

PHASE ONE: FACING REALITY OF BONDAGE

LESSON ONE:

We might present the appearance that everything is fine in our lives, but this is only the surface, like the visible part of an iceberg. Underneath there are all of the hurts and false beliefs we have tried to ignore. Rather than going to God for help in dealing with the pain, we use coping strategies to comfort, distract and protect ourselves – strategies that come from our attempts to control our lives and maintain a good image. Jer. 6:14 – “You can’t heal a wound by saying it’s not there.” Heb. 13:6, 1 John 4:18, 2 Peter 2:19, Prov. 14:12

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 1

We’re here to address something that most of us have been avoiding for a long time. It’s really a problem that affects every person on the planet: How do I deal with the pain and damage that result from living in a fallen world? No matter the source of that pain and damage, we have to choose how to respond. Rather than deal with it, though, a common choice is to create the illusion that we’re doing just fine and can live on the surface without getting into the mess. Don’t go digging into the problem, pick a strategy that helps us keep it at bay. What will help us protect, comfort or distract ourselves from an ugly reality?

You may have heard this situation described as wearing a mask. It’s an attempt to look as though we have everything under control and have no problems, especially big ones. This is based on pride – being more concerned about our images than on getting well. The truth is that as long as we keep up these false images, it becomes that much harder to be honest. When we take off our masks, other people will be encouraged to take theirs off too, and more of us can experience freedom

This is hardly a new situation. In Jeremiah chapter 6, the prophet is telling the kingdom of Judah that the Babylonians are about to descend on them and carry the people away because they wouldn’t live according to God’s plan. They’d been given many warnings over the years and God was finally saying OK, it’s time to face the consequences. Instead of leading the people away from the path of disobedience, leadership had downplayed the seriousness of the situation. Jeremiah confronts this in verse 14: “They have treated superficially the broken wound of my people, saying, “Peace, peace” when there is no peace.” The Living Bible translates this verse this way: “You can’t heal a wound by saying it’s not there.”

We handle this issue by promoting the impression that we’re managing things pretty well. We wouldn’t dream of admitting that we’re struggling with doubt, rejection, shame, guilt and condemnation. How do we usually respond to the question, “How’s it going?” Probably something that doesn’t let the other person get too close, like, “I’m fine.” We’re afraid of the reaction if we got honest

and started talking about the battles going on. And truthfully, how would we respond if someone was honest with us? It's a lot easier to just not go there.

This is where our coping strategies come in. Taking our cues from the world around us, we think if we just had this product, or ingested this substance, or had a new relationship, or controlled other people through anger, people-pleasing or isolation, or any other in a whole list of potential escapes, our problems would be solved. Proverbs 14:12 speaks bluntly about this: "There is a way which seems right to a man and appears straight before him, but its end is the way of death." You may think you're not doing anything that could lead to such a drastic end. But have you experienced a loss of trust, relationships, peace, hope, or physical, emotional or mental health? There can be death in every one of those areas and more. What we've been doing is basically like sticking a bunch of bandaids on a cancerous tumor. The devil also has lots of suggestions for ways to deal with our issues, but there aren't any real solutions in any of those scenarios.

Some of the damage has been done with words, spoken by us or to us by others. These words can be incredibly destructive and leave lasting scars that Satan loves to attack. One of his favorite tactics is to throw these hurtful words at us when we're in a difficult place. Someone may make a comment that takes us back to that painful place, even though they may have no idea of the power of their words to open the wound. James 3:8 says, "But no one can tame the human tongue; it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." That may sound extreme, but verbal abuse and gossip can create false beliefs about ourselves that are long lasting. We may believe we'll never be good enough for God or anyone else, fearing rejection and judgment if we let anyone know who we really are. It's important to remember Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We're not the only ones who fail. God has the solution in Jesus.

We've been going to the wrong source for help and deliverance. We may have tried in the past to give it all to God. Somewhere along the way, we've decided that He's really not dealing with things in the right way or the right timing. We see the Israelites in this situation in Exodus. In chapter 25, God called Moses up to Mt. Sinai to give him the law for how the people were to live. Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights on that mountain. Meanwhile, did the people spend that time celebrating their deliverance from bondage to the Egyptians? Did they talk to each other about the great new life God was going to give them? Well, maybe at first. All we know is by the time the story gets back to them, they were tired of waiting and went to Moses' brother Aaron. In chapter 32:1, they tell him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron goes along with this and uses their gold jewelry to make the figure of a calf. The people look at this creation and declare that this is the god who led them out of Egypt. Then Aaron proclaims that tomorrow there will be a feast to the Lord. They're going to worship the calf just like they've worshipped the Lord.

Where did they get this idea? To them, God is very intimidating and unapproachable, so they let Moses have the contact with Him. They looked at the way their neighbors dealt with their own frightening gods and copied them. Because we're living in the time of Jesus as the source of salvation,

we see them as incredibly foolish. But let's remember that we've turned to our own solutions too. We may not call them gods, but have they become the things we turn to instead of to God?

God is ready to wipe them all out and start over again, but Moses intercedes for them and goes down to confront the situation. When questioned by Moses, Aaron's response is found in verses 22-24: he blames the people for everything, even denying responsibility for the calf that "came out" of the fire. Have we ever made lame excuses for the results of our bad choices? I sure have.

We know the Israelites had a long history of ups and downs in their relationship with God and God sent Jesus to be the final solution to this universal struggle between our will and God's loving plan. We find ourselves right in the middle of this same battle for who will be in charge of our lives. Paul talks about this struggle in Romans 7:15. "For I do not understand my own actions (I am baffled and bewildered by them). I do not practice what I want to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate (and yielding to my human nature, my worldliness – my sinful capacity)." That's from the Amplified translation. He's saying that he knows things haven't been made right by his choices, but he just can't stop making them. That sounds all too familiar for most of us.

We may have tried to get out of this cycle before, relying on our own willpower. New Year's resolutions are a good example of this. We identify those pointless behaviors that haven't worked and come up with new ones to take their place. They might work for a while, but then we slip up and find ourselves right back in the old ways. This just reinforces the belief that we're doomed to failure and it's not worth the fight, so we might as well enjoy ourselves. As long as we rely on our own strength and motivation, lasting change is impossible. And we still haven't dealt with the underlying issues.

It's important to acknowledge that we're not in this struggle alone. Just as God is fighting for us to succeed, there are other forces fighting for us to fail. Ephesians 6:12 tells us, "For we are not fighting against flesh and blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places." This isn't meant to paralyze us with fear but helps us recognize what we're up against. Satan intends to keep us feeling helpless and hopeless, but no matter how big he makes himself appear, he's not bigger than God! And God wants to use all of His resources to give us lasting freedom.

Our part is to begin with honesty. It's time to remove our masks, admit our brokenness and take steps to deal with the real nature of our hurts. It won't be accomplished at once, but God provides endurance for the process.

Francesca Battistelli expressed this situation so well in her song "If We're Honest". Listen to these words and see if you can relate.

Truth is harder than a lie. The dark seems safer than the light, and everyone has a heart that loves to hide. I'm a mess and so are you. We've built walls nobody can get through. Yeah it may be hard, but the best thing we could ever do...

Bring your brokenness and I'll bring mine, cause love can heal what hurt divides. And mercy's waiting on the other side if we're honest.

Don't pretend to be something that you're not, living life afraid of getting caught. There is freedom found when we lay our secrets down at the cross.

It would change our lives, it would set us free. It's what we need to be....if we're honest.

Scripture references

Jeremiah 6:14, Proverbs 14:12. Romans 3:23, Exodus 25, 32:1, 22-24, Romans 7:15, Ephesians 6:12

PHASE ONE: FACING REALITY OF BONDAGE

LESSON TWO:

It's time to address the underlying issues and admit we've been trying to do God's job. Our attempts to bury the pain can't provide lasting solutions and have damaged us and others. We acknowledge that our sin nature has been driving the cycle and God is the only one who can stop it. Nothing we have done is able to keep God from loving us and wanting to deliver us. Matt. 19:26 "With man this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible." Rom. 7:18, Psalm 40:12, Prov. 29:23, Luke 12:2, Eph. 5:13-14, John 10:10

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 2

We've begun to see that our lives have been based on systems of damage control. They keep the pain at bay while we conduct our daily lives. Our attention has been on putting out superficial fires that are becoming harder to ignore. We may even start to believe that we can "fix" ourselves and make the problems go away. We finally recognize that this doesn't result in real deliverance and only delays the day when we'll be able to confront the truth. We're also starting to see past our defenses and see the problems that have grown within ourselves and our relationships. It's time to start looking straight at the cause of all of this pain. We're tired of fighting the same battles and wonder what it would take to be at peace.

Pride has helped us in our ability to keep things going, but this pride is misplaced. Proverbs 29:23 says, "A man's pride and sense of self-importance will bring him down. But he who has a humble spirit will obtain honor." It takes humility to admit we're only giving the appearance of having a healthy, successful life. When we decide to take a closer look at how we're managing everything, we recognize the patterns of our decision-making. We see repeated reactions of fighting back in defense and retreating to protect ourselves. Why do we keep choosing the same responses over and over? We started believing things about ourselves because of actions we took or those taken by others. We allowed other people to define who we are and what worth we had in the world. We lost sight of how God sees us and accepted the world's view as the only truth.

This distorted view is fed by guilt, shame, rejection and condemnation. Looking at the results of our sin nature can overwhelm us. Psalm 40:12 puts it this way: "For troubles without number surround me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more numerous than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails within me." This is what it can feel like when we only look at our wrongs. They seem impossible to overcome. And our enemy wants to keep this going by stealing our hope that things could ever be different. He constantly reminds us of our failures and how we can never live up to any of God's expectations. He wants to blot out anything good in our lives. Jesus describes him as a thief and tells us

in John 10:10, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

How will we ever make sense out of all of this information? We begin by listening to Jesus in Luke 12:2: “But there is nothing so carefully concealed that it will not be revealed, nor so hidden that it will not be made known.” This may not sound comforting at first, because our real fear is having our sin and damage exposed for the world to see. There are lots of forces at work to keep things hidden. Those who have hurt us don’t want to be exposed, and neither do we when we’re the ones doing the harm. The sin nature fights hard to make excuses for actions while often blaming the one who was hurt. Talking about it is discouraged or even threatened. Sometimes the harm involves multiple members of a family and becomes a secret that must be protected. When Jesus talks about exposure, he means these things will lose their power over us when they come out in the light. There’s a saying that tells us we’re only as sick as our secrets. These are covered by His blood given freely to set us free.

The bible tells many stories about cover-ups of terrible choices and what happens when the truth finally comes out. We read about people who have lied, cheated, taken advantage of the weaknesses of others, stolen and even murdered. In each case, someone felt justified in taking the action. It’s the selfishness at the core of our nature driving us to get what we want, when we want it. Looking at the consequences of bad choices, we wish things had been done differently. That’s where Satan wants to keep us; stuck in regret, reliving our failures and those of the people we trusted. He tells us there’s only one way to look at all of this wreckage – a hopeless mess. This is where God wants to come in and take us on a different path. He has the power to overcome and transform what has been done.

Romans 6:23 says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.” It can be hard to accept the simple truth of this verse if we’ve been conditioned to see ourselves as hopelessly flawed and without value. We see God’s gift of salvation as too good to be true. Could God ever really accept me as I am when I can’t even accept myself? God promises that He can. He calls us His beloved children, the ones He has plans for and the ones He wants to be with forever. He knows we can never undo the damage we’ve cause or that has been done to us, and He doesn’t expect us to. He does the repair work. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” Our efforts don’t save us. He is the only one who can take away our pain and heal our hearts.

Some of us have grown up believing that we have to earn God’s forgiveness, and it’s hard to break that mindset. We believe that God is keeping score and there’s a real possibility that His grace has a limit and He’ll change His mind. We may struggle with fears of poor performance, realizing we can never be perfect in our own strength. People may have used this as a weapon to control us and we’ve believed them. They’ve told us we don’t deserve to be treated well. But the apostle Paul reassures us in Romans 8:38, “And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love.”

