pray and discuss how we should celebrate this time together. We've personally witnessed elaborate ceremonies with huge receptions, while others were simply a community gathered together with small gifts of encouragement. We've known of others doing quiet dinners with only a few, and others still just had a connection point with hugs from their parents. We haven't found a one size fits all form of celebration, but remember, the focus is your walk with God. Let's seek Him together and begin whatever preparations we'll need to know His joy for this time of your life. We are so honored to be your parents and to get to celebrate you, we are so grateful for your willingness to walk these months of pursuit together, we are forever proud of who you are. We love you.

Father, thank You for the gift of time together in relationship. Thank You for our child who has become our adult son or daughter, our brother or sister in You. Bless us, keep us, shine Your face upon us, and give us Your peace.

[illegible]

APPENDIX: SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Find us online at WeGottaLove.com where we share as the Lord leads. You can easily reach us here, and we would be honored to hear your testimony or feedback!

The Immanuel Approach by Karl Lehman

This book is a good source for understanding, and a guide for practical how-to of seeking God for personal spiritual healing and encounter.

Rhonda Calhoun of Harvest Home Ministries

Find her teachings about intimacy with God on YouTube or in their local bookstore, each rich in their own way with personal experiences of encountering Jesus and inner healing.

Dr. Caroline Leaf has authored many books worth reading to gain knowledge on how the brain, memories, and thought patterns work.

Building Thanksgiving with Joy: A Message by Bill Johnson. Find it on Bethel's YouTube Channel.

Imagine the God of Heaven, John Burke

The Hidden Art of Homemaking, Edith Shaeffer

APPENDIX: CONTINUED STUDY

If you've come this far with us, you've done a big work for your heart! This work will continue the rest of your life, and we pray for strength, endurance, and wisdom to do well!

If you find yourself hungry for more from this workbook, here are a few suggestions:

- Go back through each section, find every Bible verse reference and write it out by hand. Then, turn it into a prayer for your life. It is so good to pray for yourself!
- Look back over your notes and add any more thoughts. Do you still agree with your perspective? Your thoughts will likely evolve over your years, seasons tend to bring different flavors. Your thoughts are not written in stone! Make notes over the years and continue to work on your foundation.
- Do you still have questions about different topics? Write out your questions and discuss together. Seek the Lord for wisdom and understanding. He may lead you to a conference, a book, a concert, a retreat... He knows exactly what you need to navigate your life.

