



FOLLOWING JESUS

40-DAY SPIRITUAL GROWTH CHALLENGE



DAILY CHALLENGE BOOK



FOLLOWING JESUS	2
HOW TO USE THIS BOOK	3
WEEK 1	4
WEEK 2	16
WEEK 3	28
WEEK 4	40
WEEK 5	52
WEEK 6	64
WEEK 7	76
EXTRA JOURNALING SPACE	88



FOLLOWING JESUS

This 40-day spiritual growth challenge will be rewarding and life-changing for you and those around you. As you follow Jesus during these next 40 days, be encouraged that you are displaying faith by seeking him. Celebrate because you have decided to pursue God with all your heart, mind, and soul. There is no better way to spend your time!

What will be the result of this passionate pursuit? You will encounter King Jesus in a radically new way. A vibrant and healthy relationship with Jesus changes everything. As you seek Jesus, I want you to know that he loves you and wants to transform your heart from the inside out.

Throughout these 40 days, we will look at the life and ministry of Jesus in the gospel of Mark. God ensured this gospel was recorded so you could have a written record of his love for you. This gospel is also an invitation to follow King Jesus.

This workbook is designed to lead you through this season with devotions, guided prayer and fasting days, and weekly spiritual discipline challenges. Each weekend, the message will set up the week's teaching and encourage your journey. You can maximize this journey through participation in a small group. Life was not meant to be lived alone. We grow better when surrounded by good friends who love Jesus and have the same end goal.

As you start this journey, don't forget the grace of God. The Bible is full of people who sought God with their entire hearts. Through their lives, we see triumphs of faith, but we also see great seasons of struggle. You are on a journey of grace.

As you start this journey, two thoughts will run parallel. First, you are being challenged to run after Jesus with more passion and dedication than ever before. At the same time, when you mess up or miss your goals for the day - it's okay! When that happens (and it will), dust yourself off and return to seeking Jesus with all your heart.

The point of the challenge is not the challenge itself - the goal is to live healthy, Spirit-filled lives and grow closer to Jesus and one another.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK:

Each week of this journey will be divided into three parts: daily devotions, guided prayer and fasting, and weekly spiritual discipline challenge days.

In all, you will have five days of activity to complete. Feel free to divide these days up however you see fit to work them into the rhythms of your week.

PRAYER & FASTING DAYS

Throughout this journey, we will set aside Mondays to pray and fast. The goal of a fast is to give up eating for a set period to increase your hunger for God's presence. We suggest fasting from food from when you wake up until dinner. If you have dietary restrictions, you may choose to fast from one meal or create a healthy fast.

If Monday conflicts with your rhythms, you may choose another day.

DAILY DEVOTIONS

Each week, you will find three days of devotions. The other two days of the week should be your guided prayer and fasting day and your spiritual challenge day.

The devotions will walk you through the message of Mark's gospel in correlation to the Sunday morning message. There will be guided questions, activities, and prayer exercises. Please don't skip over these. They serve to add to your devotional experience. Feel free to write in this book as much as you would like.

SPIRITUAL CHALLENGE DAYS

Each week, you will find one spiritual discipline challenge. The goal of these challenges is to stretch your faith muscles and help you move toward Jesus in new ways. Give yourself grace as you go about these challenges. Some may come more naturally than others.

Look ahead to the spiritual challenge each week and plan what day you will set aside to complete it.

CATCH-UP DAYS

You will notice that each week only has five days of spiritual activity. Ideally, you will begin each week by listening to the message during the Sunday morning worship gathering, and then you will start your devotional activity on Mondays. This helps you to personalize and apply what God is speaking to our church on Sundays. It also allows you to have a couple of catch-up days if you need to catch up.

HEARING FROM GOD THROUGH PRAYER & FASTING

Commit to fast and pray today from the time you wake up until dinner.

START WITH SCRIPTURE:

15 "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

(Mark 1:15 | NIV)

- Think of this verse as your food for the next few hours.
- Try to commit as much of it to memory as possible throughout your day.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY:

Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through this short devotion.

Jesus has called you to follow him as king of your life. Today, we are celebrating our calling to walk with him. It is a great privilege to receive an invitation from Jesus. Once you understand the nature of the invitation and who exactly is inviting you, you'll realize it's time to celebrate.

Today, we celebrate that our loving God called us from a kingdom of darkness into a kingdom of light. This calling changed our lives forever! With joy, we turn from the ways of the world and put our hope in the good news of this invitation.

PRAYER PROMPTS FOR YOUR FAST:

Throughout your day, pray through these prompts. When you feel hungry for physical food, see that as an invitation to feast on God's Word by pausing to reflect and pray.

Praise God for your salvation today. Reflect upon what he has brought you out of and, more importantly, where he is taking you.

- "Lord, you are a king worthy of celebration, you have accomplished more than I could ever imagine in my life."
- "Thank you, God, for the transformation you are working out in my life. Thank you for what you have brought me out of and where you are taking me to."
- "Thank you, God, for the strength to follow Jesus today. Show me where the invitation to follow you closer is being offered to me now."

***Remember to look ahead to your spiritual discipline challenge for this week and plan out when you will do it.**

GOD'S KINGDOM

DAY 1

14 After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15 "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

(Mark 1:14-15 | NIV)

T

Mark's gospel wastes no time getting to the point. Just fourteen verses in, Jesus is already ready to launch into his three-year ministry career! Jesus bursts onto the scene with this announcement:

"The **time** has come; the **kingdom** of God has come near."

(Mark 1:15 | NIV, **emphasis added**)

Two words jump out at us from that verse: the word **time** and the word **kingdom**.

The original language of the New Testament has two words for the word time – **kairos** and **chronos**. **Chronos** is a word that describes literal time (i.e., minutes, hours, days). **Kairos** is a word that depicts significant moments in time.

You need to know that the Jewish people had been waiting centuries for God's kingdom to be restored to power. And now, Jesus comes onto the scene announcing, "The moment you have been waiting for is finally here. God's kingdom has come."

But what does Jesus mean by God's kingdom? When you think of a king, you may imagine palaces, thrones, jesters, and royal garments. A king reigns and rules over all that is within his domain.

The Bible tells us that God is the creator of all things. That means the entire created cosmos is within his domain. He is the rightful ruler over all that exists. He has the authority to govern and control the whole universe.

When Jesus announces that God's kingdom has come near, he declares that God has come to reestablish his reign and rule in this world. Throughout the gospel of Mark, we will see that Jesus is God's true king – and he is a good king.

Most kings rule with cruelty and might – but Jesus' kingdom is one of love, justice, and mercy. He is a king who has come to bring the fullness of life to all who follow him (see John 10:10).

Over these next forty days, you will have the opportunity to surrender to Jesus as king of your life. Let me encourage you today by telling you that Jesus is a king worthy of our surrender.

What images come to mind when you think of a king?

What makes Jesus a king worth following?

Is there any area of your life that you have not surrendered to the reign and rule of King Jesus?

REPENT

DAY 2

14 After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15 “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

(Mark 1:14-15 | NIV)

T

Jesus calls those who would follow after him to do two things if they would enter his kingdom: **repent** and **believe**.

Today, we will examine the word **repent**, and tomorrow, we will explore what it means to **believe**.

When you read the word “repentance,” what images come to mind?

Some people may have a negative view of the word repentance. It is certainly a word that carries a lot of baggage in our culture. For example, you may picture men holding signs that urge you to repent of sin, saying, “Turn or burn.”

But God never intended for repentance to be a negative word. It is actually an invitation from our heavenly Father to step into a different way of living – one that leads us to life.

The word the Bible uses for repentance literally means to turn around or to change your mind. It’s as if you were on a road that was taking you in one direction, and you decided to turn around and head in another direction.

When Jesus calls his followers to repent, he calls them to reverse course – to turn around and head in a new direction. We used to travel the road in pursuit of the things of this world, but now he calls us to reverse course and aim at the kingdom of God.

