

OUR FAMILY CELEBRATION PAGE



September 19—November 13, 2010

We are so excited about this time in the life of John Knox Presbyterian. And we hope and trust that this little devotional will be used by God in amazing and surprising ways for your family as we go through this fall together as a family of faith. Have fun with these daily readings and activities and be open to what God will do in your hearts and minds. It will be good to be able to share with others in the congregation of how a particular day's reading impacted each of us!

SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILY DEVOTIONS

OUR FAMILY CELEBRATION PAGE

Family devotions can often seem more like chaos than church. Remember: your goal is not perfection. You might think of your goal as something more like “holy confusion.” You just want to add a sense of God’s holiness to your busy household. Here are a few simple suggestions.

1. Choose a consistent time and place. Whether it’s at breakfast around the table or in your children’s rooms just before bedtime, having devotions at the **same** time and **same** place is the best way to be consistent. Choose the best time for your family and then don’t worry if you miss a day here or there.
2. Have different family members read the Scripture and devotion each day. This will give everyone a feeling that they’re a part of **deciding** to have family devotions.
3. After reading the devotions, take a minute to pray together. Talk to God about the needs in your family... the church...the world... your friends... those who need to find Christ... your work... your school... etc.
4. Be yourselves! It’s O.K. to laugh. Noise is not only allowable during devotions... it is probable. If you allow your children to be themselves during times of devotion it’s amazing how much more they learn. What you think is bouncing off of them is actually sinking deeply into their souls.

“You must love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and might. And you must think constantly about these commandments I am giving you today. You must teach them to your children and talk about them when you are at home or out for a walk; at bedtime and the first thing in the morning.” Deuteronomy 6:5-7 (TLB)

Saturday, November 13 — Thanksgiving
THANKSGIVING IS CELEBRATING

If you haven't learned how to celebrate you haven't truly learned to trust God. Those who truly trust in Him take the time to celebrate what He is doing. Believers in Christ should not be unsmiling workaholics. They have learned to accomplish great tasks while still being able to enjoy life. Sometimes we accomplish a task only to find that we have become consumed by it... and so we cannot celebrate it. Nehemiah was a leader who not only knew how to work, he knew how to celebrate. As he led his people to celebrate after they had finished the wall around Jerusalem he teaches us some important lessons in celebration in our families and in our church family at JKPC.

Celebration grows out of worship.

Worship is one of the vital keys to personal joy. In the Old Testament they regularly celebrated in festivals and special Sabbath days. They intentionally built into their lives opportunities to celebrate God.

Celebration should be fun.

Sacred does not equal sad. Enjoyment, after all, is God's idea. And so Nehemiah includes in his celebration a great feast. There should be no one in this world who has a better time celebrating than those who know Jesus as their savior. We have something to REALLY celebrate!

The result of celebration is strength.

The joy of the Lord is our strength. Far from sapping our strength for "more important things," celebration actually gives us the real strength we need to endure. Some people have the attitude, "Let's wait until we get to heaven to celebrate. Right now we have work to do." The problem with that is it doesn't take into account the way God has made us. We need to celebrate what He has done in order to receive the strength to do what He wants us to do. If you feel like your spiritual gas tank is empty here's your one word prescription: CELEBRATE!

Family Discussion Question: What has God done in your lives this last year that you need to celebrate? Personalize this devotion guide by taking time to individually write down your "celebration list" on the last page of this guide. If you have children that cannot write, ask them to tell you what to write for them.

Children's Activity: Cut up some confetti or get some streamers, read John 3:16 and then throw them into the air to celebrate what God has done. (Be sure to tell your kids first that the best part of any celebration is the clean up.)

Sunday, September 19 — Faith
FAITH IS LIVING BEYOND THE ROUTINE

"What is faith? It is the confident assurance that something we want is going to happen. It is the certainty that what we hope for is waiting for us, even though we cannot see it up ahead." Heb 11:1 (TLB)

Faith is the secret to "rut free living."

We all know what it's like to live in a rut. Too often what starts with great promise settles into a lifelong habit of routine. A couple gets married - yet somehow a promise of life long love turns into habit and routine. A business gets started - but before long the dream turns into drudgery. A fresh and real commitment to Christ is made - yet you find yourself settling for the average life rather than the abundant life. Faith makes the difference! Faith helps us to handle the two main things that might push us into the rut of routine...

Life's disappointments...

Disappointment can make us feel, "I guess that's all there is... I'll have to learn to settle for less." Faith energizes us to look past our disappointments and to see God's promises.

Life's successes...

Disappointment can make us bitter... success can make us self-satisfied. A little success can be a dangerous thing! Faith has the power not only to help us with our struggles, but also our successes. Faith puts success in perspective. It reminds me that I'm not the source of the success - it is God who has given these gifts to me. It also helps me to see that I'm not the reason for the success. Of course, God is pleased with my happiness. But the ultimate reason for all He does in our lives is to show the world what He is like... to bring glory to Himself.

Family Discussion Question: Is disappointment or is success the greater challenge in your life right now?

Children's activity: Show your children how "ingrained" a routine can become by having an "unroutine" day: Have everyone sit at different places when you eat or watch T.V... or sleep with your head at the foot of your bed. You come up with ideas... have fun with this!

Monday, September 20 — Faith
THE CHANGE EXCHANGE

“By faith Abraham, even though he was past age--and Sarah herself was barren--was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.” Heb 11:11 (NIV)

Have you made faith’s great change exchange? Have you learned to exchange life’s pressures for God’s promises? We all live in one of two ways, under life’s pressure or within God’s promises. The secret to promise living is faith... believing what God has told me about Himself and His world in His word.

When you believe God’s promise you belittle life’s pressure. When you trust God’s promise you trample life’s pressure. When you count on God’s promise you count out life’s pressure. When you depend on God’s promise you defeat life’s pressure. When you receive God’s promise you reject life’s pressure. Is that clear! Promise and pressure are mutually exclusive... they can’t exist together.

There are two common attitudes that push the promises of God out of our lives as believers. Watch out for these! (You can see them in the life of Abraham as he struggled with believing God’s promise about sending he and Sarah a son)

I’ll have to settle for less I’ll have to get it myself

Although Abraham struggled with these attitudes, he ended up putting his faith in God. Just because **you** struggle does not mean that you cannot end up making the great “change exchange.” You can be a person of genuine faith.

Family discussion question: Where do you feel pressured right now? As a family, pray for each other. Pray that God’s promises will ease your pressures.

Children’s activity: Show how promises “push out” pressure by filling a cardboard tube (paper towel or toilet tissue) with crumpled paper. Once the tube is filled show them how the new paper you put in always pushes out the old.

Friday, November 12 — Thanksgiving
TAKE THE TIME TO SAY THANK YOU

“When one of them saw that he was healed, he went back to Jesus, praising God in a loud voice. Then he bowed down at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. (And this man was a Samaritan.) Jesus said, ‘Weren’t ten men healed? Where are the other nine?’” Luke 17:15-17 (NCV)

Only one in ten took time to tell Jesus thank you. Jesus asked a striking question, “Where are the other nine.” Indeed, where had they gone. What were they doing that was so important that they did not have time to thank the one that saved them from leprosy? Let’s imagine where the “other nine” might have been for a moment. The purpose is not to condemn them, but to recognize that we might easily have been among them.

One of the “other nine” might have been hurrying to the temple to complete the legal requirements that went along with such a healing. So focused on keeping the rules and getting things done in the right order that he did not have time to stop and say thank you.

Another was just following the crowd. If the majority had turned back to tell Jesus thank you, he would have gladly followed. It would have never occurred to him to do something other than what “the others” were doing. Those who take the time to say thank you are those who stand above the crowd... not simply with the crowd.

One of the nine might have been afraid to go back. Someone with the power to heal his leprosy might also use that power to give him leprosy again. He might have felt that he didn’t really deserve so great a blessing. What if he said or did the wrong thing and Jesus found him out for who he really was.

A few of the nine might have felt embarrassed to go back. As a leper he’d been used to thinking of himself as a useless outcast. What difference would his word of thanks make to a powerful public figure like Jesus.

Odds are that all of us find ourselves amidst “the others” at times. Today take some time to be “the one” who tells Jesus and tells others “thank you for what you’ve done.”

Family Discussion Question: What have you “forgotten” to thank God for?

Thursday, November 11 — Thankfulness
AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” 2 Cor 9:15 (NIV)

Let me call your attention to the most important “thanksgiving” we have to offer. We should give the greatest thanks for our greatest gifts. The Bible reminds us that the gift of Jesus Christ is so great it is beyond description.

Thanks for that great a gift demands more than a card or a few words. Thanks to Jesus is given as we give our lives back to Him. Emphasize the “give” in ThanksGIVEing this year. Give Jesus your past, depending on Him for forgiveness and freedom. Give Jesus your present, trusting in His direction for today. Give Jesus your future, count on Him for the hope that you need.

Family Thanksgiving Activity: As you prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving this year, have each person in the family prepare a gift of thanks to Jesus for when you celebrate Thanksgiving this year. Sort of like Christmas... only it’s us doing the giving and God doing the receiving.

Take the time to make this a special celebration. Here are a couple of ideas about how to specifically do this.

1. *Write on a card the answer to the question, “The thing that I most want to thank Jesus for during this last year is....” Then take those cards and have each person wrap their card as a gift to Jesus. Have an actual present opening where people open someone’s box or card or bag other than their own. Read what each person in the family is thankful for.*

OR....

2. *Make a “thanksgiving tree” and decorate it with statements of all the things that you’re thankful for as a family. The tree can be one of your larger houseplants. You could even tape them all over your refrigerator. Make little slips of paper to write the thanks on and simply COVER the tree with statements of your gratitude to God!*

Tuesday, September 21 — Faith
FAITH’S FINAL EXAM

“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.” Acts 6:8 (NIV)

Know how to recognize a priceless person? Just look at their price tag! You can see what a person is worth by looking at what it takes to buy them off. I wonder how you and I would do if we had to face “faith’s final exam.” It is an exam that only a few Christians down through the ages have had to face. It is a test that has only one soul searching question.

Stephen faced this test when he was being judged for his faith in Acts 6. Faith’s final exam is “Would I be willing to give up my life for what I believe?” We sing about giving our all to Jesus and tell Him that we’d offer our very life for him. But what if the threats were real? It’s an important test, for your attitude towards dying for your faith has much to say about how you’ll live your faith!

Take a look at Stephen, for example. He showed himself to be a priceless person, a person who would not back down in his faith no matter what the threat. Stephen became the first Christian to actually die for his faith. What was the secret to such a great faith? Acts 6 tells us that Stephen lived as a man “full of faith and the Holy Spirit.” **He had answered faith’s final exam long before he faced the court that would condemn him.** We’re all like tubes of toothpaste. When the squeeze is put on us what comes out is whatever we’re full of! This means that we don’t have to “cram” for the tests of faith. Let Christ **fill** your heart and mind, your decisions and actions... today!

Family Discussion Question: Where do you need to be “full of faith” today?

