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EQUIPPING MEMBERS OF A. UMUT KILISESI IN
CENTRAL ASIA, WITH AN INTRODUCTORY
FRAMEWORK FOR BIBLICAL CHANGE

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For my brothers and sisters in Central Asia. May this project be a means the Lord
uses to keep you trusting in Christ and pressing on to the end.

Jesus is worth it.

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PREFACE

The original inspiration to study biblical counseling more in-depth came from my pastor, counselor, mentor, professor, supervisor, and friend, Dr. Jeremy Pierre. I thank God for him. If one ever accuses me of offering wise counsel, Dr. Pierre's example and teaching would be the reason. Thanks, bro. I would also like to thank Dr. Robert Jones, for reading and interacting with this project, especially since I know he cares deeply about the spread of the gospel in Central Asia. His 31-Day Devotional on Anger is available in the local language and is usually the first one to get taken off the shelf! May the Lord continue to use him through his teaching and writing to bless many all over the world.

Our current ministry is in a country in Central Asia. We would not be there if not for the influence of Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and its elders. In particular, Dr. Shawn Wright has been a constant source of encouragement, support, and counsel to us. We count it a great privilege to claim Clifton as our home fellowship. The brothers and sisters we know in Central Asia have encouraged my heart to keep pressing on in faith. They lack many of the resources and benefits we take for granted, but their love for Christ mentors me daily. Persevere, my friends. Jesus is worth it. It is a joy to live life with you all. Lastly, to my wife and our three boys: You four are my greatest gifts from the Lord. J., the heart of your husband trusts in you. Boys, come magnify the Lord with me.

John Norton

Central Asia

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Everyone in Christ has experienced a fundamental change in identity (2 Cor 5:17). Furthermore, those in Christ continue changing as they experience his transforming work in their growing ability to respond differently in their world. Specifically, they learn to put off the responses that were characteristic of their old life and put on the responses that are characteristic of their new life in Christ (2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:1–17). This process of change happens as God’s Spirit uses his Word in the context of the believing community; in other words, they care for one another in the context of the local church (Gal 5:13–6:10). This care comes in the form of counsel—shared wisdom tailored to a person’s life. Furthermore, since every believer is able to counsel (Rom 15:14), and in fact already *does* counsel (whether it is recognized as such or not), for church leaders, the quality of the counsel given is of utmost importance. Not every Christian will share the same level of confidence in his own ability to change or to help others change. But every Christian is nevertheless called to exercise that ability. The difficult question then is not “*Do* Christians seek change and try to help others change?” But instead, the question is, according to God’s Word, “*How* should they change?” How do the Scriptures call them to change? How can they grow and mature in Christ? What beliefs, desires and commitments of the heart will cultivate the change they desire? How wise and biblical is their help to others?

Professional counselors can be helpful, even needed at times, but often the most effective help comes while drinking tea with a friend on a normal Saturday. The average believer who commits to love his brothers and sisters in Christ by pointing them to faith can have the strongest influence. Here is how that influence works: because he is

personally in Christ, he has changed and is continuing to change. Because he is a member of the body of Christ, he is helping others change as well. To carefully study Scripture with a particular focus on its application to biblical change will help believers better know how to change and help others change by faith in Christ. Furthermore, every believer ought to be equipped in this ministry, and elders bear the primary responsibility for this equipping (Eph 4:11–16). As an elder at A. Umut Kilisesi (AUK) in Central Asia, my goal was to equip the church members in this task. Therefore, this project sought to equip the members of AUK with a simple, yet holistic, introductory model of biblical change so that they better understand change, how people change, and how to help others change as they walk by faith in Christ together as a church.

Context

My city is the fifth largest city in the Central Asian country where I live, with about 2 million people, but only 70–80 believers spread out over three or four established churches. Small churches face challenges, but one benefit is the deep relationships that can be cultivated throughout the whole body. These deeper relationships provide the context to care for one other, especially among the local population, since they are a more stable presence in the city. AUK has about 25 local members, 15 foreigners, and an average of 50 total individuals in attendance on a given Sunday morning.

The local culture is relational in nature; friendships are started quickly, but deep bonds take more time to cultivate. Trust precedes great influence. Before someone will listen to advice, he or she will first need to know and trust the person. The culture is also oral, which helps explain why the communication style is more indirect and can lack clarity at times. Because of this indirect communication style, picking up on nuances or hints in conversations is indispensable to understanding someone and offering wise counsel.

Many within the church come from dysfunctional backgrounds: broken homes,

extreme poverty, lack of education, physical and/or sexual abuse, and the false religious system of Islam. These backgrounds greatly influence current issues believers encounter. Things once thought normal and acceptable (lying, anger, abuse, gossip, slander, etc.) are now acknowledged as contrary to God’s Word, but the process of change is hard—it can be a lonely, confusing, and discouraging one.

While these various struggles can be debilitating, the shame associated with them (especially abuse) can be worse. Local culture in this Central Asian country, like most in the Middle East, is an honor and shame culture, and therefore places great value on communal opinion and maintaining honor.¹ Individuals are pressured to keep issues hidden in order to maintain a respectable image in the community. Fear of others’ opinions or of being exposed can hinder many from turning to others for help.² Social pressures and fear of communal consequences can lead some to hide their faith and not commit fully to the church. But deep relationships have the potential to break down these barriers so that one can experience repentance, healing, and true gospel community.

Despite the experiential difficulties of following Christ in such cultures, many foreign missionaries do not focus on providing this care. Foreigners typically emphasize speed, results, evangelism, and short-term goals that leave limited time and resources for this soul care. Most mission organizations prioritize evangelism above everything else. Evangelism *is* needed and ought to be emphasized, but the result can leave new believers on their own in working through the struggles of life. In order to care for someone facing

¹ Kenneth Bailey provides the following testimony, which serves as an example of the Muslim mindset in an honor-shame culture: “There is nothing in this entire world that you need to protect more than your honor. Because you’re nothing without your honor. You’d be dirt, just dirt and nothing else. If someone tried to take my honor, then I’d do anything to get it back. Literally anything.” Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 11.

² While there are some strengths or benefits to honor-shame cultures, there is the negative “underside.” Bailey cites the following as examples: “fear of others’ opinions, rejection by family, gender inequality, gossip, nepotism and cronyism, hiding weaknesses, pressure to marry, focus on externalities, unquestioned obedience and public shaming.” Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 24.

these everyday struggles, one must develop a deep level of language and cultural acquisition (which most foreigners do not reach), patience (most foreigners emphasize speed), and contentment with faithfulness (most foreigners are attracted to numbers, events, and other things they can report). The typical counsel given by church leaders to believers with these sorts of struggles is to share their faith and read their Bibles. While this counsel is not necessarily wrong, it is not sufficient. Unfortunately, in this stream of thought, “discipleship” is composed of a few lessons to understand the gospel, learn one’s testimony, and address other foundational topics with a mere cursory mention of the Scriptures. Instead, extra care needs to be taken to help these believers mature and walk by faith in Christ amidst their struggles.

Most local believers lack theological depth. Unfortunately, the culture does not highly value reading, research, or critical thinking, resulting in unstable believers deficient in deep spiritual roots and solid foundations in the Scriptures. Furthermore, given their family and/or work situations, many believers lack spare time to devote to study. Because the economy is not strong, many work long hours for little pay. Theological resources are both sparse and unhealthy. Few Turks write theological resources, and some of the more popular translated material is not helpful (e.g., Joyce Meyer).

Rationale

The local Central Asian church is small, theologically weak, and spiritually immature in many ways. Local believers struggle in unique ways due to their particular cultural, religious, and familial backgrounds, and the few believers at AUK are no exception. They are both needy and needed³—in need of others to come alongside them to help them work through their issues by faith in Christ and needed to do the same in the

³ Edward T. Welch, *Side by Side: Walking with Others in Wisdom and Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 11.

lives of others. If they are equipped for the task, local believers will be better suited to offer biblical counsel than a foreigner because they tend to be in longer-lasting and deeper relationships with other locals and understand the language and culture from within. Foreigners generally stay only a few years and lack depth in their understanding of language and culture. Gospel ministry requires sharing the message of who Jesus is; but it also requires sharing one's life with others (1 Thess 2:8). That is why local brothers and sisters have the capacity to go deeper, and thus be more effective, than foreigners.

The church in my Central Asian context is young and thus has many needs. One evident need is for resources and training in the area of biblical counseling. According to the Biblical Counseling Coalition (BCC), biblical counseling is “whenever and wherever God’s people engage in conversations that are anchored in Scripture, centered on Christ and the Gospel, grounded in sound theology, dependent upon the Holy Spirit and prayer, directed toward sanctification, rooted in the life of the church, founded in love, attentive to heart issues, comprehensive in understanding, thorough in care, practical and relevant, and oriented toward outreach.”⁴ Simply, it is a tool for helping bring change in the life of believers with all kinds of problems in all kinds of contexts. To my knowledge, no material exists in the local language to give a model, or method, for biblical counseling.⁵ Nothing exists to help believers understand not only *what* they do, but *why* they do it, that will then lead them in the process of biblical change. Instead of being told to change their behavior, they need material that will help them examine their hearts in light of the gospel and get to the root of problems so that true gospel change can happen (Luke 6:43–45). They need to know that change begins and continues as they

⁴ Biblical Counseling Coalition, “Confessional Statement,” last modified July 2018, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/confessional-statement/>. For a more detailed explanation of this summary sentence, see the complete BCC confessional statement.

⁵ Through our translation projects, Powlison’s *Seeing with New Eyes* (David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003]), and a number of the devotionals in the 31-Day Devotionals for Life series through the BCC have been translated. Our hope is to continue translating biblical counseling resources.

come to Christ in faith and live their lives in him (Matt 11:28–30). Nothing is available to show them how the cognitive, affective, and volitional functions of the heart are interrelated. Believers in Central Asia have almost nothing to help them see how this dynamic heart responds and relates to God, themselves, others, and circumstances.⁶ Little exists to help them find their ultimate identity as the people of God, and then also explains their struggle against evil outside themselves in the form of suffering, and within themselves as they fight sinful desires (1 Pet 2:9–12). They must continually look to God as their good, sovereign, and present Lord as they persevere in faith and let him be their refuge and strength (Ps 46). They need to meditate on God’s Word day and night so that new beliefs, desires, and heart commitments are cultivated as they walk in faithful obedience (Ps 1). They would be helped by understanding and experiencing how the Spirit uses the Word in the context of the church to cultivate true change through faith in Christ. They need to know change happens as they cultivate life in the Spirit by sowing to the desires of the Spirit (Gal 5:13–6:10). Because they are in Christ and have the Spirit, they can put off the desires of the flesh and live in the Spirit, which is true freedom. This Spirit-produced freedom is expressed through sacrificial love toward their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ as they bear one another’s burdens within the church. Other Christian books and materials have been translated to help local believers, but these resources either lack biblical faithfulness, proclaim a distorted or confusing gospel, ignore the local church, are too lengthy, or significantly misunderstand the change process.⁷ A simple, yet holistic, introductory framework for biblical change in Central Asia would be a new and unique resource.

In addition to a lack of materials, there is also a lack of trained counselors.

⁶ See Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2016).

⁷ For an explanation and critique of two popular models currently being used in Central Asia, see chap. 3 of this project.

Professional biblical counselors do not exist in this Central Asian country right now; consequently, even if pastors want to refer people to someone, there are no options. Because pastors are overworked and ill-equipped to counsel, they lack the ability to help. However, every believer is able to counsel (Rom 15:14), and if qualified elders will equip believers in this ministry (Eph 4:11–16), they can begin to offer more biblical and effective care to one other. Foreigners can play a crucial role by offering training to mature local believers able to adapt the material in a more contextual way and then better help equip and counsel others. In summary, these local brothers and sisters can go deeper in relationships, understand the language and culture better, and are a more stable long-term presence in their cities.

Certain skills are also needed to provide wise counsel. For example, Turks have strong opinions and do not hesitate to communicate what they think others should do. What is the problem? They tend to speak before listening, offer advice before understanding, and focus on behavior over heart motives. Therefore, they need material to equip them first to ask heart-focused questions to understand someone's experience and heart motivations. Different people need different counsel, yet Christians must stay patient with one another as they struggle to change by faith (1 Thess 5:14).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project was to equip the members of A. Umut Kilisesi in Central Asia, with a simple yet holistic introductory framework for biblical change so that they better understand who God is for them, and who they are as his people as they experience life and respond from the heart to the troubles in it. Furthermore, the goal is for them to understand how those responses are transformed by faith in Christ as the Spirit uses the Word within the church, and how they can help their spiritual family in that same transformation process.

Goals

1. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of biblical change and how to help others change at AUK.
2. The second goal was to develop an introductory ten-week interactive Bible study curriculum on change in the local language to provide a framework to understand God, his people and their experiences and heart responses in this world, how those responses are transformed by faith in Christ as the Spirit uses the Word within the church, and how they can help their spiritual family in that same transformation process.
3. The third goal was to increase knowledge among AUK members so that they better understand God, his people and their experiences and heart responses in this world, how those responses are transformed by faith in Christ as the Spirit uses the Word within the church, and how they can help their spiritual family in that same transformation process through implementing the Bible study curriculum.

Research Methodology

The first goal was to assess the current understanding of biblical change and how to help others change at AUK.⁸ Local believers at AUK come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, but almost none of them was raised in a Christian home. The spectrum on how young they are in the faith and their current spiritual maturity level is wide; therefore, an assessment was needed to obtain more detailed data on their ability to counsel. This goal was measured by administering a Likert scale survey at the start of the Bible study series.⁹ The survey assessed current understanding of the human heart, the goals and means of biblical change, the process of change, and typical skills needed to help others. This goal was considered successfully completed when at least ten surveys were electronically recorded and analyzed.

The second goal was to develop an introductory ten-week interactive Bible study curriculum on change in the local language to provide a framework to understand God, his people and their experiences and heart responses in this world, how those

⁸ All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use.

⁹ See appendix 1.

responses are transformed by faith in Christ as the Spirit uses the Word within the church, and how they can help their spiritual family in that same transformation process. The curriculum was created in an inductive Bible study format, with questions and discussions designed to focus the attention on rightly understanding God's Word and applying it to biblical change. Between sessions, assigned homework helped participants apply what had been learned and to set them up for the next study. The curriculum highlighted key topics: the need and responsibility to help one another; the character of God in his goodness, sovereignty, and presence; the identity of believers as saints, sufferers, and sinners; the heart and its three main functions (cognitive, affective, volitional); faith in Christ as the center of change; the role of the Spirit, Word, and community in change; and the process of loving others through seeking to understand their experiences in order to wisely bring the truth of God's Word into those experiences and call others to faith in Christ. The entire curriculum sought to properly contextualize the framework through culturally appropriate examples, stories, proverbs, teaching styles, etc. This goal was measured by a panel of four experienced and mature believers: two local believers and two co-workers in other cities, who utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, contextualization, and applicability of the curriculum.¹⁰ This goal was considered successful when a minimum of 80 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The third goal was to increase knowledge among AUK members so that they better understand God, his people and their experiences and heart responses in this world, how those responses are transformed by faith in Christ as the Spirit uses the Word within the church, and how they can help their spiritual family in that same transformation process through implementing the Bible study curriculum. Since the curriculum was used on Wednesday evenings during our men's and women's Bible study time (on rotating

¹⁰ See appendix 2.

weeks), the goal was to impact as many members as possible, but with particular attention to a core group of ten to fifteen local believers. This goal was measured by administering a pre- and post-survey to measure the increase in knowledge of biblical change and the change process.¹¹ The pre-series survey was given to all attendees at the start of the series and was the same survey used for goal 1 (given only one time). The post-series survey used the same questions as the pre-series survey and was at the last Bible study. This goal was considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms were used in the ministry project:

Biblical counseling. Biblical counseling is a term that communicates a particular view and method of counseling. Within its confessional statement, the BCC clearly and comprehensively defines the term as follows:

Biblical counseling occurs whenever and wherever God's people engage in conversations that are anchored in Scripture, centered on Christ and the Gospel, grounded in sound theology, dependent upon the Holy Spirit and prayer, directed toward sanctification, rooted in the life of the church, founded in love, attentive to heart issues, comprehensive in understanding, thorough in care, practical and relevant, and oriented toward outreach.¹²

Contextualization. Anytime one crosses a culture he or she must labor to communicate clearly. When believers cross cultures with a particular gospel message to communicate, even more care must be taken to ensure the message of Christ is understood accurately. Scott Moreau, Gary Corwin, and Gary McGee define contextualization in this way:

The core idea is that of taking the gospel to a new context and finding appropriate

¹¹ See appendix 1.

¹² BBC, "Confessional Statement."

ways to communicate it so that it is understandable to the people in that context. Contextualization refers to more than just theology; it also includes developing church life and ministry that are biblically faithful and culturally appropriate.¹³

The dynamic heart. Within this project, the heart represents the inner man and is at the core of change. The heart is always responding, or as Jeremy Pierre explains, it is “dynamic.” How does the heart respond? Pierre points to three dimensions in his definition of the heart:

Human experience is three-dimensional. The human heart responds cognitively, through rational processes based on knowledge and beliefs. It also responds affectively, through a framework of desires and emotions. It also responds volitionally, through a series of choices reflecting the willful commitments of the heart.¹⁴

Having defined important terms, it is also important to note that there were certain limits on this project. Since AUK is a small church, there were relatively few believers involved in the project. At best, 30–40 members went through the process, with a smaller number attending all 10 weeks. Furthermore, the curriculum had to be simple for a few reasons. Since everything had to be translated and taught in the local language, simpler lessons helped maintain clarity. Even though the concepts were basic, most of the content was still relatively new to members of AUK. Background knowledge could not be assumed, so each lesson had to be holistic, yet not overwhelm with information or be unrealistic in goals. These lessons were meant to provide the basic framework for counsel that can then be further developed in the future.

Certain delimitations applied as well. Each lesson was taught on Wednesday evenings, which limited each lesson to 45–60 minutes, but with a lot of discussion within that time. Lessons needed to focus on main points without distraction from helpful, but secondary, topics. Only members of AUK were involved in surveys or interviews. Foreign members of AUK were involved in the studies but did not complete surveys,

¹³ Scott A. Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 12.

¹⁴ Pierre, *Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 12.

since the aim was to train local believers.

Conclusion

We all counsel—the question is whether our counsel is effective and biblical. To grow as counselors, we must better understand biblical change, how people change, and develop a framework for the counseling process so that we can wisely help others. Chapter 2 argues that the Bible provides the necessary framework for biblical change by examining five key texts. Chapter 3 seeks to understand and analyze two popular models of counsel currently being used locally in order to set up the need for a better, more biblical, model. Chapter 4 describes the content and process of teaching the ten-lesson biblical change curriculum developed for AUK. Chapter 5 then evaluates the project based on completion of the specified goals.

CHAPTER 2
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS
THAT PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK FOR
UNDERSTANDING CHANGE

This chapter argues that the Bible provides a framework for understanding change. Biblical change happens as the people of God rightly understand and trust (1) who God is in his goodness, sovereignty, and presence with them; (2) who they are fundamentally as his people who suffer and sin in this world; (3) who Jesus is as the gentle and humble Savior calling them to follow him; and (4) the God-ordained means of the Spirit using the Word in the context of the church to cultivate true change. In short, believers change—and help others do the same—as they together trust in the gospel of Christ and sow to the Spirit.

Psalm 46

Psalm 46 reminds and summons believers to worship their good, sovereign, and present God.¹ If they live in light of who God is, then they will find comfort in him through all the struggles of life. A possible background to Psalm 46 is the Assyrian invasion of Judah in 701 BC, during the reign of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18–19; cf. Isa 36–37). With this story in mind to at least “serve for illustrative purposes,”² the verses of Psalm

¹ Ps 46 is in book 2 of the Psalter and is generally classified as a “song of Zion” with its focus on Jerusalem as the city of God (other Songs of Zion: Pss 48; 76; 84; 87; 122). Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 84. Also, John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2, *Psalms 42–89* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 66. Peter Craigie disagrees with the Song of Zion classification, preferring instead that it be labeled a “song of confidence.” Peter C. Craigie and Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 19, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 342.

² Ross correctly highlights the lack of direct connection to the Assyrian invasion in 701 BC; therefore, readers must be cautious in assigning one. But he also correctly concludes, “If that was not the event, then something very much like it lay behind these lines. That event at least allows us to visualize how some of these lines might have been understood in a historical context.” Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 85. Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 65. Goldingay sees possible links to the Red Sea story (Exod 14–15)

46 powerfully communicate trust in God in the midst of uncertain, even perilous, circumstances. Hezekiah was a good king who did what was right in the Lord's sight (18:3). He trusted the Lord and thus proved to be the most faithful king of Judah (18:5–6). In his fourth year as king, Assyria besieged the northern kingdom of Israel (Samaria) during the reign of King Hoshea and after three years captured it (18:9). Seven years after the deportation of Samaria, Assyria's new king, King Sennacherib, set his sights on Judah and Hezekiah. He mocked Hezekiah's trust in the Lord (18:22, 32) and boasted in his strength over Hezekiah and the nation as he attempted to intimidate not only Hezekiah, but all the people of Judah (18:27–35).

Hezekiah, through great distress and anguish, responded by seeking the Lord in the temple and by asking the prophet Isaiah to inquire of the Lord on their behalf (19:1–4). Hezekiah himself sought the Lord in prayer and asked him to act so that the whole earth would know that he alone is God (19:15–19). He alone had the power to save Jerusalem. The situation was bleak and the reality that other kingdoms had been destroyed at the hand of Sennacherib was unavoidable (19:17). But God asserted his sovereign control over all things and promised to act against the king because of his proud and mocking attitude—Sennacherib would not enter Jerusalem but instead go back home in defeat. The Lord heard Hezekiah's prayer and decided to rescue Jerusalem (19:32–34), and in faithfulness to his word that night the Angel of the Lord killed 185,000 soldiers in the Assyrian army. The next morning the people got up and saw all the dead bodies as well as Sennacherib leaving with his army (19:35–36). Sennacherib was eventually killed by his own sons while worshipping his god Nisroch (19:37).

When Psalm 46 is placed within the context of 2 Kings 18–19, or similar

(Goldingay, 66–67). As does Craigie in the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1–18): Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 343. Kidner concludes, “There is little to be gained by historical speculation.” Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 191. Both the Assyrian invasion and Red Sea events seem possible backgrounds to the Psalm, and contrary to Kidner, helpful to consider as one seeks to rightly understand the Psalm.

biblical accounts, its words can carry more of the weight the original authors intended since it is connected to a specific context. The Israelites must have felt this weight as they heard the psalm read aloud. “It is,” writes Allen Ross, “one of the most powerful songs of confidence in the saving presence of the LORD.”³ In fact, it is awe-inspiring to read Psalm 46:8–9 while freshly imagining the people of God coming out to see what the Angel of the Lord had just accomplished on their behalf. He had just put 185,000 men to death—there were dead bodies and blood everywhere. The people of God were left to stand in absolute wonder and terror at the works of their God: their prospect the day before had been imminent death or deportation at the hands of Sennacherib, but now they were filled with astonishment at the salvation of the Lord. The people of God could now sing out in prayer, “Come see the works of the Lord, who brings devastation on the earth. He makes wars cease throughout the earth. He shatters bows and cuts spears to pieces; he sets wagons ablaze.” God did this work of salvation for the fame of his own Name—so that he would be exalted in the earth and that everyone would know that he alone is God (46:10). Psalm 46 remembers and praises the Lord of Armies, the God of Jacob, who saves his people as they find refuge and strength in who he is—in his perfect goodness, absolute power, and constant presence with them. No matter the circumstances, they should not fear, because this God (the one true God) is with his people, offering them comfort, strength, refuge, hope, and peace.

God Is a Refuge and Strength (46:1–3)

In verse one the people of God acknowledged him as their refuge and strength, or “strong refuge.”⁴ They clearly do not have the power or resources to protect themselves; therefore, if they are to have any hope, God is, and must be, their refuge. A

³ Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 83.

⁴ Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 87. Ross emphasizes God is a place of safety and resource for strength.

true refuge is strong, stable, *and* a place of comfort. In other words, it is *good*. For the people of God in a dangerous and unpredictable world (e.g., faced with an army besieging their city), the only place of refuge, where goodness, strength, stability and comfort can be found, is the Lord.⁵ They must choose to rely on his strength, and not their own, which is why the first stanza of this psalm is focused on God.⁶ The good news is that as they look to the Lord as their refuge and strength, they are doing exactly as he desires. He is a helper⁷ who is *always* found in times of trouble, and when God’s people trust him as their all-powerful and good refuge, the whole earth will know that he alone is God and will be exalted throughout the whole earth (v. 10). Because he is a strong refuge, he can provide safety; because he is good, he can provide comfort.

Because of who God is, his people ought to be confident. The logic is clear: “If God is a strong refuge, if he does give help in times of trouble, then there is nothing to fear.”⁸ The truths about who God is, and in particular who he is for his people, should change how they *feel*. To get to that level of impact is not easy, but it should be the eventual outcome of faith in God. Or as Broyles acknowledges, “Confessing what we should believe is easy; bringing our hearts to feel that confessed security is monumental.”⁹ While God’s people might have legitimate earthly reasons to fear and doubt—the earth might be trembling and the mountains toppling into the depths of the seas; the waters might be roaring and foaming and the mountains quaking with turmoil;

⁵ Commentators note, “God as refuge is a common designation for God in the Hebrew Bible, used some ninety-four times, forty-four times in the Psalter.” Nancy L. DeClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 422.

⁶ DeClaisse-Walford, *The Book of Psalms*, 422.

⁷ Ross argues, “Stating that God is a help is much more forceful than saying that God helps people; it indicates that he so abundantly helps people that he is what help is all about.” Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 88.

⁸ Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 89.

⁹ Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 209.

armies might be descending upon them—they will choose to trust in the Lord and not be afraid because *God* is their refuge and strength. As they look to him and not their circumstance, they find comfort in his goodness, security in his strength, and help in their every need.

God Is with His People (46:4–7)

With the eyes of faith, the people of God see a reality beyond their circumstances. In stark contrast to the turmoil, destruction, instability, and fear-inducing realities of the world, there is a river that supplies the city of God with joy, nourishment, comfort, hope, and security.¹⁰ The faithful remnant connects themselves to this stream by taking God’s Word as their truth; and therefore, they experience joy in his presence and continual help in times of trouble. They delight in the Word and meditate on it day and night, which makes them like trees planted beside flowing streams¹¹ that bears fruit and prospers (Ps 1:2–3). The chaos is transformed to peace because of the presence of God.¹² Jerusalem was the special dwelling place of God, especially the temple and the holy of holies (46:4).¹³ Though the city was under attack and unsafe, God’s people had no need

¹⁰ For a discussion on whether the river mentioned in v. 4 is literal or symbolic, see Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 91–93. It seems possible Jerusalem had a water source from the Gihon spring that could be referred to as a “river.” The river could also be symbolic of God’s provision for the city. Both can be accepted since “the people would have seen the provision of water as evidence of the presence of God . . . just as he had provided the river of life in the Garden of Eden in the beginning” (93). Broyles prefers the symbolic imagery: “This river of Psalm 46 is probably an image depicting the holy place (i.e., the sanctuary) where the Most High dwells as the source of life for the city of God.” Broyles, *Psalms*, 209. See also Walter Brueggemann and William Bellinger Jr., *Psalms*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge, 2014), 217. Goldingay also connects this river with the river of life in the Garden: “This river waters a city, and the line thus hints that God’s story could make its way from the garden where it began to the city where it will end.” Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 69.

¹¹ Brueggemann and Bellinger see the connection between “streams” in Pss 46:4 and 1:3: “‘Streams’ is the same term used to portray the nurturing of the tree in Psalm 1; in Psalm 46, it is Zion that is nurtured.” Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 217.

¹² DeClaisse-Walford, *The Book of Psalms*, 424. God’s presence transforms the water. Kidner writes, “With God the waters are no longer menacing seas but a life-giving *river*.” Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 192.

¹³ I understand the “city of God” as a reference to Jerusalem; for this view, see Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 717. Others see Dan as a possibility: Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 68–69; Ellen T. Charry, *Psalms 1–50: Sighs and Songs of Israel*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015), 236.

to fear because *God* was within his city and would help her (46:5). This city of God will not be toppled because God is *within* her and will help her when the morning dawns (46:5; cf. 46:1; Exod 14:27). God’s people, the faithful and obedient remnant,¹⁴ will be saved because he is with them and will not let his people be completely toppled. Why can they be confident in this promise? Because God himself is in the city, and he cannot be defeated. His people can trust his Word, even when circumstances tell them otherwise.

All the disorder, chaos, and rage of the nations is no match for the power of God, for when he merely lifts his voice, the earth melts (46:6). Ross encourages, “So as the menacing powers of the earth invade and threaten God’s people, God speaks the word only, and they all dissolve.”¹⁵ No king or ruler of this earth can stand up to the Lord of Armies, for his Word is enough to put all the danger to rest.¹⁶ This Lord of Armies is *with* his people (46:7; Immanuel, “God is with us” cf. Isa 7:14; 8:8, 10), but they must see him with the eyes of their hearts as they trust his Word. As they do, they will not fear.

God Is God (46:8–11)

The Lord not only speaks and promises; he also acts, and all people are summoned to come and see his works. He gave his people a promise and stayed faithful to his Word by rescuing them and destroying the wicked and proud. All those who oppose him, whether nations, kingdoms, or people, will be devastated when he ends the battle, because salvation for his people means destruction for his enemies. The Lord is fierce and ought not be mocked, for he, and he alone, is ruler of the world—his works

¹⁴ Wilson reminds that the temple could not be used as a “talismen to ward off evil.” Wilson, *Psalms*, 717. The promise here “could be misleading if not coupled with covenant loyalty and obedience.”

¹⁵ Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 95.

¹⁶ The “Lord of Armies” likely “has its origin in the cultic life of Jerusalem and refers to the God who sits enthroned upon the cherubim in the inner sanctuary of the temple. Zion, the city of God, is the place from which God will command peace and security for all the earth.” DeClaiss-Walford, *The Book of Psalms*, 424. The emphasis is on the power, or strength, of the Lord. Bratcher and Reyburn offer a few alternate translations, such as “the LORD, who is the strongest of all” or “the LORD, who is all powerful” or “the LORD, who has all strength.” Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reyburn, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Psalms* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 434.

prove it. This fact is a comfort to the people of God, as DeClaisse-Walford writes: “The image of God as warrior provided the ancient Israelites with a powerful picture of protection and defense in the midst of the chaos of the natural and political world in which they lived.”¹⁷

Then, in verse 10, for the first time in this psalm, God speaks. The Lord calls *all* people to stop fighting, and to look to him as God, the exalted One in all the earth. Wilson emphasizes the personal word of God in this verse, writing, “The voice of the triumphant warrior God breaks into the scene in the first person, challenging foe and faithful alike.”¹⁸ In this one verse, God gives two commands and one promise. The first command is to “be still,” better translated “stop fighting.”¹⁹ Those fighting must cease their toil, struggle, and efforts and pay attention. The second command is a call to know, or believe, that Yahweh is God, he is the great “I AM,” and that is enough for them. He is the same God who revealed himself to Moses (Exod 3–4) and will fight for his people and be their refuge and strength. He will help them when they need it, and delight them with his presence. Why does he act in such ways? For the exaltation of his own Name. His promise is that he alone will be exalted among the nations,²⁰ meaning the ultimate focus of the earth is not God’s people, but God himself. Hezekiah knew this reality and thus asked God to rescue them not for their own sake, but so that all would know that he is God (2 Kgs 19:19). As the people of God know, believe, rest, and live in who he is,

¹⁷ DeClaisse-Walford, *The Book of Psalms*, 425.

¹⁸ Wilson, *Psalms*, 718. Goldingay also sees the addressees as the nations and Israel. Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 72. God is telling his people to “stop the tumult and the warfare; stop for a moment and consider the God of the Israelites.” DeClaisse-Walford, *The Book of Psalms*, 425.

¹⁹ “The traditional ‘be still’ is widely misunderstood as a command to be reverent (in church) and meditate on God’s blessings. The Hebrew verb means to cease, be inactive.” Bratcher and Reyburn, *Translator’s Handbook on Psalms*, 435. Kidner sees similarities in Jesus’s command to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 194.

²⁰ “The distinct repetition of the verb in both clauses stresses the point that the LORD God will demonstrate his glorious sovereignty over all the earth . . . his absolute sovereignty will be acknowledged and accepted among all the nations.” Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 99.

they will enjoy him as their refuge and strength to the exaltation of his Name.

Why do the people of God not fear in a chaotic and dangerous world? Ross summarizes the psalm well: “Because God is with his people, providing them with safety and strength, they need not fear any calamity that threatens to destroy them, for they may rest assured that the LORD will bring an end to all war and devastation.”²¹ In other words, they know that God is God, and that this belief changes everything. They will not be afraid, because they choose to interpret their circumstances through faith in the Lord, and in particular, *their* Lord, who is perfect in his goodness, absolute in his power, and constant in his presence with them.²²

1 Peter 2:9–12

Believers’ fundamental identity is defined as the people of God. God chose to show them mercy and call them out of darkness into his marvelous light, but they still war against evil. Evil is experienced outside themselves, or externally, in the form of suffering, and from within, or internally, in the fight against sinful desires. Therefore, in this life, it is appropriate to describe believers as saints who suffer and sin.²³ As they keep these categories (and experiences) in proper relationship to one another, they are better grounded to grow in Christ and persevere in faith. Peter writes his first letter to encourage the suffering believers in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia to persevere by living according to their identity as the people of God, to the glory of God. The difficulties they are experiencing are not a surprise to God, and therefore, should not

²¹ Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 86.

²² “In the midst of our tumultuous, chaotic modern world, Psalm 46 reminds us that God can calm the raging seas and the trembling mountains and turn them to rivers of life and calm dwelling places. All that is required of us is that we *stand still* and acknowledge the God who is *with us*.” DeClaiss-Walford, *The Book of Psalms*, 426.

²³ My categories and concepts of saint, sufferer, and sinner were formed by, and are dependent upon two works by Michael Emlet, the second being his more recent and complete work on the topic: Michael R. Emlet, *CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2009); Emlet, *Saints, Sufferers and Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2021).

surprise them (4:12). As they suffer according to God’s will, they are to trust him as they give themselves to what is good (4:19). Peter is careful to root their ability to persevere in what God has already done on their behalf, for he has chosen them (1:1), given them new birth through the resurrection of Christ (1:3), secured an awaiting inheritance for them in heaven (1:4), and is currently guarding them by his power through their faith (1:5). They are his people, and he will protect them, but it is still “necessary” (1:6) for them to be saved through suffering (4:18). Sufferings of this world will refine their faith (1:7) and allow them to share in the sufferings of Christ (4:13); therefore, believers can rejoice in, and persevere through, their “momentary” suffering as they trust the Lord to eventually restore, establish, strengthen, and support them (5:10).

Believers’ new life through the resurrection of Christ calls them to image their Creator by being holy (1:15–16). They have been redeemed by the blood of Christ from their old “empty” way of living according to the flesh (1:18), and now are to live in purity expressed through love for one another (1:22). The gospel, the living and enduring Word of God, was proclaimed to them and thus has changed, and is continuing to change, how they live (1:23–25). Therefore, they are to rid themselves of the sin that represents their old ways (2:1) because they have been born again through the gospel and called to holiness, primarily manifested in love toward one another (1:22–25; see also Gal 5:13–26; Eph 4:1–32; Col 3:1–17).²⁴ They are to desire the Word of God and find their nourishment from it as they grow in their faith, just as newborns crave milk (2:2).²⁵ Believers will long for continued nourishment from the Word because Peter is confident

²⁴ “Why did Peter begin with the call to put away evil attitudes and actions? Probably because such things destroy love, and responsibility to love was the main idea in vv. 22–25.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, New American Commentary, vol. 37 (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 97.

²⁵ Schreiner helps readers see the only true imperative in verses 1–3 is “to desire.” While “rid yourselves” can, and should, function like an imperative, “the central command in this paragraph is the injunction to long for the ‘pure spiritual milk’ (v.2).” Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 97. Also in defense of “milk” referring to the Word of God, “Peter used *logikos* to define milk here, so that the readers will understand that the milk by which they grow is nothing other than the word of God” (99).

that they have tasted that the Lord is good (cf. Ps 34).²⁶ Peter then again confirms their identity as the people of God; while they might be rejected by others, they are chosen and honored by God (2:4).²⁷ God is building his spiritual house through his people as a pleasing sacrifice to himself through Jesus Christ (2:5). Unfortunately, not all will receive the grace of God through faith in Christ, but will instead reject him, as they were destined to do (2:8).

Believers as Saints (2:9–10)

But, as verse 9 emphasizes, New Testament believers collectively as God’s people are a chosen race (Isa 43:20), a royal priesthood (Exod 19:6; cf. Rev 1:6), a holy nation (Exod 19:6), and a people for his possession (Isa 43:20–21; Exod 19:5).²⁸ Terms like *chosen*, *royal*, *holy*, and *owned* or *possessed* define God’s New Covenant people in Christ as they gather together in the church.²⁹ Just as God chose and defined Israel, he has

²⁶ Believers “should long for the Lord if indeed they have tasted or experienced his kindness (Ps 34).” Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 102. Also see Schreiner’s helpful discussion on the difficulty of translating “if” in v. 3, and his conclusion that Peter is not expressing doubt that they had tasted that Lord was good—“he was confident that the answer would be affirmative.” Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 100.

²⁷ “The life of Christ functions as a pattern for the Petrine Christians, for they too are despised by many, but they are chosen and honored in God’s sight, destined for vindication after suffering.” Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 104.

²⁸ Peter H. Davids rightly observes, “The emphasis throughout is collective: the church as a corporate unity is the people, priesthood, nation, etc., rather than each Christian being such.” Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 91. Michaels concludes that with each term Peter is reinforcing “the notion that the believing community of which (and to which) Peter writes belongs uniquely to God. Without mentioning God directly, he portrays a race chosen of God, a nation holy as God is holy (cf. 1:15–16), and a priesthood belonging to God the King.” J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 49 (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 109.

²⁹ Scott McKnight asserts, “There is no passage in the New Testament that more explicitly associates the Old Testament terms for Israel with the New Testament church than this one.” Scott McKnight, *1 Peter*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 109–10. Jobes writes that these terms are “adjectives that describe collectively the nature of the relationship of Christian believers to the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 162. Michaels makes the interesting point that Peter does not address the church as the new Israel or new people of God, but instead consistently addresses “his Gentile Christian readers as if they were Jews.” Michaels, *1 Peter*, 107. Or Donelson, “The recipients are not priests; instead, together they form a priesthood.” Lewis R. Donelson, *1 and 2 Peter and Jude*, New Testament Library (Louisville: John Knox, 2010), 66.

chosen New Testament saints.³⁰ Therefore, their identity is defined by him, not by themselves or their experiences. The terms that used to define Israel as a nation (Isa 43:20), now define the church—those that have faith in Christ.³¹ This chosen race is comprised of some from all races to “constitute a new race of those who have been born again into the living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”³² The people of God are a mixed people, called to be distinct from all others, for he has set his affections on them so that they would proclaim his praises because of who he is and what he has done in creation and redemption (2:9; cf. Acts 26:18; 2 Cor 4:6; Eph 5:8).³³ The church is to be a royal priesthood³⁴ and holy nation (Exod 19:5–6) centered in the kingdom of God and “mediating God in Christ to the nations” as “a people set apart for God.”³⁵ The salvation and consequent identity he graciously gives to his people will result in his being magnified as others see their obedience and holiness (2:12). The New Testament people of God know that they do not deserve this adoption into the family of God, nor did they do anything to accomplish it; formerly they were outside of God’s promises and without

³⁰ As Schreiner notes, Peter has emphasized this point from the beginning of his letter: “We saw in the first verse of the letter that Peter introduced the theme of election to strengthen God’s pilgrim people, and he returned to it here.” Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 113.

³¹ “God’s elect nation is no longer coterminous with Israel but embraces the church of Jesus Christ, which is composed of both Jews and Gentiles.” Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 114. Referring to all the descriptions, Schreiner summarizes, “Again the privileges belonging to Israel now belong to the church of Jesus Christ. The church does not replace Israel, but it does fulfill the promises made to Israel; and all those, Jews and Gentiles, who belong to the true Israel are now part of the new people of God” (115). See also Jobes, *1 Peter*, 158–64. Clowney discusses the covenantal change: “The change of the new covenant is intensive as well as extensive.” Edmund P. Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England: IVP Academic, 1988), 33. His point is that all people (Jew and Gentile) now have greater access to God in Christ.

³² Jobes, *1 Peter*, 159.

³³ Davids on the phrase, “proclaim the praises”: “Christians are to ‘publish abroad’ the mighty works of God, which include both his activity in creation and his miracle of redemption in the life, death, resurrection, and revelation of Jesus Christ.” Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 93. See also Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: IVP, 2009), 119.

³⁴ “Its faithful consecration to God, the King of the universe, therefore makes its priesthood a royal service.” Jobes, *1 Peter*, 160.

³⁵ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 160–61.

hope (Eph 2:11–22), but God chose them to call them close, extend his mercy, and make a people for himself (1:3; 2:10; cf. Hos 2:23; Rom 9:25–26). Like Israel, they deserved judgment. But Hosea’s prophecy to an unfaithful Israel is fulfilled in the church as sinners trust in Christ.³⁶ Because of God’s great love and mercy, he makes a people for himself and gives undeserving sinners mercy, which ought to cultivate in them a deep sense of safety in belonging to him (Hos 2:14–23).³⁷ Peter makes clear to suffering believers that their fundamental identity in this world is the chosen, royal, and holy people of God. They are his! Consequently, as they experience sufferings, especially unjust sufferings, they will have a rock-solid understanding of who they are. First and foremost, they are God’s people.

Believers as Sinners (2:11)

After establishing believers’ new identity in Christ,³⁸ Peter shifts in verse 11 to the heart of his teaching in this letter—how the people of God are to live rightly before others as strangers and exiles in this world.³⁹ “Because all Christians are citizens of God’s holy nation,”⁴⁰ and thus different from the rest of the world, they will struggle against evil not only from others and the world as sufferers, but also as sinners, from within themselves in a spiritual war against their own sinful desires.⁴¹ As God’s people,

³⁶ “But God spoke through the prophet Hosea, promising a future restoration, a time when by unmerited love and mercy God would again constitute a people for his special possession, who would declare the mighty act of God that brought them into existence . . . their conversion to Christ is the fulfillment of that promised restoration.” Jobes, *1 Peter*, 163–64.

³⁷ Donelson notes, “The general force of verse 10 is to underline the sense of safety that is included in being a people of God . . . ‘mercy’ reinforces the surety of salvation by locating its origin not in human behavior but in the character of God.” Donelson, *1 and 2 Peter and Jude*, 67.

³⁸ Jobes reflecting on 1:1–2:10 and the transition in v. 11, states, “With this exposition of their new identity in Christ, Peter is now ready to instruct his readers in how to discharge their role as a people chosen for God’s own possession in relationship to the world in which they live.” Jobes, *1 Peter*, 164.

³⁹ The terms *strangers* and *exiles* are focused on believers’ relationship with the world, and again connects the church with the nation of Israel “who began their history as aliens in Egypt and lived much of their history as resident aliens and foreigners in exile.” Jobes, *1 Peter*, 168.

⁴⁰ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 169.

⁴¹ I take these sinful, or fleshly, desires to cover all selfish desires opposed to the Spirit. For an

they are expected to fight against internal sin because it is a battle for the soul. Peter urges them to abstain from sinful desires because he knows that as God’s people, sin’s power can no longer dominate them (2:11; cf. 1:14; 4:2; Rom 6:6–7). Paul makes a similar plea to the Colossians when he commands them to put to death the sin that has already died in Christ (Col 3:3, 5). Because Peter knows the presence of sin remains in their hearts and the flesh is warring against the Spirit (Gal 5:16–18), God’s people must choose to reject, or abstain from, their sinful desires, and failure to do so “would mean yielding to their enemy and allowing their very selves to be taken captive.”⁴² This battle with sin is the normal experience for those called out of darkness into God’s marvelous light. Verse 11, Schreiner explains, “is instructive because it informs us that those who have the Spirit are not exempt from fleshly desires.”⁴³ The difference is that through their new birth in Christ, they now have the power through the Spirit to “rid themselves” of the flesh as they exercise self-control (2:1; Gal 5:23).⁴⁴ The focus of the battle is not “out there,” removed from believers in the form of the culture, unbelievers, or the sinful world in general, but the problem is in the heart of believers themselves—at the level of desire. Consequently, for Christians to gain victory in this spiritual battle, they must focus their efforts where the battle is waging—in their own hearts. Scripture is clear that external, or visible, sin is rooted in a sinful heart. It is out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45). From the heart comes all sorts of evil and sin that defile a person (Mark 7:20–23). Jesus, by exposing their rebellious desires, called his disciples to focus

explanation of this view, see Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 95–96. Duane F. Watson also takes a broad view: “It is whatever turns focus away from the mutual love of God and neighbor toward the self.” Duane F. Watson, *First and Second Peter*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 58. As does Donelson, *1 and 2 Peter and Jude*, 69. To live a holy life means one will abstain from sinful desires—it is the “negative dimension of living a holy and obedient life.” McKnight, *1 Peter*, 126.

⁴² Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 96.

⁴³ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 120.

⁴⁴ “Such a command implies that inward desires are not uncontrollable but can be consciously nurtured or restrained.” Grudem, *1 Peter*, 122.

on the source of their sin, not just on the outward acts. Instead, he rooted adultery in lust, murder in anger, hypocrisy in pride, etc. (Matt 5–7). Peter is urging Christians, with their fundamental identity as God’s people, to abstain from the sinful desires that wage war against the soul (cf. James 4:1). They are *the people of God*, who fight against their sinful desires.

Believers as Sufferers (2:12)

Peter also knows that believers will suffer by experiencing evil outside themselves, and so he calls them to conduct themselves honorably in all of life, which is different from their former “empty” way of life (1:18). They are to live this way before others so that they too will believe in Christ to the glory of God.⁴⁵ Peter again echoes Jesus’s words in Matthew 5 when he calls his disciples to be salt and light so that others will see their good works and give glory to God (Matt 5:13–16). The lives of believers are even more radiant when viewed against the backdrop of unjust and undeserved suffering. Peter’s call is for them to act honorably and holy *when* (not “if”!) those of the world slander them as evildoers. Their holy lives might bring unjust slander (4:4), but they might also bring some to faith as they observe how good their lives are. No matter the response from the world, the Christian’s right response to unjust suffering is to abstain from sinful desires and live a holy (honorable) life. Like Peter emphasizes throughout his letter, Christians will experience suffering in this life, but God is in control and is using all things for their good and his glory. Christ modeled for them how to suffer (2:21–25); therefore, they can trust him and persevere in doing good. Their sufferings do not define them, for they are *the people of God*, who suffer as they live in a sinful world

⁴⁵ I agree with Jobes’s interpretation of “on the day he visits” when she concludes, “The day of visitation should probably be understood as a reference to the future final judgment, by which time Peter hopes that unbelievers who have observed the good works of the Christians they have slandered will have come to faith in Christ.” Jobes, *1 Peter*, 172; see also Michaels, *1 Peter*, 118, 120. Grudem, *1 Peter*, 123–25. “Because they observe such works, some unbelievers will repent and believe and therefore give glory to God on the last day.” Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 124.

and are sinned against by others.

In a few short verses, Peter places Christians in three categories that correspond with their experiences in this world: saints, sufferers, and sinners. They are fundamentally saints defined as God's chosen, royal, holy, redeemed, and adopted people. But as his people they experience evil, both outside themselves as sufferers as they live in a fallen world and are sinned against, and inside themselves as they war against their sinful desires. The threefold way of identifying believers as saints, sufferers, and sinners is helpful to make sense of their experience in this world and can provide a helpful framework for believers to provide wise care for one another in constant love as the end draws near (4:7–8). As Christians hold all three in proper biblical balance, they will be better equipped to persevere through suffering and live holy lives as the chosen and redeemed people of God. May they steward their gifts to build each other up in the church so that God may be glorified through Jesus Christ in everything (4:11)!

Matthew 11:28–30

Change begins when the needy come to Christ in faith, and it continues as they take his yoke and learn from him. Change, from beginning to end, is centered on Christ. Those who humble themselves, see their need, and come to Christ will be changed by him. Disciples are drawn to Christ as they see him for who he is, but unfortunately, not everyone responds positively to Jesus and his message. Even God's people in the Old Testament, the nation of Israel, largely rejected him as the Messiah. It is in that context that Matthew 11:25–30 is found, the second of five main blocks of teaching spanning from 11:1–13:52. In chapters 11 and 12, Matthew records different responses to Jesus and his ministry—some reject him and others come to him, but all are invited to follow him and find rest for their souls.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Grant Osborne summarizes the flow of 11:25–30 well: “Jesus thanks God for his sovereign will in revealing salvation, then takes on himself that authority as the Son, and finally uses that authority to invite the weary to enjoy salvation and rest in him.” Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Exegetical Commentary

Jesus responds in verse 25 with praise to the Father for hiding the truths of the kingdom from the wise and intelligent and instead revealing them to infants (“little ones”; cf. 10:42; 13:11–17; 18:1–4).⁴⁷ This act of concealing and revealing is something in which his Father took pleasure (11:26). Jesus’s public prayer of praise reminds the reader of his words in 9:12–13, when he responds to the Pharisees’ objection of his eating with sinners by clarifying that he did not come to call the righteous, but sinners. His point is not that some are righteous (all are sinners), but that due to their pride, some “think they are righteous.”⁴⁸ Those who are “well” have no need of a doctor; only those that are sick do. Similarly, those who think they are wise and intelligent, such as the Pharisees and disobedient Israel (“this generation”, 11:16), are consumed with pride and thus an unteachable spirit. In contrast, infants are constantly learning and growing—they are dependent upon others and needy in almost every way, and “it is the simple, childlike who become the disciples of Jesus.”⁴⁹ The Father joyfully chooses to reveal himself to the humble and teachable, to the lowly and insignificant, yet he hides the same truths from those who would claim to be wise.⁵⁰

The Father, the Lord of heaven and earth (11:25) has given all things to the

on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 437.

⁴⁷ R. T. France understands “little ones” as a reference to Jesus’s true disciples, and they are only “little” in the world’s eyes. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 441. In application, France’s point is correct, even if Matthew is using an age distinction to make his point.

⁴⁸ Osborne, *Matthew*, 439.

⁴⁹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33a (Dallas: Word, 1993), 319.

⁵⁰ “The contrast is between those who are self-sufficient and deem themselves wise and those who are dependent and love to be taught.” D. A. Carson, *Matthew: Chapters 1 through 12, Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 275. Not all intelligent people reject Jesus, and not all “little ones” come in faith, but the “wise” in their self-sufficiency often rely on their wisdom. What is needed is “simple trust.” Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 293. Or Turner, “Here the contrast is not literally between intellectuals and children but between those who are proud and those who are humble.” David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 303.

Son (11:27; cf. 28:18). This authority entrusted to the Son is displayed by him deciding to whom he will reveal the Father (11:27; cf. John 1:18),⁵¹ which means Jesus cooperates with the Father in the work of hiding and revealing the kingdom, making each sovereign over salvation.

The Call: “Come to Me” (11:28a)

Immediately after Jesus affirms his control over election in salvation, he gives a general call to all people.⁵² It is a simple offer for those not yet his followers: “Come to me.” The offer is not hard to understand, but it is radical. Jesus calls all those who are needy (“weary and burdened”) to come to him and learn from him as they let his teaching shape their reality. This call resembles his message to his first disciples (“follow me”; 4:19; 8:22; 9:9), combined with his ongoing call to his disciples (“abide in me”; John 15:4–5). To respond in faith to the offer to come to Jesus places one under his easy yoke and light burden, trusting it will provide rest for the soul. Jesus’s offer can be explained with five observations.

Jesus’s offer is focused on *himself*—all must come to *him*. “Follow me”; “abide in me” is his consistent call.⁵³ Jesus does not point people to someone else’s life or teaching; he knows that he alone has the words of eternal life (John 6:68). Jesus clearly places himself in a position only appropriate for God himself: he centers all of life around himself, his teaching, and his promise of rest.⁵⁴ This offer, writes France, “is expressed in

⁵¹ “The saying ascribes to Jesus the critical place in the revelation of the Father.” Morris, *Gospel According to Matthew*, 295. Speaking of v. 27, Turner concludes, “One would be hard pressed to speak of the Son in more exalted language.” Turner, *Matthew*, 304. Also, Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 319–20.

⁵² France notes how it is important “that this declaration is followed by Jesus’s open invitation to any who are in need (not only the ‘chosen’) to ‘come to me’ (v. 28).” France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 445.

⁵³ “This verse is thoroughly and strikingly Christocentric.” Turner, *Matthew*, 304.

⁵⁴ “Jesus stands not only in the place of Wisdom and truth but even in the place of Yahweh.” Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 323. For the possible allusions to wisdom literature in these verses (cf. Dan 2; Sir 6, 51), see Craig A. Evans, *Matthew*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 247–48. Ben Witherington III sees clear connections to wisdom throughout 11:25–30. Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys,

a direct invitation to find the solution to life's problems by coming to Jesus."⁵⁵ He is the focal point for salvation and thus all of life. Only he can promise true rest for weary and burdened souls; only his yoke and his teaching will bring them life, for only he is the true lowly and humble one. To whom else could they go? Furthermore, why would they want to go to anyone else?

The Condition: All Those Weary and Burdened (11:28b)

The offer has a *condition*—only for the weary and burdened. In one sense Jesus's offer is to "all," but "all" is qualified by "who are weary and burdened."⁵⁶ All those who recognize their need, who are broken down by life and its struggles, can come to him. Jesus's words here echo his words in 9:12–13 (referenced earlier) when he responds to the Pharisees that only the sick need a doctor, that he came to call sinners, not the righteous. All are in need, but only some humble themselves enough to see it. Unfortunately, others think they are healthy and righteous, and this self-deception keeps them from responding to the call to come. The Father delights to reveal truth to "infants" (humble, needy) and hide it from the "wise and understanding" (proud, self-sufficient). To be weary and burdened is to be tired of life and the struggles in it, to be beat down, discouraged, and hopeless, but such as these will hear Christ's offer—"come to me"—as amazing news. The first step of change is to come to Christ in faith.

The Cost: Take My Yoke (11:29a)

The offer has a *cost*—one must take up Jesus's yoke. His "yoke" is his teaching, and it is in contrast to the heavy "yoke" of the religious teachers (23:4; cf. Acts

2006), 237–40. For a contrary view, see Charles H. Talbert. *Matthew*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 150.

⁵⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 447.

⁵⁶ "The only requirement is that those who come to him must recognize their need for help and be willing to accept his yoke and learn from him." France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 448.

15:10; Gal 5:1). The law of Christ brings life and freedom (Gal 5:1–6:10), for his commands are not burdensome (1 John 5:3). To come to Jesus does not make one an authority for himself, but places him under Jesus’s authority, or yoke, which then provides comfort and security and “paradoxically, will bring not further toil but ‘rest’.”⁵⁷ True freedom is found neither in the law, nor in complete independence, but in submission to Christ—and Jesus’s disciples are instructed to take up his yoke and learn from him.⁵⁸ Morris states clearly, “To be a follower of Jesus is to be a disciple and therefore a learner . . . to commit oneself to him means to commit oneself to a learning process.”⁵⁹ Matthew uses the final words of his Gospel to emphasize Jesus’s teaching when he commissions his followers to go, baptize, disciple, and to teach all nations to obey all his commands (28:18–20). The nations will learn from Jesus through the teaching of his disciples as they continually take up his yoke and learn from him. Likewise, it is the wise man that builds his life on the solid foundation by hearing and obeying Jesus’s words (7:24–27). To learn from Jesus is to spend time with him, but it must be in a way that submits to him as one’s Lord. It is to come with humility and teachability—like a “child” (18:1–4). The desire of his disciples will be to make Jesus’s thoughts their thoughts, his desires their desires, and his decisions their decisions. Like Mary, they will spend their time at his feet learning from him (Luke 10:38–42).

⁵⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 449. Jesus’s call is first for his disciples to come to him, and as they do, they will receive his teaching (law, yoke). It is worth noting, as Blomberg does, “Jesus calls people not to the law but to himself.” Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 194. Ortlund explains that Jesus’s yoke brings rest because “it is a yoke of kindness” like the “burden” of a life preserver to a drowning man. Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 21.

⁵⁸ Morris notes, “In the New Testament yoke is always used metaphorically and signifies bondage or submission to authority of some kind.” Morris, *Gospel According to Matthew*, 296.

⁵⁹ Morris, *Gospel According to Matthew*, 296. Or, as Hagner writes, “Discipleship demands nothing less than life commitment and comprehensive self-denial.” Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 325.

The Reason: He Is Lowly and Humble in Heart (11:29b)

Jesus's offer has a *reason* to be accepted—because he is lowly and humble in heart.⁶⁰ When the weary and burdened come to him, how will they find him? What is Jesus like? In these verses, Jesus explains what is nearest, or most central, to him. He is lowly and humble in heart, meaning these qualities were true of him “at the very center of all that he was,”⁶¹ and because of who he is, sinners are drawn to him. He is gentle, loving, gracious, and caring; therefore, as Andrews concludes for counselees, “He is the safest place for you to go in your struggle.”⁶² These qualities are in his heart, which means he delights to have all in need come to him. He does not hesitate or recoil when sinners come to him—he rejoices! He does not look with disgust or impatience when those helplessly sick seek refuge and healing in him, for their coming is what his heart desires. As he has said, his call is directed to such people since he *wants* them to come and finds pleasure when they do. Indeed, as Ortlund notes, “The posture most natural to him is not a pointed finger but open arms.”⁶³ To know the heart of Jesus draws the hesitant close as they trust who he is and how they will be received. As sinners truly understand the heart of Christ, more than anything else they will desire to come to him, take his yoke, and learn from him, for they know whatever he will do for them will be good.⁶⁴ France explains, “The beneficial effect of Jesus's yoke derives from the character

⁶⁰ “While some have taken ‘for’ as explicative, ‘learn from me *that* I am meek,’ it is better to see it as causal, providing the reason for learning and obeying Jesus.” Osborne, *Matthew*, 443. “Jesus invites people to accept him as their Lord because they will find him humble and gentle” Barclay M. Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 356. For a popular level book meditating on these characteristics of Christ, see Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*. In fact, I settled on Matt 11:28–30 for this chapter after reading his book. I also credit him for helping me see the importance of who Christ is in his heart for struggling sinners.

⁶¹ Morris, *Gospel According to Matthew*, 297. Ortlund reminds readers, “In the four Gospel accounts given to us in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—eighty-nine chapters of biblical text—there's only one place where Jesus tells us about his own heart.” Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, 17.

⁶² Laura Andrews, “More than a Proof Text: ‘You Can't Fix It—but You Can Come to Him’ (Matthew 11:28–30),” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 29, no. 2 (2015): 67.

⁶³ Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, 19.

⁶⁴ “The demands imposed by this yoke will bring relief to the weary and burdened because they are imposed by the one who is ‘gentle and humble in heart.’” John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*,

of the one who offers it.”⁶⁵ Whatever they experience, it will be with the one who is lowly and humble in heart. As one responds to the call to come, he knows to whom he is going, and it is knowing the character of Christ that gives him further reason to come.

The Promise: Soul Rest (11:28c, 29c)

What does Jesus promise to those who come? What is the benefit of responding to his call? The *promise* for believers is they will find rest for their souls. All those who come to him will take his yoke, learn from him, and as they do these things, will find their souls to be at peace. This rest is connected with the Sabbath rest explained in Hebrews 3:7–4:16 (esp. 4:3–11): even though it is ultimately a future reality, it can be experienced in part now (“today,” Heb 4:7).⁶⁶ Jesus’s promise of soul rest does not eliminate the need for physical work, nor does he promise his disciples they will not struggle, go through trials, or suffer in this life. But those in Christ will have an inner “rest” that only comes from the salvation found in him because their sins are forgiven (Eph 1:7), they have been reconciled with God and are at peace with him (Rom 5:1), and all the promises of God are theirs in Christ (2 Cor 1:20), as they await their future inheritance (Eph 1:14). Therefore, through all the trials and sufferings, weary and burdened souls can experience rest. Their salvation is accomplished, and their souls can joyfully receive that good news by faith. Jesus’s yoke is easy and his burden is light because he is lowly and humble in heart. The “paradox” of an easy yoke and a light burden “is to be resolved in the experience of the Christian life.”⁶⁷ His call for all to come to him is a heart-felt offer that delights to see those in need come. As the Lord, he knows

New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 477.

⁶⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 450.

⁶⁶ “The rest is both present and future, both the present relationship with God and the eternal rest in heaven.” Osborne, *Matthew*, 442.

⁶⁷ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 478.

that he is the focus of true life and that only his truth will set sinners free. He promises rest for weary souls and has the authority to deliver on his promises, both now and forever. True and lasting change is centered on the person and work of Christ and happens as sinners come to, and remain in, him. Change will come, but as Andrews notes, “resting in Christ is always the starting point . . . you need him first.”⁶⁸

Galatians 5:13–6:10

Biblical change happens as believers cultivate life in the Spirit by sowing to the desires of the Spirit. Those in Christ have the Spirit and the ability to put off the desires of the flesh and live in the Spirit, which is true freedom. Furthermore, this Spirit-produced freedom is expressed through sacrificial love toward one another as they bear each other’s burdens within the community of church. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul deals directly with some serious gospel issues. The Galatians were turning to a different gospel from the one Paul had preached to them (1:6). This “gospel” was pulling them back into slavery to the law as they sought to be justified by works of the law (5:4). But Paul makes one thing plain—no one is justified by works of the law, but instead by faith in Christ (2:16). “It is clear,” he writes, “that no one is justified before God by the law, because the righteous will live by faith” (3:11). Believers in Christ are no longer under the law (3:25); consequently, Paul earnestly warns them not to submit again to slavery under the law because they are free in Christ (5:1). Some teachers were persuading those in the churches to turn from the gospel Paul had preached (5:7), and these preachers were to be cursed (1:9). For these reasons, Paul spends the first few chapters of his letter defending his apostolic authority and the gospel he preached (1:1–2:21). His point is clear: both he and his message are to be trusted and thus the theology of the Judaizers should not be trusted (3:1–4:11).⁶⁹ The heart of the gospel is at stake and so implications

⁶⁸ Andrews, “More than a Proof Text,” 68.

⁶⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

for believers in their daily lives is massive. On one side is the danger to live under the law and replace justification by faith with justification by works of the law. Paul rejects this view as anti-gospel. On the other side is the danger of rejecting the law and using this “freedom” to live according to one’s own sinful desires (cf. Rom 6:1–2). This, too, is anti-gospel and merely trading one form of slavery (to the law) with another (to one’s sinful desires or flesh). Contrary to both of these distortions of the gospel, David DeSilva argues that Paul will “show how the Spirit . . . provides sufficient guidance and support for them to rise above the power of the flesh and to live virtuously in God’s sight.”⁷⁰

Serve One Another through Love (5:13–15)

In 5:13, Paul begins to address more specifically the question, “How should Christians live?”⁷¹ He argues that their new lives in Christ have “the direction (love) and power (Spirit) that they need to live godly lives.”⁷² The sin within them will be overcome not through the law, but through the work of the Spirit as believers cooperate with him and bear his fruit. It seems Paul has anticipated a possible overreaction to his teaching on freedom from the law and, as Schreiner writes, he wants to be clear: “Freedom from law

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 330. My outline follows Schreiner: 4:12–20 (Follow Paul’s example by living in freedom from the Mosaic law); 4:21–5:1 (Stand in the freedom that is in Christ); 5:2–12 (Do not submit to circumcision). Schreiner, *Galatians*, 339. According to Ronald Fung, “He is taking issue with the false position that freedom from the law issues in moral license—a conclusion either mistakenly drawn by his own converts or, more probably (cf. on 2:17, 21; 5:6), wrongly considered by his opponents to be the consequence of his preaching.” Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 243. Moo’s summary of this section is as follows: “The Spirit enables believers to overcome the continuing power of the flesh and, by stimulating love for others, provides for the true fulfillment of the law.” Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 339.

⁷⁰ David A. DeSilva, *The Letter to the Galatians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), ebook, paragraph 1, sec. VIII.

⁷¹ Moo, *Galatians*, 340. Moo sees two words dominating Gal 5:13–6:20: Spirit and love. Moo, *Galatians*, 339. Longenecker highlights three emphases of Paul in this section on Christian freedom: love, serving one another, and the Spirit. Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 41 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 236.

⁷² Moo, *Galatians*, 348.

does not mean freedom from all moral obligations.”⁷³ Paul begins by reminding the churches that they were indeed called to be free, and there is genuine freedom found in Christ, the freedom in which believers ought to live. But what does it mean to be “free”? Paul will explain more of the nature of this freedom, but he first emphasizes that it is not a freedom to live according to the flesh, since freedom from the law should never lead one into sin.⁷⁴ Instead of using their freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, they are to use their freedom to serve one another through love. They are free to express their love by serving others!⁷⁵ This love is an expression of their faith in Christ (5:6) that leads them to serve one another in fulfillment of the law (5:14; cf. Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39–40).⁷⁶ Others might go back into slavery by receiving again the yoke of the law, but the dangerous overcorrection Paul now addresses is the temptation to go back into slavery by living according to the flesh. Both are forms of slavery and damage believers since both are rejections of the gospel of Christ.

Walk by the Spirit (5:16–26)

How then are Christians to practice this mutual service and live free from the

⁷³ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 330.

⁷⁴ “True freedom must never be equated with natural human desires.” Schreiner, *Galatians*, 336. Moo writes, “In the context of this letter, freedom means liberation from the powers of the old age: sin, the ‘elements of the world,’ false gods, and especially the law.” Moo, *Galatians*, 343. Timothy George defines flesh as “fallen human nature, the center of human pride and self-willing.” Timothy George, *Galatians*, New American Commentary, vol. 30 (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 377.

⁷⁵ Schreiner writes, “True freedom liberates believers from their selfish will so that they find joy in serving others.” Schreiner, *Galatians*, 334. Also Fung, “However free believers may be, they are not their own; the goal of their freedom is mutual service through love.” Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 245. Fung believes love is not the motivation or manner, but the means by which they serve one another. Moo, contrary to Fung, sees love as the reason and manner in which believers serve others. Moo, *Galatians*, 345. George states it well: “Christian freedom is freedom to love and therefore freedom to serve.” George, *Galatians*, 378. As does Bruce, who argues, “The call to freedom, then, is a call to oneness in Christ and to loving service within the believing community.” F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 241.

⁷⁶ Fung makes the point that love is not the motivation or manner, but the means by which they serve one another. Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 244. His distinction between manner and means seems unnecessary.

desires of the flesh? Paul's solution is to walk by the Spirit,⁷⁷ and if they do, they will certainly not carry out the desires of the flesh (5:16). A life lived in the Spirit will not be dominated by the flesh but will walk in true freedom from sin. While a believer has been born of the Spirit and given new life in him, which solidifies his fundamental identity in Christ, there is still the need to put the flesh (cf. Col 3:5 "earthly nature") to death. The Spirit gives power to live a new life, but the believer must also choose to walk by the Spirit.⁷⁸ Power over sin does not eliminate the presence of sin in the believer, nor does it remove him from the temptation, or opportunity, to live according to the flesh. This reality means there are now competing desires warring against each other within the heart of believers (5:17), even if their overall life in the Spirit is "optimistic" toward sin.⁷⁹ The Spirit will lead the church (5:18),⁸⁰ as those free from the law and flesh walk by the Spirit (5:16).

Even though the works of the flesh are "obvious" (5:19–21), Paul still identifies specific sins, since whether one is in living in the flesh or Spirit "can be discerned objectively."⁸¹ Those who live in sin are slaves to the flesh (John 8:34) and though he does not intend to be exhaustive ("and anything similar"), the works of the flesh Paul lists are varied. His main goal is to warn these believers not to live according

⁷⁷ "The 'walk' of the believer is determined by the Spirit, who both directs and empowers Christian living." Moo, *Galatians*, 353.

⁷⁸ Walking by the Spirit means to "be under the constant, moment-by-moment direction, control, and guidance of the Spirit." Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 249. Schreiner highlights the tension in the verse between divine enablement and human choice. See Schreiner, *Galatians*, 343. In reference to v.18, Fung states, "He must let himself be led by the Spirit—that is, actively choose to stand on the side of the Spirit over against the flesh." Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 251.

⁷⁹ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 345. Fung understands the last phrase to mean "that in the Spirit-flesh conflict it is impossible for the believer to remain neutral: he either serves the flesh or follows the Spirit." Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 251. For an overview of the three main interpretations, with a hesitant acceptance of Schreiner's and Fung's view, see Moo, *Galatians*, 355–56.

⁸⁰ George offers a helpful reminder: "Paul's words were addressed to the entire believing community." George, *Galatians*, 388.

⁸¹ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 345. George notes the contrast is between the *works* of the flesh and the *fruit* of the Spirit. One is the "products of fallen human beings" and the other "is the result of his indwelling presence." George, *Galatians*, 390.

to the flesh, with the goal they can fully mature in Christ (Col 1:28). The stakes are high, because the heart that loves the flesh and habitually lives according to it will not inherit the kingdom of God, for it becomes clear that it has not trusted in the true gospel (5:21).⁸² Those who have been justified by faith are those who “once lived” according to the flesh (Eph 2:3), but—praise be to God—they were washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God (1 Cor 6:11). To live according to the flesh as a slave is in the past for the believer; the dominating power of the old self was crucified with Christ (5:24; cf. Rom 6:6–7). Those in Christ can, and will, live differently.

What is the evidence of the Spirit’s leading? What does the Spirit produce in those who keep in step with him? “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (5:22–23).⁸³ This fruit is not opposed to (or by) the law in any way and cannot be created by the law.⁸⁴ As believers live in, are led by, and keep in step with the Spirit, they will gradually replace anger with gentleness, jealousy with goodness, drunkenness with self-control, sexual immorality with love, and factions with peace. Love can be seen as the primary fruit of the Spirit and is defined “as giving oneself for others so that they are encouraged and strengthened to give themselves more fully to God.”⁸⁵ The reason believers have the ability, or power, to live this new life is that the Spirit works in them through faith in Christ. Through faith in the gospel of Christ, believers have been adopted by the Spirit,

⁸² “Those who are slaves to the works of the flesh show themselves to be no heirs of the kingdom of God.” George, *Galatians*, 398.

⁸³ Fung on the singular “fruit” of the Spirit: It “shows that the nine graces mentioned are not, so to say, different jewels; rather, they are different facets of the same jewel which cohere and show forth their luster simultaneously.” Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 262. For seeing love as the first and primary fruit, see Schreiner, *Galatians*, 348.

⁸⁴ Like Schreiner suggests, it seems best to take both views here—no law prohibits fruit of the Spirit, and the law cannot produce this fruit. Schreiner, *Galatians*, 350. See also Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 273.

⁸⁵ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 349.

made sons and daughters of God, and cry out to him as their heavenly Father (4:6). This adoption in Christ means they belong to him and have therefore crucified their flesh with its passions and desires in him (5:24).⁸⁶ Believers in Christ have been transformed at the level of heart desire, and the flesh no longer rules them through its passions and desires. They can now put to death what has been crucified with Christ (Col 3:5), call out to God as Father, and since they live by the Spirit can “keep in step with the Spirit” (5:25),⁸⁷ as they cultivate his fruit. To experience freedom lived with, in, and by the Spirit, believers must be intentional to cultivate change in cooperation with the Spirit.⁸⁸ It is worth noting that these commands and exhortations are plural and thus primarily apply to the corporate body of believers. This communal application means that Christians who have covenanted together in a local church are to keep in step with the Spirit *as a community* and love each other in a way that mutually benefits the whole and avoids unnecessary conflict (5:26).

Bear One Another’s Burdens and Sow to Reap (6:1–10)

Those in the Spirit⁸⁹ bear a particular responsibility for the spiritual good of

⁸⁶ Commenting on the addition of the phrase “with its passions and desires,” Longenecker concludes that Paul “lays stress on the completeness of the crucifixion involved, for not only are the outward manifestations of the flesh destroyed but also its dispositions and cravings put to death.” Longenecker, *Galatians*, 264. Or as Schreiner clearly states, “The flesh has been dealt a decisive blow at the cross.” Schreiner, *Galatians*, 351. Furthermore, Moo explains, “The crucifixion of the flesh does not mean that it is totally destroyed but that it is definitely judged and its power decisively broken.” Moo, *Galatians*, 368.

⁸⁷ Bruce summarizes, “Living by the Spirit is the root; walking by the Spirit is the fruit, and that fruit is nothing less than the practical reproduction of the character (and therefore the conduct) of Christ in the lives of his people.” Bruce, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 257. Fung relates “live by the Spirit” and “keep in step with the Spirit” with the indicative/imperative distinction. He writes, “Precisely because the Spirit is the source of their life, they are to keep in step continuously with the Spirit in their conduct.” Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 276; see also Fung’s indicative and imperative excursus (278–83); George, *Galatians*, 406.

⁸⁸ Schreiner, commenting on v. 25 and the phrase “keep in step with the Spirit” concludes, “Life in the Spirit is not on automatic pilot, for the battle against the flesh continues (5:17), so that believers must continue to walk by the Spirit (5:16) and be led by the Spirit (5:18).” Schreiner, *Galatians*, 357.

⁸⁹ The “spiritual” ones are all believers in Christ for “all of the Galatians received the Spirit when they heard the message of the gospel (3:2, 5). . . . Therefore, as those who are walking by the Spirit (5:16), are led by the Spirit (5:18), and are keeping in step with the Spirit (5:25), they are to reestablish

their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ (6:1). When a brother or sister is overtaken by sin, his fellow believers are to pursue him with the goal of restoration to the body (cf. Matt 18:15–20). But they must approach him with a gentle spirit and caution, so that they do not fall into temptation as well. Believers fulfill the law of Christ⁹⁰ by carrying one another’s burdens (6:2) as a practical application of service through love (5:13–14). These struggles and burdens are varied, as some may be physical or financial, others relational, still others more emotional, etc., and Paul exhorts the Galatians to carry them together.⁹¹ Schreiner puts it simply: “Life in the Spirit is community life.”⁹² Believers are freed from the selfish desire to look out only for themselves, and instead they take up the humble example of Christ to consider others over themselves and look out for their interests as well (Phil 2:3–4). Any pride that might come through comparison with others or taking credit for their fruit is not the way of love. Each person should examine his own work, for that is what he will be held accountable to in the end (6:3–5).⁹³

To conclude this section of his letter, Paul gives a “fundamental principle of the Christian life”⁹⁴ in 6:7 that helps inform the discussion on flesh versus the Spirit and

those who have fallen.” Schreiner, *Galatians*, 358. See also George, *Galatians*, 409–10; Moo, *Galatians*, 374–75.

⁹⁰ For a discussion on the “law of Christ,” see Schreiner, *Galatians*, 359–60. Most basically, it is the command to love. Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 288.

⁹¹ To bear others’ burdens well, Moo writes, “will often mean entering into their lives with empathy and a concern to take on ourselves whatever of their own sorrows and difficulties that we can.” Moo, *Galatians*, 376.

⁹² Schreiner, *Galatians*, 363. He also writes, “What it means to live in the church of Jesus Christ is to help others as they face the difficulties of life.” Schreiner, *Galatians*, 363. George emphasizes, “The duty of bearing one another’s burdens is stated in the imperative mood; it is not an option but a command.” George, *Galatians*, 415. And Longenecker argues this command “is the exact opposite of libertine attitudes based on a desire to live solely for one’s own self—the whole intent of Jesus’ example and teaching comes to fulfillment within the church.” Longenecker, *Galatians*, 276.

⁹³ For this interpretation, see Schreiner (following Witherington), *Galatians*, 362. Also Moo, *Galatians*, 378–82. Moo’s summary of 6:3–5 is helpful and clear: “Each believer, Paul argues, should avoid the pride that comes when they do not truly understand themselves (v. 3). Any sense of pride should be based on critical self-reflection and not on a comparison with others (v. 4). This is because, on the day of judgment, each believer will need to answer for themselves alone (v. 5).” Moo, *Galatians*, 378.

⁹⁴ Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 294.

slavery versus freedom. He writes, “For whatever a person sows he will also reap,”⁹⁵ meaning, his current heart responses and experiences are drawing from pre-established beliefs, desires, and decisions to the degree that he has been either sowing to the Spirit or to the flesh.⁹⁶ There are only two choices: one will sow to the Spirit (5:16, 18, 25) through loving service leading to life, or he will he sow to the sinful and selfish flesh, leading to destruction (6:8; 5:21).⁹⁷ To sow to the Spirit is not an easy pursuit, and the temptation to give up is real, but believers must not grow tired of doing good, trusting the future benefits will be worth it (6:9).⁹⁸ They ought to continue to work for the good of all, while at the same time bearing a particular responsibility to help meet the physical and spiritual needs of those in the household of faith—their brothers and sisters in Christ (6:10).

Biblical change can happen for believers, but only as they actively cultivate life in the Spirit by intentionally sowing to the desires of the Spirit. It is a long-term fight at the level of heart desires, but because of the cross of Christ, they can fight victoriously as they live and keep in step with the Spirit. Believers will reap what they sow, and thus will either experience the freedom to which they have been called in Christ or will go

⁹⁵ Even if, as Schreiner argues, Paul is especially focused on giving financially, he believes the principle can and should be applied generally. “The words ‘sowing’ and ‘reaping’ in this context refer especially to generosity in giving. . . . It is probably the case that what Paul says in 6:7 cannot be limited to giving, that we have a principle that sums up life as a whole.” Schreiner, *Galatians*, 368.

⁹⁶ For an extensive treatment of the heart and its responses, see Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2016); in particular, chap. 2 focuses on explaining how present responses have their roots in pre-established beliefs, desires, and commitments of the heart. See Jeremy Pierre, “The Dynamic Expression of the Heart, in *Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 29–52. I found Pierre’s illustration (pp. 31–32) comparing the heart to an icy mountain cap thawing under warming conditions into a lively river extremely helpful. He concludes, “The immediate response is simply the expression of the established character of the heart.” Pierre, *Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 31–32.

⁹⁷ What is at stake is not merely “degrees of reward” but “life itself: salvation.” Moo, *Galatians*, 386–87.

⁹⁸ In Fung’s words the verse is saying, “If we persevere in doing good, we shall at the appointed time reap the fruit of our labors.” Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 297. The present reality of “visible results” is uncertain even if the future “reaping” is certain. Therefore, believers “must be cautious in putting too much stock” in these visible and present results. George, *Galatians*, 426.

back to slavery to the law or sinful flesh. Their Spirit-empowered freedom in Christ will be expressed through sacrificial love toward others as they bear each other's burdens within the community of the church.

Psalm 1

Meditation on God's Word is a primary means of biblical change, as God's Spirit uses his Word in the context of the community of faith to mature his people. Steve Midgley argues meditation on Scripture is a key discipline the Lord uses to "turn commitment into reality, ambition into action, lofty ideals into life lived."⁹⁹ The blessed man delights in God's instruction and meditates on it day and night, and thus will bear fruit and persevere as the Lord graciously watches over him. Psalms 1 and 2 introduce the book of Psalms,¹⁰⁰ with the first psalm calling the righteous to walk in the blessed way by continually meditating on God's Word and thus allowing it to be their source of nourishment.¹⁰¹ This psalm shows the people of God the path to a happy, fruitful and healthy life, but to walk in this way requires they not only read God's Word but *meditate* on it.¹⁰² To delight in and meditate on the Word also means they will not follow the ways of the world, for these two paths in life lead in opposite directions.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Steve Midgley, "Meditating for a Change: Embracing a Lost Art," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 34, no. 1 (2020): 20.

¹⁰⁰ "Book One of the Psalter, as a whole, may be read as the story of the reign of David." Rolf A. Jacobson, *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 55. Even though the author is unknown, because book 1 of Psalms (Psalms 1–41) is overwhelmingly Davidic, it seems best, as Wilson proposes, to place Ps 1 and Ps 2 "to/for/by/concerning/under the authority of/in the style of David." Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 89. Early copies have these opening psalms separate from the rest and without number, giving further evidence to their introductory purpose. Wilson, *Psalms*, 92. "Psalms 1 and 2 together form the introduction to the whole Psalter. Psalm 1 introduces the human responsibility for remaining faithful to the Law of the LORD in a confusing and chaotic world." Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 54.

¹⁰¹ The language of "blessed" seeks to draw others in and announce, "the blessings of a lifestyle in order to encourage readers and hearers to follow this commended lifestyle." Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 28.

¹⁰² "The message of the psalm centers on the importance of meditating on God's word." Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 182.

¹⁰³ Wilson clearly states, "How one responds to the revelation of God unleashed by reading the

The Blessed One (1:1–3)

Psalm 1 contrasts the righteous and wicked as well as their two opposite ways of life.¹⁰⁴ The way of the righteous is to delight in the Lord through his Word, and he is therefore blessed as the Lord “watches over” him (1:1–3, 6), but the way of the wicked is fleeting and ends in death (1:4–6).

The opening verse describes the “happy” or “blessed” life “refer[ring] to the joyful spiritual condition of those who are right with God and the pleasure and satisfaction that is derived from that.”¹⁰⁵ This blessed life is not “reward,” but is something one cultivates as he lives a certain way.¹⁰⁶ In the Beatitudes, Jesus uses the same language (Matt 5:3–12). Psalm 1 will call the people of God to true life, but first it highlights how the blessed one will *not* walk in the advice of the wicked, stand in the pathway with sinners, nor sit in the company of mockers. In short, he will not live like the rest of the world, since “the way of the righteous must struggle against the traffic, buffeting against the currents of peer pressure and group-think.”¹⁰⁷ The psalm acknowledges the temptation and potential influences of the world and its deepening damage as one’s thoughts, behaviors, and relationships conform to the wicked path.¹⁰⁸

psalms determines one’s ultimate destiny.” Wilson, *Psalms*, 93.

¹⁰⁴ Ross divides the psalm in three parts (vv. 1–3, 4–5, 6). Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 184. As does Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 28.

¹⁰⁵ Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 185.

¹⁰⁶ Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 61. Craigie continues, “Just as a tree with a constant water supply *naturally* flourishes, so too the person who avoids evil and delights in Torah *naturally* prospers, for such a person is living within the guidelines set down by the Creator.” Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 61.

¹⁰⁷ Jacobson, *The Book of Psalms*, 60.

¹⁰⁸ Kidner makes an interesting connection not in walk, stand, and sit (he sees those as three degrees of departure from God), but in the words *counsel*, *way*, and *seat* as they “draw attention to the realms of thinking, behaving, and belonging, in which a person’s fundamental choice of allegiance is made and carried through.” Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 64. The progression of walking, standing, and sitting with sinners is taken by some to suggest a “gradual descent into evil.” Wilson, *Psalms*, 94. Or Jacobson suggests, “Perhaps the idea is that sin is a temptation that one first tries out, later becomes accustomed to, and finally becomes a habit or lifestyle.” Jacobson, *The Book of Psalms*, 61. Or Ross notes, “In the three descriptions of the unrighteous there is a growing intensity, signifying that what may start as a harmless bit of advice from an unbeliever may end up with a dangerously close connection to those who want to destroy the faith.” Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 187.

The blessed one will not walk in the advice of the wicked; his thoughts and beliefs will not be shaped by those who rebel against God's Word and ways. Despite their attempts to persuade, he will not be conformed to the wicked age, but will be transformed by the renewing of his mind, so that he may discern the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God (Rom 12:2). Additionally, the blessed one will not stand in the pathway with sinners, meaning he will not identify with those that live in a pattern, or lifestyle, of sin. People are influenced through information and arguments, and also through example and relationships. Both can draw one away from the Lord; therefore, the blessed man will avoid the pathways of sinners. Finally, the blessed one will not sit in the company of mockers. Mockers, Wilson observes, "actively seek through their mockery to express disdain for right living and seek to belittle and undermine those who want to be righteous."¹⁰⁹ To live with such people is almost certainly to be influenced by them as they foster a sense of belonging. Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 15:33 is appropriate: "Bad company corrupts good morals." Israel, and by extension all the people of God, are to engage the world in a way that influences and impacts others and points them to the Lord. But the people of God must be careful to assess whether they are impacting others, or rather being impacted by others. "The point of this threefold intensification," writes Ross, "is to show that if people at first take their spiritual guidance from unbelievers instead of God, they will gradually begin living like the world and become more entangled in it."¹¹⁰

The blessed one will not allow the wicked to negatively influence him but will instead intentionally allow something else to shape and mold him. His pursuit is to delight in the Lord's instructions and meditate on it day and night because he knows that

¹⁰⁹ Wilson, *Psalms*, 95.

¹¹⁰ Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 188.

“whatever really shapes a man’s thinking shapes his life.”¹¹¹ It does not seem necessary to limit the “Law” or “Lord’s instruction” to the Pentateuch, because this opening psalm calls all to meditate on the book of Psalms and, by extension, all of Scripture.¹¹² Notice the blessed one finds his “delight” in it. The act of meditation will be a joy to him as his heart desires to read, understand, think on, and obey God’s Word. The instruction of the Lord will be more precious than pure gold and sweeter to him than honey dripping from a honeycomb (Ps 19:10). Because he delights in it, he meditates on it day and night, and because he meditates on it day and night, his love for it continues to grow.

This exhortation for Israel to meditate on God’s Word is not new. The greatest command given to Israel, the Shema, calls the nation to love the Lord with all their heart, and to keep the Lord’s commands in their hearts by repeating them to their children, talking about them constantly, and putting them in places that will serve as reminders (Deut 6:4–9). Joshua picks up this command and exhorts the nation as they enter the Promised Land that the Book of the Law should not depart from their mouths, but they should meditate on it day and night so they can walk in obedience and prosper (Josh 1:8). To mediate is more than reading or even understanding; it is a heart exercise where one immerses himself in the Scriptures in order to apply understanding to the heart, leading to changed desires and affections.¹¹³ In other words, to meditate on a truth is to start to find “a home in God’s teaching.”¹¹⁴ As one memorizes, understands, prays, obeys, and speaks God’s Word to others and to himself, he is practicing the spiritual discipline of biblical

¹¹¹ Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 64.

¹¹² Jacobson argues “the Lord’s instruction” is the best translation and way to understand the psalm. Jacobson, *The Book of Psalms*, 61. He argues, “Psalm 1 is, significantly, and instructional psalm that teaches that the psalms are God’s instruction” (56). See also Brevard Childs, quoted in Wilson, *Psalms*, 96. In an even broader sense, it seems appropriate to expand the “Lord’s instruction” to cover all of Scripture. See Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 188–89, esp. 189n18; Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 29.

¹¹³ Midgley, “Meditating for a Change,” 25.

¹¹⁴ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 29.

meditation.¹¹⁵ The Bible calls believers to dwell on Scripture and fill their minds with its truth to the point where it begins to influence *everything* in their lives—what they believe, what they desire, and how they decide to act.¹¹⁶ Psalm 1 teaches meditation on God’s Word as the means by which the people of God avoid the influence of the wicked and live in the way of the righteous.

Jesus also makes a strong contrast in his Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:24–27). He concludes his sermon to his disciples by contrasting two ways to live—there is the way of wisdom and the way of folly. The wise man is the one who hears and obeys Jesus’s words, for he is like a man who built his house on a solid foundation of rock. It is firm, secure, and long-lasting. But those who hear the words but do not live them out are the fools who build their foundation on the sand. Their foundation will not last against the storms. In a similar way, according to Psalm 1, internalizing and living out the Word of God is the difference between a healthy, strong, fruitful tree rooted in the ground (1:3) and an isolated, weak, dry chaff blown away by the wind (1:4). The focus of the blessed man’s heart is to live in God’s Word. There are many things to consider in life, but all other tasks and joys must be understood and experienced in view of this greater focus. The believer must intentionally avoid a distracted thought life so that he can continually—day and night—think deeply about the Word. He is consumed with the Word, and as he dwells on it, it infiltrates his being and begins to change him.¹¹⁷ Meditation on Scripture is one of the primary means of living by faith in the God of the Scriptures.

¹¹⁵ Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 189. Midgley makes the case for meditation being the “middle ground” between Bible reading and prayer, meaning Bible reading and meditation done rightly naturally leads one to prayer over those truths. Midgley, “Meditating for a Change,” 29–30.

¹¹⁶ Wilson makes a similar point: “Torah so feeds and shapes the mind and heart of those who give themselves to it that their feet are kept firmly on the path of life.” Wilson, *Psalms*, 96–97.

¹¹⁷ “Such daily and continuing familiarity with these texts—more than any other, I believe,” writes Wilson, “ultimately *masters and shapes us to the will of God* in ways we can hardly anticipate.” Wilson, *Psalms*, 100.

The result of delighting in the Word and meditating on it day and night is that the blessed one will be like a tree planted beside flowing streams. Jacobson rightly brings attention to this visual image: “The book of Psalms begins with a picture. Not with a prayer, or a hymn of praise, but a picture.”¹¹⁸ The righteous one has positioned himself like a healthy tree near a constant source of life in the flowing streams of God’s Word, and “as the water makes the tree grow, the word causes the person to grow spiritually.”¹¹⁹ The image is of abundant health leading to strong roots, which are constantly nourished and lead to a long and fruitful life.¹²⁰ Both the tree *and* the stream of water are crucial. “The righteous person is not just like a tree, but one that has been *transplanted* next to a stream!”¹²¹ In contrast to the one who walks, stands, and sits with those of the world, the blessed man meditates upon the Word, and thus is planted beside the flowing streams of God’s gracious presence and counsel.

Jeremiah 17:5–8 describes the difference between those who trust in the Lord and those who trust in mankind. He writes that the person who trusts in the Lord “will be like a tree planted by water” (17:8), that will have deep and strong roots and will produce fruit. Psalm 1 follows a similar image of a tree planted by a reliable source of nourishment which will then lead to fruit and prosperity. The biblical image shows the way of the righteous to be good, beautiful, and stable. If one delights in the Word and meditates on it day and night, he *will* be nourished in his soul and *will* in time bear the

¹¹⁸ Jacobson, *The Book of Psalms*, 64.

¹¹⁹ Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 190.

¹²⁰ Jacobson develops the image well: “This image is well-suited for the life characterized by study of torah. The nourishment that sustains the tree is hidden; it is internal nourishment that feeds the life of the tree, drawn up through invisible roots. Yet the life thus imparted suffices to fortify the tree against the harsh conditions of Israel’s arid climate to such an extent that it never withers, but faithfully bears its fruit at harvest time.” Jacobson, *The Book of Psalms*, 62. “It is an image of resilience.” Charry, *Psalms 1–50*, 3.

¹²¹ Jacobson, *The Book of Psalms*, 64. He goes on to explain how the stream is the Lord’s instruction and we are the tree. “We must identify ourselves with the tree *and* the water with God’s instruction. Like a tree that quietly, invisibly, constantly receives strength and life through its roots, so are we given God’s Word as a steady source of life.”

fruit of faith as he prospers under the Lord's hand. But just as a tree does not bear fruit quickly but must grow and develop over time, so the fruit of meditation is not immediate. It takes time for the Word to cultivate new thoughts, desires, and commitments in the believer, but it will happen as the Spirit uses the Word in the context of the community of faith.

