

Gifts of Freedom

-13 Week Excerpt Study Guide-

Each of the three books in the Gifts of Freedom series (*Embracing Life, Spirit, Faith, and Adversity; Understanding Provision, Communication, and Death* and *Unwrapping Increase, Destiny, Relationships, God and the Gifts of the Spirit*) includes a study guide designed to give you an opportunity to dig deeper into the content of the book and explore how each of the Gifts of Freedom can make a dynamic difference in your life. This abbreviated group Study Guide includes:

1. **Excerpts** from each of the books. These excerpts allow you to delve into the major focus of each chapter and apply life-changing principles directly to your everyday living.
2. **Considerations** designed to stimulate thought and ideas generated by the excerpts and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers.
3. **Meditation Moments** that allow you time to reflect upon the reading and your answers, and to listen for God's voice.
4. **Prayers** offered as suggestions that will help connect you with your heavenly Father who "inhabits the prayers of His people." The suggested prayers serve as beginning points; your own personal prayers can continue from these starting points.

Leader Tip: Review the Leaders Notes several weeks in advance of the first session, and keep them handy during the study, especially if you are new at leading this kind of study group.

Taken seriously, this study will give you tools to dramatically improve your life and embrace the 'Gifts of Freedom' which God offers. The result of this will be a more intimate relationship with Him, and more freedom in your life! Take time to enjoy reading the **Excerpts**, answer the **Considerations** honestly, relax in the **Meditation Moment**, and rejoice in the **Prayer** with your Lord. What you gain from this time of study and reflection will change your attitude, perspective, and future!

THE LESSON OUTLINE / SCHEDULE

<u>Book 1—Embracing Life, Spirit, Faith, and Adversity</u>		
Week 1	Chapter 1	What's My Purpose, and What Went Wrong?
Week 2	Chapters 2 & 3	Gift #1—Life
Week 3	Chapters 4 & 5	Gift #2—The Holy Spirit
Week 4	Chapters 6 & 7	Gift #3—Faith
Week 5	Chapter 8	Gift #4—Adversity
<u>Book 2—Understanding Provision, Communication, and Death</u>		
Week 6	Chapters 1 & 2	Gift #5—Gold
Week 7	Chapters 3 & 4	Gift #6—Frankincense
Week 8	Chapters 5, 6, 7	Gift #7—Myrrh
<u>Book 3—Unwrapping Increase, Destiny, Relationships, God and the Gifts of the Spirit</u>		
Week 9	Chapters 1 & 2	Gift #8—Increase
Week 10	Chapters 3 & 4	Gift #9—Gifts of the Spirit
Week 11	Chapter 5	Gift #10—Relationship
Week 12	Chapter 6	Gift #11—Your Destiny
Week 13	Chapter 7	The Ultimate Gift—God of the Trinity

Week 1
Book 1—Embracing Life, Spirit, Faith, and Adversity
Chapter 1—What’s My Purpose, and What Went Wrong?

We celebrate beginnings. We have birthdays, anniversaries, national holidays, and grand openings to commemorate these events. Remember the birth of your children or maybe a niece or nephew? How about the first date with your spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend? Maybe you remember your first kiss? Or how about the day you drove your first car home? These events are powerful and memorable because they are part of your personal history. These “beginnings” helped shape who you are.

There are even greater “beginnings” that shape us, including the beginning of the world and, yes, the beginning of humankind. All of our “beginnings” find their source in God, the Creator of all things, the Giver of all good and perfect gifts.

He is the Giver of life—consciousness, self-awareness, the ability to decide. So what are we to do now? Why are we here? How should we live? What is our purpose?

The Beginning

*...Let **Us** make man in Our **image**, in Our **likeness**... (Genesis 1:26).*

You don’t read too far into the first book of the Bible, Genesis, before meeting this foundational verse that answers some of our deepest questions. We were created in the image and likeness of the triune God—Father, Son, Holy Spirit. If that’s true, why are we so messed up? And if we are made in God’s image, why are we so inclined to act so ungodly? To answer these questions it is important to know about God’s nature.

First, God is light. Without light we cannot see anything at all. Similarly, without God we cannot see or experience the spiritual things of this life. The Bible says:

- *For with You [God] is the fountain of life; in Your **light** we see light (Psalm 36:9).*
- *...The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving **light** to the eyes (Psalm 19:8).*
- *Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim You, who walk in the light of Your presence, O Lord (Psalm 89:15).*
- *In him [Jesus] was life, and that life was the **light** of men (John 1:4).*

Second, God is spirit, or a spirit being. But there’s more—in John 4:24 we also learn that we must have a spirit with which to worship Him, or, in essence *communicate* with Him. From this, we can deduce that God intended at least some part of us to be *spirit* and this spiritual component plays a significant role in how God wants to communicate with us.

*God is **spirit** and His worshipers must worship in **spirit** and in **truth** (John 4:24).*

Third, God is love. You only have to read the morning newspaper to see how God’s creation, humankind, is missing the mark regarding love. Violence, war, terrorism, and countless other evils are clearly the result of people who are *not* living out the biblical definition of love. Each one

of us has fallen short of living out this biblical definition at one time or another. But God desires us to reach for and regain His character of love. Thankfully, God also desires to help us get there.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Fourth, God is just and merciful. Because God is a just God, sins must be punished or there is no justice at all. Imagine if judges routinely did not enforce the law! Chaos would be the result. A world without true justice is cruel to its occupants. Also, there can be no love without justice. If you saw someone you love doing something that would hurt him or her, wouldn't your attempt to correct the person be an act of love? Love demands that we correct others when they do wrong. God is indeed a God of love, which makes Him also a God of justice.

...the Lord disciplines those He loves, as a father the son He delights in (Proverbs 3:12).

*...Yes, Lord God Almighty, **true** and **just** are your judgments (Revelation 16:7).*

The Fall

God gave Adam and Eve (and us) free wills. Satan tempted Eve to use her free will—to become as God, just like he had tried to do. Instead of listening to the Spirit of God in her, she was influenced by her senses; and her desires caused her mind to make the wrong choice:

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it (Genesis 3:6).

Adam and Eve wanted more than just to reflect God's image and likeness—they wanted to become "gods." By rejecting God's instruction, Adam and Eve broke communion with God. Many people in today's world also want to set their own rules and be their own god—they freely choose to disobey *God's will* and subsequently suffer the consequences of a life without communion with their Creator.

The Answer

In spite of our failures our Father in Heaven loves us and wants an eternal relationship with us. Out of love for us, God did not want sin, along with the negative effects of sin (rudeness, violence, wars, terrorism, etc.) to last for all eternity, therefore sin results in death so it can be extinguished once and for all.

At the same time, He created a way for sin to be punished without condemning *us* all to *eternal* death. He did this by sending His Son, an innocent Man, who agreed to take our punishment so that both justice and love would be fulfilled. His innocent blood shed on the Cross covers our sin in the sight of God so that when God sees us, God sees Christ's righteousness.

Jesus Christ is the key to reconnecting with God's Spirit and eliminating the effects of sin in your life. The process begins with a decision to receive, unwrap, and use the Gifts of Freedom which God offers.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. What was God's original plan when He created man?
2. It takes light for you to physically see. Do you need His light for better spiritual insight? Why is His light so important for us to see spiritual things?
3. Why did God make us in His image and likeness? Where do you see His image and likeness manifesting itself in your own life? And areas it is not?
4. Why did Adam and Eve's sin (the Fall) ruin their relationship with their Creator? Have you ever felt distant from God? Was it your actions, or God's that prompted that feeling?
5. What was Satan's strategy to lure Adam and Eve into sin? Does Satan use this strategy in your life? If so, how does he tempt or lure you away from God?
6. Can a person really hide from God? What are some of the ways you try to hide from God?
7. To have a perfect world, don't we all need to act according to His image and likeness? Do you see the need for the consequences of sin to be death so the cancer and evil of sin won't last forever? Is a just God required for us to live in a just world? In what ways and why? How did God satisfy justice and love at the same time?

Instructor note: You can supplement with additional questions from Book 1, Chapter 1 Study Guide section, pages 269-274.

MEDITATION MOMENT

God's purpose for creating you is to have an intimate relationship. You will find freedom in life through that intimate relationship; because where the Spirit of God is, there is freedom.

*Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is **freedom**. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).*

Based on what you've learned, do you know God better? Do you understand His path, essence, intent, and His plan for you? What can you do to discover His destiny for you and gain the freedoms necessary to obtain it?

PRAYER

Lord, thank You for the gift of your Son. Open my heart and mind as I begin to learn more about your gifts and how they can help me connect more deeply with Your Spirit.

Student note: Remember to read for the next class Book 1, Chapters 2 and 3, "the Gift of Life."

Week 2
Book 1—Embracing Life, Spirit, Faith, and Adversity
Chapters 2 & 3, Gift #1—Life

*For the wages of sin is death, but the **gift of God is eternal life** in
Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).*

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is
the **gift of God**—not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).*

Do you remember what it felt like as a child to wake up on Christmas day and race from your bedroom to discover presents under the tree? Anticipation and excitement swirled inside you at a dizzying pace as you reached for each gift with your name on it. Were you careful as you unwrapped your gifts? Or did you tear into the paper with wild excitement? The Bible says that the *gift* God offers us is eternal life, accepted through faith alone. Eternal life would be a pretty big Christmas gift to open by anyone's standard!

Remember your childlike wonder on Christmas Day—the waiting, the expectancy—the genuine expression of surprise and delight? Jesus loves that childlike wonder and excitement—that genuine expression of surprise and delight. In fact, when asked who was the greatest in Heaven, Jesus answered:

*I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the
kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the
kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3-4).*

He wants us to keep this childlike nature as we get to know Him and unwrap His gifts, because children have an open, accepting, non-critical, and trusting attitude. Having this attitude should be easy as God's gifts are so wonderful and are available year-round. The question is: Will you receive, unwrap, and use them?

The Gift of Life

The first gift is the most important. It has an "open this first" sticker on it because it's a prerequisite for all the other gifts. I'm referring to the *gift of salvation*. God clearly offers this gift to all of us, but the nature of gift-giving is that you can't receive a gift you refuse to accept. And, it's impossible to receive a gift by force. God does not force us to become His companions.

Maybe you're a really good person. You do good things. You don't have any obvious sins in your life. Who knows, perhaps you even go to church every week. However, in God's eyes you have fallen short even if you've only sinned once. Even *one* sin makes you incapable of being holy, pure, and blameless:

*For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking
all of it. (James 2:10)*

Let's look at it this way: If you had a reservoir of clean water and you poured even the smallest amount of poison in it, the whole reservoir would be poisoned. No one could drink from it; and

since God is perfectly pure, He can't drink from it either. Remember that there is *no* darkness in Him.