For younger children: Make up some “price tags” to show the real value of some of the things in your home. Have your kids tell you how much things like furniture and appliances are worth... make up a tag and put it on those things. Then, ask them to put a price tag on a Bible.... then on themselves. Remind them of the incalculable value of the Bible, of the tremendous value God places on them.

**Wednesday, September 22 — Faith
TRUE DEDICATION**

*“So the king and all the Israelites dedicated the temple of the LORD.”
1 Kings 8:63 (NIV)*

What do we mean when we say dedication? To one person it may mean giving up a part of a football game to come to church on Sunday mornings, to another it may point to a decision to begin giving some of their money to the Lord's work, while to another it may add up to leaving all that they know to serve the Lord as a missionary in a foreign country. What does it mean to dedicate a temple, a church, a child, a life - to dedicate them to the Lord. In 1 Kings 8 Solomon dedicates the great Jerusalem Temple to the Lord. In so doing he teaches us some important lessons about the character of dedication.

Dedication means Open Declaration

Dedication is a public announcement of your intentions and commitments. Many see dedication as some inner commitment that no one can really see or understand. Not true... it is expressed in public commitments and public actions. You know when dedication begins to happen? When you begin to place your faith on the line in terms of public commitments. It's that willingness to declare to others that adds up to dedication.

When our forefathers penned the Declaration of Independence they turned a philosophy into a dedication to freedom.

When John Kennedy said, “We will put a man on the moon before the end of the decade.” He transformed a scientist's dream into a country's dedication.

God asks us to make “open commitments” of our faith. Baptism is an open statement that a life has been dedicated to Christ. Prayer is a way that we bring out into the open our dependence on God. Worship is one way that we say openly and publicly that God is important to me.

Family Discussion Question: When others look at your life, what do you think they would say you are “dedicated” to?

**Wednesday, November 10 — Thankfulness
PRAISE TO GOD**

*“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his.”
Dan 2:20 (NIV)*

The Bible tells us that Daniel was one of the wisest men who has ever walked this planet. Even a quick look at his life reveals that one of the secrets to that wisdom was his everyday decision to give praise to God. Intelligence and knowledge without praise add up to pride. It is when we add praise to the mix that God's wisdom begins to emerge. In Daniel chapter two we see in Daniel's example three specific ways to praise God:

Praise God for His Character - “Wisdom and Power are Yours”

Tell God, “Your love is great... Your faithfulness is wonderful... Your decisions are perfect.” Don't worry, He won't get a big head about it. He's God. One of the healthiest things we can do is praise Him for who He is.

Praise God for what He is doing to YOUR Character

“You have given ME wisdom and power!”

Praise God for His Actions in History

Daniel 9:15 says, “*Do it again, Lord.*” That's pure praise: rejoicing in God's power in the past and recognizing God's power in the present.

God's greatest action in history was the giving of His son. 1 Corinthians 1 calls the crucifixion of Christ foolishness to the world, but to us the wisdom of God. The cross is where God shows His wisdom and power to the world today.

We have a picture in our minds of getting wisdom by visiting a holy man on top of some far off hill. As if someone who is detached from the world is the person who has all of the answers? Wisdom IS found on a hill... but the hill is called Calvary. It is not found in someone who is detached from us, but where God identified Himself with all in the world. Want to see wisdom? Look at the cross. Want to enjoy wisdom? Praise God for what He did for you on the cross.

Prayer: Thank You Lord, for the love that you showed for me on the cross. Let the truth that you will love me no matter what guide my decisions and my actions today.

Tuesday, November 9 — Thankfulness
THANKSGIVING LIVING

“No matter what happens, always be thankful, for this is God’s will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.” 1 Th 5:18 (TLB)

We all know how a Thanksgiving turkey fills our stomachs. How does thanksgiving living fill our lives? What does thanksgiving DO to us? To understand the result of thanksgiving you need only look as far as the objects of thanksgiving. What we’re thankful for becomes the faith focus of our lives. If we’re not thankful at all we end up living a faith without focus. Thanksgiving has the power to bring God’s perspective and focus to our everyday lives!

When I thank God for his blessings it impacts my attitudes. We all know what it’s like to be around the person who thinks the world “owes them something.” That kind of thinking fills a person with ingratitude and bitterness. What about the person who recognizes through thanksgiving the wonderful truth that God has “given them everything.” That’s the person with the truly magnetic personality. The attraction is in their attitude of continuous joy. You cannot find that attitude in our world apart from thanksgiving.

When I thank God for his Character it impacts my character! Thankful people become holy people. As you thank God for His patience you develop endurance. As you thank Him for his unfailing love you’ll grow an ability to love even the unloveliest... to love even in the worst of times. As you thank Him for His grace you develop a giving attitude. Praise not only pleases God, it changes us!

When I thank God for His Son it gives me a new sense of security and victory. The results of the gift of Jesus are staggering, truly “indescribable.” Thankfulness is the proclamation of our trust in the truth that Jesus loved us and gave His life for us. When your faith focus becomes Jesus Christ then your life focus becomes victory!

Family Discussion Question: What character quality of God would you like to thank God especially for this thanksgiving week?

Thursday, September 23 — Faith
TRUE DEDICATION, PART 2

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship.” Rom 12:1 (NIV)

There are two more lessons about dedication that we learn from the study of Solomon that we began yesterday. Besides Open Declaration...

Dedication means Sacrifice

They sacrificed an unbelievable amount that day! 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats. That’s a lot of T-bone steak and leg of lamb! Why? What could be the purpose of such sacrifices? What did sacrifices do for men that was so important to the Lord. Sacrifices are “A gift of trust to the Lord.” As they sacrificed they declared that they trusted God to take care of their needs. They were saying, “Instead of hoarding and declaring my trust in myself, I’ll give to You, Lord, to declare my trust in you.”

Dedication will inevitably involve some sacrifices. Sacrifice is ultimately an expression of trust in the Lord. You’re willing to give something up because you trust Him more than that something.

Dedication means Praise

A significant part of dedication is praise to God. Solomon’s praise as he dedicated the temple centered on the fact that God has kept His promise. There is a **specific** praise that not only expresses, but actually increases our dedication to the Lord. That specific praise that grows our dedication is “Thank You Lord for your Faithfulness.” It is a praise that recognizes that all that we have comes as a result of God’s promises to us... as a result of His faithfulness in our lives.

That type of praise recognizes that I can be dedicated to God because God is dedicated to me! He is dedicated to my joy, my peace, my growth. God has dedicated Himself to my personal happiness and fulfillment. How dedicated is He? *“He who did not spare His own Son, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things.” (Romans 8:32)*

Family Discussion Question: What sacrifice would REALLLLY stretch your dedication?

**Friday, September 24 — Faith
TRUE DEDICATION, PART 3**

“Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands toward heaven and said: “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below--you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way.” 1 Kings 8:22-23 (NIV)

Dedication means praise and sacrifice and open declaration. Today we learn one final truth about dedication from King Solomon

Dedication means Ministry

We cannot be dedicated to God without being dedicated to meeting the needs of the people He has made. Solomon dedicated the temple to the needs of the disappointed and the defeated, those besieged by sin and by loneliness, those involved in the battles and the prisons of life.

Too many, too often make dedication the most impractical of things. It could never be lived, only talked about. There is a dedication made up of myths and fables and pipe dreams.

If you're striving to become more dedicated to the Lord it doesn't take you long to discover that there is a whole Christian subculture in which dedication is made up of spiritual sounding words and big name conferences and fancy looking materials. You cannot practice dedication in a conference or with mere words or on the pages of a notebook. It's built out of trusting God with the practical needs of your everyday life. You might be able to learn about it at a conference and be inspired toward it with a notebook, but don't ever fall into the trap of believing that the conference is where real dedication is expressed.

Dedication is expressed in ministry. It is expressed in what you choose to DO with your life: a decision to serve the Lord and the to serve the people He has made.

Family Discussion Question: Can you think of one simple ministry your family could do this week?

Children's activity: Do a simple ministry project with your children this week.

**Monday, November 8 — Thankfulness
HOW TO SAY “THANK YOU”**

“I will never worship anyone but you! For how can I thank you enough for all you have done?” Jonah 2:9 (TLB)

“Thank you.” Those two words are incredibly significant and deeply spiritual. One of the greatest skills we can develop in life is the skill of saying thank you. Nehemiah had obviously developed this skill. In chapter 3 of this book there are 3 important lessons about saying a simple “thanks.”

Be specific

Recognize the person. Say their name when you're saying thanks. A thank you is a wonderful opportunity to let another person know how important they are to you. Also, be specific about what they have done. It's one thing to say, “Thanks for dinner.” It's better to be more specific, “Thanks for cooking the sauerkraut just the way I like it.”

Be sensitive

The best words of thanks recognize not only an action but the heart behind the action. Jesus showed this kind of recognition when he noticed a child's humility, a widow who gave two mites, a woman who poured perfume on his feet. How encouraging it was to people as He looked beyond the bare bones of their actions to see and recognize the valuable attitudes of their hearts.

Be searching

Find ways to invite your mind to think about those whom you might want to thank. It bothers me that I often rush through life without taking time to thank those who have meant the most to me. Does that bother you also? I have a question written on my weekly schedule to force me to think about thanking people: “What 5 people will I write a note of encouragement to this week?” You might try something like this to help you to mentally search out those whom you want to thank.

Family discussion question: Who do you need to write a note of thanks to...today? Take a minute right now to thank each person in your family for something they have done recently? Be specific. Be sensitive.

Sunday, November 7 — Thankfulness
THE INGREDIENTS OF THANKFULNESS

*“I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.”
Cor 1:4 (NIV)*

Understanding the right ingredients is all important! Heloise wrote in her “hints” column that that best way to cook a moist turkey was to, “Put a cup of water in the cavity of the turkey, cover with tin foil and bake.” A reader wrote back to complain. “The turkey came out fine, but the plastic cup in the turkey melted!” Imagining that person trying to squeeze that cup into that turkey reminds us that directions must be specific! What are God’s specific directions for developing a thankful heart? What are the ingredients that result in thanksgiving? Here’s your “Thanksgiving recipe.”

Recognize God’s grace

When was the last time you sent your boss a thank you note for that month’s check? Of course you don’t... you don’t thank someone for what you earned. That’s why a recognition of God’s grace is such an important ingredient of thankfulness. When we recognize that all we have is a gift from Him it makes us into thankful people.

Understand God’s righteousness

“Righteousness” means that God ALWAYS does what is right. Beginning to get a glimmer of how righteousness ties in with thanksgiving? Sometimes life doesn’t feel like a gift - doesn’t look all pretty with a bright bow on top. Thankfulness than results from the knowledge that God is righteous. When life seems to have been unfair, when it seems to have cheated you, remember that God is righteous. His purpose will reign in the end.

Thank God with other people

Of course you can and should give thanks all alone. But the truth is: if you don’t have a place to give thanks with others you’ll soon stop giving thanks at all. You need to hear others give thanks. You need to share what God’s doing in your life with others. Thankfulness is like bananas... it grows best in bunches.

