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It’s a great honor for me to serve the church alongside many extraordinary men and women of God. But through all the ups and downs, there’s one thing I’ve learned: When you consider the miraculous preservation of the body of Christ for the last 2,000 years, Jesus is obviously the one who is holding us together (Col. 2:19).

The Bible tells us Jesus “nourishes and cherishes” the church (Eph. 5:29). He binds us together by His Spirit. He listens to our prayers, helps us grow, and pours out His love through us. Caring for others is one way we respond to these awesome blessings. But what can we do to show our gratitude?

We can steward God’s gifts (including the gospel), worship Him, and prepare as the body of Christ for His return. In these last few months of the year, my prayer is that you’ll discover how wonderful it is for us all to stand together, members of one kingdom, and express our devotion to Jesus Christ. As you come to the end of this study, I hope you have a new excitement about sharing your love for the Lord with believers everywhere—and happiness at recognizing your unique and vital role in the worldwide church. Together, let’s look forward joyfully to our future with Him.

Thank you for sharing this journey with us, and God bless you.
Picture this: You’ve decided to take a trip with a dear friend. You know that exciting and interesting things are going to happen along the way, but you have no idea what they might be. You haven’t seen a full itinerary, but after just a few hours, you’re already worn out from all the excitement. “Let’s just stop here,” you might say.

This is the kind of predicament Peter, John, and James found themselves in when they went up on the mountain to pray with Jesus. They were “overcome with sleep” at the most inopportune time: the transfiguration. When they were completely awake, they saw that the Lord’s face and clothes were shining—and He was talking to Moses and Elijah! When Peter understood the glorious revelation before him, he wanted to preserve it forever and offered to set up tabernacles for each of them.

Like Peter, we may also find it easy to get stuck on an idea or a plan when we’re excited. But sometimes we have to pause and consider the larger picture. In that moment with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, Peter and the others got a preview of the kingdom of God. They saw Jesus as He truly is and responded eagerly. And that’s how it will be when we’re face-to-face with the Lord someday. After being His followers here on earth, we’ll get to see Him in His divine reality. And we will finally be the created beings He intended—redeemed and fully restored.

What does it mean to keep the fully glorified vision of Jesus alive in our heart? How do we surrender ourselves to Him in the present while keeping His promises for the future in mind?

In this volume of the Whole Church Guide, we’ll explore those questions by looking at three important topics: sustaining the mission of the church, offering ourselves in sacrifice and worship, and looking ahead to our future as the bride of Christ.
HOW DO WE SUSTAIN OUR MISSION?
Have you ever accomplished a difficult task and thought, Wow, I’m amazing! You worked hard and were eager to receive praise from others. It’s easier than we realize to think highly of ourselves—even more highly than we should.

We’re just as likely to do this with God’s blessings. How often do we think these are gifts we deserve or have earned? I’ve worked hard, followed the rules, we think, so of course He’s blessed me. We might envy others’ skills and abilities or things they have received.

Sound familiar? These feelings lead us to believe we’re not as gifted as we should be or our gifts aren’t recognized enough. Or, perhaps, we just feel entitled to something more.

It’s difficult to believe God’s blessings come solely from His unending grace. But the truth is, His blessings are mercifully given to us, even though we won’t use them perfectly. Still, we can’t see why He gives unearned, undeserved gifts or why they seem unequally distributed.

But God isn’t surprised we think this way. In fact, when pride, jealousy, or frustration comes to light, that’s another demonstration of His grace. We can invite the Lord to help us deal with those feelings and focus on receiving His gifts with thanks and praise.

It’s a privilege to use our gifts to build God’s kingdom—not just financially, but also in our interactions and the way we spend our time. Let’s look at how we can joyfully prepare for Jesus’ return while contributing to the ongoing life of His church—and use His blessings to encourage others and meet their needs.

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***Monthly Prayer***

**Heavenly Father,**

You have blessed me in so many ways. Give me the awareness that everything I have is Yours. It is through Your generous sacrifice that I have the opportunity to use these blessings to help build Your kingdom. Holy Spirit, teach me to become more aware of the gifts I have received and discern how best to use them. Lord, I pray my efforts would be a reflection of Your wisdom, grace, and peace. Amen.

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**USE THIS PRAYER, OR LET IT INSPIRE ONE IN YOUR OWN WORDS, AS YOU MOVE THROUGH THE WEEKLY REFLECTIONS IN THE FOLLOWING SECTION.**
When you think of stewardship, what comes to mind? It’s easy to focus on finances—in fact, the Greek word most often translated as stewardship is also the root for economy and economics. But the term relates to more than just money. Even in the ancient world, it had to do with managing the affairs of an entire household. In the Old Testament, for example, Joseph became the steward for Potiphar’s household, and his job was to responsibly manage all the family owned.

In fact, the idea of stewardship goes back even further—all the way to the very beginning of Genesis. Upon fashioning humans to bear His divine image, God told them to imitate Him; He called them to be productive and have dominion—that is, exercise humble authority—over the earth. As stewards of God’s creation, they were to reflect who He is. That involved doing the hard work to maintain, preserve, and beautify the earth. So, what does it look like for us to model that today? Has God presented us with specific opportunities to protect, maintain, or make the world around us more beautiful, truly reflecting His image?
**TRY THIS**

When God invited humankind to participate in building His kingdom, He placed the first people in a lush garden so they could “cultivate it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). Think about your own life, and identify any areas where God has placed you with an invitation to cultivate and keep. Maybe you have an opportunity through your workplace or volunteer activities. Perhaps He’s inviting you to learn more about the area you live in and the value of caring for it through community engagement or beautification. Or maybe it’s as simple as keeping your home orderly and well maintained. Write down two or three of these areas and some ideas for how you can begin this work.

**KEY VERSES**

“**THEN THE LORD GOD TOOK THE MAN AND PUT HIM INTO THE GARDEN OF EDEN TO CULTIVATE IT AND KEEP IT.**”
—GENESIS 2:15

“**THE EARTH IS THE LORD’S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS, THE WORLD, AND THOSE WHO DWELL IN IT.**”
—PSALM 24:1

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

→ Is it easy for you to think that all of the things on earth belong to God? Does that change your understanding of stewardship?

→ In your life, what does it look like to bring God glory by using the things He’s given you?
IMAGINE WATER FLOWING DOWN rocks to a stream, then to a river, and ultimately flowing out into the ocean. In a similar way, everything flows out of God’s provision for us. When God gives us abilities or other blessings, it’s not an accident, a product of our own hard work, or the result of good genes. Our God is a God who knows what He is doing—and He specifically and intentionally gives us each different gifts, at times just for the benefit of others.

If you have particular skills, strengths, or financial blessings, give Him thanks. The purpose of our gifts isn’t to make us feel better about ourselves or improve the way other people see us. God’s gifts are an opportunity for us to know Him better and participate in building His kingdom. Through them, and in obedience to Him, we fulfill His mission.
TRY THIS

Which people in your life are particularly good at using God’s blessings to enrich their communities or bless others? Write down their names and how they are doing this. As you pray this week, specifically ask God to use these servants to fulfill His mission and contribute to growing His kingdom in His way.

KEY VERSES

“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” —1 Peter 4:10 (ESV)

“For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.” —Romans 12:3

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

➔ Throughout Scripture, we are called to responsibly care for the different gifts we receive from God. As we read above, we should use our gifts so we can be “good stewards of God’s varied grace.” What do you think that means in today’s culture?

➔ How do you feel when you consider that He gifts us differently on purpose?
HAVE YOU EVER TITHED, volunteered at church, attended a Sunday service, or spent time in prayer? Of course I have, you’re probably thinking. But did you think of such activities as kingdom-building, mission-sustaining work?

It’s easy to accept these regular practices as essential to the formula of Christian life. You might even think they’re basic. But in those small acts, you’re actually doing something great: You’re demonstrating that you treasure everything God has provided you. Through generous giving, service, and worship, you’re not simply being a good steward—you’re offering these gifts back to Him in love.

In every part of life, there are opportunities to demonstrate that we love God and desire to glorify Him. Think about your daily habits and interactions, from the food you eat to the people you meet. What are you doing to show how important His glory is to you?
TRY THIS

God cares for us, all the way down to the smallest details of life. As you think about His gifts this week, take an inventory of the talents and abilities you have, opportunities you’ve received, or things you own. Ask God to help you enjoy these gifts and to reveal ways you can bring Him glory by using them. Write down any ideas that come to mind.

Is God asking you to simply express more gratitude to Him? Maybe He wants you to share your gifts with others—giving money, serving the less fortunate, supporting missionaries. Or perhaps He just wants you to focus on the gifts you can’t actually own, taking time to delight in His creation or spend time with your family.

KEY VERSES

“WHETHER, THEN, YOU EAT OR DRINK OR WHATEVER YOU DO, DO ALL TO THE GLORY OF GOD.” —1 CORINTHIANS 10:31

“JOHN ANSWERED, ‘ANYONE WHO HAS TWO SHIRTS SHOULD SHARE WITH THE ONE WHO HAS NONE, AND ANYONE WHO HAS FOOD SHOULD DO THE SAME.’” —LUKE 3:11 (NIV)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ How do you feel when you read Paul’s exhortation above to “do all to the glory of God”? In which areas do you feel confident you’re already doing this? Where would you like to focus more on bringing Him glory?

→ In what areas of your life are you offering God’s gifts back to Him? How?
Sometimes God calls us to participate in His mission in unusual or even confusing ways. These might be special situations that ask us to step outside of our normal manner of doing things and take a risk, give sacrificially, inconvenience ourselves, or even suffer for the sake of others. Have you ever felt called to go beyond your routine to do something extraordinary?

For some Christians, this might look like answering a call to move overseas and share the gospel with unreached people groups. For others, it might mean giving more than usual to help your church or community meet an important need. Or perhaps it involves taking a risk to support and come alongside someone who is struggling. Not all of us are called to make big, overt gestures. But we all can endeavor to listen with courage, trusting God to guide us in how we use His gifts—whatever that may look like.
TRY THIS

Think about what it means to listen to God with courage. Can you remember times when you felt He was asking you to take a step that made you uncomfortable or even fearful? How did you deal with it? Write a few sentences about your experience, focusing on what He asked you to do, the way you felt, and how He guided you through it.

KEY VERSES

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

“Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.”
—1 Corinthians 16:13-14 (NIV)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ In the verse above, Paul encourages the Corinthian Christians to “be on guard,” “stand firm,” “be courageous,” and “be strong.” These phrases evoke military images, but what does it mean to do them in love?

→ What does it look like to live with a loving posture—whether we’re doing something routine or out of the ordinary?
As believers, we’re called to leave a weighty, permanent imprint of God’s love, goodness, and forgiveness on the world wherever we go, for as long as we walk on this earth.

—Leaving a Godly Legacy, Charles F. Stanley
GATHERED IN PRAYER

by Joseph E. Miller
Spearheading this movement are pastors who recognize a lack of clarity and understanding with regard to how we actually “talk with God,” not just as individuals but as church communities—as the body of Christ on earth.

By the age of 26, Kris McDaniel had become a successful church planter in downtown Atlanta. From its inception, Trinity drew crowds of mostly young people, many of them unfamiliar with church. Yet McDaniel, who had recently emerged from a difficult season of ministry overseas, still faced spiritual struggles.

“My prayer life was anemic at best,” he said. He quickly discovered his congregation didn’t know much about prayer, either. In confronting what he called his own sinfulness and immaturity, McDaniel realized he couldn’t lead others into intimacy with God if he himself wasn’t experiencing that.

“One of the best gifts we can give our congregations is to liberate them to be beginners, to stop pretending that we’re good at things we frankly aren’t very good at,” he said.

At Vintage Church in Santa Monica, California, pastor Ger Jones encourages everyone to attend one of their monthly prayer training ministry events. “We find that the best way to hear from God is when you’re praying for someone else,” he said. The leaders at Vintage have, in a sense, democratized the access to prayer training so that everyone, regardless of position, is prepared to serve and support one another. “Praying for others is not a trophy for maturity,” Jones said. “[It] is a fundamental privilege of the children of God.” Jones’s goal is for members throughout the church, whether in community groups or basics-of-the-faith classes, to be ready to pray for one another on the spot when a need arises.

More than 2,000 miles away, just outside Nashville, Tennessee, the congregation of Green Hill Church has been experimenting, too, trying out different types of prayer gatherings. Senior pastor Daryl Crouch said...
members responded really well to a recent 24-hour event: The sanctuary was transformed into one large prayer room, with several stations prompting prayer for specific needs—whether for the sick, or mission partners, or the needs in their city.

And yet Crouch acknowledged there’s still room for growth. “I grew up in the church,” he said, “but a lot of the people we’re reaching didn’t. They’ve not really heard people pray. There’s a gap, an area for improvement.” Crouch hopes that an ecumenical, citywide prayer initiative they’re working on will be part of the answer.

In recent years there has been a resurgence of churches relying on liturgy—historical, ordered services. This is happening in evangelical congregations across various denominations, with prayer being an essential part of the rhythm in liturgical life. That often looks like using a blend of prewritten prayers or praying Scripture, both individually and together in church services. Winfield Bevins, director of church planting at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, studies such spiritual movements nationwide. “To be honest, a lot of people don’t know how to pray,” said Bevins, a former pastor. “They don’t have the discipline to even know when to pray. And that’s why I think pressing into some of these historic patterns is important and helpful.” According to Bevins, a great place to start is saying the Lord’s Prayer as a congregation, a template Jesus gave His disciples when they asked for direction on how to pray.

Kris McDaniel urges reminding people that at the end of the day, prayer is simply about our relationship with the heavenly Father. “Just last night I was speaking with my son, and we were talking about prayer,” he said. “It should be as simple and accessible as the most honest and heartfelt conversations we have with the people we love.”
FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT to Jesus’ ministry on earth and into the life of the church today, we see evidence of God’s provision. And responsibly using and sharing His gifts involves looking ahead, preparing the way for future generations of the faithful. We model this in our own life when we plan and save for college and retirement. We also see the principle at work in us when we try to anticipate unexpected expenses—for example, by paying for insurance policies. But at the same time, God wants us to focus on today: to love our neighbors, come alongside our communities, and answer His call to make disciples here and now.

Both of these perspectives can feel urgent—we want to make a way for future generations while also living in a manner that shows we’re preparing ourselves, anticipating the Lord’s return. What does it mean to love the people around us as Jesus loves, while leaving a legacy for those who haven’t yet been born or reborn?
TRY THIS

It’s easy to focus on the apostles as the ideal for how we should live out our faith. They were all leading churches, shepherding thousands of people. Yet among those thousands, we’d probably find people like us—believers who are called, not to lead or teach the multitudes but to live a faithful life. Try to imagine the experience of early Christians. What would it have looked like to cheerfully follow Jesus, using the gifts He had bestowed upon them for the good of their communities while preparing a way for today’s church? Does considering early Christians in this way change how you feel about believers’ roles and responsibilities?

KEY VERSES

“EACH ONE MUST GIVE AS HE HAS DECIDED IN HIS HEART, NOT RELUCTANTLY OR UNDER COMPULSION, FOR GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER.” —2 CORINTHIANS 9:7 (ESV)

“EVERY GOOD GIFT AND EVERY PERFECT GIFT IS FROM ABOVE, COMING DOWN FROM THE FATHER OF LIGHTS, WITH WHOM THERE IS NO VARIATION OR SHADOW DUE TO CHANGE.” —JAMES 1:17 (ESV)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ Think about your time, talents, abilities, and finances. What does it mean to be a “cheerful giver”?

→ What are some ways that you can creatively provide for future generations—in your family, your community, or your church?
As we go about our business, it’s easy to get sucked into the busyness that the world demands, and forget to be thoughtful, thankful, and gracious in our interactions with each other. Maybe this is why so many of the letters in the New Testament start with a prayer for grace, peace, and even mercy to come to the recipient. From these opening sentences, the writers remind us that God offers blessings of grace and peace to all who believe in Him.

We have an opportunity to reflect that in our own life by joining God in His work. As we use His gifts to make disciples, we are humbly inviting the world to experience His grace and peace for themselves.

This month, we focused on what it means to sustain the mission of the church and build the kingdom by offering our God-given gifts back to Him. We explored what it means to be good stewards of His many and varied gifts, supporting the work and life of the church while living in anticipation of Jesus’ return.

Thankfully, we have our whole life to contemplate how God is calling us to demonstrate grace and peace by using the unique skills, abilities, and resources He has given us. Next month, we’ll shift our focus and discuss what offering ourselves to God requires—from corporate worship to our daily routines.
AS LONG AS YOU BELONG TO THE FATHER, THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL BE THERE, living in you, SIGNIFYING HIS OWNERSHIP. WHEN HE MOVED IN, HE MOVED IN TO STAY. He’s not going anywhere.

—The Spirit-Filled Life, Charles F. Stanley
HOW DO WE OFFER OURSELVES TO GOD?
She has this. You do that. He said something to me.

In today’s culture, many of us think in these terms—focusing less on our communities and emphasizing the individual. We can become disconnected from one another as we focus on our immediate needs and pleasures—including our need to be right. But Christians have a different journey in the family of God. We get to join together in the daily work of reorienting our life around our Savior.

Being in community like this might even feel countercultural, but doing so is an important part of our witness in the world. And it’s what Paul meant when he encouraged us to come together in “one spirit, with one mind striving side by side” (Phil 1:27 ESV)—in worship, service, and sacrifice.

As the body of Christ, we have the opportunity to take whatever things we receive from God and immediately offer them back to Him in thanks. Whether it’s our work, our relationships, our possessions, or ourselves, the challenge is to present our life to Him with an open heart and open hands.

What does it mean to offer not just ourselves but our communities to the Lord? Think about what it looks like to worship and sacrifice side by side. How do we relinquish our own desires and invite God to do what He wants with us—making us into something that reflects His creativity and will?

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**Monthly Prayer**

Heavenly Father,
I am so thankful for the precious and merciful gift of Christ’s sacrifice. Lord, I pray the renewing work You are doing within me would show on the outside and demonstrate that You are my greatest treasure. And if You are calling me to offer something to You that I am holding back, I ask Your Holy Spirit to reveal that and draw me closer to You. Help me to follow Jesus’ example and offer myself as a living sacrifice in everything I do. Amen.

USE THIS PRAYER, OR LET IT INSPIRE ONE IN YOUR OWN WORDS, AS YOU MOVE THROUGH THE WEEKLY REFLECTIONS IN THE FOLLOWING SECTION.
HAVE YOU EVER SACRIFICED something valuable for another person? It’s easy to think of extravagant examples, but sometimes sacrifice starts with small gestures, like giving a family member that last piece of dessert or agreeing to switch seats with a stranger on an airplane. For most of us, it involves putting off doing something for ourselves or accepting an inconvenience for the good of another person.

In the Old Testament, we see this principle at work: God’s people offered things that were important to them as a sign of their dedication and commitment to Him. Sacrifices took many forms, but they all involved letting go of earthly comforts and possessions. In fact, the word sacrifice comes from a Latin term that means “to offer something” or “surrender something for another.” And the same word in Hebrew means “to bring something near”—in this case, to an altar or to the Lord. Today we still have opportunities to bring our life to God, daily drawing closer to Him.
TRY THIS

Christians don’t make offerings at the temple as the people of the Old Testament did, but we must still try to draw closer to God. Is there anything the Lord is calling you to change or give up, perhaps for the good of another person?

KEY VERSES

“HE IS THE ATONING SACRIFICE FOR OUR SINS, AND NOT ONLY FOR OURS BUT ALSO FOR THE SINS OF THE WHOLE WORLD. WE KNOW THAT WE HAVE COME TO KNOW HIM IF WE KEEP HIS COMMANDS.” —1 JOHN 2:2-3 (NIV)

“But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.” —PSALM 73:28 (ESV)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ It’s common to have habits or practices that ground us in our faith—even if such routines are not formal rituals. What are some of the habits in your life that help you feel closer to God?

→ Are there any new ways that you could draw closer to Him?
When you think of offering yourself to God “as a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1 ESV), what comes to mind? Is it serving people in need within your community or tithing generously? Or does the idea feel more complicated than that? In the midst of work, family, or other responsibilities, it might seem as if you are giving up so much already.

This command can be confusing because biblical sacrifices were animals whose lives were offered. As D. L. Moody once said, “The problem with a living sacrifice is that it keeps crawling off the altar.” But perhaps that’s exactly the point Paul is making. He doesn’t mean literal human sacrifice. Instead, he’s encouraging a pattern of continuous, daily surrender to God.

What does it mean to offer yourself to God as a living sacrifice in a typical day, week, or month? In seasons of joy and praise as well as seasons of sorrow and suffering? In everything you do?
TRY THIS

In her writing on loneliness, Elisabeth Elliot suggests offering ourselves to Christ in four ways—giving Him all we are, all we do, all we have, and all we suffer. Almost every part of our life can be connected to one of those categories.

Using the worksheet on the Whole Church website or a piece of paper, make two columns, each with four rows. In the first column, write down these words: am, do, have, suffer. In the second, write down what comes to mind for each term (I am feeling nervous about a meeting; I do drive the kids to soccer; I have new books; I suffer waiting for test results). This week, offer the items on your list to God, inviting Him into each situation with prayer and praise.

KEY VERSES

“OR DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT YOUR BODY IS A TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT WHO IS IN YOU, WHOM YOU HAVE FROM GOD, AND THAT YOU ARE NOT YOUR OWN?”
—1 CORINTHIANS 6:19

“I APPEAL TO YOU THEREFORE, BROTHERS, BY THE MERCIES OF GOD, TO PRESENT YOUR BODIES AS A LIVING SACRIFICE, HOLY AND ACCEPTABLE TO GOD, WHICH IS YOUR SPIRITUAL WORSHIP.” —ROMANS 12:1 (ESV)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ How do you feel when you read Paul’s words above, which say that “you are not your own”? 

→ Try to describe what it means to be a living sacrifice. How would you explain this command to someone who struggles with the idea?
How can we, as modern-day Christians, offer ourselves in worship to God? You probably think of things like attending weekly services, studying the Bible, participating in the Lord’s Supper, and baptizing believers. But in what other ways can we give ourselves wholly to God?

Just as we gather in our local congregations to worship, pray, and support the church, we are called to come together and serve in our own neighborhoods. This might mean being more hospitable, caring for the vulnerable in our community, or advocating for the voiceless. Whatever form our involvement takes, even ordinary actions and interactions can be an offering to God.

What should you do in those moments when you feel called to sacrifice but have trouble facing that prospect? You might find comfort in reciting (or memorizing) a verse about God’s mercy. You can also write a brief prayer on a note card and keep it with you, just in case you start to feel overburdened. Having the words already written can take the pressure off knowing what to say. It’s always a good idea to have a few tools to help guide your thoughts back to the Lord.
TRY THIS

As you consider what sacrifice looks like in your life, make time to discuss it with your family or small group. Consider making a list of spiritual tools to help you handle any negative thoughts and emotions that may come. You might consider fasting together, creating additional time to pray and worship collectively, supporting an organization in the community with your money or time, or participating in a specific initiative at your church, such as a mission or outreach ministry.

KEY VERSES

“LET US BE GRATEFUL FOR RECEIVING A KINGDOM THAT CANNOT BE SHAKEN, AND THUS LET US OFFER TO GOD ACCEPTABLE WORSHIP, WITH REVERENCE AND AWE.” —HEBREWS 12:28 (ESV)

“YOU ALSO, AS LIVING STONES, ARE BEING BUILT UP AS A SPIRITUAL HOUSE FOR A HOLY PRIESTHOOD, TO OFFER UP SPIRITUAL SACRIFICES ACCEPTABLE TO GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.” —1 PETER 2:5

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

→ How do we honor Jesus Christ with our life—especially in the way we carry ourselves and interact with others?

