



THE ANGER BOOK

Michael Blunk

**Prepublication Promotional Copy Chapters 1-12 Only
The Completed Manuscript Consists of 40 Chapters**

michaelblunk.online

dr.michaelblunk@gmail.com

Here Is the Plan...

After all these years, I've learned that plans, no matter how meticulously formulated, are subject to change and revision. I will assume you have also experienced unforeseen delays and setbacks scrambling your well-intentioned plans. Perhaps similar vexations inspired the late Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel to say, "Blessed are the flexible, for they will not be bent out of shape."

With my first book, *The Grateful Damned*, released in April, I've since turned my attention to *The Anger Book*. Other than sharing the same author, these books are nothing alike. *The Grateful Damned* is a rather lengthy netherworld fantasy while *The Anger Book* is a highly practical, relatively concise, biblically based workbook/group study guide written for Christians who struggle with anger issues.

This is an abridged version of *The Anger Book*—a prepublication copy containing 12 of the entire book's 40 chapters. While one cannot judge a book by its cover, a dozen chapters should give readers more than a clue as to whether this book is worth reading.

If you would like to be notified when the full book is released, please drop me a line at dr.michaelblunk@gmail.com. I won't bombard you with ads or promos—I promise!

Hear My Confession

Yesterday, I lost my temper while navigating through heavy interstate traffic. My reaction toward the offending driver was wholly inappropriate--fiery, profane, and vitriolic. The recipient of my road wrath would have never supposed that the red-faced screamer behind the steering wheel was an ordained clergyman, Bible writer, speaker, and critical thinking teacher.

That was yesterday. Today, I am writing about anger--more specifically, I am writing about anger control. You may rightfully ask, "Who wants to read your thoughts on anger control after owning up to your own nasty temper? Physician, heal thyself!"

If this is your reaction, please know I am in total agreement. My thoughts on anger control are unworthy of your attention, but God's words on the topic are invaluable, so if you, too, struggle with keeping anger under control, I will let the Bible speak and we will grow together.

According to the American Psychological Association, "Anger is an emotion characterized by antagonism toward someone or something you feel has deliberately done you wrong. Anger can be a good thing. It can give you a way to express negative feelings, for example, or motivate you to find solutions to problems. But excessive anger can cause problems. Increased blood pressure and other physical changes associated with anger make it difficult to think straight and harm your physical and mental health."

At the risk of stating the obvious, anger is an emotion. Emotions come from God. You and I are creations made in God's image. This is to say we share some of the attributes of our Creator. God is not a detached, stony-hearted, impersonal deity void of feeling. God has emotions. We have emotions. Anger is an emotion we share with God.

Anger is neither good nor evil. The object or source of our anger and how we express our anger are the determinants. Anger may be good. Anger may be bad. We may say

the same of fire. Fire can be used to bake bread, harden bricks, or warm chilled hands. Fire can also destroy buildings, wipe out forests, and burn human flesh. Anger can motivate people to seek means of overcoming moral wrongs and anger can cause an aging clergyman to scream at an offending motorist.

I have managed to convince a few people, primarily immediate family members and close friends, that I am a rather clever fellow. As I need their encouragement and am comforted by their devotion, I will not attempt to correct their thinking, but I will make no attempt at impressing you. I am a terribly flawed individual whose faith is often riddled by doubt and whose persona is frequently marred by runaway emotions. With this said, I am not such a fool who would audaciously presume to fix your brokenness through some sort of self-help methodology conjured from my own fertile imagination. Fix you? I cannot fix myself. I cannot even fix a flat tire. What I offer is a Bible study focusing on anger control. You will learn nothing from me, but we can learn much about anger control from God.

This study is divided into forty daily readings followed by a series of critical thinking questions. Why forty? Moses spent forty days on Mt. Sinai. Jesus fasted in the wilderness forty days. Noah's gopherwood barge set sail after a forty-day deluge. As numbers go, forty is spiritually significant, and who am I to buck the system?

Again, I know nothing and can teach you nothing, but you and I will explore the scriptures together and, perhaps, forty days from now, we will be the better for it.

Our Journey: Day 1

In today's study, we will explore

- righteous anger versus the more common brand of vulgar anger
- pent-up anger
- anger as a character flaw

Those Annoying Rats Living in our Cellars

“Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil (Ephesians 4:26, 27 NKJV emphasis mine).

According to the Apostle Paul's words to the Christian believers living in Ephesus, it is possible to experience anger without incurring sin. This has been called *righteous anger*. As for me, my anger is all too often just another sinful outburst; there is seldom a scrap of righteousness when my temper ignites. Perhaps your own conduct parallels mine.

Let us note the Apostle Paul also warned against clinging tenaciously to our anger. By allowing “the sun (to) go down” on our wrath, we permit this pent-up anger to fester and brew deep within ourselves. Pent-up anger demands our constant focus. The destructive habit of clinging to grudges robs us of God's joy while blinding us to the divinely appointed duties and opportunities set before us. We become as bottles filled with deadly toxins. As believers in Christ Jesus, you and I are called to be ambassadors of God's love and purveyors of the Gospel message--the salt and light of the world. I find no place in Scripture commanding us to be as cauldrons of poison.

The Apostle Paul also warns that sinful anger gives Satan a foothold in our lives. This is not to say anger necessarily opens the door to demonic possession, for believers in Christ Jesus have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and, as such, cannot be possessed, but unbridled anger quenches the ministry of God's Holy Spirit and makes us much more vulnerable to the lies and deceptive schemes of our enemy. Unrepented sin muffles the

voice of God while clouding our judgment. In such a muddle-minded state, we are far more likely to do the devil's bidding, so to speak. For those of us who struggle with a volatile temper, we must confess our sin to God and allow Him to make us right through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. As we progress in our study, we will have much more to say on the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

And later in our study, we will explore the topic of righteous anger more fully; for now, let us focus on the unrighteous anger common among many of us.

A few years ago, a college professor made threatening remarks to a student journalist during an outdoor campus protest. Grabbing the student's camera, the enraged professor shouted, "Hey, who wants to help me get this reporter out of here? I need some muscle over here." A short time later, she was dismissed by the university. During a follow-up interview, she expressed her regrets and explained that her deplorable actions did not truly represent who she was.

I disagree. My verbal tirade aimed at the offending motorist cannot be excused simply because of its spontaneity. In truth, these sudden outbursts represent *exactly* who we are.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis explained, "We begin to notice, besides our particular sinful acts, our sinfulness; begin to be alarmed not only about what we do, but about what we are. This may sound rather difficult, so I will try to make it clear from my own case. When I come to my evening prayers and try to reckon up the sins of the day, nine times out of ten the most obvious one is some sin against charity; I have sulked or snapped or sneered or snubbed or stormed. And the excuse that immediately springs to my mind is that the provocation was so sudden and unexpected; I was caught off my guard, I had not time to collect myself. Now that may be an extenuating circumstance as regards those particular acts: they would obviously be worse if they had been deliberate and premeditated. On the other hand, surely what a man does when he is taken off his guard is the best evidence for what sort of a man he is? Surely what pops out before the

man has time to put on a disguise is the truth? If there are rats in a cellar you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats: it only prevents them from hiding. In the same way the suddenness of the provocation does not make me an ill-tempered man; it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I am. The rats are always there in the cellar, but if you go in shouting and noisily they will have taken cover before you switch on the light.”

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing (Proverbs 12:18 ESV).

Mind you, we are not speaking of ordinary, verminous pests; these angry, foul-mouthed rodents with their hair-trigger tempers are armed and dangerous and ready for a fight. Their cruel, hateful words are like sharpened javelins that pierce the hearts of their intended victims. We who struggle with anger often take aim at those near to us--close family member, spouses, and longtime friends. We harm those we love. To be sure, the wounds we inflict are slow to heal and typically result in sorrow and regret. I shudder in horror when reminded of some of the vicious words that have spewed from my mouth.

By contrast, a wise person speaks in ways that bring healing rather than hurt. Those who govern their tongues have fewer instances of regret; those who give their tempers a free reign rant in the shameless manner of fools.

My recent outburst while driving along the interstate proves there are rats in my cellar. Have rats infested your cellar, too? Thankfully, God is ready to help us clean house.

For your personal contemplation or group discussion:

- What is the difference between righteous anger and anger that is laden with sin?
- What are the dangers of harboring anger?
- How does unbridled anger give Satan a foothold in our lives?
- How do sudden outbursts of anger reveal who we truly are?

Our Journey: Day 2

In today's study, we will explore

- the first biblical account of murder
- how uncontrolled anger can lead to violent behavior
- the dangers of anger when coupled with emotional problems
- the dangers of anger when paired with substance abuse

In the Beginning

In the opening pages of Genesis, we read of the paradise God created for the first couple, Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve knew no illness, faced no risks from injury or disease, had no fear of foreign invaders, or had any reason to worry about a lack of material needs. Additionally, they enjoyed a close, intimate fellowship with their Creator. The Bible also tells us that Adam and Eve had dominion over the earth. Do not fall into the trap of believing the first couple was ignorant or childlike--among the six billion people who live on earth today, there is not a more perfect couple, intellectually and physically, than Adam and Eve. And do not fall into the foolish belief they were glorified gardeners. As God had given them dominion over the earth, Adam and Eve possessed powers that are beyond the understanding and reach of today's earth dwellers.

Sadly, their desire to usurp God's authority led to the Fall and the curse of sin ended the paradisaal state of the planet. Stripped of their immortality and steeped in sin, the original glory from their creation departed Adam and Eve. They knew themselves to be naked. By the time we reach the fourth chapter of Genesis, we learn that the sin nature had now infected the first couple's offspring.

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also

brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.”

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?” And the Lord said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground (Genesis 4:1-10 ESV).

This passage raises a lot of questions. As examples, why were sacrifices offered? Why did God, who accepted Abel's sacrifice, refuse Cain's offering? In this study, our primary focus is on the topic of anger, but allow me to offer two brief theological explanations. Throughout the Bible, we learn that, without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin (Hebrews 9:22). As people with an inborn sin nature, we tend to take the matter of sin rather lightly, but sin is wholly repulsive to our Creator. How can I say this? If you will pardon the figurative language, sin makes God sick to His stomach. Because of the immaculate purity of His divine nature, our Creator God recoils from sin in total disgust. Do not be foolish in thinking God is too delicate or overly sensitive--the problem is that we are entirely too comfortable in our sin. Despite our often cavalier and even humorous attitude toward sin, our trespasses are serious business and only the shedding of blood can bring about the forgiveness of sin.

With this said, Cain offered God a *bloodless* sacrifice. Although his mother and father's sin had brought an end to earth's paradisaic state as well as their own immortality, Cain most likely considered the matter of sin's ravages against the people and the planet they inhabited as minor and even inconsequential; this we may know with certainty: Cain's sacrifice was unpleasing to God. On the other hand, Abel's sacrifice was a foreshadowing

of the ultimate sacrifice made by our Lord Jesus Christ on that cruel Roman cross--the perfect sacrifice, wholly pleasing to God, that takes away our sin.

In his anger, Cain slew his younger brother Abel. This is the first of many murders recorded in the pages of the scriptures.

When I was sixteen, I landed an after-school job in a restaurant. I appreciated the opportunity of earning my own spending money as well as making new friends with the other teens on the restaurant's payroll. Dennis was one of those easy-going, jovial kids who entertained the rest of us with his quick wit and boyish antics. On or off the clock, he was always good for a laugh. Years later, I learned that my boyhood friend had, during a fit of out-of-control rage, brutally murdered his wife. At the time of the murder, he had been undergoing treatment for depression. To compound matters, he had also been ingesting illegal drugs. Anger, narcotics, and emotional problems incited the young man to murder his wife and the mother of their two small children.

During my years teaching at a large men's prison, I understood forty percent of the penal institution's population had been convicted of murder. Four out of ten inmates who walked the prison yard had taken another person's life. Substance abuse was often a mitigating factor in the commission of these capital crimes; with other inmates, varying degrees of mental illness had triggered violent, out-of-control outbursts that led to their murderous acts. This has caused me to wonder: Under the right circumstances, how many of us decent, every day, law-abiding people might be capable of taking another human life? Stress, exhaustion, panic, illness, or fear mixed with a heavy dose of anger can lead an otherwise ordinary person to act in extraordinarily treacherous ways. And though most of us will never take another life, Jesus strongly warned against the murderous thoughts we may harbor against those who have wronged us (Matthew 5:21, 22). Pent up anger is like a grenade with the safety pin removed.

Anger seldom acts alone. Combining anger with greed, envy, lust, hatred, bigotry, irrational thought, depression, exhaustion, or an altered state of consciousness brought

about by harmful drugs yields a deadly concoction that may lead to all manner of villainous acts.

According to Bureau of Justice statistical data, a survey of state and federal inmates revealed “32% of state prisoners and 26% of federal prisoners said they had committed their current offense while under the influence of drugs. Among state prisoners, drug offenders (44%) and property offenders (39%) reported the highest incidence of drug use at the time of the offense. Among federal prisoners, drug offenders (32%) and violent offenders (24%) were the most likely to report drug use at the time of their crimes.” As substance abuse tends to lower an individual’s inhibitions, there can be no denying anger mixed with alcohol and/or narcotics make a deadly cocktail.

Returning to our Genesis account, God gave Cain fair warning: “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.” Tragically, Cain chose to ignore God’s counsel. In his anger, he killed his younger brother Abel.

For those of us who struggle with anger, we have been warned that sin is crouching at the door. All is not lost, for God’s Holy Spirit stands ready to help us overcome the ravages of sin and, with His help, we will not be ruled by anger.

For your personal contemplation or group discussion:

- God is wholly pure and righteous. Conversely, we have been infected by a sin nature. How does our inherent sin nature lead us to downplay the serious byproducts of sin?
- In what ways do we see society comfortable and “at ease” with certain kinds of sinful behavior?
- How did Abel’s animal sacrifice foreshadow Christ Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice on a Roman cross?
- Why was Cain’s sacrifice unacceptable to God?

- What may occur when anger is coupled with intoxicants?

Our Journey: Day 3

In today's study, we will explore

- the destructive nature of jealousy
- the toxic elements of anger coupled with envy
- the folly of blaming God for one's own shortcomings
- allowing discontentment to be a motivator

O, Jealousy, thou ugliest fiend of hell! thy deadly venom preys on my vitals, turns the healthful hue of my fresh cheek to haggard shallowness, and drinks my spirit up. --Hannah More

The Green-Eyed Monster

If I continue telling you about my weaknesses and personal shortcomings, you may abandon me altogether, but I feel a great need of getting my own anger out of the cellar and into the open. To fully appreciate what I am about to confess requires some background information. I grew up in a good home and enjoyed many advantages denied to others. Even so, I was a chronic under-achiever for much of my life. My high school years were hallmarked by laziness and mediocrity. Academically, I simply refused to exert myself. These loathsome habits continued in college. In and out of school, I was no ordinary college drop-out—I was a habitual, uninspired, bone-idle, chronic college drop-out. True, I now have some letters that follow my name, but these degrees were earned after my fiftieth birthday.

Many people manage quite well without a college education, but for much of my life, I had a goodly number of financial struggles that might have been averted with a degree or specialized career training. Indeed, there was a price to pay for my cavalier approach

toward education and vocational preparedness. As an under-employed husband and father, I was only a so-so provider. From time to time, I could not meet my financial obligations, and this led me to take advantage of my mother and father's generosity. As I struggled, others around me were succeeding and this only highlighted the long history of laziness and poor decision-making that was holding me back.

Although I had been raised in church, I largely ignored God until my thirty-fifth year. One afternoon in May 1989, the burden of mounting fears and frustrations led me to cry out, "Lord, I am tired of living life my way! Let's try living life Your way for a change!" Ignoring my lack of spoken eloquence, God graciously honored this hastily uttered prayer and I became a born-again believer in Christ Jesus. Though I was a new creation in Christ Jesus and my eternal destiny was settled once and for all, many of my old earthly problems simply refused to go away. I continued struggling in my work and my anxious creditors continued hammering me for payments. I drove an older vehicle that continually leaked coolant. (To this day, I am preoccupied with my vehicle's temperature gauge.) As our friends purchased comfortable homes and socked away money in their retirement accounts, my wife and I appeared to be forever stuck in a cramped apartment. At times, I felt worthless.

A new family joined the small church where my wife and I were members. As a way of introducing themselves, the congregation was invited to their home for an outdoor barbecue. Their house, situated in one of the posher neighborhoods, was spacious and immaculately furnished. Two gleaming new vehicles, an SUV and a minivan that presumably did not leak coolant, were parked in the drive.

The family's husband and father, a trim, energetic, good-looking fellow, was a Secret Service agent who had guarded presidents. He had a perfect job, lived in a perfect house, drove a perfect vehicle, and had a perfect family--two adorable kids and a gorgeous wife.

I looked upon him as a living, breathing testimony to my own personal shortcomings and failures. Admittedly, I envied his rugged good looks, his material possessions, and the

glamor and prestige that came with being a Secret Service agent. He was everything that I was not, and I envied all that he had.

Envy has been described as an unhealthy preoccupation with another's blessings. How well I understand the cancerous, soul-destroying resentment that comes from coveting what rightfully belongs to another. Deep down, I blamed both him and God for my miserable state of being when, in truth, the real culprit and author of my failures was none other than the grim-faced man in the mirror.

And so, as I wallowed in a pit of self-induced envy, I became angry with God. My anger was unfounded, of course, but when emotions are left unchecked, logic and reason are curtly ushered out the door. In time, I concluded God did not love me as much as He loved others. I never doubted my salvation, but I truly questioned the validity of God's love for me. I suspected that He loved others and only tolerated me. As I said, runaway emotions can spoil one's thinking and the pent-up anger which had never been challenged was as a festering wound that would not heal.

As Moses trudged down the mountain, the final commandment carved on the pair of stone tablets read, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's (Exodus 20:17 ESV)." Nothing good comes from coveting blessings enjoyed by another. In my case, this unbridled covetousness, a poisonous byproduct that comes from ignoring the Tenth Commandment, manifested itself as a seething anger and this seething anger

- spoiled my joy as a follower of Jesus Christ
- distanced me from His intimate fellowship
- caused me to overlook the blessings that were mine
- quenched the ministry of God's Holy Spirit who dwells within all believers
- caused me to ignore my own culpable role in the creation of my personal woes
- gave me license to resent someone who had not wasted his God-given opportunities

- did me absolutely no good at all

A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot (Proverbs 14:30 ESV).

Envy is a destructive emotion that putrefies the soul with the toxicity of Hell itself. “Envy,” Charles Caleb Colton wrote, “if surrounded on all sides by the brightness of another’s prosperity, like the scorpion confined within a circle of fire, will sting itself to death.” Rather than expressing bitterness from a longing for the blessings of others, we will do well to be thankful for what we have and, if what we have is not enough, let us humbly petition God for more. Wishing that others had less will not give us the abundance we crave.

Let us not confuse envy with discontentment; discontentment with one’s station in life is not necessarily bad. Discontentment can serve a positive purpose. As an example, an overweight man, discontent with his appearance and energy level, might join a gym and change his eating habits. Indeed, it was discontentment with life in general that drove me to Jesus Christ. Weary of living life under my own direction, I asked Him to step in and intervene on my behalf. Again, our overweight friend, discontent with the quality of his life, might take on exercise and swear off double cheeseburgers. In this case, his discontentment will have served him well. On the other hand, if he continues in his slovenly habits, his discontentment may lead him to envy or despise those who are toned and fit and, as such, sink deeper into misery.

For your personal contemplation or group discussion:

- Envy is an unhealthy preoccupation with another’s blessings. How might we combat feelings of envy to avoid its poisonous effects against our happiness and contentment?
- Consider an individual who is discontent with her low-paying job. She finds little satisfaction in the work and struggles to meet her financial obligations. Discontentment can drive her to bitterness or her dissatisfaction with the status quo can motivate her to return to school, learn new job skills, or seek other means

that will improve her situation. Discuss the healthy and unhealthy aspects of discontentment.

- It has been said a dog wags its tail over its supper dish, but most people never bother to show appreciation to God for the blessings they enjoy. How can a heart of gratitude move us to a closer relationship with God?

Our Journey: Day 4

In today's study, we will explore

- the bitter nature of self-loathing
- when self-loathing leads to self-destruction
- how God's love lifts and encourages "the unlovable"
- the positive aspect of self-criticism

Some persons are always ready to level those above them down to themselves, while they are never willing to level those below them up to their own position. But he that is under the influence of true humility will avoid both these extremes. On the one hand, he will be willing that all should rise just so far as their diligence and worth of character entitle them to; and on the other hand, he will be willing that his superiors should be known and acknowledged in their place, and have rendered to them all the honors that are their due.

--Jonathan Edwards

Self-Loathing

Returning to our previous narrative, the harm I suffered and the misery I endured was the result of two self-inflicted wounds. The first wound, of course, was caused by envy--my unhealthy preoccupation with this Christian brother's blessings. The second wound, perhaps far more deadly, was anger toward me. Why had I wasted the God-given opportunities from my youth? As a young man with his future before him, why had I devoted more time and energy to an electric bass guitar and a ragtag band of musicians who were going nowhere than to my university studies? What had I been thinking? Why

had I approached the preparations for adulthood and personal responsibility so flippantly? Rather than setting aside funds for those proverbial rainy days, why had I spent every earned dollar on trivial, inconsequential purchases? Why had I allowed myself to accumulate senseless debt? Why had I repeatedly ignored my parents' wise counsel through a long string of foolish decisions?

As I compared myself to others more successful, I began to loathe the man in the mirror. And why not, I reasoned. He was the real culprit. He had ruined my life and I hated him for this. Again, and again, I retraced the ill-chosen path I had followed in life. I repeatedly scrutinized each harrowing wrong turn and every dead-end detour; I thoroughly examined the host of ridiculous choices that had exacted such a heavy toll against my happiness, well-being, status, personal growth, and security. In the end, I placed myself on trial. The mountainous evidence was weighed, and a verdict was handed down. I was guilty as charged.

Many people think too highly of themselves. During this time, I thought too little of myself. Both points of view are destructive and both points of view are unworthy of one who professes faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Those who come to hate themselves are those who have come to believe the lies of an inner voice that berates, abuses, and heckles its victims incessantly. The inner voice, reeking with smoke and brimstone, may say,

- "You are a worthless human being!"
- "No one in their right mind could possibly love you!"
- "You are the ugliest person on earth!"
- "You were born a loser and you will die a loser!"
- "Give up your dreams and ambitions! You are a chronic failure!"
- "What was God thinking when He created you?"

In some cases, self-loathing leads to self-destruction. A tragic example of self-destruction that made national headlines occurred not long ago. A thirteen-year-old California girl

named Rosalie began to believe the cruel lies hurled at her from a group of callous, insensitive classroom bullies. Unable to bear their torments any longer, the dear child took her own life. In truth, Rosalie was a bright and pretty little girl with an engaging personality. Sadly, she came to accept the bullies' wretched lies as truth and, as such, felt compelled to end her precious life. In her suicide note, she apologized "for being ugly."

A prison chaplain once asked me to keep a watchful eye on an inmate who briefly attended a class I taught; found guilty of raping a minor, he was in and out of the prison infirmary for repeatedly mutilating himself. Finding the weight of his shame unbearable, he sought ways of doing great physical harm to himself. I was told that genital mutilation and other forms of destructive behavior are not uncommon practices among inmates convicted of violent sexual crimes.

Do not misunderstand what I am about to say; the violent crimes committed against innocent children are beyond heinous--in fact, I am grappling to find an adjective vile enough to describe such repugnant behavior; even so, to say these men have crossed a boundary in which God's forgiveness is no longer an option is to deny the saving power of our Lord Jesus Christ. Like it or not, Jesus is mighty to save--and He can save a serial rapist from the bowels of Hell as easily as he can save an income tax cheat.

The Apostle Paul, a former terrorist whose hands were stained by the blood of innocent women, men, and children prior to his conversion, described himself as the "chief of sinners (I Timothy 1:15)." This was no pious platitude. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul declared himself to have been the worst sinner who had ever lived. If we take Paul at his word, no one is beyond Christ's redemptive power. If God can redeem the "chief of sinners," He can redeem anyone. For this reason, no one should ever fall into the mental trap of self-loathing. To do so is to discount the power of God. He is merciful beyond human comprehension.

Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence (Proverbs 15:32 ESV).

From my youth, I had ignored much of the wisdom of my parents and the life-building precepts recorded in the pages of the scriptures. Always looking for shortcuts and seldom choosing to apply myself, my habits and decisions yielded disappointment and failure. And, in the end, I came to despise myself. Thankfully, the day came when I became teachable. Having had enough, I was ready to abandon my slovenly ways and listen to the voice of God.

Self-criticism, based on a reasonable self-examination, is not to be confused with self-loathing. Self-criticism is an exercise in honesty and prudence that can bring about positive changes. Self-loathing is, quite simply, destructive. We are not to hate ourselves just as we are not to hate others.

Self-criticism says, "I have made a mistake." Self-loathing says, "I am a mistake."

For your personal contemplation or group discussion:

- Explain the difference between self-criticism and self-loathing.
- Humility gives little thought to self. Self-loathing, albeit negative, is to think excessively of one's self. Do you agree?
- Self-loathing says, "Even God cannot possibly love me." Discuss the personal damage caused from harboring such destructive thoughts.

Our Journey: Day 5

In today's study, we will explore

- the positive side of guilt
- the dangers of prolonged guilt
- the blessings that follow God's forgiveness

Peace does not mean the end of all our striving.

Joy does not mean the drying of our tears;

Peace is the power that comes to souls arriving

Up to the light where God appears.

-- G. A. Studdert Kennedy

Guilt: The Magic Elixir

In small, manageable doses, guilt is a magic elixir that allows us to see ourselves, however briefly, as God sees us. The raging tirade against the offending motorist mentioned in the opening page of this treatise was followed by an acute bout of guilt. I could scarcely believe the outburst of anger and profanities had come from me--but it had come from me, and I felt like a fool! For that moment in time, guilt stripped me of that flimsy facade of respectability while revealing a frothing, tyrannical despot who lurked about in the dark recesses of my soul. This ugly revelation was followed by an almost instantaneous repentance. I repented of my misconduct, that is, I confessed my outrageous behavior to God, turned away from my anger, and focused my thoughts on more edifying matters.

Without that healthy dose of guilt, I might have gone about my business feeling fully justified in losing my temper. Again, a reasonable dose of guilt helps us to see ourselves as God and others see us.

But guilt is a medicine taken with a spoon. We are not to bathe in guilt. We are not to drown ourselves in a sea of guilt.

On the night of His arrest, both Simon Peter and Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus. These two men, intimate friends and members of the small band of Jesus' disciples, played the role of traitors--quislings who turned their backs on the sinless, guiltless Son of God. Later, reflecting on his traitorous misdeeds, Simon Peter wept bitterly (Luke 22:62). On

the other hand, Judas Iscariot, after returning the thirty pieces of silver received as payment for betraying Jesus, hanged himself (Matthew 27:5).

Do not miss this point: Both Simon Peter and Judas Iscariot acted as traitors. Both Simon Peter and Judas Iscariot experienced feelings of guilt after committing their shameful deeds, but Judas Iscariot allowed guilt to usher in thoughts of despair. Despair is a false belief that all hope is gone, and nothing can be done to remedy the dreadful situation. To sink into despair is to deny God's ability to restore one into a right relationship with Him. No Christian should ever allow despair to gain an inner foothold. Judas, wallowing in guilt, would not accept God's forgiveness; he chose, instead, to take his own life. Peter, no less guilty than Judas, repented of his actions, accepted God's forgiveness and, two months later, preached a sermon that garnered three thousand Christian converts.

In my own life, I have allowed self-loathing to steal my joy, blind me to God's blessings, spoil my witness, conjure resentment toward others, and douse the flames of ambition and personal progress. Guilt, in measured, reasonable doses, is good medicine, but an overdose of guilt is as deadly a toxin as heroin and fentanyl.

Once guilt has served its purpose, that is, after the sense of guilt has revealed flaws in our character or behavior, we are to repent of our trespasses through confession, thank God for His forgiveness, and move forward in our Christian walk. There is no time for sitting in a heap of ashes while outfitted in our finest sackcloth; furthermore, we may be certain God does not expect us to beat our breasts while crying, "Woe is me!" No, we are to repent of our wrongdoing, rejoice in God's forgiveness, and return to our Christian duties. If God is able to forgive us, surely, we can forgive ourselves. Unlike the Israelites who spent forty years in desert wanderings after fleeing Egypt, we are not to pitch our tents in the wilderness of self-loathing and despair.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the

passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:1-7 ESV emphasis mine).

In the ages to come, we, the redeemed, will be God's trophies--living tributes to His abundant mercy and lovingkindness on display for the universe to behold. Perhaps He will point to me and say, "This is Michael. From the beginning, I had plans for his life--plans to prosper him, plans not to harm him, and plans to give him hope and a future. Instead of making good use of the many advantages I had set before him, he frittered away his youth in trivial pursuits that brought no lasting pleasure to him and no glory to Me. Those years were wasted years--precious years that might have made an impact on time and eternity. During these years, Michael gave me little more than lip-service. He professed to be a believer, but his actions said otherwise. Besides faithlessness, an acute bout of laziness and a lack of foresight were his problems. To compound matters, he often blamed others for his own self-inflicted frustrations and failures. Yes, he blamed others for the wounds he bore--wounds brought about by his own hands! You may wonder how I was able to perform a good work in such a contrary, slovenly individual, but here Michael stands--a living testimony to My abundant grace and mercy!"

Two thousand years ago, our Lord Jesus suffered at the hands of cruel Roman soldiers. Beaten, abused, tormented, and stripped of His clothing, He was nailed to a roughly hewn cross hoisted between two criminals in the town dump. He suffered immense, unspeakable pain coupled with mocking public humiliation--a shameful, lingering, protracted death to satisfy our sin debt. But the story does not end here. Three days later, He walked out of the grave, just as He said He would, and, today, He sits at the right hand of the Father making intercession for His saints. Day and night, He intercedes for you and me so that we may live to His glory.

If you, like me, have found difficulty in forgiving yourself of your trespasses, failures, and shortcomings, we must remember that our lack of self-forgiveness is tantamount to saying that Jesus' sacrifice is not quite enough. Shall we frustrate His lavish, abundant grace with a misguided sense of self-loathing?

For your personal contemplation or group discussion:

- How does guilt help us see ourselves more clearly and accurately?
- What are the dangers of wallowing in guilt, so to speak? In other words, once guilt has performed its work, we should move forward. Do you agree? Discuss.
- How do we frustrate God's grace when we refuse to forgive ourselves just as we are to forgive others?

Our Journey: Day 6

In today's study, we will explore the narrative of an enthusiastic young pastor who encounters great disappointment in ministry.

Great Expectations

Josiah's encounter with the Lord Jesus was nothing less than profound. His conversion experience, though not quite on par with the Apostle Paul's Damascus Road experience, was, nonetheless, powerful and unforgettable. It was hardly surprising to family and friends when Josiah announced his desire to answer God's call to ministry. Four years later, after earning a degree from a midwestern Bible College, Josiah returned to his hometown in search of an opportunity to serve the Lord.

As it happened, Josiah's great uncle was a close friend of a Rev. Hobart Modine, the senior pastor of an older, well-established church located in one of the city's poorer neighborhoods. Despite the modest campus, the church was celebrated for its work with

the poor and Rev. Modine was hailed as a local hero and champion of social justice. As the church had a vacancy to fill, Josiah's great uncle arranged for a meeting and a short time later, Josiah was hired as the church's new youth pastor.

As Josiah was single and free of debt, income was not a prime consideration. An opportunity to follow his divine calling was paramount while money was merely a peripheral matter. Josiah truly longed to serve as a full-time minister of the Gospel, and, after all, those who are motivated by Wall Street salaries should go to work for Wall Street, but Josiah's heart sunk when Rev. Modine presented him with a miserly compensation package. A beggerman's wages and no health insurance--take it or leave it--Josiah quickly understood why the position had not been filled. Reluctantly, Josiah accepted Rev. Modine's offer.

Josiah reminded himself that the church was situated in an older, crumbling neighborhood and, as such, was most likely unable to offer staff members wages and benefits comparable to the salary packages offered by affluent suburban churches. Josiah also reminded himself "there's more to life than money," and assumed Rev. Modine was paid modestly, too, but when another staff member mentioned that the church's lead pastor was, in fact, sumptuously rewarded, Josiah began to resent his tight-fisted employer.

More on-the-job disappointments followed. Josiah discovered his boss was ill-tempered, arrogant, profane, pragmatic, and secularly minded. Staff meetings never began with prayer. There were people on the payroll who lived in open sin. Although the church had been founded many years earlier by a sincere pastor who loved Jesus and esteemed God's word, Rev. Modine could hardly be called a godly leader. He ran the church more in the manner of a business.

Over time, Josiah's resentments increased. He came to dislike his boss and Josiah's evangelical beliefs often placed him at odds with other staff members. He was lonely, frustrated, and disappointed. While in Bible college, he had dreamed of serving alongside sincere Christian leaders. Instead, Josiah often felt as though he was working for a

business in which a cross was little more than a trademark. Confused and perplexed, he often complained, “What a farce! I had no idea I was signing on to this!”

As the years passed, Josiah became bitter, not with Jesus, but with ministry in general. Deep down, he was certain of the legions of sincere pastors whose lives truly reflect their dedication to Jesus Christ, so why had Josiah ended up at a place such as this? How had he come to work for such a hypocrite who, as Jesus described, appeared outwardly righteous but, inside, was “filled with dead men’s bones.” After an incident in which Rev. Modine had once again wrongly abused him, Josiah hastily tendered his resignation. Enough was enough. He would work for this man no more.

Rather than finding a position with another ministry, Josiah accepted a job with a secular business. For the time, he wanted to step away from church work, but not from his Christian faith. He was relieved to have freed himself of the toxic atmosphere created by his former employer. Even so, Josiah found himself battling anger and resentment. There were days when he fantasized himself as a Christian “whistle-blower” who would expose his former employer’s shameful behavior to the local religious community. In his better moments, of course, he knew that his real motivation was in seeking vengeance--a most unhealthy mental preoccupation that has no place in the heart and mind of a Christ follower. For the time, he would keep his mouth closed. Josiah knew seeking revenge against Rev. Modine was hateful and wrong and to act in such a manner would make him no better, and possibly worse, than his former employer.

What follows is a series of quotes. Evaluate each of Josiah’s statements as if you were a willing friend ready to listen and advise:

- “Months have passed since I resigned as the church’s youth pastor. I do not miss the work and I certainly do not miss the ungodly atmosphere that hung over the place, but I am having a difficult time letting go of my anger toward Rev. Modine. I can hardly think of him without becoming upset and miserable. How can I free myself from these toxic emotions?”

- “Several times a week, I imagine sending letters to all of the local pastors telling them what Rev. Modine is like behind closed doors. Everyone thinks he is a saintly hero. I know better!”
- “I understand God is sovereign and that He does not make mistakes, so how can God stand idly by as Rev. Modine lines his pockets while making a mockery of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?”
- “I had a heart for ministry. I truly wanted to serve Jesus as a full-time vocation. My intentions were good, so why did God put me under the thumb of a religious phony?”
- “Deep down, I know the anger that I harbor is destructive. Had I been spiritually stronger, I might have brought about some positive changes in the church. Instead, I sunk to the level of my surroundings and became harsh and critical. Maybe I am as angry with myself as I am with Rev. Modine.”
- “I suppose I should feel sorry for Rev. Modine. The day will come when he will account for his actions to God. And if I will not let go of this anger, I, too, may find myself in the uncomfortable position of explaining my resentments to God.”

For your personal contemplation or group discussion:

- How do we deal with the frustrations of unfulfilled expectations without slipping into a dungeon of seething anger and long-term resentment?
- Describe the destructive attributes of clinging to one’s anger and resentments. How can the harboring of these emotions rob a Christian believer of joy, peace, and tranquility?
- How can we effectively pray for our enemies? How can we lift those who have harmed us to the throne room of God?

Our Journey: Day 7

In today’s study, we will explore

- the biblical origins of assigning blame to others
- the foibles of blaming God and others for self-inflicted wounds
- the value of seeking God’s will for our lives

In the Beginning, Adam Blamed God

Several years ago, a highly emotional and highly intoxicated woman entered my office. Face flushed, eyes red from crying, she blurted, "You're a preacher! Tell me something! Why did God take my old man from me?"

In a slurred tongue, she went on to say her fifty-nine-year-old live-in boyfriend had suddenly died from a heart attack. Why had God so callously taken him from her, she demanded to know.

I learned that her boyfriend had spent most of his life in the grip of untreated alcoholism. For the past six months, he had remained sober; even so, most of his years had been marred by excessive drinking. During this time, the ravages of alcoholism had taken a toll on his physical well-being.

I make a point of not debating theology with someone whose judgment is clouded with alcohol, and the woman sitting across from me was clearly inebriated. Even so, I gently but firmly suggested that her boyfriend's years and years of heavy drinking were responsible for his death and rather than blaming God for his passing, she should consider her boyfriend's long history of alcoholism. I then suggested she come back and discuss this matter with me after the alcohol had passed from her system. Again, engaging in meaningful discussion with a drunk is an exercise in futility. I never heard from her again.

The American writer, John Steinbeck, who was known for his heavy drinking, stated he never resented his frequent morning hangovers. They were, as he explained, a natural byproduct of excessive drinking. Why should anyone who insists on drinking excessively complain about a dry mouth, queasy stomach, and throbbing headache, he reasoned. If

anyone is determined to drink in the manner of a fool, let the jolly reveler be prepared to accept the morning-after consequences.

In my own life, I have frequently blamed God for the disappointments and failures brought about by my own hand. Perhaps you, too, have blamed God for wounds that were self-inflicted. If so, you and I learned to play the "blame game" from our earliest ancestors, Adam and Eve.

Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?"

And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.' "

Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?"

So he said, “I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

And He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?”

Then the man said, “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate (Genesis 3:1-12 NKJV).”

As to this narrative, there are a few salient points we should consider. Firstly, Adam and Eve were not simple, droopy-eyed, slack-jawed knuckle-walkers who communicated through coarse grunts and primitive gesturing. On the contrary, they were God’s *magnum opus*--the pinnacle of creation. Were we to stand in their pre-fallen presence, even the best and brightest among us would shudder and recoil in self-loathing humiliation. Do not be deceived through misunderstanding--physically and intellectually, Adam and Eve were superior to us in every way. As such, it was not stupidity that caused Adam and Eve to act in defiance to their Creator; they were not simpletons, for the first couple was fully aware that their disobedience was an attempt at usurping God’s authority.

Secondly, Adam and Eve were not glorified gardeners. The first couple had been given dominion over the earth and its creatures by the Creator. I join other Bible teachers who believe Adam and Eve exercised a godlike authority over the elements. Jesus, the Second Adam, could calm a raging storm, wither a barren fig tree, and send a school of fish into Peter’s net. It is not unreasonable to believe Adam and Eve had similar powers bestowed upon them by God.

Thirdly, I join other Bible teachers who believe Adam and Eve, in their pre-fallen state, were clothed in a type of shining glory. For a time, Moses radiated a glory after receiving the Ten Commandments from the Lord. Additionally, we read of Jesus, before, during, and after the Incarnation, clothed in a dazzling, radiant glory. Again, it is not unreasonable to believe Adam and Eve, prior to the Fall, emitted a splendid radiance, perhaps, from

their sinless state and proximity to God. After their woeful disobedience, the glory departed from Adam and Eve leaving them naked.

Clearly, Adam and Eve were superior to us in every way. To think of them as a pair of not-so-bright chuckleheads beguiled by a cleverer being does not square with the facts. Adam and Eve were willing partners in Satan's attempt at robbing God of His divine authority. Rather than seeking God's forgiveness, Adam pointed an accusing finger at his Maker and said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate."

In my life, I have attempted to blame God for my own self-inflicted wounds. What I have learned from such folly is this: The first step to healing is to stop blaming God and, instead, begin seeking out His will. God has plans for us. Plans to prosper us. Plans not to harm us. Plans to give us hope and a future. We can know this by reading and taking to heart God's promise recorded in Jeremiah 29:11. The sooner we meet Him, pick up our marching orders, and begin along the path ordained by Him, the sooner we will experience satisfaction and fulfillment. This is not to say there will be no difficulties, struggles, and even suffering along the way--this is evident in the life of the Apostles and legions of Christian martyrs who have suffered and died for the cause of Jesus Christ, but in good times and in bad times, there is no better place to be than in the midst of God's will.

For those who insist on blaming God for their self-inflicted woes, misdirected anger is a poor substitute for pure joy and personal contentment.

For your personal contemplation or group discussion:

- God declares, in Jeremiah 29:11, that He has plans for each of us--plans to prosper us and not to harm us--plans to give us hope and a future. With this promise in mind, why is it illogical to blame God for our woes and misadventures?
- How do poor decisions and ill-conceived plans come back to harm us?

- God is quick to forgive our sins, but the consequences of our wrongful actions may stay around to haunt us. As an example, a repentant bank robber can experience God's forgiveness, but the lengthy prison sentence remains to be served. In your own life, how have poor choices been followed by lingering consequences?

Our Journey: Day 8

In today's study, we will explore the first part of a narrative of a young woman raised in a highly dysfunctional home.

Jodi's Story (Part One)

Throughout childhood, Jodi often wondered how much better life would be had she been born into a "normal family." Jodi defined a normal family as one that demonstrated love, respect, security, and stability among its members. According to Jodi, the real culprit was her mother. Jodi's mother was cold, distant, and overly critical.

Shortly after Jodi was born, her older sister, Alyson, died after being struck by an automobile. From all that Jodi had heard, Alyson had been a bright, beautiful, sweet-natured little girl. The entire family had reeled in horror and disbelief from this sudden, unexpected tragedy.

Growing up, Jodi lived in the shadow of her older sister's seemingly sacred memory. Her mother would cruelly remark, "You are nothing like your dear older sister Alyson. Alyson was the prettiest little girl who ever lived. Why do you have to be so plain? And dear Alyson was ever so clever. It will be a miracle if you somehow manage to finish school. Child, it would have been better had Alyson lived and you had been killed by that drunken motorist. I suppose God knew what He was doing, but why I lost my dear Alyson and am stuck with you defies understanding."

Jodi's father seemed powerless in defending his surviving daughter against the tyranny of his wife. He never spoke cruelly or harshly to Jodi, but he seldom had a good word to say. Of course, he was just as unhappy as Jodi, but he could escape the toxic atmosphere of their home by working overtime at the aircraft plant. Jodi found similar relief from her mother's stifling bitterness when she enrolled in school. The classroom became Jodi's sanctuary and, thankfully, her teachers tended to treat her far kinder. The best part of Jodi's day was when she boarded the school bus. The worst part of Jodi's day occurred when the 3 P.M. dismissal bell rang. Jodi never smiled during the bus ride home.

At sixteen, Jodi became pregnant. The child's father, a high school junior named Christopher, had been the first boy to show Jodi any measure of attention. Christopher immediately asked Jodi to marry him; the boy's family agreed to let the newlyweds stay in their home. Thankfully, Christopher's parents were highly supportive. They encouraged the young couple to finish high school and then seek further vocational training. After graduation, Christopher enrolled in the community college's diesel mechanics program while Jodi studied to become an occupational therapy assistant.

As time passed, Jodi and Christopher's marriage flourished. Ten years and two more children later, Jodi and Christopher were proud homeowners, financially comfortable, and successfully established in their careers. Their three sons were bright, well-behaved, and well-adjusted, too. Christopher proved to be a caring, conscientious father and Jodi strove to be the kind of mother she had longed for during her childhood.

Jodi credited her family's success to God. About the time their first child was born, Jodi and Christopher joined a dynamic, loving, Christ-honoring church. She came to understand we are all sinners and incapable of pleasing God through our own works and deeds of righteousness. Thankfully, the young couple discovered by placing their faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, they would become sons and daughters of the King. "Gospel" means good news and Jodi and her husband received this good news enthusiastically. Their pastor reminded them that the sons and daughters of the King never need to grovel

about like dirty-faced beggars. Jodi and Christopher knew they were truly and passionately loved by the One whose love matters most. For the first time in her life, Jodi felt like a real princess and, to her great joy, Father God became the loving parent Jodi had longed to know.

Since her marriage ten years earlier, there had been little contact between Jodi and her mother. Predictably, Jodi's mother had shown no interest in the lives of her daughter, son-in-law, and three grandsons. From time to time, Jodi's father stopped by for a visit, but the infrequent get-togethers were generally brief, for he secretly feared the clandestine visits, if made known, would incite his wife's wrath.

Without warning, Jodi's father suddenly died of a stroke during his shift at the aircraft plant. A short time after the funeral, Jodi's mother telephoned to say, "Harold's death has made me realize that our family has a lot of issues. I want to set aside our past differences and strengthen our relationship, Jodi. It is not too late for us to be a real family. Are you willing to meet me halfway?"

For your personal contemplation or group discussion:

- Why is it vitally important that parents shower their children with unconditional love? How does the withholding of parental love leave children feeling unwanted and insecure?
- Why do you believe Jodi's mother directed her anger with God toward Jodi?
- Do you believe Jodi's father was an equally unfit parent or do you think he was the second victim of his wife's seething anger? How should he have responded to his wife's cruelty and to his daughter's vulnerability?
- What does it mean to be "adopted" into God's family through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior? How is Father God the perfect parent?

Our Journey: Day 9

In today's study, we will explore the second part of a narrative of a young woman raised in a highly dysfunctional home.

“But I (Jesus) say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44 NASB) ...”

Jodi's Story (Part Two)

In this session, we will continue with Jodi's narrative. What follows is a series of quotes from our story's characters. Imagine yourself as an old family acquaintance. How would you respond to each comment? What advice would you offer? Please remember that, as Christ followers, we are called to be peacemakers. As you consider each comment, remember, too, that our goal is not to exact revenge against Jodi's mother. Conversely, we are not to encourage Jodi to play the role of a helpless victim. As Christians, our words of advice and encouragement should be as a healing balm; with this said, avoid reactions that would only fan the flames of further hurt and resentment. Peacemakers must speak and act in ways that foster forgiveness which, in turn, halts the flow of anger.

“Okay, so I wasn't the perfect mom. I cannot deny this fact. In my defense, I suffered a tremendous loss when my dear Alyson was killed by a drunk driver. Had Alyson not been taken from me, we would have had a happier home.” --Jodi's mother

“As a child, Jodi suffered terribly. She could never please her mother. According to her mother, Jodi wasn't smart enough or good enough or pretty enough to deserve her love. My poor wife grew up in a home where she was starved for affection. And now, without warning, her mother wants to be a part of our family? I cannot help but wonder about her motives. What does she really want from us?” --Christopher

“I know I should forgive my mother, but does this mean that I have to pretend that none of the bad stuff happened? Am I supposed to say, ‘That's okay, Mom! You weren't so

rotten after all. Had I been a better daughter, we would have gotten along.’ Is this what I am expected to say?” --Jodi

“Alyson was the perfect little girl. If I may speak frankly, Jodi could be a trying child. She had many of her father’s worst traits. She even looked like her father--not that he was of any help around the house. He was a difficult man who drained the patience out of me. Of course, it was my duty to care for her. I made sure her clothes were clean, and the child never missed a meal. In all those years, I never raised my hand to her. No, we were never close--there was never a real mother and daughter bond between us, but is it too late to mend that relationship?” --Jodi’s mother

“The Bible says we are to love those who have harmed us. How can I do this? Am I to magically conjure up warm, mushy feelings toward my mother? How do I ignore nearly thirty years of hurt and rejection? I refuse to believe that God expects me to somehow manufacture tender, affectionate emotions that are simply not in me.” --Jodi

“I have only seen Grandma two or three times. She doesn’t come around to see us. I don’t think she likes us. I don’t think Grandma likes anyone. I don’t think she likes herself, either. She is a very unhappy lady.” --Brady, Jodi and Christopher’s oldest son

“I don’t want to be guilty of harboring grudges. A grudge is like poison, and I do not want to be filled with poison. Our pastor said a component of forgiveness is setting aside thoughts of revenge. He also said I should pray for her restoration and well-being. I can do this. I can let go of vengeful thoughts and I can pray that my mother is healed of the anger and bitterness that has defined her life. Maybe this is how we are to love our enemies.” --Jodi

“We ought to forgive Jodi’s mother. It is the right thing to do. When we forgive those who have harmed us, we are imitators of Jesus Christ. Someone might say that Jodi’s mother does not deserve forgiveness. That is correct. But you and I do not deserve Jesus’ forgiveness, either. If we were deserving of His mercy, there would be no message of

grace. I have spoken with Jodi and the children about this. They agree. By God's grace, we are going to open our hearts to Jodi's mother." --Christopher

"In Romans 5:5, the Apostle Paul wrote God's love has been poured into the hearts of Christian believers through the Holy Spirit who has been given to all who have placed their faith in Him. This is a supernatural love, so to speak, that comes straight from the heart of God. God knows my struggles and He will help me to love my mother." --Jodi

"As I see it, God is the primary problem. Had He not taken my precious Alyson from me, we would have enjoyed a happier home, and this hurt and misunderstanding could have been avoided. By the way, I received precious little support from my husband and Jodi. They did not seem to understand the depth of my pain and grief. But what is done cannot be undone and I am perfectly willing to forgive God and everyone else and move on with my life." --Jodi's mother

For your personal contemplation or group discussion:

- It cannot be denied that Jodi's mother suffered a tremendous loss with the death of her first child. Why do you think she aimed her anger and frustration in the direction of her husband and, more particularly, her younger daughter? Additionally, do you think there may have already been bitterness hidden deep within her heart that finally came to surface after Alyson's untimely death?
- Once again, consider Jodi's father's unwillingness to intervene on his younger daughter's behalf? In your estimation, why did he cower to his wife's anger? How might he have acted that would have brought healing to his broken family?
- Does God expect us, as Jodi wondered, to "magically conjure up warm, mushy feelings" toward those who have harmed us? Or does genuine love go beyond mere sentimentality and emotionalism?
- What happens to those who endlessly harbor grudges? What becomes of those who steadfastly refuse to forgive the trespasses of others?
- How can God help us to love and forgive those responsible for our hurts and sufferings?

Our Journey: Day 10

In today's study, we will explore

- how anger can fuel evil, vengeful, murderous thoughts
- why peacemakers are called "blessed"
- the benefits of remaining calm and rational amid conflict

Nabal: A Man Who Lived up to His Name

"Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the former." --Albert Einstein

Unbridled anger, as we learned in our previous study in Genesis, often triggers extreme acts of violence that frequently result in all manner of tragic episodes; in his anger, Cain murdered his innocent brother Abel. In the following narrative, taken from I Samuel 25, David, motivated by revenge and fueled by white-hot anger, vows to slay his adversary, a rancher named Nabal, along with Nabal's hired servants. Thankfully, a virtuous, clear-thinking woman named Abigail intervenes and prevents what we would call a mass murder.

To fully appreciate this story, let us explore the background and circumstances leading up to this account. Saul, the first King of Israel, had acted disobediently and, as such, had fallen out of favor with God. God swore the crown would go from Saul to David. King Saul stubbornly refused to accept God's decree; to prevent David from becoming his successor, Saul hunted David and his small band of followers as if they were criminals.

David and his valiant men, encamped near a large ranch in Carmel, hid in the wilderness of Paran from King Saul and his larger army of fighting men. Filled with defiance, Saul would have stopped at nothing to rid himself of David and his loyal band of men. David

and his small army lived off the land, so to speak, in order to survive. No doubt, they fed on game, fish, and whatever grains and fruit could be harvested in the wild.

Nabal, whose name means *fool*, was an unsavory character who owned a highly successful ranch. As we shall see, Nabal lived up to his name. He was a fool--but he was a well-to-do fool whose riches came from his vast holdings of land and chattel. In those ancient times, ranchers such as Nabal were at the mercy of thieves and marauders who would steal grain and livestock and had no qualms with the killing of the landowners and their servants who stood in their way.

David and his army were honorable men. Though they camped near Nabal's ranch, they respected his property. Additionally, David and his men served as a shield and protector. Thieves bent on pillaging and bloodshed had no desire to face David's soldiers. There can be no doubt that Nabal's entire ranching operation was the beneficiary of David's presence.

Then David rose and went down to the wilderness of Paran. And there was a man in Maon whose business was in Carmel. The man was very rich; he had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. He was shearing his sheep in Carmel. Now the name of the man was Nabal, and the name of his wife Abigail. The woman was discerning and beautiful, but the man was harsh and badly behaved; he was a Calebite. David heard in the wilderness that Nabal was shearing his sheep. So David sent ten young men. And David said to the young men, "Go up to Carmel, and go to Nabal and greet him in my name. And thus you shall greet him: 'Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have. I hear that you have shearers. Now your shepherds have been with us, and we did them no harm, and they missed nothing all the time they were in Carmel. Ask your young men, and they will tell you. Therefore let my young men find favor in your eyes, for we come on a feast day. Please give whatever you have at hand to your servants and to your son David (I Samuel 25: 1-8 NKJV).'"

Instructing them to demonstrate tact and cordiality, David's ambassadors of good-will were to peaceably approach Nabal with a simple request: Please give whatever you have at hand to your servants and to our son David." The request was entirely reasonable, for David and his men had guarded Nabal's servants and livestock from bloodthirsty plunderers. The season's financial success was due, in part, to the vigilance of David's honorable men; the time had come for Nabal to return the favor.

When David's young men came, they said all this to Nabal in the name of David, and then they waited. And Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants these days who are breaking away from their masters. Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers and give it to men who come from I do not know where (1 Samuel 25:9-11 NKJV)?"

Nabal spoke as a fool. "Who is David?" he incredulously asked. David, who had slain the giant named Goliath with a well-placed stone to the forehead, was known and celebrated throughout Israel as a brave and mighty man of God. Instead of treating his guests with civility and respect, Nabal implies that their master may be nothing more than a runaway slave. A fool's tongue is seldom guarded. Instead of expressing gratitude for their valuable services, Nabal responded to the delegation's cordial greeting by hurling insulting words in their direction.

So David's young men turned away and came back and told him all this. And David said to his men, "Every man strap on his sword!" And every man of them strapped on his sword. David also strapped on his sword. And about four hundred men went up after David, while two hundred remained with the baggage.

But one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal's wife, "Behold, David sent messengers out of the wilderness to greet our master, and he railed at them. Yet the men were very good to us, and we suffered no harm, and we did not miss anything when we were in the fields, as long as we went with them. They were a

wall to us both by night and by day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep. Now therefore know this and consider what you should do, for harm is determined against our master and against all his house, and he is such a worthless man that one cannot speak to him (I Samuel 25:12-17 NKJV)."

One of Nabal's hired hands, knowing that his employer was wholly unreasonable, reported this breach of civility and honor to Abigail. Abigail was no fool though she had married one. Most of us know through first-hand experience that reasoning with a hot-headed tyrant is futile. Even at the risk of peril, men and women like Nabal are neither interested in truth nor fair play. As such, Nabal's servant feared the dire consequences that would likely follow his employer's shabby treatment of David's men.

Then Abigail made haste and took two hundred loaves and two skins of wine and five sheep already prepared and five seahs of parched grain and a hundred clusters of raisins and two hundred cakes of figs, and laid them on donkeys. And she said to her young men, "Go on before me; behold, I come after you." But she did not tell her husband Nabal. And as she rode on the donkey and came down under cover of the mountain, behold, David and his men came down toward her, and she met them. Now David had said, "Surely in vain have I guarded all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belonged to him, and he has returned me evil for good. God do so to the enemies of David and more also, if by morning I leave so much as one male of all who belong to him (I Samuel 25:18-22 NKJV)."

Wasting no time, Abigail prepared a lavish peace offering to appease David and his soldiers; it was this prudent woman's intention to right the grave wrong of her blithering husband and avert the very real possibility of bloodshed. Do you often wonder why the world seems to be overly populated by Nabals while the Abigails are grossly underrepresented? In my own life, I have played the role of a Nabal--angry, vile, and unreasonable. Perhaps you have Nabal tendencies of your own. I certainly do.

Perhaps you have also noticed that, in his anger, David is demonstrating some Nabal-like tendencies, too. Not only has he vowed to slay Nabal, he has sworn to kill every male in Nabal's household. Let us make no mistake about it--if David carries out his threat, he will be guilty of mass murder. Anger that is uncontrolled is a deadly force that has resulted in unspeakably bloody horrors that defy understanding and reason.

Are you wondering why, among David's band of faithful soldiers, no one was raising an objection over this murderous threat? This question has crossed my mind, too. Their loyalty to David is commendable, but their leader is determined to commit a horrific act and is there no one on the side of honor? Anyone in a position of leadership will do well to surround himself or herself with sensible, reasonable people willing to speak up even in tense situations. In a future Bible study, we will encounter a rather hot-headed leader who received wise counsel from his subordinates. Their solid advice saved his life.

When Abigail saw David, she hurried and got down from the donkey and fell before David on her face and bowed to the ground. She fell at his feet and said, "On me alone, my lord, be the guilt. Please let your servant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your servant. Let not my lord regard this worthless fellow, Nabal, for as his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name, and folly is with him. But I your servant did not see the young men of my lord, whom you sent. Now then, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, because the Lord has restrained you from bloodguilt and from saving with your own hand, now then let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be as Nabal. And now let this present that your servant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who follow my lord. Please forgive the trespass of your servant. For the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord, and evil shall not be found in you so long as you live. If men rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the Lord your God. And the lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling. And when the Lord has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you and has appointed you prince over Israel, my

lord shall have no cause of grief or pangs of conscience for having shed blood without cause or for my lord working salvation himself. And when the Lord has dealt well with my lord, then remember your servant (I Samuel 25:23-31 NKJV)."

The quality lacking in David and his soldiers is found in this singular woman Abigail. We will continue looking at the wisdom of Abigail in a moment, but did you notice that she was entirely familiar with David. Abigail had heard the thrilling recollections of David's heroic deeds. She understood, too, that David was ordained by God to be Israel's next king. This remarkable woman also knew that the armed warrior breathing fire and revenge was, in his better moments, truly a man after God's own heart. Indeed, David's reputation was known throughout Israel, but her foolish husband Nabal mockingly asked, "Who is David?"

Years later, David's son Solomon would pen the words, "A soft answer turns away wrath... (Proverbs 15:1)." Solomon's inspiration may have come from the story of Abigail's wise and prudent handling of his father. Though free from guilt, she takes a measure of responsibility for her worthless husband's actions. Abigail's humility and graciousness is not wasted on David. He realizes that this beautiful woman, married to a fool, speaks words of godly wisdom--and this is precisely where David and Nabal differ. Both men have acted rashly, but, to his credit, David is willing to hear the voice of reason while Nabal is content wallowing in his own folly.

Just as Abigail humbly accepted responsibility for her husband's appalling behavior, centuries later, a wise and honorable prophet of God named Daniel, held captive by his Babylonian oppressors, identified himself with his own sinful countrymen. It is interesting to note Daniel ranks among the noblest of all whose lives are chronicled in the pages of Scripture. This is significant because Abigail and Daniel point us to Jesus Christ; though He was without sin, He identified Himself with sinful people and suffered an agonizing death on a cruel Roman cross. Three days later, He walked out of a borrowed tomb and, today, our Living Savior intercedes on our behalf. His sacrifice took away the sin of the world and His bodily resurrection proved His power over death and the grave.

If I may paraphrase Abigail, she went on to say, “My husband, true to his name, is a fool. Do not give him your attention and do not get caught up in his nonsense. God has sent me to say that you are a better man, David, and if you slay him, your sterling reputation will be tarnished. Why all this fuss over Nabal? Knowing him as I do, my useless husband is not worth the loss of your reputation. Put away your sword and let God fight your battles. Sheath your temper, too, and allow God to deal with your enemies. Erase this useless man’s memory from your mind. God has bigger and better plans for you!”

In our lives, we encounter fools such as Nabal. Some are mere annoyances. Others would deprive us of our rights or our property; others, still, would do us harm. Our greatest risk comes from a desire to exact revenge by our own hands. We can distance ourselves from these Nabals. If necessary, we can pursue lawful, honorable means of fending off their threats, but we are not to stoop to their level. We are not to respond to folly with folly. When one argues with a fool, onlookers are often confused as to who is, in fact, the fool.

Though this has been previously mentioned, let us never forget that, in his anger, David was on the cusp of committing mass murder. Had he followed through with his threats, we can only speculate as to the woeful outcomes that would have surely followed. The prisons are populated with women and men who, in anger and rage, took another’s life. In many cases, their actions were not premeditated. I spent four years teaching in a men’s prison and I seldom encountered an inmate that I would describe as a “monster.” Even so, out of control anger has led to countless murder convictions. Let no one among us who wrestles with unbridled emotions think that we are incapable of committing dreadful acts while under the spell of anger. Too, Jesus warned that we can be guilty of murder without raising a hand to another (Matthew 5:21, 22). This is a most sobering thought.

And David said to Abigail, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have

kept me this day from bloodguilt and from working salvation with my own hand! For as surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there had not been left to Nabal so much as one male.” Then David received from her hand what she had brought him. And he said to her, “Go up in peace to your house. See, I have obeyed your voice, and I have granted your petition (I Samuel 25:32-35 NKJV).”

Blessed are peacemakers like Abigail. This lone woman, acting as God’s messenger, disarmed a celebrated giant slayer and four hundred fighting men. Against all odds, Abigail averted a bloodbath. May we never underestimate what a faithful woman or man may accomplish when acting in accordance with God’s will.

Like the prodigal son who finally came to his senses, David came to his senses, too, by abandoning his quest for bloody revenge. If I may now paraphrase David, he said, “Praise the God of Israel for sending you to show me the recklessness of my plans for bloodshed! Had you not intervened, I would have wrongfully slain your husband and every male servant in his employ. In my anger, I devised a plan for revenge--a plan that was vile and evil--a plan that was far from God’s will. Truly, you are a woman of wisdom. I have heard your prudent words and will now act upon them. Go in peace, Abigail.”

Let us give credit to David for heeding Abigail’s wisdom. Even in his anger, he was not deaf to the truth. Godly women and men must always be prepared to receive the truth. Conversely, the ungodly have little use for truth. To those who mock God and disdain that which is good, truth and wisdom are repugnant. In today’s world, we see legions abandoning God’s eternal truths for the sake of ever-changing climates of opinion and the doctrines of so-called political correctness. Such people exchange truth for lies. In doing so, they embrace evil and jeer at Christian virtue. We see this fatal flaw in the warped, twisted thinking of Nabal. Like all who are steeped in nonsense and irrationality, Nabal was deaf to his wife’s good counsel.

And Abigail came to Nabal, and behold, he was holding a feast in his house, like the feast of a king. And Nabal's heart was merry within him, for he was very drunk. So she told him nothing at all until the morning light. In the morning, when the wine had gone out of Nabal, his wife told him these things, and his heart died within him, and he became as a stone. And about ten days later the Lord struck Nabal, and he died (I Samuel 25:36-38 NKJV).

Back at the ranch, Nabal hosted an “eat, drink, and be merry” party to celebrate his good fortune; quite naturally, he was his own guest of honor. Instead of renewing his mind on God’s truths, Nabal chose to saturate his brain with alcohol. For those familiar with the Book of Daniel, you will note the parallel found in Daniel 5. Nabal’s party mirrors Belshazzar’s drunken feast. Both celebratory events ended with the deaths of their extraordinarily foolish hosts. Nabal also appears to be very much like the rich fool portrayed in our Lord Jesus’ parable recorded in Luke 12:

Then He (Jesus) spoke a parable to them, saying: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?’ So he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.” ’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided (Luke 12:16-20 NKJV)?”

Might Nabal have been the source of our Lord’s inspiration? Perhaps. We may know with certainty that living for self leads to tragic endings.

When David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, “Blessed be the Lord who has avenged the insult I received at the hand of Nabal, and has kept back his servant from wrongdoing (I Samuel 25:39 NKJV) ...”

Realizing God had called upon Abigail to prevent him from murdering Nabal and his servants, David demonstrated his gratitude through praise. God attended to Nabal just as He ultimately deals with all ungodly fools, for vengeance is His work and not our work. A short time later, David and Abigail were married. It is reasonable to assume this remarkable woman was a positive and stabilizing influence in King David's long life.

For your personal contemplation or group discussion:

- Discuss what you learned about Nabal's character. How did he live up to his name?
- In his anger, David swore vengeance against Nabal and his servants. Had David followed through with his threat, how would this have sullied his reputation? Might this barbarous act had made him an even more evil man than Nabal?
- To his credit, David carefully weighed the words of Abigail and abandoned his plan for mass bloodshed--a plan that was born in anger. To his folly, Nabal's ears were continually deaf to Abigail's wisdom. God places wise and prudent people into our lives for very specific reasons. Why is it vital that we heed the wisdom of the godly?
- Discuss what you learned about Abigail's character. In what ways might we describe Abigail's personal attributes as being Christ-like?

Our Journey: Day 11

In today's study, we will explore the dilemma of a family ripped asunder by hurt and betrayal.

Isabella's Story

As a child, Isabella was a shy, compliant, well-behaved little girl. Her parents were quiet, gentle people who maintained a tidy, orderly home. They attended church as a family, lived modestly, were regarded as a stable, loving family, and were well liked by the small

circle of friends and acquaintances in their community. Isabella got along well with the neighborhood kids as well as the boys and girls in her school, but she was also content entertaining herself with puzzles, drawing, story books, and piano practice. Isabella was a highly creative child who earned impressive grades while demonstrating good manners and an even temperament.

Isabella met Manny during her final year of high school. Manny was jovial, confident, and occasionally brash. Unlike Isabella, Manny did not take his studies or, indeed, much else very seriously. The young man was a borderline student who gave little regard to school rules or classroom protocol. He was, however, a handsome youth who was always good for a laugh. Secretly, Isabella felt a strange attraction to him; she knew, of course, that her parents would never approve of a boy like Manny.

As the school year progressed, Manny went out with several girls before asking Isabella for a date. After saying yes, she warned Manny to be on his absolute best behavior when meeting her parents. "They are a bit old-fashioned," she half-apologetically explained. "Please watch what you say, because I want them to like you!" True to his promise, Manny put on a good front whenever in the company of Isabella's parents.

Soon after high school graduation, Manny and Isabella were married. Isabella's parents were heartbroken. Why rush into marriage, they asked. What about college? How do these two teenagers expect to support themselves? But their real concern was Manny himself. Despite the young man's thin outer layer of respectability and good manners, Isabella's father and mother feared their new son-in-law would bring their daughter nothing but heartache and disappointment.

Isabella gave birth to twin boys just days before their first wedding anniversary. Soon after their second anniversary, a daughter was born. Caring for three little ones kept Isabella busy, but she proved to be a loving, attentive mom. Manny, on the other hand, did not take the rigors of marriage and parenthood seriously. As he bounced from job to job, Isabella often found herself at odds with the apartment's rental agent and their other

creditors. More than once, in order to avoid eviction or the discontinuance of utilities, she begged money from her mother and father.

Manny refused to grow up and accept his rightful responsibilities. He drank excessively with his old friends and, from time to time, passed nights with women he would meet at the bars he frequented. Isabella suffered from the pangs of betrayal, but she had been too humiliated to seek the advice and comfort of her pastor or parents. Not knowing what else she could do, Isabella devoted her attention to her children while enduring the grief caused by an unfaithful husband.

Late one evening, Manny staggered to his automobile after downing several shots of vodka. Manny had driven while under the influence of alcohol on dozens of occasions, but his luck finally ran out, so to speak, when he struck a police vehicle. The injured law officer went to the hospital and Manny went to jail. Waiving a jury trial, the judge handed down a five year prison sentence. A week later, Isabella filed for divorce.

While serving his sentence, Manny joined the prison's chapter of Celebrate Recovery, a Christ-centered addiction, recovery, and relapse prevention program; he also attended the prison's substance abuse program and proved himself to be an eager, enthusiastic participant. Sensing the spiritual void in his life, Manny faithfully attended Sunday morning chapel services. After a confession of faith, the prison chaplain arranged Manny's baptism. Renewed by the positive changes in his life, Manny sent Isabella long, glowing letters about his recovery, his newfound sense of purpose, his faith in Jesus Christ, and his dedication to becoming a good husband and father upon his release.

The following is a series of quotes from our narrative's characters. As before, imagine yourself as an old family acquaintance. How would you respond to each comment? What advice would you offer? Carefully weigh and evaluate each quote. As believers, we should respond in ways that bring healing to the injured and glory to our Savior, Jesus Christ.

“We are not wealthy people, but my husband and I have helped support Isabella and our grandchildren since Manny’s incarceration. Isabella is a sweet, wonderful daughter and our three grandchildren are adorable. Frankly, Manny doesn’t deserve Isabella and the little ones. Other than inflicting hurt and pain, he has done little else for them. I want nothing to do with my daughter’s deadbeat ex-husband.” --Isabella’s mother

“Lately, I have been receiving letters and phone calls from Manny telling me how he is a changed man. Maybe he has changed and maybe he hasn’t. These so-called “big changes” he talks about might be for the benefit of the parole board. Manny knows how to put on a good front. Am I skeptical? You bet I am! And I am angry, too. If you had lived with someone like Manny, you would understand my skepticism and anger.” -- Isabella

“I see the parole board next month. I am praying that the board will realize that I am a changed man and send me home. I am also praying that Isabella will find it in her heart to forgive me and take me back. If she says yes, I will be the kind of husband and father that Isabella and our children deserve!” --Manny

“Only God knows his heart, but I believe Manny’s conversion is real. From my viewpoint, God is moving in this young man’s life. Of course, a lot of these jailhouse conversions are simply a farce, but I am going to give Manny the benefit of the doubt. The real question is whether or not his wife and family can release their anger and forgive him.” -- Chaplain Thomas

“From time to time, I have dinner with a gentleman from my church. At the moment, our relationship is casual, but he has a good job, and he is very stable. He likes my kids, too. Manny had his chance. Maybe I can do better than Manny. Maybe the kids and I deserve a husband and father who is stable and responsible.” --Isabella

“I spoke with Isabella by phone last evening. Our conversation was civil, but I could hear a tinge of anger in her voice. She has her doubts about me, and I can understand why. I

cheated on her and I did a poor job of supporting our family, but if she will give me another chance, I will spend the rest of my life making up for all the misery and suffering I caused. I am still young and healthy. I am a reasonably intelligent person. I can hold down a good job and I can be a loving husband and father. With God's help, there are no limits to what I might accomplish. All I need is a chance." --Manny

"My wife and I want only what is best for our daughter and our three grandkids. If Manny has truly changed, then he should be willing to prove himself before asking Isabella and the kids to take him back. Let him get a job, catch up on years of child support, be a responsible citizen, and steer clear of drugs and alcohol. Let him prove himself. If he does all this, then maybe she can take him back in a year or two." --Isabella's father

"Manny has his faults, but Manny has his good points, too. He can be very sweet and charming. I must admit that I have missed him, but when I think of the heartache he has put us through, I feel anger welling up inside of me. There is a part of me that loves him, but there's another part of me that very nearly hates him. What should I do?" --Isabella

"Last night, I thought about Isabella and the kids having dinner, playing in the park, and checking out storybooks at the library. Had I not played the role of a fool, I would be with them. It would be very easy to get angry and hate myself--and I have already experienced these feelings again and again since being locked-up, but Jesus has forgiven me of my sins and if He is not angry with me, then I can forgive myself, too." --Manny

"I don't like Manny and I surely don't believe he has miraculously changed. And if Isabella takes him back, then my husband and I will be forced to support him, too. Once a cheat and a liar, always a cheat and a liar." --Isabella's mother

"I cannot expect Isabella to forget about the past, but I am eager to prove that my future is bright and full of promise. I will place myself at her mercy. If she needs time, I will give her time. All I want is a chance to prove that God made a new man out of me." --Manny

For your personal contemplation or group discussion:

- Realizing it is easier to sympathize with those who have not harmed us personally, is Isabella reasonable in questioning the authenticity of Manny's transformation? Should she simply accept his word as a statement of fact?
- Due to their ongoing financial support, Isabella's parents have every right to express their opinion about Manny. Do you agree?
- As followers of Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven, but the consequences of our past actions may not necessarily go away. What are some of the consequences Manny will face upon leaving prison?
- If Manny is truly a changed man, how can he prove the validity of his transformation to his wife and her doubtful parents?

Our Journey: Day 12

In today's study, we will explore

- loving our enemies versus despising our enemies
- the fruit of the Spirit versus the briars and thorns of the flesh
- ambition versus envy
- God's will versus self-will

The Christian should resemble a fruit tree, not a Christmas tree! For the gaudy decorations of a Christmas tree are only tied on, whereas fruit grows on a fruit tree.

-- John R. W. Scott

Radical Transformation

But I (Jesus) say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44 ESV) ...

Love is much more than a feeling. Let there be no misunderstanding in the matter, for genuine love is not an attempt at conjuring warm, ooey-goey emotions toward the brute who just shoved you to the ground after stealing your wallet or purse. Love is praying that such a person will repent and turn to Jesus for forgiveness and restoration. I am reminded that the Apostle Paul, prior to his conversion, was a wild-eyed, fanatical religious terrorist. The blood on innocent Christians stained his clenched fists. Had God struck this fiery Pharisee dead, the world would have been infested with one less zealot, but from his restoration, the church received her most prolific writer of New Testament scriptures. We can all thank God for the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul. Come to think of it, I have met a number of great pastors and Bible teachers who, prior to their conversions, were enemies of God's people. How do we love our enemies? We pray that our enemies will be transformed by Jesus. We pray that our enemies will become our friends. We pray that God will show our enemies the same lavish measure of grace and compassion He demonstrated to us.

When our prayers change from "Lord, please hurl a lightning bolt down on so-and-so's ugly head," to "Lord, may this person who has caused me grief come to know You and the joy of Your salvation," our hearts are softened and all deeply rooted bitterness begins to dissipate. We are most like Jesus Christ when we learn to love our enemies.

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19-21 ESV).

The carnal individual, who has little regard for God and gives even less thought to eternity, lives under the authority of his or her own desires. This is not to say that non-believers are axe murderers or find pleasure in setting fire to orphanages, but the works of the flesh stand in direct contrast with the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and other shameful acts are the thistles, thorns, and briars of the flesh. The Apostle Paul is abundantly clear in stating those who continually practice such evil deeds will not do so with impunity; carnally minded persons who produce weeds rather than fruit face a perilous eternity of regret. Apart from Jesus Christ, there can be no eternal joy. Apart from Jesus, anger, bitterness, resentment, and envy find their unholy sanctuary.

Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the Lord all the day (Proverbs 23:17 ESV).

Ambition begins with a desire and is followed by a willingness to work toward the achievement of a particular goal. In contrast, envy is an unhealthy, self-focused preoccupation with the achievements, prosperity, and blessings of another. Ambition can fuel success; envy fuels resentment and discontentment. Of course, blind ambition can drive men and women to engage in extreme and even immoral methods for the sake of achieving their desires, but envy is a sin that is never justified.

There are legions of ungodly people who live quite sumptuously. Rather than envying their temporal gains, believers are to walk humbly and reverently in the ways of the Lord. The spoils of the ungodly will soon fade away, but for those whose treasures are in Heaven, the dividends of righteousness are eternal. We should pray for the redemption of the ungodly, for there are no treasures stored in Hell--only insatiable cravings that can never be satisfied.

Surely vexation kills the fool, and jealousy slays the simple (Job 5:2 ESV).

This truth bears repeating: Jealousy is an unhealthy preoccupation with the blessings of another. For that matter, the object of the jealous individual's envy may not, in the long run, prove to be such a blessing. A closer examination will likely reveal that the proud

homeowner of the heavily mortgaged suburban mini mansion is also burdened with high property taxes, hefty maintenance costs, and staggering utility bills. Many years ago, I was briefly employed by a single man who owned a six-bedroom home. If you argued that his business is none of my business, I would agree with you; even so, I am befuddled wondering how he benefited from five empty bedrooms.

The Greek philosopher Antisthenes wrote, “As iron is eaten away by rust, so the envious are consumed by their own passion.” How many jealous souls are utterly consumed because they cannot boast of as many empty bedrooms as their neighbor?

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long (Psalm 25:4, 5 ESV).

The God of our salvation has a plan for your life and my life, and His plans do not include perpetual feelings of anger, hatred, and resentment that steal our joy, but how can we understand His will if we are far from Him? His plans are far better than any schemes or goals we might conjure from our own imaginations, but too many of us are caught up in our own desires or are too preoccupied with what the world is saying to hear His gentle, loving voice. We will never know His ways until we shut out the world, put a lid on our own selfish ambitions, and wait upon Him for our marching orders. We speak loftily of following our dreams, but there is no greater satisfaction than living out God’s divinely inspired purpose. Would not even the most rudimentary exercise in logic teach us God’s dreams are superior to our own dreams? What more could we desire? God’s ambitions are attainable, too. When He bids us to fly, He gives us wings.

For your personal contemplation or group discussion:

- How do we demonstrate love to our enemies?
- Discuss the difference between ambition and envy?
- How do the works of the flesh differ from the fruit of the Spirit?

- Apart from Jesus, there can be no ongoing contentment and no lasting peace. Discuss this truth.
- What is the end result when an individual pursues his or her will while ignoring the pathway ordained by God?

you have not noticed, there is hardly a shortage of politicians, educators, and entertainers who mock our nation's Judeo-Christian heritage. Our adversary, the devil, has a lot of friends in high places, and they do not like us one whit, so we had better stick together.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "No Christian and, indeed, no historian could accept the epigram which defines religion as 'what a man does with his solitude.' It was one of the Wesleys, I think, who said that the New Testament knows nothing of solitary religion. We are forbidden to neglect the assembling of ourselves together. Christianity is already institutional in the earliest of its documents...We are members of one another." Jesus loves you and Jesus loves me; therefore, we are to love one another. He shed His blood for you. He shed His blood for me. I am not wrong in saying Christians are related by blood--His blood. So, as blood relatives, let us be kind and gentle and loving toward one another. This is His will.

I have heard people excuse themselves from corporate worship because "the church is full of hypocrites." Very well, then, but hypocrites also shop at malls, dine at restaurants, attend music concerts, work in factories and offices, study at universities, read books in libraries, picnic in municipal parks, cheer on their favorite sports teams, sunbathe on tropical beaches, and work out at gyms. Are you willing to give up restaurants, malls, theaters, stadiums, beaches, shops, gyms, and parks in order to avoid contact with hypocrites? Or will you be a hypocrite and single out the church?

I suppose I will see you at worship service this Sunday.

For your personal contemplation or group discussion:

- Discuss at least three vital benefits of regular church attendance.

- A trustworthy pastor esteems the Bible as accurate and authoritative. A counterfeit pastor has little faith in the scriptures. Discuss the spiritual pitfalls of a church led by a pastor who does not believe the Bible is God's infallible, wholly trustworthy book.
- How are we, as believers in Christ Jesus, related by blood?

If you like what you have read, the complete book with its addition 28 chapters is scheduled for release on or before the Labor Day weekend, 2024. In the meantime, may the Lord bless you and keep you.

michaelblunk.online

dr.michaelblunk@gmail.com

