

FAITH MADE REAL

GROUP LEADER'S GUIDE

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CONTENTS

About This Study	4
Week 1. The Truth of Godly Influence	5
Week 2. The Truth of God's Comfort	7
Week 3. The Truth of God's Grace	10
Week 4. The Truth of God's Presence	13
Week 5. The Truth of God's Providence	16
Week 6. The Truth of God's Provision	19
Week 7. The Truth of God's Purpose	22
Week 8. The Truth of Obedience to God	24



ABOUT THIS STUDY

Do you know someone whose faith is strong? If you were to interview that person, you would find that his or her faith did not develop suddenly without testing. Genuine faith matures through adversity, sometimes interrupted by doubting and questioning God. The apostle Peter explained that “all kinds of trials” act like fire that refines gold. They prove the genuineness of our faith so our faith may “result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pet. 1:6–7).

In the eight sessions of this *Faith Made Real* guide, you and your group will benefit from conversations with men and women whose faith was tested and came through the testing stronger and more clearly focused on the Lord and his will. Expect each session to draw you to the storytellers as personal friends with whom you can identify.

Allow free-flowing discussion in every session, and be sensitive to stories of testing, doubting, and victory that emerge from the discussion.



WEEK 1

THE TRUTH OF GODLY INFLUENCE

READ

Acts 9:1–31; 13:1–12; 15:1–35; 16:1–5

REMEMBER

“And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2).

REFLECT

We live in a culture captivated by fame. Almost weekly, it seems, the media deems another Hollywood star a celebrity, making it nearly impossible to remember who was en vogue last year or predict who will soon stand in the limelight. So many people associate fame with authority and impact. The movie star’s wardrobe choices influence our clothing selections. A professional sports star’s endorsement prompts us to pick up a new snack food. But do these individuals truly influence us? Do their actions and words deeply change our souls and shape our characters and legacies?

In the book of Acts, the apostle Paul offered us an interesting example of the contrast between celebrity and influence. Upon his conversion, Saul (renamed Paul in Acts 13) began preaching the gospel and proclaiming his faith in Christ to Jews and later to Gentiles. He was not the person anyone expected to deliver such a message because he was formerly a persecutor of Christians.

After being guided and mentored by Barnabas and led by the Holy Spirit, Paul’s ministry—sharing the good news from city to city—flourished. His message was so clear and convincing, and the favor given to him by God so evident, that some of the communities he visited sent people to accompany him on his travels. By living alongside these men and women, including them as ministry colleagues, Paul himself became a great spiritual influencer. His legacy was not rooted

in public popularity or the spectacular demonstration of his message; it was apparent in his commitment to his calling and the impact and investment he made in individual lives: Timothy, Silas, Titus, Silvanus, Sosthenes, Aquila, Priscilla, Onesimus, and Phoebe, to name a few.

It's easy to confuse celebrity and fame with influence. But spiritual influence is not making a glitzy impression on someone; it's being a channel of internal change, effected by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul's values and virtues were transferred to those who served alongside him. As they left his tutelage, those he mentored and influenced surely considered what Paul would do and how he would lead in their particular situations.

In the stories of Part 1 of *Faith Made Real*, note particularly the way God used one person to influence the life of another. Sometimes the relationships are intergenerational, reaching to a younger person, providing courage and strength in a time of need. Who knows how many generations will benefit from a word fitly spoken at just the right time.

RESPOND

After reading these testimonies, consider the words of Psalm 78:1–8 and respond to these questions:

1. Think of and name several people who have positively influenced you.
2. Did you seek out a specific person (or people)? What drew you toward them? What was the most surprising element of that relationship?
3. In a few sentences, relate the person's most significant actions or comments, thinking in terms of their influence on you.
4. What caution would you give to those who are young in the faith about their spiritual heroes?
5. Think of and name several people whom you are influencing. How are you intentionally investing in the welfare of a younger generation?
6. One of the themes present in these chapters is moments when God demonstrated his faithfulness. Can you identify any of those moments in your life? What in your life do you "recall to mind" and "therefore . . . have hope" (Lam. 3:21)?
7. How do we open ourselves up to the influence of others? How can we allow their stories to influence us?



