



PAIN, PASSION, AND PURPOSE

EXPLORING OUR UNIQUE GIFTS

PAUL AMOS AND NATHAN DEWBERRY

Pain, Passion and Purpose Study Guide

© 2025 by The Redeemed, Nathan Dewberry and Paul Amos, Trustees

All rights reserved. No portion of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the author.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked MSG are from The Message. Copyright © by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Scripture quotations marked NCV are from the New Century Version®. © 2005 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation. © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

- 03** Introduction
- 07** How to Use This Guide
- 09** Session 1: Explore Experiences That Shape You
- 23** Session 2: Process Your Pains
- 38** Session 3: Understand Your Personality
- 52** Session 4: Assess Your Spiritual Gifting
- 66** Session 5: Connect Passions to Purpose
- 77** Session 6: Navigate the Intersection
- 90** Session 7: Overcome Challenges & Obstacles
- 102** Session 8: Put Purpose into Action
- 116** Session 9: Share in Celebration

Introduction

“That’s just a little scratch—stop your crying!”

“Man up and quit whining! Pain only makes you stronger.”

“Tough it out—real men push through the pain.”

Whether you’ve heard these words or not, you’ve undoubtedly absorbed certain messages about how to handle pain in your life. For most men the conditioning begins at an early age. Depending on how your parents and caregivers responded when you were injured, got sick, or had your feelings hurt, you may have learned that “big boys don’t cry.” While it varies from culture to culture and family to family, sons are often rewarded for enduring pain without complaint and shamed for acknowledging it.

As a result, many men learn to ignore pain in their bodies and compartmentalize or push away painful emotions. Rather than acknowledging our pain, we neglect caring for ourselves in hopes of becoming stronger, tougher, and more manly. But when we don’t tend to our needs, seeking comfort and asking for help, we often redirect our emotional pain destructively into rage, violence, and addiction—which unfortunately can be considered more socially acceptable than sadness.

Unsurprisingly, that tends to break down eventually.

For many guys it’s a crisis beyond their control. We lose a parent, a job, a child, a wife, or our health. We might discover a spouse’s betrayal, have our addictions exposed, or no longer have the energy to fight the ongoing battle with depression and anxiety. Or it might simply be a cumulative layer of various pains that we can no longer bear causing us to break. Whatever the wall may be, hitting it forces us to go in a new direction.

So where do you go in that new direction? How do you process the pain you’ve experienced and figure out what you are truly passionate about and what purpose you were created for? That’s what this small group study is all about.

You don't have to wait until you hit a wall to change course, process your pain more effectively, and live out of your God-given purpose. Whether you're in the midst of a debilitating crisis or simply weary from the daily grind, you're ready for a change. You're willing to admit that the ways you relate to pain are no longer working (if they ever did) and that you want healthier, more godly ways to deal with the inevitable pains of life.

Learning new ways to process pain will require you to be honest about the past events, losses, and relationships that have hurt you and to process and grieve them with others. And our goal is not simply to move forward, but to move forward with purpose.

In the weeks ahead, you're invited to actively participate in the company of other men willing to be vulnerable about some of your life's most devastating moments. We'll examine the way our pains often reveal our passions, the things we care most about in life. With greater self-awareness of our passions, we gain a deeper understanding of our divine purpose.

Becoming more authentically the man God created us to be, we enjoy the satisfaction that comes from serving him and others. We realize that our suffering has not been without meaning as we draw on our pain to inspire and empower those around us. We learn to find comfort in God's presence—often manifest through support from our trusted relationships and authentic community.

Basically, we can use our pain to strengthen our faith and live out our purpose, or we can allow our pain to envelop us with a sense of self-absorption and victimhood. Your pain either becomes your prison or your classroom. Finding purpose in your pain is rarely easy — it requires courage to acknowledge, express, and share it in healthy ways. When we allow our pain to eclipse our sense of purpose, we lose

sight of who we are and what God has called us to do. When we learn to handle our pain honestly and process it as part of our story, we often discover opportunities to help others experiencing similar struggles.

A past participant in one of our small groups explains:

When my wife found out about my affair with a coworker, I felt like my life had ended. I asked for my wife's forgiveness but realized how much anger and resentment I had been carrying because of the ways our marriage disappointed me. It took many hard, honest conversations—including some with a relationship therapist and an older Christian couple from our small group at church—for us to repair the rupture revealed by my affair.

Our relationship is far from perfect, but we've worked hard to learn new ways of relating instead of allowing our default defenses to kick in. We've learned to love each other by communicating with honesty, kindness, and respect rather than harboring hurt feelings and unspoken disappointments. After experiencing some major healing in our marriage these past couple years, we've agreed to lead a small group for couples struggling with betrayal and trust issues. My wife and I don't feel qualified, but we sense God wanting to use our experiences to help others discover His power to heal and change us.

More often than not, your purpose is clarified by your pain. God wants to use what you've been through to help someone else find their way. Just consider the incredible hardships suffered by the apostle Paul—persecution, arrests, shipwrecks, snakebites, imprisonment, to name a few—and yet he used those painful times to grow closer to God and to make a difference in the lives of those around him. Paul wrote,

“God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4 NLT).

When you're suffering, God makes a difference in you.
Then he uses you to make a difference in the lives of others.
Your pain reveals your passions and fuels your purpose.

How to Use This Guide

Group Size

This study guide is designed to be experienced in an online group setting with approximately eight to twelve men. By the second session, the group will be closed to new participants at the discretion of the group leaders. You are encouraged and expected to contribute to your own group experience as well as the experience of the other men participating.

Materials Needed

Everyone in your group will need direct access to this study guide, which includes the opening questions you will discuss, main points and principles, directions for activities and discussion questions, and personal reflection in between sessions. We strongly recommend reading through each upcoming session prior to your group's next meeting. However, if you cannot read ahead every time, don't let that keep you from coming to the session — you can still benefit from the discussion.

Facilitation

Your interactions each session will be facilitated by group leaders. The leaders will be responsible for explaining the material in further detail, answering any questions you may have, and engaging everyone in group discussion. They will also keep track of time and pace your progress to cover the main ideas while allowing for spontaneous questions and interactions.

The group leaders will also read questions aloud and share answers and examples from their own stories and past experiences. They won't put anyone on the spot but will encourage everyone to participate and ensure that all group members have the opportunity to contribute. In addition to leadership

training provided by other staff, your group leaders will also draw on a Leader's Guide developed specifically for this study.

Prayer

Prayer is foundational for everything we do at The Redeemed, particularly our small groups. You will be encouraged to pray throughout this group experience, both on an individual basis as well as within the community of your group sessions. As you become better acquainted with the other men in your group, letting them know you're praying for them on a daily basis can be a great way to strengthen your relationships. If you want to grow in your faith and be known, accepted, and loved by other brothers on a similar journey of faith, then prayer is essential.

Reflection

In between online group meetings, you can maximize the impact of this course by considering and completing the reflection exercise at the end of each session. Depending on your schedule and inclination, you can include these reflection exercises as part of your personal prayer or devotional time during the week. If you're unable to engage with the reflection exercise in between group sessions, don't worry. Their purpose is simply to help you reinforce what you're learning and experiencing in the group and to help you personalize and apply these ideas.

**"LIFE CAN ONLY BE
UNDERSTOOD
BACKWARDS; BUT
IT MUST BE LIVED
FORWARDS."**

-Soren Kierkegaard

Getting Started

Many men don't reflect on the life experiences that have shaped their story until they are faced with a major disruption—something like a loss, a divorce, or a health crisis. They have been going and going, pushing through daily ups and downs for years, but suddenly, they aren't sure how they got here or how to move forward. They know they don't want to rely on old, default ways of coping — such as compartmentalization, denial, or escape through addiction — but they're unsure how to change and find new, healthier ways of living.

Most of us don't like to face our pain. Our bodies are sensitive, which we learned as toddlers when we fell down or touched something hot. Similarly, we learned early on that experiences can hurt our feelings, and we relied on our parents and caregivers to provide comfort, security, and safety when we felt upset.

Based on those experiences from birth until now, you have formed assumptions, conclusions, and defensive strategies for managing and avoiding pain in your life. You may be very self-aware of the moments in your life contributing to your pain-management style or have no idea why you feel, think, and respond the way you do when in pain. Regardless, there's tremendous value in examining your story and seeing what and who have influenced you and the way you relate to yourself, to others, and to God.

With greater self-awareness, you discover connections between past experiences and present behaviors. Discovering these connections then allows you to make different choices when faced with pain rather than to continue relying on strategies that once helped you survive but are now getting in the way of healthy development and spiritual growth. You recognize a bigger perspective on the story of your life and begin to glimpse your hardest moments in a new light.

While it's often uncomfortable, painful, and disruptive to reflect on life's most traumatic and challenging moments, they hold the key to unlocking your ability to thrive. And while you may have learned, both directly and implicitly, that you must endure your pain alone, that's not how God intends for you to live. He made you to live in community and to experience the rich benefits of relationships in which you are known, accepted, and loved. The big problem, of course, is that relating to others also carries the risk of pain. Most of us learn at an early age that a few people may be safe while others carry the threat of hurting us.

If you've previously participated in a small group with us at The Redeemed, then you know that relationships, Christian brotherhood, and community are core to our DNA. God has called us to minister to men in ways that break isolation, foster healthy authentic relationships, focus on biblical truth, offer new tools for personal growth, and celebrate community. We're committed to creating a safe space for you to awaken your true self, forge strong friendships with other men, and ignite your passion and purpose for lasting change.

This nine-week study is designed to help you risk vulnerability about the challenging and broken areas of your life while connecting with other men willing to share theirs. Through personal reflection, group exercises, meaningful conversations, and shared experiences, you will discover what it means to be part of a transformative community of brothers. You will be able to remove the masks used in other areas of your life and be known for who you are and where you are in your life. Even as other men pour into your life, you will be pouring into theirs, helping one another grow in your faith as you become more like Jesus.

That said, for some traumas, revisiting your most painful memories can knock you off balance or bring up significant physical or mental symptoms. If this describes you, consider finding a licensed therapist or other professional mental health support to help you process your trauma in a healthy way. As we said before, we aren't meant to endure pain alone — and sometimes, that means we need more help in addition to a small group community.

Exploring your pain, passion, and purpose is hard work and can't be done successfully on your own. While it's often a scary process, just remember you're not alone. This group is a safe place for looking at your life, making connections in your story, and discovering new ways to be intentional in following the example of Jesus. Your pain has not been in vain but can become the cornerstone for becoming of the man of God you are meant to be.

Checking In

For this first session, go around the group and introduce yourselves as you answer one of the following questions:

- What's one lesson you learned about how to respond to pain during your childhood? Who—and what—taught you this lesson?

- What three words best describe where you are right now within the story of your life? How do these three words express where you are presently?

Exploring the Big Idea

“The unexamined life is not worth living,” according to a famous declaration attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. David expressed a similar desire for personal revelation in one of his best-known psalms: “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24). Both statements emphasize the benefit of **examining yourself and your story in order to find meaning**. David reminds us, though, that inviting God to direct our examination leads us in the “way everlasting.”

You may be tempted to dismiss looking at your life as self-indulgent or non-productive. After all, as followers of Jesus, aren't we called to focus less on ourselves and more on others? We are indeed called to “love our neighbors as ourselves,” but this instruction presupposes our ability to love ourselves and to know our true identity in Christ. Without considering our story, we often remain stuck in place instead of becoming more of who God made us to be.

Knowing your story also allows you to share it with others.

The psalmist demonstrates his desire for others to know the Lord through his testimony: “Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me” (Psalm 66:16). We see similar instruction after Jesus casts out the legion of demons inhabiting a man living among the tombs near the shore of Galilee (Mark 5:1-20). Empowered by demonic possession, this man could not be restrained by chains or shackles even as he cried out and harmed himself with sharp stones. After he has been set free and healed, this man wanted to accompany Jesus only to be told, “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19).

Self-discovery allows you to identify and acknowledge the experiences, both positive and negative, that have shaped your life. As you explore your story, you discover themes and patterns of behavior that help you learn more about who you truly are and the purpose God has designed you to live out. And as you will experience in this group, **considering the ways you have handled your pain and passions in life provides greater insight into your true identity and divine purpose.** For men committed to following Jesus and living in the fullness of God's grace, **self-discovery empowers your impact and deepens your joy and gratitude.**

- On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “story—what story?” and 10 being “I know my story inside out,” what score expresses your response to looking at the experiences shaping your life? Why this score?

- What value do you see in pursuing self-discovery? What causes you to feel resistant or reluctant to explore your story?

Considering the Word

Our exploration of our stories is guided and illuminated by the Bible, our foundation for all truth. The unwavering principles of God's Word provide us with clarity, wisdom, discernment, inspiration, and reassurance by strengthening our faith and increasing our awareness of God and his goodness. Scripture enables us to see ourselves, others, and God through an eternal and sacred perspective.

Follow along as your group leader reads aloud the following passage from Paul's second letter to the believers in Corinth:

²¹ Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone

without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

2 Corinthians 11:21-30

- What do you suppose is Paul's intention or motivation for listing these dramatic experiences from his life? What is the basis for his boasting?
- What does this summary of Paul's life story reveal about his character and personality? What does it reveal about his relationship with God?
- What are some of the most dangerous experiences and scary situations you've faced in your life? How have they shaped who you are right now and how you relate to God?

Discussing the Truth

Depending on your faith background, you may have been encouraged to develop your Christian testimony into a clear, concise message you could share with others at a moment's notice. You may have been instructed to write out the major ways you've experienced God at work in your life and then to memorize what you've written. Often these reflections focus on how you first came to know God and invite Jesus into your life as your Lord and Savior. You may have shared this testimony with many people, in both individual and group settings.

While having a premeditated testimony to share is a good idea, we sometimes limit ourselves—and others—by relying on something scripted in the past. As your relationship with God continues to grow and deepen, the story of this relationship evolves as well. Although you may be able to describe the time, place, and context of how you came to know Jesus and accept the free gift of salvation by grace, your story extends before and after this life-changing event.

As your seasons of life and relationships change, your awareness and understanding of your story often changes as well. You may recognize how certain parts of your story can provide insight into the way you handle struggles and challenges. You may be able to make connections between events and relationships in your childhood that resulted in certain defenses, assumptions, and behaviors. While these may have helped you survive painful and traumatic moments growing up, these same strategies may now be preventing you from moving forward and growing in your faith.

As we each reflect on our own experiences, it's also important to share our stories in community with trusted people who can also provide insight and perspective. Sometimes we don't realize how much pain we've suffered and

endured until we encounter the reactions and responses of others. Sometimes we may not realize what's true about us and how others perceive us because we rely on the story we tell ourselves rather than compare that self-told story to honest feedback from others.

At The Redeemed, one of our core beliefs is that God wants us relating in authentic community. He created us to be part of a social and spiritual tribe willing to support, encourage, and lovingly challenge us to become more of the men of God we're intended to be. In this group you are among brothers who are willing to hear your story, accept and love you in the midst of it, and provide their constructive observations and insight.

As you share your stories with one another, keep two key elements in mind: confidentiality and compassion. Everything shared within the group stays within the group confidentially unless there is legitimate concern regarding self-harm or the harm of others, which your group leader will address. You are entrusting one another with some of the most painful, traumatic, or sensitive experiences in your lives. This trust includes accepting one another rather than judging, extending compassion and curiosity rather than shame.

- Who presently knows you authentically because you have shared your story with them? How would you describe your relationship with them?

- What fears, anxieties, and concerns do you feel rising up inside you as you consider sharing your story—all of it—with the other men in this group? What past experiences of sharing your story has resulted in rejection, judgment, and shame?

- What's one—and keep it at one for now—experience in your life that has been a major turning point for you? How does this experience continue to have an impact in your life right now? In your relationships?

Wrap-up Activity

Close this session by going around the group and sharing your answers to the following questions:

- What stands out to you from this first session on self-discovery and the major experiences influencing your story? Why?

- What's one personal goal or intention you have for your participation in this small group over the next nine weeks? How would you like the other men to support and encourage you in this endeavor?

Closing in Prayer

Go around the group and share any prayer requests you would like others to pray about, and then pray for those requests together, either silently or out loud or both. Thank God for bringing you all together to explore your story and to share your pain, passions, and purpose with one another. Ask God's Spirit to give you each wisdom, compassion, and courage as you share parts of your story with one another and listen and receive what others share. Trust that the Lord will protect each of you and guide you in his truth.

Reflection Exercise

The short questions and brief exercises provided in this section are not intended to burden you with homework between group sessions. They're simply here to help you benefit from reflecting and applying these ideas to your own life. You're encouraged to keep a journal during the course of the entire group study so that your responses and reflections are together in one place. Even if your time is limited or you miss a week, writing down your thoughts can help you process your experiences and provide a record of your personal growth and relational connections. There will be time for you to share some of your reflections and results at the beginning of the next session.

Sometime before your next group session, set aside at least 15-20 minutes to complete the following exercise as you reflect on what lingers from the first session. Before beginning, spend a couple minutes in prayer, inviting God to show you what he wants you to remember and any actions he wants you to take. Look back over all that was covered in the previous group session along with any notes or comments you made. Then read through the following exercise and reflection questions before completing them in your journal or notebook.

- Create a timeline of life experiences, identifying significant moments of pain and trauma as well as joy and discovery. You may find it easier to use posterboard or butcher paper in order to have more space as you focus on listing these times in chronological order to the best of your ability. Feel free to get creative if you're so inspired, using colored pencils and markers, symbols and doodles.

- As you look over your timeline, what surprises you or stands out more than you expected? What patterns and themes do you observe in the way your life has progressed?
- With this timeline in mind, what title would you give a documentary or movie based on your life so far? Why does this title seem to fit?

Finally, choose one of the men from your group to contact prior to your next group session. Plan to spend 10-15 minutes on a video call together getting better acquainted and discussing one of your take-aways from the first session.

Group member I will contact:

Day/time when we will have a video call:

**“EXPERIENCE IS NOT
WHAT HAPPENS
TO YOU. IT IS WHAT
YOU DO WITH WHAT
HAPPENS TO YOU.
DON'T WASTE YOUR
PAIN; USE IT TO HELP
OTHERS. ”**

- Rick Warren

Getting Started

Growing pains are inevitable.

Every man struggles with moving from the psychological, relational, and spiritual dynamics of his family of origin into adulthood. Maybe you view your childhood as happy and relatively healthy, or maybe you are all too aware of the dysfunction in your family of origin. Either way, the people you grew up around — your parents, siblings, and other key people in your childhood — contributed to who you are today. You entered adulthood with a legacy of loyalties, assumptions, demands, duties, and patterns of behavior from your family of origin. That impact continues today, whether as models of adulthood you intentionally imitate or as patterns that you work to avoid repeating.

How you handle pain, respond to conflict, express anger, show love, and experience God can be traced back to your earliest years. And in this chapter, we're focusing especially on handling pain. While you may not consider trauma to be a part of your upbringing, no one matures without suffering pain along the way. And if you struggle to remember moments in your childhood that weren't difficult, then you quickly adapted to ongoing pain as part of everyday life.

Without an awareness of why and how you feel, think, and behave the way you do based on pains of the past, you will likely continue operating on autopilot. After all, we can assume, it has worked so far — it's how we survived to adulthood. As humans we exquisitely adapt to our external environments and our interpretation and perception of them in order to avoid pain and danger and to experience pleasure and safety. But once you're an adult, the survival methods of the past often get in the way of continued growth.

For example, perhaps you grew up in a household where disagreement usually led to extreme dysfunction—including unbridled anger, shouting, name calling, physical struggles, and occasional violence. Scary stuff for a little boy. So you learned the cues and triggers, often without consciously realizing it, that seemed to ignite these stressful, frightening outbursts. Maybe you noticed that they often occurred when your mother disagreed with your father, often about how to budget and spend money. Consequently, you became an adult who avoids conflict with others while also being irrationally frugal with your finances.

You're likely already aware of certain situations, conversations, places, and sensory cues that cause you discomfort or stress, both physically and emotionally. Early conditioning might result in your dreading family holidays, dodging conversations about politics, avoiding your old neighborhood, or hating the scent of soap used by a certain family member. Growing up, this alarm system alerted you to possible pain and likely danger. Now as an adult, you have much more agency and control over how you respond and numerous resources for coping that you didn't have then. Without making the connections between past and present, though, you can easily remain caught in those old patterns.

The apostle Paul describes this frustrating dilemma of wanting to do one thing and yet finding yourself doing another: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Romans 7:15). Paul is describing the tension experienced when the selfish desires of our sinful nature tug-of-war with our redeemed heart's desire to love and obey God. But his description aptly describes the process of feeling trapped by what we do when we fail to realize the influence of our backstory.

While we are forgiven through God's grace and mercy by the power of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, we may not be experiencing the abundant life and full freedom available to us when we process our pain and seek God's healing power. In order to mature, we must surrender our old coping strategies and discover new ways of relying on God. Processing our pain allows us to experience healing and grow stronger in our faith.

Checking In

Go around the group, once more reminding others of your name and where you're from, and check in by answering one of the following questions:

- What was one of the "rules," spoken or unspoken, in your family when you were growing up? How was it enforced?

- What's one of your default defenses that you believe likely began in childhood? What event or situation comes to mind that reinforced this survival strategy?

Exploring the Big Idea

You will recall that one of the core values of our mission at The Redeemed is to forge brotherhood among men. One of the most powerful ways of bonding with others is to share your story, honestly and openly, and to be known, accepted, and valued. When we risk being vulnerable enough to tell the truth about the pain we've experienced in life, we shatter the isolation that often comes with carrying that pain. We humble ourselves—something that's not easy or comfortable, especially for men—and reveal ourselves without posturing, competing, or comparing.

Similarly, you have the privilege of listening and hearing the other men in your group share their stories with you. You can gift them with your attention as you listen with your heart as well as your ears. Your group leader will describe the format you will follow in greater detail, but this session is an opportunity to begin unpacking your pain in the safety of your small group community. You might be surprised how cathartic and healing it can be simply to tell the truth about what you've endured, knowing you will not be judged or criticized, only accepted and supported.

While you will not have time to tell your entire life story during this session, you can share the headlines and highlights that you find most significant in shaping who you have become. And you will have opportunities moving forward in between group sessions to meet online with other men from this group and share in greater detail. It's scary laying down our armor and letting other men see our fears, insecurities, flaws, and weaknesses—but it's also liberating. Unencumbered by masks, you will also discover more of who you are and how God has made you.

Telling your story and having witnesses to what you've experienced is powerful, but it's only part of processing the pains you've encountered in life. While there is no perfect method or progressive formula for processing your pain, we have listed some practices below that you may find helpful in pursuing healing and becoming more self-aware. And self-awareness allows you to see the patterns of default responses that you've developed and to decide if there are better, healthier ways of dealing with pain now that you have more knowledge, support, and resources.

Keep in mind that these practices often overlap and require patience, compassion, and curiosity toward yourself. Resist the temptation to dismiss your feelings, shame yourself for feeling and thinking the way you do, or condemn yourself for past failures and transgressions. Remember, God loves you so much that he sacrificed his Son in order to forgive you and empower you with new life through the power of his Spirit.

- **Acknowledge and accept that you're experiencing pain or that something in the past was/is painful.**
- **Name the pain by identifying the various emotions connected to and/or contributing to the hurtful events and traumatic moments you carry.**
- **Pay attention to your body and find a way to address and relieve the pain physically. Focus on breathing slowly, noticing where you hold tension in your body, and grounding yourself with mindfulness and prayer.**
- **Express the pain in some way that helps you externalize it and surrender it before God. Journal without stopping**

to edit or curate, talk to someone you trust who cares about you, pray by pouring out your heart to God, and read Scripture to ground yourself in truth.

- **Study the impact this pain has had in your life and how you want to handle it moving forward.**
- **Ask for what you need from others in order to move through your pain and grow stronger.**
- **Look for ways your pain connects you to others and their pain. Consider how you can come alongside others to let them know you understand their pain and they're not alone.**
- **How have you usually handled the pain in your life up until now? How productive have these strategies been in helping you grow and in strengthening your faith?**
- **When have you risked sharing the hardest parts of your story with others? How did they respond to what you shared? How do you wish they had responded?**

Considering the Word

Follow along as your group leader reads aloud the following passage:

¹Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ²Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed—and they waited for the moving of the waters. ⁴From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease they had.

⁵One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

⁷“Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

⁸Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” ⁹At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

John 5:1-9

- Why do you suppose Jesus chose to ask the lame man, “Do you want to get well?”, even though Jesus was certainly aware of the man's condition? What does this question imply about our part in processing our pain and experiencing healing?

- This lame man had suffered for thirty-eight years, continuing to watch as others were healed while he had no one to help him get into the pool. What pain have you carried for most of your life that continues to weigh you down?

- When you consider Jesus asking you this question—“Do you want to get well?”—how would you respond? How have you grown comfortable living with your pain? How will your life be different without pain limiting you?

Discussing the Truth

It can feel overwhelming to examine your past and connect what you find there to who you are and how you handle pain in the present. You may feel discouraged and want to stop, and that is certainly a valid option depending on what has happened to you and its impact on your life. You may consider exploring your past pain as a battle that can't be won since the past cannot be changed. You may be tempted to give up and settle back into what's comfortable and familiar in the ways you view your past pains.

Pay attention to how you feel as you think about your past—these feelings are valid. At the same time, keep in mind that even though your past cannot be altered, your response to it can. God redeems our past pain and uses it to equip and empower us to be who he created us to be. While God can heal you instantly, most people usually experience healing as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. Growth and redemption often occur as the result of gaining self-awareness as you look back, understanding the pain you've experienced, and identifying the tendencies you developed as a result of that pain.

A good place to start is being honest about the family dynamics in your upbringing. What was your experience of growing up the way you did? What was your role in your family? Try to identify the behaviors you did repeatedly in order to cope with fears and unmet needs. Think about the secrets you've been carrying, especially the ones tied to how you view your identity and self-worth. Look for ways you continually experienced pain and frustration and notice the longings inside you as a result.

While it's scary to look at your past pains, it's also an essential part of spiritual maturity. Your brokenness is not

the greatest barrier to the life of freedom God wants you to experience—the greatest barrier is when you don't surrender your brokenness. When you continue to conceal, deny, ignore, or numb the pain in your life, you impede the process of transformation God has already started in you.

Surrendering your pain requires more than what you may have learned about repentance, confession, and accountability. These elements are essential to processing your pain and becoming more like Jesus, but they aren't one-and-done boxes to check. They are relational practices. True surrender requires saying yes to God's presence in your life on an ongoing, everyday basis, inviting him into your wounds even as you share them in community with trusted brothers committed to your growth and healing.

- Based on the guidance and instructions of your group leader, take about 3-5 minutes to share more of your story with the other men in your group. Feel free to refer to the timeline you completed on your own prior to this meeting.

- With increased awareness of your story, what continues to be one of the most painful wounds you carry? How can the other men help you process and heal this wound?

- How does hearing the stories of the men in your group give you a different perspective on your own story? Why?

Wrap-up Activity

Close this session by going around the group and sharing your answers to the following questions:

- How do you view your past pains differently now than before you started this group study? What has helped you shift your perspective?

- What's one unhealthy behavior, stubborn habit, or ongoing addiction you continue to battle as a result of past pains in your life? What's one step you can take with the help of your group members toward changing this response?

Closing in Prayer

Go around the group and share any prayer requests you would like others to pray about, and then pray for those requests together, either silently or out loud or both. Thank God for each man in your group and the story he has shared. Ask God to empower you to experience healing from past wounds and to look for ways you can help other group members heal from theirs. Pray for courage to surrender your pain to God and to continue sharing vulnerably with your Christian brothers so that you can deepen your faith and live out your divine purpose with more power and freedom.

Reflection Exercise

Sometime before your next group session, use the questions below to help you continue processing your pain and considering your story. Pay attention to what lingers in your mind or resonates in your heart as you reflect on your last group meeting and the experience of sharing your story and hearing the stories from your brothers in the group. Feel free to review your life timeline or anything covered in the previous session along with any notes, questions, or comments you made. Knowing this is hard and holy work, spend a few minutes in prayer stilling your heart before God and asking for his Spirit to guide you. Record your responses to the following questions and prompts in your journal or notebook.

- What was the most challenging part of sharing your story with your group in the last session? What was the most rewarding part?

- How did you relate to the stories shared by other group members? Which ones could you relate to most? Why?

- What did you decide not to share with your group in relaying your story that you wish you had shared? Prayerfully consider sharing it with one of the other men in your group during the following one-on-one connection.

Finally, schedule a brief (about 15 minute) video call with someone from your group (but not the man you connected with in your previous one-on-one connection). Discuss your experience examining and sharing your stories in the previous group session. Encourage one another for your courage and vulnerability in the risks you took to share honestly with the group. Wrap up by praying for one another or at least sharing a request related to how you're processing your pain and reconsidering your story.

Group member I will contact:

Day/time when we will have a video call:

**“TO GROW YOURSELF,
YOU MUST KNOW
YOURSELF.”**

- John C. Maxwell

Getting Started

You have a story you tell yourself about yourself. We all do. This narrative started with what you experienced early in life — how others viewed you and met your needs and how you responded to that. But what if this story isn't entirely true? What if the story you tell yourself is based on false assumptions, inaccurate conclusions, and lies from the enemy? Wouldn't you want to know the real story and your true identity?

When you think about your personality, you probably have certain qualities, traits, and characteristics come to mind. Things you naturally seem to gravitate toward and have a knack for understanding as well as areas without any appeal or natural ability. You might think of your personality as the product of your strengths and weaknesses, your preferences and predilections, your unique way of relating to others and the world around you.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), personality “refers to the enduring characteristics and behavior that comprise a person’s unique adjustment to life, including major traits, interests, drives, values, self-concept, abilities, and emotional patterns.”¹ And trying to describe and categorize human personalities is nothing new. The Ancient Greek philosopher Empedocles speculated that personalities reflected the four elements—earth, air, fire, water—while the physician Hippocrates, best known for the Hippocratic Oath taken by doctors and medical professionals, classified temperaments according to physical fluids or

¹ <https://www.apa.org/topics/personality#:~:text=Personality%20refers%20to%20the%20enduring,%2C%20abilities%2C%20and%20emotional%20patterns.>

“humors”: blood (sanguine), black bile (melancholic), yellow bile (choleric), and phlegm (phlegmatic).²

Today the study of personality has advanced considerably, taking into account a greater, more thorough grasp of the complex interplay of assorted variables—including genetics, environment, biology, psychology, and neurology. Numerous systems for describing, categorizing, and understanding various personalities have evolved as well, and we’ll explore one of them, the Enneagram, later in this session.

As you consider what you already know about your personality and become a more thoughtful student of yourself, the ultimate source of wisdom remains the Bible, which tells us, “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7) and urges, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Proverbs 4:23). Basically, how we think of ourselves largely determines who we are, which in turn impacts everything that comes out of us, so we need to protect our hearts.

Scripture also reminds us of the inherent challenge with the story we tell ourselves about ourselves: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). This explains why the apostle Paul urged us not to rely solely on who we think we are or want to be but “rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh” (Romans 13:14) and instead “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

That’s why it can be so helpful to reflect and try to understand our personalities — not just for our own gratification but to have a more accurate story about ourselves. Understanding who you are and why you tend to do what you do allows you to

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/personality>

more fully embrace your true identity in Christ and to live out your God-given purpose. Knowing yourself only has eternal value within the context of becoming who God made you to be.

Checking In

Go around the group and check in by answering one or both of the following questions:

- What three words best describe your personality right now? Who do they reveal you to be?

- Considering your personality, which animal best reflects or symbolizes who you are? Why?

Exploring the Big Idea

Like any story, the one you tell yourself about who you are includes various relationships, events, obstacles, and challenges. Because your mind and body are wired for survival, however, the ways you filter these variables are not necessarily accurate or reliable for the duration of your life. In other words, **you may be living out a story that's based on misperceptions and misunderstandings.** For example, rather than living out the heroic story God has for you, you may have settled for a passive role as a minor character.

While it's true you cannot rewrite the story of your past, you can revisit the key moments and consider them from new, redemptive vantage points. As Joseph told his brothers many decades after they had betrayed him and sold him into slavery, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). Terrible things have happened in your life that should not have happened, and other things that you should have experienced and received have not. But God and his purposes are bigger than what we're able to see and interpret from our limited human perspective. Living by faith means trusting God even when our pain feels unbearable and our story seems headed for a dead end.

Understanding your personality requires you to invite God into the fullness of your story and to ask his Spirit to provide illumination. While some elements may be divinely revealed to you, **God often uses other people, relationships, and resources to help us discover more of who he made us to be.** Other people help us see ourselves as they experience us, mirroring back to us what we may not be able to see in our blind spots. Relationships with trusted others provide opportunity for being known, accepted, and loved in ways that we may never have experienced. Key resources often reveal patterns, themes, and aspects of who we are through different paradigms that provide fresh insight.

Spiritual growth and transformation occur when you begin seeing more of your authentic self, risking vulnerably in relationship with others, and living out your divine purpose by trusting God more and more. **Understanding your personality** is foundational to this process and **helps you see the difference between the old narrative you used to tell yourself and the new story you were designed to live out.**

God intended for your identity and your purpose to work in synchronicity with his plan for your life. Paul explains, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). When you grow in self-discovery and understand more of who you are and what you’re made for, you experience the supernatural peace that comes from knowing your true worth. You become the hero of a new story co-written with the author and finisher of your faith, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 12:2).

- What thoughts and feelings rise up inside you when you consider that you may have been living out the “wrong story”? What limitations have you experienced because of the story you’ve been telling yourself about who you are?

- How would your life be different if you saw yourself as the hero of an epic story God has created you to live? What would change in your life if you accepted the truth of who God made you to be?

Considering the Word

Follow along as your group leader reads aloud the following passage:

²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'"

Acts 17:24-28

- How does this passage remind you that you're part of a bigger story? How have you experienced God using you and your life to further his larger story?

- What does it mean for you personally to know that in God you live and move and have your being? How does this awareness affect the way you view your personality? Why?

- Who in the Bible, other than Jesus, have you frequently found appealing, intriguing, and compelling in light of your own story? What have you learned about yourself through this person's story in Scripture?

Discussing the Truth

Most of us enjoy learning more about ourselves, particularly if the tools and methods reveal insightful patterns while recognizing our distinct uniqueness. One of the most popular, and many would say accurate, tools for understanding yourself and your personality is known as the Enneagram. While its origins date back centuries, the Enneagram's popularity has seen a resurgence in the broader culture during the past few decades, mostly because this ancient system remains surprisingly relevant and timeless.

The Enneagram helps you look at yourself, your identity, your behavior and relationships—as well as those of other

people—through the lenses of nine different types. While far from perfect, its wisdom can empower your self-discovery and increase your self-awareness by revealing your mindset, motives, and behavior tendencies over time and seeing how they manifest on a daily basis. The nine types and their descriptions not only provide insight into our strengths and weaknesses, predominant virtues and vices, but also the story we tell ourselves about who we are and what we need in life. Even better, the Enneagram can provide direction for growth and maturity specific to each type.

If you're new to the Enneagram, you will find a wealth of resources available online including tests to determine your type. To get started or refresh your memory, review the brief descriptions for each of the nine types below and then answer the questions that follow.

Enneagram Ones have a strong sense of right and wrong and depend on action, organization, discipline, and order to live up to their high, often perfectionistic standards. They may struggle with anger, especially with themselves, but they also see many ways to help make the world around them better.

Enneagram Twos love to help others in need and find significance in giving of themselves, their time and resources. They frequently overlook their own needs, however, which can lead to resentment and manipulation. When balanced and grounded, Twos can be humble and generous, helping others flourish.

Enneagram Threes are known for their achievements, performances, and ambition to be the best. When challenged, they may resort to exaggeration and deception, both of themselves

and others, but when thriving, they set big goals and can lead the way toward success.

Enneagram Fours seek beauty, depth, and meaning and often pursue and express these symbolically and creatively. When they avoid falling into the comparison trap of envying others, they enjoy using their sensitivity and creativity to connect with others and provide a bigger perspective.

Enneagram Fives observe and investigate others along with their surroundings, relying on research to address their curiosity. In the face of an unpredictable world, they may struggle with retreating and hoarding what they consider valuable—money, power, education, information, possessions. But when healthy and grounded, Fives can provide insight and wisdom.

Enneagram Sixes tend to be loyal and supportive and find significance in helping behind the scenes. They sometimes struggle with distrust and anxiety, which can result in being skeptical of others and focusing on worst case scenarios. At the same time, this can equip Sixes to think through solutions to any problem, and they steadfastly look out for the people they care about.

Enneagram Sevens are often optimistic, idealistic, and enthusiastic, always looking ahead at the next big thing. Left unchecked, Sevens may become over-indulgent and give in to their appetites for what gives them pleasure and meaning. When healthy, they often bring a fresh perspective and energy.

Enneagram Eights often lead, challenge, and protect in pursuit of their goals, which unchecked can result in control issues

and dominating others. They can struggle with lust—not only for sexual gratification but also for power, authority, wealth, fame, and recognition. Centered and balanced, Eights can protect the vulnerable and lead towards innovation.

Enneagram Nines serve as peacemakers and try to facilitate everyone's needs in order to achieve harmony and synchronicity. They sometimes underestimate their contribution and withdraw into passivity, distractions, and inactivity. Overcoming this tendency, they can become advocates for others who can bring people together and help bridge divides.

- How familiar were you with the Enneagram prior to this session? What's been your experience and impressions with what it reveals about you and your personality?
- What does the Enneagram reflect accurately about your strengths and weaknesses? In what ways does it seem lacking?
- What other tools, methods, and resources have you used previously that provided insight into your personality? Which ones have been especially helpful for you? Why?

Wrap-up Activity

Close this session by going around the group and sharing your answers to the following questions:

- What do you need from the other group members in order to help you understand your personality more accurately and objectively?

- What's one specific aspect of your personality you want to reconsider and invite God and others to help you understand and address more directly in order to experience change?

Closing in Prayer

Go around the group and share any prayer requests you would like others to pray about, and then pray for those requests together, either silently or out loud or both. Thank and praise God for who he is and how he has made each man in your group with a unique combination of traits, qualities, and tendencies that form your personality. Ask God to help you and to know how to help one another as you pursue being the authentic, passionate man he created you to be.

Reflection Exercise

Before your next group session, use the questions below to help you reflect on your last group session and what you're learning about your personality. Begin your reflection time by stilling yourself before God and inviting him to reveal what you need to consider as you seek to become more of the authentic man of God he has made you to be. Think back over all that was covered in the previous session along with any notes, questions, or comments you made. Then write down your responses to the following questions and prompts in your journal or notebook.

- Recall the three words you used to describe your personality at the beginning of the last group session. Do they still seem the best words to reflect your personality, or can you think of any others that are more accurate now? What three words do you wish described who you are?

- Who in your group seems to have a similar personality to your own? What can you learn about yourself based on what you've observed and experienced with them?

- What's one aspect of your personality that causes you to feel discouraged, disappointed, or ashamed? How can God redeem this aspect to help you grow as you accomplish his divine purpose?

At this point, you probably have a lot you would like to discuss with another group member. Choose a man from your group to contact, not someone you've already connected with, and schedule a brief video call before your next group meeting. Share at least one of your responses to the above questions during your discussion. Conclude by praying for one another.

Group member I will contact:

Day/time when we will have a video call:

**“GOD NEVER LOSES
SIGHT OF THE
TREASURE WHICH HE
HAS PLACED IN OUR
EARTHEN VESSELS.”**

- Charles Spurgeon

Getting Started

Your design reveals your destiny.

You may have observed this playing out the last time you went to your medical professional for a checkup. Many of the tests, indicators, and screens now incorporate technology and the latest advances in science in order to help you know your genetic predispositions for certain diseases and conditions. By knowing more about your body at a level beyond what can be detected externally, you're equipped to make proactive decisions, take preventative measures, and plan for possible setbacks.

Similarly, examining how God has uniquely designed you can help you understand and proactively think through how to use your abilities, talents, and gifts. Many people in the Bible testify to this divine design in the ways they lived out their stories. David even praises God and thanks him directly for being "marvelously made" in "body and soul" (Psalm 139:14 MSG). You, too, have been "marvelously made" by your Creator, created in his own divine image to reflect his glory and to fulfill his purposes.

Paul explains, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). Notice here that God prepared you "in advance" for the sacred purpose you're called to live out, both in how he designed you and in the experiences you've lived. Clearly, the Lord has a purpose in mind for each of us before we're even born. This makes sense — consider the way we often create new products and invent new devices to meet a specific need. Doctors and scientists look for ways to eradicate disease and to expedite recovery from injury. Inventors and innovators come up with solutions to household problems such as leaky pipes, inefficient heating and cooling, mold and

dust. You can probably think of many ways that people create something with a specific purpose in mind. Similarly, God designed us in his own image to fulfill his divine purposes on a much larger scale—for eternal significance.

Long before you were born, God had plans for you, things he wanted you to do during the course of your lifetime. So he engineered you in specific ways that make you uniquely qualified and equipped to fulfill this purpose. The way you're made reveals your function and your fulfillment. As you discover how God has made you, you can also gain a clearer perspective on what you're called to do. Your spiritual gifting can show where you can make a unique impact.

Your design reveals your destiny.

Checking In

Go around the group and check in by answering one or both of the following questions:

- What would you like to share from your between-sessions study last week? What has resonated with you since the last session?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “don't have a clue” and 10 being “99.9% certain,” what score reflects your present awareness of your unique purpose and spiritual gifting? Briefly explain the score you chose.

Exploring the Big Idea

We often think of discovery as a one-time event, an “aha!” moment when something previously unknown is revealed or we see things from a fresh perspective. When it comes to discovering your divine design, however, discovery is a process. Some people may have a clear sense of what they were created to do from a young age, but most of us discover it through a variety of means and methods over time—often throughout our entire lifetime. Even after you know your God-given purpose and realize the spiritual gifts you’ve been given to fulfill that purpose, the context for how you use your gifting may change along with your seasons, ages, and stages of life.

You’ve already started exploring different aspects of your purpose by reflecting on your story, the major points of pain and trauma in your life, and the unique aspects of your personality. As we saw in the last session with the Enneagram, there are many different tools, resources, and assessments to help you learn more about how you’re made and ways to live out your purpose. Using different tools can help you uncover different aspects of who you are and what you’re made to do. Some may reinforce what other tests have indicated while others provide new insight or more nuanced clarity.

Another good resource for self-discovery that leads to understanding your spiritual gifts is the DISC assessment. You might have encountered this framework in the workplace — it has been widely used for considering different personalities when managing teams or leading organizations. Here’s a brief summary for each of these four types:

D is for Dominance: direct, task oriented, decisive, organized, outgoing, outspoken, a natural leader and problem solver

I is for Influence: relational, easygoing, witty, outgoing, people-oriented, a natural networker for relationships

S is for Steadiness: reliable, stable, supportive, analytical, a natural collaborator and unifier

C is for Conscientiousness: goal-oriented, detailed, compliant, efficient, a natural manager who follows through on quality

You may have taken a DISC test previously or assume you automatically know your type. You might have had your assumptions reinforced by other tools such as the Myers-Briggs or StrengthsFinder assessments. But even if you're fairly confident of your type, try to remain open to new possibilities or ways of seeing how God has made you. This is where you can help one another in this group by providing additional input for you to reflect upon. Self-discovery assessments reveal helpful glimpses into your personality and gifting, but they often only provide a surface or cursory picture of who you are and what you're all about.

Personality assessment can provide helpful language as we try to understand ourselves. However, most of what we understand about our personalities comes from how. In addition to what you learn from personality assessments, keep in mind the way your purpose emerges in three other areas: your gifts and passions; your life experiences; and your pain and suffering. Let's briefly consider each of these:

1. Your Gifts and Passions

Your gifts and passions usually emerge in those areas that you naturally love and enjoy doing, which often—but

not always—makes them easy to identify. For example, you may excel at leading and know that others seem to naturally gravitate to you and your direction. Or, you may know that you don't like to lead and are more comfortable supporting a cause you believe in from behind the scenes. God's Word tells us, "We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us" (Romans 12:6). You've likely filtered through some of your natural gifts and passions already, but it's important to remain alert to where you feel drawn. Consider the topics, issues, and concerns that compel you to feel strong emotions and to take action.

2. Your Life Experiences

The events and situations you've experienced are part of what God uses to equip and empower you for your purpose. Sometimes these are obvious, big moments, but don't overlook the more mundane, everyday moments, too. We're told, "Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him" (Romans 12:1 MSG). While you might assume you need to go to seminary or have professional expertise or prestige for God to use you, God often delights in using people that others overlook or consider unqualified. If you're willing, God will use you in ways that may surprise you.

3. Your Pain and Suffering

As you explored in the second session, your pain has influenced many areas of your life, personality, and relational style. But you'll recall that your pain and suffering is not in vain. Not only is God with you in the midst of it all, he uses what you've endured to provide his comfort, love, and healing to others

when they're hurting as well. We're told that he comforts us in our troubles so that we're similarly able to comfort others (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). If we're willing to embrace and reflect on our trials, our pain can be redeemed and become part of our purpose.

- What have you already learned about yourself and your gifting from using various tests, assessments, and indicators? How do these relate to your divine purpose?

- Go through the three other areas—gifts and passions, life experiences, pain and suffering—and summarize how each equips you for your divine purpose:

Gifts and Passions:

Life Experiences:

Pain and Suffering:

Considering the Word

Follow along as your group leader reads aloud the following passage:

³For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Romans 12:3-8

- Why do you suppose Paul begins here by cautioning us not to become arrogant or conceited about your gifts, abilities, and talents? How does this relate to why we're given these gifts and how we're called to use them?

- In what way have you resisted or struggled to embrace your unique design and direction in life? What challenges or obstacles do you continue to face in living out your purpose?

- How have the gifts of your other group members encouraged, supported, challenged, and blessed you already? How can you encourage and support them in living out their purpose?

Discussing the Truth

You are called to reflect God—his character, glory, goodness, love, and mercy—and to serve others regardless of what your unique personality and gifting may be. Scripture makes it clear that you are a minister and ambassador for Jesus just as much as any pastor or staff member at your church. While you may discover that working in ministry is part of God’s purpose for your life, you may also be called to use your gifts in another way. Everyone is called to steward all that God has given them to love him and to serve others. We are to be light that illuminates the darkness of the world and salt that flavors its blandness. We’re told, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession,

that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

Peter makes it clear that you’re responsible for sharing what God has done in your life with everyone around you. You are chosen to serve as part of a royal priesthood along with everyone else who’s accepted the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. With the Holy Spirit dwelling within you, you have direct access to God and his power. While we each have different and unique gifting, we’re still given these gifts for the benefit of others and to advance God’s kingdom.

In other words, whether you’re a professional minister or not, you’re called to reflect him in everything you say and do. You’re not on the second-string team waiting for your big moment to step up to the plate. You’re already on the playing field wherever you are and whatever you’re doing! There’s not an A-list and a B-list of those who serve God and his people based on how many followers they have on social media or the size of their ministry.

Every role is important whether they’re out front, behind the scenes, or as is the case for most of us, in between. God calls you to use your gifts just as he calls all his beloved children. With your Heavenly Father, the One who created you and sent his Son to die for your sins, you are valuable and worthy. There are no insignificant characters in the grand narrative God is revealing.

We are all teammates, growing and serving together. Everybody is needed to serve as God has designed and called them—which means if you don’t contribute, everyone around you suffers, including the men in this group. Every person and every gift is vital to the work to further God’s kingdom: “All of you together are Christ’s body, and each of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27 NLT).

- Are you more inclined to think more highly of yourself compared to others and their gifts or more lowly? How does either of these allow your insecurity to blindfold you to what God is calling you to do?

- When have you experienced a clear sense of God using you and your gifts to accomplish something for him, for others, and/or for his kingdom? What did you contribute that reflected your unique gifting?

- What's one way you would like to serve others and advance the kingdom but haven't yet had the opportunity? What do you need in order to move toward serving this way?

Wrap-up Activity

Close this session by going around the group and sharing your answers to the following questions:

- What do you know about your unique gifting and divine purpose now that you didn't know before you started this study? How is God using what you're learning to reveal more of how he made you and what he made you to do?
- How can the other men in the group encourage, support, and challenge you to live out your God-given purpose with greater impact? What do you need from them to be a better steward of your spiritual gifting?

Closing in Prayer

As you wrap up this session, go around the group and share at least one prayer request that you would like others to pray about, and then pray for those requests together, either silently or aloud or both. Thank God for the unique way each man is "marvelously made" and divinely called to fulfill God's purposes through his life. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide and direct each of you as you look for direction and opportunity to serve others. Pray for clarity and discernment so that you can see your gifting more clearly and know your purpose with greater confidence.

Reflection Exercise

As your group approaches the halfway point in this study, it's a good time to consider what God is revealing to you, both through the content of the previous sessions as well as through the words, responses, and interactions with other men in your group. Use the following questions and prompts to help you reflect on how you want to move forward and make the most of the remaining time together.

Before you begin, spend a few moments in prayer simply stilling yourself from all distractions and the busyness of the day. Ask God to meet you where you are and remind you of his love for you right now. Ask him to show you more of how he has created you and how he wants you to serve and steward the gifts you've been given.

- How would you describe your experience in the group so far? What has been the most helpful aspect of your group time? What has challenged you the most?

- How are the other men in your group helping you to see who you really are and what God has called you to do? What do you need from them to continue embracing your true identity in Christ and your God-given purpose?

- What have some of the men in your group said to you that continues to linger? Why do you suppose this resonates so much?

Identify which of the men in your group you haven't yet connected with one-on-one in between sessions and plan a video call before your next group meeting. Check in with one another and then discuss one truth from Scripture that you are using to help renew your mind and win your battles this week.

Group member I will contact:

Day/time when we will have a video call:

**“THE MEANING OF LIFE
IS TO FIND YOUR GIFT.
THE PURPOSE OF LIFE
IS TO GIVE IT AWAY.”**

- Pablo Picasso

Getting Started

Whether you realize it or not, you have superpowers.

They may not reflect the extraordinary abilities of your favorite comic book character or movie hero, but they're often just as unique and subtly more powerful.

Superheroes typically have origin stories explaining how their abilities and superpowers came to exist. Usually, they experienced extreme pain, endured some trial or experiment, or suffered an accident or injury that resulted in surprising results. Simply put, their weaknesses became transformed into their strengths.

If this sounds familiar beyond the adventures of Batman, Spiderman, and Deadpool, there's good reason. The apostle Paul described a similar transformation that occurs as we learn to rely on God's power rather than our own efforts. Paul suffered the torment of "a thorn in my flesh," as he described it (2 Corinthians 12:7), and pleaded with God to remove it. After his third request, Paul did not experience an end to his suffering and instead heard the Lord tell him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

While this was not the answer Paul hoped to receive, he discovered the power available to him through humility and faith when forced to rely on Christ: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

You've already started to explore the way your pains and passions have shaped your story and influenced your divine purpose. You have greater self-awareness about your natural abilities, spiritual gifting, and experiential wisdom. Now it's

time to focus on the places where you can have the greatest impact with your gifts. Often we acknowledge our pain before we are ready to share about it and let God use it to help others. This process takes time. But learning to accept and share those experiences as part of your story can free you to experience greater redemption.

While God did not cause the pains in your life, he was present with you during those darkest moments and continues to redeem them through the power of his Spirit in you. He has also created you to serve a bigger cause than earthly celebrity, wealth, fame, or achievement. As you practice acceptance and invite God to use your pain for eternal purposes, you discover your spiritual superpowers. You realize what you're most passionate about and how you can serve others and advance God's kingdom. You discover the joy, fulfillment, peace, and contentment that only comes when you're doing what only you can do.

Many superhero stories explore themes related to the great responsibility that comes with great power. As followers of Jesus growing in our faith, we also have a great responsibility to connect our pain to our passions in order to maximize the impact of our purpose. The more you have been given by God, the more you want to give to others. The more you have been blessed, the more you want to be a blessing.

Checking In

Go around the group and check in by answering one or both of the following questions:

- What's one thing you would like to share from your between-sessions study last week? How has God been moving in your life since the last session?

- Who was your favorite superhero when you were growing up? Why did you especially like this character?

Exploring the Big Idea

As you continue to make connections among your pains, passions, experiences, personality traits, and spiritual gifts, your purpose becomes more refined and uniquely personal. You are wired differently from the other men in your group—and from everyone else on the planet—for a deliberate purpose divinely engineered by God. You're not one in a million or even a billion—**God made you to be one of a kind!**

When you consider the way God made us all unique, he clearly loves variety. Every snowflake and each human fingerprint is unlike all the others, and, in the same way, your unique intersection of pain, passion, and purpose belongs to you and you alone. When you discover the way the Lord has made you and live out of this purpose, you will experience a sense of fulfillment unlike any other. Without a doubt, you will know that you were made to do what only you can do.

You may be tempted at times to think you have nothing to contribute—or that what you do have is not enough. But this kind of thinking opens up your mind to more lies from the enemy. He wants you to believe you're not talented enough, smart enough, capable enough, or man enough to serve God and advance God's kingdom. **If the enemy can prevent you from owning the truth of your God-given identity and purpose, then he can minimize the impact God has designed you to have.**

What's true is that God is the ultimate Creator, an artist of incomparable ability who has given each of us special gifts to use in special ways. **He created you to fulfill all the abilities he has instilled inside of you.** Yes, there will be some gifts and abilities that overlap with the way others are made and called to serve, but even then you will have something distinctly your own to contribute in how you serve.

So don't believe the enemy's lies. No matter where you find yourself on your faith journey right now or what you've done or not done in the past, you are God's chosen man for the mission he has for you. He doesn't just want part of you—he wants all of you. And he wants you to go all in on using what he's given you.

If you're willing, God will continue revealing how you can be used by him in great ways. Once you discover your personal mission, that divine purpose for which he designed you, then you will experience a sense of wholeness and peace that won't waver when circumstances change or others let you down. **When you love your purpose, you love your life.**

- What are some of the ways you see your pains, passions, experiences, personality, and spiritual gifting intersect in your purpose? How have they shaped you to be the man of God he created you to be?
- What are some of the enemy's lies that sometimes tempt you to doubt who you are and how God has made you? What are the truths based on God's Word that dispel these lies?

Considering the Word

Follow along as your group leader reads aloud the following passage:

God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful:

wise counsel
clear understanding
simple trust
healing the sick
miraculous acts
proclamation
distinguishing between spirits
tongues
interpretation of tongues.

All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what, and when.

1 Corinthians 12:4-11, MSG

- What have you been given that reveals more of who God is? How does this usually manifest to those around you?
- What are some of the benefits others experience when you live out of your divine purpose? What do you have to share that others need?
- When have you recently been aware of living out of your purpose? What was the context, and how did you contribute based on your unique gifting?

Discussing the Truth

Imagine being in a community of other believers in which each of you shares who you are and what God has called you to do. Imagine each person taking a turn and summing up naturally and succinctly what God has instilled in them and what he's revealed about how to live out your unique and sacred mission. It might sound something like this:

"Hi, my name is Kyle, and God has created me to share the spiritual gift of mercy. I love helping others who are in need—the homeless, addicts, runaways, people who have been through severe trauma. Whether I'm volunteering at a shelter, leading a recovery group, or providing food to the

hungry, I know that I'm doing what I was made to do."

"Hey, I'm Sam! God has designed me with unique gifts of administration. I serve on the board of several ministries as well as the leadership team at my church, and I love solving problems and finding systems that help us have greater impact. It's what God created me to do!"

"I'm Eli, and God created me to serve with the gift of hospitality. I love welcoming others and making them feel like they belong, whether greeting at my church, hosting a Bible study in my home, or just having friends over for dinner. I love feeling like I'm making a difference by doing what I'm good at doing."

"Hi, y'all, I'm Pete, and God has designed me to serve with the gift of encouragement. I've been through a lot of hard things in my life, but I've discovered the joy of coming alongside other men who are struggling with similar challenges. I feel alive when I'm able to listen and accept guys who feel depressed, discouraged, and disheartened and remind them of what's true. I feel God at work when I'm simply willing to open my heart and show up."

You get the idea. Now it's your turn. Before going around the group and sharing your own awareness of the purpose God has given you, answer the following questions to help clarify what you want to share.

- If you had to sum up what you believe your God-given purpose to be, you would say:

- What are some examples of times you've been able to live out that purpose?

- If you're not sure about your purpose yet, ask the other men to provide input and ideas to help you gain a clearer understanding.

Wrap-up Activity

Close this session by going around the group and sharing your answers to the following questions:

- Since beginning this group, what have you learned about yourself and where your pains, passions, personality, experiences, and spiritual gifts intersect?
- What aspects of your divine purpose would you like to have more clarity on? How would this kind of clarity help you live out your purpose with greater impact?

Closing in Prayer

As you go around the group and share prayer requests, feel free to provide an update on any past requests you've shared with the group. Then take a few minutes to pray together, giving God thanks and praise for how he continues to reveal the unique ways he has made each of you to fulfill the divine mission that only you can accomplish. Ask for protection against the enemy's lies so that you can continue living in the truth and serving with purpose.

Reflection Exercise

Sometime before your next group session, set aside at least fifteen minutes of uninterrupted time with God. Your focus should be on stilling your heart before the Lord and listening to what his Spirit might be speaking into your life. Ask him to continue revealing and confirming your divine purpose and to open your eyes to opportunities where you can serve others and advance his kingdom by doing what you are made to do. Conclude your prayer time by asking for guidance, wisdom, and discernment as you use the following questions and exercises to help you reflect on and process all you're learning.

- When you reflect on what you've learned about your purpose in life, what thoughts and feelings rise up in you? What concerns, fears, and worries are you carrying related to living out your purpose?
- Who in your group has helped you to see your purpose more clearly and to embrace what God has created you to do? How was this man particularly helpful?
- Who in the group can you bless in the remaining sessions by sharing your gifts and who you are? Who can you uniquely encourage and support as they process their calling?

Once again, pair up with someone from your group you haven't connected with yet—perhaps your answer to the above question—and schedule a video call together before your next group meeting. Check in with each other on what you're experiencing and how you see God at work in helping you live out your divine purpose. Conclude by sharing at least one personal prayer request and praying for one another.

Group member I will contact:

Day/time when we will have a video call:

**“THE PLACE GOD CALLS
YOU TO IS THE PLACE
WHERE YOUR DEEP
GLADNESS AND THE
WORLD'S DEEP HUNGER
MEET.”**

- Frederick Buechner

Getting Started

If you've ever seen an aspen tree with its fan-shaped leaves quaking in the breeze, then you likely saw an entire stand of aspens. Each of these exquisite trees, which happens to be the most widespread tree in North America, is actually not an individual tree but part of a larger organism. Aspen trees share an extensive underground root system, so a group of aspen trees is considered a singular living entity within its environment. They share the same nutrients and water supply, which means the health and growth of any one aspen depends on the others of its kind within a grove.³

Similar to the aspens, your purpose cannot exist without support from others and your contribution to them. Simply put, your health and growth depend on the people around you—and their health and growth depend on you. Living in community provides support and perspective in all areas of your life. God has designed us to understand and fulfill our purpose through community — we simply cannot do it entirely on our own. Just as our three-person God is always in relationship with himself, God made us in his own image to be relational, to need each other.

As men, we're often much more comfortable—usually because we've been socially and culturally conditioned this way—to be independent, self-sufficient, and isolated. Rather than being encouraged to need one another, many of us have learned directly and indirectly to rely only on ourselves and to remain skeptical, if not distrustful, of other men. We can compare and compete, but we aren't always rewarded for cooperating and collaborating.

³ <https://www.nationalforests.org/blog/tree-profile-aspen-so-much-more-than-a-tree>

You will recall that one of our core values for us here at The Redeemed is authentic community. We're committed to helping you realize who you really are in order to do what you have been created to do. Authentic community allows you to be open, honest, and vulnerable and to discover the freedom that comes from living out of your true identity in Christ. This process only happens when we break down walls and foster genuine connections. When genuine connections are made, you discover you're not alone and have brothers who care about you.

Like the aspen tree, you cannot live as you're intended by yourself. Your purpose cannot exist in a vacuum apart from relationships with others. Your gifts are designed to be used to serve, minister to, and meet the needs of those around you. What good is it to know your purpose if you're not living it out to benefit others?

Real success only occurs when you're exercising your purpose by giving to others and by receiving from them. God's Word is clear: "The whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow" (Colossians 2:19). You can't maximize the impact your life can have without other people committed to walking alongside you on a similar path. You can't be you without them—and they can't be themselves without you.

Navigating your purpose is about following God to become more of who he made you to be—and who he made you to be is part of a fellowship of people who know, accept, understand, support, encourage, and challenge one another.

Checking In

Go around the group and check in by answering one or both of the following questions:

- What would you like to share from your between-sessions study last week? How has God been revealing more about your unique purpose since the last session?

- When have you felt like you were part of a group, team, or fellowship of other men who genuinely knew you, accepted you, and cared about you? If you haven't experienced this before, what has kept this from occurring?

Exploring the Big Idea

Being part of a community not only helps you live out your purpose—it also helps you grow. When you're doing the work that God has called you to do, you naturally grow. You grow closer to God as you rely on him more. You grow stronger in your faith and your willingness to trust him for things you know you could never accomplish on your own. You grow in experiential wisdom as well as in the wisdom that comes from following Christ and consistently engaging with God's Word.

Your growth has no finish line in this earthly life. You will always discover there's more to learn, to observe, to experience, to discover, to enjoy, and to share with others. Spiritual growth provides the foundation for growing in all the other areas of your life. Even when you face disappointments and unexpected pain, your spiritual strength and reliance on God's Spirit sustains you and helps you to persevere.

When you know who you are and what God has designed you to do, then you can remain focused and anchored during the inevitable storms of life. The winds and waves of unexpected change cannot tear down your identity and purpose when you're committed to following God and intentional about your spiritual growth. Your relationship with God becomes your firm foundation, your solid and unshakeable rock. James reminds us, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (1:17).

Committing to community means committing to growth, and both commitments require you to be intentional. Pursuing your spiritual growth as you live out your purpose keeps you from settling for less than God's best for your life. Sometimes you may be tempted to settle, to play it safe, to stay put—it seems part of our human nature. But resigning yourself to what you already have and refusing to risk basically means being a poor steward of all that God has entrusted to you. While you will be tempted to enjoy the security that settling seems to bring, you're called to so much more. Don't settle for less when there's so much more to experience!

There's a balance, of course, between pursuing growth and showing gratitude for the many blessings you already enjoy. You don't want to miss out on the blessings in front of you because you're overly focused on what's ahead. Healthy spiritual growth holds the tension between contentment and longing for more at the same time. Even as you're content with what God has for you and all the ways he provides for you, you don't want to stop with only your past successes.

If what you did yesterday still seems big to you, you likely aren't growing today. The legendary Babe Ruth said, "Yesterday's home runs don't win today's games." A commitment to

growth means risking with intention to fulfill the mission God has created you to accomplish.

- Look around at the other men in your group. How do you see them differently now than you did when your group first started? What has contributed to this shift?
- How have the other men in the group helped you to belong to a purpose bigger than yourself? How have you helped them experience this same sense of growth?

Considering the Word

Follow along as your group leader reads aloud the following passage:

⁴¹ Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. ⁴² When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. ⁴³ After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. ⁴⁴ Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ Everyone who heard him

was amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

⁴⁹"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁵¹Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

Luke 2:41-52

- When have you taken a risk to fulfill your God-given purpose that others around you didn't seem to understand at first? How did you handle their response?
- Why do you imagine Jesus responded to his parents the way he did in this passage? What was he wanting them to understand about his identity and his mission?

- How does being known and encouraged by others, including the men in this group, help your spiritual growth and maturity? What are some ways you've grown and become more authentically your true self in the past year?

Discussing the Truth

Even as a boy, Jesus knew who he was and what his Heavenly Father had sent him to earth to accomplish. From this young age, Jesus was clearly intentional about growing and fulfilling the sacrificial mission of his life as a human. We're told he grew in "wisdom and stature" and "in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52). We're called to follow his example, which includes developing a deliberate plan and cultivating a mindset and spirit of growth.

Without being intentional, it's easy to drift with the current of daily life and be swept up in the demands and responsibilities you encounter. But when you're consumed by what seems urgent in the moment, the temporary concerns can encroach on the transcendent purpose you're called to live out. You have to make time for God and prioritize the significant, eternal work he's called you to do. There are at least four elements to address when being intentional about your spiritual health and personal growth: **dedicated time, setting specific growth targets, identifying and pursuing resources, and applying action to fulfill your goals.** Let's briefly consider each of these.

Taking control of your schedule is certainly easier to pursue than to master, but it's essential for healthy growth. There will always be variables that disrupt your schedules

and routines, but anticipating them can help you remain focused. The most obvious way and perhaps greatest tool for managing your schedule around your purpose is saying no. Setting boundaries around what you're called to do requires saying no to many worthwhile opportunities and enjoyable encounters. While this is rarely easy, it's necessary to maintain your energy, attention, and focus on what you know you're called to do.

Specific growth targets are also essential. These are not goals to show your mastery as much as they're directions where you sense God's guidance. Some goals may seem obvious, such as creating habits to maintain your physical and mental health, while others may seem more unclear in the moment yet prove valuable down the road. By now you've developed certain habits and routines for living your life. With your God-given purpose in mind, now is a good time to audit your time and see if the way you're spending this most precious resource aligns with what you're created to do.

With dedicated time and specific growth targets in place, you will likely recognize the resources you need to help you reach your growth goals. It might be finding a mentor, volunteering with a ministry or nonprofit, participating in a Bible study, pursuing education and training, or making a career change. You may not receive all you need at once, but identifying what's needed can help you know how to pray as well as know how to make better decisions.

We'll explore application and action more in Session 8, but for now think about the small steps you can take toward living a more purposeful, growth-stimulating life. Again, you shouldn't try to make several big changes at once. Just begin thinking about how you can implement some smaller

changes toward your targets. You can start by considering how you can grow in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and other people.

- What are some ways you have pursued spiritual and personal growth in the past? What have you learned about yourself and what works best for you on a practical basis?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “chaotic and unregulated” and 10 being “perfectly planned and executed,” how would you score your present schedule and routines? What’s working well and what needs improvement in the way you’re spending your time?
- What’s the biggest area of growth you believe you need to pursue in the weeks and months ahead? How can the other men in your group help you grow in this area?

Wrap-up Activity

Close this session by going around the group and sharing your answers to the following questions:

- How does experiencing a sense of community in this group help you see your God-given purpose more fully and clearly? What still needs clarification?

- Considering all you've covered in the sessions so far, where are you in relation to knowing and living out your divine purpose? What excites you most? What frustrates you most?

Closing in Prayer

Go around the group and share any prayer requests you would like others to pray about. Update others on any past or ongoing requests and then pray for everyone's requests together, either silently or out loud or both. Describe some specific aspects of your group that you're especially grateful for and thank God for them. Ask God's Spirit to continue to reveal your purpose and to empower you to encourage and support one another in your endeavors.

Reflection Exercise

Prior to your next group session, spend a few undistracted minutes to reflect on what lingers from your last group session. Try to still your heart and calm your mind from the many busy demands of your week and invite God to show you what you need to focus on in order to become more of the man he has made you to be. Look back over all that you've covered in the previous sessions along with any notes or comments you've made. Then use your notebook or journal and write down your responses to the following questions and prompts.

- Complete the following sentence: "What surprises me most about my God-given purpose in life would probably be _____, and it surprises me because _____
_____.
- What questions or concerns continue to linger about your awareness and practice of your divine purpose? What would you like to ask or discuss with the other men in your group to help you with these?
- Which man in your group might be a resource for helping you walk into a more purpose-focused lifestyle? How do you think he could help you? Be as specific as possible.

Instead of a video call with another group member this week, think about another man you know whom you would like to know better. He might be a guy at church, a coworker with a similar sense of humor, a neighbor you wave at but rarely engage with, or the friend of a friend. If it's possible, ask him in person if you could get together for coffee or lunch—if not, call or text him to see when you might get together.

It's a big risk but in addition to relationships and community with the men in this group, it's vitally important to cultivate authentic friendships in close proximity. Don't disclose that you're meeting with him because of this exercise; just let him know you'd like to know more about him.

Potential friend I will contact:

Day/time when we will get together:

**“IT'S NOT THAT I'M
SO SMART, IT'S JUST
THAT I STAY WITH
PROBLEMS LONGER.”**

- Albert Einstein

Getting Started

If only you could identify your purpose, live it out with impact and significance, and experience all the joy and contentment that it brings—without any impediments, barriers, or obstacles. But while you're on this side of heaven, you will inevitably encounter challenges, no matter how clear your purpose or how well you live it out on a daily basis. Making connections from your pains to your passions to your purpose provides clarity, but it doesn't mean life will be easier.

In fact, sometimes you may feel like it was easier to coast through life when you weren't sure about your purpose. Once you know it, then you realize the cost that comes with living it out. Remaining focused on what you know you're created to do provides a strong foundation, but storms can still slow you down and leave you battered. Self-doubt, fear of failure, fear of change, fear of success, nagging false assumptions, the lies of the enemy, lack of support and encouragement—purpose-inhibiting hurdles will continue to pop up.

This is you must continue to rely on God as the power source for your life and your purpose. Without faith, without attunement to the Spirit's presence in your life, without connection to community, you will likely lose sight of what God has called you to do and how he has equipped you to do it. Your goal in living out your divine purpose is not to eliminate all obstacles but to anticipate them, face them, and overcome them through the power of Christ.

Toward the end of his life, the apostle Paul declared, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7). But you'll recall that the battles Paul fought were often messy, scary, and overwhelming. The race Paul ran was not a quick jog along a level path but a trailblazing endurance race through uncertain wilderness.

Through it all, Paul persisted and trusted that, no matter what happened or what he faced, God was with him and still in charge. Paul concluded, “I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love ... nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

You have the same promise from God in the midst of any and all obstacles you may face. Encountering setbacks does not change who you are and what you have been created and equipped to do. The setbacks simply clarify that purpose. Once you have a clear sense of what God has called you to do in this life, don’t allow anything to stop you from pursuing this divine calling. You may need to adjust your expectations, to grieve losses, to adapt to changes along the way, but never waver in being the man of God you are becoming and serving as only you can serve.

Checking In

Go around the group and check in by answering one or both of the following questions:

- What’s been lingering with you from your between-sessions study last week? How has God’s Spirit been speaking into your life since the last session?
- What obstacle, big or small, are you facing right now in your life? How is it affecting your ability to live out your God-given purpose?

Exploring the Big Idea

Many of the challenges you will face in living out your God-given purpose lead back to how you view failure. **Most of us are conditioned to avoid failure at all costs—even if that means settling for less, avoiding problems, and remaining stuck.** No one likes to fail, and even more, none of us wants to think of ourselves as failures. The distinction is important because it's often a wedge the enemy uses to tempt us away from God and to derail our purpose.

Everyone fails in this life. From birth to death, not only can we not avoid failure—it's essential to our growth and forward progress. Babies and toddlers don't learn to walk by deciding one day to stand up and stride across the room. No, they learn to stand in that wobbly, shaky way required to find their balance. Then they begin taking a baby step or two until they fall. Then they get up again and start again ... and again ... and again ... until they can teeter on two feet.

Look at the lives of anyone you consider successful, and you're guaranteed to find a trail marked by one failure after another. The key to their success, of course, is that they, too, got back on their feet and kept going, learning what they could from their fall and adjusting the next time. **They learned to view failure not as something to be avoided but as an inevitable part of the process of succeeding.** Testing, risking, trying out new ideas and ways of solving problems and overcoming obstacles is key not only to our physical survival but to the way we learn to thrive in our divine purpose.

Rather than view something as a failed attempt, we often turn our failures into false assumptions about our identity. We think that we're just bad at this or that we're incompetent in general. This may be reinforced by parents, siblings, teachers, coaches, and bosses who berate and embarrass us when we

stumble, rather than lift us up and help us get back on our feet. Unfortunately, they may have their own insecurities and fears about failure that they projected onto us. Rather than own their own weaknesses and flaws, they chose to make us feel like failures rather than overcomers.

There's a parallel here between the way we view guilt and shame. Guilt is remorse over something we've done and left undone—it's about our choices, motives, actions, and behaviors. Shame, on the other hand, tries to poison how we view ourselves and our ability to grow. **Shame, like failure, often makes us feel like we're the problem.** The enemy loves to use this as a weapon against us in order to undermine our relationship with God and our purpose in serving and advancing his kingdom.

Yes, **everyone fails** in this life, **but no one is a failure.** God is at work in the lives of each human being, pursuing us and inviting us to trust him. Left to our own limitations, we fail and begin assuming we're inadequate, inept, not enough. Relying on God, we fail but we know that he can use even the hardest falls and most painful challenges to strengthen our faith and to empower our purpose for greater impact. You will fail at times in living out your purpose. But you will never be a failure.

You are a beloved son of God who has a divine mission with eternal impact.

- When have you struggled with feeling like a failure rather than simply knowing that you had failed in something you attempted?

- What impact has your view of failure had on the way you see yourself and your purpose? How do you believe God views the times you have failed in your life?

Considering the Word

Follow along as your group leader reads aloud the following passage:

³For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

- What does it mean to you to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ”? How does this help you overcome some of the obstacles and challenges you face daily?

- What are some of the strongholds you've had to demolish in order to live out your God-given purpose more intentionally? What false beliefs and insecurities do you continue to battle at times?
- What are some practical ways you can rely on God's power to help you overcome the challenges you're facing right now? How can the other men in this group help you in this endeavor?

Discussing the Truth

Breaking strongholds and taking your thoughts captive to Christ is an ongoing process. Changing the way you see yourself usually doesn't happen overnight. Instead, it requires a commitment to spot the cracks in your faulty thinking and false assumptions. You may not even realize all the messages you've accepted about yourself that are simply not true. That is why community with others is essential for your growth. We all need people who love us enough to tell us the truth and help us break free of old labels, false beliefs, and the enemy's deceptions.

As men we often isolate ourselves and ruminate on the story we tell ourselves, one that may seem logical or plausible based on the way things appear or the limited information available to us. We assume that others view us as less-than, as weak or incapable, because of certain past experiences and the self-doubts that linger. We tell ourselves we need to compensate by creating a strong, stoic, capable mask to

prevent others from seeing who we really are. Rather than acknowledge our humanness, we try to project strength at all times.

Culturally and socially, we're also often encouraged to compare and compete with one another rather than to connect and collaborate. We resist asking for help because we're afraid it communicates our weakness—when it actually takes considerable courage to know we can't overcome life's obstacles on our own and ask for help. We allow the enemy to use shame against us to keep us shackled to false beliefs that our sins are the worst, that our weaknesses are unmanly, and that our mistakes are unforgivable.

But you have the power to change your thoughts—and one of the most effective ways to replace old lies with eternal truth is in this community of trusted brothers. It's not easy to acknowledge what you've believed about yourself for years, even decades, is not true. However, you can do it — and you need to in order to access more of God's power to be the man you are meant to be. In order to change your life, to live out more of your divine purpose, you must change the way you think.

The key requires identifying the old strongholds and demolishing them with the truth of who you are in Christ and who God is as your purpose-giver. Jesus said, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). God's truth sets you free by breaking the grip on the old, inaccurate story you've been telling yourself and revealing the new, life-giving epic he is now authoring in your life. He gives us the power to change in ways we can never experience on our own.

We see this truth echo throughout the pages of God's Word: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). The power of this truth also contrasts who we used to be with who we are

in Christ: “You were taught ... to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds” (Ephesians 4:22–23).

Changing your thinking must be intentional and deliberate. It must include brothers alongside you willing to remind you of who you are and what you’re called to do, even as you do the same for them. In order to experience this transformation, you must focus on truth and allow your old fears, insecurities, and false sense of self to fade away. You are a new creature in Christ, an overcomer, who can do all things through him who strengthens you.

- What’s one of the false assumptions or inaccurate beliefs from your old story that continues to linger in your mind? How does this old belief inhibit your growth and ability to fulfill your purpose?
- What’s true according to God’s Word that dispels this old, false belief about yourself and your abilities? What verse or passage of Scripture can help you remember what’s true?
- How has the truth of who you are in Christ set you free to live out your most authentic, purpose-pursuing life? What are some specific areas of your life where you’re experiencing this freedom right now?

Wrap-up Activity

Close this session by going around the group and sharing your answers to the following questions:

- How can the other men in this group help you face and overcome the obstacles and challenges you're currently facing? What do you need that they can provide?

- What stands out or resonates most with you from this session right now? What thoughts and feelings has it stirred up in you?

Closing in Prayer

Go around the group and share any prayer requests, particularly any obstacles or challenges you're currently facing, that you would like others to pray about. Include any updates on past requests and then pray for everyone's requests together, either silently or out loud or both. Ask God to strengthen your faith and to empower you to break all the strongholds lingering from the old story you used to tell yourself. Thank him for what's true about you and each man in this group as you continue to follow Jesus and rely on the power of God's Spirit in your lives.

Reflection Exercise

Before your next group session, find some time without distractions and reflect on what continues to stay with you from the previous session. As you still your heart and mind before God, ask his Spirit to help you focus on the areas where you need to demolish more strongholds and allow the truth to set you free. Feel free to review what you covered in the previous group session along with any notes or comments you made. Then grab your notebook or journal and write down your responses to the following questions and prompts.

- What's preventing you from living out your divine purpose completely and whole-heartedly right now? Do you sense you're lacking things you need or holding onto things you don't need? Or both? Try to identify what you need to surrender and what God wants you to pursue.

- What challenges or obstacles are you facing in your relationships right now? What's your part in trying to move through or overcome this barrier?

- What personal struggle or obstacle did you not mention during the last session because of fear, shame, or embarrassment? Consider how sharing it with another brother from your group would help you overcome it. Ask God to give you wisdom about when/if to disclose this and to whom.

Reflecting on your relationships with the others in your group, who are the men you want to know at a deeper level? Who are the men you trust most and would like to support you in your journey? Choose one of them and set up a video call to share your thoughts about the obstacles and challenges in your life. