

REACH GATHER GROW

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PREFACE

Matthew 28:19-20 is referred to as the Great Commission. It is the last two verses of the book of Matthew. Jesus has already risen from the dead, and He gets the disciples together for some final words. It is a coach's last pep talk as the players enter the arena for a big game. He says, ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

It is these verses that are the basis for who we are as the Church: The Church exists to glorify God by reaching the world, gathering with the saints, and growing in the Word.

This mission seems quite clear from Jesus' words:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," (glorify God by reaching the world)

"baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," (glorify God by gathering with the saints)

"teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (glorify God by growing in the Word).

This process is not a straight line with an ending point. It is more like a spiral as we reach, gather, grow we should then want to be reaching more of the world, gathering, growing, and so on.

Reach Gather Grow consists of four study guides for personal or group discussion and twenty-four devotions covering the mission of the Church. These help remind the believer to focus on essentials and listen for their calling by God.



CHAPTER 1

IREACH

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

I was raised with 20/15 vision. It was such a gift. Slowly, the eyesight started to diminish, and my arms were getting too short as I held the paper further and further away. At the age of forty, reading glasses were appreciated. I now wear a contact only in my left eye that helps with reading and seeing things that are close. I can wear the contact for thirty days without ever having to clean it. Science and technology have sure helped in a lot of ways.

Have you had eye surgery or wear corrective lenses? If so, when did you start?

John chapter 9 contains the story of Jesus healing a man who was born blind. Verses 1-7 describe the miracle.

“As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’ Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud and said to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.”

How long was the man blind?

How would he take care of himself? What did his daily routine look like?

Do you think there is significance in how the miracle was performed and that Jesus sent the man to go and wash?

How would you have felt during the whole ordeal if you were the man?

As John chapter 9 continues, the man who was blind continues to get a clearer view of who Jesus is. Four key phrases divide this section.

1. ***"The man called Jesus."***

Verses 8-12 read, ***"The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some said, 'It is he.' Others said, 'No, but he is like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' So they said to him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'"***

What does the fact that the people did not recognize the “beggar” imply?

How did the man describe the one who healed him?

In reaching people with the Gospel, sometimes we have to help them realize that Jesus existed. They need to realize He was a man who actually lived on earth. This lends itself to the topic of whether He was a liar, lunatic, or the Lord. Some like to make the distinctions as a man, myth, or the Messiah.

What do these phrases mean?

2. ***“He is a prophet.”***

Most people acknowledge that a man named Jesus existed. Some people and even religions will admit that Jesus was even more than just a man as they refer to Him as a prophet. Verses 13-23 record some interesting dialogues.

“They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, ‘He put mud on my

eyes, and I washed, and I see.’ Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?’ And there was a division among them. So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’ His parents answered, ‘We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.’ (His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.) Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him.’”

I love it when people actually search to figure out who Jesus is. A discussion is better than debate. As they argue whether the Christ would break the Sabbath while acknowledging that he performed a miracle, the man simply tells his story. There are times when our simple story of what Jesus did for us is more effective than deep theology.

What was the punishment for anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Christ?

What “punishment” is there today for anyone who confesses Jesus to be the Christ?

3. ***“God does not listen to sinners.”***

The theologians and scholars of the time were arguing with an uneducated beggar, and I believe they lost the debate. They could not refute his simple claim, ***“One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”***

Verses 24-33 continue the story, ***“So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, ‘Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.’ He answered, ‘Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’ They said to him, ‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’ He answered them, ‘I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?’ And they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.’ The man answered, ‘Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’ They answered him, ‘You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?’ And they cast him out.”***

This story has so much irony. The blind man is the only one who could see the Messiah. Everyone else appears blinded. The ones who spent years studying and teaching the mystery of the Messiah were taught by the illiterate man.

What is the main argument of this passage?

Were the Jews in this story actually seeking truth?

How can this relate to today?

4. ***“Lord, I believe.”***

This chapter ends with such excitement. It is always a joy to watch someone give their life to the Lord. Verses 35-41 end the chapter as the man truly sees the Light, ***“Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshiped him. Jesus said, ‘For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, ‘Are we also blind?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind,***

you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains.'"

What was the man's immediate response upon believing in Jesus?

What should be the next steps once someone gives their life to the Lord?

It appears this part of the journey was all covered in one day. It is not always that quick, but the process can be similar. Help people through the process. Creation can lead to a Creator. The next questions would be whether or not the Creator still has an interest in His creation and if He wants to have a relationship with it. That brings the discussion to Jesus.

"And now let me address all of you,
high and low, rich and poor, one with another,
to accept of mercy and grace while it is offered to you;
Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation;
and will you not accept it, now it is offered unto you?"
George Whitefield, Preacher and Evangelist

TESTIMONY

MATEAS STACK

REACH, DEVOTION 1

Mateas Stack

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, those who are called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28

Long before I knew this verse existed, my mother ingrained the gist of it into the brain of her four kids, “God has a plan.” Quite honestly, I had no idea who God was or why in moments of trial she said this; quickly I classified it as a cliché.

That sounds like a decision made by a bitter old person, but I can assure you I came to that conclusion at age seven – when my father unexpectedly passed away. I recall my mom collecting us in her arms and only saying those four words repeatedly. I was immensely confused and angered by the confidence she had in that statement and remained that way as we relearned how to be a family.

In the midst of moving and finding a new normal, I would hear *her phrase* and think, “Is she not paying attention?” I questioned her as she began dragging us to church, a place where more weirdos shared that phrase. Out of respect, I went along with the weirdness, until life’s deleterious fist struck again. This time my grandfather was taken by cancer and my oldest brother in murder. It became the ugliest time of my life.

During this time, my mom consistently brought us to church. I hated it. I hated coming into a room, as my life unraveled, to a guy screaming excitedly about God and His Son, Jesus, being awesome. Nothing made sense, I took everything and processed it through a lens that

REACH DEVOTION 1

was angry, broken, and hurt. I hardened my heart and distorted God into someone maleficent. Despite my pleas, my mother still made me go.

Over the next span of time, God softened my heart, and I invited Jesus into my life at age ten. I still was not sure what that meant exactly, but I knew He was supposed to help me and I began feeling a change.

After this, I became a Sunday Christian with no deeper growth. I ignored the change I felt and kept unhealed pain close to my heart; nevertheless, God pursued me. On March 7, 2015, He won, and I truly began to see Jesus and His love for me. I was baptized the next week and have since begun living out my faith.

Today, I am pursuing full-time ministry. There are days I struggle to find God's truth in the midst of my feelings, but He never fails to meet me where I am at and take me in the direction I need to go. Romans 8:28 is no longer a cliché or a source of anger, but has become a beacon of clarity knowing that whatever hits me is going to be worked together for good. Rarely do I know how, but I know it is worked to bring us closer to Jesus and the purpose He has brought to our lives.

TESTIMONY

JOYCE LYMAN

REACH, DEVOTION 2

Joyce Lyman

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 6:23

What do you say about someone who has been in church their whole life? As it turns out, and as I have learned, God writes everyone's story differently. I have been attending The River Church since I was about eight. It was during my days in Awana that I accepted Jesus as my Savior. I then decided to get baptized at the same time as my cousin, with my uncle baptizing me. Having all of this happen at such a young age sort of hinders me from knowing what life was like before knowing Jesus. I continued to stay in all of the kid's programs, expanding my knowledge of the Bible, little by little.

Looking back, I can see how well God took care of my sister and me through my family's struggles and as we went into middle school and high school. I was always one to keep my feelings to myself, but then God showed me how to express my emotions through music. He allowed me to participate in the choir for seven years, until graduation, which gave me opportunities I would never have received otherwise. During that time, God also worked through others to mentor me and prepare me for leading worship in the church. I have such an indescribable feeling of gratitude and zeal towards the Lord's work and His people. It is such a joy to me to know that I belong to a big, loving family that truly cares for me.

At this point in my life, I feel as though God has called me to work in worship ministry. Where? When? How? Those are the questions I will see answered in God's timing. With the faith, I have come to

REACH DEVOTION 2

know and the trust I have built up, I pray that I am able to follow what God has in store.

“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” John 4:24

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’” Hebrews 12:28-29 (NIV)

TESTIMONY

AARON LARVICK

REACH, DEVOTION 3

Aaron Larvick

I do not remember the first time I came to church, but I am pretty sure that my family was going to Faith Baptist before I was born. I grew up as your pretty average church kid, going to Sunday school, VBS, camp, and the rest of your typical things. I was baptized when I was six, but I did not completely get it. I knew that Jesus had died for me and that if I asked Him to save me from my sin than He would take me to Heaven. That was my mindset all the way into middle school.

However, near the end of middle school, I became part of a Christian leadership school called Teenpact. After participating for a while as a student, I began working as a staffer. Once I was placed in a position of higher influence, I realized something, "How can I be pouring into people that need Jesus if I have made my walk with Him about myself?" That is the thing, you cannot. At this point, I had to lower myself and have a relationship with Christ that was not about me getting into Heaven but was about living a life worthy of my calling and bringing Him glory through every aspect of who I am.

As I have now spent two years of my life traveling around with Teenpact, I have seen the Lord work in ways that I did not know was possible. I have seen people healed from conditions that they were born with that have never been healed before, prayers answered in incredible ways, and students at a young age realize that we all have purpose and direction that is rooted completely in Christ.

Through this growth, I have felt a calling on my life to pursue full-time ministry specifically focusing on music and worship ministry. I have

REACH DEVOTION 3

placed my life in His hands and His control. I am no longer living for a fun time with like-minded people but rather a God who deserves every ounce of me. I believe, "Anything less than everything I am is not enough for Him."