WEEK 2

THE TRUTH OF GOD'S COMFORT

READ

John 11:1–44

REMEMBER

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled” (John 11:33).

REFLECT

Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church starts with an incredible description of God: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (2 Cor. 1:3–4).

Read it again: “the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles”—it’s a striking line made even more powerful when seen through the lens of John’s account of Jesus’ personal reaction to the death of his friend Lazarus.

When Jesus arrived in Judea, four days after Lazarus’s death, he found Mary and Martha deep in the throes of grief over the loss of their brother. Martha, likely overcome with emotion, immediately asked Jesus why he hadn’t shown up earlier and prevented her brother’s death. And yet she quickly stated her belief in Jesus’ ability, even four days after the burial, to relieve her grievous burden. “I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask” (John 11:21).

Martha wanted Jesus to provide instantaneous relief from her suffering. And yet Christ’s response to her situation illustrates one way that God works: at times he does not relieve us of our pain; rather, he comforts us in the midst of it.

In this gospel account, Jesus first offered comfort through his presence. He went to the women who were grieving and made himself available to them in their season of need (vv. 17–20). Second, Jesus comforted Martha by reminding her of the truth: that Lazarus would rise again because of who Jesus was (vv. 23–26). In the midst of sorrow and pain, truth can be lost in our overwhelming circumstances and emotions. Third, Jesus comforted the mourners by lamenting with them. Seeing the body of Lazarus, he wept alongside them, identifying with their grief (vv. 33–35).

Though translations have changed, the lyrical King James Version repeatedly calls the Holy Spirit “the Comforter.” Explaining that he will soon not physically be present with his followers, he assured them: “I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever” (14:16 KJV). And a stronger promise: “I will not leave you comfortless”—as orphans (v. 18 KJV).

In her classic *The God of All Comfort*, Hannah Whitall Smith challenges her readers:

“Comforter.” What a word of bliss, if we only could realize it. Let us repeat it over and over to ourselves, until its meaning sinks into the very depths of our being. And an “abiding” Comforter, too, not one who comes and goes, and is never on hand when most needed, but one who is always present, and always ready to give us “joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.”¹

While we are not guaranteed a journey free from suffering and grief, we are promised God’s comfort in the midst of our walk with him. This comfort is often provided through others, as they are willing to be present with us, as they remind us of truth and sympathize with us in our difficult days. In the stories of Part 2, you read of people who have walked through—and continue to walk through—the valley of the shadow of death, all the while, being recipients of God’s comfort in the midst of their difficulties and loss. Their stories help us claim the reality of the presence of the “God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 1:3). Here and now. In our midst. “Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God . . . comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work” (2 Thess. 2:17 KJV).

RESPOND

After reading these testimonies, consider the words of Psalm 23 and respond to these questions:

1. Describe a time when you desired relief from a difficult situation but were met with God's comfort as you awaited.
2. If God's comfort does not come in the form of relief from suffering, how will you recognize it?
3. "Sometimes no explanation is sufficient to account for suffering. The only decent thing is silence—and the sacraments."² Does this ring true to your experience with suffering? How do the sacraments fit into this picture of God's comfort?
4. What difference does it make that God is present in your sufferings? Why is this a comfort?
5. How can you be used as an agent of God's comfort to those around you in similar seasons?
6. What promise from Scripture do you quote for yourself or plan to memorize so you can quote it, when you are in need of comfort from significant loss?
7. Jeremiah 31:15 states: "This is what the LORD says: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'" Are there times when comfort simply can't be received and, if so, is that all right?
8. How can we know—or can we—when we need to push back with another's refusal to be comforted?

NOTES

1. Hannah Whitall Smith, *The God of All Comfort* (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2006), p. 37.
2. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (Boston: The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, 1955), p. 96.