Many are mistaken in believing that they need to change their lives, quit sinning, and become perfect before they can receive the gift of salvation. But the reservoir, our hearts, will always be poisoned. Our hope rests in Jesus Christ; only he can provide the gift through which salvation is received. Only Jesus can provide the renewing Source to purify our reservoir.

The gift of salvation which Jesus embodies is a *gift*, pure and simple. We can't earn or attain this salvation on our own. We receive this gift by the *grace* of God. The concept of grace is unique to the Christian faith. Other religions teach the idea of Karma which is the philosophy according to which the quality of people's current and future lives is determined only by *their* behavior in this life. Jesus offers us *grace*—which can be defined as unmerited or undeserved favor.

Jesus Christ's sacrifice cleans the reservoir so you can reconnect with God. If it were up to you to do good works—to earn your salvation, you would become enslaved to your efforts. How many good deeds would you need to perform? How would you ever know if you'd done enough? God's plan is simple: accept His gift and by His grace you are set free! There is only one way to receive eternal life and freedom, we have to *believe* Jesus was sacrificed to make atonement for our sins.

The Most Important Question

We are all going to die at some point. We all hope to cross over that canyon of death into a new and better life of some kind after we die. Who are you trusting to get you across that high wire? It's an *important* question. The *most* important question you will ever have to answer in this life. Failing to properly answer or procrastinating leads to the same disastrous result—trusting in yourself. Are you really your own master of eternal life and death?

So what about this wonderful *gift of life*? Well, *unlike* toys and clothing we eventually grow out or tired of, the gift of life will make our lives exciting to live—every day here on earth and especially after we die. The gift of life that God offers to us enriches our daily lives—gives us purpose and meaning. The gift of life assures us that we will spend eternity in the presence of a God who loves us unconditionally, who has only our very best interests at the top of His priority list.

Unwrapping and using this gift will bring joy and confidence to your life. God gives you this gift so you can have an abundantly joyful life *now*, and an eternal life of blessings with Him. (See John 10:10 and John 14:2.)

Things to do after you've accepted Christ as your personal Savior:

1. Find a Church.
2. Be baptized.
3. Change old habits.
4. Read the Bible
5. Participate in Communion.
6. Remember the Sabbath.
7. Rededicate your life.

8. Develop an ongoing relationship with Him.
9. Conform your image and likeness to Him.
10. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you with 1 through 9.

For more detailed discussion about the gift of life through salvation, read *Book 1* in the *Gifts of Freedom Series—Embracing Life, Spirit, Faith, and Adversity*.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. What memories do you have of unwrapping gifts when you were a child? Why does God desire a childlike nature from His children?
2. The first Gift of Freedom is life—salvation. How much work do you need to do before you can receive this gift? Why should you open it first?
3. Why would the first gift be called *Life* if you already have it? How is the kind of life God offers different from your current existence?
4. Can God drink of an intimate relationship with you in your present condition? What is the only way to purify your reservoir?
5. What role does your salvation play in beginning your relationship with God? In exuding His image in likeness? How can you continue to work out your salvation?
6. Is it difficult for you to believe that God accepts you the way you are? Why or why not?
7. Do you think Satan is attacking God's seeds growing in you? Is there anything that you can do about it?

Instructor note: You can supplement with additional questions from Book 1, Chapters 2 and 3 Study Guide sections, pages 275-286.

MEDITATION MOMENT

Have you received and opened the first gift? If not, what is stopping you from accepting and unwrapping the gift of Salvation? If you have, what does this change mean in your daily life? What changes do you see coming as you seek to grow spiritually? Make a plan for how you will begin to grow and write down your initial thoughts.

PRAYER

Lord, thank You for the gift of life. Help me to accept it by faith and learn to avoid the temptations Satan puts in my way as I seek to grow closer to you.

Student note: Remember for the next class to read Book 1, Chapters 4 and 5, "Gift of the Holy Spirit."

Week 3
Book 1—Embracing Life, Spirit, Faith, and Adversity
Chapters 4 and 5—Gift #2 The Holy Spirit: Comforter and Counselor

*Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the **gift of the Holy Spirit** (Acts 2:38).*

When you fell in love with your husband or wife you probably couldn’t wait to introduce them to your friends and family. This person was so wonderful you just had to share him or her with others—you couldn’t keep this gift to yourself. When Jesus was departing the world and introduced his disciples to the Holy Spirit, it was much the same. Jesus was saying, “Yes, you know and have seen me, but though I am leaving, just wait until you meet this wonderful Counselor, Guide, and Helper—the Holy Spirit.”

I will not leave you as orphans... (John 14:18).

Jesus’ promise was fulfilled by the next Gift of Freedom: the Holy Spirit.

And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever... (John 14:16).

When Jesus promised the coming of the Holy Spirit to believers, what He was promising was a new connection with God, a gift for those who would believe:

[Jesus said] *“When the **Counselor** comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me” (John 15:26).*

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

Before we see how the Holy Spirit is going to help you, let’s understand who He is and where He came from. The Holy Spirit was present at the creation of the world:

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters (Genesis 1:2).

The Holy Spirit helps us in a number of key ways. He leads believers to a greater understanding of Gospel truths, gives us strength to endure the hostility of the world, and helps us communicate with God.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

We can’t understand the ways and nature of God because we have been shaped by earthly circumstances. Our minds have been, in a sense, grounded, and that grounding leads us to death or a disconnection with God. Still, we desperately need a way to communicate with God. Our earthly bodies and minds block us from intimacy with a Holy, sinless God. The Holy Spirit helps

us connect to God's ways—which are unreachable on our own. When you are born again the Holy Spirit becomes your companion forever, dwelling within you. The moment you accept the gift of salvation, you receive a gift the world doesn't have: A comforter and counselor you can call on to help you face life's many challenges, the Holy Spirit.

Hope and Comfort

Are you wrestling with an issue in your life that seems dead and hopeless? If so, remember that the same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead can provide you resurrection power in all parts of your life. Whether you need a physical, mental, social, or financial resurrection, your reliance on God is your only hope. His workspace is faith; this is where He can shape a fulfilling life for you. It also provides a forum where He can hear and respond to your desires. Your mind will put *limits* on what you can do, but God's will for your life is *limitless*. Connect yourself to God's Spirit in a meaningful relationship and watch your new identity start falling into place.

The Holy Spirit leads us into the completely fulfilling life God offers to all of His children. There may be times when we make some wrong turns from God's plan for our lives, but just like the new guidance systems on cars, the Holy Spirit is ever present, ready to get us back on track when *we're* ready again to follow His leading. This is important: You will make some wrong turns in this new life, but even then you won't be left alone. Even when you feel down or sad or like you've failed, the Holy Spirit is working to restore you just like your body does in such a marvelous way when you cut yourself.

If you pray, the Holy Spirit will give you answers, but; however, you must be open to receive them, otherwise you can miss them like the Christian in the following story. Once there was a Christian man whose neighborhood was flooding. He prayed and asked God to save him and God assured him He would. As the waters rose, a fire truck came by and the firemen offered the man a ride out of the neighborhood. The man was convinced God would save him so he said "No thanks." As the waters continued to rise, the man had to climb up onto his roof. A boat came by and offered him a ride. Still trusting God, he again replied, "No thanks." The flood kept rising and the man found himself balanced on his chimney, the water now moving up around his neck. A helicopter dropped a rope ladder and offered a flight to safety. With his faith still strong, the man said "No thanks, God is going to save me." Well, the waters didn't stop and the man finally drowned. When he got to Heaven he immediately went to God to complain, "I thought you said you were going to save me! What happened?" To that God replied "I sent a fire truck, a boat and a helicopter—what else did you expect me to do?"

Our environment and experiences also condition us to automatically act and react in a certain, often Godless way. Influences such as our race, parents, upbringing, education, physical abilities, size, mental abilities, economic standing—each of these impact the way we think. But with salvation and the Holy Spirit's guidance and power, we can have real perspective beyond life's experiences and influences.

The Holy Spirit also helps you choose the right paths to take in life—even when the road forks. He leads us down the path to *abundant life*. I want to clarify that an abundant life does not necessarily mean riches, perfect health, no disappointments, and so on. An *abundant life* is when you achieve the things you were *destined by God* to achieve—being in the center of His will. There is no greater joy in life than to know and live out the experiences and achievements you were uniquely designed and destined for. Reaching that destiny usually involves pain and

struggle. The heroes, prophets, apostles, and disciples in the Bible would testify to this. Remember, the runner in a great race goes through great pain and struggle to prepare himself. That struggle makes victory that much sweeter and fulfilling.

As you pursue God's wonderful plan for your life, there would be no fulfillment in life without the struggle. Keep in mind—the greater the struggle, the greater the reward. Part of our reward is eternal and will come later. But here and now our reward is joy, true satisfaction, and real love. Those things that the world is trying to buy, acquire or take pills to find, we have in Jesus through the Holy Spirit and our relationship with God.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. Why does Jesus offer us the Holy Spirit? How is this a “new connection with God”? What is the Holy Spirit's role in your life?
2. Which word used to describe the Holy Spirit has the most meaning to you right now? (Some examples: comforter, helper, advocate, guide, etc.) Why did you choose this word?
3. What are some areas of your life that could use divine help, guidance, or council? Do you know some ways the Holy Spirit will speak to you? List them.
4. Given the fact that God knows everything and is all powerful, can you see areas in your life where He could provide supernatural resurrection power?
5. Have you ever felt prompted by the Holy Spirit? Describe that experience. If not, in what areas of your life do you hope to experience His prompting?
6. How can it be difficult or even troubling to wait on “God's timing”? Why is God's timing perfect and how does faith play a role in waiting?
7. Consider the story of the man in the flood. What crisis do you face today? What are three ways God could provide a way out or might already be answering the request? Could something you need to do be the answer? Are you looking and open to perceive Him in your circumstances?

Instructor note: You can supplement with additional questions from Book 1, Chapters 4 and 5 Study Guide sections, pages 287-298.

MEDITATION MOMENT

Think about what you've learned about the Holy Spirit's role in your life. What are some things you know now that can help you grow closer to God? List some practical things you can do to better understand the Holy Spirit's role, and to pursue His wisdom, comfort, and guidance.

PRAYER

Father, thank You for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Lead me in my understanding of the Spirit's role in my life and help me to see and hear His promptings.

Student note: Remember for the next class to read Book 1, Chapters 6 and 7 on the Gift of Faith.

Week 4
Book 1—Embracing Life, Spirit, Faith, and Adversity
Chapters 6 and 7: Gift #3—Faith

*...think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a
measure of **faith** (Romans 12:3 NKJV).*

Can a postcard truly capture the immensity of the Grand Canyon? Can the grandeur of Niagara Falls be described with words alone? Do vacation pictures really do justice to your favorite beach? If you've been to amazing places like these, you may have snapshots to show your friends. But two-dimensional images pale in comparison to the first-hand experience. You might even say "you have to see this for yourself!" as you show them the pictures.