The apostle John, a close follower of Jesus, had this to say about living for the world and living for the kingdom:

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you. 16 These are the ways of the world: wanting to please our sinful selves, wanting the sinful things we see, and being too proud of what we have. None of these come from the Father, but all of them come from the world. 17 The world and everything that people want in it are passing away, but the person who does what God wants lives forever.

(1 John 2:15-17 | NCV)

Reread verse 16. In what ways are you tempted to live according to the “ways of the world”?

Verse 17 tells us that living for the kingdom means living for “what God wants.” What would it look like to reverse course and begin living your life for what God wants?

14 After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15 "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

(Mark 1:14-15 | NIV)

T

Yesterday, we explored what it means to **repent**. Today, we will explore what it means to **believe**.

There is a fascinating verse in a New Testament letter written by James, the brother of Jesus:

"You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless?"

(James 2:19-20 | NLT)

The verses above tell us that even the demons believe there is a God. That's a wild thought, isn't it? James, the author of the verses above, points out that genuine belief goes beyond simply agreeing that something is true.

The word the Bible uses in the original language is **pisteuo**, which means more than just mental acquiescence to a set of facts. The belief Jesus describes is an active faith. It's a belief that takes Jesus at his word and goes where he tells you to go.

Believing in Jesus requires action. It's the conviction that leads to committing yourself to follow Jesus. You demonstrate the strength of your belief in something by your willingness to act upon that belief. For instance:

- You show your belief in the power of aerodynamics by your willingness to board an airplane.
- You show faith in your financial advisor when you act on their advice and invest where they tell you to.
- A child demonstrates trust in their parent when they jump into their arms from the side of the pool.

Are you getting the picture? If you really believe in something, **you'll act upon that belief**.

TRUSTING JESUS

Another word for belief is the word **trust**. Placing your faith in King Jesus means trusting that what he says about you is true and that what he calls you to do will lead to the fullness of life.

Look up the following scriptures in your Bible and write what you learn about trusting Jesus in the boxes on the right.

Proverbs 3:5-6

Isaiah 26:3-4

Hebrews 11:6

Out of all that you learned today about what it means to "believe" in Jesus? What was the most challenging for you?

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE CHALLENGE: CELEBRATION

Set aside one day this week to challenge yourself to this spiritual discipline.

CELEBRATION

As we follow Jesus, we regularly pause and celebrate our transformative relationship with God. This discipline will build your faith and give you joy as you reflect on all that God has accomplished in your life. As you look back today, ask the Holy Spirit to flood you with sweet memories of spiritual milestones. Simply put - take time to reflect and remember. Look for themes and key lessons.

When the Holy Spirit brings a moment to mind, ask him to remind you how God's grace came through for you. Then, it's time to celebrate!

CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

Pick an option that works best for you, or make up your own.

- 1) Write down what God shows you as you reflect on your journey with Christ. Then, write a prayer, song, or poem that rejoices over what God has done for you on this journey. Offer this up to God as an act of worship and celebration.
- 2) Prepare a meal and invite family and friends over for a celebration. During the meal, celebrate with one another by sharing what God has done in your life. (You should probably let people know this is a celebration dinner. But hey, if the Holy Spirit is calling for a celebration sneak attack, go for it!)
- 3) Invite a friend out for coffee and share and celebrate God's goodness with them.
- 4) Write a letter to people who have played an important role in your journey with Jesus. Encourage them by letting them know how you are celebrating.

HELPFUL TIPS TO GET YOU STARTED:

It's okay if this feels awkward. You are not bragging or being self-centered. The purpose of celebration is to pause, reflect and rejoice. As you do so, your heart will fill with joy, and you will receive spiritual strength.

HEARING FROM GOD THROUGH PRAYER & FASTING

Commit to fast and pray today from the time you wake up until dinner.

START WITH SCRIPTURE:

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

(Mark 1:35 | NIV)

- Think of this verse as your food for the next few hours.
- Try to commit as much of it to memory as possible throughout your day.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY:

Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through this short devotion.

Hearing from God is a crucial practice needed to follow Jesus. Hearing from God leads to the most exhilarating moments in our lives. However, all the noise and distractions around us can make it challenging to listen to his voice. Add the daily pressure of life to that, and God's voice can become a faint whisper in the background.

This is why followers of Jesus have to place a high premium on getting alone with God to pray and listen. It will lead to more power in your life as you follow Jesus. Letting Jesus guide you is hard, and it will require grit. But God has promised to give you everything you need each day as you pursue him with all your heart.

PRAYER PROMPTS FOR YOUR FAST:

Throughout your day, pray through these prompts. When you feel hungry for physical food, see that as an invitation to feast on God's Word by pausing to reflect and pray.

Confess your weakness. Name your shortcomings to God, and declare your dependence upon his power today.

- "Lord, I give you my weaknesses. Today, I choose to walk in your grace's power."
- "Jesus, give me the power to walk in victory. Help me to depend on your grace for my past and your empowerment for my future."
- "Holy Spirit, give me resurrection power in every area of my life. Please help me to walk in that power today and not my own. Give me the strength to live into my calling today."

***Remember to look ahead to your spiritual discipline challenge for this week and plan out when you will do it.**

FOLLOW ME

DAY 1

17 "Follow me," Jesus told them, "and I will make you fish for people." 18 Immediately, they left their nets and followed him.

(Mark 1:17-18 | CSB)

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Follow me. This is the simple invitation of King Jesus to the men beside the Sea of Galilee. James, John, Simon (who would later be called Peter), and Andrew were fishermen by trade. They lived on the water, catching fish and running the family business.

This is likely not the first time they have met Jesus. They were aware of the rumors that he might be the long-awaited Messiah (see John 1:35-42). At this point, crowds had begun to form around Jesus everywhere he went because of the miraculous power that seemed to accompany him.

But on this day, Jesus zeroes in on these four fishermen and extends them a tremendous invitation. Jesus' call to "follow" him is a challenge to go "all in." To lay aside life's other priorities and make the kingdom of God their number one focus. Responding to this invitation would mean giving up their careers, livelihood, and more.

Read Jesus's invitation to his disciples in Mark 1:17-18 again. What would it have cost these fishermen to follow Jesus?

IMMEDIATELY

In verse 18, Mark uses a word he will use in various ways throughout his gospel. It's the word **"immediately."** Sometimes translated as "at once" or "without delay," this word is used over forty times throughout Mark's gospel. Here are just a few examples (*with emphasis added*):

As soon as he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. (Mark 1:10 | CSB)

Instantly her flow of blood ceased, and she sensed in her body that she was healed of her affliction. (Mark 5:29 | CSB)

They all saw him and were terrified. *Immediately* he spoke with them and said, "Have courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." (Mark 6:50 | CSB)

At the invitation of Jesus, the disciples immediately left their boats and followed him. They were eager and determined to listen to the voice of Jesus. It didn't matter that following Jesus might cost them their livelihood—he was worth it to them.

Notice that Jesus says he will do the work in fulfilling this invitation. He tells the disciples, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." You be obedient, and I will produce the results.

Friend, God is extending an invitation this season for you to commit to him further. He has new things he wants to produce in you, your marriage, and your relationships. He may be cultivating a fresh calling for the situation you find yourself in today.

Whatever the case, have courage! Respond with immediate faith and obedience, trusting he will meet you on the other side.

Pause and pray. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you about where King Jesus is inviting you to go "all in" with him during this Easter season. What would it look like to respond to that invitation "immediately"?

THE QUIET PLACE

DAY 2

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

(Mark 1:35 | NIV)

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Read Mark 1:21-39 to begin your devotions today.

The first day following Jesus was an eventful one for the first disciples. In less than 24 hours, they saw Jesus teach in the temple with astonishing (perhaps divine) authority. They watched Jesus deliver a man tormented by an impure spirit. They witnessed Jesus rebuke a demonic spirit, and the spirit obeyed. They saw Jesus heal their friend's mother-in-law so instantly that she began to serve and wait on them. They watched crowds gather around Jesus as he performed miracle after miracle late into the evening.