→ In addition to Sunday services, what are some ways that you can come together with other Christians to worship the Lord?
Imagine you’re standing in front of a beautiful rose bush. As you move closer to smell the flowers, you notice that some of the branches have been cut away—pruned to encourage growth. It’s just what any rose gardener wants: lots of healthy flowers. Now hold on to that mental image of blossoms spilling over. Our relationship with Jesus is a garden of sorts, and an abundance of roses is a good picture of what happens when we’re willing to prune (or sacrifice) to know and love Him better.

When we surrender something valuable for the sake of God’s glory, we might be tempted to focus on what’s being cut away from our life. But perhaps we should stop and think instead about what we gain.

When we follow the example of Christ—the One who surrendered everything for the glory of His Father—we are able to join God in fulfilling His plan for our life. We obediently serve and give of ourselves. And in return, we find freedom in a life filled with His love, mercy, and heavenly promise.
TRY THIS

Have you ever sacrificed something to reach a goal? Was it hard to let go of possessions, comforts, or even specific ways of thinking? Write down and reflect on two to three examples from your life. As you reflect, ask yourself if anything was gained from those sacrifices.

KEY VERSES

“ICH COUNT ALL THINGS TO BE LOSS IN VIEW OF THE SURPASSING VALUE OF KNOWING CHRIST JESUS MY LORD. FOR WHOM I HAVE SUFFERED THE LOSS OF ALL THINGS, AND COUNT THEM BUT RUBBISH SO THAT I MAY GAIN CHRIST, AND MAY BE FOUND IN HIM.” —PHILIPPIANS 3:8-9

“THROUGH HIM THEN, LET US CONTINUALLY OFFER UP A SACRIFICE OF PRAISE TO GOD, THAT IS, THE FRUIT OF LIPS THAT GIVE THANKS TO HIS NAME. AND DO NOT NEGLECT DOING GOOD AND SHARING, FOR WITH SUCH SACRIFICES GOD IS PLEASED.” —HEBREWS 13:15-16

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ What role does sacrifice and suffering play in the way you seek to know the Lord more deeply? What does it look like to focus on gaining Christ?

→ Consider the verse from Hebrews 13. What might it look like to “continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God”?
New beginnings trigger something in us. Whether in our immediate family or in our communities, welcoming a baby often sparks a feeling of excitement and hope, and it’s the same way with the Christian life. We’re beginners when we first come into our faith, and we celebrate new beginnings as people around us become Christians. Again and again, we’re reminded of our own need for renewal in Christ, and this requires us to undertake the difficult task of submitting ourselves to Him. If you have found that to be challenging, you’re not alone.

Offering ourselves to God is called a sacrifice because it costs us a lot. Giving Him our life is not always easy. Throughout the Bible, people present themselves to God: They offer up their bodies and the things they do—like seeing, hearing, speaking, moving, acting—and God accomplishes what they couldn’t have done on their own.

And just like these faithful individuals throughout history, you can invite the Lord to work through you. Maybe you don’t feel that you’re up to it or that you have much to offer. Or maybe you feel broken or see yourself as a failure. Still, there’s no telling what He’ll have you do for His glory, if only you’ll let Him.

This month, we looked at what it means to offer ourselves to the Lord, inviting Him to change our thoughts and actions. And once we’ve presented ourselves to Him, we may find it easier to go out into the world as His representatives and serve others. As we look ahead to next month, keep that in mind. We’re acting as Jesus’ body on earth because we love Him and He loves us.
If you want to cultivate the spiritual art of intimacy with the Lord, you need to align your will with His. Until that happens, worship will remain a mystery.

—Enter His Gates, Charles F. Stanley
THE WHOLE CHURCH: WHAT IS OUR FUTURE?
You’ve probably heard the church called Jesus’ bride—He is the husband, and we are the wife. It’s a beautiful metaphor but can be confusing for many of us. Human marriage gives us language to describe this relationship with God, but it’s not perfect—even the best earthly marriages fall short. And especially if you’re a woman who was or is in a difficult marriage, you might think the idea of being anyone else’s bride is crazy.

The Bible calls Jesus’ followers many things in addition to His bride: His body, members of God’s family, people for God’s possession, and temples of the Holy Spirit. These images help us see the church as more than just an organization. You might even say that in the ways we interact and serve, the church is a living organism.

Maybe that’s what Paul meant when he described the church as a “body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part” (Eph. 4:16). We’re all connected and rooted in the love, sacrifice, and promises of Christ.

Think about what it means to be His body and His bride—and what these images convey with regard to the future of Christ’s church? What does our relationship with Him look like as we live in anticipation of His return?

Remember, these are just metaphors to help us understand the great mystery of life with God. Our relationship with our heavenly Father is like no other we’ll experience on earth. And the Lord invites us to join in His mission—He is working in and through each one of us and our church families to establish His kingdom.