"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." 1 Corinthians 2:2-5

TESTIMONY

JOHN RIGG

REACH, DEVOTION 4

John Rigg | *Assistant to the Reach Pastor*

Music has always had an impact on me throughout my entire life. Whether it was listening to my mother's 45 collections or tuning into my favorite station on my transistor radio, music moved me, and it altered my thinking. I even spent a short time playing guitar in a garage band as a teenager entertaining people at weddings and special events, and it was who I was. So, it was no surprise to me later in life, that God would use music to reach me, to rescue me.

I was 40 years old, and the life that I had created for myself was not working out as I had planned. My wife of 19 years, had just announced to me that she no longer wanted to be married and was leaving. We had two sons, teenagers at the time, and my fear was that this was going to blow up their world, and it did, along with my own. During this time of great confusion, I constantly evaluated my life to somehow figure out where I had gone wrong. In my mind, I was a good man, husband, and father, yet everything was falling apart, I was seeking answers. So, like so many others that self-guide their lives, I made wrong decisions, developed unhealthy friendships, and patronized places I had no business being in; a bad situation was getting worse.

One day a friend, seeing the state of my life, suggested that I try attending church. He invited me to tag along with him and his family on Christmas, although he did not regularly attend himself, he said it could help me. In my mind, it could not hurt, so I went. Over the following weeks, I went alone again and again. Each week the Pastor would talk about the love of God and the great lengths that Jesus had gone to ensure that my eternity would be spent with Him in Heaven.

But I already knew that, at least in my head. You see, as a young boy our mother would take my brother and I to church most weeks, sign us up for Vacation Bible School and church camps, yet the love of God was only knowledge to me. That is why at age 16, I left the church and began my journey of making my own way in the world.

So here it was, years later, I sat in church listening to the worship band and watched the words on the screen. God, knowing the impact that music has on me, spoke to me. The lyrics that day were from a Matt Redman song entitled Heart of Worship.

*I'm coming back to the heart of worship
And it's all about you,
All about you, Jesus
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it
When it's all about you,
It's all about you, Jesus*

It was at that moment that the power of the Gospel message that I had heard my entire life, left my head and pierced my heart forever. The life that I had been living was a life without God, and it was all about me and what I had made of my life. In an instant, I saw my sin for what it was, disobedience. Now broken even further than I thought possible, I confessed my sin as I sang along with the band, "I'm sorry Lord for the thing I've made it, when it's all about you." God heard me, and through the sacrifice of Jesus, forgave and saved me from myself. I now live in the power of a changed life, a life that once was distant from God, but now is drawn in by the realization of His grace, and relentless pursuit of me and the entire human race.

Romans 1:16 says, ***"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."***

TESTIMONY

TAMELA RIGG

REACH, DEVOTION 5

Tamela Rigg | *Beauty for Ashes* Director

I vaguely remember my early childhood days. We moved around a lot due to my father being a musician. My parents divorced when I was in fifth grade, my father received custody of me, and my mom received custody of my brother. From fifth grade through ninth grade I moved 27 different times; therefore relationships and friendships were difficult and have been throughout my life. My father had remarried numerous times, and during one marriage I was exposed to the Gospel and Billy Graham.

In ninth grade, the court awarded my mother custody of me. This was the first stable home I had until I graduated. I also had an Aunt that showed the love of Jesus and gave constant unconditional love throughout my childhood. But during this time, I was exposed to pornography which affected my view of a relationship the way God would have it.

I married at 19 and thirteen years later had a very difficult divorce. I was confused, depressed, and had suicidal thoughts. I was successful in a career and had all the luxuries in this world but was not happy. I always prayed and knew of God but did not have a relationship with Him. I knew I needed to take care of some childhood issues before I could begin to heal and to be in a healthy relationship. I had been to numerous therapists in my past, but this time God was in it and provided an amazing lady who helped me. I started to attend the River Church in Holly, and every word was a pierced knife into my heart and what I was feeling. I would cry every time I went to church but then saw God so tenderly begin to heal me. My father passed away in 2005, and at that time many more childhood

memories came back to me including sexual and emotional abuse. This explained why I did not remember most of my childhood. God has been molding, healing, and changing me every day. I am grateful that He saw this strayed sheep and constantly pulled me in and held me close to heal me.

Matthew 18:12 says, ***“What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?”***

There is an amazing story of how God weaved my new husband into my life. God gave me someone who would tenderly and humbly help me love again the way God would want it. God graciously heard every word I prayed for a husband. We have diligently sought to be obedient to God's calling in serving Him in many ways.

Ephesians 3:20-21 says, ***“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”***

REACH

REACH, DEVOTION 6

Chuck Lindsey | *Reach Pastor*

We say the word “reach,” but what does that actually mean? For me, a picture is helpful. When I hear the word “reach” my mind immediately sees the Olympic runner stretching forward with everything he has as he crosses the finish line. On the heels of that, I see the picture of someone who has dropped something just out of reach, who leans and stretches to try to get that item. This is Reach. It means that we use whatever methods we can, to go beyond the walls of our churches, to share the Gospel with lost people. We want to reach them. Reach is “leaning forward” (if you will); it is a collective “stretching out” to do what Jesus told us to do, **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”** (Mark 16:15 NKJV).

If I were to try to condense a “how to” on reaching lost people, it would come down to two main things: Knowing the Gospel and loving people.

Know the Gospel - Do you know the Gospel? In short, the Gospel is the message of what God has done to save lost people. Do you know it? Can you explain it? Can you walk through it from memory? If not, I would encourage you to practice this! It might be an obvious statement, but how can we expect God to use us to share a message we do not know and cannot explain?

A good place to start is by memorizing what is perhaps the best-known verse in the Bible, John 3:16. The whole of the Gospel is encapsulated in this single verse. There we see the love of God for sinful humanity, a love that caused Him to send His Son to a cross for our sins so that we could be with Him forever. The best part, it is

simply by belief (not by works!). Do this, grab a sheet of paper (or your phone notes app) and write the verse down at the top of a piece of paper, read it, read it out loud, and then read it phrase by phrase. Next, write down each phrase in the verse (***“For God,” “so loved,” “the world”***) and what it means (Who loved? God did. Who did He love? The world/people. What did He do? “He sent His Son”). Next, ask a friend or loved one to let you talk through it a few times with them. This will really help to cement it in your mind. Have your friend “quiz” you, ask them to throw one of the phrases at you (i.e. ***“that whosoever”***) and explain it. Peter said it this way, ***“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear”*** (1 Peter 3:15 NKJV). Once you are able to walk through it confidently, you are equipped.

The next step is to love people – I am not talking about a “yeah, I love people” kind of thing. I am talking about a deep, broken-hearted, cry from your heart to reach the lost. This is an absolute game changer. John Hyde demonstrated what I am talking about when he famously prayed, “Give me souls God or I die!” The person that genuinely prays this is going to find God using them to do what they are asking Him to do. How do we come to love people more than we love ourselves, our comfort, or our priorities? It happens, first and foremost, by a humble, repentant confession to God that we do not do these things. It is an admission to our Lord that I do not love people the way I should and asking for His forgiveness for this. That is step one. Nothing happens until that does. Next, we must ask Him to fill us with His Spirit, for the Scriptures tell us that the “fruit of the Holy Spirit is love.” Ask Him to fill you with a supernatural love for those who are lost in your life. Next, very practically (do not tune out here) begin praying for the people He brings to mind. Pray that their eyes will be opened, their heart will be softened, and that they will turn to Jesus. Pray daily, specifically, and faithfully. As you do this,

you will see ***“the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us”*** (Romans 5:5 NKJV).

Lastly, we must actually take a step! I have heard a saying for many years now, and it goes like this: “Share the Gospel, and if necessary use words.” I hate that saying! It is annoying because it is used as an excuse to only “live out the Gospel” rather than actually sharing the Gospel. How about both? There comes a moment when we must open our mouths, trust God for the words, and walk someone through what Jesus Christ has done for them. The person who has taken the time to equip themselves with the Gospel and is passionately praying that God will use them, will find that He still uses people to rescue people. Just consider for a moment what it will mean to you to be in Heaven and have our Lord Jesus point to one person, two people, a family member, or a crowd, and say, “They are here because you asked Me to use you. They are here because you prayed. They are here because you shared My message with them.” It will be joy eternal!



CHAPTER 2

GATHER

TOMMY YOUNGQUIST

Why does The River Church call weekend meeting times “gatherings?” Have you ever wondered that? Why not call it “Church” or a “service?”

What did you call a “gathering” when you were young?

I grew up going to a “service” at “Church.” That is just the way it was. I never considered the implications behind the verbiage. It is good to take a second to dissect that phrase. What is a service at Church?

The word “service” (when referencing a service time) means “a ceremony of religious worship according to a prescribed time” (*Webster’s Dictionary*). Is that what God’s Church means? Is it just having a prescribed time to worship Him? Psalm 34:1 says, ***“I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.”***

Likewise, Hebrews 13:15 states, ***“Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.”***

So, should we prescribe one time a week to worship our God? No, we should continually worship Him throughout every moment of every day. The next word to examine is “Church.” Paul says something very interesting in his letter to the church of Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 3:9, Paul says, ***“For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.”***

I want to encourage you to find this Scripture and read the verses before and after it. What does the Spirit urge Paul to write about the Church and its members?

God, through Paul, painted a perfect picture of what the Church is. The Church is not a what; it is a who. Believers in Christ are the Church, His people. We the saints are His body, the Church. God's building has nothing to do with a structure, but everything to do with the body.