Family Activity: Start making a “Thanksgiving List” today... see how many things you can write down. Try to fill several pages... or you even might use a piece of poster board. Include things and people you are thankful for in the family of faith called John Knox Presbyterian Church.

Saturday, September 25 — Faith
AN ABEL FAITH

“By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.” Heb 11:4 (NIV)

The best way to learn faith is from people. Why? Because faith is not so much a matter of what you know as of who you are, it’s built not just out of knowledge but out of relationships. Take a look at Abel, the first faithful man. Three things happened to him because he had faith. They each point out how faith will affect our lives.

He offered a better sacrifice.

Faith affected his generosity. What was better about Abel’s sacrifice? Cain offered but Abel offered his best. Faith adds up to a willingness to give your best to the Lord. You can trust Him with it!

He was commended as righteous by God.

Faith affected his relationships. Righteous is a word about relationships, it points to being in right relationship with God. Preschoolers define it as being God’s friend. Faith gave Abel a commendation for his relationship with God.

He still speaks

Faith affected his influence. The most powerful tool you have for influencing this world is your faith. Why so powerful? Because actions and decisions based upon faith simply last longer. Cain may have cut Abel’s life short, but Abel’s faith still speaks! Want to make an impact? Seminars can hone your skills and organization can improve your opportunities and principles can enhance your planning... but it’s all a drop in the bucket without faith. If you’re mathematically minded: Impact = (Skills + Organization + Planning + “Whatever”) **times** Faith. Great skills times no faith equals zero impact. A few skills multiplied by a great faith adds up to incredible impact

Family discussion question: Where could you “offer your best” to the Lord right now in one specific way?

Children’s activity: Have your children take an offering to church tomorrow. Put it in an envelope, on which they write (or write with them) “My best for the Lord”.

Sunday, September 26 — Service
BECOMING A SIGNIFICANT SERVANT

“Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.” James 5:17 (NIV)

How do we live the most significant life possible? **We serve our way into significance.** For most of us the words “significant” and “servant” do not go together. There is a man in the Old Testament book of Kings who can show us the way. His name... Elijah! One of the most significant things about Elijah is that he was like us. He was a man of awesome miracles, of powerful actions, and the book of James reminds us that he was just yet like us. Since he is like us we can learn from him some lessons about being a significant servant.

Servant Lesson #1: God is willing and able to meet all of my needs.

Significant servants make that confidence the launching pad of their lives and ministries. God is ABLE - He has the power. God is WILLING - He has the love.

In 1 Kings 17 Elijah learns this lesson beside a brook in the desolate Kirath Ravine. In order to teach him this lesson God does for Elijah what He regularly does for His servants. He reduces life to the basics. Elijah certainly was down to basics! All he had was the water the Lord sent and the food that God delivered... via the “Raven Parcel Service.” God used a raven to bring food to Elijah. God has help where we least expect it! He provides in ways that go beyond our narrow expectations. That’s what we learn when life is reduced to the basics.

The “basics” are simply this: **a place of complete and total dependence upon God.** In that place God reminds us: we depend on Him alone for all of our needs. Why does God put us in such places? Reducing life to the basics helps to refocus upon God. We recognize again just how dependent upon God we really are. Not our paycheck, not Pavilions, not the Microwave or McDonald’s or Mastercard. God is the Father who graciously supplies all of our needs.

Pray this Servant’s Prayer: Everything in my life is there because you bring it to me Lord. I’m totally dependent upon you for everything! Every drink of water, every breath, every bite of food.

Family Activity: Make up some “God gave us this” stickers on post it notes and have your kids stick them all over your house to look at today.

Saturday, November 6 — Sacrifice
THE JOY OF SACRIFICE

“But remember this--if you give little, you will get little. A farmer who plants just a few seeds will get only a small crop, but if he plants much, he will reap much.” 2 Cor 9:6 (TLB)

To the uninitiated, basketball can be the most disorganized looking sport. Everyone runs up and down the court with no apparent plan. They do have plays in the game. One of the few plays most easily understand is called the “give and go.” You give somebody else the ball and then you go towards the basket. They give the ball back to you, and you score. I’d like to pick up on that to suggest a play that we desperately need to see executed more often in our lives and our families: the give and grow. Paul’s advice to us is simple, found in a two word command and a two word promise.

The command? Plant much! The promise? Reap much! It’s the simplest addition: few = small, much = much. It’s the simplest agriculture: if you plant a lot of seed you can expect a large harvest. How do we sow with our lives? We can give ourselves in hospitality: opening our home in order to meet people’s needs. Or how about ministry: going out from your home to meet people’s needs. Or what about stewardship: using the resources God has given to us to bless others. The challenge is clear. We need to plant our lives.

Paul says that we are made rich so that we can be generous. That’s an eye-opener!! Our riches are given not primarily to encourage our luxury... but our generosity. God’s riches are not an invitation to luxury, there are an opportunity for generosity. We should all carry around stickers that say “opportunity.” Stick them on everything that God places into our hands: our paycheck, our car, our house. Each are an opportunity to praise God, love people and express our faith.

Family discussion question: What do you need to put an “opportunity to praise God” sign on in your mind right now?

Children’s activity: Write “opportunity to praise God” on several 3X5 cards. Ask your kids what to put them on today.

Friday, November 5 — Sacrifice
TWO COINS

Read the story of the widow in Luke 21:1-4.

Two very small coins. Two mites, two 1/8ths of a penny. What could such a small amount buy. How could such a pittance be of any value to even a poor widow? It wasn't enough to make a difference; to buy a meal or rent a room or purchase a robe. It was seemingly only enough to remind her of all this widow had lost, all that her life now lacked. Yet, they were all that she had. She lived in a society in which a woman without a husband was not allowed to provide for herself. These two coins had become her only security: all that she had left.

Two very large coins! Two of the most talked about, most adored pieces of money in all of human history. More valuable than the crown jewels of England for their impact. More rare than the rarest of coins for their teaching. What could these two coins buy? They earned the highest praise of Jesus. Jesus looked at this woman and saw not a poor widow, but a woman of wonderful faith. These two coins became her lasting legacy, summing up all that she had done right.

There is a hidden fear for many of us in the reading of this story. If Jesus commended this woman for giving all that she had, might not he also ask the same of us? He does! He asks us to be **willing** to trust Him with our all. And if He ever challenged us to actually give it all away, be assured that He would not stop meeting our needs. Can you imagine the reward of that kind of genuine generosity?

Jesus is teaching his disciples, then and now, an important lesson as He points to this widow. We tend to be impressed with the amounts that people give. God is impressed with the heart that we give it with.

Family Discussion Question/ Children's activity: Make up a story together. How do you think God rewarded this poor widow when she got to heaven. Enjoy this by going into the wildest and grandest detail you can imagine.

Monday, September 27 — Service
BECOMING A SIGNIFICANT SERVANT, Part 2

Servant's lesson #2: Outer victories mean nothing if I do not win the inner battle. You'd think that chapter 18 of 1 Kings contained the biggest battles of Elijah's life. He battled the powerful king Ahab, he battled 450 false prophets! But in chapter 19 he faces an even bigger battle, the battle within himself. He won the battles of 18 fairly easily, yet almost lost his life in the battle with himself. In 1 Kings 19 Elijah gives clear expression to the kinds of inner battles which God's servants will inevitably have to face. See if you can relate to any of these feelings he expressed.

"I want to run."

We often feel like running after a great victory. The combination of physical and emotional fatigue make us feel like escaping when everyone else is celebrating. When we're run down we want to run away.

"I've had enough."

The feeling is, "I've reached my limit..."

"I'm all alone."

The greatest inner battle is the battle of loneliness. When you decide that you're all alone the inner battle is lost.

The inner victory for Elijah was won on 6 different fronts. God told him: You need **rest!** (v. 7) You must **worship!** (v. 8) You can **tell someone!** (v. 9-10) You need a **fresh encounter with God!** (v. 11-13) You are **useful** (v. 15-17) You **aren't alone!** (v. 18)

Let's focus for a moment on the idea of a fresh encounter with God. Elijah, who had always seen God in the fire and the storms, heard God this time in a gentle whisper. You might feel desperate to hear God's voice right now. Keep listening! Elijah didn't hear God the 1st or 2nd or even the 3rd time. But he was faithful to be where God wanted him to be and eventually heard God's still small voice. What do you need to hear God whisper?

Pray this servant's prayer: Lord, I want to serve you for the rest of my life. I pray that you would give to me the wisdom to rest when it's needed, the desire to place a priority on worship, the courage to tell You about the problems I face, the inner confidence that I am useful to you and the assurance that I am never alone in serving you. I pray that I would regularly hear you speaking to me in fresh, new ways.

Tuesday, September 28 — Service
THE SERVANT'S SURVIVAL STRATEGY

“You can be sure that the more we undergo sufferings for Christ, the more he will shower us with his comfort and encouragement.” 2 Cor 1:5 (TLB)

The world is full of survival manuals and instructions. You need them whenever you go into unfamiliar territory. A jungle survival manual to tell you that boa constrictors aren't just giving friendly hugs. A parent's survival manual to tell you about diapers and diet and discipline. Second Corinthians is a Servant's Survival Manual containing a Servant's Survival Strategy. Chapter 1 in the manual is, “How do servants deal with burdensome problems?” There are three steps, none of which can be ignored.

God pours out His comfort.

He cannot help Himself, it's His character to comfort. He is the God of compassion. He is the Father of all comfort. The word comfort here means “to come alongside and help.” This is much more than a card in the mail! God promises Himself to comfort His servants in difficult times.

We are filled with God's comfort.

God makes comfort more than a word on a page, He makes it real in our lives. God's comfort comes in reaction to our circumstances. This is why worry is so devastating: we're trying to find the comfort before we've faced the circumstance. God's comfort causes us to look back after the trouble is past and say, “I don't know how I survived that.”

Our comfort from God overflows to others.

We are comforted, so that we might comfort others. We may always be able to figure out the reasons why a problem comes into our lives. But we can always see God work the miracle of transforming our sufferings into other's comfort. God's comfort is so magnificent that when He pours it out on us there is always enough that it overflows to others.

Family Discussion Question: What is one place in your life where God's comfort has or could overflow from you to others.

Family Activity: Show your children how God's comfort overflows by filling up a glass with a gallon pitcher of water. Talk about the fact that because God is bigger than us He always has more help to give us than we will need.

Thursday, November 4 — Sacrifice
SACRIFICING TO GIVE

“Those who cry as they plant crops will sing at harvest time. Those who cry as they carry out the seeds will return singing and carrying bundles of grain.” Psa 126:5-6 (NCV)

A missionary tells about understanding the significance of this verse for the first time. During a time of drought the tribe with which he was working saw their supplies of corn stretched to the limit. He recalled seeing a father take one of the last bags of dried corn out of his families store room. This corn could have been pounded into meal to make the cakes that were the staple of the families diet. But, instead, he took the corn to the field where he sowed the seed into the ground. The missionary saw tears flowing down the man's cheeks, and he understood. It hurt to put into the ground what might be his families last meal. Yet he knew that without sowing that seed his family would certainly starve the next year. So he sowed with tears knowing that he would one day reap with joy.