What does it mean that “whatever he does prospers” (1:3)? In the context of the psalm, what will the blessed man, who delights in and meditates on the Lord's instruction day and night, do? The psalm assumes he will live in faithful obedience to God's Word, and, as Ross clarifies, “doing *that* is what will succeed [emphasis added].”¹²² Meditation is a means to faithfully walking with the Lord in obedience because it immerses God's people in the truth, which changes them (cf. John 17:17; Rom 12:2; Jas 1:22–25). Furthermore, as demonstrated by the Old Testament saints who lived by faith, to prosper does not mean one will experience only health, wealth, and comfort. Some by faith “conquered kingdoms, shut the mouths of lions, escaped the edge of the sword, put foreign armies to flight, and received back their dead” (Heb 11:33–35). But others by faith experienced mocking, scourging, and imprisonment. Some were stoned, sawn in two or were killed by the sword. Some wandered about in poverty and were homeless, afflicted and mistreated (Heb 11:36–38). No matter what their experience in this life, by faith they persevered to the end and ultimately trusted that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28). Therefore, to “prosper,” according to Scripture, is to live by faith in the Lord under his gracious, watchful care. Every experience of sufferings that comes to the righteous is determined by the better and wiser plan of God (cf. other biblical examples of “prospering” in 2 Cor 1:8–9; 12:9–10; 1 Pet 1:6–7; Matt 5:10–12).

¹²² Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 191.

The Wicked (1:4–5)

The wicked, however, do not have these promises. Their joys will be fleeting, like chaff unconnected to the source of life, and thus lacking any depth or security, which the wind blows away. What appears to be convincing advice, an appealing path, and enjoyable company in verse 1, all turn out to be empty and destructive in the end. The Psalmist wants his readers and listeners to consider the two paths and decide which they will pursue. Wilson presents the options well: “The contrast is acute: between fruitful tree and useless chaff; between well-watered stability and dry, dusty, windblown impermanence.”¹²³

In addition to the relative health and beauty of the righteous way over the wicked one, there are also clear future consequences to each path. The world might seem reasonable, appealing, or convincing now, but in the end, the wicked will not stand in the judgment. They will have no defense and will be condemned by the very Law they rejected during their lives, leading to their exclusion from the community of the righteous. Previously, they sought to persuade the righteous few to join them in their wicked way of life, but now when seeking a place in the assembly of the righteous, they will find themselves excluded.

Two Ends (1:6)

Ultimately, the Lord will “watch over” the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will lead to ruin. There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death (Prov 14:12), and so it is with the wicked, sinners, and mockers. In contrast, the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, meaning he is *with* them, “knows” them intimately, and promises to stay with them to guide them through life by his gracious and wise providence.¹²⁴ The choice is ultimately between life and death. The paths are

¹²³ Wilson, *Psalms*, 98.

¹²⁴ “The verb *yada* is often translated as “watch over,” to convey the providential nature of God’s care. But the more literal *know* is used here to convey a more intimate and internal care.” Jacobson,

separate, and the ends are opposite (Matt 7:13–14). Will one follow the word of man or the Word of God? Will he delight in the ways of man or in the ways of God? The blessed man will delight in the Lord’s instruction and meditate on it day and night; consequently, he will cultivate faithful obedience and increasingly resemble a healthy, stable, fruitful tree planted by the flowing stream of God’s Word. Regular meditation on Scripture is the delight of God’s people and one of the God-ordained means of cultivating true change and perseverance in the faith.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that the Bible provides a framework for understanding change. Biblical change happens as the people of God begin to rightly understand and trust who God is in his goodness, sovereignty, and presence with them. To change they must also start to understand who they are fundamentally as his people who suffer and sin in this world. Furthermore, the entirety of one’s Christian life, and therefore the change process as well, is centered on who Jesus is as the gentle and humble Savior calling men and women to follow him. As sinners come to and remain with Jesus, they change. And finally, the Bible presents the God-ordained means of the Spirit using the Word in the context of the church to cultivate true and lasting change. In short, believers change—and help others do the same—as they together trust in the gospel of Christ and sow to the Spirit.

The Book of Psalms, 63. See also Ross, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 192–93.

CHAPTER 3

A CRITERIA TO EVALUATE COUNSELING CURRICULA APPLIED TO TWO EXAMPLES IN CENTRAL ASIA

This chapter outlines the essential criteria to use when evaluating counseling curricula from a biblical counseling perspective, and then applies these criteria to the mission field in Central Asia by explaining and evaluating two curricula being used for counseling and care. These two examples do not represent the same theological beliefs or practices, but each is intended to help believers here work through various struggles in their lives with the ultimate goal of change. The first curriculum, based on Rusty Rustenbach's *A Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer* (LIHP), is used primarily in one-on-one conversations where a facilitator guides another through a prayer session, asking God to reveal hurtful experiences from one's past to identify the origin of his or her current struggles. After the Lord brings an experience to mind, often through images or impressions, the facilitator or counselee will ask God to reveal a specific hurt or emotion associated with that experience. Then the goal is to identify what lie was believed as a result of that hurt and to replace it with truth. The truth will break the bondage of past damage and bring freedom and healing, and thus a changed life. The second curriculum, *The Wounded Heart* (WH) by Dan Allender, and *The Journey Begins* (JB), a twelve-session workbook based on his book, seeks to help sexual abuse victims. Unfortunately, like many places in the world, sexual abuse is prevalent in Central Asia, and local pastors have felt the need for help in this area for some time.¹ WH and the JB

¹ It is hard to estimate numbers and percentages because of the extremely low reporting rate. But according to one prominent and experienced local pastor, "We expect all new members to have experienced domestic and/or sexual abuse in their past. It is almost a given. Male and female."

lessons happen within small groups of four to six participants and emphasize that change happens through honesty, community, and bold love.

Both curricula utilize Scripture, encourage honesty, openness, and vulnerability, and aim for inner heart change in the process. They differ from each other and from a biblical counseling perspective in how they utilize Scripture, explain the gospel message, and understand the change process, as well as the role of the local church in change. Christians in the church, and especially those who serve overseas,² must have the ability to evaluate methods, tools, and curricula. The following criteria is meant to provide categories to do this well.

Criteria to Evaluate Counseling Curricula

Any framework for change that claims to be biblical must at minimum be evaluated by four criteria.³ Before examining specific curricula, I will briefly explain each criteria.

How Does It Use Scripture?

The foundation for the Christian life and worldview is the inerrant and sufficient Word of God. Biblical counselors have been, and continue to be, clear on this point.⁴ God's Word is meant to transform lives as his people look to him in faith through the Scriptures. More than anything else, God's people need to hear from him and have him speak into their present experiences and struggles, because God's Word, and it alone,

² My family and I have been serving in Central Asia since 2014.

³ While he does not use these exact four criteria, I learned much from how Powlison critiqued modern integrationists. My categories are an attempt to provide a simple, yet clear and comprehensive, means for average church members to evaluate counseling curricula. In his journal article, Powlison emphasizes the need to understand the role of Scripture (truth, epistemology), the motivation of the human heart (desires, needs), the true gospel that gives a right understanding of God (and centers everything on him) and human nature as fallen sinners in biblical counseling curricula. See David Powlison, "Critiquing Modern Integrationists," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 11, no. 3 (1993): 24–34.

⁴ For an in-depth explanation of how biblical counselors view and use the Scriptures, see Bob Kelleman, ed., *Scripture and Counseling: God's Word for Life in a Broken World* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2014).

can lead to true change and provide the ultimate answers to life's struggles. Any model, tool, or curriculum designed to help believers change will make use of Scripture in some way. But the primary question to evaluate "biblical" counseling curricula is not *if* Scripture is used, but *how* it is used. Furthermore, how are participants learning to use Scripture as they work through a particular curriculum? Are they developing the necessary skills and disciplines that cultivate a long-term healthy use of Scripture? Or are they merely given Scripture references or brief engagements that leave them dependent on the curriculum instead of God's Word?

When evaluating a curriculum, one should ask if the terms are defined biblically. A common problem one encounters when Scripture is not rightly understood and applied is that unbiblical categories and definitions can easily be read back into biblical texts, carrying their secular meanings and baggage with them. For example, the following terms can be defined in radically different ways: healing, heart, change, redemption, need, freedom, and suffering. Does the curriculum seek to define and explain terms within a biblical worldview, or does it assume an extrabiblical definition and impose it on the Scriptures? Similar to this error is the temptation to add biblical texts onto already-developed secular ideas in order to "integrate" them. In these situations, Scripture will almost certainly be misused and functionally subordinate to the secular "truths." Or, as Powlison asserts, "The net effect in every integrationist's system is that secular error eats up biblical truth."⁵

Furthermore, does the curriculum read and understand Scripture passages within their biblical context? Just as biblical terms need to be defined, Scripture must also be read and understood in its original context. Does it consider the textual, epochal, and canonical horizons of Scripture?⁶ Does it first think "then" ("their town") before

⁵ Powlison, "Critiquing Modern Integrationists," 25.

⁶ My understanding of the textual, epochal, and canonical horizons of Scripture comes from my time in Stephen Wellum's hermeneutics class (course 22100, The Southern Baptist Theological

application to “now” (“our town”)?⁷ Is meaning being drawn out of the text or read into it (exegesis vs. eisegesis)? If one were to look up the Scripture references and examine their immediate contexts, would they be teaching the points for which they are referenced? In more thematic studies, Scripture can easily be (mis)used in a “proof-texting” type of way. While it is not inherently wrong to list biblical references in support of one’s argument, each Scripture listed must be examined within its biblical context to determine whether it indeed is supporting one’s argument. A commitment to study Scripture in context will provide the necessary check for curricula in how they use Scripture to build their framework. If, for example, after deeper study of the text, it is determined that the point argued does not arise from that text, either other texts must be examined to determine whether they do indeed argue this point, or else the teaching itself must be rejected or adapted. In other words, for a curriculum to be “biblical,” it must rightly handle the Bible. Furthermore, the best curriculum not only faithfully understands Scripture, but shows participants in the lessons themselves how the conclusions are drawn from the Scriptures. If done well, they offer true hope for change to believers while also equipping them to rightly understand and apply the Scriptures. They can cultivate long-term health by modeling how God’s Word can speak into their present experiences and change them as they rightly engage with it.

What portions of Scripture does the curriculum emphasize? Are any parts of Scripture used to negate other parts of Scripture? For example, are texts that explain suffering and hurt used to deny or downplay other texts about sin and the need for personal responsibility and repentance? One scriptural truth must never be affirmed in a way that rejects another; instead, both must be held in biblical balance. The Bible, writes

Seminary, Louisville, fall 2009).

⁷ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hayes, *Grasping God’s Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020).

Carson, is not “an open-shelved supermarket where we are at perfect liberty to choose only the chocolate bars.”⁸ Or a related question is this: Is everything based on a few isolated texts? Has it made tertiary truths central, and as a result, minimized central truths? If the scriptural emphasis is in the wrong place, those who learn and apply the curriculum will quickly become unbalanced in their beliefs.

Lastly, what role does the curriculum give God’s Word in the change process? Does it play a primary role in change? Is reading, studying, memorizing, singing, praying, speaking, and meditating on God’s Word emphasized throughout? Or is engagement with Scripture minimal or sporadic? For a curriculum to truly be biblical, the Bible needs to be the primary means of change.

What Gospel Does It Proclaim?

The first criterion to evaluate a curriculum of change is to examine how it uses the Bible in general. The next essential criterion to examine is the actual gospel message it proclaims.⁹ The fourfold structure of God, Man, Christ, Response is a helpful gospel outline and because it is being used more regularly here, it will provide the structure here.¹⁰

First, who is God? How is he presented? Which of his characteristics are emphasized? Is it his love, grace, holiness, justice, or forgiveness? How are these

⁸ D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 95. Carson also gives examples of how many allow one truth to cancel out another. In reference to prayer and the tension between human responsibility and divine sovereignty, he writes, “They permit inferences drawn from one pole of the biblical presentation of God to marginalize or eliminate the other pole” (207).

⁹ For a full explanation of the gospel applied to counseling, see Bob Kellemen, ed., *Gospel-Centered Counseling: How Christ Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014). The danger of a deficient or therapeutic gospel is serious. Powlison warns, “This therapeutic gospel may often mention the word ‘Jesus,’ but He has morphed into the *meeter-of-your-needs*, not the Savior from your sins. It corrects Jesus’ work. The therapeutic gospel unhinges *the* gospel.” David Powlison, “The Therapeutic Gospel,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 25, no. 3 (2007): 3.

¹⁰ Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Gospel?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010). This resource has been translated into the local language.

characteristics held in balance with one another? How a curriculum displays God is of utmost importance because, as Powlison writes, “In the light of who he is, you discover who you truly are: a dependent creature, a stray and renegade, a beloved child, a much afflicted human being.”¹¹

Second, one must evaluate how the curriculum understands humanity through questions like these: Are people identified in relation to who God is and how he created them? Can people know and relate to him? Is reconciliation, or peace with God, the elemental need of humanity? What is fundamentally wrong with humanity and the world? Are people essentially broken, wounded, and hurting, or are they rebellious, sinful, and guilty? Why do people do what they do? Is true and lasting heart change possible?

Third, what does the curriculum present as the solution to the problem of sin? Is the person and work of Jesus Christ offered as the fundamental solution to the problems of life? Why did he come, die, and rise from the dead? What is his relationship to the world and sinners now? What role does he play in the change process?

Finally, according to the curriculum under examination, how do people partake of the solution found in Christ? What response is required? Or, in other words, what must people do to experience the salvation found in Christ? Is repentance and living by faith in Christ explicitly taught? Does Christ and his gospel focus on God through the redemption, forgiveness, adoption, and reconciliation found in him? Or are secondary benefits emphasized, like inner peace, restored relationships, or freedom from addictions? In summary, as Powlison writes, “Get first things first. Get the gospel of incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and glory. Live the gospel of repentance, faith, and transformation into the image of the Son. Proclaim the gospel of the coming day when

¹¹ David Powlison, “Counsel and Counseling: Christ’s Message and Ministry Practice Go Together,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32, no. 1 (2018): 3.

eternal life and eternal death are revealed—the Day of Christ.”¹²

How Does Change Happen?

Different curricula view change and the change process differently. For example, when evaluating a curriculum, one should ask whether it presents change as typically happening in an instant or experienced progressively over time? What are the primary means of change? What must one do, if anything, to bring about change? What is God’s role in change? Is change something that needs to happen to you (exorcism, deliverance, second blessing) or something you do in cooperation with God? What words characterize the change process (bondage, spiritual warfare, fight, cultivation, healing, deliverance, etc.)? Should a believer’s attitude toward change be optimistic or pessimistic?

What Is the Role of the Local Church?

Lastly, when evaluating a curriculum, one needs to examine whether the local church is an essential and core component in the change process.¹³ What role do the public ministries of the Word play in counseling, and how do these ministries relate to the private and interpersonal ministries of the Word? What responsibilities do church members have toward one another and how do these responsibilities help cultivate biblical change? Who is able to counsel?

A Guide to Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer

Rusty Rustenbach’s *A Guide to Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer* (LIHP) is gaining popularity as a counseling curriculum for change in Central Asia.¹⁴ After a brief

¹² Powlison, “The Therapeutic Gospel,” 6.

¹³ See Bob Kellemen and Kevin Carson, *Biblical Counseling and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

¹⁴ Rusty Rustenbach, *A Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2011).

overview, it will be evaluated based on the four criteria listed above: use of Scripture, proclaimed gospel, understanding of change, and role of the local church in change. LIHP “has to do with God speaking His life-altering truth into lies we came to believe during hurtful childhood events.”¹⁵ Furthermore, “inner healing focuses on binding up these broken places and setting us free from areas of captivity.”¹⁶ It is based on five main principles: (1) everyone has had their hearts broken; (2) the hearts broke in response to something that happened in the past; (3) one’s reaction to events—not the events themselves—brings about bondage; (4) present difficulties often trigger past pain; (5) and life-changing truth can be known and experienced when God communicates it to someone in a supernatural way.¹⁷ Healing from hurts, freedom from captivity, and a focus on the past are the core elements of LIHP. When it is practiced through a facilitator, it is a three-way conversation between an individual, facilitator, and God, with the facilitator asking God questions and the individual receiving impressions from God, which he or she then tells the facilitator.¹⁸

Whether self-described as such or not, LIHP is a counseling curriculum that seeks to base itself on the Bible (particularly Isa 61:1–2 and Luke 4:18); therefore, it can be described as a biblical counseling curriculum. It seeks to offer help to those with struggles ranging from repetitive unwanted behavior, bondage, or compulsion, to recurring painful emotion, to an overreaction to a present difficulty or trying circumstance.¹⁹ These struggles encompass almost every counseling issue. Because of

¹⁵ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 135.

¹⁶ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 173.

¹⁷ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 32–37.

¹⁸ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 175. Also, “We’ll ask God questions to enlist His omniscient help to reveal any pain buried within us, to take us to the core wounding event, to reveal lies we have come to believe, and to replace those lies with His truth” (71).

¹⁹ Navigators’s People Resources Team, *Facilitating Inner Healing Workbook* (Colorado Springs: Navigators, 2011), 2.

LIHP's growing influence and popularity in overseas work, it is helpful for those engaged overseas and involved in the care of souls to understand and engage with it. Before offering a few areas of critique, I highlight four areas of strength in LIHP.

Strengths and Areas of Agreement

First, LIHP rightly focuses on the inner man for lasting change. Instead of offering a list of rules to modify behavior, the focus of LIHP is the heart. Rustenbach emphasizes, "God is passionate in His desire that His truth would penetrate and reside in the very center of our hearts (see Psalm 51:6)."²⁰ To focus on the heart does not mean LIHP is unconcerned with outward change—but it believes change begins with the heart.²¹ And when change happens from the inside out, it "increas[es] our intimacy with God, enhanc[es] our experience of the fruit of the Spirit, and set[s] us free from a lie or area where we felt bound up."²² LIHP places a healthy priority on the heart.

Second, LIHP emphasizes the need to enter another's struggle to care well. A wise friend, counselor, or facilitator will seek to understand the person in front of him and love them well by listening to hurts, even weeping together with them (Rom 12:15). He will identify with another's experience such that the other feels heard, understood, and cared for. This type of love and compassion for the hurting helps others feel safe to be vulnerable.²³ To offer care in this way requires genuine humility, focusing not on self but on another brother or sister in Christ and his or her needs.²⁴

²⁰ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 75.

²¹ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 15.

²² Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 173.

²³ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 208.

²⁴ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 155.

Third, LIHP is centered around prayer. Participants seek God for answers and trust him as the one who can rescue, deliver, and protect. Before, during, and after inner-healing sessions, prayer is encouraged and modeled. Regardless of one's perspective on change, prayer must be central to the process, and on this point LIHP is strong.

Fourth, LIHP seeks to confront lies with truth. The emphasis on replacing lies with biblical truth is similar to Neil Anderson's book *Bondage Breaker* (in fact, Anderson wrote the forward to LIHP). God's Word is the foundation for change and believing its truth will set one free (John 8:31–32); as the mind is renewed by truth, one will experience transformation (Rom 12:2). Unfortunately, there are many lies Christians believe, but the Word of God is powerful to penetrate hearts through the Holy Spirit.

These strengths are reasons to praise the Lord and commend LIHP. May all curricula that seek to help others walk by faith in Christ have these four characteristics imbedded in them. Despite these areas of strength, LIHP has significant areas of weakness.

Categories to Evaluate

Scripture use. LIHP regularly misuses Scripture in a variety of ways. Among these are weak interpretation, filling biblical words with contemporary meaning, ignoring biblical categories or relevant texts, and twisting the words of a passage to fit the pre-determined point. Perhaps its most obvious misstep is with the foundational texts for the whole curriculum. Rustenbach connects his work to the messianic text in Isaiah 61:1, as read by Jesus in the synagogue with fulfillment claims as recorded in Luke 4:18.²⁵ Rustenbach focuses on the Messiah's ministry to "heal the brokenhearted." According to LIHP, Jesus quotes Isaiah 61 to clarify that "an important part of His gospel would be to

²⁵ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 29.

emancipate His followers from many of the horrible side effects of living in a broken and dysfunctional world.”²⁶ Furthermore, “it’s clear that an integral part of the Messiah’s mission was to bring healing to the broken places of the heart.”²⁷

The problem is that Luke 4:18 almost certainly does not include the phrase “He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted.” Instead, this phrase was a later scribal addition and probably an attempt to follow the LXX²⁸; consequently, only the later Byzantine texts and those that base their translation on them include it. That said, it is not necessary to conclude that Jesus (and Luke) intentionally left out “healing the brokenhearted” to communicate he is *against* healing—Jesus clearly ministers in healing ways to those broken over their sin. So, what is the issue? Rustenbach is not carefully handling the Scriptures. He conveniently uses the NKJV when quoting Isaiah 61:1 and Luke 4:18, which may show a desire to force the text to say what he wants it to say. Throughout the book he uses at least ten different biblical translations (NKJV, NASB, NLT, NIV, MSG, AMP, NCV, PH, ESV, WNT). This is not inherently wrong, but it can betray a desire to make Scripture fit one’s pre-established convictions, as seems to be the case in this situation. From the start and even with its most foundational text, LIHP displays a lack of care when handling Scripture.

In addition to this textual variant, Rustenbach’s interpretation of Jesus’s quotation of Isaiah 61 is questionable. LIHP anachronistically infuses contemporary psychological definitions to terms like *healing*, *brokenhearted*, *captivity*, and *liberty*, and divorces them from a biblical perspective of personal responsibility and sin. For example, Rustenbach defines brokenness as “disappointments, hurts, and events” that wound one’s

²⁶ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 29.

²⁷ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 213.

²⁸ “The inclusion of the clause *iasasthai tous syntetrimmenous te kardia* (“to heal the brokenhearted” [Isa. 61:1c]) in the Lukan citation in some manuscripts seems to be an attempt to assimilate the quotation with the LXX reading.” G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 289.

heart, and a “major focus” of Jesus is to heal that brokenness.²⁹ He argues that Jesus came to bring freedom to those held captive to bondages such as cigarettes, drugs, sexual impurity, and workaholism.³⁰ This brokenness and bondage portray struggling believers as victims held in bondage against their will for sins for which they are not responsible. Therefore, they primarily need healing or deliverance, not forgiveness. But what is particularly Christian about freedom from these things? If brokenness and bondage is not rooted in sin and the need to be free from it, then the redemptive work of Christ will not be central. Contrary to Rustenbach’s interpretation, a more faithful reading of Luke 4:18 would focus on Jesus’s ministry as the Messiah to save his people from *sin*. Sinners need forgiveness, and that is the primary focus of Jesus’s ministry and of Luke 4:18.³¹ Jesus does heal broken hearts, comfort his children in their pain, and free them from bondage, but all these aspects of salvation come as sinners turn to Jesus in faith to find forgiveness.

Furthermore, LIHP offers no biblical hermeneutic to help readers and practitioners rightly handle the Word. How can they faithfully understand and apply God’s Word? What disciplines must be in place to guard against the misuse of Scripture? LIHP does not give attention to the context of verses or provide a grid for applying different promises found in Scripture. Instead, whatever biblical text comes to mind through an impression or image is assumed to be from the Lord (unless explicitly

²⁹ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 29.

³⁰ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 30.

³¹ “The captives are also those imprisoned by sin (see 1:77; 3:3). The chains of iniquity (Acts 8:23) incarcerate sinners, and the noun ‘release’ is primarily tied to the forgiveness of sins in Luke-Acts (1:77; 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18).” David E. Garland, *Luke*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 198. Furthermore, Garland summarizes, “‘To open the eyes’ in these passages means to lead someone to salvation.” Garland, *Luke*, 198. Or as Stein states, related to the concept of “freedom” in Luke, “Whereas it may include healings and exorcisms, ‘freedom’ (*aphesin*) always refers to the forgiveness of sins elsewhere in Luke-Acts.” Robert A. Stein, *Luke*, New American Commentary, vol. 24 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 158. Joel Green agrees that “‘release’ or ‘freedom’ is often best translated as ‘forgiveness’—that is, ‘release from sins’ or ‘forgiveness of sins’—with the result that Jesus is presented as the Savior who grants forgiveness of sins.” Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 180.

contrary to Scripture).³² For example, within LIHP the Father’s message to Jesus, “You are My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased” may be directly spoken to a counselee.³³ While believers have been adopted in Christ and are loved and accepted in him, they are not part of the Trinity and will never have the same relationship to the Father as Jesus. One must be careful when speaking “biblical promises” to another.

At times LIHP uses proof-texts to justify its claims, but a closer look reveals that these verses do not teach what is claimed. For example, LIHP encourages a participant to ask God to help him experience a past negative emotion again during the counseling session³⁴; meaning, if one struggles with anxiety, he should ask God to help him feel anxious in that moment. What is Rustenbach’s biblical justification for such a practice? He lists Job 36:15–16. He takes the general biblical truth from Elihu—(even if Elihu wrongly applies it to Job) that sometimes “God uses affliction to save sinners from their sin and set them on the right path”³⁵—to mean that sufferers should relive past pain so that they can hear from the Lord, discover the roots of their struggle, and find freedom.³⁶ LIHP’s step is neither described nor prescribed by the text. Struggling sinners can find comfort in Job 36, but these verses do not encourage them to pray to experience the same negative emotions again.

A weak hermeneutic is also apparent in Rustenbach’s view on forgiveness: he thinks it is sometimes necessary to forgive ourselves and even God.³⁷ Scripture does not call believers to forgive themselves but instead to receive by faith the forgiveness God

³² For example, Rustenbach rightly rejects a man’s impression that he can divorce his wife even if it feels right to him. Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 62.

³³ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 44.

³⁴ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 72.

³⁵ Tremper Longman III, *Job*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 402.

³⁶ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 73.

³⁷ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 84.

offers. But even more damning, Scripture does not call anyone to forgive God, since to do so would be to accuse him of wrongdoing, which is impossible for God.³⁸ At one point, Rustenbach acknowledges that God does not need forgiveness, yet he still leads people to do it.³⁹ The reader is left confused by these contradictory statements.

Finally, thinking back to the “impression” the participant waits to receive from the Lord, other potential hermeneutical errors come into view. After “hearing from the Lord,” he is encouraged to try to find a verse to verify that his impression is of the Spirit.⁴⁰ This order is backwards. Instead of desiring and/or expecting the Lord to speak apart from his Word and then going to the Scriptures afterward to affirm that word, it is much healthier for the normal practice to be that one meditates on the Word and, through right understanding of the text, asks the Lord to speak to him through the truths meditated upon. Thus, Rustenbach’s example can lead to serious misuse of Scripture through fallacies like “the right doctrine from the wrong text,” proof-texting, and eisegesis.

Proclaimed gospel. LIHP emphasizes a therapeutic gospel. The biblical gospel focused on reconciling guilty sinners to a holy God through the death and resurrection of Christ is not explicitly denied in LIHP, but its actual proclaimed gospel message focuses on the benefits, or results, of salvation, not on the heart of the gospel itself. Consequently, the gospel emphasis is misplaced in LIHP. Rustenbach’s own testimony is an example of this shift away from the heart of the gospel to the benefits or results of salvation. He describes his life before Christ and his struggles with shame, self-contempt, and attempts to feel better through cars, alcohol, sex, and partying.⁴¹ In his own words, “Propelled by

³⁸ For an in-depth examination of forgiveness, see Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008). Brauns answers the questions related to the claim that individuals need to forgive God and/or themselves.

³⁹ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 89.

⁴⁰ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 139.

⁴¹ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 23.

my unhealed and festering wounds, my life was going downhill faster than a tomahawk gunship with a broken rotor.”⁴² His life was a mess, but then at age 21 he told himself, “Rusty, you’ve tried everything else to make life work and find inner peace. Why not try Jesus Christ? And so, empty and desperate, I surrendered my heart to Jesus.”⁴³

There is no reason to doubt the genuineness of Rustenbach’s conversion, but he clearly states his own motives for coming to Christ. He came to find inner peace. He came because he had tried everything else, and it was not working. Why not try Jesus? His testimony lacks a recognition of his sin before a holy God. He does not speak of a desire to be forgiven and reconciled to the God he once opposed. He does not speak of Jesus dying to bear the penalty for his sin and Jesus’s victorious resurrection from the grave to give him new life through the defeat of both Satan and death at the cross. Peace with God was not at the forefront of his mind when he professed Christ—instead, his goal was to find inner peace in all the struggles of life.

Perhaps it is partly because of his personal experience that he encourages prayers like, “Lord Jesus, thank You that You especially came to bring healing to the broken places in my heart and to free me from inner captivity.”⁴⁴ Praise the Lord, Jesus heals sinners and gives them inner peace, but this healing and peace is a *result*, or fruit, of genuine conversion, similar to other emotions such as joy, love, and hope. Jesus *especially* came to forgive sinners and reconcile them to God through his death and resurrection.

How to change. Related to a misuse of Scripture is how LIHP misunderstands the way God speaks to his people today, which then negatively impacts how it counsels

⁴² Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 23.

⁴³ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 24.

⁴⁴ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 70.

believers to pursue change. LIHP prioritizes hearing God speak apart from his Word. Rustenbach lists three ways God speaks to his people. He starts well by stating, “First and foremost, God speaks through His written Word.”⁴⁵ Unfortunately, the rest of his book functionally denies this statement. In fact, he even acknowledges his emphasis on the two other means he believes God uses to communicate (thoughts or impressions; pictures or images) since these are the “most common ways God communicates in our inner healing,” and are the “primary means” the book focuses on.⁴⁶ Instead of interacting directly with God’s Word, the practice is to ask him a question and then “listen.” Rustenbach believes God rarely speaks in an audible voice today (although he believes God sometimes does),⁴⁷ but he more often speaks through impressions or images. People are not encouraged to engage with any biblical text initially, nor are they to meditate on any portion of Scripture before approaching him in prayer, but instead should ask God to communicate directly to them and then wait in silence for God to “speak” through one of those two means.⁴⁸

In one of the examples from Rustenbach’s book, Kevin was struggling in his marriage and had neglected his wife for a long time.⁴⁹ During a time of inner-healing prayer, Kevin received a mental picture of a bride with a veil over her face. What did the image mean? Kevin decided, “Jesus wants me to pursue my wife in the same way He has pursued me.” Kevin’s statement is not wrong; in fact, God has already spoken to Kevin on how he should love his wife as her husband (Eph 5:25–30). But why should an image be more valued and powerful than God’s Word? The image he received led him in a good

⁴⁵ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 54.

⁴⁶ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 55–56.

⁴⁷ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 55.

⁴⁸ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 21.

⁴⁹ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 56.

direction, but that is beside the point. The point is that it prioritizes impressions and images over the written Word of God. In Kevin's case, his interpretation was consistent with Scripture, but what if it contained a different message? Would God's Word have priority or his impression? This practice in LIHP separates what God has joined together. God speaks to his people by his Spirit through his Word. The Spirit primarily uses the Word since he is the One who inspired it (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21), and Jesus sent him to remind his disciples of his words (John 14:26; 16:13–14). Rustenbach seems to misunderstand these connections when he writes, "I saw how much more deeply people were helped when God spoke to them, as opposed to when I told them the truth or had them read Scripture verses."⁵⁰ Or, "God's Word is alive and refuses to be restricted to paper and ink."⁵¹ He places a false dichotomy between God speaking and God's written Word—for it is precisely through his inspired Word that God primarily and normally speaks to his people.

Furthermore, according to the examples in LIHP, a consistent way God speaks to people in inner-healing prayer sessions is through words of affirmation, such as "you are my favorite,"⁵² "it's not your fault,"⁵³ and "I love you even when you fail."⁵⁴ One is left to wonder, does the Lord ever speak words of critique? Does he ever call out selfishness, pride, blame-shifting, self-justification, or hypocrisy? In fact, Rustenbach writes that in one session a man claimed God told him he was fired from his job because of his double life and pornography addiction. However, Rustenbach directed the man in a

⁵⁰ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 122.

⁵¹ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 37.

⁵² Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 55.

⁵³ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 17.

⁵⁴ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 74.

different direction, because that word did not “witness” with his spirit.⁵⁵ Might not the guilt or shame he felt have been the Lord’s discipline in his life? Would the Lord’s discipline be out of the question for someone leading a double life and addicted to pornography? How could one rule out such discipline from a loving heavenly Father (Prov 3:12)? He just might be using that sense of conviction to draw a wayward son or daughter back to himself (Heb 12:5–6). Yet Rustenbach seems to rule out this possibility.

Connected to hearing God speak apart from Scripture is Rustenbach’s belief that prayer is more about listening than talking.⁵⁶ This conviction simply lacks biblical support. The Scriptures are filled with prayers and the content of what people have prayed, showing how they voice their hearts to the Lord, both for themselves and others. In prayer they are speaking to the Lord. Of course, silent meditation (listening) can be a healthy aspect to prayer, but it would be more biblically faithful to say prayer is talking with God, with an aspect of listening to him speak through his Word. Psalm 139, which Rustenbach uses to defend listening in prayer,⁵⁷ is actually a good biblical example of the psalmist voicing a prayer to the Lord, asking him to search his heart and lead him in the way everlasting, while also listening to him afterward (Ps 139:23–24).

Another problem with LIHP is how it views change through the lens of healing, and by prioritizing healing, it minimizes biblical categories such as repentance and reconciliation. It claims that people struggling in this life need to be healed from past hurts, since this is the key to unlock the power needed for believers to live in freedom.⁵⁸ The Bible, however, emphasizes believers’ freedom from the power of *sin* through their union with Christ by faith (Rom 6:5–11). Through this union believers have died with

⁵⁵ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 62.

⁵⁶ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 10.

⁵⁷ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 48, 58, 67, 214.

⁵⁸ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 137.

Christ and are therefore no longer slaves to sin (6:6), but free from it (6:7). According to Scripture, forgiveness of sins and union with Christ, not healing from past hurts, is the pathway to freedom.

Also, by its almost exclusive focus on healing, LIHP places an unhealthy emphasis on believers as victims or sufferers. True, healing is needed because of hurts or wounds in the past, some of which came through extremely painful experiences where the person was sinned against, maybe even victimized. Yet, while it is true that everyone has suffered and been sinned against in the past (some to a greater degree than others), believers should not primarily view themselves as victims. Believers are the people of God (saints) who also struggle against evil both outside of themselves in the form of suffering, and from within in the form of personal sin.⁵⁹ People are naturally bent toward self-justification and blame-shifting; thus, to emphasize victimhood to the degree that LIHP does will likely only increase the tendency to excuse and justify sin. After all, it is natural to see the speck in another's eye instead of the log in one's own (Matt 7:3–5).

It should also be noted that most of the past hurts described in LIHP are actually not the result of abuse or extreme trauma, but are average experiences of disappointment, such as parents not attending soccer games,⁶⁰ a mom not paying attention to her daughter while changing another child's diaper,⁶¹ one child not getting ice cream when other kids did,⁶² or feeling “neglected” because parents worked from 7–3:30 each day.⁶³ By encouraging believers to think back to their past and focus on the hurts, LIHP

⁵⁹ For a fuller treatment of believers' identity as saints, sufferers, and sinners, see Mike Emlet, *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2021).

⁶⁰ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 34.

⁶¹ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 35.

⁶² Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 31.

⁶³ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 36.

encourages a victim mentality.⁶⁴

Because LIHP focuses on past hurts, it maintains that present inner healing only comes through dwelling on the past. For example, according to LIHP one must identify the earliest experience connected to the present struggle, especially those before age 18,⁶⁵ in order to break the bondage of the believed lie. Rustenbach tells the story of Victor, a pastor who struggled with alcohol abuse and pornography.⁶⁶ Why did Victor struggle with alcohol and pornography? Through LIHP he came to believe it was because as a child he had felt rejected by his father when he was corrected for fighting with his younger brother. This rejection made him feel like he could never be good enough. In prayer, Victor received a powerful affirming word from the Lord and “was now ready to renounce the lies he’d believed in order to eliminate any influence the enemy had gained.”⁶⁷ Was this experience with his father the “key” to help Victor change? LIHP assumes his past is key, but this perspective of change does not help him understand the various dynamic functions of his heart (cognitive, affective, volitional).⁶⁸ Instead of exploring the variety of present factors, experiences, motives, and beliefs that influence someone, LIHP focuses solely on the earliest experience identified in childhood that comes to the surface during prayer. By dwelling on the past, it does not explore other influences, expose deeper motives, lead to specific repentance, comfort with greater

⁶⁴ Rustenbach tries to deny the claim that pointing to the past as the root cause for present struggles leads to blaming the past, accusing others, or excusing oneself. See Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 35.

⁶⁵ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 32. There are times when one is encouraged to think back to experiences even in infancy (31). This practice is extremely controversial and should be rejected within biblical counseling. For a more biblical framework on dealing with the past, see John F. Bettler, “Counseling and the Problem of the Past,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 12, no. 2 (1994): 4–23; Stephen Viars, *Putting Your Past in Its Place* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2011).

⁶⁶ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 75.

⁶⁷ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 76.

⁶⁸ For an in-depth look at the functions of the dynamic heart, see Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2016).

promises, or call to necessary lifestyle changes.

In going back to the past, LIHP attempts to expose the lies believed in response to past hurts in a way that excuses present sin.⁶⁹ For example, Rustenbach once counseled a man who was kicked off his ministry team because he lost his temper with his team leader. The rationale given was that as a leader himself, this man had damaged his reputation and was therefore removed from leadership.⁷⁰ Instead of helping this man take responsibility for his sin, repent, and grow in Christ, Rustenbach led him to explore his past and eventually realize his sin of anger “was a direct reaction to past verbal abuse and neglect by his father.” Did his father have an influence on him? Most likely his influence was immense. Should his father be viewed as the *primary* or sole reason he struggles with anger? Absolutely not. Wisdom will lead one to ask more questions and explore other avenues to understand why he is responding in anger. What is he wanting (Jas 4:1–3)? Why does he desire those things? To what degree is he wanting, or demanding, those things?⁷¹ What sort of things has he been cultivating through his decisions? What does he believe about God, self, others, and circumstances? His past with his father is one piece of the puzzle, but the puzzle has more than one piece. There needs to be more balance, with the (biblical) emphasis on personal responsibility and a healthy reinterpreting of past experiences.⁷² In the Garden, Adam and Eve were deceived by the father of lies and fell

⁶⁹ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 35.

⁷⁰ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 34.

⁷¹ For a deeper explanation and more heart probing questions to examine demanding desires, see Robert D. Jones, “How Good Desires Go Bad,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 24, no. 2 (2006): 42–46.

⁷² For example, instead of feeling neglected by a busy mom, one could conclude, “My mom was busy with a new baby. I get that she did not have endless time for me.” Or instead of being upset about getting ready for school alone each morning, one could reason, “My parents worked hard to provide for me and had to work early mornings. I’m thankful for their commitment to provide.” Or it could be a simple conclusion such as, “I overreacted.” “I was being selfish and prideful.” At times and with certain experiences, reframing past “hurts” in these ways can be healthy as it encourages balance, personal responsibility, understanding, and grace.

into sin. In one sense, they were victims of an evil scheme. After the Lord confronts them, they try to blame-shift (Gen 3:12–13). But how does the Lord respond to them? He holds them personally accountable for their sin (3:16–19). Being held accountable and taking responsibility for sin does not ignore influences that are upon that person, nor his experience as a sufferer.

If the key reason a person struggles now is because of hurts he experienced in the past, then the need to take responsibility for personal sin, repent, and put on one's new self in Christ are given minimal importance. LIHP views one's captivity to sin as passive, meaning he is being held captive against his will.⁷³ It is as if he is a helpless victim who is forced to act against his own will. But does this align with the biblical picture of our relationship to sin? True, those who sin are slaves to sin—yet they are *choosing* to serve sin (John 8:34). Those living in sin *love* the darkness and *refuse to* come to the light lest their deeds be exposed (John 3:19–20). Sinners outside of Christ are under slavery, captivity, and bondage because they are following their sinful desires and are willfully rebelling against the Lord. Sinners are not being held against their will but are living according to their sinful desires and natures (Eph 2:3). To turn to Christ in repentance and faith, one must take responsibility for his or her sin and receive the forgiveness found in Christ.

Lastly, LIHP portrays change, or freedom from struggle, as more instantaneous than progressive. According to LIHP, when the hurts, pains, bondage, and captivity from past experiences and the connected lies are replaced with truth, the freedom is “complete.”⁷⁴ Meaning, at that point one can experience freedom in a way that they no longer struggle with the sin. Rustenbach claims many can experience complete healing if

⁷³ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 30.

⁷⁴ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 114, 221.

they follow the path to inner-healing.⁷⁵ In many ways LIHP resembles deliverance-type ministries that “break spells” and speak authoritatively over areas of captivity and bondage.⁷⁶ Rustenbach closely follows Neil Anderson’s view of spiritual warfare, where the heart of the battle is replacing lies with truth, and when done rightly, evil bonds are broken, and freedom is experienced.⁷⁷ According to both LIHP and Anderson, this change can happen in an instant.

The Bible calls sinners adopted in Christ to cultivate change in the Spirit (Gal 6:7–8). Believers walk by, are led by, live in, keep in step with, and sow to the Spirit (Gal 5:16, 18, 25; 6:8). Consequently, they will over time display more of the fruit of the Spirit in their lives (Gal 5:22–23). Believers are to put death the old earthly nature that has already been crucified with Christ (Col 3:1–17). Their life is one of “putting off” and “putting on” in conformity with their new self in Christ (Eph 4:17–32). The Christian life is a war with internal desires of flesh-versus-Spirit that battle against one another (1 Pet 2:11; Gal 5:17), and this battle will continue throughout this life. One can gain significant victory over sin since the power of sin has been broken in Christ (Rom 6:6–7). Believers are no longer slaves to sin; however, because the presence of sin remains, believers are called not to let sin reign in their bodies nor to obey its desires (Rom 6:12). For example, one might gain a level of freedom from sexual sin and no longer view pornography, masturbate, or live a promiscuous life, but the battle against lust, wayward thoughts, and sexual temptations will continue.⁷⁸ If the expectation is instantaneous freedom from

⁷⁵ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 103.

⁷⁶ Rustenbach, *Guide for Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*, 99.

⁷⁷ See Neil T. Anderson, *The Bondage Breaker* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2019).

⁷⁸ Here is one counselor’s reflections on working with two sexual strugglers, Zach and Mary: “They benefited from consistent reminders about the process of crockpot sanctification. Their growth in abiding in the Vine, walking in honesty with trusted brothers and sisters, and waging war against sexual sin was slow, but it was steady!” Ellen Mary Dykas, “Abiding in the Vine: Walking with Sexual Strugglers,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 30, no. 2 (2016): 76.

sinful sexual desires, then one will be discouraged and frustrated.

Role of the local church. LIHP presents a curriculum that almost completely ignores the role of the local church in the change process. It does not place counseling alongside other ministries of the Word, such as the public preaching of the Word, observance of the Lord's Supper, corporate prayer, service, evangelism, and study of the Scriptures. The public and private ministries of the Word are not mentioned in his book.⁷⁹ The need for community in the context of a local church is ignored. The healthy habits and disciplines that lead one to long-term maturity in Christ are not outlined.⁸⁰ Why? Perhaps because LIHP believes that change primarily happens with God speaking directly through impressions (with the help of a facilitator, if needed) that lead to freedom from the past and healing from prior hurts. It is presented as a stand-alone curriculum that brings healing to those struggling. Unfortunately, change is not presented as a community project through involvement in a local church.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while some have been genuinely helped by LIHP, it is an unhealthy and unbiblical curriculum that prioritizes certain elements of change to the neglect of others. It lacks biblical faithfulness by misusing Scripture, prioritizing hearing God speak apart from his Word, viewing change through the lens of healing, insisting that the past is key to present change, presenting change as instantaneous, and placing the

⁷⁹ Powlison helpfully labels the public, private, and interpersonal ministries of the Word under the categories of proclamation, meditation, and conversation. Powlison, "Counsel and Counseling," 6.

⁸⁰ "Do the practices of our day-to-day lives aim our desires toward the kingdom of Jesus Christ or toward some alternate and unbiblical vision of what constitutes abundant life?" Michael R. Emler, "Practice Makes Perfect? Exploring the Relationship between Knowledge, Desire, and Habit," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 27, no. 1 (2013): 28. In his journal article, Emler interacts with and applies James K. A. Smith's work: James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). For a fuller treatment of how habits form one's desires, see Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*; Greg E. Gifford, *Heart and Habits: How We Change for Good* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2021).

emphasis of the gospel message on the fruit of salvation. Consequently, it is not a curriculum biblical counselors should use or recommend others use, either personally or in the care of others. There is no reason to doubt that Rustenbach and other proponents of LIHP are sincere in their desire to care for suffering saints; in fact, may many more Christians like them be burdened to care for their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ enough to enter into their struggles and seek to point them to the Savior. But healthier, more biblical options should be preferred.⁸¹ May biblical counselors continue to labor together to make these alternatives available so that the people of God know better how to walk by faith in Christ through all the struggles of life, as they trust the Spirit to use the Word in the context of the church to cultivate lasting change and maturity in Christ.

The Wounded Heart

Dan Allender has written many counseling-related books,⁸² but this review focuses on his book *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse* (TWH),⁸³ because it serves as the basis for a popular counseling curriculum used in Central Asia called “The Journey Begins” (JB), or “Journey Groups.”⁸⁴ These groups

⁸¹ For resources that offer a better model see David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003); Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002); Pierre, *Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*; Timothy Lane and Paul Tripp, *How People Change* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2008); Lane and Tripp, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2008); Emler, *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners*; and Edward Welch, *Side-by-Side: Walking with Others in Wisdom and Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015). The following ministries promote biblical counseling: Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCFE; <https://www.ccef.org/>); Biblical Counseling Coalition (BCC; <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/>); Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC; <https://biblicalcounseling.com/>); Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship (IBCD; <https://ibcd.org/>); Overseas Instruction in Counseling (OIC; <https://discoveroic.org/>).

⁸² Some of his works include the following: Dan B. Allender, *The Healing Path: How the Hurts in Your Past Can Lead You to a More Abundant Life* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 1999); Dan B. Allender and Cathy Loerzel, *Redeeming Heartache: How Past Suffering Reveals Our True Calling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021); Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III, *The Cry of the Soul: How Our Emotions Reveal Our Deepest Questions about God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994); Allender and Longman, *Breaking the Idols of Your Heart: How to Navigate the Temptations of Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007); Allender and Longman, *Bold Love* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992).

⁸³ Dan B. Allender, *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008).

⁸⁴ To purchase these lessons or read an overview of each lesson, see Open Hearts Ministry (OHM), *The Journey Begins: Leaders Guide*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Open Hearts Ministry, 2019),

study nine to twelve lessons in a small group context and are designed to help sexual abuse victims gain healing in Christ.⁸⁵ Although these lessons were not written by Allender, at times they will be referenced because they display how others read and apply Allender's work in local ministry contexts.

Allender is a self-proclaimed disciple of his mentor and best friend, Larry Crabb.⁸⁶ While Allender must be examined by his own work, it is helpful to place him within a certain stream of Christian counseling, sometimes referred to as integrationists, since Allender is intentionally continuing down Crabb's path.⁸⁷ While Crabb's methodology differs from biblical counseling, his foreword to TWH lays out helpful criteria for evaluating Allender's book. He writes, "If that pioneering effort is to be biblical, it must insist that the image of God is central to developing a solid view of personality; that our sinfulness, not how we've been sinned against, is our biggest problem; that forgiveness, not wholeness, is our greatest need; that repentance, not insight, is the dynamic in all real change."⁸⁸ These principles fit well with the previously established four criteria organized to help evaluate biblical counseling curricula. Before a critical assessment, Allender's work has several general strengths that deserve mention.

Strengthens and Areas of Agreement

Allender encourages victims of sexual abuse to deal with the problem.

accessed November 11, 2021, <https://ohmin.org/shop/12-session-leader-guides/12-session-the-journey-begins-leader-guide/>.

⁸⁵ In Central Asia it seems that they have condensed the lessons into 9 weeks, but the Journey Group leaders do not give out their local-language material to those who have not been trained with them. Therefore, I was not able to look specifically at what they use in this context, and my review considers the twelve-week English lessons that can be purchased online.

⁸⁶ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 7.

⁸⁷ For a good overview of the different streams of Christian Counseling, see Stephen P. Greggo and Timothy A. Sisemore, eds., *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012). For a biblical counselor's critique of an integrationist's approach, see Powlison, "Critiquing Modern Integrationists."

⁸⁸ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 10.

They have been sinned against, and it is not their fault; though the process of healing can often seem “to intensify the problem,” the “work of restoration cannot begin until a problem is fully faced.”⁸⁹ One can grow and change, but that process will be painful at times since the past cannot be distorted or denied.⁹⁰ The hurt will eventually lead to healing—but that may be hard to believe at the beginning of the process. Furthermore, Allender wants to help these victims overcome not just the damage of the abuse itself but also its negative impact on their relationship with the Lord.⁹¹ Allender’s answer to the “why?” or “what is the point?” questions about dealing with the past and all its pain is simple: “to live out the gospel.”⁹² It is the good news of Christ that calls sinners to himself and to a life lived by faith in him—including the painful and slow process of change.⁹³ At this point he is distinctly Christian. If sinners are brought back into a right relationship with God and live in light of who he is and what he has done for them, then they will be able to face their past and their problems by his grace.

Allender opposes “so-called Christian alternatives” to counseling. He understands these alternatives can do further damage by promoting “denial-based forgiveness, pressured demands to love, and quick relief from pain through dramatic spiritual interventions.”⁹⁴ In actuality, there are no easy or quick solutions for the complex struggles of life—and any curriculum that promises them might have an initial appeal but will often leave sufferers struggling even more. A right understanding and application of Scripture should guard believers from such practices and lead them in

⁸⁹ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 13.

⁹⁰ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 15.

⁹¹ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 14.

⁹² Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 45.

⁹³ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 45.

⁹⁴ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 14.

better ways. The process of change in a believer's life will often be slow and progressive over his or her lifetime. Allender's call is appropriate: "Let us as Christians acknowledge without shame that regeneration does not alleviate, or in fact diminish, the effects of sin quickly or permanently in this life."⁹⁵ To understand this point is extremely important and is a clear distinction between LIHP and TWH. Allender opposes "quick cures" and "holy passivity" curricula since they "never resolve the deep damage."⁹⁶

Allender teaches that one's past is influential, but not determinative. "To say," he writes, "'my abuse 'made' me do it, or 'keeps' me from doing it or not doing it,' is a violation of human glory, freedom, and responsibility."⁹⁷ The experience of abuse and the trauma associated with it do bring massive consequences and impact upon one's life, but this does not excuse personal sin and rebellion against God. Knowing one's past can help in understanding why one might struggle in particular ways, but it does not mean he or she is not responsible. In other words, there is an impact, but that impact is not determinative. Allender tries to provide balance between personal responsibility and the negative impact of abuse. He concludes, "The past does not exonerate our rebellion, but it does put our unique rebellion in a context as to why we have found God hard to trust."⁹⁸ Never excusing or explaining away sin because of abuse, the focus should be on idolatry as the core issue and repentance as the means to change.⁹⁹

TWH tries to clearly define terms. For example, sexual abuse is defined as "any contact or interaction (visual, verbal, or psychological) between a child/adolescent

⁹⁵ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 15.

⁹⁶ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 18.

⁹⁷ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 25.

⁹⁸ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 31.

⁹⁹ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 36.

and an adult when the child/adolescent is being used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or any other person.”¹⁰⁰ Allender also seeks to define different types of sexual abuse (sexual contact and sexual interactions) as well as giving examples of more or less severe forms of abuse.¹⁰¹ Another example where he defines terms is his discussion of boundaries, which he believes victims need to be trained to establish in relationships to avoid further abuse. But he also realizes that the discussion of “boundaries” can often lead “to self-centered, arrogant, autonomous self-protection,” which he does not want.¹⁰² Instead, he encourages boundaries to help victims love God and others; consequently, he tries to define what he does and does not mean by the term.¹⁰³

Categories to Evaluate

While biblical counselors may find numerous points of general agreement with TWH, it is helpful to evaluate Allender’s work under the aforementioned four categories: (1) use of Scripture, (2) proclaimed gospel, (3) perspective on change, and (4) view on the role of the local church in change.

Scripture use. Allender does interact with Scripture and at times does this well. For example, as previously mentioned, he helpfully (though briefly) explains Romans 1:18–23 to counter the claim of psychologists that suppression is distinct from repression.¹⁰⁴ He points to Romans 1 to argue that humans willfully suppress the truth and are therefore morally accountable for their idolatry. This willful rebellion then leads

¹⁰⁰ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 47.

¹⁰¹ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 47–51.

¹⁰² Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 177.

¹⁰³ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 177.

¹⁰⁴ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 32.

to blindness to the truth and “an inability to perceive truth easily.”¹⁰⁵ Yet, their progression toward blindness does not excuse their sin because they got there through their own willful suppression of the truth. Thus, Allender directly opposes a popular psychological belief with the truth of God’s Word.

He also provides a brief commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:17 to counter the belief that the work of the Holy Spirit will lead to sinless perfection in this life.¹⁰⁶ He concludes, “This Scripture passage is a statement about our place in a new kingdom order and the privilege of ambassadorship. Therefore, to assume radical change on the basis of conversion is to neglect the essential relationship between justification and sanctification.”¹⁰⁷ Desire for perfection or quick change can dominate some counseling curricula, but Allender rightly handles the Word to point believers toward progressive sanctification throughout their lives.

One final positive example of how Allender interacts with Scripture comes in his discussion about relational styles people use to protect themselves. Before making an application point from Isaiah 50:10–11, Allender first briefly explains the context of Isaiah 50 to help the reader better, and rightly, apply God’s Word.¹⁰⁸ To understand the meaning of “walk in the light of your fires” (50:11), one must consider the context in Isaiah and see how “the opposite of trusting God in the midst of darkness is the word picture of lighting one’s own fire.”¹⁰⁹ Allender then transitions to his application point about relational styles and self-protective strategies, but he has rooted his core idea in the text of Scripture after a consideration of both its content and context.

¹⁰⁵ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 32.

¹⁰⁶ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 145.

¹⁰⁷ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 145–46.

¹⁰⁸ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 157–58.

¹⁰⁹ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 158.

While Allender encourages other disciplines such as prayer and fasting, theoretically Scripture reading holds a place of primacy in TWH. He states, “While prayer invites exposure and fasting intensifies hunger, study of the Word exposes, awakens, and ultimately satisfies the heart by taking it into the mind of God. The Scriptures orient the heart to ask the questions that are of greatest concern to God.”¹¹⁰ With statements like this one, it is unfortunate to find a general lack of interaction with the Scriptures in his book. While it does have some positive examples of biblical interpretation, it is difficult to evaluate TWH’s use of Scripture because it does not discuss passages in any extended way. Allender maintains a biblical gospel and makes many helpful and wise observations and applications in line with Scripture, but one is left wanting more extensive and direct engagement. The strength of the book lies in its observations about the complexities of abuse in order to understand the abused and abuser, not in its regular or extensive use and application of Scripture. My primary critique of its use of Scripture is that it simply does not use it enough. It is a flaw that will likely be more pronounced in his disciples and in works based upon those of Allender.

Consequently, curriculum like JB follow with a similar sporadic engagement with Scripture. Even when Scripture is referenced, it is often used as a springboard or proof-text to dwell on a predetermined point. For example, in the third lesson of JB, the story of Nehemiah and rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem is used as “a case study of rebuilding after devastating damage.”¹¹¹ It is then spiritualized for victims of sexual abuse by comparing the opposition Nehemiah faced (Neh 4:1–23; 6:1–19) with the need for victims to “break strongholds” in their lives.¹¹² This feels like proof-texting: it seems there was an agenda for the lesson and a passage of Scripture was then found to try to

¹¹⁰ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 193.

¹¹¹ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 49.

¹¹² OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 60, 62–63.

support it.

This highlights a general problem with JB—it tends to personalize biblical stories too quickly before examining and understanding them in context. Lesson 1 begins with the story of the Good Samaritan but from the perspective of the one who was wounded (Luke 10:25–37). After a brief word on the passage, abuse victims are encouraged to identify with that man.¹¹³ This may be an appropriate application, but by personalizing the story so quickly, the lesson sidesteps the main point of the passage and does not place the victim’s experience in the proper context of the whole story. Or, in the second lesson, the story of Tamar is briefly studied (2 Sam 13:1–22), but mainly as an attempt to identify with her experience to understand one’s own story better.¹¹⁴ Her experience is used as a framework to write out one’s own story (the set-up, seduction, shame, silence, secrets, shame’s questions).¹¹⁵ But before immediately thinking of application or personalizing the story, God’s Word must be rightly examined and understood. In this way, the curriculum can help form good Bible study habits and result in more biblical and powerful application in the life of a believer.

There are also times when JB over-psychologizes a text and reads into characters’ emotional experiences. For example, in session 8, after looking at Genesis 1–3, assumptions are made about Adam’s thoughts and psychology. “He has questions about his competency: Do I have what it takes? Am I enough?”¹¹⁶ These questions assume more than the text communicates and overly psychologizes Adam. Eve is given a similar evaluation: “Am I desirable? Am I too much? Am I enough? She avoids situations

¹¹³ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 7.

¹¹⁴ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 32–33.

¹¹⁵ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 39.

¹¹⁶ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 157.

that leave her feeling defenseless and is haunted by her chronic sense of loneliness.”¹¹⁷ What is the textual justification for such thoughts? JB makes no argument from Scripture, but instead reads into the text and assumes these points. This practice can be dangerous and is contrary to sound biblical hermeneutics.

Despite an overall weakness on this point, one of JB’s sessions in particular does do a much better job of studying Scripture and making application points directly from the text. Session 10 examines the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32 and “explores what it looks like to ‘re-turn,’ to repent from our harmful choices and walk back down the road toward the Father.”¹¹⁸ This session analyzes the younger son, the father, and the older son—making observations and applications along the way.¹¹⁹ This results in valuable insights into repentance and how God’s love, patience, and mercy call sinners back to him.¹²⁰ Similarly, session 12, on the journey of redemption from the story of Joseph (Gen 37–50; Ps 105), also stays closer to the text, with Genesis 50:20 as the key verse. It emphasizes the need to “see a bigger picture” in the context of one’s experiences and puts victims’ lives in the framework of the gospel story. In doing so, victims will depend on their restored relationship to God, shift their focus from evil to God’s redemptive plan, make God the central figure in their lives, and move themselves along in the process of forgiveness through grace and bold love.¹²¹ When a session interacts directly with a passage of Scripture and draws meaning from the text after a more careful consideration of its original meaning, it will better encourage and build up believers in Christ and help them walk by faith through their struggles, even when those struggles are

¹¹⁷ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 157.

¹¹⁸ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 187.

¹¹⁹ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 189.

¹²⁰ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 190–91.

¹²¹ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 219.

a result of sexual abuse.

Proclaimed gospel. For any counseling work, it is important to examine the explicit gospel message it proclaims, because therein is one's view of God, humanity, and Christ (theology, anthropology, and Christology). According to TWH, the main problem "is not abuse itself, but the sinful energy to trust what is not worthy of her heart Consequently, the root problem and cure for an abuse victim is essentially no different than for any other sinner."¹²² Abuse victims might struggle more than most, but the core of the problem and the solution remain the same. All sinners need the grace and forgiveness found in the gospel of Christ, since the "fundamental enemy" of all, even abuse victims, is sin.¹²³ Allender further expresses his view of sin as he reflects on Romans 1:18–23 and the "moral insanity" described by Paul. Willful denial of the truth leads one down a path of greater suppression of the truth (distortion, illusions, etc.).¹²⁴ This rebellion is a willful refusal that then leads to more "automatic" responses of evil, but simply being further down the path of suppression does not absolve them of responsibility. If the problem is sin, then any legitimate solution must be focused on solving the problem of sin—of both the abused and the abuser. Because Allender identifies the core problem (disease) as sin, he can speak about abuse in a more biblical way (as a tragedy).¹²⁵

His view of sin reaches beyond actions and into motives that are "stained" by sin.¹²⁶ Motivation matters because it "opens the door to the possibility of seeing the enormity of the problem and the need for something more than mere behavioral

¹²² Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 27.

¹²³ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 27.

¹²⁴ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 32.

¹²⁵ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 27.

¹²⁶ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 59.

alteration.”¹²⁷ TWH places a focus on the heart. Allender encourages victims to move from self-protective strategies toward trust in the Lord and love for others:

If we ignore or trivialize our self-protective manner of dealing with people, we will inevitably overlook the deepest sin of the heart: our fallen commitment to take charge of our life so we will never be hurt or shamed as we were in the past. And if we fail to recognize and repent of the sins of the heart, we will not deeply change. We will not deeply love.¹²⁸

TWH also recognizes original sin in each of us: “The presence of sin is in us at birth, though it is naïve and unformed.”¹²⁹ People sin because they are sinners, but this does not mean they do not possess inherent value or dignity. Allender’s view of mankind is framed by both dignity and depravity—or, as he cites Francis Schaeffer, man is a “glorious ruin.”¹³⁰ The image of God places an amazing dignity on every human being, but sin has “ruined everything.”

TWH presents a Christ-centered gospel anchored in the grace of God. Drawing from Galatians 3, Allender points sinners to the amazing work of Christ on the cross:

Christ’s willingness to become a curse for our sake so that we would never bear the curse of God is our freedom and joy (see Galatians 3:10–14). It is incomprehensible that the God of blessing would curse His own Son for the sake of offering us His gift of restored relationship. The gospel is an astonishment, an unexpected and unnerving intrusion into a fallen world.¹³¹

Allender follows John Stott in *The Cross of Christ* to highlight both the love and the wrath of God as displayed in the Cross.¹³² “The Cross is the proof of the everlasting, sacrificial love of God, but it is more; it is also the evidence of the wrath of God against

¹²⁷ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 78.

¹²⁸ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 159.

¹²⁹ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 33.

¹³⁰ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 57.

¹³¹ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 213.

¹³² See John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006).

sin.”¹³³ Towards the end of TWH, Allender clearly and succinctly proclaims the gospel as he mentions God’s love and wrath, his anger toward sin, man’s rebellion, shame, and deserved judgment, Jesus as the second Adam, the Lamb of God, and his joyful sacrifice and atonement.¹³⁴ TWH’s proclaims the biblical gospel. For this reason, it is unfortunate the JB lessons are not as clear. For example, outside of a brief paragraph in session 5 following a discussion on Genesis 3 and the Fall, a direct gospel proclamation is not found.¹³⁵ Parts of sessions 10 and 12 do touch on aspects of the gospel like sin, repentance, grace, redemption, forgiveness, and faith, but not in an organized or extensive way that anchors Christ and his salvation at the center of the change process.

How to change. The path to change presented in TWH is not an easy or quick-fix one. To the contrary, it claims “the best path is through the valley of the shadow of death. The crags of doubt and the valleys of despair offer a proving ground of God that no other terrain can provide.”¹³⁶ The damage of past abuse impacts all of someone’s being as well as how he relates to others, but this damage might be the very thing that leads him to the God of all grace. Change is possible, but both honesty and solutions that account for the complexity of the problems are essential.¹³⁷ TWH emphasizes the need for victims to ask themselves a crucial question that will lead them toward biblical change or away from it: “Do I believe that God is a loving Father who is committed to my deepest well-being, that He has the right to use everything that is me for whatever purposes He deems best, and that surrendering my will and my life entirely to him will

¹³³ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 214.

¹³⁴ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 214.

¹³⁵ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 102.

¹³⁶ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 19.

¹³⁷ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 173.

bring me the deepest joy and fulfillment I can know this side of heaven?”¹³⁸ This question forces one to wrestle with whether he believes God is good, sovereign, and present. It also places the starting point of change at the sinner’s view of God.

For them to change, TWH challenges suffering sinners to commit their wills to make different choices. Allender regularly uses “choice” or “choosing” language. For example, while reflecting on one abuse victim he writes, “Her largely ignored childhood choices will keep her from seeing God rightly and choosing to trust Him as an adult until she faces those choices and the reasons she made them.”¹³⁹ Allender knows that to change, one must by faith make concrete decisions that will lead to that change. Even though he is mainly thinking of sexual abuse victims, this can be applied to other sufferer-sinners as well. A significant personal responsibility should be placed on them to actively engage in the change process; passivity will not lead to change. He also clearly believes that change takes time—especially for those with difficult pasts, viewing this as a truth that “cannot be overemphasized.”¹⁴⁰

Allender also recognizes how unreliable memories can be, and thus encourages others not to put too much weight on them. “Memory is to some degree a reconstruction of the past that is highly susceptible to erosion, bias, and error.”¹⁴¹ Furthermore, “we are capable of deceiving ourselves with the most honorable, sincere, and pious of intentions.”¹⁴² Therefore, TWH cautions strongly against using “dissociative techniques” because they can create a narrative that feels true but turns one away from reality and

¹³⁸ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 174.

¹³⁹ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 28.

¹⁴⁰ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 173.

¹⁴¹ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 31.

¹⁴² Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 34.

responsibility to address the root issues.¹⁴³ Instead of trying to recall more memories, TWH recommends victims focus on the ones they already struggle with and address them appropriately. Allender outlines his thoughts clearly:

A primary focus on the past or recovery of memories will insidiously take us on a path that requires us to know the past in order to change the present. In fact, precisely the opposite is true. To the degree we grapple with the present, taking responsibility for current idolatry in the form of self-glorification and self-protection, then what is to be known about the past will be clear over time. In that sense, *the past is the servant of the present*—and change in the present clears the way for whatever God wants us to know about the past.¹⁴⁴

This perspective is almost in complete opposition to Rustenbach in LIHP, but is more in line with Scripture (Phil 4:13).

Another strength in Allender’s view of change is the insights he offers for understanding victims and the experience of sexual abuse, some of which are quite powerful.¹⁴⁵ He helps others grasp the confusing dynamics going on in the heart of victims and why their responses may seem irrational and contradictory at times. To help them change, someone must show them genuine love and move toward them and into their experiences.¹⁴⁶ He explains that sometimes victims can hide the impacts of abuse “below a socially competent exterior that does not look wounded or confused.”¹⁴⁷ They then tend to relate to others as the Good Girl, the Tough Girl, or the Party Girl.¹⁴⁸ “The Good Girl is committed to pleasure and relief through faithful attendance to relationship; the Tough Girl, to the exercise of power through control and intimidation; the Party Girl,

¹⁴³ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 34.

¹⁴⁴ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 35.

¹⁴⁵ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 64.

¹⁴⁶ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 178.

¹⁴⁷ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 85.

¹⁴⁸ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 160–70.

to enmeshment and control through seductive lust and/or guilt.”¹⁴⁹ Because Allender has spent many hours listening to and working with victims, his conclusions bear weight. For example, he observes a common fact from every abuse victim he has worked with: “I have never worked with an abused man or woman who did not hate or mistrust the hunger for intimacy.”¹⁵⁰ They have learned to hate a good desire because of what has been done to them.¹⁵¹

Allender goes on to explain how victims often feel “marked for life” by the shame they experience.¹⁵² Everyone feels shame at some point, and distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate shame is vital because “much of the shame we experience is not due to the exposure of our sin, but the revelation of some deficiency (or better said, perceived deficiency) in our dignity.”¹⁵³ When abused, the biblical response is to grieve, not to hide or condemn oneself in shame.¹⁵⁴ Understanding the typical process and dynamics of abuse is helpful for both the abused person and those seeking to care for him or her. Through proper understanding, experiences can be put into biblical categories, the fog of confusion can be diminished, and one can be freed from unnecessary guilt.¹⁵⁵

Another insightful and helpful observation Allender makes is the victim’s typical experience of ambivalence, which he defines as “feeling two contradictory

¹⁴⁹ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 169.

¹⁵⁰ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 56.

¹⁵¹ “*The tragedy of abuse is that the enjoyment of one’s body becomes the basis of a hatred of one’s soul. Abuse arouses within the victim a taste of legitimate pleasure in a context that makes the enjoyment a poison that destroys.*” Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 96.

¹⁵² Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 62.

¹⁵³ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 63.

¹⁵⁴ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 65.

¹⁵⁵ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 89.

emotions at the same moment.”¹⁵⁶ Abuse victims can experience relational, sensual, and sexual pleasure “in the midst of powerlessness and betrayal[, which] sets off a profoundly convoluted spiral of damage.”¹⁵⁷ The damage and confusion come as one loves what he hates and hates what he loves, since “the very thing that was despised also brought some degree of pleasure.”¹⁵⁸

TWH is blunt about change: it is risky. One must start to hope, love, and feel again, and all these emotions carry significant risks, because they open one up to experiencing pain again. Previously, the victim might have made the choice that to “live free of the pain, then she must choose not to be alive.”¹⁵⁹ In other words, to stop the pain, she had to stop feeling—she needed to “kill” or “numb” that part of her soul, and in the process, she lost more of herself. Change will bring her back to life, and one can only take steps toward true life by faith in Christ. Because the victim has been betrayed by others, it will take time for her to trust and enjoy others and herself again, as she recovers from the damage done.¹⁶⁰

Allender’s prescribed path to change can be summarized by the following words: honesty, repentance, and bold love. “*Honesty* removes the pleasant, antiseptic blandness of denial. *Repentance* strips away self-contempt and other-centered hatred and replaces it with humility, grief, and tenderness. *Bold love* increases power and freedom through the exhilaration of loving as we were made to love.”¹⁶¹ Overall, these are biblically faithful categories that point abuse victims in a healthy direction. TWH’s view

¹⁵⁶ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 133.

¹⁵⁷ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 133.

¹⁵⁸ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 135.

¹⁵⁹ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 108.

¹⁶⁰ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 127.

¹⁶¹ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 180.

of change avoids many common pitfalls found in other curricula and has much to be commended.

Role of the local church. Despite many good and biblical things to say about the experience of abuse, how to change, and the gospel of Christ, TWH is particularly weak in the role it gives the local church in change. In one section, Allender seeks to answer the question, “Do I really need help to change?” He speaks about the value of “community,” but never locates this community in the local church.¹⁶² Instead, he generally defines “community” as a group that will aid in “honest and pointed discussion of both our dignity as persons who bear the image of God and depravity as sinners.”¹⁶³ While the church can and should function in these ways, the local church is not specifically mentioned. Thus, it seems likely that TWH and JB most often form these groups without consideration of the local church. For example, the third session of JB includes a discussion about how both damage and healing occur in the context of relationships.¹⁶⁴ If the local church were primary in the writer’s mind, then this would have been a perfect place to encourage active engagement in that community. Likewise, session 8 mentions “a picture of healthy community” but does not reference the church.¹⁶⁵ Session 9, on breaking strongholds, is even more direct about community. It says, “Breaking them [strongholds] in community can be healing and restorative . . . [Eph 6] The picture of standing in battle side by side with our brothers and sisters in Christ is powerful. . . . You do not stand in isolation. You stand in community.”¹⁶⁶ Amen! This is a true statement. However, for that community to be biblical, it must primarily be anchored

¹⁶² Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 36–40.

¹⁶³ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 37.

¹⁶⁴ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 54.

¹⁶⁵ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 159.

¹⁶⁶ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 184.

in the local church. In session 6, JB mentions the church, but only as one option in a list of possible groups where one might be received, accepted, and believed.¹⁶⁷ Clearly church is no different from any another “community, or a small group.”

Furthermore, if a more robust theology of the church were present in JB, session 11, on disappointment in relationships,¹⁶⁸ could have been better tied to the Scriptures. The session claims “Conflict + Resolution = Intimacy,”¹⁶⁹ but does not base this claim on any text. To stay committed to the body of Christ, especially through relational conflict, a right theology of the church is foundational. Without this theology undergirding it, the session’s encouragement falls a bit flat. “When your community disappoints you, God wants you to stay lovingly involved—to confront when necessary, pray and stay in relationship, believing He will sustain you.”¹⁷⁰ Why? If the session had rooted these points in the “one-another” commands given to believers in the context of a covenanted body of believers, the responsibility to persevere in difficult relationships would have been clearer and more powerful.

Similarly, if the local church is not central in the process of change, then the other normal, or regular, means of grace experienced in the context of a local church (preaching, prayer, Lord’s Supper, baptism, etc.) will not have a place in helping others grow in Christ. Allender has some vivid descriptions of the Christian life and the believer’s battle or process of change, for example—but they would have been more beautiful, and biblical, if the local church were primary in his thinking.¹⁷¹ The local church can and should be critiqued by those who might call it to minister better to victims

¹⁶⁷ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 117.

¹⁶⁸ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 199.

¹⁶⁹ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 206.

¹⁷⁰ OHM, *The Journey Begins*, 206.

¹⁷¹ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 230.

of sexual abuse, but this does not mean it should be dismissed. No, it must remain core in the Christian life, as it is the context for long-term discipleship of believers. Similar to my critique of TWH's use of Scripture, the main problem with TWH related to church is that of neglect. Simply put, TWH does not give the local church a functional role in the change process. But for biblical counselors, the local church is primary and essential.

Conclusion

In conclusion, LIHP is a problematic biblical counseling curriculum and ought to be wholly rejected. TWH, however, can be a helpful resource for those who want to help victims of childhood sexual abuse change in Christ. It can help them understand the experience of abuse and be better able to move toward victims in wisdom. Within Allender's work the gospel is clear, sin is addressed, personal responsibility is maintained, time for change is given, and compassion is extended to struggling saints. True, there are some concerns with TWH and JB, but with a few key adjustments, they can be used by biblical counselors. First, Scripture will need to be used more often and in more substantial ways. Good hermeneutics must be modeled and taught throughout the sessions and points shown to come from Scripture itself. And second, in both TWH and JB, the church as the body of Christ and primary Christian community must play an essential and core role in the change process. If these two changes are made, then church members, victims, and counselors can more wholeheartedly embrace the curriculum and make use of it in caring for others. But whether one chooses to adjust Allender's work and use it or learn from him and create something new, his work should be considered in the care of childhood sexual abuse victims.

What might a simple, yet holistic introductory curriculum for biblical change that models a good use of Scripture, clearly proclaims the gospel, and cultivates change over time in the context of a local church look like for believers in Central Asia? The next chapter seeks to answer this question by describing the content and process of

teaching a ten-lesson curriculum developed for the believers at AUK. The final chapter evaluates the lessons based on the previously specified goals.

CHAPTER 4
A BIBLICAL COUNSELING FRAMEWORK
FOR CHANGE

Preparation of Curriculum

My ten-lesson curriculum, “Biblical Change: How to Change and Help Others Change,” began on September 28, 2022, at A. Umut Kilisesi in Central Asia. In order to prepare the lessons, I spent years seeking to learn the local language and culture, as well as the local church culture within the believing community. These lessons were designed to fit within the common discipleship format used by many churches. My desire was to create a contextualized set of lessons that would provide the basic framework for how individuals could change and help others change. To get the lessons ready for the men of the church, I translated and edited them with a few local believers over the course of months. The audience for this initial teaching of the lessons was the men of our local church, done in place of our men’s Bible study on Wednesday evenings. Generally, 10–15 men attend this Bible study, which begins at 6 pm with a meal together. Then, from about 6:45 pm to 8:15 pm, we study the Word together in discussion format. Since the men only meet every other week for Bible study, it took about four months to complete the ten-lesson study.

The overall goals of the lessons were (1) to introduce church members to a basic framework for understanding change, how to change, and how to help others change; (2) to model a healthy use of the Scriptures in soul care by examining biblical texts in their context to understand and apply them appropriately; (3) to contextualize biblical counseling principles to the lives of believers in Central Asia; (4) to encourage and equip church members to care for one another more wisely and effectively; (5) to

root the context for change in the character of who God is for his people; (6) to prioritize the need to recognize the functions of the heart (cognitive, affective, volitional) in order to change biblically; (7) to center change on the person and work of Jesus Christ; (8) to frame biblical change as the work of the God’s Spirit to use his Word within the context of the community of his people; and (9) to cultivate long-term change through practical steps of obedience motivated by faith in Christ.

Biblical Change: How to Change and Help Others Change

Lesson 1: Spiritual Friendship—What Is Different about Us? (Col 3:12–17) (Understanding Change: Part 1)

During week 1, on September 28, 2022, we centered our study on Colossians 3:12–17 in order to answer the question, “What is different about us?” Why are our relationships as believers different from other relationships? What is unique about our friendships within our local churches? The goals of this first lesson was for believers (1) to begin to understand the biblical vision for relationships in the church; (2) to submit to the Word of God as their authority for change; (3) to know and feel their responsibility to care for one another; (4) to know and feel their need for others in the body; (5) to understand the differences between relationships in the church and in the world; and (6) to pursue spiritual friendships as a means to bring God’s authoritative and redeeming Word into their lives.

After completing the pre-lessons survey with the thirteen attendees, we began with some introductory material to establish the need for change as believers. We all have changed, are being changed, and will be completely changed because of our union with Christ. The focus of these lessons is on the present—how we can change now and how we are being changed by faith in Christ. We talked about how change happens as the Spirit uses the Word in the context of the local church to conform us into the image of

Christ. This change happens as we work together to understand and apply God’s Word to our lives.

Each lesson had a case study that helped us think practically and apply the lesson to a life situation. The case study this week was of an unbeliever, Mehmet, asking a believer, Omer, why he goes to church. What was different about the relationships he has there? Mehmet was beginning to understand the basics of the gospel but was confused about the role of the church. After studying Colossians 3:12–17, we returned to the case study to answer Mehmet’s question according to God’s Word.

After a brief overview of the book of Colossians, we looked more closely at chapter 3, where we saw how indicatives precede imperatives. We live a certain way because of who we are in Christ. We then highlighted how our relationships as believers are different because of Christ. We “put on” unique qualities as a spiritual family—compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. We bear with one another, forgive one another, and above all, put on love. We let the peace of Christ rule our hearts and are always thankful. We let the Word of Christ dwell within us richly and sing truth to one another. Believers teach and admonish one other as they do everything in the name of Christ, with thankfulness to the Father. These characteristics should define our relationships because of what Christ has done, and if they do, we will experience a supernatural, gospel-displaying community that will build up the church and glorify the Lord.

We ended our lesson by praying Colossians 3:12–17, for one other and our church. We also looked at how to start cultivating change by selecting a book from the 31-Day Devotional for Life series to read three times over the next few months.¹ The first

¹ This devotional series is published by P&R, produced by the Biblical Counseling Coalition, and ed. Deepak Reju (see <https://www.prpbooks.com/series/31-day-devotionals-for-life/2>). We are currently translating them into the local language, and as of December 1, 2022, we have eight titles in print and another four ready to be printed. The goal is to make the whole series available in the local language. These are the first biblical counseling resources to be made available in this language.

reading was to become generally familiar with the book. The second reading was to delve deeper and examine personal application. The third reading was to think about how we might help someone else struggling in a similar manner.

Lesson 2: *God—Who Is He for Us?* (Ps 46) (Understanding Change: Part 2)

For our second lesson, we met on Tuesday evening, October 4, 2022,² and focused on who God is for us through a study of Psalm 46. We had a total of nine participants. The goals for lesson 2 were for believers (1) to know God is their refuge, that he is sovereign, and with them always; (2) to interpret their lives considering who God is for them; (3) to trust God in all three of these key attributes (refuge, sovereignty, and presence) as they work toward change.

The lesson began with a review of lesson 1 and the truths we learned from Colossians 3:12–17. It was encouraging to hear that the main points of the lesson stayed with participants, particularly the unique relationship believers have with one another because of Christ and our shared responsibility for one another in the church. It was also clear that many of them have started to read the 31-Day Devotional they picked out and had found those first few days helpful.

We then read a case study about Elif and her struggles, which led us into our study of Psalm 46. The lesson inductively walked through the Psalm, after first discussing that the context of the Psalm was a dangerous and out-of-control time for the people of God. The Psalm describes the earth trembling, the mountains toppling into the sea, and the waters roaring and foaming. But amid apparent terrible circumstances, the confession of God's people was that he is their refuge and strength, a helper always found in trouble. Despite the chaos all around them, they looked to God, and their beliefs about his character changed their response.

² We met on a Tuesday for one lesson. All the other meetings were on Wednesday evenings.

We discussed what a refuge is and how that might be similar to, and different from, being strong. Because God is both our refuge and strength, this impacts how we approach him. It was also helpful for the participants to recognize that the response of God's people came before any deliverance. They did not know what God would do, but because they trusted in who he was for them, they responded out of faith, not fear.

We then learned from the Psalm that God is with us, and that he is sovereign. His presence comforts his people, and his sovereignty assures them that he is in control. In verse 10, God calls on his people to stop their fighting, to be still, and to know that he is God. Instead of focusing on, and responding to, their circumstance, they are to look to him and respond out of who he is in his character.

In summary, we learned from Psalm 46 that God is our refuge, meaning he is our place of comfort and safety. God is sovereign, meaning everything is under his control. Lastly, we learned God is with us, meaning we are never alone and always have a helper in times of need. Each of these characteristics of God are always crucial for God's people. While one truth might be particularly meaningful to someone at a particular time, remembering and resting in all three provides a stability and balance to our view of God and the Christian life that will aid us as we seek to persevere in Christ through all the struggles of life.

To finish the lesson, we returned to the story of Elif and sought to apply the teachings of Psalm 46 to her situation. To cultivate change in that upcoming week, we committed to memorize Psalm 46:1, and think on these three characteristics of God. We would also continue reading our 31-Day Devotional.

Lesson 3: Believers—Who Are We in this World? (1 Pet 2:9–12) (Understanding Change: Part 3)

For lesson 3, we meet on October 12, 2022. That evening twelve participants attended, nine of whom were local believers. The main goals for lesson 3 were for

believers (1) to primarily see themselves as the people of God (saints); (2) to understand a significant part of their experience in this world as sufferers and sinners; (3) to find comfort in how these three categories relate to one another; and (4) to become more aware of how desires for good things can become controlling or ruling desires, and thus sinful.

As with the other lessons, we began with a review of what was covered in previous lessons. After this brief review, we looked at the story of Zeynep, a young believer from a difficult home with an abusive father. Her story aimed to display the complexities of a sufferer, sinner, and saint. We then briefly examined 1 Peter as a whole before taking a closer look specifically at 1 Peter 2:9–12. Peter describes New Testament believers as a chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, and a people for his own possession. These descriptions are shocking because they are how Israel was described in the Old Testament. Consequently, the church is now the new covenant people of God and God’s appointed means to declare his praises. These verses clarified for participants that our fundamental identity as believers is that we are the people of God.

We then looked at verse 11 and saw that as strangers and exiles in this world, we are to abstain from sinful desires. Believers are in an internal battle against sinful desires. Though we are new creations in Christ, we still struggle against sin. The focus of the battle is not others, the fallen world, or even primarily the negative fruit in our lives, but instead, the focus is the heart. In order to understand heart desires, we briefly discussed James 4:1–2 to see how outward conflicts come from sinful desires within us. We want things, and when we do not get them, we often respond in anger because our “wants” have become needs or demands. Therefore, to examine our hearts, we do not primarily ask what we did, but what did we want, value, or love. Furthermore, how greatly did we want that thing? Our desire might have been for a good thing, but because we let that desire become a demand, we sinned when we did not obtain it, or we sinned to secure or keep it. After studying verse 11, we summarized that we are the people of God

who also struggle against sinful desires in our hearts.

Our last verse, 1 Peter 2:12, taught us how as believers we live among sinners; therefore, we will be sinned against. We will suffer. Yet, the reality of this suffering does not determine our response—we can live an honorable life before those who treat us poorly; and when we do respond out of faith, the Lord can use that response to draw others to himself so that they, too, will glorify him.

In summary, the Bible describes believers as the people of God who fight against indwelling sin while enduring suffering. Our fundamental identity is as the people of God, but we also struggle with sin within us (sin) and outside of us, as we are sinned against by others and live in a fallen world (suffering).

To conclude the lesson, we returned to Zeynep to make sense of her experiences through the categories of sufferer, sinner, and saint. In order to cultivate change, participants were encouraged to continue reading their devotional as well as to spend time examining their own heart desires and how they view themselves as a saint, sufferer, and sinner.

**Lesson 4: Our Hearts—Why Do We Do
What We Do? (Mark 7:14–23)
(Understanding Change: Part 4)**

For lesson 4, we met on October 26, 2022, and had a total of nine participants, seven of whom were local believers. The goals for lesson 4 were for believers (1) to understand that biblical change is focused on the heart; (2) to see how the functions of the heart (cognitive, affective, volitional) relate to one another; (3) to recognize that their present heart responses to the various circumstances of life are rooted in, and are coming from, pre-established beliefs, desires, and decisions of the heart.

After a review of the previous three lessons, we read the story of Mert, a young man struggling with jealousy after a new man, Mustafa, joined their group. The first main passage of lesson 4 was Mark 7:14–23. In this section Jesus is responding to religious

leaders who are upset with his disciples for eating with unclean hands and not obeying the traditions of the elders. Jesus responds by calling them hypocrites and telling them that their hearts are far from the Lord. Jesus then, in verse 14, continues his response to the religious leaders, while also calling the crowd to listen. Jesus reverses the logic of what makes a person unclean. The religious leaders of the day focused on external rules (the washing of hands, observing traditions and rituals), but Jesus makes clear that what actually makes a person unclean is what comes out of his heart.

The disciples initially do not understand what Jesus said, so they ask him about the parable, and Jesus continues to explain. He lists things that proceed from one's heart and make him unclean, such as evil thoughts, adultery, coveting, slander, and pride. In our lesson, we grouped these sins into categories of thoughts or beliefs, desires or emotions, and decisions or actions of the heart. We then discussed how thoughts, desires, and decisions relate to and impact one another. We also highlighted the main source of our problems as not "out there" but instead in our hearts. Therefore, the goal of change is to focus on what we have stored up in our hearts; when changes are made at the heart level, godly fruit will come.

Next, we turned to Luke 6:43–45 to examine Jesus's teaching about good and bad trees, as well as good and bad fruit. Luke 6 has a similar context to Mark 7 in that Jesus is speaking against hypocrisy. He asserts that good trees bear good fruit and bad trees bear bad fruit, and each tree can be known by its fruit. Jesus's point is that those who have stored up good in their hearts will produce good fruit, but those who have stored up evil in their hearts will produce bad fruit in their lives. Situations or people do not determine what comes from hearts, but they do provide opportunities for what is already in our hearts to be exposed—for good or bad. We talked about the futility of trying to staple a good piece of fruit onto a bad tree. Obviously, that fruit will not last. Likewise, our goal is not to "do" better, but to change from the inside out, with the result of real and lasting change. We discussed the example of how a minibus driver might

respond to a particular situation if he has nurtured sinful thoughts, desires, and commitments in his heart, versus godly thoughts, desires, and commitments.

After finishing our study of Luke 6, we summarized the main principles of the lesson and returned to the story of Mert, in order to examine the good and bad fruit in his life. We then considered thoughts, desires, and decisions that might have been causing him to respond the way he did to Mustafa. This was a fruitful discussion that also helped expose the importance of asking ourselves and others more specific heart-focused questions to gain insight into why we respond the way that we do.

The lesson ended with some applications for the upcoming week—to continue to read the devotional, memorize Proverbs 4:23, and personally reflect on the bad fruit in our lives, asking ourselves, “Where might it be coming from? What thoughts, desires, or decisions need to change in order to produce good fruit?”

Lesson 5: Christ—Where Do We Begin? (Matt 11:28–30)(How to Change: Part 1)

For lesson 5, we met on November 9, 2022, and had a total of fifteen participants, with eleven of these being locals. The goals for lesson 5 were for believers (1) to center all of change on the person and work of Christ; (2) to feel and respond to Jesus’s call to come to and learn from him; (3) to trust Christ as their Savior—not anyone or anything else.

After reviewing the previous four lessons, we discussed how those lessons aimed to give us an understanding of biblical change. Now, in the coming four lessons, we would seek to learn how to change. How can we start to move from being an unhealthy tree with bad roots to a healthy tree with healthy roots? Lesson 5 was our starting point. Before examining our main text (Matt 11:28–30), we looked at the story of Pinar, a wife and mother struggling to change and find hope in her walk with Christ. She has lost the joy of her salvation and started to doubt whether she is even a believer. How can she start the process of change?

After briefly discussing the context of Matthew 11 and Jesus's interaction with the religious leaders in his day, we focused on verses 28–30. In verse 28, Jesus extends his call to come. But the call has a particular object—those he is calling are to come to him. This call also has a condition—those who are weary and burdened are to come to him. Strength, intellect, status, or righteousness are not necessary to come to Jesus. In fact, he specifically calls the exact opposite kind of people—those who are weak, needy, and helpless.

Along with this call and condition, we discussed how Jesus extends a promise to those who come to him: he promises rest for their souls. This rest is much more than physical; it comes through forgiveness and peace with God. But this promise also comes with a cost. Jesus asserts that all who come to him must take up their yoke and learn from him. Together we studied how Jesus's "yoke" is his teaching and way of life. For those who come to him, this is an easy and light burden, especially compared to the yoke of the law and the religious leaders of that day (see Acts 15:10; Gal 5:1; Matt 23:4). To follow Jesus is not to be without a law, but it is to come under his authority and take on his way of life, which leads to joy and peace. Jesus's call is for those in need to come to him and stay with him—they are to learn from him and submit to him in everything.

Next, we studied how Jesus gives those in need a reason to come to him—he is lowly and humble in heart. In the heart of Jesus is such a character that draws needy sinners to himself. When we are at our lowest and most desperate (most entangled or enslaved to sin), the thing Jesus asks of us at that moment is to come to him. We discussed how his heart is not against us or disgusted with us; rather, he rejoices when we turn to him. For all believers, but especially for those from an Islamic background, to believe this truth about Jesus changes everything. As we discussed these truths about Jesus's character and attitude toward us, many were deeply impacted.

After studying Matthew 11:28–30, we summarized the lesson. Change begins, continues, and ends with Jesus. It is focused on him. We also learned that to change, the

first step is to recognize our need. We must humble ourselves and see that we are sick and in need of a doctor. Next, we learned how Jesus wants us to come to him. At his core, in his very heart, is the love of a Savior who desires sinners come to him. To come to Jesus is to stay with him, to learn from him, and take on his Word as our truth and way of life. Finally, when we come to Jesus, we receive his promises and, ultimately, rest for our souls.

At the end of our lesson, we returned to the story of Pinar and sought to use the truth we learned in Matthew 11 to care for her and point her to Christ. We had a profitable conversation on how to help her begin the change process. The soul care homework for this week was to continue reading the 31-Day Devotional, summarize Matthew 11:28–30 in our own words, use it in personal prayer, and then encourage a brother or sister in Christ with it.

**Lesson 6: The Holy Spirit—How Can We Live in Freedom? (Gal 5:13–6:10)
(How to Change: Part 2)**

For lesson 6, we met on November 23, 2022, with nine local believers and a total of twelve participants. The goals for this lesson were for believers (1) to connect freedom in the Spirit with serving one another through love; (2) to understand life in the Spirit as a battle against sinful flesh; (3) to intentionally cultivate life in the Spirit that produces the fruit of the Spirit; (4) to bear the responsibility to help one other fight against sinful flesh and sow to the Spirit; and (5) to recognize that change takes time. We reap what we sow.

The lesson began with a brief review of the first four lessons and a more detailed review of lesson 5. During that time, I asked one participant to draw our diagram and explain its elements. While he drew, the other participants helped him fill out details and explain what each symbol represented.

We then turned our attention to lesson 6 and the question, “As we trust in

Jesus, how can we start to cultivate change?” Before turning to Galatians 5:13–6:10, we read Yusuf’s case study about his struggle with pornography. We were left with the question, “How can he start to live in freedom?”

Galatians is a book written by Paul to address attacks on the gospel. Many were rejecting the gospel by returning to slavery under the law. However, slavery to the law was not the only attack on the gospel, since some wanted to use their “freedom” in Christ as an opportunity to act sinfully. Toward the end of his letter, Paul confronts this anti-gospel message.

We saw in Galatians 5:13–15 that instead of using our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, we are to use it to serve one another through love. We are freed from thinking only of ourselves and can now fulfill the summary of the law, which is to love our neighbor as ourselves. In Galatians 5:16–26, we studied how Paul describes the battle of the flesh against the Spirit. Believers are commanded to walk by the Spirit, which they can do because they belong to Christ, have crucified the flesh in him, and have been given life in the Spirit (vv. 24–25). It was helpful for many in our group to see how this internal battle is a normal struggle for Christians. We then examined the differences between the works of the flesh (vv. 19–21) and the fruit of the Spirit (vv. 22–23). We especially emphasized that the good fruit in our lives is a result of the Spirit—it is he who produces the fruit as we walk by and sow to him. The work of the Spirit in our lives should give believers an optimistic view towards change.

Galatians 6:1–10 connected for us life in the Spirit with a responsibility toward one another. We are to gently restore a wayward brother or sister and carry one another’s burdens as we seek to fulfill the law of Christ. As believers, we are called to intentionally make our burdens heavier in order to make another’s lighter. We struggle together in this life. We fight our own flesh, but we also participate in our spiritual siblings’ fights such that we together walk in the Spirit.

Next, we learned Paul’s general principle in 6:7—we reap what we sow. To

sow to the flesh is to reap destruction, but to sow to the Spirit is to reap eternal life. The stakes are serious, and it was important for us to see how we are always sowing to something. The language of “sowing” was also helpful for us to understand how change takes time. It is a process, and we should think of a farmer when we are seeking change. We sow, plant, water, and cultivate now so that we can bear fruit later. As we had studied earlier, if we walk by and sow to the Spirit, he will produce the fruit in our lives.

Our session concluded with a summary of the main principles from Galatians 5–6, as well as a continued discussion about Yusuf and how we might provide help for him in his battle. I was impressed with the care participants sought to show Yusuf and their particular insight into his life, applying what we learned from God’s Word to help him start to cultivate change. Finally, we reminded ourselves to continue to cultivate change ourselves by reading our devotional, serving a brother or sister that week in a practical way, finding a way to bear another’s burden and pray for him or her, and praying the Spirit would continue his work in our lives as we sow to him and war against the flesh.

**Lesson 7: God’s Word—How Can We Cultivate Spiritual Health? (Ps 1)
(How to Change: Part 3)**

For lesson 7, we met on December 14, 2022, and had a total of 11 participants. The goals for this lesson were for believers (1) to understand that God’s Word is the primary means the Spirit uses to cultivate change in our lives; (2) to start to practice the spiritual discipline of Scripture meditation; and (3) to see how God uses meditation on Scripture to change the functions of the heart (beliefs, desires, and decisions).

After a brief review of the previous six lessons, I asked a different participant to help draw our visual diagram. Together we put the pieces together and used this time for further review. I was encouraged to see some of the main components, and their associated concepts, crystallizing in the minds of our men. Before we began our study of

Psalm 1 to answer the question, “What can we do practically to sow to the Spirit and change?” we read about Dilek’s story—in particular, her desire to feel accepted and her struggle to read the Bible.

Psalm 1, as the introduction to the Psalter along with Psalm 2, provides a framework to read the remaining 148 psalms. We reminded one other how psalms are songs, or poems, written to God. They are voiced prayers that describe real experiences and express real emotions. They show us how we can, and should, live all of life before the Lord. Psalm 1 begins by describing what the blessed, or happy, one will not do. Basically, he will not go the way of the world and follow sinners but will instead take pleasure in God’s Word. As his delight, he will meditate on it day and night. The result of meditating on God’s Word is that he will become like a tree planted beside flowing streams—a picture of health and stability. He will grow and flourish and bear fruit in season.

We discussed how the prosperity that comes from meditation on God’s Word does not mean life will go as we want it, or that God will cause all our problems to disappear. But, it does mean that we can trust God to solidify our trust in him and fill our souls with the joy, peace, hope, and contentment that we crave. Spiritually, we can be healthy and produce the fruit of the Spirit. Prayerful meditation on God’s Word is the primary way that the Spirit works in those in Christ to move them from a bad tree producing bad fruit, to a good tree producing good fruit. The righteous are characterized by delighting in God’s Word, and this delight places their lives under the authority of God’s Word, allowing it to change everything about them.

As a group we discussed tangibly how we might practice daily meditation on God’s Word. Each person had different ideas and practices, but the common theme was that it would be a discipline requiring time and effort, but would prove vital for our lives both individually and corporately. Our commitment is for God’s Word to influence us more than the world does, which will happen as we read, understand, and apply his Word

to our lives.

Our lesson ended with a discussion about how we might encourage and teach Dilek to meditate on God's Word. We also spent about ten minutes individually looking at one verse to get as many observations from that verse as possible, then sharing these observations together. It was amazing to see how many observations were made in those ten minutes. Finally, in order to cultivate change in our lives, we encouraged one other to continue the 31-Day Devotional, with a particular focus to how we might be able to help someone else with it. We committed to pray for wisdom to love our brothers and sisters well and also to meditate on the same passage of Scripture that upcoming week, aiming to write down at least thirty observations from it.

Lesson 8: The Church—How Can a Community Change Together? (Eph 4:11–16)(How to Change: Part 4)

We met for lesson 8 on January 4, 2023, and had a total of 12 participants. The goals for lesson 8 were for believers (1) to see change as a community project; (2) to take responsibility to help others change; (3) to look to the church for help to change.

We began again by reviewing the previous lessons and drawing our visual diagram. This time we had more unified answers and the visual seemed to make more sense to the attendees. In the final week concerning how to change, we focused on this question: "The Spirit uses the Word to change us. What, or who, else does he use?" Our main text was Ephesians 4:11–16.

To set up our study of Ephesians 4, we read the story of Fatma and Emre, two believers with radically different backgrounds and interests. Still, as brother and sister in Christ, how can they grow to love, serve, and build each other up in him? Chapter 4 of Ephesians is focused on unity within the body of Christ. We saw how Paul teaches that God gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry. These people are themselves gifts given to God's people to help them

better engage in the work of ministry. How does Paul describe the work of ministry? He describes it as a work that builds up the body of Christ, the church. Consequently—and this was an important point for our group—all believers ought to work for the benefit, building up, strength, and health of the church. The responsibility to do these does not fall completely on pastors or church leaders.

We discussed how the goal of ministry is for all believers to grow into maturity in Christ, such that we are stable and secure in him. How do we, as a church, move in that direction and cultivate this type of ministry? We learned from Paul that we are to speak the truth in love to one another; by relating to each other in this way, we will grow up in every way in Christ. The necessary components are truth and love—and speaking in this way with each other. For the body to be healthy and build itself up, each member is needed. And as each member works for the benefit of the whole, the Spirit will use the Word in the context of the church to mature and change believers in Christ.

We concluded our lesson with a fruitful discussion on how we, as the church, can help believers like Fatma and Emre to love, serve, and minister to each another. Each needs the other and the Lord will use each to mature the other in Christ. We also concluded that if their relationship were to deepen and flourish over time, it would be a powerful display of the gospel to both the church and the surrounding community.

To cultivate change we agreed to pray for one other believer in the church that week and try to find a way to encourage him or her with truth. We also committed to intentionally try to get to know more people at church that week—to sit next to them, engage them in conversation, and find ways to love and serve them. Lastly, as a group we tried to memorize Ephesians 4:15, and meditate on speaking the truth in love, with an awareness of which aspect might be harder for us—truth or love.

**Lesson 9: Love, Listen, and Understand—
How Can We Start to Help Others?
(Helping Others Change: Part 1)**

Because of scheduling issues at our church, we completed the first half of lesson 9 with lesson 8 on January 4, 2023; and we completed the other half on January 18, 2023, with lesson 10. The goals of lesson 9 were for believers (1) to love others by seeking to understand their struggles and identifying with their experiences; (2) to learn how to ask thoughtful questions and listen well so that they can better understand another's struggles; and (3) to bring the truth of God's Word into their understanding of another's struggle.

Our time began with an overview of the previous eight lessons to summarize the main points we learned about change and how to change. A different participant drew our visual diagram, and we again worked through its details together. Then, building off of our reflection on Ephesians 4 and how every member is to engage in the work of ministry, we previewed the final two lessons that discuss how to help others change.

Hakan's case study focused on his ongoing struggle with being easily offended (a common struggle in this culture). The outline for this lesson was that we need to love, listen, and seek to understand others if we are going to help them grow in Christ. But, from the start, we reminded ourselves that we must be praying for ourselves—that the Lord would give us love, patience, and wisdom—as well as praying for the other person, since it is God who changes lives.

Paul's example with the Thessalonians provided our example of how to love. In 1 Thessalonians 2:8, Paul describes how he shared the gospel and his own life with the believers in Thessalonica. He, along with his companions, loved the Thessalonians deeply. As he loved them, he taught them what is of first importance—the gospel of God. We discussed how loving others means giving of ourselves, and that comes at a cost. Love is demanding and will require sacrifice.

How can we practically display love? To answer this, we next studied a

principle taken from four different verses (Prov 18:13, 15; 20:5; Jas 1:19) which showed that the wise listen well. To love others is to listen to them. Everyone agreed that it is important to listen to others, but they also agreed that in their culture, listening is not something they do well. They are quick to speak and offer their opinions, but they are not quick to listen. We discussed how listening is a skill we can develop and that, in order to grow as a listener, we need to grow in asking better questions. To ask good questions, we discussed different categories of questions—broad and narrow, open-ended, and specific questions. We saw the need to ask questions that bring out someone’s thoughts, desires, and heart commitments as he relates to God, himself, others, and the circumstances of his life. To organize these questions, I gave the participants a handout that categorizes these questions and gives examples.³ Some of these categories they had never thought about before.

Why do we take the time to ask questions and listen well? We saw together that the goal of listening and asking questions is to understand our brother or sister in Christ. We want to know them and help them feel known. To engage in this way is to apply Jesus’s principle in Matthew 7:12: “Whatever you want others to do for you, do also the same for them.” We agreed that we all appreciate it when someone listens and understands us; therefore, we want to do the same for others. To understand might also require talking with other people (Prov 18:17). As we try to understand someone and their struggle, we also discussed how we need to try to understand their struggle in light of Scripture. How does God’s Word help us understand? What are common themes or dominant issues in someone’s life, and what might be their corresponding biblical categories? How might the Bible speak into their struggles? We learned that we need to understand both the person and God’s Word if we are to help someone change and grow

³ Jeremy Pierre, “Listening with a Discerning Ear: Asking Questions in Light of the Gospel,” course handout (PDF) for 80553 (The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Summer 2020). This handout was translated.

in Christ.

We summarized what we had learned up to that point, and then we turned to our final lesson. For application that week, we decided to write out questions we can ask other people at church, to continue work in the 31-Day Devotional, and to try intentionally to listen more (speak less) in our conversations that week.

Lesson 10: Minister the Word and Call to Live by Faith in Christ—How Can We Continue to Help Others? (Helping Others Change: Part 2)

For our final lesson, we met on January 18, 2023, and had a total of 11 participants. The goals for lesson 10 were for believers (1) to feel more equipped to counsel; (2) to understand how to bring their understanding of another person and of Scripture together into wise counsel from the Word; (3) to continually point others to faith in Christ as the basis for change; and (4) to call for specific obedience that will cultivate biblical change.

Our review this time was simply to draw our diagram and make as many observations from it as possible. We then reviewed the main points from the previous lesson—love, listen, and understand. We discussed how we did that week at trying to ask good questions and listen more. I was encouraged to hear how many attempted to apply the principles from the lesson. Our final lesson built on lesson 9 and added two final key components to help us as we try to help others change—we minister the Word and we call others to live by faith in Christ.

First, we bring God’s Word into someone’s experience. After we start to understand a person and how God’s Word speaks into his situation, we saw how we can, and should, bring the Word to bear on life because a person’s greatest need is to hear from God. Some in our group felt unable to do this work of ministry, but after reading Romans 15:14, they were encouraged to grow in the ability to minister the Word. To do this work of ministry, we discussed how we must know the Word well and ourselves be

walking by faith in Christ. It was a good reminder that we are not bringing our own wisdom, but God's Word, into someone's life. Second Timothy 3:16 outlines the functions of God's Word and how it brings disciples to maturity and equips them for every good work. As we take steps to bring God's Word into lives, we also learned how different people need unique things. According to 1 Thessalonians 5:14, some need warning, others comfort, still others help, yet all need patience. Wisdom is required to know how to practically love and help those in need.

Our last point on how to help others change focused on calling a brother or sister to walk by faith in Christ in the practical details of his or her daily life. We want to be doers of the Word, not hearers only (Jas 1:22). We learned to ask ourselves and others, "What would faithful obedience to Christ look like this week?" We must examine what we should start doing, stop doing, or continue doing in our thoughts, desires, and decisions as they relate to God, self, others, and circumstances.

To end our lesson, we briefly looked at Galatians 2:20, a reminder to ourselves that, as believers, we live by faith in Christ. We live and change in the light of the gospel, so any acts of obedience come from who we are in Christ and our ongoing trust in his grace to change us. To change we also need others, and as we call others to this Christ-centered change, we emphasized our need to come alongside them. We are not speaking from above, but alongside as fellow strugglers, as we say, "Come, let us exalt his name together" (Ps 34:3).

We ended our time encouraged that we will continue to change by faith in Christ until the end. We will keep pressing on together! Our final applications were to highlight main takeaways and next steps. How can we continue to grow, learn, and change, and how can we help others do the same? Together we closed out our time in prayer by asking God to complete the work he began in us.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The church in Central Asia has many needs. With a population of around 85 million, the country where I live has only an estimated 8,000 evangelical believers (0.009 percent Christian). This small Christian community is generally poor, lacking stable legal grounding, and scattered over 300,000 square miles in churches that average twenty to thirty members, led by overworked and underequipped church leaders. Despite difficult circumstances, many of these churches are committed to proclaim the gospel broadly and deeply to families, communities, and even whole cities and provinces that are without any gospel witness. May many hear the biblical gospel in the local language, and repent and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sin and hope of eternal life. The local church must pray, go, and proclaim the good news of Christ to the millions of lost people in Central Asia.

In addition to this great need for evangelism, the local church here also has many pressing needs within, including training and equipping for leaders and pastors, theological education to teach sound doctrine, and practical resources and literature to help churches grow in health. As one becomes familiar with the church in this country, he or she will certainly recognize another critical need: to care for struggling believers in the church as they fight to trust Christ and grow in him through the challenges of this life. The suffering and sinful people of God need to be better shepherded toward Christlikeness. In short, the local church needs a vibrant biblical counseling ministry. In my experience, most foreign workers and church leaders tend to focus on evangelism, apologetics, music, college ministry, seminars, and conferences. These pursuits are

needed and God-honoring; however, focusing attention on them leaves relatively little energy and resources to help existing believers as they struggle to fight sin and trust in Christ. Those who do minister to believers are generally seeking to train or equip them to engage in those same types of focused ministries.

Why are other ministries prioritized over member care, or biblical counseling, especially within the missionary community? Several factors may contribute to this. First, to counsel effectively requires a level of language and culture acquisition that takes most foreigners years to obtain. Communication at the heart level enables conversation about deep issues, yet many foreigners either fail to put in the necessary work or do not stay on the field long enough to build the language and culture foundation required to minister in this way. Furthermore, many are tempted to see this personal ministry of the Word as a distraction from the “real work” they were sent out to do—to proclaim the gospel to a lost world. They are surrounded by millions of lost souls and have supporters back home wanting to hear about their impact on the spiritual darkness. Taking the necessary time to help a struggling believer with his pornography addiction, anger problem, broken marriage, depression, or anxiety will mean reducing or putting aside other efforts for a time. The hours essential to get to know someone, build trust, and understand the complexities and challenges of his life are significant—especially in a relational culture like that of this Central Asian country. But this type of ministry is not easily quantified or reflected on reports to supporters back home. Numbers of professions of faith, baptisms, or new churches can seem like clear and tangible results, while a believer taking a step of faithful obedience in his walk with Christ can feel insignificant. Counseling is also painful—both for the counselor and counselee. To speak openly and bear one another’s burdens will be emotionally, physically, and spiritually draining for all involved. Many believers have painful pasts and also currently endure much suffering; to engage with their struggle is to feel those pains and sufferings along with them. Many foreigners are either unwilling, unavailable, or ill-equipped to plumb those depths with locals.

How might we, as foreign missionaries, begin to help? First, we can influence other foreigners in the missionary task of making disciples of Christ in all nations by helping them see how, if it is to be lasting, this work should be done in and through the local church.¹ Our goal should be to make *mature* disciples that persevere to the end. If the end game is maturity in all areas of a disciple's life, and if we believe the Spirit will use the Word within the church community to make such disciples, then we will delight to spend more time and resources on helping believers in the church grow. Even if every missionary did not come with the explicit purpose of providing this sort of care or helping train local believers in this way, all of them should desire believers to grow in Christ and receive the care they need. If the Central Asian church is to proclaim the gospel faithfully to the lost people around them, it also needs to make sure it is faithfully caring for its members, with all their particular struggles, so that they can live in Christ and be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

This project and its ten lessons were designed to provide an initial framework of biblical change, or the basic building blocks of how to change and help others change. This will then hopefully be applied in future studies to address specific needs such as anger, depression, anxiety, trauma, etc. Biblical counseling is a new work in Central Asia. We are just getting started, and these lessons are meant to serve as a starting point. We must love our brothers and sisters here enough to enter into their deepest and most painful experiences with the goal of helping them trust Christ through them. I hope and pray that these introductory lessons are a small, but helpful, step in the right direction.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was to equip the members of A. Umut Kilisesi in

¹ For an explanation of the IMB's teaching on the missionary task, see International Mission Board, *IMB Foundations*, digital file, accessed December 19, 2022, <https://store.imb.org/imb-foundations-digital-download/>.

Central Asia, with a simple yet holistic introductory framework for biblical change, so that they better understand who God is for them, and who they are as his people as they experience life and respond from the heart to its troubles. Furthermore, the goal was for them to understand how faith in Christ transforms their responses, as the Spirit uses the Word within the church, and how they can help their spiritual family in that same transformation process.

As I developed and then taught the lesson set, the need for biblical resources in this area became even more obvious. When participants experienced the fruit that comes from cultivating change in biblical ways and saw their need for further growth, they became hungry for biblical resources to help them in the process of change. Digging a little beneath the surface of these believers' lives reveals vast amounts of sin and suffering needing to be addressed. But if we start to dig, we need to be ready to care for our brothers and sisters in biblically faithful ways.

Although the church here is small, it has many foreigners invested in it, and that gives rise to competing theologies and resources about change. I reviewed and critiqued one such resource, *Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer*,² in chapter 3. There are others that could not be explored in the scope of this project. In addition to specific resources, there are also common beliefs and practices within the Central Asian church regarding change. Some teach that the greatest need is “healing” from past pain or sin, which can, and should, come immediately to those who seek it. Others teach that the greatest need is deliverance from evil spirits and the stronghold of Satan. Still others communicate the need to “move on” and “forget what lies behind,” not addressing past issues at all. We must use the Scriptures to evaluate and critique these competing

² For example, see Open Hearts Ministry (OHM), *The Journey Begins: Leaders Guide*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Open Hearts Ministry, 2019); OHM, *New Hope: Multiplying Healing to Wounded Hearts*, www.multiplyhealing.org. New Hope curriculum is available only to those trained within the ministry, however, I received the seven-session curriculum via special permission email on September 22, 2022.

theologies. Then, in addition to wise discernment and critique, we must present a positive framework for biblical change. Because of my desire to present an initial framework drawn from a right understanding of God's Word, each lesson centered on a portion of Scripture and sought to model good hermeneutics. Then, after a guided inductive study, the lessons highlighted specific principles for how to understand change, how to change, and then how to help others change. The goal was to let God's Word speak and equip us to more rightly view God, ourselves, and how we relate to God in Christ.

The lessons were intentionally basic, or introductory, in nature because, while the concepts were simple, they aimed to help build a solid foundation, which cannot be assumed among first-generation believers from a Muslim background. These simple truths were new to some in our church: that believers are brothers and sisters in Christ; that God is with us; that Jesus desires sinners to come to him; that change takes time and must be rooted in the heart; and that all believers can help other believers grow in Christ. Observing these truths encourage and equip our men helped solidify for me the need for this simple yet holistic framework for biblical change to go out to other churches who speak the same language. We will always have a need for some to specialize, acquire professional training, and help in more extreme situations. Nevertheless, if all believers were provided a framework for biblical change, they would be better equipped to grow in Christ and help others do the same.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

This project included three goals to determine the effectiveness of the lessons. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of biblical change and how to help others change at AUK. This goal was accomplished when twelve men (nine local believers) took a twenty-one-question, five-point Likert scale survey before beginning the lessons. I was able to gather helpful information from the responses. For example, only two local believers agreed that all believers can counsel. After talking with a few

brothers, I discovered that the reason they think that only some can, or should, counsel is that they have observed others try to offer counsel but cause harm through unhelpful advice and practices. Some also believe that to be able to understand and help a struggling person, one must formally study and earn a psychology degree. A few also mentioned that they think only pastors or church leaders can counsel. Another helpful bit of information I gained from the survey was that all participants except one acknowledged the need to receive counsel from others, with five of the nine local brothers strongly agreeing that they need counsel. This response was surprising because not many openly ask for help or readily share personal struggles. Combined with the first observation, I concluded that most of the men in our church feel the need to receive counsel but will likely only seek it out from those they feel are qualified to offer it (pastors, educated, etc.). A final significant observation was that every participant either agreed, or strongly agreed, with the need to learn more about counseling and obtain materials on biblical counseling in the local language.

The project's second goal was to develop an introductory ten-week interactive Bible study curriculum on change in the local language, which would provide a framework to understand the following: God; his people, their experiences, and heart responses; how faith in Christ transforms those responses, as the Spirit uses the Word within the church; and how they can help their spiritual family in that same transformation process.³ This goal was measured by a panel of four experienced and mature believers: two local believers and two foreign co-workers in other cities, who utilized a rubric to evaluate the curriculum's biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, contextualization, and applicability. This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 80 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level. One of the local believers who evaluated the curriculum is one of the few second-

³ See appendix 3.

generation believers in his country and is currently preparing for ministry through SBTS online. He made many positive and encouraging comments about the biblical faithfulness of the lessons. The other local believer, an elder in a local church, is getting a PhD in psychology and served as the translator for the lessons into the local language. He spoke highly of the content and format and is eager to see them used widely in local churches. The two foreign co-workers each have more than twenty years of experience on the field. One has a PhD in theology and the other a master's degree in counseling. They both were encouraged by the contextualized content of the material for the local church and acknowledged the great need for biblical resources in this area.

The third goal was to increase knowledge among AUK members so that they better understand God, his people and their experiences and heart responses, how those responses are transformed by faith in Christ as the Spirit uses the Word within the church, and how they can help their spiritual family in that same transformation process through implementing the Bible study curriculum. I taught the curriculum over a four-month period, and we met every other week on Wednesday evenings from 6 to 8:30 pm for most of that time. We averaged ten participants for each study, beginning with a meal together, followed by the study (60–90 minutes). I administered a pre-survey and a post-survey to measure the effectiveness of the study on its participants. Eight local believers were present to take both the pre- and post-survey, even though all eight of them did not attend all the lessons. Six of the eight participants showed an increase in knowledge. The total average increased from 90.875 to 93.625.

Four questions in particular displayed an increase in knowledge (as shown in table 1 below), with the biggest increase related to the ability of all believers to counsel. Given the emphasis throughout the lessons on our responsibility to care for one another, this increase was not surprising. But overall, I would have liked to see a greater increase in knowledge. One cultural factor that might have contributed to the surveys displaying a smaller increase in knowledge than what they experienced is the desire to get high scores

and excel on tests. The education system in this Central Asian country is focused on standardized tests that determine a student's major and university. Because of the constant pressure to get high scores, a t-test like the one given might not be the best way to measure one's knowledge on a topic, especially when it is largely self-reflection. For example, seven of the eight participants recorded on the pre-survey that they feel equipped to counsel other believers. This is an interesting result considering that to my knowledge none of them have received any training or education related to counseling. Furthermore, I have spoken with a number of these men about how to help other believers and they have said they feel unable to help and that the person should speak with a professional. When I put these two observations together, I believe there is a strong desire to put a high score on every question, which most likely led the first survey being inflated in its scores. Despite not using the best evaluative tool given the culture, it was still encouraging to see positive change. The most encouragement has come from follow-up conversations with participants to hear the things they have learned. Just this week I spoke with a young believer that is set to be baptized in a few weeks. As we were talking about his ongoing struggle against sin, he mentioned how our lessons helped him reflect on heart motives and that the visual used throughout the lessons has stuck with him. He now naturally thinks about change through the framework presented to him during this project! Goal 3 was considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference between the pre-survey and post-survey scores.

Table 1. Pre- and post-project survey results sample

Question	Pre-Project Survey	Post-Project Survey	Change
I feel equipped to counsel other believers.	32	35	3
I counsel others.	30	34	4
I know how to ask questions to understand another's experience and the reasons why they respond the way they do.	31	35	3
All believers can counsel.	19	25	6

Strengths of the Project

This project has five main strengths. First, I believe this curriculum meets a particular need in the local church here. Over the past few years, I have gathered information to see what is available in the local language and what others are doing in the area of counseling. There is very little in general and almost nothing from a biblical counseling perspective. Considering the clear need for biblical counseling resources in this language, a main strength of the lessons was that they sought to meet this need.

Second, the lessons' format fits well with the typical local church's structure for Bible study. Most churches in this country organize a Sunday morning worship service relatively similar to those of churches in the West. However, other ministries of the church might look a bit different. They generally do not have another whole-church gathering during the week, and very few churches have a Sunday school ministry. Yet, they do usually have midweek men and women's Bible studies, which are often curriculum-based and more inductive, small-group-type discussions. The ten lessons of this project fit well within that sort of format, because they are inductive, intended for small groups, and last around 60–90 minutes.

Third, this project attempted to contextualize biblical counseling for the local church in Central Asia. It was not written with a western audience in mind and then translated into the local language. Instead, the case studies were written with local believers in mind and included details that might be unique to their context. In addition to the case studies, each study began with a meal together. This step of fellowship should not be understated. If we had arrived at 6 pm and immediately begun our study, the study may not have had as much of an impact. But taking time to first talk, laugh, and get to know one another, and then to study together, kept our relationships in view as a key component of change. The goal was not only to help the men learn from the Word, but also to get to know one another and begin to apply the truths of the lessons within the context of our relationships.

A fourth strength of the project was its clear gospel proclamation, combined with an explanation of how the Spirit uses the Word within the church community to change us into the likeness of Christ. All these key components came from a careful study of specific portions of Scripture, using and modeling biblical hermeneutics. The main visual used throughout the lessons was also a key part of the learning process to solidify core concepts, since we created it together lesson-by-lesson. In the end, each participant could identify and explain the fundamental truths from the lessons by looking at and/or drawing the visual.

A final strength of the project was that through developing the ten lessons, I had to anchor my convictions about heart change, mutual care, who God is for believers, who we are as his followers, the role of the Spirit and the Word in the change process, and the overall counseling process in specific texts of Scripture. Situating these in key biblical texts was extremely helpful for me to be able to crystalize my beliefs and communicate them effectively to others. I no longer feel like I am providing proof texts, but instead I am more able to walk people through portions of Scripture so that they see these truths for themselves. Focusing on only ten lessons also helped clarify for me what

is of greatest importance for an introductory framework for biblical change. Many other elements could have been included in the lessons, but I was forced to focus on the most crucial components and leave other truths about change to future studies.

Weaknesses of the Project

I noticed four main weaknesses of this project. First, a few of the lessons included so many details or questions that they went a bit long. Since each study was discussion-based, we spent a significant amount of time on questions that were of greater interest to some, leaving little time for other questions. When individuals wanted to talk, explain a story, or make a point, I was culturally bound to let them speak. Most of the time these were helpful comments, but as with any group discussion, sometimes we digressed or had to take time to correct an unhelpful comment. Furthermore, we have a few men who tend to dominate discussions, meaning others were not able to participate as much or we could not keep to our time constraints. These factors made a few of the lessons exceed the 90-minute mark, which was challenging for some attendees. I will need to edit the lessons and utilize better discussion management skills to address this issue.

Second, meeting biweekly was a weakness because it became hard to maintain momentum and sustained thought. Each lesson built on the previous one, and although we began each week with a review, it was hard to keep certain truths fresh in our minds. This weakness was compounded by all but one participants' desire to keep their study packets at the church, so that they would not lose or forget to bring them. This meant that they could not review past truths or look ahead to the next lesson.

A third weakness was my limitation in the local language. While I have worked hard at language and culture acquisition over the past nine years, and I have reached an advanced level of the language, I often still feel I cannot express a thought or teach a concept as clearly or precisely as I would like. I eventually make my point, but

more advanced language acquisition would make the study more fruitful. I hope that local believers will teach through this curriculum in the future, which would eliminate this challenge.

Finally, another weakness of the project was in the application section after each study. We did not have a system of accountability to help one another take steps to cultivate change between each lesson. Were people doing the homework? Were they taking the practical steps of faithful obedience? Were they reading and interacting with the 31-Day Devotional? Some were, but I believe many did not. The next time I teach this curriculum, I need to consider how better to help participants apply biblical change throughout the week.

What I Would Do Differently

After considering this project's weaknesses, there are four things I would like to do differently in the future. First, I would seek to make these lessons weekly for ten weeks, instead of biweekly, in order to build momentum and heighten a focus on the material. Unfortunately, with our current church structure, it is challenging for both men and women to do a study every week. Each group meets every other week on Wednesday evenings, and adding a second meeting during the week has proven difficult for most members. If we did this, I think attendance would drop significantly. Could we mix men and women together? The challenge here is that the group would be quite large, potentially up to thirty people, which is far too many for a discussion-based study. It is possible that we could split the group in half and a co-teacher could help lead. Yet, childcare is another challenge, both due to cost and limited space. If kids were present, our ability to focus on the study would decrease significantly. Given our current setup, there does not seem to be a good solution for the childcare situation. Still, I think it is imperative to find a way for this study to happen on a weekly basis.

A second change I would make is to shorten the lessons as much as possible.

Despite multiple edits focused on condensing the material, this final version of the ten lessons needs further editing to shorten them even more. This would help us stay within our time constraints and better hold participants' attention.

Third, in the future I would find a way for participants to interact with the lesson before and after each study. While I did send a message before each study asking them to read the main text for the upcoming study, I think interacting with the lessons themselves would be helpful. Maybe they could work through the lessons beforehand individually, and then come prepared to engage in the discussions and ask more thoughtful questions.

Lastly, as I mentioned in the weakness section, I would provide more accountability for the group to apply truths learned during each lesson in their daily lives. Accountability groups of two or three could aid in this. Or, the study leader could function as more of an instructor, requiring assignments, which he grades and gives feedback on, then presenting a certificate to those who adequately meet expectations. Making the curriculum more formal and class-like might seem strange, but for cultural reasons, it could be received well and aid in learning.

Theological Reflections

My main theological reflections came through preparing and teaching the project's ten lessons. Each lesson helped to sharpen and clarify my thoughts and forced me to root my convictions about biblical change more explicitly in God's Word. I can highlight at least seven theological reflections from this project.

First, I learned what characteristics about God I need to emphasize to suffering people. From Psalm 46, I saw that when God's people trust in his goodness and seek refuge in him, believe in his strength and providence over all things, and live in light of his constant presence; they can then respond out of faith no matter the circumstances. The people of God need at all times to trust in all three of these characteristics of God, even as

they allow individual characteristics to minister to them uniquely at specific times.

