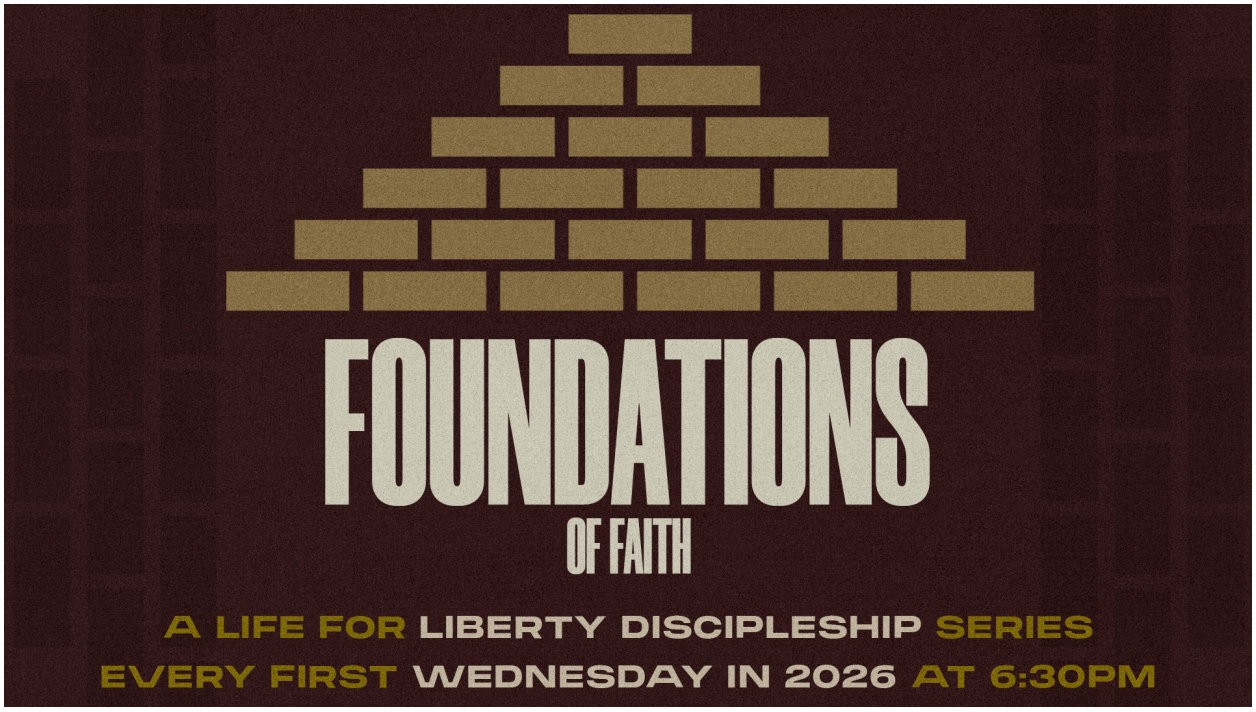


Foundations of Faith Church-Wide Discipleship

Weekly Study Guide

Foundations of Faith
A Life *for* Liberty Discipleship Series

For our 90th anniversary, the Church at Liberty Square is pairing the two essential cornerstones of any church, evangelism and discipleship, into this yearlong, church-wide study.

Jesus Himself specifically linked the two together as symbiotic within a healthy church (Matthew 28:19-20). And the early church repeatedly proved the point that evangelism and discipleship go hand-in-hand. Moreover, discipleship is often the direct fuel for church growth (e.g., Acts 2:42-47).

After the Gospels and the book of Acts, almost the entire remainder of the New Testament is an extended primer on discipleship – exhortation, encouragement, reproof, rebuke, and correction around *understanding* and *living* the Good News individually and as a church. Indeed, now, just as then, we often *share* the Good News by how we *live* it. Actions still speak louder than words.

In fact, the biblical record and pattern of evangelism seem to suggest that a small subset of everyday Christians evangelized with actual words of preaching and teaching – primarily the apostolic leadership, appointed deacons, and those whose ministry required them to "do the work of an evangelist."

But the writings of Paul, Peter, James, and John demonstrate that *all* in the early church were expected to evangelize through how they lived their everyday lives, sanctified by the blood of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. In doing so, they were true to two of Jesus's central exhortations to His church: "In the same way, *let your light shine before others*, so that *they may see your good works* and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16), and "A new commandment I give to you, that you *love one another*: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. *By this all people will know that you are my disciples*, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

This makes sense, because the New Testament spends considerable time and energy on how to actively live a Christlike life, to be like Jesus. The Bible repeatedly admonishes and teaches us to love with *action* not just with *words*. "Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:18); "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only…" (James 1:22); "They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works" (Titus 1:16); "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

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In short, to evangelize well – to show the world we are Christ's by how we actively love Hannothers (John 13:34-35) – we must first disciple well within our church.

This guide will help us do just that.

How to Use This Study Guide

On the first Wednesday of each month in 2026, we will teach on a monthly discipleship focus. We highly encourage each person at Liberty Square to attend these first Wednesday night lessons. They will form the backbone of our corporate discipleship for that month and, indeed, each month will build on the previous one.

But the teaching does not stop with the Wednesday lesson. Unique to this series are follow-up materials for each component of discipleship. For each week, we will provide additional scriptures and reflective readings about the monthly topic, as well as questions and points of prayer to consider in one's own devotion and study time. In addition Liberty Groups and other discipleship-oriented church groups and ministries will highlight the monthly theme.

So how does one use the guide?

First, **go at your own pace each week**. We intentionally will not provide you daily material, because we want you to take your time and linger over the weekly scriptures and questions. We would rather you repeatedly read a passage and let it sink in than superficially gloss over multiple chapters.

Second, **think practically**. For most of the series, the weekly reflections will include ways that we can internalize the monthly discipleship theme and then live it out in our lives, whether at home, at work, at church, or within the community. Remember, the overarching goal of discipleship is to make us more like Christ. This takes practice. Our salvation came freely to us by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and through our confession of His Lordship. Our sanctification, however, requires effort from us. And our submission is an invitation to the Holy Spirit to remake, reorient, and rehabituate our lives.

Third, **use this guide with others**. Use it in your families, within your Liberty Groups, in your Sunday morning class, in any ministry within Liberty Square. We sometimes over-individualize the Christian journey, neglecting that much of the book of Acts paints the picture of a church that "had all things in common," that prayed, worshipped, learned, fellowshipped, and "did life" together (Acts 2:42-47). The goal of

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Foundations of Faith is to grow us both in our personal walk but also equip us for life within the body of Christ.