It's hard to comprehend God's unconditional love because it's not what we experience here in this life. Even those who love us and want the best for us can fall short because they're human too and have suffered from hurt that affected them. They may do things they think are for our good which can actually harm us. We may question what God Himself does and wonder why He allows things to happen. Applying our limited understanding to God's ways will keep us in confusion. God will help us process the pain, starting with this promise in Romans 3:24, "and all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." That word "all" includes us. God redeems us by Jesus' sacrifice alone. With that as our firm foundation, we can go into difficult memories and stand against the pressure of destruction. We can confront what was done and realize it has no power to limit what God can do to change us. It doesn't matter whether we fully understand it or not. He is the one who'll make things clear when we spend time with Him, reading and thinking about His word so we can know Him better.

This is what God really wants – a relationship with us. Not like the kind of relationships we usually have. He wants us to be free to come honestly to Him no matter how we're feeling. We don't have to cover anything up or pretend everything is great when it's not. He wants us to confess our weaknesses, but He also wants to celebrate our victories. He wants us to be fearless in bringing all of our thoughts into the open, never doubting that He will always love us. When we're quiet and open to His presence, He'll help us see things from His perspective. He wants to take those ideas which have been twisted and restore them so we can be released from confusion and misinformation that keep us separated from Him. Then we can fully trust Him to lead us through this process to freedom.

Scripture references

Proverbs 29:23, Psalm 40:12, John 10:10, Luke 12:2, Romans 6:23, Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 8:38 and 3:24

PHASE ONE: FACING REALITY OF BONDAGE

LESSON THREE:

We need to build our foundation on God's character and promises, not on our human nature. He already has plans for us, and they're good. When we put our trust in God and give Him authority over our whole lives, we can accept His power to change us and believe that He will do it. Romans 11:36 "Everything comes from God alone. Everything lives by His power." Luke 15:11-32, 2 Cor. 12:19, Phil. 4:13

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 3

It's time to check the foundation of our lives and see what needs to change. We may say we believe in God, but what exactly do we know about Him? Has our view come from our experiences in the world or from His own word? How does He see us and what is our place in His eyes? When we look at the way we've been running our daily lives, is He invited in regularly or only when there's a crisis?

If we search in His word we can begin to see that His nature is revealed in His creation as well as His interactions with people. Paul says in Romans 1:20: "For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see His invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature." There is assurance in looking at His maintaining of this world. There are changes from day to day but there is order in the whole. He can be trusted to provide a strong, consistent base for us to build on and a reason to hope in His ability to make us new.

Looking further in Romans to chapter 5 verse 5, we see "And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with His Love." The Spirit serves as a witness to this love by walking alongside us to help us understand who God is and how He is working in us. He serves as our advisor and we can learn to recognize His voice when we get quiet and wait to hear Him.

God is often described as our Father, especially by Jesus. One of the most beautiful pictures of His character as a Father is described in the parable about the prodigal son in Luke chapter 15. We usually focus on the son in this story and his choice to get an early inheritance that he can use however he pleases. If we look at his father's actions, we begin to see what God sees when He looks at us, determined to go our own ways and act on our own wisdom.

The father doesn't refuse this unusual request but divides his property and gives the son's portion willingly. We aren't told if any words of advice were given, but we can imagine the father knew this probably wouldn't end well. God's gift of free will is shown here. We're not His slaves but can choose our own direction. After blowing his entire fortune on partying, the son discovers the hard truth:

his “friends” were happy to accept his money but wouldn’t return the favor when he himself was broke. Forced to take the kind of job usually done by the lowest servants, the son had hit rock bottom.

This was the moment he realized what he’d really given up. Even his status as a younger son was better than the pigpen he was in. But this also reveals something about how he saw his father: the son knew he could go back home and be accepted, maybe not as a son but at least as a servant. He knew his father would never refuse to give him a place. The son rehearses his speech of repentance and heads home, believing he’ll be received. God shows throughout His word that He is ready to take us as we are if we’ll only ask.

In verse 20, we see that the father has been on the lookout for his wayward son. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” He had never forgotten his son or given up on him. He didn’t just wait for his son to show up, he went to meet him where he was. The son makes his humble apology and gets a surprising response. In verses 22-24 we hear the father tell the servants, “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to celebrate.”

Jesus is letting us see the Father’s heart for us. We see He is compassionate and eager to accept and restore us to our relationship with Him as His children, no matter what we’ve done. He doesn’t want us to feel isolated from Him by guilt and shame, but celebrates our moves toward Him with full acceptance. 1 John 3:1 says, “See how very much our Father loves us, for He calls us His children, and that is what we are! But the people who belong to this world don’t recognize that we are God’s children because they don’t know Him.”

We know that the prodigal son’s older brother thought he didn’t deserve this lavish reception. He couldn’t believe his father could look at this colossal waste of the inheritance or the selfish lifestyle his brother had led and not only forgive him but bring out the best of everything and have a huge party. He complained bitterly to his father about it and was told in verses 31-32: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” There may be people in our lives who see us as the older brother did, making us believe we don’t deserve such acceptance either, but we have to take God at His word. He knows we’ve replaced Him as the focus of our lives and handled our hurts with substitutes that don’t work. He shows us that even though our solutions have created new problems, He will restore us.

God has a specific purpose for our lives which we can find if we are committed to learning about Him and following His way. Psalm 40:5 says, “Many, Lord my God, are the wonders You have done, the things You planned for us. None can compare with You; were I to speak and tell of Your deeds, they would be too many to declare.” We can ask God to remind us of all the times He’s been there for us. He can help us look at situations in our lives with fresh eyes so we can recognize His presence, even in our worst moments. Getting into God’s word isn’t just a chore we have to do to score points with God. It’s how we learn who He really is. We need to know we can trust Him so we can give Him complete

authority over our lives. Proverbs 16:3 tells us, "Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and He will establish your plans." He helps us develop new plans of dealing with our hurts. Believing these words will help us exchange the image we have of ourselves as failures who could never be good enough to be accepted by a holy God or anyone else. In Ephesians 3:17 we are given a new way to see ourselves: "Then Christ will make His home in your hearts as you trust in Him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong." God wants to take out the deep roots of damage and replace them with His own work.

Getting rooted involves going deep into the power that's available to us to break strongholds in our minds, bodies and spirits. Romans 11:36 says, "For everything comes from Him and exists by His power and is intended for His glory. All glory to Him forever!" He'll not only deliver us and set us free but He'll use our stories to reveal Himself to others. They can then see the possibility of change in their own lives. Philippians 4:13 promises, "For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength." This may sound hard to believe when we look at our circumstances, but 2 Corinthians 12:9 gives us Jesus' assurance: "And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.'" Paul goes on to say, "Therefore most gladly I will boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Paul doesn't get discouraged by how little he can do on his own because he knows Jesus can start with that small bit and make it grow through His much greater power. This is also the source of our hope for a different outcome. We can have the same confidence Paul had when he gave God full control of his life.

Scripture references

Romans 1:20 and 5:5, Luke 15, Psalm 40:5, Proverbs 16:3, Ephesians 3:17, Romans 11:36, Philippians 4:3, 2 Corinthians 12:9

PHASE ONE: FACING REALITY OF BONDAGE

LESSON FOUR:

“If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always gotten.” Our coping strategies have kept us trapped in cycles of failure and unrealistic expectations. We need to accept God’s truth, not “my truth”. We identify the lies we’ve believed and choose to live in strength, not weakness. 2 Cor. 1:8-9: “We were really crushed and overwhelmed, and feared we would never live through it...we saw how powerless we were to help ourselves, but that was good, for then we put everything into the hands of God.” Rom. 7:15-17, Prov. 29:25

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 4

Maybe you’ve heard the saying, “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always gotten.” We may laugh at the obviousness of that, but how many of us have been using the same actions or beliefs to handle every situation that’s difficult? Do we procrastinate or avoid dealing with it at all, choosing some method of escape? Do we jump in to rescue another person so we can feel useful or important? Are we stuck in a cycle of beating ourselves up for not handling everything perfectly? There are so many ways to endlessly repeat destructive patterns instead of believing that we could be different, and none of them come from God. It’s like being on a hamster wheel, using a whole lot of energy to go nowhere.

Paul tells us what it’s like to live inside this maze of frustration in Galatians 5:16-17:” So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won’t be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions.” There’s that nature again, insisting that we should be able to manage everything ourselves, but if we’re honest, we know we aren’t really making things better. We just keep thinking that this time will be different.

It’s become popular to focus on “my truth.” That means each of us can operate on our own version of the truth, usually at odds with others. Using this as a basis for making decisions keeps us at the mercy of our own views, which are being increasingly shaped by the world and spiritual forces that aren’t working for our good. These views are changeable and can shift dramatically, leaving us unstable. We may try new things that still aren’t helpful because they remain based on our opinions. God’s solution is to give us His truth as revealed in His Word. It hasn’t changed because He doesn’t change.

Jesus describes this situation in Matthew 7:24-27. “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came

down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

We may have built our lives on the mindset of “This is as good as it gets.” We don’t believe that anything can really change, so we settle for less. What we’ve been doing may not be working, but change might bring something worse. What if we try something new and mess up? More disappointment is the last thing we want. Satan is more than willing to keep us fearful and uncertain, even thinking that we don’t deserve better outcomes because of who we are or what we’ve done. Keeping us focused on the condemnation of our performance, past and present, is his goal. He wants us to ignore the power of God that’s available to make changes happen.

Many of our problems start with lies we’ve believed that have twisted how we see ourselves and our relationships. Proverbs 29:25 says, “Fearing people is a dangerous trap, but trusting the Lord means safety.” Why? Because only God has a pure view. Each of us sees a world shaped through input that we’ve accepted as true, either from our own ideas or those that have been put on us by someone else. When we act out of fear of what someone else may think, we’re setting their opinions above God’s. Then we’ll try to measure up to standards that can be very different than the ones God has when He looks at us. We focus on our actions instead of our identities as God’s sons and daughters.

People evaluate us on what they see, but 1 Samuel 16:7 tells us, “...The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” And He’s the only one who really knows what’s going on in our hearts. Assumptions are made every day based on an interpretation of what we see that’s colored by whatever has shaped us. How many times have you misread a situation and found out that what you thought you saw wasn’t accurate? That can lead to conflicts, avoidance and broken relationships. It can also lead to unrealistic expectations of ourselves and other people, setting us up for more disappointment, frustration and anger.

The good news is that even when we’re confused and getting far off track by following our own ideas, Paul reminds us in Hebrews 13:5-6: “for He Himself has said, ‘I will never abandon you,’ so that we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?’” We may be rejected by people when the results of our assumptions and expectations blow up in our faces, but God is ready to talk it over with us so we can find His truth and see things from His perspective. We become more comfortable having these conversations when we spend more time with Him, getting to know Him at a deeper level.

If we’ve experienced abandonment, abuse or condemnation from another person, this verse may be hard to trust. There will be a lot of lies that have kept us from understanding that we can have a secure place with God. We believe that He’ll get tired of us and leave us to fend for ourselves. These lies are being used to hold us in patterns of weakness, trusting on our own resources for relief. Paul shares the tough times he endured while ministering in Asia in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9. “We were really crushed and overwhelmed, and feared we would never live through it. We saw how powerless we were to help

ourselves, but that was good, for then we put everything into the hands of God". Paul saw his weakness as an opportunity to recognize that his life was sustained by God, no matter what kind of intentions Satan had to destroy him. He could acknowledge his limitations without shame and look forward to accomplishing his plans with God's help.

Psalm 31:7 says, "I will rejoice and be glad in Your faithfulness, because You have seen my misery, You have known the troubles of my soul." This is where we are. We can come to God and tell Him we see how being in charge has resulted in more hurt. Ignoring the causes of the hurt has made real, lasting freedom impossible. It will take His wisdom and our openness to stop the cycle of denial. We can stop relying on other sources of direction and finally break free from creating more damage.

He is faithful to keep His promises to help us, regardless of how worthy we feel of receiving His help. He shows us how misguided our efforts have been because of faulty ideas we held as truth. He helps us understand what we've believed and why. He sees the whole view of our lives and encourages us to look at it too, not getting discouraged or sidetracked by each failure. He provides the grace to deliver and we take steps of faith to believe Him and act on what He does. This is the source of our confidence and hope in taking those new steps. It also gives us the motivation to keep going in this process. It's important to acknowledge every move we make to change, no matter how small it may seem.