Second, I learned from 1 Peter 2:9–12 that believers are aided when they understand their life experiences through the categories of sufferer, sinner, and saint. They are fundamentally the people of God, who also battle with internal sin as sinners and external sin through suffering caused by others' sin because they live in a fallen world. Believers can tend to identify primarily as sufferers or sinners in their daily lives, but their primary identity must be as the people of God, especially when they fight against personal sin or experience suffering in uniquely difficult ways.

Third, I learned from Mark 7:14–23 to place the necessity of heart change within a clean-unclean framework. Our hearts are the problem because what comes out of them makes us unclean. Since the battle is not only with sinful desires, but also with good desires that become needs or demands and lead us to respond in sinful ways, these issues are complex. Furthermore, if we deal with the heart and cultivate at the root level what is good and healthy, the fruit will come (Luke 6:43–45).

Fourth, Matthew 11:28–30 taught me that coming to Jesus in faith is the first step of change, in response to his call and in accord with his heart's desire. Those in need are called to come to Jesus, to take up his yoke and learn from him. When they come, they will receive rest for their souls. They should come because he is humble and gracious in heart and desires the needy to come to him. Change begins, and continues, with Jesus.

Fifth, I learned from Galatians 5:13–6:10 about the Spirit's role in changing us. Believers are called to live in freedom, which is expressed in serving one another in love as we walk in step with the Spirit. Believers must live in the Spirit, and as they sow to the Spirit, they will reap the fruit of the Spirit and eternal life. Biblical change is cultivated over time, and the imagery of farming, and sowing in particular, is a helpful biblical metaphor for change. We reap what we sow.

Sixth, I learned that the Word is the primary means the Spirit uses to change

God's people. More concretely, I learned from Psalm 1 that as God's people delight in and meditate on the Word day and night, they will become like trees planted beside streams of water and will bear fruit in season. Meditation on Scripture brings all the functions of the heart (cognitive, affective, volitional) into the experience of the Word, and the Spirit uses it to change God's people. In fact, the primary means the Lord uses to change our thoughts and beliefs, desires and emotions, and decision and actions is meditation on his Word through faith in Christ.

Lastly, I learned how a healthy counseling (one-another) ministry is closely connected to the biblical understanding and practice of church membership. The Spirit uses the Word in the context of the church community to change us. If the people of God in a particular area are not committed to a local church body, they will be cut off from a core means that the Lord uses to change us. Thus, they will not cultivate the spiritual friendships or experience the mutual care God desires for his people, as seen in Colossians 3:12–17 and Ephesians 4:11–16.

Personal Reflections

Developing this project over the past few years has helped in many ways that will enable me to minister better in the future. One personal application has been an increased desire to devote more time to developing a counseling ministry in the Central Asian church. Due to other church responsibilities, I can currently only give a relatively small percentage of my time to counseling or developing a counseling ministry in our church or country wide. However, in future years, I want to intentionally take steps to delegate team and church responsibilities so that I can focus more on counseling. More resources need to be made available. Trainings need to be developed for church leaders and those interested in helping. Many more hours need to be spent with those in need of help. These will all take time and intentional effort, and they require focused and continual investment on my part to adequately develop them. Lord willing, counseling

will become a greater part of how I invest my time overseas.

I also learned how hard it is to create new and contextualized materials in another language and culture. Every aspect of the lessons (content, structure, etc.) required countless steps of preparation. At times I struggled to progress because I was not sure what would be best for the believers in Central Asia. During the translation phase, we encountered key concepts that would not translate easily into the local language. For example, I desired to highlight the word and concept “to cultivate” in explaining biblical change, to emphasize the time and intentional effort needed to bring it about. However, the local language did not have an equivalent, and so we had to change the translation in accord with each specific context. At times we used words that mean “to grow or raise up,” other times we used words that communicate “to plant or sow,” and still other times, we simply had to explain the concept by saying that change would happen over time and not be instantaneous. I had many discussions with the translator about these issues, and while we hopefully selected the precise words for each context, I was reminded of the challenges of communicating cross-culturally.

Furthermore, another important personal reflection of this project was for me to remember how much more I need to grow in learning the local language and culture. I can live, minister, and preach in the native language. I can express my ideas and seek to convince others. Yet, I still have limitations. When speaking in detail, I can lack specificity. When listening to a local brother or sister, at times I can miss what precisely they are saying. Because I am a foreigner, I can miss innumerable subtle relational and cultural cues. A major skill in counseling is reading someone and knowing how to relate to him or her. In order to relate well, ask the right questions, and be able to offer care, I must be able to understand someone’s experience and bring precise and clear truth into his life in culturally appropriate ways. Therefore, I must personally continue to grow deeper in my knowledge of the local language and culture.

Ministry takes place through relationships, and relationships take time to

develop. If a counseling ministry is to be developed for the church here, we must unite church leaders to learn, train, and serve together. How will those groups form? This will primarily take place through personal relationships. Therefore, I must continue to develop and deepen relationships with local pastors and put greater effort into connecting with those who have a particular interest in counseling. While many questions related to how to go about training and developing a counseling ministry will arise, I believe that these will not surpass the significance of deep relationships through mutual trust with local leaders. I must regularly consider how to develop this relational foundation.

Lastly, I learned that I am ill-equipped to help in many aspects of counseling. When our church members learned I was studying in this field, they began to ask me all types of questions that I have little to no experience or training. I have never counseled those who have gone through significant trauma or abuse. I do not know much about extreme psychological disorders or which medications can be helpful. The focus of my training up to this point has been on how to understand and teach a basic foundation of biblical change. How can we establish and bring this foundation, or basic framework, into individual lives and churches? How can believers grow through the common struggles of life? I feel equipped to help in these areas, not in extreme or more rare situations. Still, the questions will continue to come, and because they reflect significant need, I want to continue to learn and grow so that I might be able to increasingly help in the future.

Conclusion

The desire to pursue this degree and create this project arose from my deep love for the Central Asian church and the precious local believers I have come to know over the years. As I see them struggle, I grieve and long to provide equipped counselors and biblical resources to help them. Nevertheless, as I watch them persevere in faith, I am also encouraged and challenged in my own walk. In real and significant ways, they are teaching me how to change by faith in Christ: they are the examples that I follow. They

are the community the Lord is using to change me. They are forming me into a mature disciple and helping me persevere to the end.

While this project was not perfect, I believe it was a step in the right direction. I pray that it will serve the Central Asian church and be an impetus for others to develop biblical and contextualized counseling materials. To my brothers and sisters here: “May the Lord bless you and protect you; may the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; may the Lord look with favor on you and give you peace” (Num 6:24–26).

APPENDIX 1

BASICS OF COUNSELING ASSESSMENT

The following instrument is the Basics of Counseling Assessment (BCA). It uses a six-point Likert scale and its purpose is to assess how well each participant currently understands change and how to help others.

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify your current understanding of biblical counseling. This research is being conducted by John Norton for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research, you will answer questions before the project and you will answer the same questions at the conclusion of the project. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. By completing this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

Date: _____

Name: _____

Directions: Please mark the appropriate answer.

SD = strongly disagree
D = disagree
DS = disagree somewhat
AS = agree somewhat
A = agree
SA = strongly agree

1. I feel equipped to counsel other believers.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
2. Changing behavior is the focus of counsel.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
3. The role of a counselor is to offer practical advice.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
4. Only pastors or trained counselors should counsel.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
5. I need counsel from other believers.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
6. I counsel others.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
7. I know how to ask questions to understand another's experience and the reasons why they respond the way they do.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
8. I understand the basics of how to help others change.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
9. I understand the church's role in change.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
10. I understand how my identity in Christ relates to my sin and sufferings in this world.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
11. I understand the Holy Spirit's role in change.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
12. I know how the process of change	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

starts.

13. Change should be instantaneous.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
14. God's Word applies to our daily lives and the issues we struggle with.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
15. Who God is for his people should change how they live.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
16. All our thoughts, desires, and decisions relate to and influence one another.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
17. I know some of the main skills needed to counsel effectively.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
18. I understand the means God uses to change people.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
19. I want to learn more from the Bible about how to change.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
20. I would like more resources to help me and others change.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
21. The Central Asian church is equipped to counsel believers in the church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

APPENDIX 2

CONTEXTUALIZED MODEL OF BIBLICAL COUNSELING TEACHING SERIES EVALUATION

The following evaluation was sent to an expert panel consisting of four individuals (two locals, two foreigners) who evaluated the teaching series to ensure that it was biblically faithful, adequately thorough, contextual, and applicable to ministry.

Name of Evaluator: _____ Date: _____

Contextualized Model of Biblical Counseling Evaluation					
Lessons to be Evaluated: 1–10					
1 = insufficient; 2 = requires attention; 3 = sufficient; 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Biblical Faithfulness					
The curriculum is biblically and theologically sound. All Scripture is properly interpreted and explained.					
The material is clearly relevant to the issue of biblical counseling.					
Scope					
The curriculum sufficiently covers each issue it is designed to address.					
The curriculum covers the basics of how to change and help others change.					
Methodology					
The curriculum sufficiently addresses the change process.					
The curriculum makes use of culturally appropriate learning styles as well as uses culturally appropriate examples, case studies, visuals, stories, proverbs, etc.					
Practicality					
The curriculum includes opportunities to practice some counseling skills and apply some counseling knowledge.					
At the end of the course, participants will be able to better counsel one another.					

APPENDIX 3

SAMPLE LESSONS FROM BIBLICAL CHANGE CURRICULUM

Lesson 1: What is Different about Us? Spiritual Friendship: Colossians 3:12–17

“Let the peace of Christ . . . rule your hearts.” (Col 3:15)

(Understanding Change: Part 1)

Introduction

- All of us are trying to change and grow, and we want to help others do the same. But how can we do these things better, more wisely, and in a more biblically faithful way?
- Some fundamental truths:
 - If we are trusting in Christ, we have changed (been changed—new creations, 2 Corinthians 5:17).
 - If we are living in this world, we are still in need of change and in the process of change. We are being transformed into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18).
 - One day we will be fully changed. In the end, we will be holy like Christ (1 John 3:2; Romans 8:29–30).
 - We have changed, are changing, and will be completely changed.

Expectations for Lessons

- Change happens as the Holy Spirit uses God’s Word in the context of the church.
- Therefore, we will work to study the Bible together.
 - Work—it will require effort
 - Together—we’re in this together
 - Bible—we need God’s Word more than anything else.
- Our desire is to be nourished by the Word and thus grow (1 Peter 2:2). Our prayer is be sanctified in the truth (John 17:17). Our foundation is the inspired, profitable, and penetrating Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 4:12). More than anything, we want to hear and learn from the Lord through his Word.
- We are going to see how God’s Word speaks into our daily lives using practical stories and discussions. We will try to summarize principles but also get specific in application.
- We will seek to cultivate change between sessions through specific steps of obedience by faith. We will reap what we sow. We want to be doers of the Word.

Overview of Lessons

- 4 lessons to help us understand biblical change.
- 4 lessons to help us understand how to change.
- 2 lessons to help us understand how to help others change.

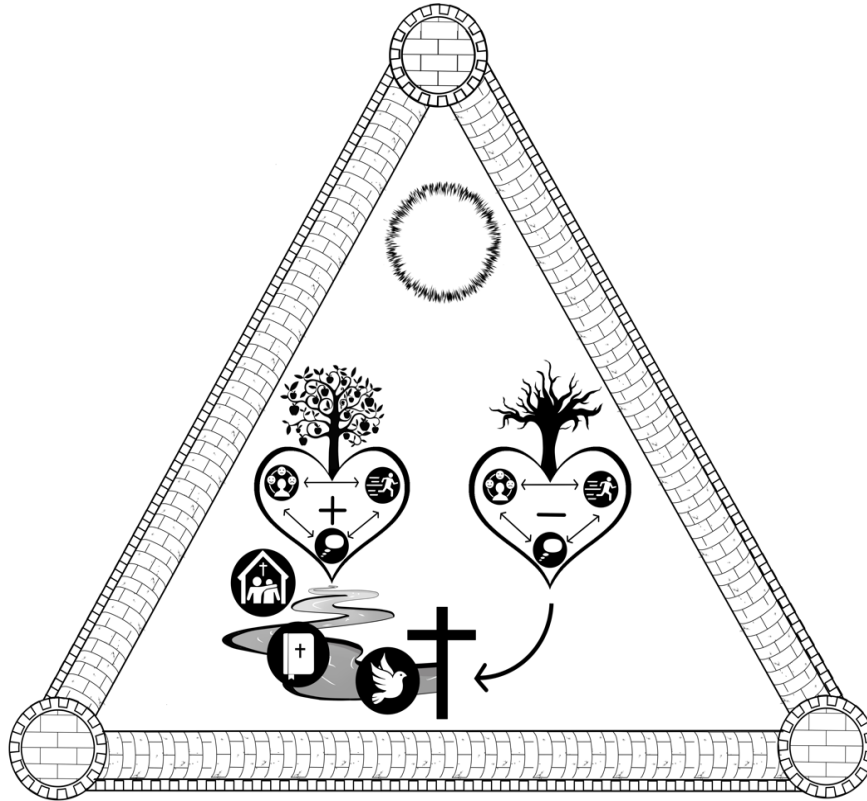


Figure A1. Adapted three-tree model for biblical change¹

Today's lesson: *What is Different about Us? Spiritual Friendship*

Let's begin with a real-life example.

¹ This visual diagram adapts and combines the following: Robert Jones, "Three Tree" diagram, course lecture notes for 34300 (The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, July 2019); Jeremy Pierre, "Dynamic Heart" diagram, in *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2016), 17.

Case Study

Omer became a believer two years ago and has been growing in his faith. He's learned a lot about the Bible and the church. He's gotten to know other believers in the church and has enjoyed learning from them. He's also enjoyed getting to serve in the church as he's able. One area Omer has stayed faithful in is evangelism. One day Omer met with his friend Mehmet to talk with him more deeply about spiritual truths. At one point in the conversation, Mehmet asked Omer a question. "I think I understand your explanation of the gospel—who God is in his goodness, holiness, and justice, that I have rebelled and sinned against God, who Jesus is as Savior and why he died for sinners like me, and then how I must respond to Jesus if I want to be reconciled with God and become a Christian—but you also talk a lot about the church. I don't really understand the church and its benefits. Could you explain more? What is that community like? What are some reasons you go to church and spend so much time with those there? What's so different about those friendships? What does the Bible say about the church?" How would you respond to Mehmet's question? Explain your answer using Scripture.

Let's study a passage and then we'll come back to Omer and Mehmet.

Let's Study the Word: Colossians 3:12–17

- Before studying Col 3:12–17, let's consider the context of Colossians and the beginning of chapter 3.
 - 1:15–20
 - 1:28–29
 - Col 2:6–7 are the key texts for the whole book. What is Paul's main point in those verses?

- That brings us to chapter 3. What is true of the Christian according to 3:1–3?

- What are Christians called to do according to 3:1–3? What are the commands?

- Which comes first, who believers are or what they are to do?
 - Why does this matter?

Colossians 3:12–14

- What is true about believers according to 3:12?

- As a reminder, to whom is Paul speaking/writing?
- What difference does that identity make in their daily lives? What are believers to do according to 3:12–14?
- Are any of these possible to put on in isolation from others?
- What is their motivation to put on these things?
- Why the need to command believers to “put on” these characteristics in the church?
- What should define Christian friendships/the believing community? What command here can summarize them all?

Colossians 3:15–17

- What are the two commands in verse 15?
- Fundamentally, what is the peace of Christ? (1:20, 22) What are implications for our friendships?
- According to verse 16, something else about Christ defines our community (3:16)? What is it?
- What are some other responsibilities we have toward one another (3:16)?
- Finally, how is everything in the community to be done? (3:17)

Let’s Summarize Principles from the Text

- We are chosen, holy, and loved by God (3:12).
- But it still takes work/effort for us to become who we are in Christ (3:10, 12–14). We are given commands on how to live out who we are toward one another.
- Our friendships/relationships are different because Christ called us into one body and as we let his peace rule our hearts (3:15).

- Our friendships/relationships are different because the word of Christ dwells richly among us (3:16).
- Our friendships/relationships are different because we teach and admonish one another in all wisdom as Christ’s Word dwells in us (3:16).
- Our friendships/relationships are different because we do everything, including relating to one another, in the name of the Lord Jesus (3:17).
- In summary, our friendships/relationships in the church are different because of Jesus and his good news.
 - Isn’t the vision of this community beautiful and attractive? Do you want to be a part of this type of community and have others act in these ways toward you?
 - What do we need to “put off” to develop spiritual friendships? What do we need to “put on”? How can you, in your life, help us cultivate this type of community and have these types of spiritual friendships?
 - As a part of the body of Christ, you are needed. Others need your compassion, patience, and love.



Let’s Apply Scripture to the Case Study

Now let’s think through how Omer might answer his friend, Mehmet, using the truths we learned from Colossians 3:12–17. How might he answer the question, “What is different about the community in the church? What is different about us and our friendships?”

Let’s Cultivate Change

- Pick a 31-Day Devotional on an issue you’d like to grow/change in over the course of the next few months. Read through the same devotional 3 times.
 - First, as an overview of the issue and devotional.
 - Second, in-depth for yourself to process and seek to grow.
 - Third, to think of how to help someone else struggling in a similar way.
- Think about your relationships. What are some ways they display the characteristics of Colossians 3:12–17? What are some ways they fall short? Which of these characteristics is hardest for you to put on? Why is it hard for you to obey in those ways?
- Pray Colossians 3:12–17 for your friends and church. Ask God to show you how you can be a good friend.

Lesson 2: Who is Our God? Psalm 46

“. . . know that I am God.” (Ps 46:10)

(Understanding Change: Part 2)

Review

- In our last lesson we looked at Colossians 3:12–17 and saw how the Bible would answer the question, what is different about us, and our relationships, within the church? How are we to live with each other, and why? Can someone summarize some of biblical truth we discovered together? Any further reflections on that passage or our discussion together?



- Have we started to read the 31-Day devotional? Did we pray for our friends and church by name, as well as ask God to help us grow to be better spiritual friends?
- Today we are going to ask the question, “Who is God for his people?”

Case Study

Elif grew up in a difficult home. She is the 2nd of four children and has always felt like her older brother and younger siblings got preferential treatment. She was expected to help raise her younger brother and sister, and then also help her parents whenever they needed anything. She feels like they view her as the family servant. Elif has struggled with anxiety, depression, loneliness, and feelings of worthlessness most of her life. After college she got connected to believers and the church, and eventually professed faith and was baptized. For the first time, she experienced the joy of forgiveness, a desire to know the Lord, and the comfort of true friendships.

But her family situation is still difficult. They constantly expect much from her, and this limits what she feels like she can do at church and with her friends. She fears they will keep her from those friends and her church—the one place she feels some hope. It seems like her life is out of control, and she is scared to talk with her family about her faith. She has prayed countless times for the Lord to change things, to help her, and to find a way to have a better life, but nothing seems to be getting better. She is still trusting in Jesus but doesn't know how she is going to continue with her family. She comes to you worried and anxious and asks for help. “Where is God in all of the mess of my life? Why would he make my life so difficult? I'm anxious about what might happen in the future.”

How might who God is for his people be a comfort to Elif? Where could you go in Scripture to point Elif to who God is in the midst of trials?

Let's Study the Word: Psalm 46

Psalm 46:1–3

- List how the Psalm describes the circumstances of the people of God.
- What is the confession of God's people in the midst of their unstable and dangerous circumstances? (v. 1)
- What does it mean for something to be a refuge?
- How does God being their strength *and* refuge complement one another? Being a refuge and strength communicates similar, yet different, meanings. Explain the similarities and differences.
- How does God being our refuge and strength change what we believe about him?
- What do they proclaim about God's help?
- How does trust in who God is for his people change how they interpret their circumstances and how they feel? (v. 2)
- When they respond with trust instead of fear, has anything changed in their situation? What has changed?

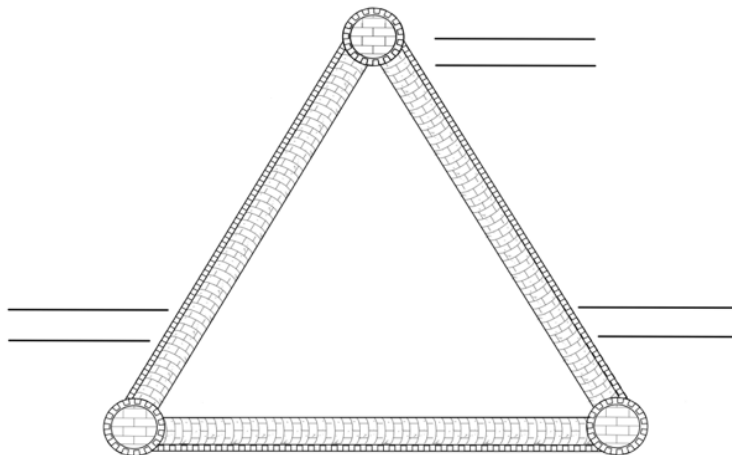
Psalm 46:4–11

- According to verses 4–7, where is God? What is he like? What difference does this make?
- What do we learn about God in verses 8–9?
- Who is speaking in v. 10? To whom is he speaking?

- He tells people to do two things. What are they?
- In summary, according to this Psalm, who is God for his people?
- Why are all three of those characteristics needed for his people to know and trust, especially in the midst of trials and difficulties? Why are only one or two not sufficient to help?

Let's Summarize Principles from the Text

- Life is chaotic and dangerous, unpredictable and out of our control.
- God is our refuge.
- God is our strength—he is sovereign.
- God is with us.
- Therefore, we respond to circumstances differently.
- Everything changes as we bring together our lives and who God is. We interpret our lives in light of who God is.



Let's Apply Scripture to the Case Study

How can we help bring together Elif's belief in a good, sovereign, and present Lord with the struggles of her life? How could God's goodness comfort Elif? How could God's sovereignty? What about his presence with her?

Let's Cultivate Change

- Which of these three characteristics of God will you think about most today? Why? How do the other two still help you?
 - Spend a few minutes writing out your thoughts.
- Memorize Ps 46:1 this week. Briefly explain the Psalm in your own words.
- Keep reading and working through your 31-Day Devotional.

Lesson 3: Who are We in this World? 1 Peter 2:9–12

“But you are . . . God’s people.” (1 Pet 2:9–10)

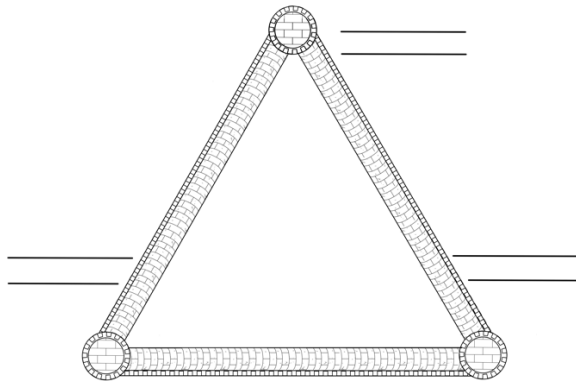
(Understanding Change: Part 3)

Review

- In our first lesson, we talked about how our relationships in the church are different. Christ has brought us together into one body and this truth changes everything about how we relate to one another.



- Last lesson we saw the need to bring God into our everyday lives. According to Psalm 46, who is God for his people? What three characteristics did we look at? Why are all three important? Can anyone repeat Psalm 46:1?



- God, and who he is for us, provides the context for our lives. He helps us interpret situations rightly and respond in faith. Now we need to ask this question: As Christians, who are *we* in this world? How can we make sense of all our experiences? As believers, how should we answer this question, “I am...” According to God’s Word, what is our identity?

Case Study

Zeynep had a difficult childhood. Her dad was an angry and distant man, who would yell a lot in the home. His presence impacted everyone and everything. She feared him and so learned how to stay away from him. Her mom tried her best to keep him calm, but she would still get yelled at a lot. She especially hated it when her dad would drink and become even more angry. Everyone around him suffered because of his anger. Zeynep learned to be quiet, blend in, avoid conflict, and keep others happy the best she could.

But she has always struggled in relationships. She allows others to use her, rarely voices her opinions, and fears upsetting others. She also craves friendship and tends to be very needy in her relationships, regularly feeling hurt by others when they don't meet her expectations. She tries to control them in subtle and manipulative ways and often will lie to avoid disappointing others or to get her way. She is always assessing how others see her, and she becomes depressed, angry, or anxious if others think or say anything negative about her. She has been a believer for many years now but often feels distant from God and others. She says, "I feel useless and like a burden on others. I'll never be accepted or loved. Everyone hates me. Maybe it would be better if I didn't exist. Maybe everything is my dad's fault. I'm embarrassed to say it, but I hate him and the things he did to us."

How can you make sense of Zeynep's experiences? How might you minister the Word to her so that she can better understand herself and her experiences?

Let's Study the Word: 1 Peter 2:9–12

Let's examine the context of 1 Peter:

- 1 Peter was written to help suffering believers persevere in faith (4:19; 5:10).
- Peter reminds believers how they have been given a new birth and a living hope through the resurrection of Christ (1:3).
- This doesn't mean the Christian life will be easy. There are "necessary" sufferings in this life (1:6).
- Even through trials and sufferings, believers are called to be holy because God is holy (1:15–16). They were redeemed from an empty way of life by the blood of Christ (1:18).
- Believers can become holy as they rid themselves of sin and grow in Christ by desiring the Word and tasting the Lord is good (2:1–3). The Word saves/redeems (1:23) and is a means of growth (2:2).

1 Peter 2:9–10

- With what words does Peter describe believers?
- What is unique about these descriptions? Where is Peter getting these terms?

- What does this mean for the church?
- How might we summarize our identity as believers? What is most true about us, or what is our fundamental identity?
 - What are some common ways people might identify themselves in the world?
- Why did God make us his people?

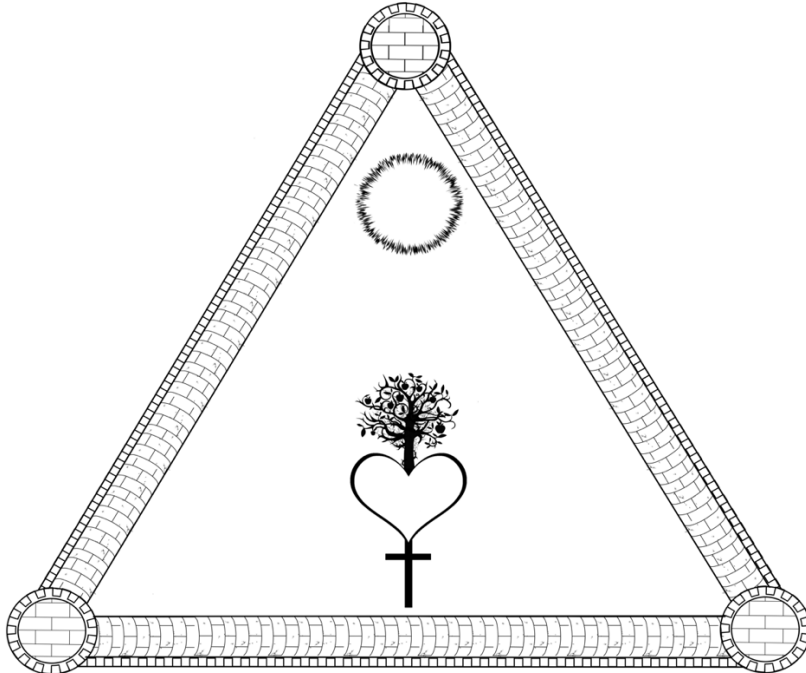
1 Peter 2:11

- What is the description of believers in this verse?
- Because we are strangers and exiles, what should we do?
- Where is the focus of the battle?
- As James asks, what often causes fights and quarrels among us (sinful conduct) (James 4:1–2)?
 - Main question is not, “What did I do?” But instead, “What did I want?”
- Can a desire for a good thing become a sinful desire? If so, how?
 - How can we discern if our desire for a good thing has become sinful?
- So, how can we now describe believers’ experience in this world?

1 Peter 2:12

- Amongst whom are we to live holy/honorable lives?

- How might they act toward us?
- What is unjust suffering? What is it like and how are we impacted?
- How might we describe our experience in this verse?
- According to verse 12, does the experience of suffering determine our response?
- According to 2:12, what else might happen if we suffer by faith and respond well?
- What are the three categories we've seen in these verses that explain the different experiences of believers in this world?
 - How do they relate to one another?



Let's Summarize Principles from the Text

- Our primary identity as believers is that we are the people of God. We have a communal identity.
- We also fight an internal battle against sin. The battle is not just against what we desire, but also how much we desire it.
- We also suffer because of the sin of others and because we live in a sinful world.
- Being sinned against and suffering do not determine our responses.

Let's Apply Scripture to the Case Study

Bring these three categories into Zeynep's experience. Take a few minutes to put her life experiences into the categories of sinner and sufferer. What is true about her in Christ?

Let's Cultivate Change

- What are some of your desires, or wants, right now? In your life what desire for a good thing can become sinful when you want it too much? Where has it become a demand such that you're willing to sin in order to get or to keep it? How might you keep it as a want and not allow it to become a demand?
 - Think back to a time when you felt angry or frustrated with someone. Ask yourself the question, "What was I wanting? What did I want that the person did not give me? Did my desire become a demand where I was willing to sin to get it or sin to keep it?" Write down your reflections in a journal. Read pp 45–46 in Anger devotional
- Do you tend to primarily identify as a sufferer? Or sinner? Remind yourself of your primary identity as a child of God (saint). Write out a brief explanation of how believers as the people of God, sinners, and sufferers relate to one another. If you're able, share these thoughts with a friend.
- Continue reading your 31-Day devotional.

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ABSTRACT

EQUIPPING MEMBERS OF A. UMUT KILISESI IN CENTRAL ASIA, WITH AN INTRODUCTORY MODEL OF BIBLICAL COUNSELING

John Norton, DMin
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Jeremy P. Pierre

This project seeks to equip the members of A. Umut Kilisesi (AUK) in Central Asia, with an introductory framework for biblical change. Chapter 1 explains the context of AUK and the goals of this project. Chapter 2 examines five key texts that give a framework for biblical change: Psalm 46, 1 Peter 2:9–12; Matthew 11:28–30, Galatians 5:13–6:10, and Psalm 1. Chapter 3 outlines the essential biblical criteria to use when evaluating counseling curricula, and then applies these criteria to my context in Central Asia by explaining and evaluating two curricula. Chapter 4 describes the content and process of teaching the ten-lesson biblical change curriculum developed for AUK. Chapter 5 then evaluates the project based on completion of the specified goals. Ultimately, this projects seeks to equip the average believer in Central Asia to change and help others change as he or she walks by faith in Christ together with others in a local church.

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