Romans 12:4-5 says, ***“For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”***

River Church, we do not go to Church; we are the Church. Each of us has different jobs to do within the Church. We do not all have the same skill set, but with many diverse skills sets, we become an unstoppable expansion apparatus in God's Kingdom.

What are some different skill sets?

So, why do we call them “gatherings?” We simply call our weekend meeting times gatherings because that is exactly what it is, a gathering of multiple members of God's Church who worship Him with their lives on a continual basis. We meet together to encourage each other, to stir each other up to good works, and to allow God's leader

to speak truth into our lives. When we hear that truth, it motivates us to dig deeper and find out more about our amazing God so we can become more like Him. When we sing together, it refreshes our souls and refocuses our commitment to God, our spouse, and our kids. We give the Holy Spirit the opportunity to convict our souls through God's leader, and that conviction compels us to change for the better.

Now, I would like to switch gears and ask two questions.

1. Why do you come to a gathering (your answer may have multiple reasons)?

If you are thinking about taking the high road with these answers, please do not. Answer honestly. When I asked myself this question, I had several answers: see my friends, have fun, listen to the band, and others. But are my reasons selfish? I want to challenge you to ask the Spirit to prepare your heart when you come to a gathering. Ask Him to show you why you are at that gathering. We need to know the biblical reasons for being at a gathering. Let Him work in and through you.

2. Do you get excited to come to a gathering or is it an obligation that you have to fulfill so your conscience does not eat at you that week? Describe the thoughts that run through your head on Saturday night or Sunday morning.

I am going to end this study guide with asking you a few more questions followed by an example.

Does your family love what you love? Explain.

All my kids will be Tigers' fans. This will not happen by accident. I grew up as a Tigers' fan. I want my kids to be Tigers' fans, too! They will see me get excited when the Tigers are playing. I have bought them Tigers' gear and will continue to do so. When my kids are old enough, I will get each of them a Miguel Cabrera #24 jersey. Why would I go through so much trouble to get my kids to like the Tigers? The main reason is not that I want them to be Tigers' fans, but because I want them to love what I love and enjoy what I enjoy. As their father, I literally have the power to shape what my kids love! God has called me, as their father, to use the power and influence He has given me to impress the hearts of my children with a love for Jesus. God has given you that power as well.

What do you enjoy because of your parents? What do your children enjoy because of you?

I asked myself those questions. How am I using my influence and excitement? What is important? Will my children see me get more excited when a Tigers' game is coming up on TV or when we are getting ready to go to a gathering? What message is sent if I excitedly jumped out of my seat at a home run, but I look like I am just going through the motions when I sing praise to God? About what does your family see you get most passionate?

Those are the things they know are most important to you. Is gathering with multiple members of God's Church, who worship Him with their lives on a continual basis, important to you? Do you get excited about it?

"A man ought to live so that everybody knows he is a Christian...
and most of all, his family ought to know."

Dwight L. Moody

“TURN YOUR EYES UPON JESUS”

GATHER, DEVOTION 1

Pat MacDermaid

“**T**o gather” means to come together, or can refer to an assembly. We gather together for many reasons: a family get together, to work, serve, study God’s Word, pray, and worship God.

God wants and delights in our praise and worship. Did you ever wonder why He gave us two voices, one to speak and one to sing? Now some will say that God gave some people better singing voices than others, and this might be true to our ears. But I think God listens to our hearts. He listens with His heart. If you cannot make yourself sing in public, try speaking the words of praise to yourself. He will hear you.

All through the Bible, there is Scripture about singing to God. Did you know that the Hebrew title for the Book of Psalms is Book of Praise? Psalm 96:1 says, **“Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth!”** Psalm 147:1 adds, **“Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting.”** Psalm 118:14 continues, **“The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.”** These are just a small example of the Bible telling us to sing to our God. The Bible is full of Scripture telling us to do just that. I think it is safe to say that God wants us to sing to Him.

I love the worship in song part of our gatherings. It gets us prepared for the message. I love all kinds of worship music. I enjoy the old hymns and the contemporary music we praise God with today.

Do you have any favorite hymns from long ago? I do. I think everyone knows and loves *“Amazing Grace.”* There are also some other

GATHER DEVOTION 1

hymns I remember and like: *"I Surrender All"* (words by Judson Van de Venter, 1896), *"Anywhere with Jesus"* (1887), and *"Abide with Me"* (1847). One old hymn I am very fond of is *"Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus"* (1922). The words of the song say it all for me.

*O soul, are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?
There's light for a look at the Savior,
And life more abundant and free.*

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.*

*His Word shall not fail you, He promised;
Believe Him, and all will be well;
Then go to a world that is dying,
His perfect salvation to tell!*

The words of this hymn tell us Jesus loves us, do not worry, you are not alone, He will light your way, and He keeps His word. Believe in Him and get out there and tell people about salvation.

There have been beautiful songs in every age. No matter if you worship like you are at home in the shower or you whisper the words, God hears you.

HIGHLIGHT

GATHER, DEVOTION 2

Pat Bedell

When I finally decided to give myself to Christ and accept Him as my Savior, there were a series of eye-opening events that brought my faith to life in a spectacular way.

Before being a believer wholeheartedly, I would attend church services and maybe learn a thing or two for the week. It was not necessarily something I would practice, but it gave me a little more Bible knowledge than the week before. After I became a follower of Christ, services transformed into gatherings for me. I was not at church to be “serviced” but to equip myself for the week to share Jesus. I was at gatherings to meet new people who became family and someone with whom to sharpen and develop. It gave me an opportunity to give back to God who has graciously given so much to me.

For as long as I can remember, I have been performing music. Whether I am playing for family, friends, or as part of the worship team, it is a huge part of who I am. Prior to being saved, selfishly wanting to be the best musician and having the best performance was my goal. It was something that was mine, it was something at which I was exceptional, and it made me feel like I was an icon of any event where I was playing (what a tool). Music is what sparked my interest in being at church. I heard a song, and it sounded very enticing, so I listened intently to learn the progressions of the song and maybe listen to a few lyrics. All I would do during worship time was listening to the progressions to see if I could play the song. Things got flipped and turned upside down when I became a believer. It was an extensive and exhausting process to humble myself before the

GATHER DEVOTION 2

Lord and give Him credit for my talents. It was also daunting to look at my behavior and ego to see that I should not receive any credit, but all the glory needs to go to God. One of the greatest gifts ever given to me was music, and I thank God for all of the blessings I have received. The greatest transformation, besides humbling myself, was that now I pay attention and study the lyrics before learning a song. I can study the artist and what the song means to them and how they were inspired to share their story. I can then learn from and see what perspective the artist learned it which gives me insight on that particular subject.

The gathering is now probably the greatest highlight of my week. Not only do I get to learn the Word of God, but I also get to do so with the friends that I call family. I get to serve the Lord with my gifts and talents. I am also spiritually filled to go and spread the Word of God and love others as were called to do. Gatherings have grown on me so much that it is now a lifestyle of which I can be proud.

MY LIVING HOPE

GATHER, DEVOTION 3

Kyle Wendel | Children & Student's Director

Summer Camp is always my favorite time of the year. I absolutely love spending the week investing in student's lives and showing how the Gospel can transform their lives. This past summer was special. God was just doing some amazing things, and it was just incredible to see and be a part of it. I think one of the things that made this camp so special was the worship. The band just did an incredible job, and you could feel their passion for the Lord in their songs. One of the nights the band was wrapping up before Pastor Jayson was to come out and preach to the students. As the band started to walk off the stage, we heard the crowd chanting, "One more song! One more song!" It gave me goosebumps hearing that. This was before the sermon was even preached! It was so cool seeing a group of students wanting to just worship in song together. There was such a power to it. Seeing students just want to worship together in a song was just something else. There is a certain power when we gather together to worship our Lord. Words just cannot describe it. You can just feel the Holy Spirit moving.

One of my favorite songs from that camp was "Living Hope." Some of the lyrics go like this:

*Then came the morning that sealed the promise
Your buried body began to breathe
Out of the silence, the Roaring Lion
Declared the grave has no claim on me
Then came the morning that sealed the promise
Your buried body began to breathe
Out of the silence, the Roaring Lion*

*Declared the grave has no claim on me
Jesus, yours is the victory, whoa!*

*Hallelujah, praise the One who set me free
Hallelujah, death has lost its grip on me
You have broken every chain
There's salvation in Your name
Jesus Christ, my living hope*

I found this song to be so powerful for worship. I highly recommend going and listening to the whole song because all of the lyrics are just amazing. However, these few verses really stuck out to me. Just think about that morning that Jesus rose from the grave. His body laid in silence in the tomb. Then the next moment Jesus began to breathe again. At this moment the promise of His return was fulfilled. Jesus came out of the grave no longer as a meek human, but instead, as a roaring lion, powerful and majestic. At this moment Jesus declared that the grave had no claim on Him, you, or me. Death and sin can no longer call me their own. Instead, Jesus said I am His! The victory is His! He has defeated it all!

Now all I can do is sing the next couple of verses in full assurance that Jesus set me free from my bondage in sin and death. Death no longer has any hold on me. My salvation comes in Jesus' name. He is my living hope! It gives me chills just writing these words down. I am awed just thinking about the morning that He rose. That morning has forever changed my life. How thankful I am that Jesus rose from the grave and saved me from my sin. He proved that He is who He said He was. He showed that He is more powerful than any sin could ever be.

FROM THE HEART

GATHER, DEVOTION 4

Donna Fox | *Assistant to the Growth Pastor*

I love to sing worship music and praise God! Every aspect of worship has a special meaning to me. I am honored to pray for people (that is why I manage the email prayer line). I give in obedience (it all belongs to Him anyway, right?). I love the sermons (all of our pastors are inspiring and good teachers). But probably my favorite, if I had to pick a favorite, is the worship music.