Honestly, Christian books and even the Bible can only go so far in presenting what faith is all about. Words, pictures, and instructions are only snapshots—if you want the real thing, you'll have to receive, unwrap, and use faith for yourself. Unless you do these things, "seeing it for yourself," the Bible and God's words to you will be no more than 'two-dimensional.'

*For we also have had the gospel preached to us, . . .but the message they heard was of **no value** to them, because those who heard **did not combine it with faith** (Hebrews 4:2).*

While the Spirit gives you access to all the other Gifts of Freedom, your faith is the catalyst required to bring them alive. Faith brought to life, or allowed you, to unwrap the first two gifts—life and the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit allows you to have understanding of the message; however, you still need to use your faith for the messages to become real to you and have an impact on your life. The Holy Spirit delivers the gifts; your faith helps you unwrap and use them.

So what is faith? Now **faith** is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Heb. 11:1). That's an interesting phrase, "certain of what we do *not* see." This could be a definition of trust, too. It's *not* easy to be certain of what you don't see, especially when what you *see* sometimes is the opposite of what you were hoping for. In fact, we couldn't be certain of anything we don't see—whether spiritual or worldly—without God's gift of faith.

Faith is paramount to God. It breathes life into your relationship and all the other Gifts, helping you conform to His image and likeness. When you act in faith, you please God because your actions of faith reflect your trust and surrender to Him. *Faith is the key to His heart.* It takes faith to unwrap all the other gifts—they are spiritual in nature, not readily identifiable by our senses or mind. Therefore faith is required to act on them; to even make them real to us. The manifestation of the gift inside that you unwrap with your faith becomes your *reward* for your *action* of faith in unwrapping it.

Using Your Faith

Imagine staring at a snapshot of the Grand Canyon taken by a friend and wanting to see and experience it for yourself. Simply hoping or wanting to see the Grand Canyon doesn't make it happen. Doing this requires action. You must pack the car, fill it with gas, check the tires and the oil, get directions to the Grand Canyon and then. . . start driving. You make the preparations in

faith and *hope* that you'll experience what you saw in the snapshot. But that doesn't ensure an easy, problem free trip. You may still run into bad weather or heavy traffic. But your faith moves you forward toward your goal, despite any obstacles you encounter along the way. What if you are in an accident along the way and end up in the hospital? You can give up hope of experiencing the Grand Canyon, or you can, in faith, resume your journey when you're released.

It's important to remember that we live in a fallen world brought about by our rejection of God. Therefore we are going to face obstacles along this journey of life.

What causes us to exercise our faith? When...

- there is something we hope for, but we can't see it yet.
- we continue to believe God will fulfill His promises.
- we know that God will provide for us, answer our prayers, and show up in challenging circumstances.
- we wait for and act in anticipation of God's physical manifestation of what we hope for.
- we base our actions on God's nature and good intentions for us—even when we don't understand the reason for what's happening.

Strengthen Your Faith

Do you believe Jesus' words in Matthew 17:20? Can our faith truly be limitless? If so, how does that change your life? If you have ever watched a spider crawling, perhaps you've noticed that some spiders can move surprisingly fast, their swift legs coordinated in a sweeping motion, moving gracefully along the ground. What if the spider's eight legs moved in different directions, some forward, some backward, and others sideways? The spider would go nowhere. *Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by **action**, is dead* (James 2:17).

Just as the spider must coordinate all eight legs to move toward a goal, we must line up *all* our actions to have a *functioning* faith—a unified faith in forward motion. Remember that you are made up of spirit, mind, and body. These three aspects of our makeup need to move in harmony, in one cohesive direction toward what Jesus calls "mountain moving" (limitless) faith. The necessary direction is to move in sync with God's will.

Paul says that to have "saving faith" we must align our *verbal* confession to what we believe in our *heart* to receive eternal life. *Living faith* works the same way. To move mountains we must unify faith and action, our *words* and our *heart*. We might be able to confess anything, but we can't hide our heart's true feelings from God.

Facing Circumstances with Faith

Faith is dynamic—it's something we need to have 24/7. It's easy to have faith when things are going well. What about the things that challenge our faith? The prayers that go unanswered? The relationships that continue to go unhealed? What do we do when we hope for things and see nothing change? Do we desire and hope in vain?

...We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we

might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us. On Him we have set our hope [with actions of faith] that He will continue to deliver us. . .(2 Corinthians 1:8-10).

In summary, acting in faith—even a strong faith—won’t eliminate problems in your life *nor* will it trump God’s will. However, acting in faith *will* allow you to overcome adversities and discover joy along the way. Most importantly, using your gift of faith and putting it into action opens His heart so you can enjoy intimacy between you and your Maker.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. Is faith something you can acquire or receive through personal prayer, teaching, and study? If not, where does it come from and how do you make it work for you?
2. The Bible says, “without faith it is impossible to please God.” Can’t we please God by “being good” and going to church? How does one live by faith? What does that look like in your life?
3. If exercising your faith is similar to physical exercise, what causes you to “break a sweat” spiritually speaking? What benefits do you receive from this exercise?
4. Do you ever feel as if you are going forward, backward, and sideways all at the same time? List a few examples, and how the cause of those frustrations.
5. Do you have faith to stay on the path God lays out for you until you reach your reward? Can you think of some examples where you’ve struggled to walk down God’s path of faith?
6. Has this fallen world tested your faith through a major trial? Did this trial bring you closer to God, or have you let it drive you further away? How could you have used these circumstances to make your relationship closer and more intimate?
7. Write your own definition of faith based on Hebrews 11:1.

Instructor note: You can supplement with additional questions from Book 1, Chapters 6 and 7 Study Guide sections, pages 299-310.

MEDITATION MOMENT

What are some ways you currently act on faith? What are practical things you can do to be more intentional in your actions of faith? Are there some things you’re currently struggling with that you need to trust God for? List those things now, and take a moment to pray for faith and God’s will in these areas of your life.

PRAYER

Father, thank You for the gift of faith. Help me to grow in faith and learn to trust You with the things I don’t understand.

Student note: Remember to read for the next class Book 1, Chapter 8, “Gift of Adversity.”

Week 5
Book 1—Embracing Life, Spirit, Faith, and Adversity
Chapter 8: Gift #4—Adversity

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me (Psalm 23:4).

Turning Adversity into Victory

Walt Disney was turned down 302 times before he got financing for the “happiest place on earth.” Colonel Sanders spent two years driving across the country with chicken recipes, which were turned down 1,009 times. Thomas Edison failed 10,000 times before he succeeded in creating the electric light. David was homeless and running for his life when he wrote Psalm 23. He went on to become the most powerful king in the world.

So what’s the point? You must let your faith drive you through the valleys of life while at the same time receiving the *gift* each adversity you encounter has to offer. Inventors use adversity and setbacks as a process to refine their products. They don’t give up. Instead they take from each adversity what they can and move on in faith toward their goal. In a spiritual sense, David, like Job, used adversity in his life to build up his faith and strengthen his relationship with God.

I am not saying that adversity is itself a gift or good. The existence of adversity in our lives produce gifts—gifts born out of adversity. Remember, though, *...we know that in **all** things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).*

As believers, we can have the same confidence as David did that God ties redemption, resurrection power, and adversity together—no matter how or why the adversity came about. God uses adversity to usher in gifts to us. Adversity was the unfortunate result of God giving humankind the freedom of choice. Although the choice in the Garden disconnected us from our intimate relationship with God, He restored this relationship through Jesus and set us back onto His original course. He imbeds redemptive gifts in adversity if we choose to use them. God can turn around every situation for our good, even attacks on you from other people or from Satan.

After reading about faith, you can probably see many of the different gifts found within adversity.

- Without adversity and challenges, you would have no victory.
- Without loss and failure, you would have no redemption.
- Without adversity and resistance, you could not grow and develop strength.
- Without adversity and trials, you could not refine your character.
- Without adversity, great testimonies could not be created to lead others to Jesus.
- Without adversity, how would we know our daily need for God?

Indeed, the biggest gift found within adversity is to drive us *closer* to God. And that closeness allows us to take our eyes off the physical present, the earthly here and now, to envision something much greater—our eternal future with Him.

Painful lows and struggles here on earth should also remind us that this world is not our permanent home; Jesus wants to comfort us in this truth:

[Jesus said] *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me. In My Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am”* (John 14:1-3).

Don’t forget that God’s original intent was for us to live in the Garden of Eden here on earth, not the valley of the shadow of death. Our choices have led us through the valleys. Through His resurrection power our final destination will be like the Garden—a place where we live in God’s presence and enjoy the splendor He intended for us—a place without the adversities we now face in life. In this place, the City of God:

There will be no more night. They [you] will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light... (Revelation 22:5).

Keep a Good Perspective

If your exercise coach told you he was giving you a free exercise machine to use at home, you’d probably feel pretty good about that. However, to use this gift to its full benefit, you’d have to work out, sweat, and train, perhaps experiencing some pain. Likewise we should be joyful when trials and adversity come our way because they give us a chance to exercise our faith. In essence, adversity is your exercise machine and you can’t build up your faith and/or refine yourself without it. There is no way to build up your muscles without resistance; it takes resistance or adversity to build up your faith.

All circumstances can help us build better spiritual muscles. Believers who have successfully built up faith through trials are a *powerful testimony* to young believers and non-believers alike. Their spiritual muscles are beautiful in the sight of God. God can do great works in you and through you when *you choose* to become the person He wants you to be.

You may be surprised to see the gifts within adversity as one of the 12 Gifts of Freedom I believe God offers. Just consider this, Jesus had 12 disciples to help Him change an entire world forever. One of those 12 betrayed Jesus, bringing Him the biggest adversity in His life—His physical death. However, wrapped in that very adversity was Jesus’ greatest *victory*—defeat of sin and death in the world—our redemption. You have been offered 12 gifts to bring God to your world, and one is wrapped in adversity.

Because of the resurrection power within *you*—your seemingly greatest adversities can become your biggest victories. Look at Abraham—when you’re willing to give up your future, God can give you the destiny He designed especially for you. Even death is a victory for those who follow Christ—a big step closer to our Promised Land in Heaven and eternal life with God!

Do you believe Jesus is working in the midst of your adversity? Do you believe the valley you may be walking through right now is not your home? Do you believe God can resurrect that seemingly lifeless circumstance in your life?

Words such as *faith* and *belief* may be easy to read off the page and nice to think about, but they may be hard to practice and live out. But remember, only a *daily living faith* can receive God's love and His gifts in midst of adversity.