Scripture references

Matthew 7:24-27, Proverbs 29:25, 1 Samuel 16:7, Hebrews 13:5-6, 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, Psalm 31:7

PHASE TWO: TAKING ACTION TO GET FREE

LESSON FIVE:

Our belief systems about life need to change and we begin to take an honest look at what we use to prop up these systems. We ask God for His perspective and accept that we need to move in a new direction and repent of the old choices. Prov. 3:5-6 “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and don’t lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.” Rom. 12:2, 1 Cor. 13:11-12, 2 Cor. 5:7

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 5

We have admitted we’re getting nowhere with the way we manage our lives. Now it’s time to actually find out why we started choosing these strategies by looking at the sources of our beliefs. Remember that you aren’t doing this alone. You’re now part of a group that’s also committed to the same process and you’ll be getting tools and support all the way.

We start by looking at where our real security is: who or what do we trust and why? This isn’t just the usual trust it takes to leave the house and start interacting with people in your daily life. This is the real foundation of your life that will give you courage to dig into difficult or painful experiences and find the roots of the problems. It’s also a process that will take some time but is totally worth every minute.

Our life experiences have shaped our trust. When people have hurt or disappointed us, we may have decided that it’s too risky to put much faith in others. Making new relationships and keeping existing ones can be frustrating, so isolation and keeping things shallow look like the best bets. We can start to assume that we know what others are thinking. Have you ever imagined what an upcoming conversation with someone would look like and rehearsed what you were going to say? How accurate were your predictions? Where do those ideas even come from? It’s so much easier to turn to something else to take our minds off conflicts and frustrations than to look any deeper. And where does God fit into all of this?

Our views of God have an effect on how willing we are to turn to Him first. If we see Him as harsh, stern and impossible to please, He’s the last one we turn to when we’ve messed up. If we see Him as remote and uninvolved, we won’t think He’s listening or even cares about our problems. If we see Him as some divine Santa Claus, we won’t understand why His answer isn’t what we wanted and think He’s unreliable. Satan is happy to contribute his lies to distort how God wants to relate with us. Just like Eve in Genesis 3, he wants us to think God is holding out on us and His word shouldn’t be trusted. Add in any negative opinions other people have contributed and we end up determined to cope on our own strength.

But we can't deny that our security system isn't making our lives better. It's time to take our views about God to the best source of information there is – His own word, the bible. Here we can find many testimonies of people who tried things their own way and turned to God. David shows his absolute trust in God in Psalm 62:7-8. "My salvation and my honor depend on God, He is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in Him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to Him, for God is our refuge." David uses the words rock and refuge throughout the Psalms when He describes God. He had many experiences hiding out in rocky caves when King Saul was hunting him, so he understood how to look for a secure retreat. Notice that he also tells us to pour out our hearts to God. He does this often in the Psalms, holding nothing back when he cries out for rescue. This is the kind of honesty God is looking for from us when we are ready to turn control of our lives over to Him.

When we're really ready to make this change, we'll finally examine where we got these beliefs about God. This process can stir up pain and confusion, but Proverbs 3:5-6 gives us a starting point: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and don't lean on your own understanding. In all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight." Trusting in our own understanding has kept us from moving forward. Making the decision to trust God gives us the courage to change. We stop trying to fix or protect ourselves. We trust God's word to be true and that Jesus has paid for our sins, as Paul says in Romans 10:9: "If you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Now we have the power to face the things we've avoided.

It's time to change the way we think about a lot of things. 1 Corinthians 13:11 describes the old way as childish: "When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things." How many of us would want to put kids in charge of running our lives? Their understanding is based on limited information and experience and mostly based on doing what they want, without thinking about any consequences. Can we see this kind of thinking reflected in our own choices? This is how one small decision made in a moment of stress can blow up into a pattern of choosing something other than God as our security. There are also lots of voices in our culture encouraging this kind of thinking, telling us we deserve whatever we want. Don't think about the consequences to you or anyone else, just take care of yourself.

Paul tells us in Romans 12:2 to stop listening to this advice. "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will." Did we ever test our old ways before putting our trust in them? Probably not. God is willing to have His plans put to the test because they are perfectly designed for us. He's the one who really knows us best.

Repentance is part of this transformation. It isn't just telling God we're sorry for choosing other things instead of Him. It involves a deliberate turning from the old ways and moving in the new direction He gives. We stop making excuses for our actions and start acting on our trust in Him. We hear Jesus say in Mark 1:15, "The time has come," He said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news." This good news isn't just for everyone else. You may have given up hope that life could ever be different, but it's time to see that this verse is for you.

Living with the consequences of our old choices has told us not to hope for the freedom we see in these verses. God looks past these results and offers lasting relief. 2 Corinthians 1:3 says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort." Notice that Paul says all comfort – not just for some circumstances, but for every one. His comfort goes beyond the surface and goes right to the source, removing the roots and giving complete deliverance. Not only that, but Paul gives us another benefit in verse 4: "so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God." We'll be able to help others see God as their solution too, just as some are doing with us tonight.

Getting a transformed mind is essential for getting a new life. Have you heard that when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail? God wants us to trade in our hammers for new tools we can find in His word. We can start to see different results in ourselves and our relationships. We can believe 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things are passed away; behold, new things have come." We can see the old things as they really are and stop pretending that this is as good as it gets. Instead of being afraid to hope for good things, we can look forward to them because we're not just using our own strength to reach them. Jesus promises to be at work in us and has given us the Holy Spirit as a guide into new understanding. If you've never accepted Jesus as your savior, you can do that tonight. If you've already accepted Him but find you've been putting your own way instead of His, you can recommit to follow Him. There are people here who will be happy to pray with you.

Scripture references

Psalms 62:7-8, Proverbs 3:5-6, Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 13:11, Romans 12:2, Mark 1:15, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 and 5:17

PHASE TWO: TAKING ACTION TO GET FREE

LESSON SIX:

It's important to invite Jesus to take an active role in our lives and in our deliverance from our control strategies. If we ask Him to set the course for healing, He will show us that it's a process, not a quick fix. We'll focus on one day at a time and the changes that need to be made now. Rom. 10:9 you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised Him from death, you will be saved." Rev. 3:20, Psalm 143:10.

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 6

We've understood that we can't make the changes that will break our cycles of bondage in our own strength. We turn to Jesus for that kind of power by letting Him come in and take control of our lives. For some of us, that means getting rid of the idea that we have to clean ourselves up before Jesus will accept us. The bible tells us clearly in Romans 5:4: "But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." He didn't wait for us to make a move. He gave His life for us before we ever knew Him. He's just been waiting for us to ask Him in.

This isn't just a matter of Him dropping in, forgiving us and then saying, "I did my part. Now you're on your own." He wants a lot more than that. He wants to be involved in every part of our lives. Listen to the way He describes it in Revelation 3:20. "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me." When someone comes to your door you get to decide whether or not to let them in. Even then, not everybody gets to share a meal with you. That's usually reserved for people you really want to be with. This is what Jesus wants – that privileged position as someone important to you, someone you'll make time for, who's worth the preparation and extra effort.

This relationship will let Jesus into those places in your heart that have been off limits to most everyone else. He wants to hear the things you've been afraid to share, the hurts that have gone too deep to think about, and the shame and guilt that Satan has been piling up on you for years until you feel unworthy of God's love. David knew this beaten-down feeling and talks about it in Psalm 34:18. "The Lord is close to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." He wants to take the broken spirit and replace it with one that's whole and healthy.

This is going to take a committed effort to give our desire to control everything in our lives to God and let Him replace it with His plans. It means trusting that His will is right and good. It means we'll have to relearn what a healthy life looks like and tell the difference between that and the one we've constructed for ourselves with our coping strategies. We need to say with the writer of Psalm 143:10, "Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God; may Your good Spirit lead me on level ground." The

ground we've been walking so far is probably anything but level – probably full of ups and downs with no real direction. That's what life controlled by the sin nature looks like. But God is changing our natures to be more like His.

Jesus' conversation with a wealthy young man in Luke 18 shows how hard it is to let go of what we know and want. This young man had kept all of the rules, but just couldn't let go of his security and trust that God would provide what he really needed. After watching him walk away, the disciples wondered how anyone could be saved and transformed. Verse 27 says, "Jesus replied, 'What is impossible with man is possible with God.'" We have to exchange our power source for the one God has prepared for each one of us individually. He's involved with every detail of our stories and knows what it will take to bring us to freedom so we can live in the way He designed. Nothing is too small to bring to Him for healing.

This may sound like a huge job and you may be tired just thinking about the work to come. In Matthew 18:28-30, Jesus used the example of an ox wearing a wooden yoke while pulling a heavy load to show how this may feel. Once again, He reminds us that His way is different than the way we've been handling our loads. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Let's examine what He's saying here. He knows this is going to be big and we'll get tired and even discouraged at times. He promises times of rest. If we let go of the burdens that have been given to us or that we've placed on ourselves, He'll give us His own strength. Not only that, He'll be right there carrying the load alongside us, teaching us how to think like He does so our choices can be different. His attitude isn't harsh and condemning, but gentle and even humble. It may be hard to imagine the Son of God as humble, but we know from other scriptures that this word was used to describe Him many times. He's not too big to get right down in the mess to help us.

This is going to be a process, not a one-and-done or a quick fix. There are a lot of things we need to unlearn and even more that we need to start doing. God won't get impatient with us and try to hurry us along. Each one of us will have to go at our own pace and be patient with our progress. Some issues may take more time to overcome than others, but God knows that. In Philippians 1:6, Paul tells us "...being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." This process of growth can continue through our whole lives so that when something new hits us and tries to drag us back into the old ways, we'll be prepared and ready to use the tools God gave us from the start.

We can expect our enemy to do his best to interfere with our new growth, but we don't need to be afraid of him. 2 Timothy 1:7 says, "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and a sound mind." The Amplified version describes this as "power, love, sound judgment and personal discipline (abilities that result in a calm, well-balanced mind and self-control.)" These are all abilities that grow the more we use them. We can ask God to help us identify what area of our lives we should work on first and approach them with confidence that we can change.

It's important to remember that we can only deal with this one day at a time. There may be years of damage to tackle, but we should do as someone who's been through this process has recommended: "Just do the next right thing." When we focus on God's ways, the right thing becomes clear. Matthew 6:33-34 records Jesus' words about getting ahead of ourselves and being consumed with what lies ahead. Speaking of God the Father, He says, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Maybe you've had a big cleanup project to do and didn't know where to start. You had to take one small part and deal with it first, continuing until the whole job was done. This process of cleaning out the garbage from the past will be like that. The result will be something that blesses us and others as well, hopefully encouraging them to try it themselves.

This will make us bear the kind of fruit that Jesus spoke about in John 15:4-5. It doesn't come from us doing things in our own strength and according to our own wisdom. Jesus tells us, "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." We already know what life was like when we were going it alone, coming up with our own ideas of how to take care of ourselves. Now we can trade frustration and pain for peace and deliverance. Other people in our lives will begin to see this evidence that we're serious about changing. Trust and forgiveness can be restored. This is the kind of fruit that Jesus wants to help us produce.

Scripture references

Romans 5:4, Revelation 3:20, Psalm 34:18, Psalm 143:10, Luke 18:27, Matthew 18:28-30, Philippians 1:6, 2 Timothy 1:7, Matthew 6:33-34, John 15:4-5

PHASE TWO: TAKING ACTION TO GET FREE

LESSON SEVEN:

We ask God to reveal the things we've hidden or ignored and prepare our hearts and minds to change, confronting any internal responses that attempt to hold us back. We seek prayer support to strengthen us for this process.

Lamentations 3:40 "Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord. Job 33:33, Job 7:11, Rom. 8:1, John 1:9

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 7

We're going to ask God to reveal the things we've stuffed down in our hearts and for His help in pulling them out into the light. We're ready to admit to the attitudes and actions that have kept us from living in honesty. We're going to apply Lamentations 3:40, which says, "Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord." This examination may reveal some ugly truths, but the good news is that we don't have to keep them. Once they're out in the open, we can choose to trade them in for different truths based on what God has been showing us in His word.

Taking this step can unleash a lot of emotions that can make us uncomfortable. Most of us have been good at avoiding them by going to our coping strategies instead. We've been afraid of all of the guilt we would feel if we owned up to how we've handled our pain and the way it's hurt us and the other people in our lives. Satan loves to magnify this guilt and watch us beat ourselves up with it. We call ourselves worthless, hopeless and all kinds of other names that keep us from believing we can change.

But God takes a different approach. Instead of using a guilty conscience as a trap, He shows us that it can be the push that we need to repent and go a different way, like the prodigal son did in Luke 15. He doesn't want guilt to be a permanent part of our lives. In Romans 8:1, we are assured, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Our acceptance of Jesus as Savior means we believe He has paid fully for all of our sins and doesn't hold them against us anymore. When Satan comes back with the garbage of your past, you should remind him that it's covered and his weapon is useless.