* * *

Because we want the Church to deliberately move together, month-by-month, we will be sharing each month's focus and guide when we arrive there in the year. The order of the topics is purposeful, all with an eye to a more purposeful, more disciplined, more fruitful Christian life (individually, at home, and within the Church) and more robust personal evangelism.

I look forward to sharing this journey with you as we grow in Christ together "so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Ephesians 4:14-15).

Let us "grow in the grace of knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity" (1 Peter 3:18).

Amen.

In the love of Christ,

Pastor Chris
Executive Pastor, Discipleship and Community
The Church at Liberty Square

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November
Formed or Deformed? Discipleship in a Distracted, Secular Age

From time to time, all of us tend to be afflicted with a case of *chronological snobbery*. C.S. Lewis originally coined that phrase in the 1950s to describe a presumptuous attitude that new, modern ways of thinking and living are superior to older, more traditional and established ones.

Of course, that is hardly true, but our myopic view of history and our selfish tendencies as humans conspire to do what they always do – center the story on us. We simply have a remarkable ability to make the story about us, whether good or bad.

Want proof? Talk to a teenager on the morning of the senior prom. She wakes up with the biggest, reddest, angriest looking pimple that medical science has ever seen. We all know how that morning unfolds. She refuses to come out of her room, and she yells through the door, "My life is over! This is the worst thing that has ever happened! No one has ever been humiliated like this."

Perspective is in shorter supply than water in the desert.

But we need not be too judgmental, because that propensity follows us through life. Our trials are tougher. Our days are darker. Our temptations are greater. Our distractions are more ubiquitous. Our world is sicker. Blah, blah, blah.

Let me pause and say this. I am not a naive fool. I fully realize that this earth is afflicted by sin and the consequences of that sin. Hearts are hardened and depraved, and the ensnarements of the enemy seem to be plentiful and commonplace.

Yet I roundly reject the pessimism of those who contend that these are the most calamitous and cataclysmic days the planet has ever seen. To start with the obvious reply: such a view does extreme violence to the astonishing movement of the Holy Spirit across every continent. Jesus is both alive and well, and, the last time I checked, "in him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4-5).

Second, imagine meeting a Polish Jew in 1942, one who was just loaded into a train bound for Auschwitz… or an Ashanti woman from the Gold Coast of Africa in 1670, shortly after she had been crammed into a wooden slave ship bound for the Caribbean… or even a Christian living in Rome in 64, a man whose wife and children were rounded up, covered in pitch and tar, fastened to a stake, and lit on fire as a human torch to

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illuminate the path to Vatican Hill. And then imagine having the gall and temerity to claim that their experiences were comparatively less awful that what we face today.

We do not like to linger in such horror, because perspective forces us to surrender such foolhardy notions that it has never been worse than it is now. And, even if the overall climate is bad, I seriously doubt one could ever tell those folks, and millions more like them through the centuries, that their hell-on-earth paled in comparison to ours.

Third, such chronological snobbery also ignores biblical history.

Take Daniel, to whom we will repeatedly return this month. In chapter 1 of his book, we learn that Daniel and his friends are shipped off in exile to Babylon. In that era, one could find no more secular, pagan empire than the Babylonians.

Upon arrival, the empire *literally* attempted to completely *deform* their identities by changing their names, language, education, diet, and even religion to match the Babylonian culture.

Now, if that sounds familiar to you, it should, because it sounds exactly like today. Our world is doing everything it can to thwart our spiritual formation and substitute spiritual **deformation** through cultural assimilation.

But I hope you see that nothing is new under the sun. We are being brainwashed into believing that right is wrong and wrong is right. We are being convinced that biology is man-made instead of divine construct, and its contours are fluid. We are being forced to condone, if not actively support, things that are against not just God's creative design and holy law but millennia of life across multiple civilizations. We are being made dependent on the government instead of the church and one another, second only to God. We are being stripped of our own individual dignity and self-determination, compelled to adopt groupthink simply to keep our jobs or keep the peace or avoid a lawsuit.

Yet… Daniel and those Hebrew boys could look across 2,500 years of history and legitimately say, "Me, too." So, we need not look out the window and hyperventilate over the state of the world. What the Bible shows us – through Daniel and so many other stories – is that such spiritual deformation is accompanied by three truths:

- Attempts at spiritual deformation are certain, no matter the era.
- We do not have to bow to the culture's attempt at deformation. We have a choice as to whether we defile ourselves or not.

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- The blueprint for how apprentices of Jesus can live deeply in a secular culture without letting the culture reshape their core is universal across history: the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, particularly for self-control, discipline, and wisdom.

We were – we *are* – made to do hard things. And this is no exception.

Discipleship in *this* distracted, secular age requires us to have the same focus as Daniel and his friends. Things we often ignore – daily habits, cultural liturgies, and digital noise – are the very tools of this war of distraction, shaping our loves, desires, and identities quietly albeit certainly.

So, this month we will work together to move from passive deformation by the world to intentional formation in Christ. First, we will explore the intensely real battle for our imaginations, for what we desire and wish to become. Second, we will honestly and forthrightly confront the architecture, and not just the architect, of that distraction. Third, we will tackle the myth of the self-made person and the toxicity of the individual expressivism that permeates our land. And finally, we will explore our own set of counter-cultural liturgies that can refocus our hearts and minds on transformative, holy habits.

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Week 1 – November
The Battle for Our Imagination

Weekly Readings:

- Daniel 1
- Romans 12:1-2
- Key idea – The world does not try to conquer us by first throwing us into the fire; the world starts its conquest by renaming us.

Before you read any of this week's lesson, read Daniel 1. Then, read it again.

In particular, let verses 3-8 soak into you.

Let's be abundantly clear about what is happening here. The Babylonians besieged and conquered Jerusalem. And to the victors go the spoils, right? But in this case, among the spoils desired by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, was the most valuable commodity of any civilization – its youth. In fact, he specifically wanted the bright and beautiful ones, those of noble and royal heritage, those given to the pursuits that underpin a society's stability, growth, creativity, and culture. He ordered them whisked away from Judah and installed under his watch in Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzer was no dummy. He knew full well that doing so would accomplish two things. First and more obviously, the Babylonians would directly and immediately benefit from the assimilation of the finest intellectual capital of another people into their own world. New ideas, inventions, systems, music, poetry, approaches, and the like.

Second and more sinisterly, he knew that figuratively raping a land of its young dreamers and doers would destroy the hope and spirit of a people. A lost generation – particularly of a society's most promising youth – is a searing historical trauma from which few civilizations recover.