I get to the church building early, and the band is practicing. As soon as I walk in, I stop and listen to the song they are practicing. Quite often I find myself singing along or humming along as soon as I step into the building. I also sing along to worship music in the car all the time.

A special time between God and me is always when the band cuts out, and we sing a capella. I have always enjoyed a capella (just voices, no instruments). It is just me, and God. My eyes are closed. I am not worrying about what anyone else around me is singing, doing, or thinking of me. It does not matter. All that matters is that I am worshipping God!

Each Tuesday morning, our staff gathers for worship, devotions, and a meeting. We are in a smaller classroom, as opposed to a large auditorium. When we begin singing, especially a capella, I get goosebumps and tears stream down as I think of all of us lifting our voices together to the One True God who deserves all our praise and worship! It is the best part of the work week!

I have many great songs in mind that have special meaning. Many hymns come to mind, as well as contemporary music. But I guess my all-time favorite would be *"How Great Is Our God"* by Chris Tomlin.

"And darkness tries to hide, and trembles at His voice." I am a visual person, so I am envisioning in my mind the devil cowering in the corner and shaking as God's booming voice overpowers him. It gives me chills to think of God's power over everything, especially evil.

*How great is our God
You're the name above all names
You are worthy of our praise
And my heart will sing
How great is our God*

We are worshipping God when we are singing from the heart. We can stand and read the music on the screen, mouth the words, or sing the words to make us look holy to the person sitting next to us, but that means nothing to God. What He is looking for is true worship from the heart. It does not matter if you cannot carry a tune, if you do not know the words, say a wrong word, are loud, or soft. All that matters is your heart. That is all God wants!

Ephesians 5:19 says, ***"Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart."*** Next time you sing a worship song, make sure it is from the heart, and you truly mean it. If not, get your heart right!

WHY DO WE GATHER?

GATHER, DEVOTION 5

Kenny Hovis | *Prison Ministry Director*

I spend much of my time in prison. Yes, it is part of my job, but it is also a passion for me. The knowledge that less than 1% of the population of our country get to go where our teams are blessed to be able to go makes me stand in awe of how God is using us. It is humbling, to say the least.

Recently, we went to a facility in the upper peninsula of Michigan. We visited three different facilities in three days, and played six softball games with inmates, after which we had an opportunity to interact and pray with the men in these facilities. Our team had the opportunity to pray with hundreds of men that needed encouragement, and in some cases wanted someone to show them how to “throw their life to God!” It was awesome watching God bless the efforts and sacrifice of time by our team.

Many times I stand back and watch our team in action to make sure that they are not clumping up too much, or going outside of the boundaries that the staff has set up for us to work. I happened to notice a very tall man standing not too far from me also watching what was happening in the yard. I 100% believe God was speaking to me to go talk to him. I have had this happen a number of times and know now that the best thing to do is just to go.

I walked up to him and asked him his name. He hesitated, looked me in the eye as to say “what do you want,” and then told me his name was Eric. I asked him where he was from, and he told me, Grand Blanc! I told him we were practically neighbors since I was from Goodrich; we hit it off immediately.

When I asked him if there was anything I could pray about with him, he shared that he had just started going back to gatherings in prison after growing up in the Church. His question and prayer request caught me off guard and really made me think. He asked, "What is a service (gathering) supposed to look like?" His observations when growing up was that it seemed to be a fashion show. Small groups of people were seeming to be crushing their Christian walk, but knowing them outside of the gathering, he did not see consistency. In prison, he saw the same inconsistencies, but also saw many men "going crazy" during worship, but they were some of the "darkest" individuals that he knew. So, my concern was I only had ten minutes for the Holy Spirit to formulate a response to his broad sweeping question.

In my answer, I remember telling him some integral parts of a gathering. I told him my analogy of a gathering is it is like being in the military and going back to the fort or base. Why does someone in battle go back to their base? They return for reassurance that they are not on the battle lines by themselves, for first aid if they are wounded, for additional direction or instruction, to train and sharpen their skills, to celebrate their victories, or how to not repeat a defeat. It is a time to learn the importance of working together; they can achieve much more than being out there all alone. All this happens at the fortress for one reason. It is to prepare the troops to go back out to battle.

In our gatherings, we should be celebrating our victories. It is the things we are able to do, people we are able to reach, and lives we are able to touch. None of this would be possible without the work of the Holy Spirit dwelling inside of us. We should be surrendering our victories back at the feet of God in genuine worshipfulness and thankfulness. In 2 Corinthians 13:11-12, Paul says, ***"Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another,***

agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.” This speaks to us being able to identify the wounded, lift one another up, and agree on a common cause. This working together and greeting one another would be a way to salute one another. Acknowledge the fact that you recognize they have been in battle. Receive instruction and encouragement, so as to be ready to get back to the battle.

The most effective soldier is not necessarily the one with the most elaborate uniform, or the one sharing all of his accomplishments so that everyone notices him. The most effective soldier is the one who realizes his purpose, his call to action, and then goes out and performs his duty to the best of his ability. It is the one who is putting himself in harm's way for the cause of his Commander. The goal is to hear, “Well done good and faithful soldier (servant).” He should then come back to base to encourage others to do the same.

When we gather, we need to remember what is important. Things like worship, encouragement, instruction, comradery, and then returning to the fight. We need to remember those who have stopped showing up at gatherings. They may need our assistance to come back for all that is important in the elements of the gathering. We need to remember we are meant to bring in the wounded. Leave no man (or woman) behind should be our motto.

After giving Eric my answer, he looked at me and thanked me. I did not think it was anything profound, but evidently, it was what he needed to hear. When we prayed together, I made sure to thank God for the answer I gave, because in my own intellect, I would have no idea what Eric needed to hear. You see, he was one of the wounded. The Holy Spirit gave him the first aid he needed. I was encouraged as the Holy Spirit used me as a first responder for Eric. Now we are both better equipped to go back into battle.

GATHER DEVOTION 5

I like to close my emails many times with a specific phrase as encouragement and seems appropriate in this context: Let's return to the battle!

DEATH WAS ARRESTED

GATHER, DEVOTION 6

Brett Eberle

Having been the Production Director at The River Church meant that I was constantly surrounded by worship music. As time went on, songs began to blend together. It was very easy to become numb to the story the artist is portraying through their songs. But every so often a song would come out with a melody that instantly grabs your attention, with words so powerful that it stirs your very soul. That song for me is *Death was Arrested*. It is one of the most dynamic songs that I have ever heard, it runs from a straight guitar introduction to the full band crushing a chorus, and there is even an a cappella part in it. As much as I enjoy the dynamics of the band, the words in one of the verses seem to have the ability to pull me out of whatever mess that I am going through and point me straight back to Jesus:

"Our Savior displayed on a criminal's cross."

The One who came to set us free from the bondage of Hell was beaten within an inch of His life. They strapped Him to a cross out in front of everyone who passed by on the road into Jerusalem. Jesus did not deserve to be on that cross, but He took it on for you and for me.

"Darkness rejoiced as though heaven had lost."

I cannot imagine the three days following Jesus' death. For His family and His disciples, it must have felt like an eternity. But everyone gets to rejoice in the next two lines.

"But then Jesus arose with our freedom in hand."

When Jesus came out of the grave, He did more than just raise from the dead; He brought the chance to escape the bondage that this world and sin keeps you. But that is not all that He brought back with Him. The last line of the verse is so powerful for me.

"That's when death was arrested, and my life began."

Jesus did not just give us the opportunity to escape the bondage of sin, but He also gave us the chance to escape the punishment of sin. The Bible says that the wages of sin is death, meaning that the cost of my sin is eternal death in Hell, but Jesus loved us so much that He was put on a cross He did not deserve, and He died. When He came out of the grave, He held our freedom and our chance at eternal life in His hands. I am forever grateful for a Savior who loves me and gave me the chance to live with Him forever.



CHAPTER 3

GROW

RYAN STORY

You can buy cotton candy grapes. It appears they can crossbreed two types of grapes and it results in different flavors. Included in the group is cotton candy. It might be a little too sweet for your liking.

Have you ever tried to plant anything? What was it? How did it go?

In the Bible, the majority of the time spiritual growth is explained, there is an agricultural parable or metaphor used.

Why do you think God would use planting as a means to describe how we grow spiritually?

One of the most well-known passages that incorporate both agriculture and spiritual growth is found in Luke chapter 8. It is the parable of the sower and the seed.

Luke 8:4-15 says, ***“And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, ‘A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.’ As he said these things, he called out, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’ And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of***

the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.' Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.'"

Why is the "Word of God" like a seed?

It is clearly stated that the seed is the Word of God. The Word is constant. It does not change, but there are a variety of soils. Luke points out four kinds of soil.

1. Packed Soil

Luke 8:5 speaks of the first soil, ***"A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it."***

What happened to the seed that fell in the thorns?

Luke 8:12 explains the first scenario, ***“The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.”***

Why did a seed that never got planted get plucked?

2. Stoney Soil

Luke 8:6 describes the second soil, ***“And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture.”***

What happened to the seed that fell in the thorns?

Luke 8:13 gives the explanation, ***“And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.”***

What are spiritual roots? Why are they important?

3. Thorny Soil

Luke 8:7 presents the third soil, ***“And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it.”***

What happened to the seed that fell in the thorns?

Luke 8:14 gives the explanation, ***“And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.”***

What are the things that choke out a person from living for God?
What are some examples?

What are some thorns in your life that you need to remove and dispose?

4. Good Soil

Finally, Luke 8:8 describes the good soil, ***“‘And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.’ As he said these things, he called out, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’”***

What can happen to a seed that falls on “good soil?”