It is only to the degree that you have faith in God's love for you that you can clearly see the gift He implants into adversities. Reacting to these adversities with actions of faith allows you to receive the gift God within.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. Does God bring adversity, or do you mostly bring it on yourself? When you do something stupid that causes adversity, does God put some form of gift in it to offer you redemption?
2. If you are facing adversity, has God turned His back on you? If God is good and loving, why does He allow adversity into your life?
3. What are some of the gifts God puts within adversities that can help strengthen and redeem your life and relationship with Him?
4. List the adversities you are facing right now. Will you look for a gift in them?
5. Are you letting life experiences govern your attitude and vision? In what ways are you letting life circumstances affect you from the outside in? What does a life that works from the inside out look like?
6. In your trials, battles, and adversities, are you open to using untraditional weapons or solutions that God may offer you?
7. God's resurrection power turns adversity into victory. How do you turn adversity into victory? What are some areas of your life that need victory?

Instructor note: You can supplement with additional questions from Book 1, Chapter 8 Study Guide section, pages 311-316.

MEDITATION MOMENT

Spend some time reading the Bible about David's faith. Consider what impresses you most about his actions. What can you learn from his faith? How can you work toward building up a similar faith? If there are obstacles or adversities in your life today, think of ways to use them for your benefit. List your thoughts.

PRAYER

Father, thank You for showing me how to turn adversity into victory. Grant me a portion of faith that will allow me to do all those things You desire for me to do, and let me see how to use adversity to accomplish them.

Student note: Remember to read for the next class Book 2, Chapters 1 and 2 on the Gift of Gold.

Week 6
Book 2—Understanding Provision, Communication, and Death
Chapters 1 and 2: Gift #5—Gold
God the Provider

We've all felt the anxiety that goes hand in hand with gift giving. We fear the recipient will not like the gift, return it, or simply find it unusable. As they tear open the package, questions buzz through our minds: *Did I get the right size sweater? Does he already have a cordless drill? Does she even wear pierced earrings?* We can't hide the truth that we want to give those we love the perfect gift—something that says "I know you and I know what you like."

God wants His gifts to be perfect as well. He knows where you are and what you need. The Bible tells us His gifts are good and perfect, (see James 1:17) though sometimes they may seem unusable until we bring our faith into play.

You've probably heard the Christmas story about the wise men who brought gifts to the baby Jesus. But have you ever wondered why these men gave a baby gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh? When you think of baby gifts, you probably think of rattles, colorful toys, baby clothes—age-appropriate items that have practical purpose. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh seem like foolish gifts, right? Yet we know the men who brought these gifts weren't fools—they were *wise men* whom God was leading. I believe they were also following God's leading in gift selection.

After Jesus' birth, God told Joseph, "Arise take the young child and his mother, flee to Egypt and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him." Satan was out to destroy Jesus just as he is out to destroy all people who follow God now. The gift of gold Jesus gave his family the means to flee to Egypt and stay there so Jesus would not be killed by King Herod.

As you go through life as a Christian you will realize that time and time again God will fulfill your needs—sometimes just as they arise.

God Promises Provision

God promises provision to all the righteous. When you accept the gift of salvation, you are given that right standing through your *personal* relationship with Jesus—you are made righteous. It's not just that God gives you the representative gift of gold, which is the gift of fulfilling your needs, but God also wants you to have faith that you have received this gift, that His promises are real, that you are His own child. With that confidence, you can begin to experience the *Peace of God*—another gift.

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and **peace** as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).*

Also, it is much easier for us to fulfill our purpose when we know the *peace of God*. This peace brings *patience* as God works out and unfolds His plan for our lives. It keeps us from acting out of desperation and doing something that goes against God's will. Confidence that God will come through—in His time, not ours—helps us resist the temptation to lie, steal, or prostitute ourselves to get what we think we need.

Shortly after I became a Christian I went through a very difficult financial time. I lost my non-essential possessions one by one. I had all the reasons in the world to worry about how our family would survive. And I did; I worried as all of my hopes seemed to derail, one by one. However, thankfully, I also experienced many moments—when in prayer, in worship, or while reading the Bible—when my spirit enjoyed faith. This gave me confidence in God’s ability to meet my needs despite the seemingly impossible circumstances. It was in these moments when I reached out to God by faith. He sustained me and gave me hope that He would provide a way out. The peace of God came over me. This certainly was supernatural *peace*, considering the circumstances.

An Attitude of Gratitude

The next step with our Provider is to add gratitude to faith and expectancy. My youngest daughter has developed this virtue well as it relates to our relationship. Many of you fathers know how powerfully persuasive thankfulness can be. People who know my youngest daughter might say that she is spoiled. I really don’t say this as a negative thing. She has high expectations for me and I am therefore inspired to meet them. In turn, I can always count on her gratefulness.

Because of what I have learned through our relationship, I now seek to be God’s spoiled child. The path to this result is faith, expectancy, and gratitude. You have to be careful, though, in your relationship with God *not* to take on the negative connotation sometimes implied in the word “spoiled”—that of *entitlement*. We should feel expectant and grateful, but *not* think that God *owes* us. I want to further make it clear that I don’t believe the *gift of gold* means every Christian is going to be rich by the world’s standard. We are all designed to experience different things because we are different people having different purposes.

Let’s go back to the story of the wise men for a moment. It’s important to note that they were *seeking* the Son of God—their Messiah. Indeed this diligent seeking is what led them to travel such a long distance. It’s what led them to *find* the Son of God, their Savior, their Provider. This same desiring spirit is how you will *find* your Provider and the Gifts of Freedom He offers. And it is in this *unquenchable* seeking you will possess the territory of your promised land (conforming to His image and likeness) here in this life.

[Jesus said] *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. **But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.** Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own”* (Matthew 6:25-34).

We need to keep our focus on God and not the things He creates or provides, no matter how interesting, satisfying, or good they may seem to be. It is important to be satisfied with what He gives each day. In that satisfaction you will please God and find a blessing.

Do you have an attitude of expectancy for tomorrow? God is a God of increase, growth, and multiplication; however, getting *more* should not be our primary focus, that should be left up to Him. Our attitude, our love, and our joy should *not* be based around possessions that come and go. Our joy should and will come from within.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. Do you believe God will provide for your every need? List a few times when He unexpectedly met your need.
2. It is easy to over-emphasize and confuse money, bank accounts, jobs, etc. over “God’s provision.” Have you done so? In what ways?
3. In what areas of your life do you try to fulfill your own needs instead of trusting God? Does this ever lead you to cut corners in little or big ways when you lack full confidence in Him as your Provider? If so, what are some of the ways?
4. Peace is often intimately linked with trust in the Bible: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you *trust* in Him....” Why do you think this is?
5. “When you face circumstances in life that overwhelm you, you’re only seeing half the picture.” What half of the picture do we see? What do we miss? Where does faith come in?
6. How do we live out a “child-like faith”? What are some of the qualities children have that make them a model for our relationship to God?
7. How can God use circumstances (good or bad) to help us reprogram our thinking? What is one situation you can see His hand in today?

Instructor note: You can supplement with additional questions from Book 2, Chapters 1 and 2 Study Guide sections, pages 257-274.

MEDITATION MOMENT

Summarize the content of this first chapter. Based on what you’ve learned, are there any steps you need to take to seek God first? To learn to trust His ways? List those thoughts here and make a plan to work on them in the coming days.

PRAYER

Lord, thank you for the gift of gold. Help me to trust you more as I seek first Your Kingdom.

Student note: Remember to read for the next class Book 2, Chapters 3 and 4 on the Gift of Frankincense.

Week 7

Book 2—Understanding Provision, Communication, and Death

Chapters 3 and 4: Gift #6—Frankincense Communicating with God through Praise and Worship

Then they opened their treasures and presented him [the baby Jesus] with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh (Matthew 2:11)

When anyone offers a grain offering to the Lord, his offering shall be of fine flour. And he shall pour oil on it, and frankincense on it. He shall bring it to Aaron's sons, the priests, one of whom shall take from it his handful of fine flour and oil with all the frankincense. And the priest shall burn it as a memorial on the altar, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the Lord. ...It is the most holy of the offerings to the Lord made by fire (Leviticus 2:1-3 NKJV).

The sense of smell has a powerful relationship with the mind, specifically memory. A special perfume or cologne. The smell of your favorite food fresh from the oven. Pine trees. The home you grew up in. Your mom or dad. A wood fire, the beach air. All of these ignite memories. Is there a particular scent that you enjoy? Well, most likely it is something you associate with someone or something, or a time or a place—something you like to think about.

This is the essence of worship—dwelling on God, letting your mind rest on His greatness, His love and good intentions for you. The Bible says that God in turn loves this aroma we offer up to Him. The scent of our dwelling on God brings Him pleasure.

Incense is used a number of times in the Bible to represent worship, praise, and prayer. In the example in Leviticus, frankincense was combined with the grain offering, which was an offering symbolizing God's provision of *all* our needs. Clearly, God is telling us something about the importance of worship, praise, and prayer—our primary means of contact with Him, our Source for everything.

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father of everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:19-20).

God desires us to worship, because it's essential to your relationship as well as your complete well-being and happiness. However, He's not interested in a ritualistic, robotic spirit of worship. He desires authenticity of the heart; worshiping in spirit and truth.

The act of serious worship is for our benefit as it gives us a proper perspective about our place in relationship with God. He is our *Creator* and we are the *creation*. Worship is the vehicle that brings our Creator glory, Lordship, and supremacy into *clear view*; therefore our earthly will and desires fade in the light of His Kingdom, leaving our destiny in sight.

Within Your Praise and Worship is Your Destiny, Victory, Freedom, Provision, Healing, Understanding, and Comfort

Worship counter balances your body and mind's natural tendency to focus on itself by shifting your focus onto God, your Creator and Provider. When you worship, you are drawn into God's presence, and in this place of power you have direct access to *prophecy, victory, freedom, provision, healing and comfort*. These are things you need to live an abundant life on earth.

Much of Book 2 in the Gifts of Freedom series came to me through my own worship. I started keeping a pen and paper with me, taking notes of what God would reveal to me in my praise and worship. David wrote many of his psalms to express worship, praise and thanks to God.

Do you only offer praise to God when your circumstances are praiseworthy? Praising God for the good things you experience is great; but remember, praising God in the midst of difficult circumstances invites His presence into that situation. You can access divine perspective, making it easier to take advantage of the gifts within that trial or tribulation.

When we are experiencing true praise and worship we are participating in an intimate communication with God. We share secrets with Him, and He reveals truth about Himself and about our future together. The Bible says He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. God is not restricted by the dimension of time, which we experience only in the present.

If you have a seeker's heart, you can open up personal prophecy from God. When you are in true praise and worship, God will share things about your destiny with you.