Nebuchadnezzar ultimately understood that a conquest is never complete or permanent when you simply roll your chariots down the streets of the capital city. Grand armies fight and win battles and inflict terror, but they do not win (or control) the hearts and minds of the vanquished. No, Nebuchadnezzar was clearheaded – to truly conquer a people, one must reshape their imagination.

Amid the battle tactics and empire building, he was steely focused on this idea: humans are thinking beings and desiring beings. What we love and appreciate the most directly shapes who and what we become. So, Nebuchadnezzar set out on a grand program of reengineering the hearts and minds of Judah's fairest and finest.

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And that is what secular culture does to us. Through its subtle, daily liturgies, the secular world reprograms us to love the wrong things.

A brief aside about liturgies – In some parts of Christianity, that word is frowned upon, viewed as a necessary casualty of the Reformation. Nothing could be further from the truth. Every church – indeed, every family, every community, every workplace – embraces liturgy. A liturgy is simply an established, repetitive sequence of ritual, routine, or behavior that a group of people follow together in order to create a shared meaning or identity. Singing your college's fight song after a touchdown is a liturgy. Reciting the Pledge of Allegiance is a liturgy. And, contrary to what some folks may think, singing two fast worship choruses and two slow worship choruses… yeah, that is a liturgy, too.

Why that digression? Because liturgy, both in the days of Daniel and in our own time, is one the world's most aggressive and obvious forms of assimilative reprogramming. Verses 4 and 5 tell us that straightaway – immediately the Babylonians set about teaching these exiled Jews their literature and language and eating habits. What could be more liturgical than talking about things while sharing a communal meal? And what is more formative to any community in our lives than breaking bread together?

And beyond the means, the Babylonians were in it for the long haul. Their resequencing effort spanned three years. Three years of tearing down one system; three years of implanting a new one. They played the long game of conquest, content to tolerate the daily ups and downs of assimilation in order to make the overall goal stick. Much like Marine Corps bootcamp, through repetition and drill, the old self shrunk and the new self emerged. Or, if you want to be more realistic about the aims of the Babylonians, much like Hitler Youth Camps in the 1930s, through repetition and drill, the old self shrunk and the new self emerged, fully bought into a murderous, evil ideology.

Do you not see the subtlety of it all? If it were not for nefarious ends, we would marvel at its sheer brilliance.

And, of course, when the captors deemed that the reprogramming was sufficient, they changed their names. We know that story well, but rarely do we pause to understand what was actually happening.

Today, our world clutches its pearls if we misgender someone, which can only happen if we mistake their actual, biological, birth sex. Calling someone what God created them is not the hoax of misgendering; it is, instead, simply stating a scientific fact. And we need not rebel against nature.

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But Babylon was doing a form of that very thing – purposefully misnaming someone in order to control the narrative of his life.

- Daniel's original Hebrew name meant "God is my judge," as in *El*, Yahweh. The Babylonians reassigned him the name Beltshazzar, "Bel's prince" or a prayer, "Bel, protect his life." And Bel was a chief Babylonian god.
- Hananiah's original Hebrew name meant "Yahweh has been gracious," and it is directly rooted in the covenant name of God. The Babylonians reassigned him the name Shadrach, which means, "Command of Aku" or "inspired by the moon god."
- Mishael's original Hebrew name meant, "Who is like God?", a rhetorical question honoring the supremacy of God. The Babylonians reassigned him the name Meshach, which means, "Who is what Aku is?" or "Worshipper of Shach," which perversely redirects Mishael's holy question to a pagan deity.
- Azariah's original Hebrew name meant "Yahweh has helped" and is rooted in God as our ultimate source of strength. The Babylonians reassigned him the name Abednego, which means, "Servant of Nego/Nebo," who was the Babylonian god of wisdom and writing.

Stop for a moment and grasp what is happening here:

Babylon did not start its conquest by throwing the youth into the fire.

Babylon started its conquest by renaming them.

Babylon sought to destroy their identity as image-bearers of the living God and recast that identity in the graven images of false gods.

The empire's goal was to alter their daily lives so that every time they were called by name, they were reminded of pagan gods instead of the one true God.

What gall! What contempt! What iniquity! And what fools we are if we cannot see the exact same thing happening today. Oh, it is insidious to be sure. But it is there… and it is omnipresent.

- The Language and Literature Strategy (The Cultural Indoctrination) – Back then, Babylon immersed young people in their literature, science, and worldview for three years to alter how they perceived truth and reality.
    - Now, the world shapes our views, young and old, through a continuous, immersive curriculum of algorithmically tailored media, all focused on what *we* like and what *we* want. Our social media feeds, those streaming

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algorithms, and even things like podcasts function as modern secular "literature," subtly training us to view human relationships, life, work, suffering, and morality through an individualistic, non-biblical lens.
    - Our digital masters condition us to satisfy the god of self, and never even blink an eye. Instead, we just hand our kids a screen to look at while we scroll on our own phone or tablet.
    - All the while those feeds, couched as innocuous entertainment, are subtly – but brazenly – rewriting the most basic of human realities, including the very purposes of sex, gender, family, and marriage.
    - Christians are forced to adopt secular vocabulary just to participate in normal societal conversation.

- The Identity Strategy (The Changing of the Names) – Then, Babylon gave the Hebrews new names that replaced the name of Yahweh with those of multiple pagan gods, attempting to recode their brains and hearts and rewire their very loyalty.
    - Now, the secular world insists that our ultimate identity is not as an image-bearer of God, not in Christ Jesus, and not in the new name he has for each of us. Instead, our identity, per the world, must be rooted in something you produce, feel, buy, or wish to believe as "truth."
    - We are awash in the sin of tribalism. Political party affiliations, cultural tribes, ideological stances, and even Christian denominations are our overlords, demanding from us total, unquestioning, unflinching loyalty. Christians face ugly pressure to prioritize our tribes over biblical values, including the unity of the church itself.
    - And this is most manifest in what we will discuss in week three – expressive individualism, the idea that one needs to "live his truth" or "find her true self." We have crammed down the throats of young adults that they need to have a personal brand, a wicked idea rooted in pride, that we are self-made masters of our destiny rather than subjects of a King.