We're going into new territory now that isn't familiar and may even seem threatening. That's how the Israelites looked at the land God had promised them. He told them to go in and claim it, but all they could see were the dangers ahead. Joshua was chosen to take Moses' place and he needed to confirm his trust God so he could be a successful leader. With God's assurance of remaining and helping them fight their battles, he could encourage the people in chapter 1:9, "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." This is another great example

of seeing how God took people right where they were in their disobedience and proved Himself faithful to them.

Preparation for this process will involve getting quiet before God so we can recognize His voice. In the book of Job, we see a man bombarded with all kinds of attacks and how he reacted to all of them. We also see his so-called friends who started off well by sitting with him in silence, but then couldn't resist the temptation to give their opinions about his situation. One of them said to Job in chapter 33:33, "... listen to me; be silent; I will teach you wisdom." You may have listened to people like this yourself and found that their so-called wisdom didn't help and often made things worse. It's important to remember that God has the wisdom we need, and when we're really listening, we'll receive it and learn to use it.

Job spoke to God in chapter 7:11, "Therefore I will not keep silent; I will speak out the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul." God welcomes this kind of honesty. He already knows about the bitterness, resentment, grudges, fear, dishonesty and self-pity we've tried to cover up. They've been blocking our ability to get past the pain. This is what He wants us to examine: what we feel and where those feelings came from, how they've shown up in our reactions to our hurts and in the consequences of our responses. These are the things we'd never want to admit having and that we've done our best to disguise. They're also necessary to face if we want to get to the roots of our issues, then expose and fully remove them.

Psalms 40:1-2 expresses how God is involved in this process. "I waited patiently for the Lord. He turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand." That's a pretty accurate picture of what it's like dealing with the messes we're in: sliding back down into the hole when we try to get ourselves out, just getting dirtier and more frustrated. God takes us out and gives us His steady foundation to build on so we can start from a place of strength. The purpose of all of this effort is to move forward, learning from the things of the past without getting stuck there. We can recognize the path to the pit and take steps to avoid falling into it in the future.

Last week we talked about the benefit of accountability partners and other believers in our healing. Prayer cover is one important thing they can provide as we start to confront our past experiences. Paul writes about this several times in his letters to new churches. First, he reminds us in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new has come." We get a fresh start and new information so we won't repeat the same damaging cycles. Paul told the members of the Colossian church in chapter 1:9, "For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of His will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives." Your prayer partners can do this for you, and you can also pray for them. We may not think of the power of prayer, but it's one of our greatest weapons. Ephesians 6:18 says, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people."

We need all of the prayer we can get in this fight for freedom, especially when we're focused on how much needs to change. Sometimes it may seem impossible to repair the damage that's been done to us or that we've done ourselves. Our enemy wants to keep our eyes right there. Isaiah 40:29 says this about God's work in our lives: "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak." We need to keep reminding ourselves that He's never expected us to do this by ourselves. Besides the constant help He's giving us, we can also work together with others in this community to motivate each other to keep going.

We're building a team of prayer support here, but we have two crucial partners that we may not have considered: Jesus and the Holy Spirit, who are both intercessors working on our behalf. Paul explains about this in Romans 8:26, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with wordless groans." That should give us real hope. Even if all we can say is "Help", God knows exactly what we need and how to answer.

We've laid out a plan for getting out of damage control and into using what God has provided for so we can enjoy becoming new creations. Remember to give yourself time alone with Him to search for what's been hidden, to prepare your heart and mind to process what you're learning and to honestly confront anything that's been holding you back. Find prayer partners and commit to praying for them too. Doing all of this preparation will help you start dealing with the specifics one at a time without getting overwhelmed.

Scripture references

Lamentations 3:40, Romans 8:1 and 26, Joshua 1:9, Job 33:33 and 7:11, Psalm 40:1-2, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Colossians 1:9, Ephesians 6:18, Isaiah 40:29

PHASE TWO: TAKING ACTION TO GET FREE

LESSON EIGHT:

God will help us identify the people and situations that have caused our pain and the damage resulting from those encounters. We acknowledge the part we played in each circumstance, looking for positive as well as negative ways our lives have been impacted. Psalm 139:23-24 “Examine me, O God, and know my mind; test me and discover my thoughts. Find out if there is any evil in me and guide me in the everlasting way.” Eph. 4:31, Isaiah 40:10

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 8

So far, we’ve done a lot of prep work in getting out of denial about our issues. We realized we need to stop using substitutes for God. We asked Jesus to be the source of our strength in this process. We also recognized how important it is to have a support team encouraging us along the way. These are all great steps, but we’re still in the shallow end of freedom, not making that full commitment to go all in yet. We have to fight the temptation to stay in the safe zone and push on out where our feet may not feel so secure. It’s time to leave the comfort zone of the general picture and get into the details.

Being honest means admitting that staying quiet isn’t really a safe place. David describes this in Psalm 32:3: “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.” That may seem like a huge exaggeration, but pain that’s been suppressed can eat away at our bodies, minds and souls. It definitely keeps us from experiencing the full life God has promised. Speaking the hidden truth out loud is the big step that really moves us forward and breaks the power of the past that keeps us stuck.

Identifying the people who have contributed to our hurts is vital to this process. We can take on a lot of baggage from their attitudes towards us and their harmful actions, getting an unrealistic picture of who we are to ourselves, others and God. This will be a major part of understanding how our lives got so messy and why we picked our escape methods for dealing with the pressure. We can start to recognize where our patterns of thinking and behavior started. Another important thing to understand is that some of these people come with their own damaged pasts. They may carry a load of pain themselves that they then pass on to us.

Make a list of these people and the nature of the damage that was done by each one. This will help organize your thoughts and help you remember what happened. This is the beginning of the process – the whole thing will take some time. Ask God to make things clear. This can be tough when strong emotions are involved, so we need His help in finding the truth. Certain words may make us think of things in the past, just as familiar aromas often do. A new person may say or do something that reminds us of someone who hurt us. They probably won’t even understand how what they’ve done in

the present is causing pain. God can show us the lie that got started in us so Satan can't use new things to reinforce the lies.

Psalm 139:23-24 tells us how to begin. "Examine me, O God, and know my mind; test me and discover my thoughts. Find out if there is any evil in me and guide me in the everlasting way." When we pray this way, we acknowledge that we have played a part in this story too. We can pray with confidence that God will not condemn us for the past but will help us see how we were wrong and learn to make different choices for a better result. He can reveal where our thinking got twisted and realign it with His ways. We can get our garbage out of the way so we can then look more clearly at ourselves and what others have done.

John describes Jesus as light in his gospel. In chapter 8:12, he records how Jesus referred to this Himself: "... I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." If we're going to go probing into a lot of dark places to uncover the hurt, we need this pure light so we won't be afraid to go in, and so we can see what's really there. The Holy Spirit will also go in with us to make sense of what we find.

Two obstacles can make this process harder: fear and resentment. You have probably heard of the fight or flight response to a problem. Resentment can be a fight against healing by building a barrier of toughness against future hurt and a refusal to let go of the past. It doesn't make us stronger; it just makes us sicker. Paul warns us in Ephesians 4:31, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with any form of malice." No matter how much you may think the other person deserves these responses, they're not the answer to lasting peace.

Fear is the flight response: don't look, don't think about it, don't be vulnerable. It also doesn't resolve anything but acts as a trap with peace out of our reach. If we think we can't overcome this barrier, Isaiah 41:10 should reassure us. "Fear not, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed. I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will uphold you with My victorious right hand." Let's break this promise down: God is with us, now and forever, no matter where we have to go. We don't have to be paralyzed by fear or dismay. He is our God who loves us more than we can imagine, and He won't withhold that love. He is true to His word. He strengthens us so we can keep on digging. He will help us with insight so we can remember and evaluate what's been done. He holds us up with the victory that's already been won when Jesus died for us. And the Holy Spirit provides His guidance through all of the information.

It may be hard to believe at this point, but positive things have happened to us along the way. They can just be buried under all of the bad memories. The Holy Spirit can help uncover these things and the people who have contributed to them. He can help you see how God was present when you didn't recognize Him. He can remind you of the good things you have done as well, the times you didn't give in to temptation to retaliate or make excuses for yourself. This needs to become a regular part of your path to freedom to keep you from being overwhelmed by the negatives. It can also be the start of a habit of gratitude toward God for the good things and people He's placed in your life.

Ask your accountability partner or support group to pray for you as you start this process. They can pray for courage to face painful events, wisdom in sorting out what happened, discernment when Satan tries to confuse or discourage you, and confidence that God has your back and you'll come out on the other side without the load you've been lugging around. Pray for each of them as they go through their own histories. Find ways to motivate each other to attend meetings and develop a meaningful daily quiet time with God.

Scripture references

Psalm 32:3, Psalm 139:23-24, John 8:12, Ephesians 4:31, Isaiah 41:10

PHASE TWO: TAKING ACTION TO GET FREE

LESSON NINE:

We examine our responses to the people who have hurt us, the specific emotions we had and the effect of those emotions on us and others. We evaluate our commitment to being totally open and honest with ourselves and with God so He can deliver us. Col. 3:9 “Do not lie to each other. You have left your old sinful life and the things you did before.” Matt. 6:12-14, Hosea 4:4

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 9

We are examining the ways we've been harmed or have harmed others and are taking steps to overcome that damage. The first step to healing has been to acknowledge what took place. Now we will look at our responses in more detail. Some are active, some are passive, but all can have a big impact on the way we'll recover. We've allowed these emotions to become deeply established and we'll need God's help to recognize why they have to go and how we can get free of their power.

It's all too easy to rationalize our reactions, assuring ourselves that they're perfectly understandable under the circumstances and comparing ourselves to others by saying, “At least I'm not doing that....”. We may even have moments where we feel in control and safe, but they aren't lasting. We still feel something is missing, leaving us empty and unsettled.

How do we deal with these emotions in a healthy way? David shows us throughout the Psalms: we bring them honestly before God and ask for His help. David didn't hold anything back and wasn't afraid to tell God the full extent of his inner struggles. In Psalm 31 we see him expressing shame, anguish, weakness, grief, dread, terror and fear of slander. In Psalm 55:12-14 he shares the pain of being betrayed by a friend. He was often in physical danger. But he doesn't just focus on his troubles. He ends his prayers with assurance that God will rescue him. In Psalm 27:13-14, he says, “I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord, be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.” He frequently describes God as his salvation, refuge, strong tower and fortress. In Psalm 54, while under attack, he looks back and remembers how God has been faithful all through his battles.

Keep these examples in mind when you're looking at your own life. You'll be facing your feelings but won't have to be overcome by them because you're looking at them with the Holy Spirit beside you. He can help you understand the reasons you felt them and how they contributed to the beliefs you developed. You may have chosen self-protection by isolating, keeping relationships superficial, hiding behind a mask or making yourself unavailable. Fear, anxiety and depression can result from these choices. You may have chosen to fight back with anger, revenge, manipulation, ridicule and control. As

you sort through all of the feelings, know that they may be part of your story but they don't have to determine how it continues.

God's word has some advice on handling all of these feelings. Anger is something we may feel we have to avoid at all times, but we know that God Himself experienced anger. In Ephesians 4:26, Paul says, "In your anger, do not sin. Do not let the sun go down when you are still angry." How do we express our anger and what is the result? Proverbs 15:18 shows two possible outcomes. "A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel." Is anger our first response? James 1:19 tells us, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." When we slow down and listen to the Spirit, He can show us what to do.

Revenge is another strong emotion addressed in the bible. It doesn't deny that we've been harmed and that there are consequences to actions. Paul says in Romans 12:19, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, 'It is mine to avenge, I will repay,' says the Lord." We naturally want justice to be done, but doing it our way may make things worse. God already has plans for dealing with each situation. We'll be looking at forgiveness in a future lesson, but it helps now to think of Jesus' words in Matthew 6:12: "And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."