You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand (Psalm 16:11). But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth. ...He will tell you what is yet to come (John 16:13).

Prayer

Communication is the adhesive that bonds people together. It turns an acquaintance into a friend and it makes a date turn into a marriage. Think about your best relationships. What do they all have in common? Most likely these people are open, willing to listen, available, and share a mutual trust and commitment. You are confident they have your best interest at heart.

On the flip side, how would you feel if your spouse, girlfriend, boyfriend, or best friend ignored you? If this person showed no interest in your life, never asked about your concerns or needs? Ultimately, we discover that the same adhesive that brings us close can tear us apart. The raw power of communication can intimately bond or break relationships. This is true with our relationship with our Creator as well.

After the Fall, God's Spirit no longer lived in man as His temple—man became unholy. Therefore, in obedience to God, man built a holy physical structure (alter or temple), where man and God could meet to communicate. God's people would request His presence in this building through prayer. Prayer can be a mysterious thing, but the Bible spells out key concepts that help us understand why we are called to pray even though God already knows your needs. It is for our benefit so we can grow our intimate relationship with Him through a two-way dialogue. Our requests create an expectation of an answer.

Praying isn't like putting money in a vending machine and punching the item you want. Nor is it like a slot machine where you put in money with absolutely no idea of the potential result and just hope for the best. For prayer to be effective, it first must be within God's will. When your prayers are contrary to His will or spiritual laws, you will not see the answer you're hoping for.

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us [faith]—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him (1 John 5:14-15).

Understanding God’s Word is vital to grow your relationship with God, and prayer is a powerful means to do just that. Your mind and heart will be refreshed, God’s Word will come alive, and the Holy Spirit will move in your life as well as the lives of those you love, when you reach out to your Heavenly Father in prayer.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. What are some of your strongest positive “scent memories”? How do these affect your mind or heart? Can you see how your faith-filled praise and worship can create memories for God?
2. What does it mean to worship God in spirit and in truth? How can you now do this?
3. Do you ever find yourself “going through the motions” of praise and worship? Is this true worship? What are the attributes of true worship? What does worship and praise do for you?
4. Do you have a tendency to only offer praise to God when your circumstances are praiseworthy? Can you offer praise to God when you are not in the mood? When you feel you have nothing to give, or when circumstances don’t warrant it? List some ways.
5. How does our limited perspective impact the way we might choose to praise and worship? How can God’s ability to see your past, present and future enter into your worship time?
6. Why does God want us to pray even though He already knows everything? What are some key elements of successful prayer?
7. When should we pray? What does it look like to pray continually?

Instructor note: You can supplement with additional questions from Book 2, Chapters 3 and 4 Study Guide sections, pages 275-290.

MEDITATION MOMENT

What does your praise and worship look like today? Do you experience it only at church, or only on your own? Plan this week to make time to specifically enter into praise and worship. If your church offers a special worship service, be sure to attend and allow God to speak to you through your worship time. Also plan times and ways you can speak to God (pray) throughout your day.

PRAYER

Lord, thank You for the fragrant gift of frankincense and the ability to praise and worship You. Help me to meet You, focus on You, and know You in worship times with an open heart and welcoming spirit.

Student note: Remember to read for the next class Book 2, Chapters 5, 6, and 7 on the Gift of Myrrh.

Week 8

Book 2—Understanding Provision, Communication, and Death

Chapters 5, 6, and 7: Gift #7—Myrrh Gift of Dying to Yourself and Doing His Will

...Then they [the wise men] opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh [herb used for embalming dead bodies] (Matthew 2:11).

[Jesus said] *“For I have come down from Heaven not to do my will but to do the will of Him who sent me” (John 6:38).*

We don't like “the end,” do we? The end of our weekend or vacation. The end of childhood. The end of a great movie or concert. In fact, that's the reason for an encore, right? We don't want the show to stop. When our checking and savings accounts run low, we pull out one of our many credit cards because we don't want our spending to end! How about life? Death is the biggest “the end” of them all. However, that was Jesus Christ's purpose on earth—to die.

Myrrh is an herb that was commonly used to embalm a dead body. Jesus' purpose was being foretold by this unusual gift the wise men brought. But “the end” of Jesus' life marked the beginning of ours. Jesus' sacrifice unto death and then resurrection to life, provides As believers with that same resurrection power. We are freed from fear of “the end,” as we will one day live on with Him, better than we can ever dream or imagine. Indeed, the closer we get to God and the more time we spend in His Kingdom while we're here on earth, the less we will fear death.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:24-25).

Of course we can't die for someone else's sin—that was something only Jesus, a perfect man, could do. But we can start experiencing some of God's life and freedom now in this dying world which will allow us to be examples for others to show them the way. In this passage, Jesus tells us we need to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Him. What does that mean?

Because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand (Psalm 16:10-11).

At Jesus' first coming they did not see this because their immediate need for a physical savior from the oppression of Roman rule blinded them to this; however, it is through His spiritual victory over sin and death, we can follow Him on the same path to a “death” that really is a metamorphoses into real life—spiritual life.

Successful Living Strategies

When you woke up today, you had a strategy. If you were tired, your immediate strategy may have been as simple as drinking a strong cup of coffee. If you have children, it probably meant getting them fed and off to school. If you were running late for work, you strategize the fastest route and a way to eat breakfast on the go. Your favorite football team has a strategy to score touchdowns. You need a strategy or plan to lose weight, to get a promotion or start a business. A

strategy is a specific ordered plan to reach your goal. As believers, we need a strategy to accomplish what our Creator has laid out for us here on earth—to move into our promised land.

Any successful military general will tell you that it is important to: 1) know your enemy and, 2) know his strengths and weaknesses, 3) know your strengths and weaknesses and 4) know the fighting territory. Simply put: 1) your enemy is Satan, 2) his strength is in his cunning and apparent beauty which enables him to turn your flesh and mind into his allies. Sin can look and sound beautiful, even romantic. Sin is pleasure for a season, but eventually leads to death. That is why you need to be alert even if something looks, sounds or feels good. I urge you to wisely consider the consequences of all your actions. You of course will have to eventually deal with those consequences in your life. 3) Your strength is God within you, and your weakness is your mind and your flesh. 4) The battlefield is your mind.

There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the Lord. The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord (Proverbs 21:30-31).

The first rule of battle is to make sure you are in sync with God. You don't want to find yourself fighting against Him.

When we are dealing with problems in the physical world we need to identify their source. If the problems are spiritual in nature, we need to deal with them spiritually before we can obtain a physical solution. This is an act of faith, to overcome our real adversary in the spiritual battlefield, not a physical one. Our victory, once spiritually obtained, is manifest in the physical world. As a *spiritual* being your battle plan need to be different from those who solely rely on their mind and body.

You will encounter people who are doing what *they think* is best. Instead they are listening to their flesh or a demonic force and not following the Spirit. They are driven by the *same* motivation as the people who tempted Jesus. Jesus knew these people were spiritually blind, acting without insight and therefore He asked for forgiveness on their behalf—on our behalf too.

The most important fact to remember is that you have a significant advantage over people who do not know God—you have spiritual insight and discernment. Satan hoped to trick, intimidate, or tempt Jesus into responding with His mind or flesh. Satan wanted to get Jesus onto a battlefield where He had no advantage. But Jesus was obedient, led by the Spirit and using His spiritual insight. Don't let Satan trick you onto a battlefield where you have no advantage—a battlefield that leaves God behind.

Jesus resisted and followed through with God's will. He forgave the people and gave up His life—His Spirit. *Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last (Luke 23:46).* You also need to do God's will and forgive the people who come into your life and hurt you, defame you, or mock you.

Finding God in the present will allow you to filter the good out of the past and future. Remember these catch phrases: *Forgiveness for the past, obedience for the present, and faith for the future.* It is important to know where you can find God. While He can experience the past, present, or future at any moment, we are designed to live in the present. The present is where we find God and the joy He offers us. ***This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it (Ps. 118:24).***

The gift of myrrh is all about death—but not a death that is sad or empty. It is about Jesus’ death that leads to life—rebirth. It is about the death of our will and the pursuit of God’s will; which brings *purpose* and *meaning* to life. For some, it is even the act of giving up our physical life for someone else or for God. Physical death may be the end of life on this earth, but for those who have received the gift of salvation, it is the beginning of a *new* and *better* life with Jesus in Heaven. (For more in-depth discussion about strategies for successful living, read *Understanding Provision, Communication, and Death*, Book 2 in the Gifts of Freedom series.)

CONSIDERATIONS

1. Have you ever had a relationship or job that looked like “the end” but turned out to be the beginning of something new or better? In what two ways did Jesus die and how did those ways become the ultimate beginning for Him? What will each of our deaths begin for us?
2. After reflecting on Jesus’ humble birth, how does this King’s arrival on the scene differ from earthly kings, royalty, dignitaries and celebrities? What was His purpose in this first arrival that required such an arrival and how will it differ from His next arrival? Why did they miss “God”?
3. Describe the concept of “dying to self.” How does this allow you to find God’s will? To become a servant? To create a testimony?
4. How do you find the “true fulfillment” God intended for you in this world? Does finding “true fulfillment” involve discomfort as we seek God’s will? What is the prominent message we hear in the media about “true fulfillment”?
5. Who is your enemy? What are his strengths and weaknesses? What are your strengths and weaknesses? What is the battlefield?
6. What is the path to a victorious life? Where do we find the strategies to get there?
7. Why is continued communication with God so important to fighting and winning our battles?

Instructor note: You can supplement with additional questions from Book 2, Chapters 5, 6, and 7 Study Guide sections, pages 291-315.

MEDITATION MOMENT

A servant’s heart comes from the realization that it’s “not all about you.” We need to die to self to truly pursue God’s will. What are some of the things you are doing for others? Are there other ways you can die to self? Make a list and then commit to working on your service to others.

PRAYER

Father, thank You for coming to die for my sins and for leading the way so I can discover what it means to die to self. Help me to develop a servant’s heart and act on that heart as I seek a greater intimacy with You. Amen.

Student note: Read for the next class Book 3, Chapters 1 and 2 on the Gift of Increase.

Week 9

Book 3—Unwrapping Increase, Destiny, Relationship, God, and the Gifts of the Spirit **Chapters 1 and 2: Gift #8—Increase**

Who doesn't want to put their time and energy into something that is going to be successful—something that will show an increase? Financially we all want to see our investment double or multiply over time. Whether it's a home, business venture, IRA, or stock portfolio, we are in many ways gambling when we invest. We *hope* for an increase, but in most cases there is no certainty of one. The investments we make in the physical world (our fallen world) are always risky because the markets are unstable, they fluctuate...and sometimes even crash! Open the business section of any newspaper seven days a week and you'll nearly always read something about economic instability.