- The Appetite Strategy (The King's Rich Food and Wine) – Then, Babylon sought to make the youths physically dependent on – if not addicted to – the luxury and indulgence of the king's table. They aggressively, but quietly, knitted the Hebrews's physical comfort to the empire's success.
    - Now, look at all the places that consumer capitalism encourages Christians to find comfort, peace, and validation. The whole sad affair leads us to endless material consumption.
    - The empire of the world – and all its dazzling imagery – has introduced into our imagination a liturgy of comfort, an unspoken belief that a successful life is measured by convenience, big houses, luxury vacations,

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frictionless living, beautiful churches, and even the number of followers our accounts have. In the process, the world slowly but purposefully suffocates the Christian calling toward self-denial and sacrifice.
    - The world numbs our spirits through shopping, food, entertainment, or its addictive substances, all to soothe our anxieties and stress, effectively replacing the Holy Spirit as our source of peace with our own comforts.

- The Excellence Strategy (Fitting into the Royal Court) – Then, Nebuchadnezzar wanted the youth to be physically flawless specimens, all highly competent and perfectly suited to serve the state.
    - Now, the world craves and demands the same. In some circles, the world forces Christians to bow to the idols of hyperproductivity and professional status, all seen as ways to gain society's approval. We willingly tie our worth to our corporate output, wealth, education, etc., yet we have no time to pray, rest (Sabbath), or serve.
    - In other circles, we elevate physical beauty to the point of idolatry, presenting our children and youth with unattainable models of perfect hair, teeth, skin, and body style. Popular culture points at airbrushed and doctored images and yells at all of us, "Look like that!" And we slavishly do, starving ourselves, spending more money than we have, vainly trying to conform our image to what the world says is beautiful.
    - And in both cases, we lust after approval. We twist ourselves into knots out of fear of professional or personal cancellation, reputational damage, or exclusion from popular and elite spaces.

Of course, the ultimate lesson we draw from Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah is this: though Babylon tried its best to reeducate, rename, and reshape those four boys, the worldly empire failed. The quartet, led by Daniel, first refused to defile themselves with the royal rations, which shows that any successful resistance to assimilation first starts with what we choose to consume.

* * *

*Final Thoughts and **Exercise** – Later this month, we will layer in tools of resistance to cultural reprogramming. But like everything else we have studied as disciples this year, first you must start with a brutally honest assessment. So, this week, we want you to do a hard thing: a liturgy audit. To reveal what is actually forming you, <u>write down</u> where your time, attention, and money went. <u>Do not sugarcoat it</u>. If you invested two hours in dreamscrolling on your phone, admit it. If you devoted a half-day to watching football, admit that, too. And do not do anything with the list… yet. We are constantly being **deformed** by the tools of the world, often oblivious to the harm it is causing. For now, whether for good or for bad, just sit with your list.*

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Week 2 – November
The Architecture of Distraction

Weekly Readings:

- Daniel 6
- Luke 10:38-42
- Psalms 115 and 135
- Key idea – Like Daniel, we must build holy habits that we maintain as our "custom since early days."

We are so often focused on the *architect* of our distraction, the enemy of our soul, that we lose sight of two things. First, more often than not, we are at the very least co-architects with him, willingly allowing footholds into our lives. The old adage, "the devil made me do it," is often as much of a lie as those Satan tells himself. We are responsible for our own actions.

Second, and perhaps more meaningful, in our desire to center the blame on the architect, we somehow look right past the architecture itself, which is the actual substance of the enchantment and ensnarement.

We can see this play out in our real world. People will run right up to the edge of a stunning vista in a national park – say, the Grand Canyon or Yosemite Falls or Denali. And the first thing folks do in response to such breathtaking splendor is whip out their phones to take a selfie to prove to the world that they were there. God's very creation is literally singing worshipful praises to him in its snowcapped peaks, lush river valleys, and bountiful nature, and we find yet another way to be focused exclusively on ourselves and our egos.

In this case, we miss *good* architecture, because we make it about us, wanting to document the moment so we can brag about it to others.

But in the case of distraction, we miss its harmful architecture, because it brings with it the release of endorphins that make us feel good about ourselves… or the release of anxiety that makes us worry about stuff around us… or the release of lust and indulgence, because it feeds us things that prey on those hormones.

I remember an early autumn day when I called my grandmother just to talk. No special purpose, other than she was special to me. When I called, she had the television turned to some news program. Granny said, "Hold on a minute, son. Let me turn this off. It ain't worth listening to. It's like they just want to make us scared all the time."

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Well… yes. Granny hit the nail on the head.

The architecture of the world is purposefully meant to distract you and turn your eyes away from the peace, joy, comfort, and the assuredness of the Kingdom. And it is so subtle, almost to the level of imperceptibility.

- Social media feeds prey on us through **outrage-driven algorithms**. They prioritize content that triggers anger, shock, or moral indignation precisely because it drives the highest and most continuous engagement. We grow angry at what we see and hear… yet we cannot pull away.
    - Yet James 1:19-20 tells us that we should all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and *slow to become angry*, because our anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.
- News programs and feeds push **sensationalism**, an endless, breathless stream of alarming and apocalyptic headlines. The whole purpose is to activate our human "negativity bias," which is our natural tendency to keep listening to, looking at, dwelling on, and remembering bad experiences and negative information.
    - Yet Isaiah 41:10 instructs us, "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen and help you."
- Our digital devices **consume our time**. They remove natural barriers and stopping points (like pages, the ends of chapters, etc.) and keep the brain in a passive, almost trancelike state of consumption. Self-control and time awareness fly out the window, as we cede not minutes but hours to idleness.
    - Yet Paul exhorts us in Ephesians 5:15-16 to be very careful in how we live, "not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil."
- Modern media – whether print, broadcast, or digital – has perfected the wily art of **curated perfection, i.e., the comparison trap**. We are never at true inner peace as a unique image-bearer of God, because the world's algorithms make us desire the allegedly most glamorous, most beautiful, most perfect… yet fully filtered moments of the lives of others. We are often left empty, vacuous, and feeling quite inadequate alongside a standard of comparison we were never intended to make.
    - Yet Proverbs 14:30 reminds us that "a heart of peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones." And that is to say nothing of the command against covetousness, nor the instruction to be conformed only to the likeness of Christ.
- We invite our devices to interrupt our lives with **push notifications and constant pings**. Our daily rhythms – including family meals, time with God, church, and work – are routinely violated by intermittent, unpredictable alerts

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that fracture our focus. Scientific studies prove that this behavior keeps the mind in a perpetual state of hyper-vigilance and diminishes its ability to rest and recuperate.
    - Yet Psalm 46:10 declares that we are to "Be still, and know that I am God…"
- Medical technology and culture collide and encourage us to use that technology to **radically alter human biology**. And here, it is not just the evil scourge of trans ideology; it also includes the more insipid ways we try to cheat aging by adjusting how God himself programmed our DNA. What does it say about our own egos relative to our Creator when we dye our hair to cover the gray, slather cream on to cover wrinkles, or whiten our teeth to conform to someone else's standard?
    - Yet Psalm 100:3 emphatically tells us, "Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his…"
- Dating apps and services have turned old-fashioned courting into a gamified interface. They have reduced complex human beings into **swipeable, disposable products** based on **instant physical gratification**. They have blossomed a culture that treats casual hookups and flings as normal, if not even desirable.
    - Yet Paul again is clear in 1 Corinthians 6:18. "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body."
- And ecommerce giants like Amazon are specifically engineered with zero friction to exploit **hyperconsumerism, impulse buying, and an appetite for materiality**. We now get stuff on demand and often on credit, which cheapens the respect we have for hard work and patience, encourages us to be poor stewards of what God has provided us, and dulls our senses to the source of true satisfaction.
    - Jesus himself warned us of this in Luke 12:15: "Then he said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.'"