It's important for us to be completely honest about the harm we've done to others. It's much easier to focus on the part they may have played. Hosea 4:4 warns, "Don't point your finger at someone else and try to pass the blame to him." Colossians 3:9 says, "Do not lie to each other. You have left your old sinful life and the things you did before." Ask yourself if you want real freedom more than the false freedom you thought you gained by using your escape methods. What were you really getting out of the old ways, and why would you want to hold on to them? Jesus offers a better way in John 8:32. "and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Have you ever tried to build yourself up at someone else's expense? We might excuse it as snark, sarcasm or trash talk, just having fun. Those who've been on the receiving end of this may be dealing with lasting effects of what was said at that time or moments in their past. James 3:1-12 goes into detail about what our words can do. He even compares our tongues to forest fires. Our enemy is more than happy to take careless words and blow them up to add to someone's pain. Reflecting on how we've been negatively impacted by words can help us choose our own more wisely.

In Hebrews 12, Paul is giving his listeners sound advice on how to live out their faith. In verse 15 he tells them, "See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." We also are going after deep roots that have hurt us and other people in our lives. Instead of ignoring them, we need God's help in pulling them out so He can replace them with truth that will lead to healthy growth. This will happen when we get a realistic view of where we've been, how we've coped and why that needs to change. We identify what to get rid of and what to hold on to. We see how our feelings have played a part in all of this mess.

Our minds have been filled with a lot of information that has kept us from seeing our lives clearly. Philippians 4:8 helps us find a better focus. "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true,

whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if anything is worthy of praise, think about these things.” We can now clean out the garbage of lies and false beliefs about God and our identity in Him and start fresh.

Scripture references

Psalms – 31, 55:12-14, 27:13-14, 54; Ephesians 4:26, Proverbs 15:18, James 1:9 and 3:1-12, Romans 12:19, Matthew 6:12, Hosea 4:4, Colossians 3:9, John 8:32, Hebrews 12:15, Philippians 4:8

PHASE TWO: TAKING ACTION TO GET FREE

LESSON TEN:

It's important to fill our minds with healthy input, especially the influence of God's word. We should consider ways we have treated our bodies and minds in positive and negative ways. Our bodies are God's gift to be used according to His plan. Rom. 12:2 "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will." Prov. 15:14, 1 Cor. 6:19-20

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 10

Putting new content into our minds and bodies will help us get out of tendencies to avoid the pain of our tough situations by making unhealthy choices. Proverbs 17:24 puts it this way: "Wisdom is with the one who has understanding, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth." What have you used in your escape from dealing with the truth? Where have you looked for peace, security or even a little breathing room? Understanding what the real issues are and that God is working in you and with you to handle them is part of taking the path toward wisdom.

Most of us have chosen to accept the world's suggestions and found that the results haven't produced anything that works. It may have seemed great at the time, but now that we're going deeper into our problems, we can see why these things haven't produced what we'd been searching for. None of them have gotten to the root causes and certainly couldn't be called wise choices when we look at them honestly. This isn't a new condition. The apostle Paul talked about it ages ago in his book to the Roman church. In chapter 12 verse 2 he warned them, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will."

Our culture isn't made according to the pattern of life God gives us in the bible, and is often openly hostile to it. Many people would tell you that God just doesn't want you to have fun. We know that the bible isn't just a rule book but instead gives us the way to have a deep relationship with the One who really knows us and our struggles. We don't have to pretend with Him. He shows us how to get through every situation. Paul tells us that allowing God to give us a new way of thinking will help us understand what He wants us to do and why it's better than our plans have been.

God's word shows us many examples of people making good and bad choices. Some of them will be familiar to us. They decided to use their own ideas to control their lives without any input from God. Proverbs 15:14 says, "The discerning heart seeks knowledge, but the mouth of a fool feeds on

folly.” One translation uses the word trash for folly. That follows the old saying, “Garbage in, garbage out.” Discernment is defined as the ability to look at information with keen insight and good judgment. It doesn’t come from making snap decisions or doing something just because someone told you it was good. It goes beyond just knowing the facts and involves closer examination before acting.

Getting more familiar and comfortable with God’s word helps us with this process. Paul tells his young assistant Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.” James confirms this in his book in chapter 1 verse 26: “Don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you’re only fooling yourselves.” There are many self-help books around, but the bible is the “God’s help” book we really need.

We can use what we’re learning to evaluate how we’ve affected our minds and bodies. Now that we have a clearer picture of what God’s design is, we can start making changes that aren’t just based on our feelings or outside sources. Some of these changes may seem hard or almost impossible to make if we try doing them with our own willpower. Jesus recognized our human limitations when He took a few of His disciples to the garden to be with Him while He prayed. In Mark 14:38, He told them “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” He knew there would be an inner battle going on, just like we’ve all experienced when we’re tempted to choose one path over another. Notice that He told them to watch or pay attention and to pray. This is a good practice for us to use. We pay attention to what’s driving us to make a choice and pray for God’s help to make the best one.

Fear of making tough choices can paralyze us at times. Philippians 4:6-7 offers a way to handle this. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” We tackle our fear by going to God with thanks and confidence that He hears. He gives us the kind of peace we can’t find anywhere else and uses it to protect our hearts and minds, so that we can choose wisely with Jesus’ help. This is available in every situation. God cares about all parts of our lives.

We’ve spent time looking at how to improve our minds but can’t forget what we’ve done to our bodies. It’s good to see them from God’s perspective. David wrote about that in Psalm 139:13-14. “For you created my innermost parts; you wove me in my mother’s womb. I will give thanks to You, because I am awesomely and wonderfully made. Wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well.” It’s easy to take these amazing creations for granted until something goes wrong. God put a lot of care and thought into making us. How much thought have you given to what you’re doing with this gift and what you put into it?

Another thing to consider is that the Holy Spirit lives in us. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.” What kind of living conditions are we providing for the Spirit? Are we asking Him to share space

with a lot of garbage, or are we inviting Him to help us clean out the trash and replace it with good things that help us grow? Do we let Him look in our closets and pull out the boxes hidden in the back that are filled with things even we don't want to see? He is ready and eager to get in there and work with us to do this job. Romans 12:1 advises us, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship." We give Him the keys to come in and help us do the work, holding nothing back.

Scripture references

Proverbs 17:24 and 15:14, Romans 12:1-2, James 1:22, 2 Timothy 3:16, Mark 14:38, Philippians 4:6-7, Psalm 139:13-14, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

PHASE TWO: TAKING ACTION TO GET FREE

LESSON ELEVEN:

Confessing our sins to God and become willing to share our stories with another person we can trust is a vital part of our deliverance. The burden of keeping our secrets is then lifted and we receive freedom from guilt and shame. James 5:16 “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” 2 Cor. 5:19, Matt. 7:3, Prov. 28:13, Psalm 32:3-5

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 11

Tonight, we're going to look more closely at confession. Hopefully you're already seeing how necessary and freeing it can be and have already started to do this. Our first confession is to God. It's not that He doesn't already know what we've done, but we need to admit those actions and choose to turn away from them. Proverbs 28:13 explains, “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy. “We may have told ourselves in the past that the old ways weren't that bad, but God has been revealing how damaging they really were. Knowing that Jesus paid for all of that when He chose to cover our sins, we can stop avoiding the truth.

Psalm 32:1-2 describes the relief we feel when we're not hiding any more. “Blessed is the one whose transgressions have been forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit there is no doubt.” We don't have to question that God's forgiveness is real. We're not carrying around the weight of all that baggage anymore. There will be consequences to face, but we can be confident that God won't desert us. We're learning how to recognize and follow God's directions using His word as our resource. We can hear Him more clearly now through His word and recognize the Holy Spirit's guidance in making better choices.

This is the first part of “coming clean” about the past, and you may have already done it. It's also important to share your story with another person. This may seem harder than confessing to God, but James 5:16 tells us, “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” It may sound strange, but when you open up to someone you trust, you feel greater acceptance. The accountability partner you chose or another support group member would be a good person to tell. You've already established a relationship with them and have had experience talking about freedom issues, so you know they can understand where you are in the process.

While you may have already shared some sensitive information with your group or another person, it may seem too difficult to be totally open with anyone. The things we're most fearful of sharing are holding us back, often because of pride in our image. We fear their judgment and try to go back to the old mask-wearing protection of the past. Jesus understands this and dealt with the issue of judging others in Matthew 7:3-5. “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and

fail to notice the plank in your own? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me get the speck out of your eye' when there is a plank in your own? Take the plank out of your own eye first and then you can see clearly enough to remove your brother's speck of dust."

Try to picture what Jesus is saying. How crazy would it be to see someone trying to get close enough to correct someone else's vision with a board in the way? He's reminding us that we often excuse our own decisions while trying to point out where someone else has gone off track. Sometimes it's even the same issue. It's been said that we often criticize something we see in others because it's what we hate in ourselves. Instead of dealing with our own problem and what it would take to change, we want to focus on what they're doing wrong. We can only see what's really going on if we're willing to take action and get rid of everything that's in the way.

We can try to keep all of this stuffed down out of sight, but the weight of keeping our secrets gets heavier the longer we hold on to them. David continues in verses 3-5 of Psalm 32: "There was a time when I wouldn't admit what a sinner I was. But my dishonesty made me miserable and filled my days with frustration. My strength evaporated like water on a sunny day until I finally admitted all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, 'I will confess them to the Lord.' And You forgave me! All my guilt is gone."

Think back to where you were in the beginning, before you decided to change. Remember the pressure of trying to live a false life that looked perfect on the outside. When you don't keep secrets, you don't have to keep track of the lies you've told to cover them or remember what story you told to which person. Everything is done in the open. There's no need to use substitutes for God because you have a real relationship with Him now. You see that you're a flawed person in a community of flawed people – no more pretending to be perfect to measure up to perfect people. 1 John 1:7 mentions this. "But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin."

Our enemies in the spiritual world want to keep us trapped in a life that's crushed under guilt and shame. These feelings are often stirred up to tell us we're not worthy of God's love and that's who we still are. Remember Romans 8:1 says, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Condemnation comes from focusing on who we used to be and letting that remain our identity. It doesn't come from God. The Holy Spirit can get our attention when we're doing something wrong that leads us back into the old ways, but that's not condemnation. It leads us to confession and freedom. Verse 16 assures us that, "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

2 Corinthians 5:19 says, "For God was in Christ, restoring the world to Himself, no longer counting men's sins against them, but blotting them out." The bible tells us that God doesn't even remember our sins that are covered by Jesus' sacrifice. When Satan tries to remind us of the past and put us back under shame and guilt, we can stand on this verse and know that God doesn't see us that way.

Paul speaks about our relationship with God in Hebrews 4:16. "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need." God is always ready to receive us in love and give us His full attention. He helps us up when we trip and sets our feet back in the right direction. He encourages us and gives us His strength to keep going. Building on this foundation is what keeps us confident and motivated to grow.

Scripture references

Proverbs 28:13, Psalm 32:1-2 and 3-5, James 5:16, Matthew 7:3-5, 1 John 1:7, Romans 8:1 and 16, 2 Corinthians 5:19, Hebrews 4:16

PHASE TWO: TAKING ACTION TO GET FREE

LESSON TWELVE:

We identify areas of our lives that haven't been fully yielded to God's control and accept His timing in delivering us from old ways, acting on the changes He wants to make. Psalm 143:10 "Help me to do your will, for you are my God. Lead me in good paths, for your Spirit is good." Psalm 37:5

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 12

We've been analyzing our issues and made first steps in changing our ways so they align with healthier thinking. It's usually not too hard to see the biggest problem. It's the train wreck that's caused the most damage, and we start addressing it first. But as we go along, we begin to notice other things that don't seem consistent with our new intentions to put God in control. You may have seen some of these things as nobody else's business. These are the areas we're sure we can handle alone – no big deal, you can trust your own judgment. Sooner or later you realize your judgment hasn't been that successful.

These are often our typical daily reactions or choices that we just accept as normal and okay. We're used to them and don't stop to think about why we choose them or what they produce. Some are so subtle we don't even realize we're doing them. What's your automatic reaction when someone cuts you off in traffic, or a family member asks you to interrupt what you're doing and help them? How do you handle a stressful day at work, and how do you plan to unwind afterward? Where do those attitudes come from? There are hundreds of these situations that can reveal a lot about our ideas of who's in control and how we should take care of ourselves. They're also areas where we can start justifying ourselves, telling God we really couldn't be expected to act any other way under those circumstances.

God will help us identify the specific areas that we haven't released to Him if we ask. They show us that we can't expect to be transformed by our own willpower alone. It's going to take God's insight to figure out what else should be changed. David experienced this and wrote about it in Psalm 143:10. "Help me to do Your will, for You are my God. Lead me in the good path, for Your Spirit is good." We need His direction as well as His strength to even see that we need a different response. That's why David asked God to lead as well as empower him so he wouldn't just keep following the same old way.