An investment in God's market is an investment where the principles never change and we are indeed assured eternal truths and rewards. With that in mind why do we put our trust and hope in the business market for financial gain? For happiness? For security? Isn't God the giver of every good and perfect gift—isn't He the true source, the true giver of increase? We'll explore how increase within God's Kingdom is rooted in the investment of our time, attention, heart, and yes, even our money, into the Kingdom of God—the *only* true sound investment.

God is the giver of *all increase, advancement, and victories*, whether those are spiritual, physical, or financial. The gift of increase has the power to free you in many ways. There is a ripple effect, like a rock landing in a pond. While you have a role to play in the process—such as planting or watering—it is by God's hand and His sovereign reserved right to determine and give the increase. God is a God of increase and multiplication. From nature we see that all life has a growth pattern and is multiplying itself.

Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work— this is a gift of God (Eccles. 5:19). And remember it is by faith we unwrap the gifts from God. In this case, our faith that God's gifts are perfect for us and though not always readily apparent they are going to be beneficial and complete. Also to be clear, increase comes to the righteous and wicked *alike*; however, it is our faith that makes the gift a true blessing in which we can joyously *rest*. Increase without faith will only cause constant anxiety to maintain the gift.

We should see God as the only source of increase in wealth, honor and strength. *Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all* (1 Chron. 29:12).

Of course God allows consequences to happen according to our choices, but by controlling the increase, God can imbed an opportunity for redemption, to get us back on track even when we make the wrong choice. This gives God room to work in our lives: to be a rewarder, to exercise His grace, to show His love, and to accomplish His will. By controlling the increase, God determines where the power, the money, and the blessings go so He can accomplish His will for us in the end.

Give God the Credit

When we understand that we don't control our increase, human pride takes a back seat and humility kicks in. This applies to all kinds of increase, including your very salvation (which is the greatest increase we receive since it grants us the promise of Heaven and an eternity with God): *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast* (Eph. 2:8-9). God knows that if we could earn our salvation through works we would be boastful and proud. This is one reason our salvation is a *gift* and for this same reason *all* increase (physical, financial and spiritual) is a gift.

God's path *drips with abundance* and leads to your *destiny*. It starts with an *action* of faith. Are you willing to act by faith?

A gift opens the way for the giver... [including with God] (Prov. 18:16). It's become clear to me in my own life experiences and through God's Word that He is *actively* involved in all aspects and details of my life's journey. The Bible says: *You enlarged my path under me; So my feet did not slip* (2 Sam. 22:37 NKJV).

By walking in faith and through the actions of our heart, we are creating the circumstances we will run into in our future. This is because we are constantly manufacturing things in the spirit realm which will *in due time* manifest in the physical realm.

Sowing and Reaping

For the past ten years I have been able to provide funds for a number of ministries in ever-increasing amounts. I could only do this because I planted seeds God grew into a towering oak tree which now provides rest and shade for others. There is indeed a *power beyond our own efforts* that can make a difference for the Kingdom—this is the power of faith and it is evidenced in the principle of “seed, time and harvest.”

God wants His Body on earth to be a blessing to the world and other Christians in need. God needs Christians who will be *open conduits* through which He can pour out His provisions and gifts. We are blessed when increase and gifts come to us, but we create further blessings when we allow these to go *through* us. God blesses those who trust in Him to use them for His purposes. It is good and right to become a blessing to others in this way.

While God provided increase to my finances, this is certainly not the only way in which God applies the principle of seed, time and harvest. God used this area to teach me because He knew it would catch my attention. So, what is God using to catch your attention? Where do you need to plant seeds? Where are you seeking increase?

Indeed, sowing grace and mercy has had the most tangible and impactful harvest in my life. Since I am imperfect, the one thing I need the most in my relationships is grace. When I judge people for their actions, I am sowing judgment and I will reap judgment in my own earthly relationships. However, if I sow grace, I will reap that much-needed grace from others. Just like sowing financially, you may have to sow over and over again in faith, but eventually you will receive a crop of grace and mercy in your life. *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy* (Matt. 5:7).

I can attest to this from my experience. (For a more detailed account of my financial success provided by God, please read *Releasing God, Destiny, and the Gifts of the Spirit in Your Life*, Chapters 1 and 2.)

CONSIDERATIONS

1. What is the primary purpose of an “investment”? How do earthly investments differ from that of God’s Kingdom? What does this suggest about a successful investment strategy?
2. Does an investment in knowing God cause increase in other areas of your life? Are you prone to ignore this? Why?
3. What does your measure of faith look like today?
4. What are some examples of “dire situations” you’ve experienced that have compelled you toward God? Do difficult times always send people toward God? Why or why not?
5. Who is your ultimate Provider? Why is understanding this important to you? How is it important to what you will actually receive? Or what about how God can use it to get the world back on track?
6. If we reap what we sow, what are some seeds you would like to uproot? What are some seeds you would like to see growing in your life that you need to begin planting? (Also consider non-physical things such as love, mercy, truth, etc.)
7. What are some kingdom-building seeds that you have planted? Imagine how and in what way these could grow.

Instructor note: You can supplement with additional questions from Book 3, Chapters 1 and 2 Study Guide sections, pages 291-308.

MEDITATION MOMENT

Summarize your understanding of “increase.” What have you learned about sowing and reaping that can help you in your day-to-day walk of faith? How will these truths help you grow closer to God? Consider practical ways you’ll put this new knowledge into practice every day.

PRAYER

Lord, thank You for the gift of increase. Teach me how to use these steps in my own life and to wait patiently on your increase.

Student note: Remember to read for the next class Book 3, Chapters 3 and 4 on the Gifts of the Spirit.

In addition to the reading assignment, you may want to complete a Spiritual Gifts assessment to help you understand how God has specifically wired you. We recommend the Gifted2serve test, which may be completed online at www.churchgrowth.net.

Week 10

Book 3—Unwrapping Increase, Destiny, Relationship, God, and the Gifts of the Spirit Chapters 3 and 4: Gift #9—Gifts of the Spirit

Holding your own newborn child is an amazing experience. Your heart is flooded with love and affection for this precious life. As a new dad or mom, you quickly realize that life is now bigger than your own personal needs. Another life now depends on you. Your attention and focus change dramatically. At first, parenthood is awkward because your sleep, meal times, and lifestyle are turned upside-down. Then you begin to see life through new eyes—those of a mother or father—and your vision is permanently altered.

So what about your new life in Christ? How will this new responsibility to God shift your vision, desires, goals, and lifestyle? How will you adjust and walk into those changes, this new life? God has given us the Holy Spirit, who offers to each of us certain gifts. If you choose to accept, unwrap, and use these gifts, you'll find help in living out these new responsibilities, and in living an abundant life

The gifts of the Spirit ignite when they are wrapped in the fruit of the Spirit; that is crucial if they are to be properly received and opened by others. If they are *not* wrapped in the fruits of the Spirit, then the gifts are *not* likely to be received well. Remember that the fruit of the Spirit are: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.*

The Bible reveals 21 primary gifts of the Spirit. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesian church, identifies five positions (the five-fold ministry) needed by a church to begin and maintain both its spiritual and physical growth.

*It was he who gave some to be **apostles**, some to be **prophets**, some to be **evangelists**, and some to be **pastors** and **teachers**, to prepare God's people for works of service, **so that the body of Christ may be built up** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*
(Ephesians 4:11-13)

In Romans chapter 12, Paul speaks about the qualities of a faithful follower of Christ; attributes required for the church body to function—a second wave of gifts which when used will show the world God. . . through you! Finally, Paul lists additional Gifts that the overall church body (you and I) need to exhibit to become life-giving and effective in our witness of God to the world.

*Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of **wisdom**, to another the message of **knowledge** by means of the same Spirit, to another **faith** by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another **miraculous** powers, to another **prophecy**, to another distinguishing [**discernment**] between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of **tongues**, and to still another the **interpretation** of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. (See 1 Corinthians 12:1-31)*

All who have accepted Jesus into their hearts and received the Spirit of God become part of a greater Body. Each of us is connected to this Body by the Holy Spirit, who acts like a central nervous system. Jesus Christ is the Head and we are His Body—working together to accomplish God's will. Our individual purpose can be completed with the specific gifts we have been offered.

But from a corporate standpoint we must work *interdependently* with other Christians, and their gifts, to accomplish *God's overall purpose*. This interdependence helps keep our pride in check. Avoid the temptation of pride in your gifts, at all costs. This is Satan's snare for believers.

Love is the primary fruit out of which all other gifts grow. When you act in love, you become like the Source of love, you grow closer to Him and your confidence in salvation grows. When you exude love you are actually fulfilling the law by fulfilling a greater law. Attacking the evil powers in the spirit realm while reaching out in love to victims in the physical realm will give you success. If *all* followers of Christ join together, then God's plan can be carried out.

Finding Your Gifts

So what part does God want you to play in the Body? What gifts did He give, specifically, to you? You may not know for sure until you experience each gift through trial and error—much like your parents may have exposed you to different sports, music, and the arts to find your gift or natural talent. In this case, it is up to you to expose yourself to all the gifts until you find the ones you want to sharpen. If you try teaching and notice everyone sleeping, then move on to the next and so on; however, if you get a little positive response on one, stay with it awhile. Remember, gifts gain strength with exercise. A brief look at the gifts follows. For a more detailed description, please read Chapter 4 of *Releasing God, Destiny, and the Gifts of the Spirit in Your Life*.

When used in love, the gift of:

- *Administration* gives you the skills to set goals and organize people to accomplish them.
- *Apostle* gives you the ability to exercise skillful leadership over several churches.
- *Discernment* gives you the ability to identify the root cause of someone's actions.
- *Evangelism* gives you the special ability to effectively present the gospel to unbelievers.
- *Exhortation* is the God-given ability to give words of encouragement, growth, or warning.
- *Faith* is extraordinary confidence that is moved to act on what you believe but can't yet see.
- *Giving* is the ability to give generously and receive satisfaction in doing so.
- *Healing* allows you to share God's healing power whether physical, emotional, or spiritual.
- *Helps* gives you the ability to help others in a variety of practical ways.
- *Hospitality* enables you to be unusually welcoming to those in need of food or shelter.
- *Intercession* is the ability to pray intensely on behalf of others through the Holy Spirit.
- *Knowledge* is the ability to know things only the Holy Spirit could have revealed to you.
- *Leadership* is the ability God gives you to lead others in accomplishing His will.
- *Mercy* enables you to have an unusual compassion for those who are hurting.
- *Miracles* gives you God's power to change things in supernatural ways.
- *Pastoring* or *shepherding* is the ability and willingness to assume the personal responsibility for a group of Christians' spiritual development and welfare.
- *Prophecy* is the ability to receive and communicate God's message to others.
- *Service* is the God-given heart to help meet people's needs through sacrificial service.
- *Teaching* allows you to effectively communicate truth so that it brings others close to God.
- *Tongues* is a heavenly language that helps you discern and accomplish God's will.
- *Tongue interpretation* enables you to hear tongues in a corporate or group setting and interpret the message for the benefit and nourishment of others.
- *Wisdom* is the ability to receive insight and spiritually meaningful knowledge from God.