WEEK 3

THE TRUTH OF GOD'S GRACE

READ

Genesis 37–50

REMEMBER

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done” (Gen. 50:20).

REFLECT

In 2006, America was shocked to hear of a tragic school shooting, this time in rural Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. As the details of this horror unfolded throughout the course of that fateful morning, the story became even more bizarre and incomprehensible as press reports identified the site: Nickel Mines, a one-room Amish schoolhouse. In a matter of minutes, multiple children were killed or critically injured by the shooter. An otherwise quiet and peaceful community was violated in an unprecedented manner.

While the world awaited this community's reaction to its suffering, few people, if any, could have anticipated its response. When anger or retaliation might have seemed justifiable, the Amish community, recognizing Jesus himself as a “forgiving Savior” and themselves as recipients of such grace, extended compassion and forgiveness to the deceased shooter's family.¹ In doing so, this devastated community acknowledged the wide-reaching tentacles of grief that reached beyond their own school and community and demonstrated the grace of God, tangibly, in the midst of their own loss and suffering.

A similar display of God's grace is seen in the life and story of Joseph. Having been ridiculed, abused, and enslaved, Joseph could have defined his life by his circumstances and the offenses of

his enemies. After enduring the rejection of his brothers who sold him into slavery in Egypt, Joseph was unjustly accused of adultery by Potiphar's wife and subsequently imprisoned. We can see ample reason for him to feel defeated! Yet Joseph emerged from his prison cell to interpret the troubling dreams of the ruling pharaoh. Joseph didn't take credit for himself, but acknowledged that the interpretation was a gift of grace bestowed upon him by God, a gift that would ultimately change the trajectory of Joseph's life; he gained the trust of Pharaoh, who named him Egypt's number one administrator. He directed Egypt's agriculture program and negotiated with foreign visitors.

Joseph was someone who not only received the grace of God, but also extended God's grace even to his greatest offenders. As famine gripped his homeland of Canaan, Joseph's brothers (who believed Joseph to be dead), traveled to Egypt, hoping to purchase grain for their survival. Though Joseph recognized his brothers, he did not initially reveal his identity. He bypassed the perfect opportunity to punish his persecutors. Instead, Joseph emotionally revealed his identity to his brothers, appeasing their fear of him and his newfound power and authority over them. He said, "Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. . . . To preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance" (Gen. 45:5, 7).

Instead of retaliating or trying to even the score, Joseph extended grace to his brothers by welcoming them, providing them with food and a new homeland, and embracing the greater work that God could and would accomplish through his situation and circumstances: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (50:20).

The truth of God's grace is found when we recognize what has been given to us through Jesus Christ, our forgiver and healer, as well as in the sharing of that grace with others. In the testimonies of Part 3, you read of others' stories that exemplify the truth and reality of God's grace.

RESPOND

After reading these testimonies, consider the words of Psalm 145 and respond to these questions:

1. Where has God's grace been evident to you this week?
2. What does it look/feel like when you receive grace from another person, not just from God?
3. How does grace differ from forgiveness?
4. When God allows bad things to happen, things that damage us, does he then owe it to us to be present in our pain and heal us?

5. Is God's grace extended to us occasionally or is it perpetual and uninterrupted?
6. Are moments of grace, like those in these stories, examples of special dispensation or our being brought to "thin places," typically by pain, where we become capable of receiving grace in a new way?
7. Discuss how the sins of others might cause you to fear and how might you overcome that fear?
8. When people we love are in crisis and in need of grace, are there things that are true but unhealthy or inappropriate to say? If so, give examples.
9. If suffering is, as it appears to be, instrumental in our experience of grace, could it be that this grace is as present in crisis and tragedy as it is in the period of healing that follows?
10. How does God's grace operate when our dreams of a lovely family life just doesn't work out?
11. How can a person practically keep a "defining moment" in life from defining who they are?
12. What would the story of Joseph look like told from the point of view of one of his brothers?
13. In what places can you extend God's grace to others?
14. Find someone who is a generation younger than you and share a story of God's grace in your own life.