David also wrote in Psalm 37:5, "Commit everything you do to the Lord. Trust Him to help you and He will do it." This is inviting God to be present throughout the day. It's telling Him that nothing is off limits or too small for His attention. Remember, we were given the Holy Spirit to walk alongside us. When we get used to talking with the Him, we learn more details about what's really going on in our

minds and driving our reactions. We become more sensitive to His voice and more willing to trust His leadership.

God will reveal lots of areas that need changes, but that doesn't mean He wants you to jump in and tackle them all at once. We've learned that our freedom is a process and it's important to keep that in mind here. Think of a time when you had a major project to do. Did you break it up into sections? Did you get distracted as you dealt with each part by noticing things that weren't really involved with that point? It's like picking up something that needs to be put away and taking it to one room and then getting sidetracked by something you see in another room on the way. God doesn't want you to get overwhelmed by the size of this process. He's patient and knows how impossible it can seem.

1 Peter 1:13-14 tells us to stay on target. "So prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world. So you must live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know better then." Stay tuned in to Jesus as your hope. Don't compare your progress to someone else's. This isn't a contest. Give God your full attention for each change and ask Him to help you know when you're ready for the next one.

James 4:10 says, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up." Humility is admitting to God how much you need Him and listening to Him first. We have used a song at New Life called "I Will Make Room For You" that talks about this attitude. Here are some of the lyrics that will help us get the right focus. "Here is where I lay it down, You are all I'm chasing now. This is my surrender. And I will make room for You to do whatever you want to. Your way is better." We set aside our broken plans and give Him space to work His miracles.

Keep in mind that when God removes an old strategy of handling your life, you need to be prepared to let Him put in the substitute. Satan is ready to make his own suggestions, and so are some of our old friends or family. They may feel threatened by our new lifestyles. 1 Corinthians 15:33 warns, "Do not be misled. Bad company corrupts good character." Changing the places you go and the company you keep can help you stay on track.

Jesus gave an example of why we need to have something new in place as soon as possible. He tells this story in Matthew 12:43-45; "When an evil spirit goes out of a person, it travels over dry country looking for a place to rest. If it can't find one, it says to itself, 'I will go back to my house.' So it goes back and finds the house empty. Then it goes out and brings along seven other spirits even worse than itself, and they come and live there." When someone gives up an addiction, a new one is often taken up to replace it, usually with the same bad results. That's a possibility for all of us if we don't replace our old problem with a solution that directs us toward God. It's too easy to excuse a new choice as "not as bad as the old one" without thinking about where this one will lead. We need to have a plan for handling temptation so we won't go backward.

This process can seem like two steps forward and three backward at times, but we can keep encouraging each other and recognizing the rewards we get at each new change. People are starting to notice that we're committed to being different. We remember what Jesus has done for us and that He's

calling out our accuser who's trying to distract and discourage us by using our thoughts against us. We are learning how to tell when a thought isn't consistent with what we see in God's word and how to take it captive. Galatians 5:16 reminds us, "So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves." God is always listening and ready to help.

Scripture references

Psalm 143:10 and 37:5, 1 Peter 1:13-14, James 4:10, 1 Corinthians 15:33, Matthew 12:43-45, Galatians 5:16

PHASE TWO: TAKING ACTION TO GET FREE

LESSON THIRTEEN:

We trade our own agendas for God's process of transformation. We let go of destructive coping behaviors and beliefs and choose new methods of handling past and present challenges. Rom. 12:1 "Offer yourselves as living sacrifices to God, dedicated to His service and pleasing to Him." Prov. 16:9, James 4:10, Phil. 1:6

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 13

At this point in the freedom process, it can be tempting to think we've got it figured out and can handle the rest of the way ourselves. We've learned some important tools and are trying them out. We may have begun to see positive results and think we already know everything it takes to make all the changes we'll ever need. We may be impatient and want to get through as soon as possible. We ask ourselves if we really need this community. We want to take back the control we gave to God.

Proverbs 16:9 says, "In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps." There's a big difference between making plans to act and actually carrying them out. We can have the best intentions of sticking with the new ways, but find ourselves going back into the old default mode when the pressure of our lives builds up. Going off on our own makes it easy to isolate ourselves. Then we get cut off from encouragement and positive resources. This isn't a self-help course. We can't fix ourselves. God must be our leader and we need to let Him do the work in us if we want freedom that lasts.

The idea of submission can remind us of bad relationships. Others may have tried to control us with abuse or manipulated us for selfish reasons. We have to set those memories aside and use what we know now about God's character to recognize that He's trustworthy. God uses His authority over us to bring peace into our lives and heal us of our hurts. When we started this process, we agreed to believe God and give His way a chance. Think of areas where you can already see the affects of letting Him lead. Psalm 116:14 says, "I'll complete what I promised God I'd do, and I'll do it together with His people." You belong to a group of committed Christ followers who want to follow through with their promises too.

It's common to believe that all we need to do is change our behavior, to just stop doing the things that were destructive. This is certainly necessary, but it's only part of the picture. We may have just exchanged good actions for the old bad ones, but if we don't go after the thoughts that drive those actions, we'll eventually be right back in the same rut. Have you ever chopped off the top of a dandelion, thinking that would get rid of it? What you didn't see was the taproot that goes deep below the surface. Our thoughts develop tough roots that need to be seriously addressed.

These thoughts can make us believe we're helpless failures, victims of bad circumstances or incapable of lasting change. We may think no one will fight for us so we have to go on the attack to get what we need. We may want what others have and believe that God is holding out on us, becoming resentful and ungrateful. Thoughts like these and many others can overtake us and become permanent parts of our identities if we just accept them. Ephesians 4:23 has a better way. "Let your minds and hearts be made new." Our minds are changed so our hearts can follow into new actions.

James 1:5-8 refers to the challenge of leaving our lives in God's hands. "If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and He will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask Him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do." Some of that instability comes because we look at how big this process is and worry that we can't stay on this new path forever. Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:34, "So don't be anxious about tomorrow. God will take care of your tomorrow too. Live one day at a time."

Worrying about the future and getting caught up in the regret of the past can distract us from the good work God is doing now. Remind yourself of your victories and share them with each other. Think about the way your words and thoughts are becoming more positive and hopeful and how that's affecting the way you look at your life. Isaiah spoke to the Israelites about the terrible things they'd been through. In chapter 43:18-19, he shows God telling them, "But forget all that – it is nothing compared to what I am going to do. For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland."

We can experience emotional highs when we have a major breakthrough, but the rest of the time can feel like that dry wasteland and empty wilderness these verses described. God will provide these good times to refresh us and help us stay on course, but we also have an enemy with tactics of his own. We may have forgotten him in the moment, but he wants to come back in and reclaim the territory God has won. 1 Peter 5:8-9 says, "Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand firm against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember that your family of believers all over the world is going through the same kind of suffering you are." Satan will puff himself up and try to intimidate us, but God is stronger. He's also working to remind us we're never alone.

Matthew 4:1-11 records the time Jesus faced temptation when He went off by Himself to fast and pray for 40 days and nights in preparation for His ministry. Satan tried to lure Him three times into putting His own choices above the plan God had made for His time here on earth. He handled each encounter with scripture, and we can do the same thing when we're being attacked. Read this passage yourself and ask God to give you ammunition from His word so you can stand up against the fake promises Satan makes. Find a way to make those verses easy to reach and remember.

One verse that shows us the power that's available to us is James 4:7. "So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." Notice that our defense is made of submitting

control to God, accepting His strength and using that strength to stand up to the devil. We reject his lies that say we are helpless and use the authority we have in Jesus to send him away. If you haven't started using this weapon, pick it up now.

Scripture references

Proverbs 16:9, Psalm 116:1 and 14, Ephesians 4:23, James 1:5-8, Matthew 6:34, Isaiah 43:18-19, 1 Peter 5:8-9, Matthew 4:1-11, James 4:7

PHASE THREE: WALKING IN FREEDOM

LESSON FOURTEEN:

God had given us complete forgiveness for our sins. We see that forgiving someone doesn't excuse the harm done or justify their actions, but it breaks the bondage of offense and allows us to live in freedom. We don't hold God accountable for the free will actions of others, and we let go of self-condemnation. Romans 12:17-18 "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Matt. 22:36-40, Isaiah 1:18-19

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 14

Last time, we started the process of asking forgiveness for the wrongs we've done to others by examining why we need to do it and how to begin. This time we'll look at what is involved in forgiving those who have wronged us. This may be harder for some to do, especially if there was sexual, verbal or physical abuse. We'll get into what this forgiveness means, but first, we need to think about God's forgiveness to us.

Romans 3:22-24 says, "We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, in His grace, freely makes us right in His sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when He freed us from the penalty of sin." It may be easier to think of how someone else has "fallen short", but Paul reminds us that we're all in the same condition. Rather than trying to keep score by comparing another person's sins to ours, we need to focus on God's amazing love for us that gives us a clean slate instead of what we deserve. Jesus explains this to His disciples in Matthew 18:21-35. Take time to read this and think about how to apply it to your life.

This doesn't mean that we deny the wrong that was done or the damage it caused. It doesn't excuse the actions. It doesn't tell us to just forget all about it. Forgiving is letting go of the offense and leaving it in God's hands. When we hold on to unforgiveness, we're often tied up in thoughts of bitterness, helplessness or revenge. Even if the other person never takes responsibility or asks us to forgive them, we can still be freed from carrying this weight around.

Paul spoke to the members of the church in Rome about this issue. In Romans 12:14, he said, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." It might seem impossible to take that further step of blessing the one who's hurt us. Again, this isn't about what they deserve, it's about the relief we can have when we are willing to be obedient to God and release it all to Him.

Paul continues in verse 17, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.” The world expects us to get even, even encouraging us to stay focused on the pain to build anger and resentment. This just keeps us stuck in a cycle that never ends until one person says that’s enough. Because of the power of the Holy Spirit working in us, we can be the one to stop it. Verse 21 says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” This shows us the war that’s going on inside. Every time we choose to forgive, we win another battle.

One of the biggest benefits we have when we forgive others is an increase in peace. Read Colossians 3:15: “And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body, you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful.” This isn’t something we have to create by ourselves, we just make room for Jesus to come in and fill us with His peace. When we spend time thinking about all He’s done and thanking Him for all of the changes He’s making, we add gratitude to peace for even more freedom.

There are times when we may want to hold God accountable for the harm we’ve received. We may want to ask Him how He could have allowed this to happen. God gave all people free will, and that means we have the ability to choose how we use that will. Using it selfishly can result in the damage we’ve received as well as the damage we’ve caused. Pain and suffering can come from these choices, but 1 Peter 5:10 offers us some hope. “In His kindness, God called you to share in His eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So, after you have suffered a little while, He will restore, support and strengthen you and He will place you on a firm foundation.”

Look at the four things this verse promises. God will restore the peace that was taken away, He will support us when we feel unable to go on, He will provide the strength to do the work necessary to become whole, and He’ll replace the shaky foundation we’ve made from trying to be in control with a solid one He’s made Himself. These are His gifts to us because He loves us, and they’re benefits we have when we accept a relationship with Him.

The Israelites were told they had to use their free will when it was time to go into the land God had promised them. Joshua 24:15 tells about this choice. “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” They had been warned that things wouldn’t go well for them if they didn’t choose God, but He didn’t force them to follow Him. He doesn’t force us or anyone else either. In Psalm 119:30, we see what decision David made. “I have chosen to be faithful; I have determined to live by your regulations.”

Sometimes the hardest person to forgive is yourself. The devil loves to plant thoughts in our minds about all of our failures. He drags in his favorite weapons of guilt and shame to keep us stuck in a hopeless mindset. But God has a different way of dealing with this. In Isaiah 1:18, He says, “ ‘Come now, let’s settle this’, says the Lord. ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, I will make them white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them white as wool.’ ” He takes our stains out completely.

Notice the last part of the last verse in this passage about the greatest commandment from Matthew 22:36-40: “ ‘Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?’ Jesus replied, ‘You must love the Lord Your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and all of your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important : ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ “ Jesus tells us that we must love ourselves, and that includes forgiving ourselves as He has forgiven us. Let go of that self-condemnation and watch what God can do.

Scripture references

Romans 3:22-24, Matthew 18:21-35, Romans 12:14,17 and 21, Colossians 3:15, 1 Peter 5:10, Joshua 24:15, Psalm 119:30, Isaiah 1:18, Matthew 22:36-40

PHASE THREE: WALKING IN FREEDOM

LESSON FIFTEEN:

Grace is God's free gift that can't be earned by our behavior. We give our obedience because it allows us to walk in freedom from our damage. His grace gives us the power to forgive and move forward instead of living in the past. 2 Cor. 12:9-10 "But He said to me, 'My grace is enough for you. When you are weak, my power is made perfect in you.' So, I am very happy to brag about my weaknesses. Then Christ's power can live in me...For when I am weak, then I am truly strong." Rom. 3:24, Phil 3:9, Heb. 4:16, 2 Thess. 2:16

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 15

We continue to take strong steps toward choosing to live in freedom and obedience to God in our daily interactions. It's getting easier to spot the things that used to trip us up and cause us to act on impulse instead of careful thought. The old ways are starting to look less appealing and we're recognizing the Holy Spirit's voice when we need to make decisions. Forgiving doesn't seem as impossible as it once did. We need to remember, though, what got us to this place: God's grace, not our own efforts.

Grace has been described as God's undeserved favor. It doesn't mean that He excuses or ignores our sins, He pays for them through Jesus. Grace depends on God's character, not our conduct. See how Paul explains it in Ephesians 2:4-7: "But God is so rich in mercy, and He loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, He gave us life when He raised Jesus from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) For He raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of His incredible wealth of grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all He has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus." Mercy, love, life and kindness are given to us freely when we choose to give our lives to Him.

We build barriers to God's love when we hold on to the idea that we're earning His grace. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 1:9, "He saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of His own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time." Notice that God already had a purpose for us from the very beginning. He didn't wait to see what we would do first. He gave us His word to follow so we could live the holy life He planned for each of us. Fear of falling short in carrying this out can keep us from experiencing His peace in the process.

Remember, following the rules isn't what saves us. It comes from our faith in Jesus as the One who covers our failures. He changes our hearts so we want to do what He says. Philippians 3:9 sums it up. "I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather I have become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with Him depends on faith." The changes we're making in how we live now come from this faith. What used to seem impossible is now not only possible but becomes our focus and goal.

This obedience allows us to live in freedom from our damage. He gives us a new identity that doesn't come from what others say or what we may have said about ourselves. Romans 5:2 shows us a beautiful picture of who we are now. "Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory." Does that sound too good to be true or even to imagine? We're told we can be confident and joyful. We don't have to hide behind anyone else in fear that we'll be thrown out because we don't belong there. We are there because God tells us we belong. We serve Him because we love Him.

He gives us a different perspective on the other people in our lives, especially those that are hard to love. We're battling our human tendencies when we choose to forgive, so we need the reminder Paul gives in Colossians 3:13. "Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others." Making allowance just means we understand that sin is the default mode in human life. That doesn't justify the offence, but we leave it to God to sort out each person's accountability.

It can be hard to wait for God to do the sorting and we can get worn out in the process. Once again, we're reminded of the role of grace in our lives. It isn't just reserved for the moment of our salvation, but it's a valuable resource for all the moments in our days. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 shows a conversation Paul had with God when he was feeling the weight of his circumstances. Hear God's response to his cry for help and how it changed Paul's outlook. "Each time He said, 'My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.' So now I am glad to boast about my weakness, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong." We may not be ready to be all in with Paul's view, but it can help us remember that our weakest moments are when Jesus comes in and gives us exactly what we need.

Paul used that power to write many letters to the churches he started. We get to read his encouragement to them and apply those words to ourselves as fellow Christ followers. In his letters, Paul shows that God promises even more than power. In 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17, he writes, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who loves us and by His grace gave us eternal comfort and a wonderful hope, comfort you and strengthen you in every good thing you do and say." We know that the Holy Spirit has been described as our Comforter. He is constantly with us, reminding us of these promises and showing us how to do these good things.

When we put these words into practice, we're showing the effects of Christ in our lives just like those early believers did. Colossians 1:6 makes that connection. "This same Good News is going out all over the world. It is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives, just as it changed your life from the day

you first heard and understood the truth about God’s wonderful grace.” While Paul may not have imagined what the world would look like in our time, God did and He’s changing us for this same purpose. Other people will be affected by the difference they see in our lives. God gives us the power to move forward instead of living in the past. We can show them that kind of change is available to them too.

Scripture references

Ephesians 2:4-7, 2 Timothy 1:9, Philippians 3:9, Romans 5:2, Colossians 3:13, 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17, Colossians 1:6

PHASE THREE: WALKING IN FREEDOM

LESSON SIXTEEN:

In order to keep moving forward in our new lives, we need to commit to following through with the things that help us focus on God and His plans: daily getting into His word and thinking about what it means, communicating with Him in prayer and filling our minds with input that helps us grow in understanding of His ways. We also need to be aware of new amends that need to be made so they don't snowball and block our relationships. John 3:21 "Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light." John 8:32, James 1:22, 1 Thess. 5:21

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 16

Imagine that you've been climbing a long winding path up the side of a mountain. It started off with a few slopes that became steeper and demanded more endurance, and then the real challenge began. You kept at it and learned to handle even more rugged stretches until you finally reached an area of level ground with a place to rest and look back at the path you've travelled. You realize that you've come so much farther than you could have imagined when you began. The view from your current position tells a story of strength and determination, and it's tempting to rest a while before going back down and celebrating your accomplishment.

But when you turn around and look up, you realize there's still more climbing to do. You can keep going and aim for the top of the mountain, or you can say you've done enough and head back down. This is a picture of our path to freedom. It's tempting to call it complete when the most damaging habits are broken and the most painful lies are replaced with truth. It was hard work and you're feeling better. You believe these changes will probably last and it seems reasonable to regain some control by handling things yourself now. You want to live on the highs you've experienced and coast on to the end.

Does that sound like a pattern from your past? Have you made great progress in an area of your life and watched it fade when you lost sight of what got you there in the first place? We need to make sure we keep using the tools that will help us be consistent in following God and His plans for us. We need to remember that freedom isn't just a short trip, it's a lifetime adventure.

First, we take some quiet time to honestly assess where we are in the journey. Are there any issues that still pop up and sidetrack us? What lies are still lurking in the back of our minds, and how do we respond when our enemy throws them at us? Are we using the truth we've learned and are we

confident in how we stand in God's eyes? This is a time for us to pray again as David did in Psalm 139:23-24, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my thoughts. Examine me, and see if I have not represented my feelings as they really are. Keep on always searching me out." We're making ourselves open to God's input at every moment and listening to what He reveals.

Paul talks to the early church in Corinth about the necessity for this kind of checkup. In 1 Corinthians 10:12, he says, "If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall." In other words, pay attention! This happens when we think we're finally mature enough to figure everything out on our own and forget we really need to stay in teamwork with God. We should absolutely celebrate our growth, thanking Him for His grace and strength while committing to continuing the work. Hebrews 10:23 says, "Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep His promises." He promised to never leave us and we can see how He hasn't.

By now we should understand how much we need God's word. It can sharpen our discernment in telling the truth from the lies our enemy sends. Remember that Jesus said, "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) He's the real truth. Just as those who work with cash learn to spot counterfeits by studying the real things, we can recognize how Satan uses his imitations to deceive and pull us away from the right way. The bible helps us to be prepared for his attacks by giving us examples of those who have succeeded and failed in the battle.

We can make a collection of favorite verses as ammo against him. Psalm 119 shows us what this looks like. In verses 9-11, the writer asks, "How can a young person stay pure? By obeying your word. I have tried hard to find you – don't let me wander from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you." In verse 27, we read, "Help me understand the meaning of your commandments, and I will meditate on your wonderful deeds." Verse 34 continues, "Give me understanding and I will obey your instructions. I will put them into practice with all my heart." Reading is a start, but we need to spend time thinking about what we've read and then choose to live by what we understand.

Staying in touch with God through prayer might have seemed tough in the beginning, especially when we read in 1 Thessalonians 5:17: "Pray without ceasing." Some of us struggled to have even a few moments of regular prayer, but what about now? If we remember that prayer is a conversation with God and we're remembering to concentrate on what we're saying instead of how, it's not that hard to keep it going. Read Matthew 6:5-13 for Jesus' instructions on prayer. Any place is a good place to talk to Him, even if it's just a simple cry for help in the middle of a tough situation. Relationships thrive on communication, and our relationship with God is no different.

We need to make sure we're maintaining exposure to material that will keep us growing and providing healthier places for our minds. In the past, we were attracted to some things that seemed good but were really harmful and took us down some dark roads. We see the difference now and aren't falling for the idea that a little bit won't hurt. If your time of reflection shows that you've relaxed your standards, read what Paul states in Galatians 5:7-8, "You were running the race so well. Who has held you back from following the truth? It certainly wasn't God, for He is the one who called you to

freedom.” Make a clean break with anything that gets in the way of an open relationship with God and ask Him to lead you to better things.

Finally, keep accountability in your relationships by staying current with any amends you owe for hurtful words and actions. We’ve learned how good it feels when we don’t drag any baggage around, so don’t let any start to pile up now. Paul encourages us in Colossians 3:1-10 by showing us what we have to look forward to and reminding us of the results we got by living the old way. In verse 10, he says, “Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him.” That’s the focus of the rest of our lives and what will keep us climbing higher.

Scripture references

Psalm 139:23-24, 1 Corinthians 10:12, Hebrews 10:23, John 14:6, Psalm 119:9-11,27 and 34, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Matthew 6:5-13, Galatians 5:7-8, Colossians 3:1-10

PHASE THREE: WALKING IN FREEDOM

LESSON SEVENTEEN:

It's easy to loosen our guard against the temptations we faced in the old days. Temptation itself is not sin, but acting on it is. Pastor Rick Warren tells us to do a HEART check: are we hurting, exhausted, angry, resentful, or tense? We need to pay attention when we encounter the situations and people that used to send us back to our failed strategies. Keeping up a running conversation with God will help us stay focused. Phil. 4:6-7 "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything; tell God your needs and don't forget to thank him for his answers. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will keep your thoughts and your hearts quiet and at rest as you trust in Christ Jesus." Matt. 4:10, 1 Thess. 5:16-18, Psalm 46:10, Psalm 1:1-3

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 17

Last week, we looked at ways to help us maintain our momentum. Tonight we'll see what happens when that momentum is threatened or broken. Facing temptation is a fact of life for every Christ follower. It's important to know that being tempted isn't sin and doesn't mean we're guaranteed to give in. It just means we need to be aware of the potential to choose the wrong way.

Take another look at Matthew 4:1-11. Satan chose to tempt Jesus in three areas: His physical needs, His obedience to the boundaries His Father had set up for His time on earth, and the choice between following His own desires or God's plan. Hebrews 2:18 says, "Because Jesus was tempted as we are and suffered as we do, He understands us and He is able to help us when we are tempted." He knows exactly what we're up against and how hard it can be to stay committed to what God has for us.

Remember how He countered Satan with scripture? God uses His word to equip us too. In the book of Zechariah, we see a governor of Judah who has to decide where he'll put his trust. In Chapter 4 verse 6, an angel tells Zechariah to encourage this man and show him where the real strength lies. "Then he said to me, 'This is what the Lord says to Zerubbabel: It is not by force or by strength, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Heaven's Armies.'"

We know this. We've seen what happens when we stay focused and let the Spirit lead us. When we find ourselves in what seems like a losing battle against giving in and going backward, it's time to stop and ask ourselves what's made us so vulnerable now? What changed? What's the weak spot in our armor? Paul talks about the need for a reality check in Romans 12:3. "Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us." Pride in our successes can prevent us from noticing patterns of compromise or make us ignore warning signs that we aren't taking threats seriously. Paul goes on in Galatians 3:3, "How foolish can you be? After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort?"

We just saw in Matthew chapter 4 that Satan wanted Jesus to test the limits of God's provision by doing something foolish: jumping off the highest point of the temple. Ask yourself if you're doing something just as risky: are you placing yourself in situations that used to harm you, trusting that you'll be strong enough to resist now? God's power is certainly strong enough to keep you from falling, but why would you want to go back there and hang around? We've all got better places to go and better ways to fill our minds and free time.

Instead of just waiting for temptation to strike and hoping that we'll resist, we need to develop a plan for dealing with it now, starting in the mind. 1 Thessalonians 5:21 advises, "Test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good." When the thought pops into your head, hold it there for examination and compare it to what God says. Ask Him to remind you what happened when you followed through with this thought in the past. How did this hurt you or someone else? Did it lead to further damaging behavior? What was going on at the time that made you turn to this solution for relief? Psalm 46:10 tells us, "Be still and know that I am God." Get quiet and listen instead of trying to convince yourself that it won't be that bad this time.

This honest communication with God will redirect your body and mind to follow Him. James 1:14-15 spells this out plainly. "Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow it gives birth to death." This shows that the thought itself is just a thought at this point, but it could become a reality. Ask God to show you if this idea came from your own mind or from someone else. We may have started listening to others who want us to get back on the old path, but Psalm 1:1 says, "Happy are those who reject the advice of evil people, who do not follow sinners or join those who have no use for God."

Our accountability partners and group members can help us sort through these ideas too. It helps to hear from someone who's not involved themselves. We've been honest with each other and have shared our struggles and successes. Hebrews 10:25 says, "Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us encourage one another all the more, since you see the Day of the Lord is coming nearer." Contact someone when the pressure to act is building so they can listen, offer an objective viewpoint and pray with you. Be available to do the same for someone else. That's a big reason God brought us together here.

So what happens if you take that step from thinking about a temptation to acting on it? Do you go back to square one with God? No, that's part of the all or nothing thinking that discourages people from coming back to Him when they fall. Remember the father of the prodigal son. Jesus told that story so we wouldn't be afraid to come to Him. We confess and turn back to Him, confident that He'll walk us through what happened and show us how to avoid it next time. In 1 John 2:1 the apostle John says, "My little children, I am telling you this so you will stay away from sin. But if you sin, there is someone to plead for you before the Father. His name is Jesus Christ, the one who is all good and pleases God completely."

1 Corinthians 10:13 tells us, "The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, He will show you a way out so that you can endure." We should go to Him first, but if we don't, our failures don't have to be the end of our stories. He doesn't give up on us. He is faithful to keep walking with us and continues to renew our minds.

Scripture References

Matthew 4:1-11, Hebrews 2:18 and 10:25, Zechariah 4:6, Romans 12:3, Galatians 3:3, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, Psalm 46:10 and 1:1, James 1:14-15, 1 John 2:1

PHASE THREE: WALKING IN FREEDOM

LESSON EIGHTEEN:

Taking time to be grateful to God for the work He's been doing in our lives is an important part of a relationship with Him. Thanking Him for our progress so far, for areas where we especially see growth and healing, for the people He's put in our lives either in person or through other resources and for the evidence of His love and care in the world around us are good places to start. Psalm 107:15 "Give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and wonderful deeds for mankind." Col. 3:17

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 18

You may have heard people talk about having an attitude of gratitude. That sounds like one of those nice little phrases that get tossed around without much thought. But we want to get serious about it tonight because of all we have to be grateful for on this road to getting free. The book of Psalms is a great resource for this, and we're going to be looking at several passages to guide our thoughts in that direction.

Psalm 100 is only 5 verses long, but it's packed with praise. Verse 4 tells us to "Enter His gates with thanksgiving; go into His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him." Instead of setting aside one day for thanksgiving like we do in this country, we can choose to tell God how much we appreciate and love Him any time we go into His presence. Make it a habit to thank Him for small things as well as major breakthroughs. Our prayers can be an immediate response in reaction to what He's doing in the moment.

Read all of Psalm 107. It's quite a bit longer, but it gets into many circumstances where God's love and deliverance can be seen. It tells about homeless exiles, wanderers in the wilderness, those who've been rebellious or foolish and are facing the consequences of their choices, and those in dangerous situations. God came through for each one of them, as He has for us. Verse 1 starts off with the theme of the psalm. "Give thanks to the Lord for He is good! His faithful love endures forever."

See if you can relate to verses 14-15: "He led them from the darkness and deepest gloom; He snapped their chains. Give thanks to the Lord for His unfailing love and wonderful deeds for mankind." Spend some time thinking about the chains God has broken for you and how your life has changed. Verses 42-43 show the result of that reflection. "The godly will see these things and be glad, while the wicked are struck silent. Those who are wise will take all this to heart; they will see in our history the

faithful love of the Lord.” You have a history with God. Start at the beginning and follow the evidence of His presence and action throughout your life. Ask Him to show you how He was with you when you didn’t realize it at the time.

As we go through the next 3 verses, think about the people and resources He’s given you to help you stay on course. Take time to thank Him for the input they’ve had. Colossians 3:16 gives us specific actions we can take to fill ourselves and others with awareness of what God has done. “Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom He gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.” 1 Thessalonians 5:11 continues with these words: “So comfort each other and make each other strong as you already are doing.” We can keep making safe spaces for sharing what’s really going on in our lives. 1 Peter 3:8 says, “To conclude: you must all have the same attitude and the same feelings; love one another, and be kind and humble with one another.” As you’re remembering what people have done for you, don’t be afraid to tell them how much they’ve helped to make your progress easier.

In Hebrews 12:1, Paul reveals the value of reading the bible for stories about God’s work over thousands of years in the lives of people who weren’t all that different from us. They weren’t all completely dedicated to Him from the beginning. Some of them fought Him at first and turned away, but saw how He kept coming after them for their good. A lot of us can see that pattern in our lives, and we’re here because God didn’t give up. Paul says of them, “All these many people who have had faith in God are around us like a cloud. Let us put everything out of our lives that keeps us from doing what we should. Let us keep running in the race that God has planned for us.” Start your own collection of stories and verses that have been especially encouraging to you and share them with others.

Another opportunity for telling God of our gratitude comes from looking at His creation and how He cares for it every day. Some of us can’t spend much time outside interacting with the things He’s made, but we can look at the sunrises and sunsets to get a clear view of what an amazing artist He is. Psalm 19:1-4 says, “How clearly the sky reveals God’s glory! How plainly it shows what He has done! Each day announces it to the following day; each night repeats it to the next. No speech or words are used, no sound is heard; yet their message goes out to all the world and is heard to the ends of the earth.” Sometimes storms may block our view for a while, but the message is still the same, just as God’s love is with us even when He seems far away.

Being in the woods, on a mountain or near an ocean can make us seem pretty small and insignificant. David expressed this feeling in Psalm 8:3-4: “When I look at the night sky and see the work of Your fingers – the moon and stars You set in place – what are mere mortals that You should think about them, human beings that You should care for them?” Satan would like us to feel unimportant and unworthy of God’s notice. That’s why he keeps throwing our past lives at us to keep us looking at failure and loss.

Jesus counters that view in Matthew 10: verses 29-31. “What is the price of two sparrows – one copper coin? But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a

whole flock of sparrows.” He used a bird that was very common and not considered special in any way. A cardinal or blue jay will catch our eyes, but not many people notice the sparrows. He goes on to describe how God is so aware of us that He knows how many hairs we lost today. How many of us keep track of that? Jesus is letting us see how important each of us is to God and how He wants to be at the center of our thoughts and lives.

Spending time with God and being truly grateful for what He’s done and is doing now is the best defense against negative attitudes and pity parties. Whether you feel you’ve come a long way or are still near the starting point, you can find evidence of growth and healing. The next time Satan comes around with his bag of garbage to throw on you, you can use these verses as a weapon to destroy his attack.

Scripture References

Psalm 100:4, 107:1, 14-15 and 42-43, Colossians 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, 1 Peter 3:8, Hebrews 12:1, Psalm 19:1-4 and 8:3-4, Matthew 10:29-31

PHASE THREE: WALKING IN FREEDOM

LESSON NINETEEN:

Losing momentum in a lifetime of following God can happen to any believer. When we start trying to control things ourselves instead of seeking God's plans and make excuses for choices that don't align with His word, we realize we're getting stuck. Our support team can help us look at our choices honestly. Making a periodic time for assessing where we are in relationship to God, ourselves and others will help us keep from losing too much ground and show any patterns that need to be addressed. Gal. 5:25 "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." Prov. 3:5-6, Heb. 13:6, Prov. 13:20, Gal. 5:13, Gal. 6:2

NEW LIFE FREEDOM LESSON 19

We've come to the last lesson in this cycle, and some of us are wondering, now what? Now comes the rest of your story. What will you do with what you've learned? How can you stay focused and successful in the maturing of your faith and the development of your relationship with God? You may be concerned about losing momentum, but it doesn't have to be that way. Continuing your daily communication with God will help you spot issues you haven't dealt with fully or sources of confusion and distraction along the way. Remember that He's always available – no appointments necessary. Don't let things build up until they seem impossible to handle. The best time to deal with an issue is now.

We have the Holy Spirit as our constant guide and counselor. Galatians 5:25 tells us, "Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives." Don't hold anything back from Him. Be completely open to His prompting: some of us call this getting "Holy Spirit nudges." You can sense when He puts a finger on an attitude or action and invites you to stop and take a look at what's behind it and the best way to approach that situation. The more you listen, the more sensitive you'll get to these times.

God knows how easy it is to get caught up in what's going on at the moment. We read in Luke 10:38-42 about how two women were affected by a visit from Jesus and His disciples. One sister, Martha, took charge of fixing dinner while Mary, the other sister, sat listening to Jesus speak. We can

probably identify with Martha's frustration at being left to do all of the practical things by herself. She even asked Jesus to intervene and make Mary help her. Notice Jesus' response in verses 41 and 42: "But the Lord said to her, 'My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all the details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her.' "

Those words might surprise us. But Jesus wasn't telling her that hospitality and service aren't important. He was just pointing out how the relationship with Him comes first. We do our best work for Him when we've had time in His presence before anything else. Then we're operating in His power and not trying to make things happen ourselves. This can be hard to remember when we're "sweating the small stuff" or under pressure to accomplish something. Listening to Him helps us strengthen the habit of giving Him first place.

Those times can show that we need a faith check. Where have we placed our trust: in our own abilities and consistency, or in God's promises? Ephesians 1:6-9 remind us what these are. "So we praise God for the glorious grace He has poured out on us who belong to His dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that He purchased our freedom with the blood of His Son and forgave our sins. He has showered His kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding. God has now revealed to us His mysterious will regarding Christ – which is to fulfill His own good plan." That's a long list of the benefits we have through Christ, along with the assurance that He's got plans that include us. Remember these verses the next time Satan comes around trying to isolate and discourage you.

The urge to take over can pop up when we start to panic if things seem out of control in our current situation. This is a good time to slow down and honestly think about how different our lives are now compared to the past. Use Galatians 5:13 to help with this. "For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love." Breaking this verse down, we see we're in a new lifestyle now, not a temporary place. This doesn't include going back and forth between being ruled by our old choices and following the new. It's about staying in a commitment to God's leadership and allowing Him to use us to benefit others as well as ourselves. Most of our old decisions were based on pleasing or fixing ourselves. That's the old life of bondage. We're now taking deliberate actions to keep moving forward in freedom.

We may have to address fears of failure and the unknown, but we don't have to do it alone. We still have a support team that can continue to encourage us if we stay connected to them. Proverbs 13:20 says, "Walk with the wise and become wise; associate with fools and get into trouble." This is pretty basic. We get to decide what advice we take, what resources we use and what outcomes we want. As much as we'd like to arrive at the finish line now and coast all the way home, this is going to be the ongoing writing of our stories. If that seems too big, remember that any story is made up of small parts. It has to be done one day at a time.

We've used the book of Psalms many times for a good reason: they give us a view into the ups and downs of David's life. One thing has been consistent: David relied on God. Even when he gave in to sin, he knew his only hope was God's forgiveness and mercy. He expresses the same emotions we have

in words that help us describe what we feel too. Psalm 34:4-6 covers a wide range of feelings that you may recognize. "I prayed to the Lord, and He answered me. He freed me from all my fears. Those who look to Him for help will be radiant with joy; no shadow of shame will darken their faces. In my desperation I prayed, and the Lord listened; He saved me from all of my troubles."

If you decide to go through the six month cycle of teachings again, you can be sure God will show you new things. We're always growing, and His word is always fresh. If you decide to move on to other things, you have that same assurance of growth when you stay open to the Holy Spirit. He reminds us of what we've learned if we listen. Either way, God has promised to be with you, just as David says in the verses we just read. Keep writing and sharing your story.

Scripture references

Galatians 5:25, Luke 10:38-42, Ephesians 1:6-9, Galatians 5:13, Proverbs 13:20, Psalm 34:4-6