Because the gifts are all used to build up the Body of Christ and you are part of the Body, once you have determined what gifts you have been given in good measure, then you need to share your gifts and find others gifted in other areas. It is important to have exposure to *all* the gifts, especially the gifts of prophet, pastor, and teacher.

The Gifts of the Spirit are the tools God gives us to show the world God Himself and His intentions through us—His Body on earth. We are called by God not only to identify our gifts, but to use them in their fullness.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. What are some ways becoming a parent alters your perspective on life and the way you live? What similar changes take place as a follower of Christ? Can you do it on our own? Why not?
2. What does it look like to let the world see God through your actions and reactions? In stressful situations, what do your actions and reactions say about your faith? Give an example.
3. True or False: God gives Christians gifts when they deserve it and can properly use them? Why or why not? What happens if you don't exercise your gifts?
4. How do the different gifts work together? How does unity in the Body of Christ impact the reach of God's hands into our world? How well have you done at submitting your head, heart, and hands to God as Peter did?
5. What value is the fruit when love is not a part of the process? Why?
6. How does love fulfill the law? Are we called to love or to live by the law?
7. Think of some of God's Gifts and how you would wrap them in pure love? What's likely to happen when you do? And when you don't?

Instructor note: You can supplement with additional questions from Book 3, Chapters 3 and 4 Study Guide sections, pages 309-324.

MEDITATION MOMENT

Think about how well you're using your gifts in love. Are there some things you need to change (attitudes, actions) to better live them out with love? Make those needed changes and watch to see how God can use you in surprising and powerful new ways.

PRAYER

Lord, You have given me unique and important gifts of the Spirit. Help me to exercise them only in love so they will impact the world in powerful ways.

Student note: Remember to read for the next class Book 3, Chapter 5 and the Gift of Relationship.

Week 11

Book 3—Unwrapping Increase, Destiny, Relationship, God, and the Gifts of the Spirit

Chapter 5: Gift #10—Relationship

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

How Relationships Complete You and Your Destiny

God offers us two kinds of relationships: 1) a relationship with Himself, and 2) relationships with others here on earth. God offers us the gift of earthly relationships for many reasons. Companionship, of course, is one of the most important reasons. Imagine what life would be like if you had nobody to talk to or share things with. Relationships also help us complete our destiny by giving us the critical support we need. Our earthly relationships also add to us through parents, teachers, pastors, mentors, spouses, children, and friends.

God has created us for synergy with others. We can see this even at the most basic levels—have you ever scooted close to someone just to stay warm? That shared body heat is a wonderful, physical example of what is also a spiritual truth. In challenging times or when under attack, two or more have a better chance of fending off the attack or problem. We needed someone to raise and provide for us when we were young, and during our elderly years we need assistance.

Spiritually speaking, there is incredible power found in a prayer of agreement with others—in combining your faith in agreement with others. Another benefit of human relationships is so we can team up with those who are strong where we are weak. This happens is especially true in business partnerships and can be a wonderful truth applicable to married life as well.

We will all face times when we need others' help. This may be physical help or prayer or encouragement or a need to rediscover the right perspective when the schemes of Satan get us turned around. Their presence can create both a physical and a spiritual synergy to help keep us "warm." This is just one of many reasons why it's good to be part of a Christian fellowship where you can regularly *give* and *receive* support.

Friendship

If you want friends, offer friendship to others. If you want a strong friendship, you must be a strong friend. Jesus, of course, is the ideal model for this. Continual strong sowing of friendship will produce some strong friends where you sowed and some supernaturally where you had not yet sowed. So be a strong friend in all cases and be expectant.

You will be tempted to set yourself above others in situations because of either power, authority, money, or even a gift you have been given that would seem to make you "better" than another. In these situations Jesus is our example because He certainly could have set Himself above mere humans. Instead, Jesus elected to be equal and indeed a servant to his brothers and sisters. We, too, are called to serve others—even friends.

[Jesus said] *“For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves”* (Luke 22:27).

When you are serving you will be given stronger friends. Strong friends will help you become the person God intends for you to be. The Bible includes a number of stories about strong friendships, including David and Jonathan (see 1 Samuel 18:1-4).

Marriage Relationship

Is marriage all about our comfort and happiness in this world, or is it about something greater? Is there an eternal purpose in marriage?

Becoming successful at marriage requires you to become Christ-like—forgiving, selfless, and serving. Marriage is a *molding* and *shaping* experience *if* you seek to do it as God instructs. The intensity of a close relationship 24/7 will exercise your *faith* and *heart*. Becoming *selfless* is a requirement for healthy marriage relationship.

Many have a selfish approach to marriage—we want to know what we can get out of it. God meant for marriage to be a vehicle to practice our relationship with Him. We need not worry about our needs getting met, but focus instead on satisfying our spouse’s needs (sowing seeds). Then and only then will we reap satisfaction in some very surprising ways. Marriage gives us a real opportunity to practice subjecting our will to another’s. You have seen that our relationship with Christ is compared to a marriage with Him and we have to make ourselves ready.

For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride [you and I] has made herself ready (Revelation 19:7).

An earthly marriage will help prepare you for an eternal wedding, an everlasting union. Most believers miss the eternal and spiritual benefits of marriage which enhances their relationship with God while at the same time molds them into a better person. Instead, most are merely seeking happiness or romance. Happiness can’t be maintained in this world because it is temporal. Likewise, our spouse will eventually make us unhappy. If you base your marriage solely on happiness, then your marriage is doomed to fail. This puts too much weight on something temporal and leaves you susceptible to wanting a new spouse when the happiness in the current relationship can’t be maintained.

The sanctity of marriage is important to God. But what if you fail? This does not mean you lose your eternal salvation. However, it does mean you will not have the most abundant life possible while on earth. To hold onto the relationship may involve fighting spiritual warfare and pulling down strongholds. It might require that you let your reputation be of no account. If you are with an abusive spouse, this may require time apart. A successful marriage will likely involve much prayer and trust in God. It will often involve offering forgiveness. And it will always require actions of faith to last until “death do you part.”

If you are divorced, don’t lose heart. God may hate divorce, but He loves those who have been through divorce. God offers everyone forgiveness and hope.

God offers us both freedom and blessings in earthly relationships if we receive, unwrap, and use them the way God intended. The gift of relationship is worth the time, effort, and energy it takes

to nurture and grow. So unwrap this special gift and invest your life in those whom God has placed into your story.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. Why do we use the expression “invest” in relationships? How does that investment look with those closest to you? Are you really too busy to make the investment?
2. How do the gifts you’ve already learned about impact the way you relate to friends, family, co-workers, and strangers? How can you improve the friendships you already have?
3. What are some of the ways relationships can give us more freedom?
4. What are some practical ways you can focus on others’ needs? How does this impact your relationship with them? With God?
5. How can God’s love exuding through you bring life to others?
6. Describe some of the ways a marriage on earth is similar to our relationship with God. What are some of the truths about our relationship with God we can discover through marriage? If you are married, what are some things that you can change to build a better marriage?
7. What are some of the blessings and freedoms we can gain when we receive, unwrap, and use the gift of relationship?

Instructor note: You can supplement with additional questions from Book 3, Chapter 5 Study Guide section, pages 325-332.

MEDITATION MOMENT

Take a close look at the relationships you are involved in today. If you’re married or dating, consider how well you’re living out the sort of relationship God desires for you as a couple. What are some ways you can work on improving all of your earthly relationships? What steps do you need to take to avoid unnecessary conflict? To grow deeper friendships?

PRAYER

Dear God, thank You for the gift of relationship. Give me wisdom in relating to family, friends, co-workers, and strangers. Please show me Yourself through these relationships so I might learn more about You and grow closer to You.

Student note: Remember to read for the next class Book 3, Chapter 6 on the Gift of Destiny.

Week 12

Book 3—Unwrapping Increase, Destiny, Relationship, God, and the Gifts of the Spirit

Chapter 6: Gift #11—Destiny

Webster's New World dictionary defines *destiny* as: 1) the seemingly inevitable succession of events, or 2) (one's) fate. The question many of us have is *who decides our destiny: God, us, or chance?*

God offers us two destinies—our *earthly* destiny and our *eternal* destiny. Our eternal spiritual destiny is received and unwrapped when we accept the gift of eternal life. However, the full experience of our eternal spiritual destiny will not be realized until Jesus' return. Our earthly is the one we have in this world of chances, where man's decision to put his will above the will of God opened a Pandora's box. Once opened, the box released sin, things that go against the will of God resulting in an infected world.

While we await the full manifestation of our eternal destiny, God offers each of us a unique and specific destiny while on earth. Have you ever considered what God's destiny for your life is? What plans He has laid out especially for you? You can choose to receive this gift or not. Achieving your destiny isn't something you do alone. God embedded within you what you will need to complete your destiny together. From this day forward you will be faced with a choice: will you choose to live out your destiny or deny it.

Your Destiny on Earth

Receiving, unwrapping, and using the gift of your earthly destiny is a lifelong process. I believe this gift is what all the other gifts work toward. They all work in conjunction with each other to free you or enable you to fulfill your God-given destiny. Without receiving, unwrapping, and using the other gifts, you cannot fully unwrap and use your gift of destiny.

You can choose to follow in God's will as Jesus did, or you can be distracted by the desires of your flesh and/or pride. If you chose the latter you will be on your own in a world of chance. You will be left to your own devices and miss out on God's *perfect power*. If you opened the gift of life—salvation—God remains in you; but if you don't follow His will, you won't know life's fullness as those who follow His will to the death of themselves. It is in this abundant life where you will find *true fulfillment* regardless of the circumstances you encounter.

Our success at living out God's will is dependent on our faith—specifically, exercising it to the maximum while keeping our earthly and eternal destinies in sight. If you wore a blindfold and were told to walk in a long straight line to a location far away, you'd probably end up walking in circles because you are imperfect. One of your legs is stronger than the other and that would cause you over time to stray from walking a straight line. To get to our destination we need to keep our destiny locked in sight so we can run toward it, making adjustments when our weaknesses try to pull us off course.

So what if we lose our focus? Well, the problems and pleasures of our earthly life will turn us every which way until we are completely lost. Pride will also turn us away from God's destiny.