What's the lesson? That we should give away our last meal? Of course not! The lesson is.... it's not always easy to “generate generosity!” When we talk about “giving cheerfully” it can sound as if giving is always an easy thing to do. That simply is not true. For those who give there is often the strange mixture of sacrifice and joy. You know that you're doing what is right and yet it is often hard to let go. That's true when we give our time, our money, our talents or ourselves.

But the truth is... there is an inevitable law of sowing and reaping at work. It's a natural law. It's a spiritual law. Those who sow in tears WILL reap with joy. The result of our sacrificing to meet other's needs is not just a feeling of satisfaction, well being or “having done the right thing.” It is JOY! What is joy? It is an overflowing sense of God's perspective on life, an overwhelming experience of God's presence in life and an overarching knowledge of God's security for life.

Family discussion question: Can you remember a time when it was difficult for you to give something? (Even preschoolers can think of an answer to this question!)

Wednesday, November 3 — Sacrifice
SACRIFICING TO LIVE

“I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” John 12:24 (NIV)

Imagine a grain of wheat talking to itself, admiring itself, noticing how round and brown and fully packed it is. Imagine it thinking about that physiology and psychology of falling into the cold, dark ground. The grain of wheat might say, “I’m feeling a little uncomfortable with this concept. I like myself as I am and think that falling into the ground would be a waste of my life.”

Jesus is not talking about wheat in this verse. He is talking to us! He’s reminding us that a sacrifice given out of a loving heart for Him always results in new life for ourselves and for others. Yet most of us have felt like our mythical grain of wheat. Sacrifice is a great idea... for other people or for some other time.

We all want to do something great with our lives. We think, “I’ll finish those goals and then I’ll have time to make the sacrifices.” Jesus says to us, “Sacrifice comes first!” Jesus led the way for us. He sacrificed His life, literally, so that we could be forgiven. The most significant sacrifice in history brought about the most significant impact upon history.

This sacrifice is not a simplistic “no pain, no gain” philosophy. We’re not talking about working hard. (Although there’s nothing wrong with hard work.) Nor is this an invitation to a “martyr complex” faith. We’re talking about true sacrifice: giving up that which is most important to you. Jesus could not have been more clear. Losing your life comes before finding your life.

And find it you will! Someone once said to a group of missionaries serving in a remote area “you have certainly buried yourselves here.” The missionary replied, “We were not buried here, we were planted here.”

Family Discussion Question: How do we get past the “I’m not sure I really want to do this” feeling that goes along with all genuine sacrifices?

Children’s Activity: Plant some seeds and watch them grow.

Wednesday, September 29 — Service
GIFTS FOR SERVING

Who is the most important worker in the restaurant? The owner: the one who plans what the restaurant will serve? The master chef: cooking everything to perfection? I’ll give a vote for the waiter. Without her or him you’d never enjoy what the owner planned, never eat what the chef prepared. Never discount the value of good service!

Who is the most important worker in God’s kingdom? The preacher that everyone notices? The leader who gets the applause? I’ll vote for the unnoticed servant. Without him or her 90% of what gets done in God’s kingdom would go lacking. We’d have teachers teaching to empty auditoriums, leaders with no one to lead. Never discount the value of a good servant!

One of the great joys of heaven will be in seeing, really seeing, the great impact and value of servants who have gone without fanfare in this world. Great servants like hundreds of volunteers who make John Knox Church what it is.

The greatness of service is only released as we choose to use whatever gifts God has given us for His glory. The greatest tragedy in God’s kingdom is a gift that is undiscovered or unused or underutilized.

The great violinist, Nicolo Paganini, willed his marvelous violin to Genoa - the city of his birth - but only on condition that the instrument never be played after his death. It was an unfortunate condition, for it is a peculiarity of wood that as long as it is used and handled, it shows little wear. As soon as it is discarded, it begins to decay. The exquisite, mellow-toned violin has become worm-eaten in its beautiful case, valueless except as a relic. The moldering instrument is a reminder that a life withdrawn from all service to others loses its meaning.

Family Discussion Question: Recognize the gifts that God has given to those in your family. Beginning with the youngest, focus on one person at a time. Have each person in your family affirm their gifts by saying, “You are really good at...” or “God has given you a gift for...”

Thursday, September 30 — Service
WHAT DOES A SERVANT LOOK LIKE?

“After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.” John 13:5 (NIV)

There is a feeling in the thirteenth chapter of John that we are there for one of the most significant events in history.

What’s your picture of the atmosphere in the upper room where Jesus and his disciples met the night before Jesus died? Maybe hushed tones and a holy glow come to mind. Let me shatter that vision with a hefty dose of reality. We come in to excited noises. The disciples are expecting Jesus to make His move to take over soon, and they’ll go with Him to the very top. They talk about what that will be like. You can just imagine them dreaming. Suddenly the volume increases. No longer excitement, but argument.

Which would be the greatest?! The argument really began when they walked into the room. No one took time to wash the other’s feet. With thoughts of greatness on their minds, they had no time for an activity usually assigned to slaves. The fact that greatness is measured with the yard stick of service had not yet registered with them.

There sits Jesus, hardly noticed as the others argue. No one sees Him get up and walk to the other side of the room. A few notice as he takes off His robe and pours a basin of water. Stunned silence overtakes them all as Jesus comes to each disciple and begins to wash his feet.

Jesus washed their feet. God in human flesh washed dirty feet. Scrubbing dusty toes - now that’s love made practical! Real love is an action, not a feeling. Everything was ready for someone to serve: the pitcher was there, the wash basin was there, the linen cloth was there. It just took a person to take it up.

We hear Jesus say, “You should wash **one another’s** feet.” What does it mean to wash the feet of a disciple today? Ask yourself, why did Jesus wash the disciples feet? It wasn’t a religious ceremony, that’s for sure! He washed their feet because their feet were dirty!! How do you wash other’s feet? What does that mean? **DO something that somebody else needs.**

Family Discussion Question: Who in your own family needs their feet washed today? (Pause here for a few comments from your kids about whose feet smell!) Seriously: who has a practical need that you could all be a part of meeting?

Tuesday, November 2 — Sacrifice
SACRIFICING TO LOVE

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” 1 Cor 13:1 (NIV)

It’s not enough for love to just be exciting, it also must be lasting! Teen age romance won’t satisfy a middle aged couple. Puppy love won’t last through the dog days of life. How can you build a love that lasts longer than a 2 hour movie, or a 210 page paperback novel? Paul writes to the Corinthians amidst their turmoil and tells them the secret of love that makes relationships last. Let’s look at I Corinthians 13 together and get some clues to the daily sacrifices that keep love alive.

“Love is patient...” (1 Cor 13:4)

Love is alive when it has time... is dying when it is hurried... is dead when it cannot wait. Waiting **together** is a part of all of our relationships! But many times love also means that I must wait for someone else - wait for them to grow or to understand - wait for them to heal or to get motivated.

Love is kind... (1 Cor 13:4)

Love is alive when it cares... is dying when it forgets... is dead when it ignores. Kindness is the ability to do the little things well. The love expressed in kindness is learning how to turn those grand vows in a ceremony into washing dishes and dumping trash... how to turn those great hopes in a hospital nursery into changing diapers and staying up with sick children. Do you ever forget to be kind? We all do! Kindness in our families, with those we are closest to, takes real effort.

“LOVE does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud” I Cor 13:4

Love is alive when it is secure... is dying when it doubts... is dead when it loses trust. Security is one of the #1 issues in relationships. Add a little insecurity to the best of relationships and love does not stay alive. This is true even in our relationship with God. What one step could you take to make that relationship where you are struggling more secure? What difference might it make for you to talk to or call someone today and say “No matter what happens, no matter how ill you become or how far apart we are... I will always love you.”

Family Activity: Here’s your assignment... be kind to someone in your family today in some unusual or new way. See if you can catch each other being kind.

Children’s activity: Show your kids how our actions affect our feelings. Have them act sad... ask if it makes them feel a little sad. Have them act angry, then act like they don’t care. Then have them act happy and ask again how their actions affect the way they feel inside.

Monday, November 1 — Sacrifice
SACRIFICING TO GROW

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.” 1 Corinthians 9:24

The truth is, our biggest hurdle in making the sacrificial commitments we'd like to make for Christ is often ourselves! We don't always feel like doing what we know is right to do! Sometimes we feel like doing what we know is the worst thing to do. Wouldn't it be great if they made a TV remote control for people! Circumstances become overwhelming - click - change channels. Can't wait patiently - click - fast forward. Afraid of the future - click - pause. Want to make up for a mistake - click - rewind. Wouldn't it be great if they made a remote control for self-control?

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9 “I make myself.” How do you do that? The key to self control is Christ control - the Bible says it is a fruit that God's spirit wants to bear in our lives. Paul talks about three areas of life that we need to make a commitment to if we are to follow his leadership in our lives in this area of a new sense of self control.

Run for the Prize: Excellence

Don't run at the back, don't run with the pack, run for the prize. In a world where many think it enough to have simply participated, we are challenged to strive for excellence.

Train for the crown: Eternity

If the relatively small promise of a reward like a gold medal can motivate us to such great heights even on a human level - just think of what a focus on eternity could do!

Aim for the goal: Energy

If you're running a race it's good to have your eye on the finish line! Paul reminded us that those who reach the finish are those who make sacrifices. He said he “disciplined his body.” We have a choice. We become a slave to our passions or we live for Christ with the passion of a slave.

Family Discussion Question: Where do you need a renewed commitment to excellence... focus on eternity... discipline for energy?

Friday, October 1 — Service
SERVING AT HOME

“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.” Gal 5:13 (NIV)

If one of God's most important calls to us is the call to be a servant, doesn't it make sense that we need to incorporate that service into our daily lives. That means being a servant where we work. That means being a servant in our own homes. If we don't serve those with whom we spend the most time, those whom we love the most, then servanthood is half hearted at best. How can I be a servant at home? Here's a few ideas suggested by Galatians chapter 5.

Survey your Home

Ask yourself: is my home a place of indulgence, or service? You see, an opportunity to serve is also always an opportunity to indulge. Nowhere is that so true as in the home. Nowhere is our human tendency towards selfishness seen so clearly as in the home. What are you doing with your opportunities? Are you taking advantage of your family? Of their work by your laziness? Of their forgiveness by your anger? Of their giving by your taking?

Surrender your Heart

Servants surrender their heart to the guidance of God's Spirit. What makes me into this servant type of person? God's Spirit! Some specific surrenders need to happen in your heart for your home to become a place of service. Wait a minute, you might be thinking. Isn't this church stuff? What does the Holy Spirit have to do with my family? Everything! Eph. 5:18 tells us, “Be filled with the Spirit,” and then spends the rest of the chapter talking about what that does in our families! Being filled with the Spirit gives us the power to make those specific surrenders that make a family strong. He enables us to surrender our plans and our agendas and our desire to have OUR needs met in order to love others. Your family life does not have to be determined by how you were raised, not if you surrender. It does not have to be governed by how it has been, not if you surrender. It does not have to be limited to what it is now, not if you surrender.

Family Discussion Question: Where is it difficult for you to surrender yourself to God's daily direction?

Children's Activity: Use a white flag to illustrate to your kids the idea of surrender. Talk about how waving it shows that you're giving up what you want to give someone else what they need. Use some practical illustrations like which TV show you watch or who gets to sit in the best seat in the car.

Saturday, October 2 — Service
SERVING ON A DONKEY

“He answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ ; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Luke 10:27 (NIV) Read the story of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-36)

Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan is a parable about the service that springs from love. The story is so simple that we often miss it’s incredible applications for our everyday lives. It is the story of three different types of people... three different responses to needs.

Those who create needs.

The robbers in this story created the needs that the Samaritan would eventually meet. How did they become such takers rather than givers? Their actions were the result of a single attitude: “My needs are more important than your needs.” Or, to say it in a word, they were **selfish**. Self-centeredness creates an avalanche of needs... it always has. That’s why the Lord so clearly says to us through Paul *“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Phil 2:4)*

Those who ignore needs.

The Levite and priest just “passed by.” It was easier to pretend the need didn’t exist, although it meant that the man would probably die. Ignoring needs is so easy. This is where the majority of us struggle. Why do we ignore others needs?

Fear: We’re afraid we might get hurt

Judgment: We have judgmental attitudes.

Busyness: We’re too busy with life’s details. (Ouch!)

False purity: We’re afraid of how their problems might affect us.

Those who meet needs.

The most striking thing about the Samaritan was that he made the choice to meet another person’s need. That meant personal sacrifice. His sacrifice was built upon his **compassion**. His compassion overcame fear and apathy. His compassion made him willing to care. His willingness to care came with a **cost**. It cost him the price of an inn. It cost him his time. It cost him his comfort, he walked while the man rode his donkey.

Family Discussion Question: Do you find it difficult to pay the price to love? To give up plans and time, comfort and resources?

Children’s Activity: Act out the story of the good Samaritan... it’s OK for one person to play several parts!

Sunday, October 31 — Sacrifice
SACRIFICING TO CHANGE

“Take with you your only son—yes, Isaac whom you love so much—and go to the land of Moriah and sacrifice him there...” Gen 22:2 (TLB)

We all have something we’d like to change in our lives. It might be our schedule or our habits, our words or our weight. Many of us struggle with making those changes. Instead of telling yourself you cannot change, why not discover the secret of lasting change.

The secret of lasting change is sacrifice. In the give and take of life what you give you keep and what you take you end up losing. Any talk about change must include an honest look at sacrifices. Lasting change is built on real sacrifices. Your attitude towards sacrifice can be a grumbled, “We all have to make sacrifices,” or a faith filled, “God asks us all to make sacrifices.” The sacrifices God asks of us always build towards the blessings God wants to give to us.

Abraham understood sacrifice. He sacrificed his former life and people when he moved to the promised land. And then, when it seemed that all the sacrifices had been made and he could coast for the rest of his life, God asked for the biggest sacrifice of all. He told Abraham to sacrifice his son. How could God ask that of Abraham? How could God ask so much of us? You’ve got it all wrong! It’s not as if He takes and we give. It’s more that he teaches us how to give so that He can give us even more.

We read this story and the tension builds - would God really let Abraham go through with it! There is a sigh of relief in us all when God stops Abraham at the end - when He provides a ram in the thicket. Hebrews 11 tells us that Abraham trusted God to resurrect his son even if he had completed the sacrifice.

In New Testament days this scene is replayed. Once again it’s an only son, ready to be sacrificed. But this time it is Jesus, God’s son, on the cross. But this time no voice calls out, no ram in the thicket. What He would not allow Abraham to do God himself did. Jesus sacrificed His life!

The sacrifice that Abraham did not have to make changed him. The sacrifice that Jesus did make changed us. There is no change without sacrifice.

Family Discussion Question: What would you like to change?

Family Activity: “Change” the color of some water by adding a few drops of food coloring. Talk about the fact that having Jesus in our lives may seem like a little thing to some people... but it changes EVERYTHING about us.

**Saturday, October 30 — Commitment
WHERE COMMITMENT LEADS**

Where did the commitment that Mary and Joseph made take this young couple?

Their commitment let them to Egypt. Because King Herod was trying to kill the baby King they had to flee their homeland. It wasn't always convenient - all fun and games - to have Jesus as their son. Hollywood would have Mary saying, "I don't feel like cooking tonight... Jesus here's some bread and loaves, could you whip something up." Or, "One of the kids is sick... heal them." The truth is, their commitments made their lives better.... but not easy. Commitments are not always convenient!

Their commitment led them to a temple. The temple where they lost Jesus when He was 12 years old. They lost the Son of God. (Or they at least thought that they had!) Their great commitment led to a tremendous feeling of having let God down. Some people are afraid to make commitments because they feel they won't be able to keep them perfectly. Let me set your mind at ease... you're right, you won't! But those who are afraid of stumbling never get in the race.

Her commitment led to being involved in Jesus' first miracle. Mary was the one that encouraged that miracle! Opportunity is being in the right place at the right time so that God can use you in His way. You can't always schedule God's will, sometimes it's just a matter of being available. Mary's commitment made her available.

Her commitment led to the foot of a cross. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was there at the cross. Can you imagine the emotions that must have nearly burst her heart? She knew that Jesus was God's Son. But Jesus was also her son. She had nursed and cared for Him as a baby - and now He was being tortured on a cross. Trust sometimes leads to a broken heart. A broken heart over our own sin. A broken heart over those who reject Christ.

Her commitment led to the upper room. In Acts we're told of the new church starting in an upper room. Not many people realize that Mary was there when that new church started. She saw the resurrected Jesus. She witnessed the beginning of His church that would change the world. In the end, her life of commitment led to a fulfillment of God's promise that she could have never imagined.

Family Discussion Question: Where is your commitment leading you right now?

**Sunday, October 3 — Purpose
A PLAN FOR YOUR FUTURE**

I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope. Jer 29:11 (NIV)

One of God's most purpose filled promises is this great promise of His plan for our lives from Jeremiah 29. Purpose is impossible without a plan. A plan and a purpose are impossible without HOPE. How do you plan for the future? In order to have hope for your future you must start with God's purpose. All the planning and scheduling in the world will not help if you do not have God's purpose for your future right at its very root. When you start with God's purpose you realize, "God has plans for me!"

God is planning right now for your prosperity. That may or may not include material prosperity, the real focus here is on significance of life. Imagine God up in heaven with a sheet of paper in front of Him. Yes, that does take some imagination! Now imagine that the paper has your name on it. Under your name is the heading, "Plans for success and significance." And finally imagine this - the paper is filled with ideas and goals and plans.

God is planning right now for your future. Before we plan anything we should always ask "God, what are your plans for my future." Our goal is not to get God to bless the future we've planned. Our desire should be to live out the future that He plans to bless us with.

God is planning right now for your hope! However discouraging things may seem at times, God has a plan for your hope! He's told us in advance, "I want to give you hope." Even the worst of circumstances can give us hope by causing us to transfer our trust from this uncertain world to God's certain future in eternity.

Family discussion question: How does this promise of God give you a new sense of hope in some particular area of your future.

Children's Activity: This is a great verse to memorize. Why not work on it together as a family over the next week. Write it on a card and place it on your refrigerator to remind you.

Monday, October 4 — Purpose
HOW DO YOU BUILD A PURPOSE?

“Stand up! I have chosen you to be my servant and my witness—you will tell people the things that you have seen and the things that I will show you. This is why I have come to you today.” Acts 26:16 (NCV)

Do you find your longing for a greater purpose and significance in life constantly being met by the realities of the humdrum routine of everyday living? It seems as if we are constantly ordering a scoop of mocha almond fudge, of mountain raspberry swirl parfait... and life keeps handing us vanilla. Vision vanishes... and sadly we tell ourselves that's the only way it can be. Many never become visionary because they expect it to pop full grown into their heads. Vision must be grown... it must be built.

You have to discover your purpose. The foundation for vision is God given purpose. You take the first step towards building a vision when you say to yourself, “God has a specific purpose for my life.” Your God given life purpose will include an **excellence** in your God given relationships and the exercise of your God given gifts. You may discover it suddenly as Paul did on a Damascus road, or the discovery may dawn on you slowly but no less brightly.

You have to dare to dream. To dare to dream you must **prepare** to dream. We somehow get the idea that great things done in our world are done on the spur of the moment, an emotion overtakes us and we accomplish something wonderful. It takes time to dream! Paul spent 17 years in the desert after his vision of purpose, preparing. To dare to dream you must also share your dream. God's promptings are transformed into living purpose as we dare to **share** our dreams.

You have to focus with goals. Goals are a means for making specific the purpose of God. One of our problems is that our faith never gets specific. “What am I going to do and when am I going to do it?” God given goals are actually statements of faith. By the way, the best goals always grow out of our worship.

Family Discussion Question: What goal for carrying out God's purpose for your life do you need to set, or to remind yourself of, today?

Friday, October 29 — Commitment
MARY: THE CHARACTER OF COMMITMENT

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” “Nothing is impossible with God.” “I am the Lord's servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Luke 1:34, 37,38 (NIV)

Perhaps the greatest commitment made by any human being was the commitment that Mary made to trust God's will in giving birth to His Son. How would you react if told you were to bear the Son of God? We see in Mary's reaction not anything strange at all; in fact, something very familiar. She acted much as people today do when they come face to face with the fact that Jesus has come into the world... that Jesus is willing to come into their world. Mary goes through three stages... confusion, questions, commitment.

Mary begins with Confusion

She was confused, because she didn't understand who God was. Her great fear made her want to draw away. The angel helps her to understand, helps us to see: if you're afraid of God, you don't understand who He is. God's angel clears up our confusion by saying, “Don't be afraid.” How needed those words are in so many of our lives. Fear, in pushing us away from God, is pulling our lives apart. “You will give birth to a son.” Truth calmed her fear and changed it to wonder.

Mary moves from Confusion to Questions - “How will this be?”

Mary was saying, “Lord, I'm not qualified.” She had as good a reason to say that as anyone in history. What the angel was telling her was impossible! However good or poor the excuse, the lesson that's needed is the same: stop looking at yourself and start looking at God. “How will this be?” Go ahead and ask! God answers our questions. He helps us with our doubts.

Mary moves from Questions to Commitment

In verse 38 you see an attitude in Mary that shines for us. Commitment seems to leap from the page as you read this verse. She makes her decision, “Be it done to me.” William Barclay writes that the world's commonest prayer is, “Thy will be changed.” Mary refused the world's commonest prayer and prayed the world's greatest prayer: “Thy will be done.”

Family Discussion Question: From confusion, to questions, to commitment; a journey that millions have taken when faced with that baby in a manger. Where do you need to take the next step in that journey today?