Not a bad first day of ministry for the would-be followers of Jesus!

Put yourself in the disciples' shoes for just a moment. What kind of thoughts do you think were running through their mind? Were they astonished? Afraid? Perhaps both?

GETTING ALONE WITH GOD

The next day, Jesus arose early to get alone with God in a quiet place (see Mark 1:35 above). In this short, almost fly-by verse, we see where Jesus got his power to do ministry. It came through his deep connection with his Father.

Jesus said it this way in the gospel of John:

“Jesus explained, “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does.”

(John 5:19 | NLT)

Jesus’s power to do ministry and walk in God’s will for his life came through a deep, abiding relationship with his Father. And the same is true for you and me.

Two principles emerge from this passage:

1. You cannot give away what you do not have. God wants to use your life as a fountain of his love, mercy, wisdom, and goodness. He wants those things to overflow from you to the world around you. But you can only give those things away if you create space to experience them yourself.

2. You were created to live at a slower pace. You were created to live at the pace of grace. God desires your being with him to exceed your doing for him, not the other way around.

Author and pastor Pete Scazzero says it this way:

*“Work for God that is not nourished by deep interior life with God will eventually deteriorate - and us with it.” **

God wants your life and the ministry you do to have depth, beauty, and harmony that makes true spiritual life possible. He wants your soul to overflow with grace and love for the people around you. But for that to happen, we must escape with Jesus to quiet places so that we can be alone with God.

How would you rate the quality of the pace of your life on the scale below? What could you change to create more space to be alone with God and be filled with his grace?

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
HURRIED & OVERWORKED **SLOW & PRESENT WITH GOD**

* Scazzero, Pete, *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2021), 13.

GOD'S WILL OR MINE?

DAY 3

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

(Mark 1:38 | NIV)

Read Mark 1:21-39 to begin your devotions today.

Jesus had arisen very early in the morning to pray and get alone with God. It was likely before the sun even came up, and it was still very dark outside.

When Jesus returned from the solitary place where he had been worshipping, he found the disciples searching for him in a panicked frenzy. Apparently, the crowds had regrouped from the day before and were looking for the miracle worker. They expected Jesus to get to work doing the powerful ministry they saw before.

But to the surprise of the disciples, Jesus does not get straight to work. Instead, he tells them it is time to keep moving. You can imagine the shock in the minds of the disciples. Things were going so well! Wouldn't it make sense for their up-and-coming ministry to stay put?

Read Mark 1:35-39 again. How would you expect Jesus to respond to the needs of the crowd? How is that different from Jesus' actual response to the urgency of the moment?

THAT IS WHY I HAVE COME

I love Jesus' response to the disciples' anxious request. He says, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

Jesus was clear about his purpose. He did not come to make a name for himself or to draw large crowds to his side. He came to obey the will of the Father and set an example for us.

On any given day, there are a million things that you can give your time, energy, and attention to. But those who call Jesus Lord are attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit and ask, "God, what is your purpose for me today? What would you have me do with today?"

Are you clear on your purpose? Have you resolved to listen to and obey the voice of the Spirit in your life? Because every day, you will wake up to a choice: will I allow the tyranny of the urgent to distract me from the purposes God has for me today? Will I allow the desires of my flesh to dictate my daily agenda? Or, will I be present, open, and available to the will of God presented to me by the Spirit that lives inside of me?

Look up the following scriptures in your Bible, and write what you learn about your God-given purpose. In the space below, write which verse speaks to you the strongest and why?

Look up the following scriptures in your Bible, and write what you learn about your God-given purpose. In the space below, write which verse speaks to you the strongest and why?

Matthew 6:25—34

Romans 12:1—2

Matthew 12:46—50

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE CHALLENGE: SOLITUDE

Set aside one day this week to challenge yourself to this spiritual discipline.

SOLITUDE

Getting alone with Jesus to hear his voice is vital to your spiritual growth. Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus seeking out his Father in solitude during major ministry decisions - whether choosing the disciples or the night before he went to the cross.

Pressure mounts in this world as we follow Jesus, and there are many voices to distract and misinform us. Sitting in silence with God helps the world's influence fade into the background so that God's voice becomes more robust. This discipline will teach you to listen to a father who loves you and loves to teach his children.

CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

Pick an option that works best for you, or make up your own.

- 1) Sit in silence for one hour. Take the first 15 minutes to be still before the Lord. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you focus on God's voice alone during this time. Then, take 45 minutes to listen to what Jesus is saying to you. Ask him to speak to you and record what he says to you. He will most likely speak to you about areas of your life where he wants you to follow him more closely.
- 2) Read the story of Jesus walking on water three times slowly (see Matthew 12:22-23). Spend the rest of your time imagining yourself as one of the disciples in the story. This exercise will help you focus more intently on the details of this account. Ask God to speak to you through this story.
- 3) Spend one hour listening to worship music in solitude. You can do this alone in a room or by enjoying a walk on your own.
- 4) Listen to scripture on the Bible app. Take the first 15 minutes and sit in silence, asking God to bring you to a point where you can listen. Spend the next 45 minutes listening to scripture.

HELPFUL TIPS TO GET YOU STARTED:

Take time to settle into this discipline. This could be unnerving if you are accustomed to having noise around you all of the time. Push through the first 15 minutes, and you will settle into hearing his voice. Through this experience, you will begin cultivating the faith that sees God moving in your life.

HEARING FROM GOD THROUGH PRAYER & FASTING

Commit to fast and pray today from the time you wake up until dinner.

START WITH SCRIPTURE:

36 Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid; just believe."

(Mark 5:36 | NIV)

- Think of this verse as your food for the next few hours.
- Try to commit as much of it to memory as possible throughout your day.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY:

Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through this short devotion.

Fear can paralyze us as we follow Jesus. Faith helps us to keep following him. Following Jesus requires movement, and movement requires courage. Plenty of circumstances, big and small, can stun our faith and stop us in our tracks – sickness, death, strained relationships, and disappointments, to name a few.

When we give our fears to Jesus, he fosters the courage to take the next step. Today is about getting rid of paralyzing fear so we can continue following Jesus.

PRAYER PROMPTS FOR YOUR FAST:

Throughout your day, pray through these prompts. When you feel hungry for physical food, see that as an invitation to feast on God's Word by pausing to reflect and pray.

Name your fears out loud to God. Offer them up to him in prayer and ask him to help you live by faith today.

- "Lord, I do not want my fears to paralyze me spiritually. I want to be able to move when the Spirit says to move. Take away my fears and replace them with the courage to move forward."
- "Lord, help me to see that you are bigger than anything I will face. Give me faith today to pray for the impossible. Move in my life by taking down this mountain that causes me fear."
- "Lord, touch my heart, soul, and mind so that I can be free from fear and follow you without any hindrance."

***Remember to look ahead to your spiritual discipline challenge for this week and plan out when you will do it.**

DESPERATE FAITH

DAY 1

21 When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. 22 Then, one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet.

(Mark 5:21-22 | NIV)

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It's been repeated time after time that "desperate times call for desperate measures." We've all been in a desperate situation that called for desperate actions.

This week, we'll look at a large portion of Mark 5, and we'll see a couple of desperate people exercising desperate faith in Jesus. Let's take a fresh look at the story.

Read Mark 5:21-43 in your Bible. As you do, note a couple of things: Who are the characters involved? What are their desperate circumstances? What is Jesus's response to them? What do you learn from their faith?

Imagine being in the circumstances of the people you just read about in Mark's gospel.

Talk about some desperate situations! Some of you might find yourself in a hopeless place as you read this. You might find yourself in a circumstance that is perplexing and crushing.