Remember, life is a journey. You don't automatically get to your destination just because you decide to go somewhere. It takes a persistent pursuit in faith to be successful. Getting on the right road toward your destiny is not easy—it takes faith. It is by the Spirit that we receive the gifts and it is by faith we unwrap and use all of them.

The same is true with your gift of earthly destiny. You receive God's will by the Spirit of God and unwrap it with your faith. You will need to use your faith to plan, pack, check the car, etc. Then, after you are on the road, you will run into challenges your faith can help you overcome; but having released your will for God's, He will carry you toward your destiny. At times you too will have to overcome the difficult task of "letting go" of your will. This may involve letting go of multiple issues that are keeping you from freedom.

It is possible when you get God's calling that you will initially be troubled by what you hear, but keep listening. Do not shut God's messenger off whether it be the Holy Spirit within you, your circumstances, a prophet, an angel, or any other method God uses. Even the angel who proclaimed Mary's destiny had to reassure her before speaking to her, *But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High..."* (Luke 1:30-32).

Your destiny will start to unfold at some point. It may take time or may come quickly once you are saved. Every person is different and on a specific, *unique* path, so avoid comparing yourself to other Christians and how their destinies may unfold. And do not be jealous. Celebrate with others what they receive from God and where He sends them.

The gift of destiny is the most fulfilling gift you can receive here on earth. It is a unique gift God has specially made just for you. Remember when you receive, unwrap, and use a gift from God, you are in turn giving God a gift as well. The gift of destiny is the most fulfilling gift you can give God while you are still on earth. Even with God, your life here will not ever reach perfection, but you *can* fulfill your destiny.

No matter who you are or how much faith you have, you will have times when you question your destiny. That is natural because you are only human, but you should never give it up or loose faith. Remain persistent in the pursuit of it. Remember Joseph? God gave Joseph his destiny in a dream, telling him that his brothers would someday bow down to him. He was left in a hole, sold as a slave, wrongfully accused, and sent to jail. Through it all, Joseph never gave up and indeed all those unlikely, tragic, painful events were required to put Joseph in a position to actually *receive* his destiny. They were all an integral part of his destiny. (See Genesis chapters 37–47.)

Your circumstances may cause you to question your destiny, but regardless what you encounter along the way, if you're following God's will, He will illuminate the specific, unique path for you to follow. Your destiny awaits!

CONSIDERATIONS

1. What are some ways you've sought your destiny? Are you trying to create your own or seeking to live out the one God offers you? What do you have to do to find the one God offers?
2. What are some of the desires of the flesh that can distract you from discovering or fulfilling your destiny?
3. How can you keep your eyes on your destination? What weaknesses (in faith, trust, prayer, worship, dying to self, etc.) do you think might have you going in circles in life—repeating the same mistakes over and over, causing you to cover the same ground repeatedly?
4. Why is it more difficult to see your destiny when you are farther from the center of God's will? What are some things you may need to do in order to see better?
5. What are some ways God surprises us as we seek our destiny? How have you been surprised so far? How can you live your life so you're prepared for and welcoming of God's surprises?
6. What was Jesus' destiny on earth? What can we learn from how He lived out His destiny? How can that help us with our own?
7. In what ways is the gift of destiny the most fulfilling gift you can receive, open, and use? How can you best deal with those times when you question if your destiny even exists? What is the Holy Spirit's vital role in this gift?

Instructor note: You can supplement with additional questions from Book 3, Chapter 6 Study Guide section, pages 333-340.

MEDITATION MOMENT

Spend some time thinking about the life you've lived so far. Then write down ways you think God might have used your circumstances to bring you to where you are today. What might He be preparing you for? In what areas can you become a witness to others? In what areas can you show compassion? Talk with a friend about what you discover, and then spend time together in prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to reveal to you what is "next" in your pursuit of your unique God-given destiny. Keep checking back with God to stay focused on your destiny. Be aware of His hand in your life and the creative, evolving ways He continues to shape your future.

PRAYER

Dear God, thank You for my unique destiny. Help me to discover Your will for me in everything I do. Give me purpose and clarity as I seek Your will and uncover the plans You have for my life—my earthly destiny.

Student note: Remember to read for the next class Book 3, Chapter 7 on the Gift of God of the Trinity.

Week 13

Book 3—*Unwrapping Increase, Destiny, Relationship, God, and the Gifts of the Spirit*

Chapter 7: The Ultimate Gift—God of the Trinity

There is a classic story about a poor married couple, Jim and Della. As Christmas approached, they began to think of gifts for each other, wonderful gifts that would accurately represent the depth of their love for one another. But they could barely pay for food and rent, let alone expensive gifts!

But Jim wasn't about to show up empty-handed on Christmas morning, so he sold his most prized possession, a gold watch. Sadly, he hadn't been able to wear the watch for several years, because the band was broken and the repair too costly. With the money from the sale of the watch, Jim bought Della a beautiful gift.

Without telling Jim, Della had also decided to sell her most prized possession, her long, beautiful hair. With the money from the sale of her hair, Della went out and purchased Jim's gift.

They were both so eager to give the other their gift, that on Christmas Eve, Della threw the door open as Jim arrived home from work, holding up her gift for him . . . a gold watch band. Jim stood there, stunned. Then without a word, he reached into his jacket, pulled out a wooden box and handed it to Della. She slid open the lid, to discover an elegant ivory hair comb.

Jim and Della had sold their most prized possessions, in order to give each other, what were now, unusable gifts.

Were Jim and Della fools? Some might say so. And some might also call those of us who give up our lives to follow Jesus Christ fools as well. However, what we get in return, God's love, is of infinite value. We surrender our lives, our most valuable possession, to God, who then gives us intimacy with Himself, true love, and real freedom, His love can only be found when you are willing to give up everything.

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... (1 Peter 1:8).

You can find this joy when you have the kind of faith that trusts God to take you to your promised land.

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you (Gen. 28:15).

If you wanted to get from point A to point B, you would first have to first determine where you were starting from. Remember the question God asked Adam in the Garden, "Where are you?" Well, this is a question He asks you *every* single day of your life on earth. It is a question He is asking for *your* benefit. He knows where you are. But *you* need to know the answer to that question to properly navigate toward Him. If you don't know where you are (point A), how can you possibly know how to get to Him (point B)?

In his first recorded sermon (known as the “Sermon on the Mount”), Jesus presented clear instructions on how to start this journey to receive, unwrap and use the Gifts of God.

[Jesus said] *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 5:3-10).

You are incapable of real success without God’s involvement, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. If you know you need Him every day, then this will prompt you to *seek* Him in everything, all the time. This is the catalyst for the growth process that leads to an intimate relationship with God.

If you do something that offends your spouse or a close friend, you experience grief as a result of your actions, and the relationship may be hurt for a time. Likewise when we are not walking and operating in the Spirit, we can lose the most precious thing—*intimacy* in our relationship with God. If we recognize and wrestle with this, we experience a spirit of sorrow about missing the mark God has for us; prompting us to change our behavior, so that we can restore the intimacy to the relationship.

We are not to dwell on our sins and failures. God knows we are weak and will fall. We are simply to acknowledge our weakness. We respond by bringing Him into the picture to help us change. Godly sorrow produces a change in behavior that will lift us up; it does *not* bring regret. When we see those things that hold us down, that’s when we should have the sorrow, produced by the conviction of the Holy Spirit. We can then “let go,” so God can lift us up - back to the top. You will find when you are successful at doing this, your top will ascend higher the next time.

When we serve and obey God’s will (even when we don’t fully understand God’s plan) we are acknowledging our dependence on God. Dependency is a virtue that enhances your relationship with God because it allows more of Him in you. God finds His place in your weakness to form a partnership with you, realizing you cannot find victory on your own. This is the type of relationship He wants to have with you—*oneness*. The more room you give God to inhabit your efforts, the more of God there will be and the less of you.

A very important part of growing with God is preparation. I am referring to the *inner* you—the part of you God is most concerned with.

But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

The lamp of the Lord searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his innermost being (Prov. 20:27).

While salvation gets you into Heaven, this gift, of God Himself, can maximize the destiny God has given us through greater obedience, submission, and love. Remember, when we receive, unwrap

and use a gift God offers, we are in turn giving Him a gift. Gift-giving is the manifestation of intimacy, as is a marriage—the *most* intimate earthly relationship. God's goal is to have an ultimate intimacy with you for eternity. The Bible suggests that while on earth we can influence our future relationship with God by how well we unwrap our relationship with Him on earth. *For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels [at His second coming], and then he will reward each person according to what he has done* (Matt. 16:27). What will you do for Him? Now is the time to consider what *gifts* you can lay at His feet.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. What are some of the steps you need to take to build a solid foundation for your relationship with God? How will this help you discover the 'promised land' that God has in mind for you?
2. What is your current point A in life? Where is that in relation to Him—to your promised land? What do you need to do to properly reposition yourself?
3. When have you known or felt godly sorrow in your life? How can that change you in good ways? If you haven't known godly sorrow yet, how do you think you can find it?
4. What are some ways Satan tries to persecute or distract those who seek a deep, intimate relationship with God? How do you respond to these attacks? How does God help you respond?
5. How do you express your love to God? How are you serving Him? How are you obeying Him? What are the signs of someone who is obedient to Him?
6. What are you most looking forward to when you receive new life after the resurrection? How can this future promised land help encourage you today towards obedience, love and holiness?
7. How can the Gifts of Freedom affect your Heaven experience? How does the unwrapping of your relationship with Him impact your life now? How about in the future?

Instructor note: Additional questions can be found in Book 3, pages 341-348.

MEDITATION MOMENT

What are some things you can work on in your pursuit of a deeper relationship with the God of the Trinity? Make a plan to keep working on these things in the coming months and years. Discovering and developing the relationship that God desires to have with you is a lifelong process, so keep seeking!

PRAYER

Father, thank You so much for the gift of You and all of the Gifts of Freedom. Give me both a desire and the wisdom necessary to receive, unwrap, and use all of these gifts so I can enter my promised land and live out the unique destiny You have planned for me.

CONGRATULATIONS!

You have completed the Gifts of Freedom Group Study Guide!

Embracing Life, Spirit, Faith, and Adversity

Understanding Provision, Communication, and Death

Unwrapping Increase, Destiny, Relationship, God, and the Gifts of the Spirit

In these three books, the author delves deeply into important topics that could not be covered adequately in this abbreviated group study guide.

Gifts of Freedom books are available at your local Christian bookstore, on Amazon.com, at giftsoffreedom.com or by calling toll free 1-800-722-6774.

You may also want to sign up for our Gifts of Freedom newsletter at the gifts of freedom website www.giftsoffreedom.com

Best wishes from author Greg Rice for a lifetime of commitment to your heavenly Father and to service to others for God's glory.