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**Monthly Prayer**

*Heavenly Father,*

Thank You for the love and sacrifice You have poured out for Your church. Teach me how to focus on Your glory in the present moment and stay faithful to You, that I might play my part and help the whole church find renewal in You. Fill us with the joy of the Holy Spirit as we anticipate an eternal and perfect union with Jesus Christ. Holy Spirit, help us grow in our understanding of Jesus as the Bridegroom so that we might be filled with all the fullness of God. Grant us a measure of Your hope and peace, no matter how uncertain the future may seem. Bless those who gather together in Your name—both in the local church and around the world. Amen.
Throughout life, we frequently find ourselves asking God to make good things happen, often because we love the people we are praying for. Parents intercede on behalf of children who drive off with a new driver’s license in hand. We pray that God would provide relief to friends or relatives struggling with their health. We might pray that our colleagues at work will have favorable conversations with their leaders.

In fact, Jesus also made specific prayer requests for His loved ones (see John 17). The night He was betrayed, His mind was on His followers, and He asked His Father to provide for and protect all believers. Knowing He wouldn’t be there in person with Christians, Jesus asked God to keep them safe, to unite and sanctify His disciples, and to give them the full measure of His own joy. What do His prayers tell you about Jesus’ desire for the church?
TRY THIS

How do we live out the answer to Christ’s prayers? This week, make time with your Bible study, community group, family, or friends to discuss what Jesus prayed for us. Talk about things like unity and sanctification, and consider what they mean in the context of our families, neighborhoods, and local congregations. Pray together that God’s people—at home and around the world—would be brought together and made holy.

KEY VERSE

“Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one ... Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth ... Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.”
—John 17:11, 17, 24 (NIV)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

➔ In the Gospels, we read about the prayer life of Jesus from time to time, but it’s rare that we see what He prayed for. What does His prayer in John 17 tell you about His priorities?

➔ In verse 11, Jesus prays for unity. Why is unity among believers important to the fulfillment of His mission on earth?
When we go through difficult seasons of life, it’s easy to feel confused or even to doubt our purpose. But the words of people who know and love us can serve as reminders of who we are. We trust their love because they stick with us, including times when doing so is costly or difficult. And they often see us more clearly than we see ourselves.

In our relationship with Jesus, we are known and seen even more clearly. The Lord is steadfast and constant in His love for us—a love that cost Him everything. That’s why He calls us His own (John 10:3), His sheep (vv. 15, 27), and His friends (15:13-14). He loves His followers in a radical, unique, and intimate way. It’s no accident that Paul compares Jesus’ love for the church to the love between a husband and wife. And His love for us is never-ending.
TRY THIS

Can you think of anyone who has stuck with you through a difficult time? Maybe it’s a close friend, a spouse, a parent, or other relative. If you’ve experienced this, how did it feel to know that person loved you and remained by your side, no matter what? If you’ve never had this sort of experience, what would it mean to have someone like that in your life?

This week, ask the Lord to show how you can demonstrate Christlike love to those you care about. Write down three or four ideas you can put into practice.

KEY VERSES

“JUST AS THE FATHER HAS LOVED ME, I HAVE ALSO LOVED YOU; ABIDE IN MY LOVE.” —JOHN 15:9

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father ... so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.”

—EPHESIANS 3:14, 17–19

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ In the above text, Paul prays for the church in Ephesus to experience and understand God’s love. What does it mean to be rooted and grounded in such deep affection?

→ Are there things in your life that keep you from fully embracing His love?
When someone says the word “home,” we might picture a building, a specific piece of land, or a country—a location we equate with our roots, or perhaps even a place of refuge. But have you ever lived somewhere that didn’t feel like home, a place that never quite clicked?

That might actually be a familiar feeling to followers of Jesus, since we are called to a different kind of citizenship. We’re not home yet, but we do know where we’re headed because of His sacrifice on the cross. And while we’re in our earthly homes, we have the opportunity to invite the people around us to look toward the place He has prepared for His children.

We’re all called to take action—by reflecting the relationship between Jesus and the whole church in our own communities and congregations. And whether we do that by loving our neighbors, studying God’s Word with fellow believers, opening our homes to those in need, or giving of our resources, through it all, we must eagerly pray for life on earth to be as it is in heaven, just as Jesus taught us to do.
TRY THIS

From time to time, we may have to fill out paperwork that asks for our country of citizenship. The majority of us write down our information without a second thought. But what if our first inclination was to focus on the eternal instead of our earthly connections? Take time this week to think about it what it means to be a citizen of heaven while being a resident of earth. List three or four things that make up your heavenly citizenship. For example, you might write that your home is heaven, God has made a place for you, and Jesus considers you a beloved friend.

KEY VERSES

“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.” —Philippians 3:20-21

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household.” —Ephesians 2:19

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

⇒ What are some practical ways that a Christian’s daily behaviors or character can reflect our heavenly citizenship and culture?

⇒ Do you think of heavenly citizenship as something promised in the future? Or do you think of it as a reality today?
No matter how you feel about yourself, embrace the truth:
God loves you, longs to shower His goodness upon you, call you His own.

Every Day in His Presence
Charles F. Stanley
God Himself is with you today. He is with you tomorrow. He is with you next year. He is with you when you die. He is with you FOREVER because with you is where He longs to be.

—A Touch of His Presence, Charles F. Stanley
Imagine you are taking a walk in the woods one day and run across something you’ve never seen before—a precious stone that’s worth millions. What would you do? Most of us wouldn’t go home and watch TV. No, we’d do whatever it took to acquire the gem we discovered. In one of His parables, Jesus tells us a story of a man who found himself in a similar situation. And when the man realized what a treasure he’d found in a field, he sold everything he had in order to buy that field. Even minutes before his discovery, the thought of selling everything he owned would have been completely ridiculous. But he found something worth the cost.

Is there anything in your life that’s worth everything—worth parting with gifts you’ve been given, your furniture, your car, or even your home? This is how Jesus wants it to be for us when we love Him. He wants us to recognize that it’s infinitely precious to know Him and be known by Him.
TRY THIS

Can you picture being the neighbor of the man in this parable? You might think he’s lost his mind as he sells everything he has. You might ask him questions or warn him how dangerous it is to take such a risk. This week, imagine a conversation you might have with him. What would he tell you about the joy and benefits of his decision? Would he have fears?

KEY VERSES

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.” —Matthew 13:44-46

“For if you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures, then you will discern the fear of the Lord and discover the knowledge of God.” —Proverbs 2:3-5

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ Read the parables in Matthew 13:44-46 aloud. Have you ever thought of Christ as your treasure?

→ The passage above from Proverbs is talking about how we pursue the knowledge of God. How would you describe your own experience of knowing and seeking God?
Do you ever find yourself longing for spring in the winter, or for fall in the heat of summer? Maybe you know how it feels to crave sunshine on your face, the breeze through lush gardens, the fragrance of beautiful blossoms, and long daylight hours to be outside enjoying it all. Maybe you even daydream about taking an extended vacation. What would it be like if winter came and never left?

The season certainly has its own unique joys, but imagine a world with barren trees, gray skies, and no flowers—where everything is desolate, cold, and bleak.

In the final book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C. S. Lewis tells the story of Jewel, a unicorn dedicated to his king and his homeland. After the final battle is fought, Aslan invites Jewel and other faithful Narnians to his country. Jewel is elated, crying out, “I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this.”

The way the world wakes up after a cold and dreary winter is a small picture of what God is promising us when all of creation is restored. He reminds us every spring that He makes all things new. Creation will be restored, which means we will be restored, too.

This month, we meditated on the future of the church, from our role as Christ’s bride and what He desires for the church, to how we might live our life now, looking ahead to His return. Picture yourself once more longing for the seasons to change. May we all have that same sort of longing for His renewed creation!
THE LORD WANTS US TO GROW IN EVERY AREA OF OUR LIVES—SPIRITUALLY, EMOTIONALLY, IN FRIENDSHIP AND FAMILY TIES, AND IN MATERIAL SUSTENANCE—ALWAYS IN BALANCE, AND ALWAYS GROWING.

—Understanding Financial Stewardship, Charles F. Stanley
If we’re honest, most of life revolves around clocks, planners, and schedules. And because of that, we are often impatient. We think, If only this could happen now, or I wish that had taken place sooner. Sometimes, depending on what we’re doing, time may seem to pass differently from the way we expect—or hope. For example, a workday might drag on while the vacation we longed and planned for is over before we know it.

We spend a lot of time worrying about what-ifs and if-onlys, lost in a sea of unanswered questions. But when it comes to eternity, we can be certain of where we’re headed—a future in God’s presence, promised by Jesus Himself. A future with no more suffering and every hope fulfilled.

Yet it’s essential that we remember one thing: God’s kingdom isn’t just something we will inhabit someday. It’s already here, right now, at hand. Everything we are and everything we do in our life has the potential to help us achieve our true purpose for being here—to grow closer to Jesus Christ and bring Him glory. The thing is, it’s impossible to do that alone.

By now, you’ve learned from this guide that the Lord had a vision for how His followers would live, and that vision has never changed. From the very beginning, He designed your life to be lived in the church. He has planned for you to take a seat at the table of God’s family and use every gift He has given you for the benefit and blessing of all. We pray that you would always remember your place in the whole church and the important work that must be done there. The people in your community need you.

As you look ahead to the new year, ask God to continue to reveal your unique place in the story of His people. He loves you more than you know—and He really does have great plans for you and those worshipping beside you. He truly is making all things new.
When Christ returns for His Church, sorrow & sadness will not exist; the gloriously happy God will reign forever with His holy joy.

—A Touch of His Joy, Charles F. Stanley