Thursday, October 28 — Commitment
REBUILDING A COMMITMENT

“The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding”
Neh 2:20 (NIV)

We are a society desperately in need of the art of rebuilding. I’m not talking about houses and cars. We need to perfect the art of rebuilding relationships: rebuilding marriages and families and friendships. We need to learn how to rebuild hope and rebuild trust and rebuild our ability to make commitments. The promise in Nehemiah 2:20 answers the question, “What makes you into a builder?” Today: let this promise encourage you to rebuild an important commitment in your life.

Expectation - *“the God of heaven will give us success”*

It is our relationship with God that grows us into expectant people. God is perfectly powerful. He is the God of all the heavens. He can accomplish whatever dream He puts in my heart. Success is a gift of God!

Dedication - *“we His servants”*

Nehemiah said an encyclopedia full about what it takes to be a builder in these few words. He had chosen to be a servant of God. Self-centered people never do a very good job of rebuilding. They may even think they have good intentions, but the truth is they become more rearrangers than builders. They try to rearrange to suit their needs rather than rebuild for God's glory.

Determination - *“will start rebuilding”*

What’s the number one reason why rebuilding does not occur? Lack of determination to start! Who's going to start? In your marriage, with your kids, in your ministry. Say to yourself, “I will start” Come on, become a builder! Stop relaxing, rebuild!! Stop retreating, rebuild! It may be a relationship, maybe a commitment. Determine to start.

Family discussion question: What’s one place where you could start to practice this art of rebuilding?

Children’s activity: Fix something together today with your kids. Make it something simple. Suggestion for non-repair types: make some pictures on your wall hang crooked and get the kids to notice them. Fix them together.

Tuesday, October 5 —Purpose
THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE OF NOAH

“Noah was a pleasure to the Lord. ...He was the only truly righteous man living on the earth at that time. He tried always to conduct his affairs according to God’s will.” Gen 6:8-9 (TLB)

Where do you find the motivation to live out the purpose of God? One of the greatest examples of God-centered motivation in the Bible is found in the life of Noah. In his life lies the secret of a man who survives the disaster of his age. What motivated him?

When Noah **built the ark** he showed us the motivational power of obedience. God gave Noah the directions and Noah followed them. The ark was a huge object lesson in obedience. Arks, temples, churches are built by people who trust God. Lives and hearts and families are built by people who trust God.

When Noah **entered the ark** he showed us the motivational power of trust. He walked into the ark behind all of the animals and God shut the door. He shut it seven days before the first raindrop fell. While the sun was yet shining and the sky was blue, while the people around were still convinced that nothing was going to happen, God shut the door. What do you think Noah was thinking that first week? All he had to carry him through was his trust.

Noah **on the ark** shows us the motivational power of faithfulness. How many days do you think Noah floated on the ark? 40? The rain fell for 40 days, but the actual time on the ark until the water receded was actually... 382 days! When you feel that God is taking too long to act and yet you keep trusting - that’s faithfulness.

When Noah came **out of the ark** he reminded us of the motivational power of worship. The first thing Noah does when he leaves the ark is go give thanks to God. What would you want to do first after a year in an ark? One of life’s greatest motivators is found in taking the time to say thank you to God.

Prayer: Today my Obedience to God will motivate me to... My Trust in God will motivate me to... My Faithfulness towards God will motivate me to... My Worship of God will motivate me to...

Wednesday, October 6 — Purpose
THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE OF JACOB

“By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.” Heb 11:21 (NIV)

Jacob... it’s all in the name. His name means “schemer.” He was a guy who always had an angle. He cheated his own family out of birthrights, inheritances and land. But here he is in Hebrews 11, commended for his faith! Jacob was the man who wrestled with God. Jacob wrestled his way to a great faith.

There were actually three phases to Jacob’s life. His early life was lived in the scheming phase. .

He spent his life trying to earn for himself what God wanted to give him as a gift. Then, after years of scheming and at the edge of disaster, came the wrestling phase. It lasted only one night but it changed Jacob’s life. He had a wrestling match... with God! When Jacob wrestles with God three things happen:

He brings him face to face with who he is: Jacob, a schemer. Jacob had to admit to God what he was really like. It’s not that God didn’t know! He wants Jacob to confess the truth about himself.

He brings him face to face with who he can be: Israel. God changed Jacob’s name to Israel, the man who would become a nation. He was the bearer of God’s promise and his descendants would be as the stars. I think we have too many “Jacob’s” and not enough “Israel’s.” Too many who can tell God what’s wrong with them but haven’t finished the story. What’s God’s new purpose for your life?

He brings him face to face with who he can’t be. Jacob tries to wrestle with God and win. Bad idea! God leaves him with a limp. Jacob lives the rest of his life with a physical reminder of the fact that God is the boss. That’s the third phase, the limping phase. Jacob’s limp was an every step reminder of his need for God.

Family Discussion Question: What is it in your life that reminds you of your need for God... every step of the way?

Children’s Activity: Put a small pebble in your shoe and try to walk across the room. Remind your children that since a little thing like a pebble can hamper us we should never pretend that we are so smart or strong we don’t need God.

Wednesday, October 27 — Commitment
UP THE DOWN ESCALATOR

Life as a believer in this world is somewhat like walking up a down escalator. As long as you keep moving ahead with your commitments, your fine. But try to stand still... and you find yourself moving in the wrong direction!

The book of Second Kings is about a time in Israel’s history when the escalator was moving down very quickly. During this time there were three kings who stood out for their commitment to faith even in the toughest of times: Joash, Hezekiah and Josiah. They each have some great lessons to teach us for our tough times about the commitments we can make to keep moving ahead.

Joash repaired the temple in 2nd Kings 12. He rebuilt the place of worship! The place of worship must remain strong in our lives if we’re to swim upstream without being washed down or worn out. I’m talking about more than just attending a worship service, but giving your attention to worship. Joash’s experience reminds us of a vital truth regarding keeping worship at the center of our inner lives. We have to be willing to pay the price. It takes time... valuable time, to worship the Lord.

Hezekiah in 2nd Kings 18 removed the “High Places,” the places of false worship. A growing faith comes when we deal with the destructive and the distracting influences in our lives. Look at how Hezekiah dealt with such places. He removed, smashed, cut down and broke them into pieces! There was no compromise... they were completely dealt with. You can’t deal with “high places” with halfway measures. It takes commitment.

Josiah rediscovered God’s Word in chapters 22-23. Even if you haven’t picked up your Bible for awhile, you probably know what shelf it’s on. That’s better than the people of Israel had done. They had literally lost the Lord’s law. When Josiah rediscovered and read it everything changed. You may need to make a rediscovery of your own; to rediscover the meaning of God’s word for your daily life. Start reading it again as if your very life depends upon it... it does!

Family Discussion Question: Whose example do you most need right now: Joash, Hezekiah or Josiah?

Children’s Activity: Draw a picture of a fish swimming upstream (against some trash going downstream) and put your name on the fish.

Tuesday, October 26 — Commitment
A COMMITMENT TO YOUR NEW LIFE

“Let the peace that Christ gives control your thinking, because you were all called together in one body to have peace. Always be thankful.” Col 3:15 (NCV)

How on earth do heavenly minded people act? What does the new life Christ gives us look like? Colossians 3:12-17 outlines for us the daily commitments that are a part of the new life that we live as believers in Jesus.

We put on the love of Christ. Love others as Jesus loved them? Every day? Paul reminds us of three truths about ourselves that give us a foundation and a strength for loving others. I am a chosen person. By God... for a purpose. I am a holy person. People who love others aren't constantly trying to prove themselves. I am a dearly loved person, dearly loved by God. In order to love I MUST KNOW that I am loved.

We're ruled by the peace of Christ. To rule is an athletic term which means to umpire. The umpire is the one who has the final say. Who has the final say in your daily attitudes and decisions? Is it the worries of the world or the peace of Christ? We all struggle with allowing our anxieties control of our lives. Paul reminds us in these verses that one of the secrets to changing our focus is found in expressing our thankfulness to God.

We're indwelt with the Word of Christ. God's word does dwell in us as we hear, read, study, memorize and meditate on it. But we're reminded in Colossians three that it dwells in us richly as we teach and encourage others with what it says.

We do everything in the name of Christ. Everything, from shopping for groceries to office staff meetings to carpools to filling out tax forms to homework. How do we make this practical? Do we say, “In the name of Christ I buy this broccoli... fill this car with gas...??” Billy Graham's wife Ruth used to have a sign over her kitchen sink that read, “Divine services held here three times a day.” Washing dishes can be an act of worship if you do it in the name of the Lord. To do something in God's name means you focus on both your purpose for Him and His presence with you.

Family Discussion Question: Can you think of the name of one person towards whom you need to act in the love of Christ. One decision you need the peace of Christ to rule in. One believer with whom you need to share the word of Christ. One place that you can start acting in the name of Christ.

Thursday, October 7 — Purpose
I CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:5 (NIV)

We can't be satisfied with just making a living, we must feel that we're making a difference! Try it - just bring home a paycheck. Nothing else - nothing more. Even if the paycheck is \$100,000 a month it won't satisfy. (Right now you are thinking “I'd like to try!”) But the truth is, we need to make a difference. Jesus gives us a promise that tells us the secret to really making a difference in this world. The secret is “abiding in Christ.” What does that mean? There are 4 aspects of abiding in John 15.

Be aware of how much you need Him. Don't miss this, “*Apart from me you can do nothing!*”

Allow His word to mold your life.

Seek to please God.

Ask for His help through prayer.

Significance is not a contest - you don't win it in competition with others. Importance is a wonderful gift given by God's love. People who make a difference in this life are people who live the joy of being chosen by God - of being important to God Himself. You are Jesus' friend. Jesus starts John 15 calling us branches and ends up calling us friends. When you see Jesus as a friend it turns your thinking upside down. It's much easier to face trouble when you have a friend beside you. You're likely to stay attached to someone you know is your friend. And, when it comes to asking, it's always easier to ask a friend. Your life is meant to count! You are chosen to be significant: to bear “fruit that will last.” Lasting fruit means changed lives, new hope, real impact upon people's hurts. It is drawing people's attention to the eternal love of God, changing someone's eternal destiny by introducing them to the opportunity we all have to place faith in Jesus Christ.

Family Discussion Question: You are Jesus' friend! What's something you could do to treat Jesus like your best friend today?

Friday, October 8 — Purpose
KEEPING YOUR PURPOSE ALIVE

“Solomon, my son, get to know the God of your fathers. Worship and serve him with a clean heart and a willing mind, for the Lord sees every heart and understands and knows every thought.” 1 Chr 28:9 (TLB)

A burned out light bulb, an empty toothpaste tube, a broken record. That’s not you! People never outlive their usefulness! True, we do feel burned out and empty and even broken at times, but don’t let that fool you. You’ve got more to offer than a toothpaste tube! You cannot outlast your usefulness!!

One of the major causes of a lack of drive is a lack of purpose. Life seems empty when it is without purpose. Sometimes we run out of purpose long before we run out of energy. How can I renew the sense of purpose in my life? In 1 Chronicles 28 David shows us how to refresh our purpose when we come to a crossroads.