Luke 8:15 tells the positive side of the parable, ***“As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.”***

What are some things that you must do to be “good soil?”

What are some things that you need to do in your life to make your soil good?

How can your Growth Community help cultivate each other’s soil?

What are your spiritual growth goals for this year?

THE FORGING PROCESS

GROW, DEVOTION 1

Chuck Lindsey | *Gathering Pastor*

“Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”
Hebrews 12:11 (NKJV)

A few years ago, on Christmas morning, my wife accomplished something pretty amazing. She finally, for the first time in our nearly 20 years of married life, gave me a gift I never expected to get. She was so excited that morning to set in front of me a heavy and oddly shaped package to open. Each tear of the brightly colored paper revealed more and more of a small anvil and a blacksmith's hammer. She knew that, for many years, I had a desire to learn the lost craft of blacksmithing and so she apparently filed that away in her mind and waited for her moment to surprise me.

It may sound strange to hear it, but I have learned many spiritual lessons from the art of blacksmithing. Most principles are specifically related to the biblical concepts of growth, correction, and discipleship. Each piece in the blacksmith's shop paints a significant spiritual picture. Consider the mighty anvil; for instance, it is a great picture of God's Word, the Bible. The bedrock promises and the instruction of the Word of God cannot change or be moved. The same is true of an anvil; it does not move. It is so strong, so stable, so sure, that it forces all other metal to conform to it. The Bible is like this. It does not change; it cannot be broken or moved. It is sure, stable, and strong. As our lives come into contact with it, we are changed more and more into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Of course, the blacksmith's hammer is the primary tool a smith will use to shape any metal. Each blow of the hammer changes that steel into what the artist sees. He has a goal in mind, and he knows how to get it there. He sees in that raw metal what no one else sees. He sees what that steel can be, and it is something that steel will never become on its own. It will never get there apart from his hand. So, he uses his hammer to get it there. The blacksmith's hammer is a beautiful picture of the Holy Spirit. Our Lord uses His Spirit as the hammer in our lives, against the anvil of His Word to lead, teach, correct, guide, encourage, and comfort. In short, the Holy Spirit shapes us into what He sees and wants us to be.

The next spiritual picture is that of the furnace. When I want to change that metal, I must heat it up. This is where the furnace is essential. It is an intense process! The furnace often exceeds temperatures of 3,000 degrees! However, without the heat of the furnace, the metal simply does not move. It dents and dings and if I continue to hit it with the hammer, it actually begins to develop microscopic cracks in its structure until it finally breaks. But, when I use the furnace to heat the steel, every hammer blow moves the steel like soft clay. It is truly amazing to watch something so hard be softened by the heat of the furnace and move into the shape you desire. The furnace is essential to the shaping process of the steel. The same is true of God's discipline. It is essential in our lives. The furnace of God's correction, teaching, and discipline is used in our lives to shape us. Through the furnace of His discipline, He softens the hardest of hearts and makes them moldable in His hands, and we need it to move, grow, and become what our Lord wants us to be. We need the furnace of God's discipline.

There are many other tools a blacksmith employs to accomplish his task. We could talk about each one, but at the end of the day, the goal is always simply to shape that metal into what he sees. That is our

Lord's purpose, too. He is the Master Blacksmith. He already sees what He wants to do in you and He knows how to do that in your life. His goal will always be to shape us into the image of our Lord Jesus and so He uses the furnace of discipline to soften us, the hammer of His Spirit to shape us, and the anvil of His Word to make us.

GROWING THROUGH THE BITTERNESS

GROW, DEVOTION 2

Max Sinclair | *Young Adult's and Guest Services Director*

Recently in my life, I have hit a wall. It was not a physical wall, although it may feel like it, but a wall nonetheless. I could feel a well of bitterness pooling in my life, a feeling that I did not wish to feel. I can pinpoint to exactly where it stemmed from: it was the fact that I was not getting poured into and growing in the Word. Now, this is not a call or cry for help but more of a call of concern to many others. I have found help, and I can now see that this bitterness was important for me to learn some lessons.

In our Christian walk, we must grow because that is how we reach others. It is a principle that we at The River Church keep to heart. Yet, the question that I ran into while going through this trying time was, "How do I keep growing in the Word when I am bitter, when I am angry, and when I feel that growing is useless and not important because others do not value my growth?" I turned to the book of Job.

The book of Job is nestled between Esther and Psalms, and it tells the story of a man who God saw as, "**a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil**" (Job 1:8b). This man was blessed with many things, a healthy large family, a large estate, many servants, and was even said to be the greatest of all the people of the east. Yet one day, all of that was stripped from him when God and Satan made a wager. Satan was told by God to take all of his blessings away, with the condition that Satan could not kill Job. This was meant to prove that Job was a loyal and faithful servant. So, Satan took away his riches and his children, destroyed his house, and killed his servants. Job was torn, broken, destroyed, and beaten. Honestly, I know of no adjective to describe his pain. In

his grief, Job wrenched his clothes off, shaved his head, and began to call out to God, but Job 1:22 says, ***“In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.”*** When I read that I was blown away. Here is this man, who had everything taken from him and had every right to curse God, and say, “Why did you do this to me?” Job had every reason to stop worshipping the Lord, yet instead of cursing Him, he cursed the day that he was born. He cursed his life and that if he had never been brought into the world, none of this suffering would have happened to him. Through conversations with friends, and then concealed in a whirlwind, the Lord confronted Job’s anger and bitterness.

In our own lives, we run into bitterness. Some experience it to the extreme of Job and others to the not so extreme. Yet, we all cry out to God seeking to understand why the world is not fair or just. This bitterness can define us and ruin our relationship with God. So how do we move forward? How did Job move forward? In the Bible, God met Job in his bitterness and taught Job that God alone is God, not Job. Through some heavy Hebrew poetry, God told Job that He is the Creator of all, that what God had done and what God was doing was not for Job to command. With that, we grow through our bitterness by being reminded that God is God and that we are not. We grow when we put ourselves last and begin to see the world and all of creation as that which belongs to God. At the end of the book (Job 42:2-6), Job replies to God and says:

***“I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
‘Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you make it known to me.’***

***I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”***

Job denied himself, became humble, and put away his bitterness to see the glory that is God. He saw the majesty of God and His complexities and recognized that all is as God wills it. We cannot change the Lord's will, but we can adapt to His will and learn that our bitterness is a self-justified grumble of pride that we need to come to comprehend. Our lives are not our own, and sometimes everything needs to be taken away for us to see and understand that.

I pray that this devotion motivates you to believe that God has a plan. In our lives, we forget to see that God is the “Author and finisher of our faith.” He is in control, and when our pride dictates our actions to put ourselves first, we begin to feel bitter about the things of God. Only through realizing that God has a plan and that we need to live within that plan and not our own, do we get to grow through our bitterness.

GROWING WITH KNOWLEDGE

GROW, DEVOTION 3

James Mann | *Children's Director*

Growing in God is undoubtedly the most important thing one can do to develop in God personally. Growing takes you from someone who just attends a Gathering and bumps you up to the next level. For me personally, growing has been furthering my knowledge and relationship with God. In 2017, I graduated with my undergraduate degree from Oakland University. Immediately, I joined Moody Theological Seminary in Plymouth, Michigan. It is not my goal to just have an extra piece of paper to hang on the wall. I truly believed that the next step for my personal growth was to study God at the graduate level. It has been a game changer on how much closer I have gotten to God. Going into my master's program, I had the mindset that I knew everything there was to know, and this degree would be a breeze. I sat through my first class, and my eyes were truly opened to how little I knew about Him. I remember sitting there and not understanding every tenth word my professor used. It was extremely discouraging but humbling at the same time.

James 3:17 (NIV) says, ***“But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”*** James 1:5 (NIV) adds, ***“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.”*** Knowledge is an important thing; there is no arguing that. Since God is and should be the center and most important thing in our lives, we should be centering our knowledge around Him. The Bible tells us He will give us this knowledge if we ask. That is simply what I did, and He opened the doors for me to have access to the knowledge achievable in a graduate program.

GROW DEVOTION 3

I will never tell someone they should not go to school. I am a very big proponent of schooling and think it is something in which everyone should find value. What I will say is that depending on what stage of life you are in, God may open a door that might be different than mine. There are many ways to grow in your knowledge of Him. Your avenue could be one of our Growth Communities, a discipleship program, or maybe it is schooling. Whatever path you choose, ask God to show you the way. A crucial point to add is that once He shows you how to grow, do not ignore Him. Instead, act on it.

WHEN ENOUGH IS NOT ENOUGH!

GROW, DEVOTION 4

John Carter

I have been attending the River Church for over six years now. I have heard the vision of Reach, Gather, Grow, and Back to Reach consistently twice a year; then more once I joined as staff. When I was asked to write a devotion for Grow, I honestly thought, "What else is there to say that has not already been said!?" If this is your first time going through Reach, Gather, and Grow, this is all new and exciting. Maybe you are like me, and you feel like the subject has been exhausted. I know I have found myself there before, and you may be thinking this is a good topic to skip. Let me show you what the Lord showed me regarding this mindset.

In 1 Timothy 4:1-2 we see Paul give Timothy some warnings. These instructions are also for us. ***"Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared."***

Pay attention to the phrases of caution in this passage. It says, ***"Some will depart,"*** and they are lead to ***"devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons."*** I ask myself, how is the follower of Christ so easily turned away? How does one choose to devote (commit, submit, allocate, give) themselves to the teachings of demons? Think of those words used to describe "devote." It indicates a complete giving over of oneself to the false teachings. How does this happen? These passages are very troubling to me and hopefully to you.

Later in verses 6-9, he says, ***"If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being***

trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance." To my question, "How is one so easily lead to follow false teachings?" Well, Paul's answer is because they have not been ***"trained in the words of faith"*** and ***"good doctrine."*** In case you missed it, that is the Grow part of our church mission. My initial heart of complaining kind of goes away after reading this. Why do we cover these topics so frequently? Well, Paul says, ***"If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus."*** I am so thankful that we have leaders in the church who are willing to remind us of the importance of growing in the Word. It is an important aspect of the believer to grow. As Paul continued to teach Timothy and us about the importance of growing, he gives us a life application, ***"Train yourself for godliness."*** We all know training the body has its benefits, whether we train our muscles in exercise or our brains in knowledge, the earthly benefit is clear. We intuitively know that training will help us in accomplishing our goals. The training we get through Grow is the stuff that helps us in not only this life but also the life to come. I love how Paul wraps it, ***"The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance."*** It is worthy of full devotion. It is worthy of our commitment. He says this for your own good so that when we are presented with the silly myths and irreverent teachings of liars, we are able to show ourselves approved workers.

In 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul instructs again. ***"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."*** You may have heard this many times before, and more than likely it will not be the last time you hear these kinds of instructions. How confident are you

in handling the Word of Truth? Growing is not just a brain knowledge of the Bible, it is the ability to handle the truth and share it with others. I hope, as I was challenged, that today you also would be challenged to train, study, and commit to growing as a believer in Christ.

MEASURING YOUR FAITH

GROW, DEVOTION 5

John Rigg | Assistant to the Reach Pastor

Many of us have traditions in our family that get passed down from generation to generation. One tradition that my family practiced was “the measuring of the chil-dren.” Every visit to grandpa’s house included a time in which we would stand each child at the kitchen doorway, back them up to the opening, and place a small pencil mark on the door casing at the top of their head which included the current date. It would be rare that grandpa would allow a visit to his house without an opportunity to see just how much each of the grandchildren had grown.

The Bible says that when someone first comes to know God and trust Him with their life, they are considered “babes” spiritually because they are infants in Christ (1 Co-rinthians 3:1). However, unlike natural babies that inevitably grow into adults, spir-itual babes can remain infants (Hebrews 5:12-14).

Just as my father would periodically measure his grandchildren to see how much they had grown, it is a good idea that believers check their spiritual growth from time to time as well. One of the best ways to measure if we are growing or not is to evaluate the manner in which we interact with people. After all, Jesus taught that after loving God, people were to be our next priority (Matthew 22:37-39).

Philippians 2:3-4 says, ***“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”***

The apostle Paul taught that we are to do nothing without first checking our mo-tives. Is our ambition a selfish one or do we have the good of another in mind? Paul says everything should be run through the filter of "Am I doing this for my gain or am I doing it for the betterment of someone else?"

So, how do we measure up? If our heavenly Father were to stand us in the doorway and place a pencil mark on the casing of our faith, where would the mark lie? Would it be above the mark that was placed there on the day of our salvation? Would we notice little or no increase in where the mark is placed?

If we find that we could use some growth in this area, Paul has the answer for us, humility. Humility displays itself when you measure the needs of others and con-clude that they are of more importance than your own. Growth is realized when we then set our desires aside to tend to the needs of another. Notice, Paul does not say that our interests are of no importance, but he teaches us that as we walk through this world, we can measure our spiritual growth by the way in which we look after people, and tend to their interests as well as our own.

CHANGES

GROW, DEVOTION 6

Larry Gabbara | *Financial Bookkeeper*

“But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.”

Psalm 73:28

Are you growing in the Lord? As we mature in our walk with God, we should be growing. There should be a noticeable change in our character, our relationships, in our personal lives, and our work life. The changes should be able to be seen in all aspects of who we are.

Ephesians 6:10-11 says, ***“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.”***

Now, this is not the easiest thing to do. The devil is always attacking us where we are the weakest. He knows where we are the most vulnerable. We have to put on the whole armor of God every day to be protected.

Growth in the Lord should be a natural progression in our Christian life. However, we will always have to deal with the obstacles of the world.

Our experiences can draw us closer to the Lord. The Lord used the prison ministry, a place I was not familiar or comfortable with, to stretch my faith and trust in Him.

In September 2017, I was asked to go with the men on a prison trip to Lorain and Grafton Correctional in Ohio. I was extremely nervous; I

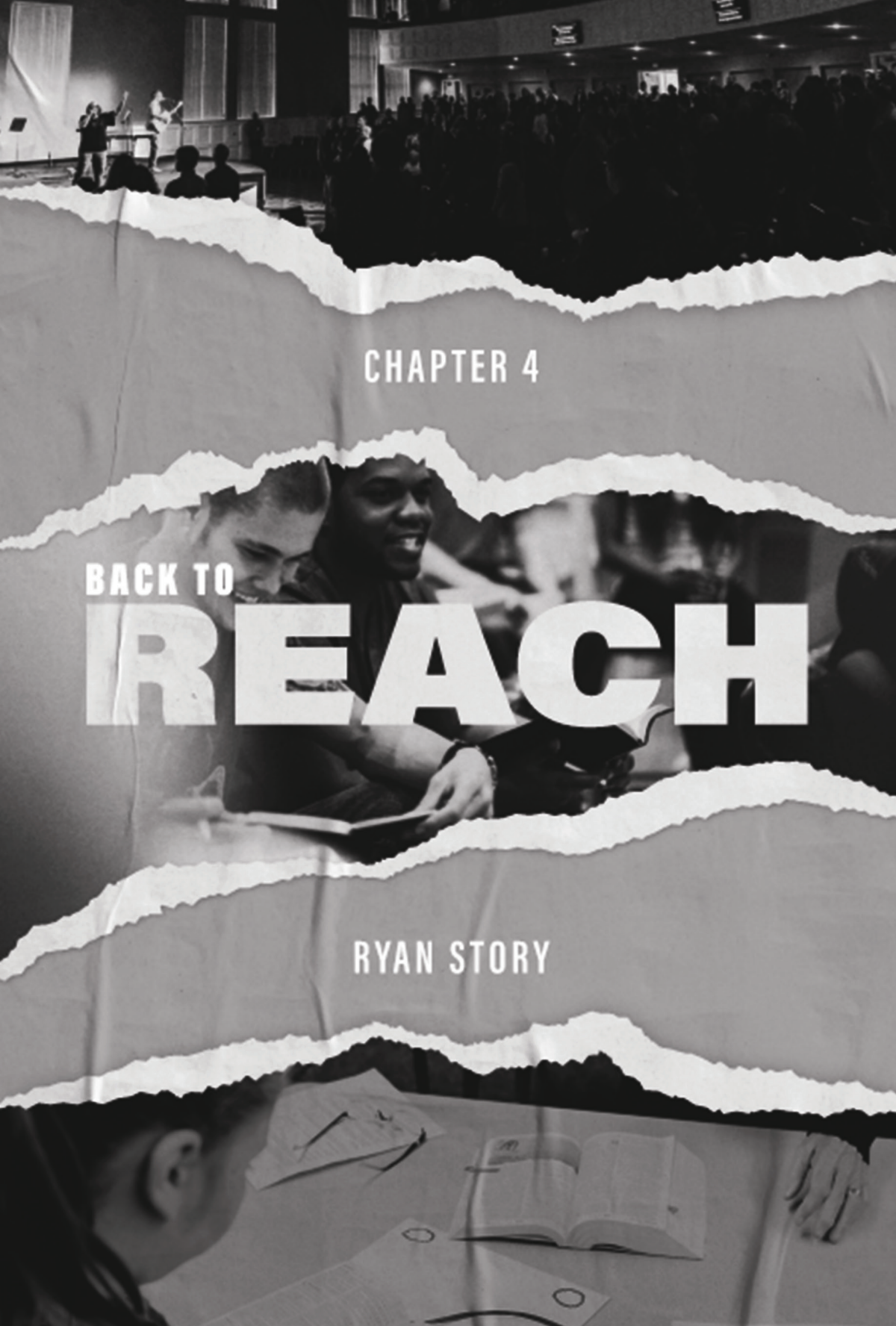
had not done anything like that before. What made me most nervous was knowing I would have to talk one-on-one to guys in prison about Jesus. I felt like I was not qualified to do that, but through spending time in prayer talking to Jesus, I got up the nerve to approach a guy. When I started to speak to him, I almost started to cry because I was so moved. Remembering that I was in a prison yard in Ohio with around 200-300 inmates, I caught myself and regained my composure. I was then able to tell him about how the Lord changed me from a sinner going down a wicked path to a child of God, that God could do the same for him.

That experience was a huge part of my growing in the Lord. I want to resemble a man that is drawing closer to God daily. It is never too late to seek the Lord and ask Him to help you make changes in your life.

In 2 Peter 3:18, we read, ***“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”***

Whether you have been a Christian for a short time or most of your life, you must choose to grow with the Lord. Change of any kind requires the repetition of forming habits to make a change in our ways. Change can come in our prayer life, through Bible study, keeping our mind and heart directed towards God, fellowship with like-minded people, and attending Church gatherings. Building an intimate relationship with Jesus is important to all of us. Our growth should be a reflection of what God is doing in our lives and draw us nearer to Him.

Romans 12:2 says, ***“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”***



CHAPTER 4

BACK TO

IREACH

RYAN STORY

I am a 250-pound man (hopefully less when this is printed), with graying hair, who is 35, and who is obsessed with all things *Disney*. From movies to songs to video games, I have always loved *Disney*. At one point, I thought I would be made fun of for knowing all the words to the *Mulan* soundtrack, now I embrace my inner Donny Osmond and just belt it out loud. As big of a fan of Disney as I was, I never had the opportunity to go to Disney World until 2018. If my math serves me correctly when this lesson is out, I will have gone for a second time. The first time my family and I went to Disney I was overly ecstatic to take a picture in front of the Cinderella's Castle inside the Magic Kingdom. To this day, it might be one of my favorite pictures of my family and me.

Recently, I was reading a book entitled "*Everybody Always*" by Bob Goff. I will let you in on a secret; I am not as smart as people might think I am. I just read (let me be honest, I listen to an audiobook) a book every week or so. In "*Everybody Always*," Bob discusses the idea of building kingdoms or castles. As I listened to this concept, I started thinking about how we, the church, are called to be building God's Kingdom by going back into the world and reaching those who do not know Jesus, who have fallen away from the church, or those who just have not found a church family. At The River Church, we call this "back to reach." I love our vision's simplicity that it starts with reaching the unreached, and it ends with reaching back to the unreached.

Sadly, though, are we (I will get super pointed), are you, actually building God's Kingdom or are you building a castle for you and your closet friends? This week we are going to look at four ways a castle is different than a kingdom.

1. Castles build moats to keep people out.

Every castle I can imagine in my mind has an amazing drawbridge with a small circular waterway around it. For a castle, the moat and draw bridge were meant to keep certain people from entering. Sadly, the church can quickly become a country club of people who all are the same race, socioeconomic group, or political party with virtually the same struggles.

Matthew 11:25-30 says, ***“At that time Jesus declared, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’”***

Why is it important we help everyone know where to find true rest?

Luke 5:29-32 adds, ***“And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’ And Jesus answered them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.’”***

Do you think the church (remember, the church is a group of believers) unintentionally keeps people out?

Do you have moats in your life where a person or a group of people are intentionally kept away from the Kingdom of God by you?

2. Castles only worry about what is going on in the castle. Kingdoms worry about what is going on around them.

I heard a preacher once say, "Your church is either a lighthouse or a bomb shelter." If we are focusing on building God's Kingdom, we have to worry about what is going on in our neighborhood. God has placed every local church in the exact area He wanted it. Sadly, Christians are "fine" with living their lives unaffected by the fact that their neighbors are going to Hell. Horribly enough, how many of us are guilty of not knowing our neighborhood's needs? I will be the first to admit while writing this portion of the lesson; I saw my neighbor pull into her driveway. I have not said "Hi" to her since winter. God has amazing timing.

Do you know your neighbor? Would your neighbor think to come to you in the event of a crisis?

How often do you talk to your co-workers?

Matthew 5:14-16 says, ***“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”***

How often do you hide the light of Christ to those who need it?

Why are we, as the church, so afraid to shine our light and love people?

John 13:34-35 adds, ***“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”***

Do people ever see Jesus in your actions?

3. Castles limit the royal family in order to proceed to the throne. In God's Kingdom, we will all be royalty.

Royal families try to keep the power to themselves. A king would want his son taking the throne regardless of how qualified they are to lead. Building God's Kingdom, we get to give every person who enters it an immediate pass to being royalty.

This idea is expressed in 1 Peter 2: 9-10, ***"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."***

Do you look at people like they are less than you?

How do you treat your fellow royal priest? Do you think the church turns off non-churched people by how we treat fellow brothers and sisters? How?

I understand the bluntness of this question, but the church has been giving "church answers" on hard questions. If we are truly Kingdom focused and not just castle focused, our gatherings should have a very eclectic look to it. We ask God to give us opportunities to minister to the poor, but then we get frustrated by them asking for help. We ask God to send us "dirty" people, and then we get concerned that

their dirt is messing up our cozy club. If we, as The River Church, truly took “back to reach” seriously, we should be motivated to make sure that any less fortunate, lost, broken, and dirty person has a crown just like us.

In a week, how often are you looking for opportunities to introduce a person to the King?

4. Kingdoms are people; Castles are buildings.

Read back to any devotional or listen to any sermon I preached, most likely you will hear me say, I am a comic book nerd. One of my top five favorite Marvel Comic Universe movies was “*Thor: Ragnarok*.” If you have not seen it, the realm of Asgard is threatened by a major enemy. While Thor, the rightful ruler of Asgard, is wrestling with what he should do, he has a vision of him speaking to his father, Odin. Thor is lamenting over the fact that the homeworld his father had built was about to fall. Odin looks at his son and says, “Asgard isn’t a place, it’s a people.” He goes on to explain that no matter where the Asgardians ended up, there would still be an Asgard.

So often we have mistaken God’s Kingdom as our church. I want to put a major emphasis on the word “our.” For a River Church attendee, it is our location. Churches have a hard time playing nicely with each other and focus more on growing their number rather than growing His Kingdom. Shame on churches wanting the name of their church to be the name above our Lord’s.

We always have to understand that the church is people. We are not called to recruit more buildings, more property, and more addresses.

We are called to further God's Kingdom by reaching those who do not know Christ as Savior. Back to reach is not chasing after people who are dissatisfied with the church down the road. Going back to reach is making sure we are purposely and passionately seeking out those who do not know Jesus, not to grow our church, but to grow His Kingdom.

Do you focus on church growth (location growth) or are you focused on Kingdom growth? How does that look differently?

Why is it important for every believer to focus on expanding God's kingdom?

What advantages come with knowing our church is not cemented down to a foundation?

What are some ways you can get involved with expanding God's kingdom?

BACK TO REACH CHAPTER 4

SERVICE ORGANIZATION

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 1

Manning Brown | Operations Pastor

When I was a young lieutenant in the Air Force, I was instilled with a set of core values by which the Air Force sought to operate from at every level in any environment. They were excellence, integrity, and service. To serve by its very nature is about performing or living selflessly. It implies humility. In John 12:1-17, Jesus washes the disciples' feet to teach them what it means to serve. Peter balked, then which Christ rebuked him, saying, ***"If I do not wash you, you have no share with me"*** (John 13:8).

As squadron commander in the Air Force, my role was to lead. That means to put the needs of the unit above my own, and since the unit operates because of its people, that meant ensuring that those under my command had what they needed to do their job to get the mission done. We read that Christ ***"emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men"*** (Philippians 2:7). The God of the universe took on the shackles of humanity so that He might serve them because through Him alone, they can be saved.

To serve first takes love. John 3:16 captures the very essence of God's love for us, in the form of a servant, His Son. We cannot possibly be effective in sharing Christ and proclaiming the Gospel if we do not first love, and thereby serve. The Church, in many ways, is a "service organization."

Secondly, to serve requires compassion. Luke 10:29-37 is the great parable of the Good Samaritan. It tells that the lengths of selflessness (to serve) is going beyond the bare minimums. True compassion is the reflection of a heart that loves and seeks to serve.

Lastly, to serve requires sacrifice. Often, when the Medal of Honor has been awarded posthumously, it is because the individual laid his life down for his fellow brothers-in-arms. Philippians 2:8 reminds us that Christ, taking on the form of a servant, ***“humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”***

To truly serve means to put the needs of others above your own. Furthermore, the need for a lost world to hear of its need for Christ is paramount.

“Only God can give us a selfless love for others,
as the Holy Spirit changes us from within.
This is one reason we must receive Christ,
for apart from His spirit,
we can never be freed from the chains of
selfishness, jealousy, and indifference.”
Billy Graham

JESUS IN DISGUISE

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 2

Gareth Volz | Senior 55+ Director

In Matthew 25:31-40, Jesus tells us how He values service. We are told in this passage that when Jesus comes to earth again as King of kings and Lord of lords in glory with all His angels, He will sit on His glorious throne and reign forever. He will gather all the nations before Him and separate those who put their faith in Him from those who rejected Him. He will judge both groups. Those who rejected Him will be banished from His presence. Those who accepted His grace by faith and became His children will be judged for the works they did for Him after their salvation.

Jesus said in these verses that when we serve others, we serve Him. He says in verse 35:

***"I was hungry, and you gave me food;
I was thirsty, and you gave me drink;
I was a stranger, and you welcomed me."***

He goes on to say in verse 36:

***"I was naked, and you clothed me;
I was sick, and you visited me;
I was in prison, and you came to me."***

In verses 37-39, the righteous asked:

When did we see you hungry and gave you food?
When did we see you thirsty and gave you drink?
When were you a stranger and we welcomed you?
When did we see you naked and clothe you?
When were you sick and we visited you?
When were you in prison and we came to you?

Jesus responded in verse 40 that when we did it to these the least of His brothers, we did it to Him.

So, let me ask you, how are you serving Jesus today? There are many opportunities to serve our Lord both within and outside the church. Here are some various ministry opportunities within the church:

- You can serve Jesus as a greeter at the door on Sunday, sharing a smile and letting them know how glad we are that they came to worship with us.
- You can serve Jesus as an usher, assisting folks in finding a seat and in the worship of giving.
- You can serve Jesus as part of the worship team, leading God's people in praise and worship.
- You can serve Jesus in the nursery taking care of little ones so parents can focus on worshipping Him.
- You can serve Jesus by teaching God's Word, whether to children, teens, young adults, couples, or senior saints.
- You can serve Jesus by being part of the prison ministry.
- You can serve Jesus by being part of the recovery ministry.
- You can serve Jesus by visiting the sick, whether in the hospital, a nursing facility, or their home.
- You can serve Jesus by leading or hosting a Growth Community.
- You can serve Jesus by helping in special outreach events like Sunday at the Fair, the Passion Play, Men's or Ladies' Retreats, and Wednesdays at the Park.
- You can serve Jesus by praying for others.

Outside the church we can serve Jesus in para-church ministries like Bible Study Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, serving meals to the homeless at places like Grace Centers of Hope, and sharing God's love with your neighbors, fellow workers, friends, and family.

What we need to remember is that when we share God's love with others by serving them, Jesus says we are serving Him. In that final judgment, when Jesus is on His throne in all His glory, He wants to honor you for what you did for and to Him. If you are already serving, keep pushing forward. If you are not serving, ask Jesus to show you where He wants you to serve Him.

There is great joy in serving Jesus - and great reward. What an honor it will be to hear Jesus say to you, ***"Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your Master"*** (Matthew 25:21).

SAKE OF THE GOSPEL

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 3

John Rigg | Assistant to the Reach Pastor

James Fell Aker was born in 1871 and was an active evangelist until his death in 1986. I will do the math for you; he was 115. At the age of 105, Aker was still preaching crusades as far away as Japan! Aker was able to share the Gospel for over 97 years and was known as a “Fire and Brimstone” style Gospel preacher. I know the term “Fire and Brimstone” has fallen out of favor these days, but I have come to realize that in most cases, guys that fall into this category are typically just extremely passionate about the sharing of the Gospel!

In 1933, Aker recalled a time when he was sick and was taken to the hospital for surgery, “The doctors said I had passed away. I was rolled into the dead room.” A nurse, who happened to go into the morgue, noticed Aker’s eyes moving; and he was revived.

So, what drives a man like James Aker to continually share the Gospel all the days of his life? What is it that motivated him, even with death knocking at the door? I believe Aker did what he did, for the same reasons that the Apostle Paul did what he did. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (NKJV), ***“For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now, this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.”***

Notice how many times in these verses that Paul uses the phrase ***“that I might win.”*** Six times Paul states that the reason he became ***“all things to all men”*** was for the ***“gospel’s sake.”*** But what does it mean, “doing something for the Gospel’s sake?” Paul says that his reason for sharing the Gospel was ***“that I may be partaker of it with you.”***

Men like Aker and the Apostle Paul realized that sharing the Gospel with more people meant more people would share in the benefits of it. They deeply cared about those that needed to hear it!

Hearing and receiving the Good News of Jesus’ substitutionary death frees a person from the guilt and the penalty brought about by his sinful nature. This is news that was never meant to stop with the recipient.

Paul stated, ***“I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more.”*** In what way could we serve someone today for the sake of the Gospel? How might we engage in relationships other than those who already know about the Good News?

The meaning of the word “serve” means to furnish or supply someone with something they need. Are we ready to become ***“all things to all men, that (we) might by all means save some?”***

I pray this is us, ***“for the gospel’s sake.”***

WORK OUT YOUR GIFTING

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 4

Pat Rowland | *Locations and Development Pastor*

Recently I sat with a young man who felt God's calling to be a Pastor, and he asked me, "How do you know if you are the right fit for a ministry position?" He was asking about getting hired to do one of the various staff positions at a church. I do not consider myself old, but I have been working in ministry for many years now. This young man was just getting started; therefore, is still working out his gifting as we all had to do.

When you are new to your faith or looking to start serving in a church, you do not know what you do not know. What I mean, is you are very excited about your faith, and you want to serve. That enthusiasm and energy are highly needed in any ministry and volunteer role. God has given you a gift or gifts, and as you use them, you start to learn more about yourself. As an experienced Pastor, I know more today about how God has wired me and where my strengths start and stop. I have a good idea as to what I can do and what I cannot and should not do. Like this young man, I did not know that in the beginning. You will not know that either until you start exercising your serving gifts. Over the years, I have had as many experiences that showed me what I should not do as I have had that showed me this is who God wired me to be. For example, in my early days of following Christ, I wanted to sing until I actually did it in front of the little church I was attending. God helped work out my gifting by saying that it is not where you need to serve. It was terrible and embarrassing. I cannot believe I even admitted that to you all. Today, when people ask me if I sing, I reply, "No one wants to hear that, trust me."

For almost 30 years, I have done things that I know are not my gifting, and I have been in roles where I believe it is what God has gifted me

to do. I would not have discovered what I am meant to do if I did not try and let God show me what I am not created to do. That is how God has worked out my gifting.

Philippians 2:12-13 (NIV) says, ***“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”***

Serving in ministry is a key part of your spiritual development. It is not about what you get from it as much as it is what you bring to the ministry. However, a by-product is that you will grow in your faith as you serve. We are blessed to be part of a church with many opportunities for you to work out your gifting. My advice to that young pastor is the same to you, “Start serving and start figuring out what God has gifted you to do and not do.” As you serve, you will get to know what you need to know about yourself and God’s unique gifting in you. How? Here are a few thoughts. Please note this is not an exhaustive list.

First, God can speak through affirmation from others. God will allow the voice of others to affirm your ability in the gift you are “working out.” Second, God can speak through the joy you experience in serving. What we do in our jobs, we get a paycheck for our effort. As we serve, we get an eternal reward and sense of joy that we gave of ourselves using our gifting. Third, God can speak through more opportunities to use that gifting for God’s glory. God will continue to bring you into those spaces to use that gift. Finally, seek honest feedback from those leading in the ministry you are serving, and allow them to be part of working out your gifting.

I want to encourage you to pray about serving, but do more than just pray, start working out your gifting by serving somewhere today! The sooner you start, the sooner you will be on your way to knowing God's true gifting in your life.

SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 5

James Mann | *Children's Director*

This idea of “Reach, Gather, and Grow” has always been an interesting idea to me. Too often, I see people reaching Grow and stopping. Why is going back to Reach so important to me? Quite simply, someone going back to Reach is what brings the unsaved through the door. It can be so simple for us to reach Grow, stay there, and focus solely on our relationship with God. This is not God’s plan for us, and we are selfish by thinking otherwise.

Matthew 9:37-38 says, ***“Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’”***

We should be viewing the idea of going back to Reach as a blessing and an honor to be a part of, not a burden. I want you to take a moment and think about how you came to the Lord. When was the first time you heard someone preach God’s Word? Some of you reading this may have been born and raised in the church. For those who were not or those who stepped away from the church, you probably came back due to someone going back to Reach. Reach is simply getting the Word of God out to the nonbelievers. With this thought process, you could be going back to Reach by just inviting someone to a church activity. This is why we have our Reach events for all age groups.

As the Children’s Director of our Goodrich location, I believe it is crucial to teach children at a young age what this idea of going back to Reach looks like as well as what they can do to be a part of it. I tell the children that as a mid-20’s male, my Reach is limited. I can make

BACK TO REACH DEVOTION 5

phone calls, write emails, send text messages, and talk to families all day, but I am just one person. If they were to reach out to those that they already have relationships with, it is more meaningful, and they are more likely to come. The same goes for us adults. If we all step out of our comfort zones and invite those that we have relationships with to hear God's Word, we are doing what God commanded us to do. Like the verse above tells us, there are a lot of people out there who have not heard God's Word, and they are just waiting. We need those who can and will go out into the world and deliver the Good News. That is the purpose of us going back to Reach.

FERVENT STEWARDS

BACK TO REACH, DEVOTION 6

Justin Dean | *Student's Director*

When it came to church, serving was what my family did. Truthfully, it sometimes felt like all we did. I can not tell you how many chairs I have had to stack throughout my time in church. Growing up, I never truly understood the point of serving. When I was a child, I blamed my parents for staying around church talking for too long. In middle school, I thought it was because we were just trying to be nice people. When I high school, I realized it was just my dad using us as free labor. As I began to spend more time coming into my own and taking a look at what biblical serving looked like, I realized it was more about my heart while serving than anything else.

Take a look with me at 1 Peter 4:8-10, ***“Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”***

It took me a while to truly grasp the reason for and importance of service to people. I did not get it, and that shaped the way I served. I served with no purpose, no drive, and without fervency or understanding. I want to take a second to break down this passage of Scripture. There is a great picture in this verse of why and how we should serve.

“Above all, keep loving one another earnestly...” What does this actually mean? People often talk about love, but no one ever clearly defines it. It is left as this amorphous, impractical, abstract ideal that we do not know how to implement into our lives. Now I am not going

to spend time trying to define it (I will leave that to someone with the Pastor title), but I do want to look at how we can use it practically. I think the key to that is the word earnestly, or a word I think fits the Greek a little better, fervently. It is the idea of enthusiastically and passionately loving others. When we show people love, by serving them, giving them compliments, or by being kind, are we doing so with enthusiasm and passion? Do we dread doing it, or are we sitting on the edge of our seats excited to show them love and care the way our God has shown it to us?

“...use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” As humans, we have natural giftings. Some are wise teachers; others are fiercely compassionate. The way we serve can look drastically different yet, in the end, achieves the same goal: to help point people to the grace of God. As God’s people, we are stewards of a multitude of different things, but above all, we are stewards of God’s grace in our lives. As such, we need to serve with that in mind. We are showing that grace to those we are serving and our service needs to be with that same fervent love that God graciously showed us.

Ultimately, we serve at the River to see people come to know the grace we know as followers of Christ. Everything we do, in word or deed, should reflect that goal as stewards of Christ. We serve, together, unified, with our giftings to point people to the grace of God, that they may seek Christ as their Savior. I encourage you if you are not currently serving, to join us in serving our Lord.

OUR MISSION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, “we don’t go to church, we are the Church.” We believe that as God’s people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

Weekend Gatherings at The River Church are all about Jesus, through singing, giving, serving, baptizing, taking the Lord’s Supper, and participating in messages that are all about Jesus and bringing glory to Him. We know that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it’s not only a refresher it’s bringing life-change.

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***“all things in common.”*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the Word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

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