If that's you, I want you to press into this story this week because in our seasons of desperation, we have access to a God that possesses the power to actually do something about it. The main principle we will discover this week is that **desperate faith makes a move**. If you want to see God's power unleashed in your desperation, it starts with moving toward him by faith.

JAIRUS: OVERRIDING PRIDE

In the opening section of this passage, we meet a man named Jairus. Mark writes:

21 When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. 22 Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. 23 He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." 24 So Jesus went with him.

(Mark 5:21-24 | NIV)

It's important to note that Jairus was a synagogue leader. He held a prominent position in the community. The district tasked him with the upkeep and care of the synagogue facility. He was a man who would've had it all—job security, social status, a pension plan, tee times for golf with the local officials.

But now he's hit with one of life's uppercuts, and he has no idea what to do. He has heard of the miraculous power of Jesus, but by this time, the Jewish leadership has declared Jesus a threat to the Jewish faith. He is a blasphemer. Surely Jairus cannot go to Jesus!

Right away, we see that one of the things that can threaten our movement toward Jesus is self-sufficiency. It is easy for us to trust our abilities, resources, and intuition to meet life's crises. But you'll face things in life that are bigger than your bank account, stronger than your discipline, and more complex than your decision-making skills. Sadly, the world would have us believe we're weak if we need to ask someone for help.

Don't let your fear of what others might say about you, your fear of looking weak, or your shame in not being able to handle it yourself keep you from moving toward Jesus.

Just look at Jairus. Think of everything at stake for him—his job, his place in the community, his livelihood. But he doesn't care—his little girl is sick. What does his social status matter if she doesn't pull through?

Isn't it silly that desperation has to drive us to the feet of Jesus? Going to Christ should always be our first move because he can actually do something about it. But unfortunately, some people would rather drown than admit they can't swim.

How do you wrestle with the temptation of self-sufficiency in your life? What keeps you from making a move toward Jesus?

BREAKING THROUGH

DAY 2

27 When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28 because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed."

(Mark 5:27-28 | NIV)

T

Don't you love this woman's faith? Note her irrationality, her boldness, and her fearlessness.

Mark reports that she has struggled with the same issue for over a decade. You'll always have problems, but floundering under the same condition for twelve years is crippling. Those who have dealt with chronic pain know this all too well.

Mark also tells us that she has exhausted all of her resources. She's been to doctor after doctor, searching for some reprieve from the pain. Not only did it not get better, it actually got worse.

BREAKING THROUGH THE CROWDS

You may resonate with the woman in this story. Maybe you've been in her shoes before. You've been to counselor after counselor trying to restore your marriage. You've been to every Dave Ramsey course to get a handle on your finances. You've committed over and over that you're really going to change this time. But nothing seems to be different. You've exhausted every avenue.

When some people get stuck, they get tired of asking for help. You think, "I'm sick of being the needy one. I'm tired of having to keep asking for prayer. It's not going to work anyway." If that's you, let the desperate faith of this woman inspire you to keep moving toward Jesus.

Look again at how she encounters Jesus:

27 When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28 because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." 29 Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

(Mark 5:27-29 | NIV)

She pushes her way through the crowd, desperate to get to Jesus. Side note: in Mark's gospel, the crowds are never a good thing. Jesus wants us to see who he truly is in the middle of the masses that follow after him. The group surrounding Jesus at this moment is the religious crowd. There was a religious stigma surrounding women like her that said

because of her issue; she was spiritually unclean. You need to know that this stigma would've impacted her entire life—sexually, maternally, financially, socially, and spiritually.

And yet, even though the crowd makes her feel unworthy and unclean, she thinks to herself, "If I can just touch his clothes, I will be healed." The word Mark uses for "she thought" really means "kept thinking." In other words, she tells herself over and over in her mind, "Get to Jesus. Just get to Jesus. Just get to Jesus. He's all I need."

Whatever your stigma, shame, or need, just get to Jesus. Sometimes our shame is magnified because we don't realize that everyone in the crowd is spiritually hemorrhaging themselves. The crowd Jesus calls us to move through is full of bleeding hearts that are broken by sin. This woman just had the desperation to step out of it and push through to Jesus. Will you?

For what do you need courage and faith during this season?

What would it look like for you to push through the "crowds" in desperation and get to Jesus?

RESURRECTION POWER

DAY 3

38 When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. 39 He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." 40 But they laughed at him.

(Mark 5:38-40 | NIV)

Did you catch the irony in the first few verses you just read? The people wailing outside Jairus's house were professional mourners²—that was an actual thing in Jesus's day! One of the ways you would show your prominence in the ancient world was by showing how many mourners you could afford to pay to come and grieve a death in your family.

Interestingly, when Jesus shows up at the house, the mourners mock him. They're offering fabricated sympathy, yet they sneer at the one who can do something about it!

Friend, let me encourage you for just a minute. The crowds love to sneer at the power of Jesus.

But, look afresh at what Jesus says to Jairus:

36 Overhearing what they said, Jesus told [Jairus]. "Don't be afraid; just believe."

(Mark 5:36 | NIV)

"Just trust me. Just cling to me. Don't listen to the crowd. Just believe." Sometimes, when you're in a desperate place, you must block out the distractions, get away from the dissenting voices, and move toward Jesus.

What would it look like for you to block out the distracting voices in your life and focus squarely on Jesus?

* Card, Michael, *Mark: The Gospel of Passion* (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity, 2012), 79.

RESURRECTION POWER

40 After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. 41 He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). 42 Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. 43 He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

(Mark 5:40-43 | NIV)

What an astonishing end to this amazing testimony! Desperate faith unleashes the mighty hand of God in your life. When you say, "I'm putting all my eggs in the basket with him, I will not depend on my own strength anymore, I'm not listening to what the crowds say—I'm trusting Jesus," God starts to bring dead things to life in you.

Throughout chapters 4 and 5, Mark has been trying to teach us something. Every story ends with only Jesus being the solution. Only Jesus can still storms (4:35-41). Only Jesus can cast away demons (5:1-20). Only Jesus can drive out disease. Only Jesus can defeat death. Only Jesus has that kind of resurrection power.

But notice, his power is ferocious, and yet it is tender. It is fierce enough to quell the winds and waves in our lives, yet it is gentle enough to meet us where we are. Jesus calls the woman he heals "daughter" (see 5:34). Has anyone spoken that tenderly to this woman in twelve years?

I believe he's looking at you and me today saying, "Daughter, son, if you'll but trust me and grab ahold of me, if you'll but make a move toward me, I can bring dead things to life in you."

He brings dead hopes to life. He can resurrection dead churches, dead dreams, dead marriages, dead relationships, and dead finances.

Because that's who he is—he's the God of resurrection.

What dead things do you need Jesus to resurrection in you? What would it look like to bring that to him in confident faith?

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE CHALLENGE: JOURNALING

Set aside one day this week to challenge yourself to this spiritual discipline.

JOURNALING

Writing down your prayers and what you sense God speaking to you is a powerful spiritual discipline. As you follow Jesus, asking God to speak to you is crucial for your walk. Journaling will bring focus to your time with God. Also, having a written record has multiple spiritual benefits.

It will help you remember what God has said to you. It will also encourage you every time you revisit those journal entries.

CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

Pick an option that works best for you, or make up your own.

- 1) Write a prayer to God asking him to help increase your faith and give you the courage to follow Jesus. Do you need to trust God more deeply to save someone you love? Do you need to trust God more deeply for physical or spiritual healing? Do you need to trust God more deeply to follow Christ? If so, ask him to increase your faith.
- 2) Write down the current fears that are hindering you from following Jesus completely. Then, ask God to help you by providing encouragement to overcome these fears. Finally, write down any encouragement from God next to your fear.

Suggestion: Look for promises in the Bible that directly speak to your fear as a source of encouragement. You can also memorize those scriptures that remind you of God's promises for future use.

- 3) Read Mark 5 and journal what God speaks to you about the ministry of Jesus.

Things to consider: How do these gospel accounts increase your faith? What encouragement does this passage of scripture give you to follow Jesus more fully? Who do you identify with in this passage, and why?

HELPFUL TIPS TO GET YOU STARTED:

Try to enjoy this time. Journaling should not feel like a burden. Go at your own pace. There is no exact science for how much or how little you should write. Use your own voice, and do not turn into someone else as you write. This is a powerful discipline to add to your daily or weekly walk. God loves authors of all kinds, and he will love your writing!

HEARING FROM GOD THROUGH PRAYER & FASTING

Commit to fast and pray today from the time you wake up until dinner.

START WITH SCRIPTURE:

20 He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. 21 For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, 22 adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23 All these evils come from inside and defile a person.” (Mark 7:20-23 | NIV)

- Think of this verse as your food for the next few hours.
- Try to commit as much of it to memory as possible throughout your day.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY:

Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through this short devotion.

The heart is the control center of a Jesus follower. Words and actions do not come out of the blue. If our words and actions are pure, it is evidence that our hearts are pure. If our words and actions dishonor God, they stem from an impure heart. We don’t clean up our lives by merely paying attention to what we say and do but also knowing where those behaviors come from.

If we want to live a pure life, we need God to give us a pure heart. A pure heart is given to people who trust Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and a new identity. Jesus gives his followers a heart that is transformed to follow him. The person with a pure heart, Jesus promises, will see God.

PRAYER PROMPTS FOR YOUR FAST:

Throughout your day, pray through these prompts. When you feel hungry for physical food, see that as an invitation to feast on God’s Word by pausing to reflect and pray.

Ask God to give you a pure heart today as you pray and fast.

- “Jesus, thank you because your death and resurrection provided me with a pure heart. I am grateful that you cared enough to transform me from the inside out.”
- “Father, let me meditate on my words and deeds today. Are you pleased with them? Transform my heart so that I no longer desire to do anything dishonoring to you.”
- “Holy Spirit, may I know and sense your fire in my heart, refining me today. May every word and deed spring from a heart that honors you above all else.”

***Remember to look ahead to your spiritual discipline challenge for this week and plan out when you will do it.**

15 Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

(Mark 7:15 | NIV)

Read Mark 7:1-23 to begin your devotions today.

Jesus would have the harshest things to say to the Pharisees throughout his ministry. The Pharisees were the religious elite of Jesus’s day. They prided themselves on their ability to keep the law and walk blamelessly before God.

In the encounter you just read, some Pharisees come to Jesus complaining that his disciples are breaking a well-known Jewish custom by eating with unwashed hands. But, in the eyes of the Pharisees, they are above the disciples because they keep the commands.

Jesus responds with hard words to the Pharisees:

6 He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you **hypocrites**; as it is written: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’

(Mark 7:6-7 | NIV, **emphasis added**)

You see, the Pharisees looked clean and buttoned up on the outside. But they had one severe problem – they were filthy on the inside. They had made a good show of keeping all the rules and regulations, but their hearts were full of pride, jealousy, and envy.

That’s why Jesus calls them hypocrites. In the ancient world, the word for hypocrite was a word used to describe an actor who performed while wearing masks.* The Pharisees have done a good job masking their inner brokenness with their outward rule-following. But Jesus tells us that the Father desires more than that. He wants the inside of our lives to be pure and blameless, not just the outside.

It’s why Jesus says:

15 Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” (Mark 7:15 | NIV)

* Swindoll, Charles, *Insights for Living: Mark* (Carol Stream, IL, Tyndale Publishing House, 2016), 183.

If we're not careful, we can be just like the Pharisees. We can become good at rule-following and keeping up with the spiritual Joneses', but our hearts can remain far from God. We can be in church services, bible studies, and prayer groups and yet still be rotting away on the inside with sinful motives and mindsets.

If we want to be really clean – like clean from the inside out – we have to come to Jesus and ask him to cultivate a heart like his in our lives.

Why do you think Jesus had such harsh language for the Pharisees? What does that tell you about how God views a hypocritical faith?

Do you struggle with comparing your faith with the faith of the people around you? What does that do to your walk with Jesus?

What would it look like to come to Jesus and allow him to make you really clean?

29 Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."
(Mark 7:29 | NIV)

Read Mark 7:24–30 to begin your devotions today.

DID JESUS JUST CALL SOMEONE A DOG?

It might seem like Jesus insults this woman by calling her and her people dogs. When you first read it, you almost think, "That can't be right. Jesus would never."

Pastor and author Tim Keller^{*} explains it this way:

On the surface, this appears to be an insult. We are a canine-loving society, but in New Testament times most dogs were scavengers—wild, dirty, uncouth in every way. Their society was not canine-loving, and to call someone a dog was a terrible insult. In Jesus's day the Jews often called the Gentiles dogs because they were "unclean." Is what Jesus says to her just an insult, then? No, it's a parable. The word parable means "metaphor" or "likeness," and that's what this is. One key to understanding it is the very unusual word Jesus uses for "dogs" here. He uses a diminutive form, a word that really means "puppies." Remember, the woman is a mother. Jesus is saying to her, "You know how families eat: First the children eat at the table, and afterward their pets eat too. It is not right to violate that order. The puppies must not eat food from the table before the children do."

The woman's reply appears to impress Jesus. She musters up a courageous faith that seizes the moment and pleads with the goodness and mercy of God.

28 "Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."
(Mark 7:28–29 | NIV)

* Keller, Timothy, *Jesus the King* (New York, NY, Penguin Publishing Group, 2016), 94.

TWO STORIES OF GREAT FAITH

There is a story that parallels this one in Matthew chapter 8 about the faith of a centurion soldier. It has several similarities. Both people who come to Jesus have a child in desperate need of help, both are outsiders to the people of Israel, and both seem to impress Jesus with their tremendous faith.

Take a look at the story below:

5 When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. 6 "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly."

7 Jesus said to him, "Shall I come and heal him?" 8 The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. 9 For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

10 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such **great faith.**"

...13 Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that moment.

(Matthew 8:5-10, 13 | NIV, **emphasis added**)

Have you ever had a moment of faith like the centurion or the Syrophenician woman? If so, what inspired you to believe? If not, how do you think you would respond?

COMPASSION

DAY 3

37 People were overwhelmed with amazement. “He has done everything well,” they said. “He even makes the deaf hear, and the mute speak.”

(Mark 7:37 | NIV)

Read Mark 7:31–37 to begin your devotions today.

It’s always amazing to see how present Jesus was with the needs of the people around him. People experienced the tremendous power of God’s kingdom flowing through him wherever he went.

In the gospel of Luke, he actually told us that releasing this sort of kingdom power was what God had anointed him to do:

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

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

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

(Luke 4:16–21 | NIV)

In his compassion, God sent Jesus to bring good news to those who needed it most – the poor, the prisoners, the blind, the broken, and the oppressed.

The story of the Bible is the story of a God of compassion. A God who sees your needs and actually has the power within himself to do something about it. I don’t know what your needs are as you read this devotion, but I know Jesus told us that your heavenly Father knows about them before you even ask him for help (see Matthew 6:31–34).

The good news of Jesus is that he stands ready to meet you where you are and shower you with his compassion.

In what specific ways have you experienced the compassion of God in your life?

Where do you most need to experience the compassion of God today? Offer that circumstance up to him through a written prayer.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE CHALLENGE: SECRECY

Set aside one day this week to challenge yourself to this spiritual discipline.

SECRECY

Jesus commands the discipline of secrecy for his followers. In the Sermon on the Mount, we are commanded to pray, fast, and give in secret (see Matthew 5–7). Jesus commands this because we will learn to practice righteous living because we love God and not to impress other people. This discipline builds your faith because these actions are between you and God alone. He promises to reward you when you seek him in this way.

CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

Pick an option that works best for you, or make up your own.

- 1) Be generous to someone, a family, or an organization, and do not tell anyone about it (if you're married, it's okay to share it with your spouse). As you give, celebrate with God that you care more about his approval than the recognition of other people.
- 2) Serve someone without them knowing it was you. This is a tricky one that will take some creativity.

Suggestions: Serve someone in your family or in close proximity to you without them knowing it was you. Write someone a note of encouragement without giving away your identity. Deliver a meal for someone with creative stealth.

HELPFUL TIPS TO GET YOU STARTED:

Practicing this discipline will ensure that your service to God stays pure. It's tempting for everyone to be recognized for the good we do. This can get us off track as we seek to follow Christ. During this practice, focus deeply on the motives of your heart.

HEARING FROM GOD THROUGH PRAYER & FASTING

Commit to fast and pray today from the time you wake up until dinner.

START WITH SCRIPTURE:

29 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

(Mark 8:29 | NIV)

- Think of this verse as your food for the next few hours.
- Try to commit as much of it to memory as possible throughout your day.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY:

Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through this short devotion.

When Peter answered this question, everything changed in his life – everything! If we believe that Jesus is Lord, our life is radically reoriented around him. Our dreams, pursuits, and relationships are now filtered through this overarching vision. Jesus changed Peter's entire identity by giving him a new name, occupation, and an entirely different way of living. Peter, who defined himself as a sinful man, became the leader of the twelve apostles by declaring Jesus as the Messiah. Once you make this claim, you are past the point of no return in following Jesus. We must keep our eyes locked on Jesus as we follow him.

PRAYER PROMPTS FOR YOUR FAST:

Throughout your day, pray through these prompts. When you feel hungry for physical food, see that as an invitation to feast on God's Word by pausing to reflect and pray.

Ask God to help you stay focused on Jesus throughout your day today.

- "Jesus, help me to surrender every area of my life to your Lordship today – my marriage, my career, my desires, and my ambitions. You are Lord of it all."
- "Jesus, thank you for being a king unlike any other. You did not come to rule over my life with cruelty and force. You came to establish your righteousness, goodness, and mercy in my life."
- "Holy Spirit, may you show me where I fail to give Jesus the honor he deserves as I live my life today."

***Remember to look ahead to your spiritual discipline challenge for this week and plan out when you will do it.**

WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?

DAY 1

29 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

(Mark 8:29 | NIV)

Read Mark 8:27–30 to begin your devotions today.

The passage you just read in Mark chapter 8 is the turning point for the entire gospel. Jesus asks the disciples the question he has been leading them to throughout their whole journey: **who do you say that I am?**

A little context may help to set the stage. Mark points out that Jesus had brought the team of followers to Caesarea Philippi – a city built by Herod to pay homage to the Roman Caesar, whom the ancient world worshipped as a god. It was a beautiful and decadent city filled with a lot of cultural activity.

In the shadow of this royal place, Jesus asks the disciples whom they thought he was. Here's how they answered him:

28 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

(Mark 8:28 | NIV)

The disciples' replies indicate that a buzz had been growing around Jesus' ministry. "Whoever you are," they say, "the people know you're a man that God is working powerful things through."

Many people have many opinions about Jesus – he's a good teacher, a compassionate historical figure, and an influential religious leader. But these are not the answers that Jesus is after.

He turns the question more directly toward his disciples.

"But what about **you**?" he asked. "Who do **you** say I am?"

(Mark 8:29 | NIV, **emphasis added**)

Jesus is not interested in what the people around you think about him, but who do you say that he is? Peter gets the answer right:

Peter answered, "You are the **Messiah.**"

(Mark 8:29 | NIV, **emphasis added**)

Peter says, "Jesus, you're a king! But, not just any king – you are the king that God has promised to send to us (that's the meaning of the word Messiah). Jesus, you're my king!"

Mark has led us to see that Jesus did not come merely to be a wise counselor, a humble example, or even to forgive us of our sins. Jesus came to establish God's kingdom here on earth.

If we follow Jesus as he means for us to rightly – it means answering this all-important question: **who do you say that I am?**

How do you personally answer Jesus' question: "Who do you say I am?" What leads you to answer the way that you do?

Why do you think this is such an important question for Christians to wrestle with?

GOING TO THE CROSS

DAY 2

31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

(Mark 8:31 | NIV)

Read Mark 8:30–33 to begin your devotions today.

Do you find it strange that right after Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus tells him not to tell anyone? Why do you think that is?

The Jewish people expected that God would send a king to reestablish the throne of God in Israel. It had been promised for centuries, which is what they were waiting for as a people. However, the king they expected would come in power and victory to lead a revolution against the enemies of God in the world.

No one expected a king like Jesus. No one expected a humble king who would go to the cross and die on behalf of his enemies. That's why Jesus' words were so shocking to the disciples:

31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. 32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to **rebuke** him.

(Mark 8:31–32 | NIV, **emphasis added**)

Imagine rebuking Jesus! Peter couldn't fathom a plan for God's promised king that involved him being killed at the hands of his enemies. But Jesus doubles down:

33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." 34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and **take up their cross** and **follow me**."

(Mark 8:33–34 | NIV, **emphasis added**)

"Not only," Jesus says, "am I headed to the cross. But those who are my true disciples will follow me on the way to the cross." Taking up your cross means willingly laying down your life

as a living sacrifice to follow God and for the good of others. It is choosing every day to align yourself with Jesus and go the way of a servant - in every area of your life.

How do you respond to Jesus' calling to follow him to the cross? Is this a hard thing for believers to do? Why or why not?

Where do you sense God calling you to take up your cross and follow him today?

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

DAY 3

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

(Mark 8:34 | NIV)

Read Mark 8:34–38 to begin your devotions today.

After Jesus challenges the disciples to follow him to the cross, he paints a picture of what the way of the cross looks like for his followers. Let's walk through this passage slowly together:

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

(Mark 8:34 | NIV)

With these words, Jesus is calling us to lay down ourselves. It's a call to give up control of our lives and place control in the hands of our Father, like Jesus. As Jesus goes to the cross, he will not fight or stir up a struggle. No, he will go willingly and obediently, trusting in the good plan of God.

Will we do the same? When following after Jesus gets hard - when obeying Jesus gets costly, will we trust in the good plan of our heavenly Father and believe he leads us to life?

35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? 37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

(Mark 8:35–37 | NIV)

Jesus asks a very challenging question: "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul?" We could spend our whole lives accumulating all this world offers. And yet, when this life ends, there is nothing to show for it. What Jesus offers to those who choose to chase after him is a treasure and an inheritance that can never spoil or fade - one that lasts forever (see 1 Peter 1:3–5).

38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

(Mark 8:38 | NIV)

If we want to experience the goodness of God in the world to come, we must not be ashamed to live for him in the world today. Jesus calls those who know him as their true king to live lives of bold, unashamed, and confident hope in him.

Which of the words that Jesus spoke about the way of the cross is most challenging for you? Why do you think that is?

What would it look like for you to be obedient to Jesus in that area today?

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE CHALLENGE: SACRIFICE

Set aside one day this week to challenge yourself to this spiritual discipline.

SACRIFICE

Following Jesus requires sacrifice. This spiritual discipline requires you to go above and beyond to serve God. Get alone with God and pray and ask God how he wants you to be sacrificial in your faith today. Following Jesus was costly for the first disciples. They would have to sacrifice in every area of their lives to live up to the high calling that Jesus placed upon them. When we follow Jesus, sacrifice will be a way of life. To sacrifice is to give up something that we need or our comfort for the sake of someone else.

CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

Pick an option that works best for you, or make up your own.

- 1) Go above and beyond to serve someone in your small group or in need at church. Dig deep to be generous with your time, money, or gift to lift someone else up. Feel free to engage your small group or a close group of friends to help.
- 2) Spend time in prayer for someone else's needs. Ask God for blessing, rescue, or providence for a need on behalf of someone else. Going to God in intercessory prayer is hard work, and God honors these prayer sessions. God loves when his children pray for others.

HELPFUL TIPS TO GET YOU STARTED:

The goal of sacrifice is not to obtain God's favor. Rather, you are recognizing and honoring the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus on your behalf. It's a joy to sacrifice when done with loving motives to merely honor God's sacrifice on your behalf. It will also build your faith as you continue to offer spiritual sacrifices because God will show up.

HEARING FROM GOD THROUGH PRAYER & FASTING

Commit to fast and pray today from the time you wake up until dinner.

START WITH SCRIPTURE:

7 Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" 8 Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

(Mark 9:7-8 | NIV)

- Think of this verse as your food for the next few hours.
- Try to commit as much of it to memory as possible throughout your day.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY:

Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through this short devotion.

Jesus took his closest disciples and went up to a mountain to reveal his full identity to them. He did this so they would have a clear understanding of the magnitude of his kingdom. The disciples looked in on him and were impacted during a moment of worship. They saw Jesus in a more excellent light and heard God's encouraging and loving voice. Worship Jesus today and see him in a more significant light. Hear God's loving voice and listen for your instructions. Worshiping Jesus unlocks all of God's kingdom potential for you.

PRAYER PROMPTS FOR YOUR FAST:

Throughout your day, pray through these prompts. When you feel hungry for physical food, see that as an invitation to feast on God's Word by pausing to reflect and pray.

Ask God to help you see Jesus in all of his glory today, and ask to see him as he really is.

- "Father, help me see Jesus in a greater light. Help my eyes to focus on him only, even in my darkest hour."
- "Father, help me to hear your loving and encouraging voice. Take away anything that competes with your voice in my life."
- "Father, empower me by your Spirit to listen to Jesus. Give me the wisdom to follow your instructions for my life with faith."

***Remember to look ahead to your spiritual discipline challenge for this week and plan out when you will do it.**

JESUS' GLORY

DAY 1

2 After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. 3 His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.

(Mark 9:2-3 | NIV)

Read Mark 9:1-8 to begin your devotions today.

Jesus had a tighter inner circle of three close friends inside the group of twelve disciples: James, Peter, and John. It was these three men whom Jesus invited to the top of the mountain to experience the radiance of his full glory unveiled.

Imagine the scene for just a minute. The three men are alone on a familiar mountain with the man they've spent the last three years closely following. They probably think he was getting away for another quiet night praying to his Father in heaven. But then, something spectacular happens.

Right before their eyes, Jesus's clothes transform until they shine with a brilliant white light that's so bright it's hard to even look at him. And then, unthinkable, there before them stands Moses and Elijah—two of the most infamous figures in Israel's history. These may have been the childhood heroes of James, Peter, and John. It would be like meeting Michael Jordan and LeBron James if you're a basketball fan. Like standing before Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. if you're into history.

Imagine you are the disciples at this moment. What's going through their minds? What do you think they are feeling and experiencing?

SEEING GOD'S GLORY

In the Old Testament, God appeared on a similar mountain, Mount Sinai, in the form of a cloud. He thundered above the Israelites, and they all trembled in awe and fear. Atop that mountain, he met with the leader of his people, Moses. Moses begged to see God's glory - his infinite greatness and unimaginable beauty. God replied:

19 "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence ... 20 But," he said, "you cannot see my face, **for no one may see me and live.**"

(Exodus 33:19-20 | NIV, **emphasis added**)

The glory of God is the radiance of his power, goodness, and holy character. Until Jesus, no one could come into the presence of God without losing their life.

Mark is telling us that now, through Jesus, the glory of God has been unleashed upon the world in a radically new way. Jesus is the glory of God because he is God himself. Hebrews tells us he "is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3 | NIV).

When we encounter Jesus, we discover the majestic glory of God. Take some time today to bask in the glory of Jesus.

Look up the following scriptures in your Bible, and write what you learn about God's glory. In the space below, write which verse speaks to you the strongest and why.

2 Corinthians 3:17-18

Psalm 19

Hebrews 1:1-3

GOING TO THE CROSS

DAY 2

7 Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

(Mark 9:7 | NIV)

Read Mark 9:1-8 to begin your devotions today.

In the middle of this incredible encounter on the mountain-top with Jesus, the three disciples are wrapped up in a cloud, and they hear the voice of the Lord declare:

"This is my Son, whom I love. **Listen to him!**"

(Mark 9:7 | NIV, **emphasis added**)

"Listen to him!" These are the words the Lord speaks to the disciples. Until this point, they have been missing the bigger picture of why Jesus had come. He had already made it plain that he had come to die at the hands of his enemies (see Mark 8:27-31). And he will make similar claims twice more before he goes to the cross

Jesus wants them to really hear what it means for him to be God's King. It means surrendering to and responding to the word of Jesus when he calls us and whatever he calls us to.

LISTENING TO JESUS

Look up the following scriptures in your Bible, and write what you learn about listening to Jesus. In the space below, write out the common themes you see in the verses.

John 10:27

Luke 11:28

James 1:22

Revelation 3:22

God cares far more about what we do with his word than he does about us merely taking it in. He calls us to be doers of the word and not simply hearers.

Truthfully, we could study the Bible for years and know the words of Jesus backward and forward. But if we never put his words into practice by doing what we have heard, we're missing out on one of the most incredible ways to grow into Christlikeness.

The problem for many of us is not that we don't know the words of Jesus (although, for some, it may be). The problem for most of us is that we need to practice what we know daily. We love mercy, but we don't forgive. We want peace, but we won't give our anxieties to Jesus daily. You activate God's word by walking it out in your actions

That's what it means to listen to him genuinely.

Is there something you haven't done that God wants you to do? What would it look like for you to be a doer of God's Word today?

HELP MY UNBELIEF

DAY 3

"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

(Mark 9:24 | NIV)

Read Mark 9:14–29 to begin your devotions today.

Sometimes life is incredibly bewildering and overwhelming. We've all had seasons of great pain, confusion, and difficulty. That may be where you find yourself today.

I hope not. But life often brings trouble to our doorstep. If you're not experiencing it today, you will find it in the future. If you are in that place today, maybe this episode in the gospel of Mark can give you some guidance and hope.

Read Mark 9:14–29 again in your Bible. Read it slowly. Make a note of what is happening. What is the problem? How does Jesus respond to the problem?

DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE?

The question of this passage is the declaration Jesus makes to the father of the boy who was suffering. Take a look again:

21 Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. 22 "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." 23 "If you can?" said Jesus. **"Everything is possible for one who believes."**

(Mark 9:21–23 | NIV, **emphasis added**)

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE CHALLENGE: WORSHIP

Set aside one day this week to challenge yourself to this spiritual discipline.

WORSHIP

The discipline of worship is to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul. We do this by focusing our attention on God's character. Worshipping God helps us to draw near to God as we dwell on who he is and his great love for us. We can worship God by praying, singing, and reflecting on all that he has done on our behalf. As we do this, we will see that our God delivers us, is patient with us, and always wants our best. We are amazed at how different he is from the world around us. We will follow Christ more boldly when our perspectives about God are correct.

CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

Pick an option that works best for you, or make up your own.

- 1) Write down your three favorite attributes about God (ex., he is merciful, truthful, and good). Spend more time writing down why these attributes are important to you. Then offer God a prayer of praise because of these attributes.

Example: "God, I praise you for your mercy. Your mercy means the world to me in a world of revenge."

- 2) Listen to a few of your favorite worship songs and reflect on what they teach you about God. Sing along with these worship songs in adoration of God's character.
- 3) Read Mark 9:1-13 three times slowly. Then write a few paragraphs about why this passage moves you to worship him.

HELPFUL TIPS TO GET YOU STARTED:

The attitude of worship is to honor God with your whole heart. Our heart is reserved for God alone. Worshipping God as a follower of Christ cleanses our hearts from ungodly ambitions, possessions, or unhealthy relationships. If you have never worshiped God alone, you can easily lose focus. If this happens, refocus and pick up where you left off. Our God is a graceful God - he will meet you where you are.

HEARING FROM GOD THROUGH PRAYER & FASTING

Commit to fast and pray today from the time you wake up until dinner.

START WITH SCRIPTURE:

43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

(Mark 10:43-45 | NIV)

- Think of this verse as your food for the next few hours.
- Try to commit as much of it to memory as possible throughout your day.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY:

Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through this short devotion.

Following Jesus requires that we redefine a few things. One definition that needs to be redefined by all followers of Jesus is the word greatness. The world defines greatness with a significant emphasis on self and self-achievement. Followers of Jesus display greatness through our love for others. We must be spiritually healthy ourselves as we serve others. The love of Jesus guides our greatness. As we read in the scripture above, Jesus defined greatness by stating his intention to give his life as a ransom for many. Moment by moment, we die to ourselves and love others, trusting that God will fill us up with his Spirit.

PRAYER PROMPTS FOR YOUR FAST:

Throughout your day, pray through these prompts. When you feel hungry for physical food, see that as an invitation to feast on God’s Word by pausing to reflect and pray.

Ask God to help you pursue true greatness in your life today.

- “Lord, keep me from pursuing greatness by the world’s definition. Help me not to be selfish. Instead, help me to trust that you will fill me up as I serve others.”
- “Lord, help me to follow your greatness by loving those around me. I need strength to have the right perspective and the spiritual maturity to walk out this new definition of greatness.”
- “Lord, I will trust you to fill me as I love others. I will trust that loving others will not deplete me but replenish me. Give me wisdom for living this out in my life.”

***Remember to look ahead to your spiritual discipline challenge for this week and plan out when you will do it.**

LIKE A CHILD

DAY 1

15 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

(Mark 10:15 | NIV)

Read Mark 10:13–16 to begin your devotions today.

In the episode you just read, people (perhaps parents and grandparents) were bringing children to Jesus for him to heal, bless, and care for them. The disciples of Jesus didn't think he should be bothered with such a seemingly minor task, so they began to rebuke him for this apparent waste of his time (silly disciples, will they ever catch on?).

But Jesus took this opportunity to explain an essential principle for kingdom living:

14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God **like a little child** will never enter it.”

(Mark 10:14-15 | NIV, **emphasis added**)

God has called you and me to embrace a child-like faith if we are going to follow Jesus. Let's take a minute and explore another Bible passage that talks about child-like faith:

Read through Matthew 18:1–7 below and record what you learn about child-like faith in the space below. Make a note of any common themes you see in Matthew 18 and Mark 10.

1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2 He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. 3 And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

6 “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. 7 Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!

(Matthew 18:1–7 | NIV)

FAITH LIKE A CHILD

Child-like faith is the faith that believes God can do anything that he says he will do. It's the confidence that a child has in his parents. Perhaps when you were a kid, you thought your dad had superpowers (maybe you still do). Perhaps you imagined he was the neighborhood's strongest or most intelligent dad.

This is the kind of child-like confidence that Jesus wants us to have in our heavenly Father. But, unlike a child who believes in their earthly father despite his obvious limitations, we can have confidence that our heavenly Father really is the strongest, wisest, and most loving dad in the universe!

Would you describe your faith as child-like? What would it look like for you to embrace child-like faith today?

SURRENDER

DAY 2

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

(Mark 10:21 | NIV)

Read Mark 10:17–31 to begin your devotions today.

Jesus is headed toward Jerusalem, and a man approaches him. The gospel of Matthew tells us that he was a young man, maybe late twenties or early thirties. The gospel of Luke tells us that he was a political leader and a local ruler.

You might imagine a good-looking, wealthy, and affluent person. And he falls on his knees before Jesus:

17 As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”

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

(Mark 10:17-20 | NIV)

You can feel the man’s pain in the passage. He’s about to learn that following Jesus would cost him quite a lot. More perhaps than he is willing to give up.

But watch Jesus in response to this man:

“Jesus looked at him and **loved him.**”

(Mark 10:21 | NIV, **emphasis added**)

Don’t you love that? Aren’t you grateful today that Jesus is incredibly patient with people who don’t get it or are struggling to adjust their lives to his kingdom?

I want you to know today that Jesus loves you. His desire for you to live a simple, content, generous life is not to rob you of some earthly pleasure. It is because he so desperately loves you and wants you to have a forever treasure in his kingdom.

43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

(Mark 10:43-44 | NIV)

Read Mark 10:32-45 to begin your devotions today.

Whether we will admit it or not, we all have the desire to be great. We want to do something significant, make an impact, and leave a legacy.

The Bible teaches that God wants us to lead a life of greatness. He wants you to be a great spouse, parent, or grandparent. He wants you to be a great disciple and your church to be a great one.

The problem is that we often have a misguided view of greatness. The world thinks of great people as those with the most power, influence, and achievements. This is what Jesus was talking about when he said:

“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.”

(Mark 10:42 | NIV)

Jesus has a different view of greatness in the kingdom's economy. If you're going to live an extraordinary life, you'll have to let Jesus define greatness for you.

GREAT PEOPLE SERVE PEOPLE

Jesus defines greatness as the measure to which you serve the people around you. What we're going to discover today is that **great people serve people**.

43 Not so with you. Instead, **whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant**, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

(Mark 10:43-44 | NIV, **emphasis added**)

Jesus is clear: **if you want to become great, become a servant.**

We know this to be true. The people in your life who have had the most significant impact on you are the people who have invested in you the most. For some, that's a mentor who invested in your marriage when you first started. For others, it's a friend who poured into your children like they were your own—Someone who was present for those significant moments in their lives. Some of us think of those people who showed up for us when we were in the middle of one of life's storms—the ones who brought encouragement, kind words, and a shoulder to lean on.

Who comes to mind when you think of Someone who embodies Jesus's definition of greatness? What makes you think of that person?

BE PART OF SOMETHING GREAT

When you choose to serve, God invites you to be part of something great.

The Bible calls King David a man after God's own heart. One of David's many claims to fame is his defeat of a giant named Goliath. But you should know David's greatness didn't come from merely winning the battle - it was actually something much more insignificant that positioned him for that great moment.

David's father had tasked David with the menial duty of taking food out to his brothers on the battlefield (see 1 Samuel 17:17-18). David could have said no or been envious of his brothers, but instead, he said yes to serving them. And because David said yes to being a great servant, God positioned him to be a part of something great!

When you say yes to the role of a servant, it's an invitation from God to be a part of something special. That's why Jesus said the greatest among you will be a servant!

Who is God calling you to serve today? Someone in your family? At your workplace? Maybe even in your church?

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE CHALLENGE: SERVICE

Set aside one day this week to challenge yourself to this spiritual discipline.

SERVICE

The discipline of service reminds followers of Christ that we are called to be servants. Serving is more than just something we do. It's who we are. We are called to not be like the world and demand service from others. Jesus taught his followers to define their greatness by the way they serve others. Service should be done in humility and with loving motivation. Jesus, the Son of God, washed the feet of his disciples. We follow his great example by serving others because of God's love for them. Living a life of service is rewarding and satisfying.

CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

Pick an option that works best for you, or make up your own.

- 1) Serve someone by helping them with something. This could be offering to help do chores, providing childcare, or asking someone what would be helpful to them.
- 2) Help someone who is in need. Provide help that is appropriate and meets the real needs of those who are hurting. People that struggle with food, clothes, and shelter should be a priority. By serving these needs, you are recognizing their dignity and are being the hands and feet of Jesus.
- 3) Donate or seek out serving opportunities at an organization that helps other people.

HELPFUL TIPS TO GET YOU STARTED:

Spend time considering Jesus' service on your behalf. Think about how he humbled himself to serve you and let his service to you be your inspiration. When we serve, we keep it simple. Small things done with great love will produce kingdom fruit.



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