Involve your heart (1 Chron 28:9)

Real purpose has to involve more than the merely routine - you have to have your heart in it! If the purpose is being imposed from outside it has the feel of pressure. If the purpose is welling up from inside it has the feel of real promise and enthusiasm. Some of you are caught in the Twilight Zone between wanting and willing. You’ve got a case of the “shoulds.” Give God a willing heart.

Inspect your plan (v. 19)

Ask yourself: are my plans big enough? Are they bigger than my comfort? David’s plan for his life went beyond comfort in his life. I talk to a lot of people who’s greatest plan is personal comfort. That’s not big enough!! Are your plans bigger than your desires? Have you discovered the surprising fact that even if you got everything you desired, it wouldn’t be big enough?

Invest your resources

When a purpose catches a hold of your heart and life you become willing to invest yourself in it! David invested his own resources! About 87 million in gold and 12.5 million in silver - no small investment. It’s one thing to use someone else’s resources, quite another thing to invest your own. Purpose has a personal price!

Family Discussion: What’s the biggest plan you feel God has for your life?

Children’s Activity: Squeeze some toothpaste out of a tube... and then try to put it back in again! Talk about the fact that while WE can’t put everything back into our lives like we’d want to, God can do anything!

Monday, October 25 — Commitment
GOD’S PROMISE OF DIRECTION

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” Prov 3:5-6 (NIV)

God’s purpose must be built in to the direction and decisions of everyday life. Here in Proverbs 3 are three commitments of life that ready you for the decisions of life. They build a lifestyle that enjoys God’s daily direction.

Determine your Director - *“Trust in the Lord with all of your heart.”*
This simple phrase encourages us to ask two of life’s most important questions. First, who am I trusting? Is it myself, my fears, my friends? Or... is it the Lord. Second, how am I trusting. We’re encouraged to trust with all our heart. Half hearted trust is no trust at all.

Detect your Detractor - *“Lean not on your own understanding”.*
Leaning on own understanding is a major reason for directionless living. How do you avoid the temptation to lean on only yourself? A few suggestions. Take time with your decisions. Rollo May said, “It is an old and ironic habit of human beings to run faster when we have lost our way.” Talk to God about your decisions. Here’s the acid test for determining which way you’re leaning: how often do you talk to God?

Declare your Delight - *“In all your ways acknowledge Him.”*
Acknowledge means to let others know. Declare your delight. Personally... in your devotional life take time to tell the Lord you appreciate Him. Publicly... in your witnessing life tell others you appreciate the Lord.

Acknowledge Him! And the promise is, God will direct your paths. Not might, or could.... but will. How can I know God’s will for my life? How can I know what decision God would have me to make? If you’ll work on determining and detecting and declaring, God will do the directing!

Family discussion question: Have each person in your family answer the question, “the decision that I’m facing right now that I would most like to have God’s direction in is.....”

**Sunday, October 24 — Commitment
COMMITMENTS THAT LAST!**

“...those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” Isa 40:31 (NIV)

“It’ll never last.” Three little words so easy to say, and yet the results are so devastating! Tempted to give up on a dream? Feeling like divorce is the only way out? Feeling like the struggle of faith just isn’t worth it anymore? You just want to quit, give up, bail out, toss in the towel? Isaiah 40 is for you.

Isaiah 40 contains one of the most beautiful expressions in all of the Bible of the power and nature of God. Why does Isaiah talk about this? Because our ability to last through the storms comes from Him who makes and calms the storms. Our ability to endure through the long wait comes from Him who has been here forever. God’s word stands forever... I can last, if I’ll stand upon His word! God’s has measured the waters in His hand... I can last, if I’ll put myself in His hands! The Lord is the everlasting God... I can last, if I’ll make Him my everlasting Lord!

When you hope, your commitments will last! That is the promise that God makes to us in these verses. Your strength will renew.

You’ll soar - like an eagle. Renewed strength is the ability to dream again.
You’ll run - and not be weary. Renewed strength is the ability to strive again.
You’ll walk - and not faint. Renewed strength is the ability to endure again.

Family discussion question: What are you having a hard time waiting for right now?

Children’s Activity: Emphasize the words soar, run and walk with your kids by reading the verse and picking them up to “soar” when you read soar, running when you read run and walking when you read walk. Read it several times until they or you are worn out.

**Saturday, October 9 — Purpose
THE VALUE OF PURPOSE**

“My life is being given as an offering to God, and the time has come for me to leave this life. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” 2 Tim 4:6-7 (NCV)

Is it worth it? Visionary, purposeful living is not always easy. It not only requires a measure of personal discipline, it also includes real opposition and problems! Is it worth it? In the book of Second Timothy Paul writes knowing he will be executed in a few days - it doesn’t seem as if the Lord will intervene this time. That makes a person think about what was really of value in life. As he looked back across the years Paul was able to state three elusive, exciting qualities that had marked his life because of his vision.

An Overcoming Spirit - “I have fought the good fight”

Life is a battle. God’s purpose enables you to overcome. The words Paul uses here have the sense of “I did it!” You can sense the finality and the victory in these words. Vision changes a defeated spirit into an overcoming spirit... a fearful spirit into an overcoming spirit... an angry spirit into an overcoming spirit... a compromising spirit into an overcoming spirit.

Staying Power - “I have finished the race”

Life is a marathon. More people’s faith has been defeated by the details of everyday living than by the big battles of life. God’s purpose enables you endure. The key for Paul wasn’t being first, it was finishing. For Paul life was not a matter of competition, but of completion! Now there’s a simple truth to transform the way you live. We spend so much time trying to beat those around us in the 100 yard dashes that we run out of energy for finishing the race.

Abundant Life - “I have kept the faith”

Life is a gift. It is a wonderful gift, but also a challenging gift. Remember as a child getting a puppy for Christmas or a birthday. Your parents sat you down and said, “Now you have to walk it, train it, feed it.” You might have thought, “This isn’t a gift... it’s a responsibility!” The word Paul uses for “kept” here relates to the responsibility of a servant left in charge of a household in the absence of his master. Some people are overwhelmed by life and others are overjoyed by life. Having an eye on God’s purpose enables us to enjoy the responsibility of life as a gift from God.

Family Discussion Question: What does life feel more like to you right now: a battle, a marathon or a gift?

**Sunday, October 10 — Spiritual Gifts
ALL FOR ONE, ONE FOR ALL**

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

I (Ron) grew up with the Three Musketeers as some of my heroes. I was just 12 when the movie came out. A few friends and I would be having fun together and would declare “All for one, and one for all!” to celebrate our bond of friendship.

In a similar way, God calls us to a bond of unity as the Body of Christ — as a church family. It is the way God created us — He designed us to do life together where we are dependent on each other. A Church community is truly to be “all for one and one for all.”

One of the purposes of God giving us spiritual gifts is for there to be unity and maturity in our church family. But what exactly does unity look like for you? Do you picture a huddle of penguins, all in their “tuxedos,” waddling in rhythm as they march along? Is unity where everyone looks and acts alike?

Or do you picture a troupe of circus gymnasts, say like Cirque du Soleil? Each person is different in size and ability, but is working together to create something that is actually greater than all of its parts.

Unity does not imply conformity along with everyone else, but is rather holding to a common purpose and mission together. Unity is found when we each seek to follow Christ and contribute our “works of service,” using our spiritual gifting for the common good of God’s kingdom.

Family discussion question: Have each person in your family answer the question, “In what ways are we working towards unity in our own family, and in what ways do we work towards unity at JKPC?”

**Saturday, October 23 — Prayer
PRAYER AS COVERING ALL OF LIFE**

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Matthew 6:9

This most familiar of prayers covers all of our lives as we live them in the presence of God. Family and children’s activities reflect on its parts.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Write down and discuss what it is you are praying for here that has to do with God.

“Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we also have forgiven those who have sinned against us.”

Write down and discuss what it is that you are praying for yourselves.

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

How does this prayer regularly prayed help you build your life for God?

**Friday, October 22 — Prayer
PRAYER AS COMPASSION**

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’” Matthew 9:36-38

If yesterday the focus in prayer was other believers in the local church, today it is those outside the church, *“harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”* They are neighbors, people in the market, at the workplace, at school, wherever we are and other people are.

Oddly, here the prayer is not for them, but that Jesus will *“send out workers into his harvest field.”* A strange thing happens when we obey this call and command to pray thusly: We begin to become aware of ways in which we can be numbered among those workers in the harvest of humanity, a participation in the harvest that builds our lives for God..

It is a prayer request of Jesus. So list the *“harvest field”* places where you rub elbows with hurting, helpless, wandering people, and as you pray for Jesus to send laborers into those fields, be open to what He shows you is to be your part of the answer.

Family discussion and children’s activity: List the harvest fields or places where you know you come into contact with people like the ones Jesus described above. Then pray for these places and people, and as you do, what is He saying to you about your role in the answer.

**Monday, October 11 — Spiritual Gifts
BODY BUILDING**

“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.” 1 Cor. 12:12- 20 (NIV)

The Apostle Paul describes a vivid word picture for the church by using the image our bodies. And just as the body needs all of its parts to work together, so does the Body of Christ. Each member of the Body has a part to play, and the Body is only healthy when all the members are healthy and contributing their own unique part to the whole. If one part of the body chooses to not participate, then the entire body will become sick. There are no parts of the body that are more important than other parts.

So when we in the church think about ‘body building,’ we would do well to remember that:

- Everyone is a minister/missionary in Christ’s body.
- Everyone has a different function.
- Every ministry/mission is important.
- Everyone belongs to the others.

God intends ministry/mission to be performed in and through the context of the local church. Membership in a church body includes a commitment to ministry/ mission. The Holy Spirit has provided our church body with all the spiritually-gifted people needed to do everything God wants done—in, with and thru us. Our task is to discover, enlist, train, and support these people in ministry/mission. The mobilization of every member as a minister/missionary is the key to balanced growth in the church. The greater good of the whole Body must always take priority over the needs of any single ministry/mission. There is no place for turfism in God’s family.

Family Activity: Have each person in your family share with the others their thoughts about each person’s strengths that they contribute to the family. Question: What part of the body are you in the Body of Christ (eye, ear, nose, arm, etc.) and why?

**Tuesday, October 12 — Spiritual Gifts
NO EXCEPTIONS**

“Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit. There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” 1 Cor. 12:1-7 (NIV)

“Now to each one...” If you are a follower of Jesus, you have a spiritual gift --- there are no exceptions! If you believe, then God gives you something to contribute to the common good of the Body of Christ. And most likely that gifting is not just one spiritual gift but many. You may feel that spiritual gifts were only for people in Bible times, so there is no way for you to have them. But though you may not know what they are, God has indeed gifted you if you believe in Jesus--- no exceptions to the rule!

The fact that you have said, “Jesus is Lord,” is evidence that the Holy Spirit is at work within you, giving you the gift of faith. But that is only the beginning! Where God calls, He enables and empowers.

Have you ever completed a Spiritual Gifts assessment? Check out these websites:

<http://www.churchgrowth.org/analysis/>
<http://www.kodachrome.org/spiritgift>

No one assessment is the “be all and end all” of which spiritual gifts God has given you, so they need to be accompanied by good discernment from others whom you trust. Ask around the folks who are closest to you for what gifting they see that God has given you. See if their answers match up with the ones from any assessment you take.

And remember this: *You discover your gifts through ministry, instead of discovering your ministry by identifying your gifts.* The best way to find your spiritual gifts is by discovering them as you explore various ministries or missions. At JKPC we need to have the good attitude that there are no failures here, only experiments that didn’t turn out like we expected. So try out some ministries or missions to discover your gifts!

Family Discussion Question: Do you know your spiritual gifts? What are they? If not, what do you guess they are? Look up 1 Cor. 12:8-10 for some suggestions.

**Thursday, October 21 — Prayer
PRAYER AS CARING**

*“...always keep on praying for all the saints...pray for each other...”
Ephesians 4:18; James 5:16*

It started out as another typical Sunday at John Knox Presbyterian Church. But as the services progressed it became clear to the pastor that God wanted the people of God to prayer for each other in intentional ways. And so, when an invitation was given to come to the front of the church if you needed prayer, the front was filled shoulder to shoulder all the way across.

Then the second invitation: for others to come and place a hand on a shoulder and simply pray out loud, so the person in need could hear and be encouraged, what God placed in their hearts to pray for their friends, their brothers and sisters in Christ. Again, the front was filled with people wanting to pray for their friends, or even someone they didn’t know, but who was a member of this body of Christ saying by their standing there that they needed, they wanted prayer.

It was a powerful time. While prayer is conversing with God, it is also caring for each other, for much of our prayer time is taken praying for others. Sometimes they need to know we are doing this so they can be encouraged. We help them as they build their lives for God.

Family discussion question: What have been your experiences of being prayed for by someone else, and what did that do for you?

**Wednesday, October 20 — Prayer
PRAYER AS POWER**

“...they raised their voices together in prayer to God...After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.” Acts 4:24,31

Local church – persecution from the surrounding unbelieving community – response: prayer. Result: boldness, power to live for and speak about Jesus.

A radical scenario? Yes, especially for those of us in a comfortable culturally Christian western society and local church. But out of the realm of possibility for us as well? No – unless we concede that we don’t need the same Holy Spirit power the early church knew.

To help us grasp this dimension of prayer, think about times when you have felt weak, powerless, in the face of a particular situation. Then reflect on what happened after you prayed. Strength, power from the Holy Spirit enables us to do what we cannot do on our own – face difficulties, and do so in a way that our response bears witness to the Word of God, building our lives together for God.

Family discussion question: Who are some other members of the body of Christ with whom you might consider getting together to pray and specifically to pray for this kind of response from God? List them here.

Children’s activity: Share with your parent(s) someplace where you feel you need God to give you help, his strength or power. Write it here.

**Wednesday, October 13 — Spiritual Gifts
LOVE: THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY**

“But eagerly desire the greater gifts.

And now I will show you the most excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” 1Cor. 12:31-13:8 (NIV)

The two most powerful chapters in the Bible about spiritual gifts are like the cookies of an Oreo. First Corinthians 12 and 14 teach us about God’s gifting each of us with grace in very special ways. And these two chapters sandwich the very powerful chapter in the Bible about love --- 1 Cor. 13.

Right in the middle of dealing with the Corinthian church’s questions and concerns about spiritual gifts, Paul launches into some of the most often quoted verses in the Bible, all dealing with the importance of our actions and efforts being grounded in love. Without the motivation of love, any use of our gifts amounts to nothing. Without a foundation of love, any service we perform is meaningless — even though it may seem spectacular.

But when we seek to serve out of love, using our spiritual gifts not for ourselves but for the common good and the furthering of the Kingdom of God, then our efforts are effective, fruitful and fulfilling. Essentially Paul is teaching us that the only way to use our gifts is from the perspective of loving others, or as Jesus says, *“loving your neighbor as yourself.”*

Family discussion question: What aspect of love (love is, love is not...) surprises you? challenges you? comforts you?

Give each other a BIG hug!

**Thursday, October 14 — Spiritual Gifts
TAKING A SPIRITUAL EKG**

“Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this.” Ps. 37:4-5

“For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose.” Rev. 17:17

Do you know that each of us is said to have a unique heartbeat? Kind of like how no two people have the same fingerprints, everyone has subtle differences in how their heart actually beats. Each person has a slightly different pattern. Likewise, God has given each of us a unique emotional “heartbeat” that races when we encounter activities, subjects, or circumstances that interest us. We instinctively feel deeply about some things and not about others. An electrocardiogram (EKG) can show how your physical heart is beating, and a Spiritual EKG can show your own unique spiritual heartbeat.

The Bible uses the term “heart” to represent the center of your motivation, desires, and inclinations. Heart is the God-given motivation that compels us to make a difference in a particular ministry. This God-given motivation serves as an internal guidance system for our lives. It determines what your interests are, and what will bring you the most satisfaction and fulfillment. It also motivates you to pursue certain activities, subjects, and environments. Our Spiritual Gifts tell us what we are to do in ministry/mission, and our Heart tells us where we are to serve God’s Kingdom. Putting them together is powerful!

Family Activity:

God has given each of us our own unique heart or passion in life. Take a spiritual EKG by answering the following:

If you could snap your fingers and know that you couldn’t fail, what would you do?

At the end of your life, what would you love to be able to look back and know that you had done something about?

If we were to mention your name to a group of your friends, what would they say you were really interested in or passionate about?

What you would most like to do for others is:

The people you would like to help most are:

The issues or causes you feel strongly about are:

**Tuesday, October 19 — Prayer
PRAYER AS EXCHANGE**

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, 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 your minds in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:6-7

There is a current contemporary song that has the congregation singing, “I’m trading my sorrows, I’m trading my shame, I’m laying them down for the joy of the Lord.” (Lyrics by Darrell Evans).

When we were kids we used to trade something of lesser value for something of greater value – never the other way around – marbles, baseball cards.

This is what God is inviting us to do in prayer, so that prayer becomes not only conversation but an actual trading, an exchange of something of lesser value for something of greater value, here summarized as “requests” in exchange or traded for “the peace of God.”

What an offer! Yet surprising numbers of Christians decline this offer, choosing instead to remain parked in their pain and sorrow and shame. So prayer is an exchange and prayer, like any trade or exchange, involves choice – a choice to build our lives for God..

Family Discussion question: what do you need to trade, exchange with God, for the peace you are lacking in your life?

**Monday, October 18 — Prayer
PRAYER AS CONVERSATION**

“Hear, O Lord, and answer me, ...Hear my prayer, O Lord; listen to my cry...” Psalm 86:1,6

It was a small note card on which was written in a small child’s handwriting the following message: “I love you Dad, and the next time I ask you a question will you listen to me and answer me?”

The child was our youngest daughter and I was that Dad. Little did I realize that I had been communicating with my children – detachment!

Unlike this earthly father, our heavenly Father has conversation down pat – He knows it involves not only our speaking but His listening. However, listening and answering are two different things when it comes to communication. , “... answer me...listen...” cries the Psalmist, and we cry too at various times in our lives.

We all know what it is to have a conversation with someone and look back and realize that we realize they did all the talking – we just listened. Yet we know we had a ‘conversation.’ So it is with God – His answer is His presence, spoken or silent. Building our lives for God includes such intentional praying.

Family discussion: When was the last time you had a conversation with God and He seemed silent yet you knew you had the conversation because you knew He listened? What was it like?

Children’s activity: share with your parents times you felt like my daughter in her conversations with her Dad. What can you learn from these experiences? Write some key words or phrases below.

**Friday, October 15 — Spiritual Gifts
THE PRIORITY OF MINISTRY**

“(God says) I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.....just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”Matt. 25:35-36,40

“You can be sure that whoever gives even a drink of cold water to one of the least of my followers, will certainly receive a reward.” Matt. 10:42

Using our spiritual gifts in ministry or mission is a priority for Christians. We need to put our faith into action, or we simply stagnate as believers. The life of relationship with our Lord is one that is dynamic and action-oriented. Reflect on these important and powerful statements regarding you, your spiritual gifts, and God’s ministry and mission in the world:

You have been created for ministry/mission!

“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Eph. 2:10

You have been saved for ministry/mission!

“God saved us and called us with a holy calling. Not according to our words but according to his own purpose and grace.” 2 Tim. 1:9

You have been called into ministry/mission!

“God, in his grace, chose me before I was born, and called me to serve him.” Gal. 5 1:15

“I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” Eph. 4:1

God has designed the church to function in interdependence with each of us having our own unique ministry or mission as a priority for our lives. The spiritual gifts given to each believer are an integral part of that ministry or mission.

Family Discussion Question: What excites you about using your gifts in ministry or mission? What holds you back from doing so?

**Saturday, October 16 — Spiritual Gifts
A LIFE-CHANGING TRUTH**

Well, this has been a week focused on the spiritual gifts God gives us and using them in ministry and mission. So here is one more life-changing truth for you to ponder:

YOU ARE A MINISTER/MISSIONARY FOR JESUS CHRIST!

Consider some more thoughts and scripture passages that backup that statement:

You have been gifted for ministry/mission!

“like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.” 1 Pet. 4:10

You have been authorized for ministry/mission!

“(Jesus said) All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples...” Matt. 28:18-19a

You are to be prepared for ministry/mission!

“God gave...pastors and teachers to prepare God’s people for works of ministry, so that the Body of Christ may be built up...” Eph. 4:11-13

The body of Christ needs your ministry/mission!

“All of you together are the body of Christ and each of you is a separate and necessary part of it.” 1 Cor. 12:27

You are accountable for your ministry/mission!

“So then, each of us will be accountable to God.” Rom. 14:12

You will be rewarded for your ministry/mission!

“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your Master’s happiness.” Matt. 25:23

When we find the right ministry or mission for the right reason (out of love, not obligation), God is very pleased and we find that we are truly fulfilled—we live out our purpose and identity.

Family Discussion Questions:

What is your ministry or mission at this time? Where and how are you serving the Body of Christ or the Kingdom of God right now?

If you do not have an identifiable ministry or mission at this time, will you commit to exploring what that might be?

**Sunday, October 17 — Prayer
PRAYER AS RELATIONSHIP**

“At that time men began to call upon the name of the Lord.” Genesis 5:26

A ruptured relationship – a fractured friendship – a breakdown of communication in every way. One of the three key participants in the relationship put it this way: *“I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” Genesis 3:10*

In this last conversation for some time between our first parents and God, fear that flows from disobedience which in turn flows out of mistrust of what God said has resulted in a shutting down of the relationship.

Now in the text from Genesis people begin to seek to communicate with God again – to seek a relationship with Him, a relationship that begins with simply communicating.

Sometimes we need to let go of existing models of prayer and back up into a beginning position: it is a relationship before it is words and content. It is where we start in building our lives for God.

Family discussion question: If you were seeking to relate to God for the very first time, what would be the first thing you would want to say to Him in prayer?

Children’s activity: In the space below write your answers to the question: Why I want to have a relationship with God in my life through Jesus Christ.