Brothers and sisters, don't you see? All of this is cleverly weaponized against us. This is the architecture of the enemy in the twenty-first century. And, judging by how many people cannot put down their devices, cannot turn off the television, cannot have a conversation without referencing something they saw on Facebook, cannot even have a family meal without checking their phone or their digital watches… well, he is, at the very least, gaining ground.

In this arena, the enemy is facing little resistance from Christians.

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We have all become Marthas when we need to all be Marys… at least about this. You will recall the story of Lazarus's two sisters, Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42). Notably, Jesus never rebukes Martha for her hospitality. She was doing something productive and of service to others. Her work that afternoon in Bethany bore fruit.

But Jesus did forthrightly warn her about the dangers of distraction. He called Martha anxious and full of worry about many things. While Mary received her portion – her daily bread, the spiritual infilling necessary both for sustenance and growth – Martha let her thoughts and actions be consumed by something else. And she did so with the Messiah sitting feet away from her.

We are so much like Martha that it is painful. All the noise *that we allow to enter our hearts and minds*, and all the constant connectivity *that we crave and lust after*, completely fracture our attention. And a fractured attention is incapable of deep prayer, reflection, rest, and presence… both with God and with our family, friends, and church.

So, how do we combat this?

The answer for everything this month is simple: **build holy habits**.

Some of you may be looking for an easier or more direct solution. Sorry to disappoint. You are just going to have to learn discipline and self-control through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The pathway to victory here is drawn directly by your ability to build and sustain holy habits. In other words, as we have discussed all year, *you must be involved in your own sanctification*.

Exercise – Read Daniel 6, the familiar story of the lions' den. What was the bad news that Daniel faced? And what was Daniel's immediate reaction? The miracle of Daniel's salvation is not the most important part of the story. The most critical verse in the entire chapter, and arguably one of the most important points in all of scripture, is verse 10. I love the way the New King James Version states it:

> Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, **as was his custom since early days**.

Daniel's deliverance from savage beasts did not happen when he was thrown in the den. Daniel's deliverance started when he was a boy. Daniel's deliverance came because he refused to be consumed by bad news, made anxious by plots and schemes, distracted by the things of the world. Daniel's deliverance came because he remained steadfast to

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holy habits that were not threatened by the enticements of the world. Daniel's deliverance came because he continually purposed in his heart that nothing the world could offer him was sweeter or more wonderful than God Almighty.

So… ask yourself this hard question. How, if at all, do you look like Daniel? What is your "custom since early days?" What architecture are you building to counter the architecture of distraction? Do you have rhythms of quiet devotion in your life that protect your focus from the noise of the age? Are you too easily distracted? Do you power down your devices and those distractions so that the Holy Spirit can power you up? Do you practice silent presence?

If not, start. Even just an hour to begin. If you are, do more. As a pastor, I cannot stress to you enough – the world will take tools that are convenient for day-to-day living (like phones and computers) and adapt them to control us. We loathe that kind of talk, because few of us are willing to admit weaknesses and addictions. But it is beyond time for the church to quit being a tacit co-conspirator in the spiritual ruination of its members. This stuff will destroy you from the inside out unless you live like Daniel.

* * *

Final Thoughts – Psalms 115 and 135 are stunningly prophetic. They share almost identical passages that perfectly frame the architecture of distraction (vv. 4-8 in Psalm 115 and vv. 15-18 in Psalm 135). The psalmists presage a day when we become what we make… because what we make, in turn, remakes us. Those who do not serve God make idols from their own human hands – silver and gold in those days; digital and cosmetic in ours. Those idols "have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see; they have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell; they have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat."

If you think that sounds a lot like artificial intelligence, the very modality by which the addictive algorithmic architecture of the world runs, you are exactly right. Only God creates new and intelligent things. Anything we create is derivative from something God gave us, never original; and by what right do we even attempt to create intelligent things? If we are the pinnacle of his creation, made in his image, why would we want to create an artificial version of our intellectual capacity? What breathtaking hubris to think we can improve a technology to the point it becomes sentient, that it exceeds our God-given capacity. A Tower of Babel in our time.

So, is it any wonder that our foray into artificial intelligence has reached a spiritual and even existential crisis point? As that section of the psalm concludes, "Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them." We are being beckoned by the world to surrender. Is your life like Daniel's, full of holy habits that give shelter?

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Week 3 – November
The Myth of the Self-Made Person

Weekly Readings:

- Daniel 3
- Matthew 16:24-25
- 2 Timothy 3
- Key idea – Who owns you?

I am an American. And I am an unapologetically patriotic American. This country – her beauty and her people – are dear to me. Like so many of you who now read this, I was raised and taught to believe that, in this country, one could be anything he or she wanted if only he or she worked hard enough, sacrificed, and persevered. Indeed, some of you may have immigrated to this country for that very reason, to pursue the American Dream.

By the end of second grade, my elementary school librarian, Ms. Irene Smith, permitted me to check out books reserved for sixth and seventh graders. I had read everything else, and, having exhausted Dick, Jane, and Spot's ability to run, I immersed myself in the stories of American heroes.

Of Benjamin Franklin, the iconic, primal self-made American, who ran away from an abusive apprenticeship as a teenager with no money, and built an astonishing career as a printer, author, scientist, inventor, diplomat, and Founding Father. Of Abraham Lincoln, born in a log cabin in the rugged Kentucky wilderness, deprived of formal schooling and forced to self-educate, an abject failure at most everything he did… until he wasn't and became our greatest president. Of Frederick Douglass, a slave in Maryland who also taught himself to read and write in the face of prohibitions against such, a man who transformed himself into one of the most influential abolitionists and orators in our history. Of Andrew Carnegie, a poor Scottish immigrant kid forced to work as a bobbin boy in a cotton mill for a dollar a week, yet combined investment savvy with an innovative spirit to build one of the world's largest companies.

And on and on. These grand epics became mythologized in my mind, as did the idea of self-reliance and the belief that one's success is solely the product of one's hard work, ambition, and grit.

The rub comes in when those ideas are superimposed upon our ultimate citizenship, that in the kingdom of God with Jesus as our sovereign. Certainly, Judeo-Christian principles highly esteem hard work and industriousness, creativity and innovation, and stewardship and responsibility, but they frame all those behaviors quite differently. We

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work hard and with diligence not simply to build an empire of financial stability, rather as acts of worshipful response to God's grace and provision.

The self-made ideal credits personal talent, work ethic, and intellect for wealth, status, and achievement. The Judeo-Christian ethos teaches that everything – including the very ability to work and create wealth – is a gift from God. As Moses said to the people shortly before his death, "You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:17-18).

The self-made ideal values total autonomy, pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps, and needing no one else. The Christian ethos – especially in the context of *the church* – views humanity as inherently interconnected and communal. Christians are commanded to rely upon God (starting, most explicitly, with the Sabbath teachings) and to bear one another's burdens within the community of the body of Christ. The most conspicuous examples of human flourishing in the Bible occur when people share everything (e.g., Acts 2:42-47) rather than living as isolated individuals in the pursuit of wealth. As Paul reminds us, "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, *and each member belongs to all the others*" (Romans 12:4-5).

The self-made ideal elevates self-promotion, self-confidence, personal branding, and personal glory as necessary virtues for rising to the top. The Christian ethos centers on humility, assigning all glory to God, accepting that promotion comes only from the Lord, and recognizing the stark realities of human frailty, sin, and limitation. Claiming to be "self-made" is, at best, an exercise in extreme pride and, at worst, self-idolatrous. James teaches us that God opposes that kind of pride (James 4:6), and Paul takes it a step further by asking, "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Corinthians 4:7).

The self-made ideal measures a person's worth primarily by his or her productivity, financial wealth, social status, and visible achievements. The Christian ethos, though, defines success through the production of spiritual fruits and measures a person's worth by their status as an image-bearer of God, regardless of output.

All this distills to the following: on one's ultimate agency, the self-made person says, "I did this." A Christian should believe and say, "By the grace of God, I am what I am." And in one's relationship to others, the self-made person is transactional in pursuit of their own ambitions. A Christian should act with sacrificial love, compassionate care for the weak and vulnerable, and deep concern for the church.

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The truth is simple: **none of us is self-made**.

We are all created by God, and we bear the image of the Most High. That should inspire awe and reverence and self-control. Instead, the rebellious forces of the world needle us to reject our Maker's designs and intentions and insert our own.

The tension is real… and becoming more pronounced.

All of us – but particularly our youth and young adults – are utterly bombarded with the idolatry of self. "Live your truth," the world says in movies, television, reality series, celebrity social media, politics, news, entertainment, and just about everywhere else. We are conditioned to believe that we should do what we want, live how we want, act how we want, and satisfy whatever hunger we want. "If it feels good," so goes the mantra, "do it."

Self, self, self. My body; my choice. It is my body and my life; I can do what I want. I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul. Follow my heart. You do you, and I will do me. Manifest your destiny. I am enough. Believe in yourself.

C'mon, folks. Live my truth? Only Jesus is the truth, the way, and the life, and we have no right to stake a claim to any other corrupted "truth" (John 14:6). My body, my choice? That spits in the face of God, who both created me and now owns me (Psalm 24:1). Follow my heart? Human desires are *never* good, always corrupted by sin unless brought into submission by the Holy Spirit (Mark 7:21-23). I am enough? Hardly; I cannot save myself, and I cannot justify myself before God (Ephesians 2:8-9).

We can distill this entire self-made propaganda down to a simple concept: ownership.

This all pivots on the issue of ownership. Who owns you?

For Christians, the answer is explicit and unequivocal: Christ Jesus. "You are not your own; you were bought at a price," Paul told the church at Corinth, preaching that as the very reason we must honor God with our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Every single "body autonomy" issue finds its root in the sin of pride, believing that you own your body instead of the one who created it or the one who ransomed the soul within it.

Ultimately, the murder of abortion is simply the sinful byproduct of an insidious root sin, i.e., the pride of a woman believing her body belongs to her and not God. Adultery and fornication are the sinful byproducts of that same root sin, i.e., the pride of men and

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women believing their bodies belong to them and not God. Sexual deviance and unnatural relationships are the sinful byproducts not of lust but of that pesky root sin, i.e., the pride of those who would pervert nature because of their own desires, believing their bodies belong to them and not God. And, of course, transgender dysphoria is the sinful byproduct of that exact same root sin, i.e., the pride of those who would butcher their own anatomy because they believe their bodies belong to them and not God.

And lest one thinks I am targeting low-hanging fruit in the churchworld, the same applies to those who indulge in gluttony at the suppertable, who dress immodestly, who mutilate their bodies, who let filth spew from their mouth, who watch or listen to ungodly junk, who do any number of things to satisfy appetites that the world says bring you no harm, no peril, no consequence.

The issue is the same as it was in Eden – who owns you?

But it is our own fault, church.

We have tolerated the sin of expressive individualism for too long, to the point where it has fully infiltrated some of our congregations and certainly the minds of many who sit in our pews.

We do not have to invent our own identity. God gave us the one he wanted us to have. We simply need to grow into it, just as Jesus did, growing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52).

No matter what the world tells you about following your own dreams, God has dreams for you, too. He has a destiny uniquely assigned to you. He has a path on which he wishes to place and direct you. He designed you to look a certain way… and grow a certain way… and think a certain way… even to laugh a certain way. He loves you that much.

He only asks us to trust him, obey him, and be patient with the unfolding story. True freedom, his Spirit teaches us, is not found in our own autonomy, rather in voluntary submission to Jesus Christ. We do so by picking up our cross and following him (Matthew 16:24-25).

When we try to deviate from how God programmed us and how he is working to make us more like his Son, we inevitably botch things up. We add into our lives pressure, isolation, and fragility.

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Exercise – Let's return to our friends, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. (I have purposefully chosen to return to their Hebrew names, and I encourage you to do so, too.) Read Daniel 3, one of the most famous Sunday School stories in the entire Bible: the fiery furnace.

Truthfully, most of us could repeat it by memory. But stop for a moment to consider how their reaction fits into this week's lesson, the myth of a self-made person. When Nebuchadnezzar ordered everyone to bow when the music sounded, and these three boys refused, they were doing something completely against their own self interest. Disobeying the king assured them of a certain and brutal death. If they followed the culture of the day, they would have bowed.

But we can take this a step further. What if they had simply bowed but crossed their fingers behind their back? What if they had bowed but prayed to Yahweh instead? What if they had bowed and internally recited the psalms of David or the song of Moses or the beauty of the law?

Do you see the point? They could have chosen to act in self preservation and simply pretended to do what the king commanded. To the outside observer, it would have looked compliant to the king.

But… not to God. No, they forthrightly told Nebuchadnezzar, "not only will we not bow to your golden image of self-exaltation, but we believe God will deliver us. We belong to him, not you and certainly not to ourselves. And even if he does not rescue us from this fate, we will not serve you."

Theirs was an unhidden identity, completely anchored in Christ, not in personal comfort or self preservation.

So, here is the exercise. Survey your interactions with worldly things and people. Do you code switch? Do you say you live for Christ but, when faced with a golden image, you shift to another language or action simply to survive in that social context with that audience?

Do not dismiss this so easily. If you laugh at something to fit in… if you put your pronouns in an email signature… if you post things on social media for the comments and likes… if you listen to corrupting music or watch sin-filled television… if you wear something or do something to your body to draw attention to yourself… if you do anything to elevate your own self above that which is holy, whether for self-preservation, self-interest, or your own selfish desires, then you have an issue. Your self-made identity is winning out over that which God has for you. Submit anything unholy to

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Christ this day. Confess it to your brother and sister, and provide accountability one to another.

* * *

*Final Thoughts – "For people will be **lovers of self**, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people" (2 Timothy 3:2-5). Undoubtedly, this is one of the most sobering passages in the Bible. Paul is warning his young protege of the rampant godlessness that will mark the last days, i.e., the period between Jesus's ascension and return.*

We were in those days when Paul wrote the letter; we are in them still today. The modalities and means change; the truth in Paul's words stands immutable and timeless.

Self-idolatry is the currency of much that the world offers. Social media features, filters, self-branding tools, and a whole host of other digital traps encourage people to treat their lives as a curated performance for which the whole world is their audience. No longer is God at the center of the universe; we are. More specifically, I am. You are. He is. She is. The individual person supplants God as the fulcrum of life. We revolve everything around us, and creation itself groans at our conceit and haughtiness. We scoff at and scorn anyone who would dethrone us and the pursuits of our needs, desires, and lusts.

And, sadly, many of these are Christians… churchgoers, even church leaders. No example is sadder – or more cautionary – than that of a pastor or faith leader who has bought into his or her own hype and narrative as a self-made person. The saga of King Saul, anointed from the humblest of beginnings and the smallest of tribes to become Israel's first king, centered on toxic narcissism, a default tendency to put oneself and one's desires in the middle of all decisions. He built monuments to himself. He shifted blame. He gaslit those around him, including his son, Jonathan, and the prophet, Samuel. And he was obsessed with his public image, rather than true repentance and true service.

King Uzziah serves as another, perhaps even starker, warning. In the mere span of twelve verses, we go from this – "And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord… He set himself to seek God… and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him prosper… God helped him…" (2 Chronicles 26:4-7) – to this – "But when he was strong, he grew proud, <u>to his destruction</u>" (v. 16a).

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Spiritual leaders are particularly susceptible to this level of hubris. Quickly scan their social media accounts and see the spectacular, dizzying distance between the lowly Christ and some prominent people who claim leadership positions and platforms within the body. This is the inherent danger when anyone goes all in and all out for their "personal brand," which is just a euphemistic, less threatening way to say, "ego builder" or "self-centered promotion."

Guard your heart, dear church, from these sorts of leaders. For example, if a pastor promotes his social media or her book more than your discipleship, put your hand on your wallet and your arm around your sweetheart, and leave. If anyone in church leadership promotes themselves first and preaches Jesus second (or third), flee the wrath to come.

Ask – earnestly, fervently, repeatedly ask – the Holy Spirit for discernment and wisdom.

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Week 4 – November
Countercultural Liturgies

Weekly Readings:

- Daniel 2
- Jeremiah 7
- Acts 2:42-47
- Key idea – We so no to the Romes and Sanhedrins of our day not through our own strength, but that of the Holy Spirit *and* the church, the community of believers bound together by Jesus Christ.

Admittedly, this month's study has been heavy. For me, it was heavy to write, and I am certain that for most, it has been heavy to read and apply. The great news, though, is that we have *hope*, and we need not fear or be anxious.

But to fully access that hope, we must ask ourselves two threshold questions, both as a church and as the individuals who comprise it.

First, will we, the church today, commit to the same level of radical obedience, radical discipleship, and radical community as we see in the early church? Second, and more practically, how do we say no to the Romes and the Sanhedrins of our day – celebrity culture, instant gratification, and self-indulgence – and submit fully to Christ and one another?

When one reads Acts 2:42-47, perhaps the most beautiful exposition of Christian community in the entire Bible, there is a danger to encase the whole thing in amber and place it in a museum, a fossil of the past but whose modalities are ill-equipped to the present. Or, a danger of equal proportion – some may box the Holy Spirit into the 30s A.D. and assert that to be an authentic community of Christ, we must look exactly like that.

Both of those miss the point entirely. Luke's point in that passage is to describe a church that is *alive*, a dynamic, organic, breathing entity. Yes, the church looked to its past to draw inspiration from a great cloud of witnesses; and yes, the church looked to the future only in anticipation of our glorification and the ultimate revelation of Christ. But, beyond that, the church was then – and should be now – about the business of *today*, conspicuously alive and responsive to its time and era.

Certainly the core activities can remain the same – studying the Word, prayer, fellowship, and the Eucharist – augmented by the Holy Spirit as he sees fit. But the

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linchpin of it all is verse 44, "And all who believed were together and had all things in common."

That is the answer to the second question above. Throughout history, the church has been its most effective against the battle for our imagination, the architecture of distraction, and the myth of the self-made person when it was unified in spiritual harmony.

Perhaps such an answer is deceptively simple. Unity. **But it is almost without question that *unity* in the body of Christ is *the most prevalent discipleship theme* in the whole of the New Testament.**

Its spiritual headwaters are, of course, in Jesus's final teachings in John 13-16 and his extended, beautiful prayer in John 17. Paul and the lot of writers, though, return to this point time and again – Romans 12:4-5, 12:16, 14:19, 15:5-6; 1 Corinthians 1:10, 12:12-13, 12:25-26, 13:1-13; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:19-22, 4:3-6, 4:15-16; Philippians 1:27, 2:2-3; Colossians 2:19, 3:14-15; 1 Peter 3:8; Revelation 5:9-10, 7:9, 19:7-8, 21:2-3.

And that is but a sampler platter. In those passages, we hear full-throated exhortations that we are most effective as a church only when we live in harmony, pursue peace, glorify God with one voice, reject division, submit ourselves and our talents, refuse ethnic or social distinctions, embrace humility, and demonstrate love and compassion. And Jesus's expectation of us is that we do all of that *together*, that we have all of this in common so that our lives look, sound, act, and behave like the Kingdom.

We are *the* bride of Christ, not the *brides* of Christ. Our Savior is not a polygamist…

… which brings us back to that first question. Will we actually commit to all of that together, as one? Or will we continue to live disintegrated spiritual lives, one way at church on Sundays and Wednesdays and an altogether different way the rest of the week and outside our church community?

This was the same sober question that Jeremiah posed to Jerusalem and Judah in his powerful Temple Sermon:

> Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, *and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!' - only to go on doing all these abominations?* Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of

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> robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 7:8-11)

Our arrogance may look at those action verbs and loudly protest, "But we don't do that!" But if this month has shown us anything, it is the amazing human propensity to enticement by other gods, the chief of which in our time is *self*. Our addiction to ourselves finds no refuge in the words of Jeremiah. Indeed, it finds a home. We do what we want and, like Judah, we run into the church and sing worship songs, raise our hands, shout and pray, and act for all the world like we are delivered.

But when we leave the parking lot, self returns. Distractions return. And we struggle so mightily against both.

What we all should have learned by now is that we cannot fight these battles of spiritual deformation simply with information. We cannot read the Bible or this study guide alone, nor can we hear sermons and teachings alone, and expect meaningful change.

Our battleplan is our own sanctification, at the direction of the Holy Spirit, and the building of transformative, holy habits. Knowledge is only effective when it is coupled with practical, enduring life rhythms that sustain our discipleship.

And, in our Christian lives, as Acts taught us, *that is to happen in community*.

Let's return to this month's hero, Daniel. In chapter 2, King Nebuchadnezzar is plagued by a haunting dream. He calls for the wise men of Babylon not just to interpret the dream, but first to tell him what it is. And, of course, no man can, because no man can see inside another's mind without the discerning power of the Holy Spirit.

Nebuchadnezzar is then intent on executing all the elite of the land, which would include Daniel. Yet Daniel convinces the king's chief bodyguard to secure him an appointment at which he would reveal both the baffling dream and its interpretation.

But what Daniel does next is the lesson for us. In verses 17 and 18, we read this: "Then Daniel went to his house and made the matter known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions, and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions might not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon."

That is so subtle that we might miss it. Daniel's very first inclination is countercultural – not to handle it himself but to call upon his community for support and prayer. Daniel eschews the cult of self and, together with his friends, calls on the Lord.

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What follows in Daniel 2 is one of the most profound countercultural examples in the entire Bible, a fundamental and successful challenge to the worldview, politics, and power dynamics of an entire empire.

- The Lord, through Daniel, utterly confounds the allegedly wise and cultural elite. Magicians, sorcerers, enchanters, and astrologers all collapsed in their own limitation, flatly telling Nebuchadnezzar that "the thing that the king asks is difficult, and no one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with the flesh" (v. 11). Daniel exposes the absolute bankruptcy of secular, pagan wisdom. True revelation comes from a sovereign God.

- Daniel's actions redefine success as something that comes through humility rather than self-promotion. Instead of handling the crisis through political maneuvering or self-aggrandizement, Daniel flatly tells the king the truth: "But as for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living…" (v. 30a). Living deep within a culture of pride, Daniel models radical deflection of praise. He uses his platform not to elevate his own brand, but to make sure that only God is glorified.

- In Daniel's interpretation, he shows us the ultimate devaluation of those empires and monuments we make by our own hands out of gold, silver, bronze, and iron. They have great fragility, face certain destruction, and carry no eternal import. His words are a cautionary flag against political and celebrity idolatry and even nationalism gone amok.

- Perhaps most striking is that Daniel declares that victory comes from a stone that "was cut out by no human hand" (v. 34), and that the stone shatters Nebuchadnezzar's statue into dust. Any empire that a human builds expands via military might and political oppression, and that includes our own individual empires, which we grow through similar means. Daniel is firm that the everlasting kingdom, that of God, will be formed by no human strategy, no violence, no political faction, no manipulation.

Daniel received all that – which is an astonishing prophecy about the sheer folly of following cultural, political, and celebrity trends and appetites – because he first returned to a holy habit: praying with his faith community at the moment trouble arose.

* * *

*Final Thoughts and **Exercise** – We often leave Daniel in the lions' den, and his three Israelite brothers standing outside the fiery furnace. But these four men are arguably*

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the most sterling examples in the Bible of how to live a countercultural life, to avoid the trap of self, and to tear down the enemy's enchanting distractions.

What is abundantly clear is that God gave them to one another as a spiritual gift, a quartet of men in a foreign land, hostile to their faith and their God.

In these exercises, we so frequently focus on what we can work on as an individual. This week, and this month, though, we want to focus on your holy quartet – or maybe trio or duo. Outside of your blood family and beyond your pastors, who are your accountability partners in crafting a simple, sustainable, daily and weekly schedule that prioritizes prayer, scripture, community, fellowship, and rest?

Daniel teaches us that we all need such a community. In fact, we were created to live in such a community, both helping them and being helped by them.

If you have such a community, fantastic! If not, pray for one, and let that be your purposeful goal this very week.

And then, as a church, let us all commit to a fresh season of accountability. Call or text each day and ask three simple questions: ***What did you read in the Word of God today? What did you take before him in prayer that I can, too? Where are you struggling today, my brother or sister?***

You may think this is hokey. You may think this is beneath you. You may claim you do not have enough time. You may think no one will take what you say seriously. You may rehearse a great many false narratives.

I only know this – we <u>cannot</u> do this on our own. We simply cannot. But Jesus never asks us to. He gives us one another, yet when we ignore this, that is yet another sign of our enslavement to self-reliance and the sin of pride.

If we want to be the church, we must do the thing assigned to us as the church – that is living in community, having all things spiritually in common. We will never overcome the very real battle for our minds, never thwart the architecture of distractions, and never get outside of our self obsession if we cannot practice such humble postures with the very people Christ gave us to do exactly that.

So, let's enter a new season of accountability together. Like Daniel and his brothers, let us strive to make holy things our "custom since early days." To God be the glory.

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