NOTE

1. For more information, see Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).



WEEK 4

THE TRUTH OF GOD'S PRESENCE

READ

Exodus 32–33

REMEMBER

“The LORD replied, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest’” (Ex. 33:14).

REFLECT

Many years ago, a father and his young son boarded the deck of a commuter ferry to travel from one Caribbean island to another. In the middle of the journey, a storm blew in, and within moments a violent squall assaulted the rickety, old boat. Monsoon-like rains, deafening thunder, and frequent flashes of lightning accompanied explosive gusts of wind and ever-growing waves that lashed the boat as its passengers hung on for dear life.

With the storm's first surge, the father covered the boy with a plastic tarp that had blown across the deck. The father grabbed and clung to the edge of the boat, all the while watching to make sure his son remained safe under the protective arch of his torso.

As the waves continued to buffet the ship, the boy peeked out from underneath the protective tarp. But he could see nothing but unrelenting sheets of gray water pouring onto the boat. Afraid and disoriented, he yelled into the darkness, “Daddy! Are you holding me?” For this child, the storm itself was not the greatest thing to be feared. Rather, he didn't want to face it alone.

In Exodus 32, we don't see Moses in the midst of a rainstorm, but he certainly faced a storm of a different kind. After leading Israel out of Egypt and into the desert, he had gone to a mountaintop to meet with God and receive instructions for their future. In his absence, the impatient and fearful

Hebrews had comforted themselves by fashioning an idol—a substitute of sorts for both God and Moses, whom they sensed had abandoned them.

Enraged by the Israelites' actions, God said he would no longer travel among his people for fear of destroying them. Hearing his declaration, Moses himself acknowledged and feared the severity of the storm. While he had originally felt inadequate to lead Israel to the Promised Land, Moses' deeper fear was realized when he imagined doing so without God's presence. Who would hold him in the storm if God were not there?

He pleaded with God, "How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Ex. 33:15–16). In his great mercy, God relented, saying, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest. . . . I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name" (vv. 14, 17). Moses' journey of leadership continued and God remained present among his people.

So often we can be surprised, frightened, or overwhelmed by the circumstances and situations of life—our own personal storms. While these experiences can be unexpected and even harrowing, it's interesting to note how they are changed when we recognize and acknowledge the presence of God.

We find rest in the truth of God's presence. He has promised to be with us, working in and among us, even when the storms are raging and we can't see or understand his activity in our midst.

In the testimonies given in Part 4, you read of others who have experienced the truth of God's presence. Whether through a gentle nudge or the sudden and decisive intervention of the Holy Spirit, these stories remind us that God is near and, most certainly, holding on to us.

RESPOND

After reading these testimonies, consider the words of Psalm 71 and respond to these questions:

1. Have there been times in the past week when you've been reminded of God's presence in your life?
2. How does the recognition of his nearness affect your perception of the storms or circumstances you face?
3. These stories highlight the presence of God in varied circumstances. What is the same about God's presence in each of these stories? What is always true of God's presence, whatever form it takes?

4. What is happening when we do not feel God's presence?
5. Sometimes God is with us in the midst of very difficult circumstances, even as we walk through tragedy. If he is not preventing us from going through the valley, what difference does his presence make?
6. As we think about God's presence in our lives, what role does faith play?
7. How does knowing Jesus make a difference in our thinking of God's presence?
8. How can we encourage others in their own struggles with not feeling God's presence? How does being connected with a group of believers help us in such times?
9. Why is feeling God's presence something we crave? Or fear?
10. Is sensing God's presence something that we should actively pursue?
11. What are the circumstances that seem to reveal God's presence in your life?
12. Tell about a time you felt God's presence in your life.
13. Has God's presence changed something from your "old self" that broke patterns in your family history?
14. Since God's presence sometimes transforms us in a *pivotal event* ("my resentments are gone"), but other times it is a *process* ("my growth continues; I'm walking in freedom"), describe this difference in your life.
15. How has God's presence healed tender relationships in your family?



WEEK 5

THE TRUTH OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE

READ

Exodus 13:17—14:31

REMEMBER

“Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today” (Ex. 14:13).

REFLECT

When you read the Bible, there are two things you know for sure. One is that God does everything without us. And the other is that God does nothing without us. Does that sound like a contradiction?

It's as if there are two worlds, side by side, in which opposite realities rule the day. In the one, God acts alone and in the other, he never acts alone. In the one, he thinks, he wills, he speaks, and he orders; he gives us what we do not deserve. In the other he waits, he watches, he calls, and responds; he gives us exactly what we deserve. And so in one way everything is nailed down. God has revealed and saved and proclaimed—he himself, and not some other—and when he acts no one can reverse it (see Isa. 43:12–13). But in the other, everything is up in the air. It is “maybe,” and “not yet.” It is still happening and has yet to be decided, so we must choose, or act, or hope, or persevere.

It is hard to put these together, but if you think of them as two legs, one being providence and the other being faith, you will start to get the hang of it. By providence, I mean God's activity in this world through which he works all things together for our good. And by faith, I mean our daily surrender to that activity. These two realities do not compete with each other; they complement each other. They rely on each other. Each expects the other to be there, just in time. Providence

creates the future that faith walks into, and faith seizes upon a promise that providence has made. Without faith, providence cannot find an accomplice; and without providence, faith has nothing to believe.

When children are too young to walk, they crawl on the floor and stretch out their arms to their caregivers, as if to say, “Pick me up, pick me up.” When they are toddling on their own, they don’t want to be carried anymore. They wiggle themselves free and cry, “Put me down, put me down.” They are not too proud to be carried; they simply do what they were made to do now that they have grown up.

When we think of ourselves as growing up, perhaps we should think of it, not as being carried along by God, but as walking on the legs of providence and faith, because that is what grown ups do. When we’re young and immature we would rather be carried. But in order that we may grow up, God calls us into predicaments that require providence and faith to work together.

The story of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt is one of those predicaments. In that time, it seemed there were miracles every other day. God was active and the people did very little. “The LORD will fight for you,” Moses told them, “you need only be still” (Ex. 14:14). It was as if God was doing everything alone. It was all providence. But a closer look reveals another leg, just as busy as God’s providence, and it was the leg of faith: “When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. . . . God led them around by the desert toward the Red Sea” (13:17–18). When speaking of this strange passage, some say that God led them down the crooked road instead of the straight road. It was a parable for life.

Have you ever been with God in the desert on the crooked road? Has God promised you something then promptly made you wait? Have you doubted things you were sure of? Have you ever wondered if you’ve done something wrong, or perhaps been disqualified?

Maybe you’re not disqualified at all. Maybe it’s only providence waiting for faith to catch up. Maybe God is using the crooked road to save you because it is here, on the crooked road, that God teaches us to walk. This is where he puts us down. This is where we learn to have “confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Heb. 11:1). Providence will lead us down a road less traveled and faith will learn to see God in the manna for that day. Providence will speak of things that are not, and faith will see them and believe. Wherever we go, providence knows we are coming and gets there first. Then faith shows up knowing that God will provide.

“The way of trust is a movement into obscurity,” wrote Brennan Manning. “The next step discloses itself only out of a discernment of God acting in the desert of the present moment.”¹

In the stories that fill Part 5, you meet people who met God in that desert. Each person knew

him, and so they knew he would provide. But somewhere between the promise and the day when it all came true, God put them down on the crooked road and made them walk. Now most of them are running.

RESPOND

After reading these testimonies, consider the words of Psalm 37 and respond to these questions:

1. Where are you at on the journey of the “crooked road?”
2. Are you in a season where it seems God is doing everything, or one in which God seems silent? How can you walk the road of whatever season you are in with integrity and obedience?
3. Many of these stories identify moments when God showed up, sometimes powerfully and sometimes in the mundane. How do you identify those moments when God is active in your life?
4. What is it about the desert, the waiting, and the crooked path that makes them necessary parts of our faith?
5. One person described the difficult times in life as “bitter providence” and the good times as “sweet providence.” Does this help you in thinking about your life experiences? What similarities do the two categories have, if any?
6. The movie *Shadowlands* recounts the story of C. S. Lewis’ journey with his wife, Joy, during her cancer, remission, and subsequent death. At one point in the story, Joy tells him that “the pain now is part of the happiness then.”² What do you think that means? Would each of these stories agree?
7. Did you ever get a question from an unbeliever that, in attempting to answer it, your own faith was clarified or built up? What was that question and how did you answer it?
8. Describe an experience where you had an opportunity to glorify God in a secular environment.
9. Do you remember a time when you were a child, you observed your parents experiencing the power of God in their lives? If so, share how that influenced your faith journey.

NOTES

1. Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust: The Ragamuffin’s Path to God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 12.
2. Richard Attenborough and Brian Eastman, *Shadowlands* (Price Entertainment, 1993).



WEEK 6

THE TRUTH OF GOD'S PROVISION

READ

Exodus 16:1–35

REMEMBER

”And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

REFLECT

Once out of Egypt, Israel became fond of her slavery again: “The Israelites said to them [Moses and Aaron], ‘If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death’” (Ex. 16:3).

Does it seem strange that people, once liberated, should prefer their slavery to freedom? Of course not! For all its trouble, slavery is a kind of womb for those who have learned to live there. It’s a hard life, for sure, but once you learn how to handle yourself you can get along quite well. As long as you work, you can eat, and the more you work, the more you get. The more you get, the more important you are. Sure, there are brickyards with quotas and almost no days off, but at least you know where you stand. You know how to earn, save, and leverage your work to get even more pots of meat.

But freedom? Who can handle that? Those who are free get up every morning and gather only what they need for that day. They can’t earn it, or save it, or leverage their work to get more. In fact, there’s no way to know who’s most important because “the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much

as they needed” (v. 18). If this seems like an easier life in the morning, consider how hard it is each night when the daily provisions are gone, when the cupboards are empty, and there is nothing yet on the ground. What if there is no manna tomorrow? What if God doesn’t provide?

Slavery is a hard life but at least you know where you stand. The apostle Paul wrote, “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” (1 Cor. 4:7). Hard as it may seem, that is the way of freedom.

And between these two ways—“we got this ourselves” and “the Lord will provide”—is a wide chasm. One is the way of worry and the other is the way of trust. Like two competing objects, worry and trust cannot occupy the same soul at the same time. We cannot worry and trust at the same time. As soon as we start to worry, we have let go of trust. And in order to trust, we must let go of worry. One recedes as the other advances. In one way we take care of ourselves because we are all we have. But in the other way, we “know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning” (Ex. 16:8). When we “got this ourselves” we take control, we over-prepare, we manipulate our environment but we get respect, and worry is the price we pay. When the Lord provides, we absorb whatever happens and we wait in hope for God to deliver. One is the way of self-invention and self-sufficiency. The other is the way of surrender and faith.

In his thoughtful book, *Ruthless Trust*, Brennan Manning retells the story of the ethicist John Kavanaugh, who traveled to Calcutta where he hoped to find a clear answer as to how to spend the rest of his life.

On the first morning there he met Mother Teresa. She asked, “And what can I do for you?” Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him. “What do you want me to pray for?” she asked. He voiced the request that he had borne thousands of miles from the United States: “Pray that I have clarity.” She said firmly, “No, I will not do that . . . (because) clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.” When Kavanaugh commented that she always seemed to have the clarity he longed for, she laughed and said, “I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.”¹

The stories in Part 6 are stories of real people on their journey from clarity to trust. These are good souls who have been liberated from the bondage of worry and are somewhere on the journey toward trust. Along that journey, they encountered things that left them feeling like the Israelites in the desert; when their food was gone and there was nothing in the cupboards and nothing yet on the ground. But like Israel, they are learning how to live in this new economy of freedom. They are learning how to wait in hope for God to provide.

RESPOND

After reading these testimonies, consider the words of Psalm 81 and respond to these questions:

1. God provided manna to the Israelites each morning, day after day, years on end. How do we refrain from complaining when we long for more than “just enough”?
2. How can we learn “the secret of being content” (Phil. 4:12) in situations that are very painful? How do you think Paul came to that kind of contentment?
3. How has it been important for you to remember what God has done in Scripture or in these miraculous stories, so that they might become what God can do in your own life?
4. Several of the chapters include the element of relationships in the church that provided hope during bleak times. Is there something you are going through that you need to share with other believers, and be willing to listen to them?
5. Galatians 6:2 says, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Who needs unconditional love from you while they are waiting for grace?

NOTE

1. Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust: The Ragamuffin’s Path to God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 5.



WEEK 7

THE TRUTH OF GOD'S PURPOSE

READ

Esther 1–10

REMEMBER

“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” (Est. 4:14).

REFLECT

Josiah was a three-year-old who often hung out with his dad at the office. The spritely, towheaded toddler was charming as he wandered through the office, holding his dad’s hand and greeting everyone with a cheerful “good morning!” His father’s staff loved to see the boy and easily engaged him in conversation about anything from his favorite food to his latest preschool adventures. At the conclusion of almost every office interaction, the workers would ask, “Josiah, what do you want to be when you grow up?” They knew what he would answer. His parents had rooted it in his memory from early on, and the predictable response delighted the questioner every time. Breaking into a wide grin, Josiah would say, “A godly man.”

In teaching their son this answer to a question he would hear for much of his young life, Josiah’s parents set him up for true success. He might become a banker, a teacher, or a lawyer, but ultimately his true purpose in life would come from whatever it might be that God would equip and lead him to do.

We know very little about Esther prior to her appointment as queen. Aside from her notable beauty (see Est. 2:7), there is nothing that indicates Esther was qualified or skilled for such a role. Yet as her story as queen unfolds, we see that God called upon Esther’s character for the sake of accomplishing his divine

purposes. When instructed to remain quiet about her race, she was trustworthy and remained silent (v. 20). When Mordecai discovered the plot to kill King Xerxes, Esther selflessly reported the plan, rightly crediting Mordecai with the intelligence rather than taking the praise for herself (vv. 21–23). She showed great compassion when learning of Mordecai’s distress over Haman’s evil plan (4:4); unimaginable bravery by being willing to sacrifice her position and potentially her life to advocate for her people; shrewdness in developing a plan to foil Haman’s evil scheme; and bold and dedicated persistence in exposing Haman before the king and convincing him to reverse the edict against the Jews. God’s purposes were accomplished through Esther, not because of her formal training or education, but through her willingness to be used by God—to heed his calling even as she remained true to God’s character.

The following stories in Part 7 give insight into the lives of individuals who have been and are being used by God. These stories remind us that God does not seek our gifts and talents so much as he desires to use those whose hearts are attuned to his presence and purpose.

RESPOND

After reading these testimonies, consider the words of Psalm 18 and respond to these questions:

1. Think of one or two times when God has used the most unlikely or unqualified candidates to accomplish his great purposes.
2. Three stories in this chapter celebrate a specific date when the person’s life was completely redirected. How important is it to celebrate a specific date when God revealed a new purpose for your life?
3. Relate a time when you felt used by God and then saw a change in yourself during the process.
4. How has God used a specific group of people to help you overcome life’s struggles and find new joy or peace from God?
5. In these stories, individuals find their piece of God’s purposes—a part of a greater whole. Can you summarize the big picture of God’s purpose for the world? Can you identify how your individual purpose fits into the big picture?
6. A thread in several stories is the discovery of a call in the midst of a difficult circumstance. Why does suffering and calling often seem linked?
7. Another common thread is the way God pursues us, nudging us over time to take up his purposes. Why does God work so hard to include us in what he wants to accomplish?
8. The Scriptures have much to say about God’s purposes. What passage(s) have been helpful to you?



WEEK 8

THE TRUTH OF OBEDIENCE TO GOD

READ

Matthew 1:18–25

REMEMBER

“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife” (Matt. 1:24).

REFLECT

Two young mothers sat on a bench, watching their preschool aged children play at a public park. The first mother looked at her watch and called to her child, telling him it was time to leave. The child responded immediately by waving to the children he’d been playing with, then skipped over to his mother, offering to help her carry her bags to the car. About ten minutes later, the second mother called to her daughter, also saying it was time to leave. The child kicked the ground, then turned to her mother and whined, “Mom! Why? We just got here!” As the mother packed up her things, she called a second and third time, until the child shuffled to the park bench, clinching her teeth and uttering complaints every step of the way.

In our culture of independent individualism, it’s easy to overlook, undervalue, or misunderstand obedience. Some might define obedience as doing as we are told or following the rules. But if we’re simply doing as we are told or following the rules, an underlying question begs to be asked, what is the state of the heart? We can comply with laws or rules, following along and doing as we are told while begrudging the fact that we must do so.

However, in being obedient, the state of the heart becomes essential. True obedience is the response of people who not only do what they are asked to do, but also trust the person or authority

asking them to do it; even when they don't understand why that action or response is necessary, they believe the person asking them to do it has their best interest at heart.

In Matthew's account of the nativity narrative, Joseph demonstrated true obedience to God. Joseph was a common Jewish man, likely no older than nineteen or twenty and a carpenter by trade. His plan to marry his fiancé, Mary, was nearly detoured when he learned that Mary was pregnant before their union, leaving Joseph to assume Mary had been unfaithful to her betrothal vows and was no longer a suitable spousal candidate. Being a righteous man, who was familiar with the law and permissions it granted him in this particular situation, Joseph put aside his right to place Mary's fate in the hands of their community (likely resulting in her death) and decided to divorce her quietly. In doing so, perhaps he hoped to distance himself from Mary while still preserving her life. But Joseph's righteous plan wasn't God's plan, made evident when an angel appeared in a dream, telling Joseph not to divorce Mary. Instead, he was to marry her, claim the child (conceived by the Holy Spirit) as his own, and name him Jesus.

Joseph did all of these things. And while we don't know the exact spirit of his heart or the attitude with which he followed the angel's directions, we receive a glimpse of his posture in the way he carried out these actions. In that day in the Middle East, men represented their families in legal matters. Joseph could have gone by himself to Bethlehem to register for the census. He could have saved himself the burden of traveling with a pregnant wife. But, maybe being unsure of what might happen to Mary if he left her in Nazareth, he took her, his wife and unborn child, along with him on the journey, fully embracing his role as husband and father—being fully obedient to God's call.

Obedience to God is far more than complying with his law. It considers and relies upon the relationship we have with him and our understanding of his desire for us to be whole in him. In the following stories in Part 8, you read of individuals who moved beyond mere compliance with what they were being asked to do. As they wholly trusted God's heart, they were empowered to act in true obedience, and in so doing, they recognized God's great plan for them.

RESPOND

After reading these testimonies, consider the words of Psalm 73 and respond to these questions:

1. How can we posture our hearts toward God in such a way that moves us beyond mere compliance and into full obedience, trusting in his nearness and ultimate desire for our good?

2. God often asks for our obedience. Does he promise anything in return? What might those things be?
3. Many of these stories are about moments of more or less clear leading from God. How should we conduct ourselves in the absence of clear leading? What forms does obedience take in the time between God's clear speaking?
4. Which comes first: obedience or love?
5. How does knowing God loves us impact obedience?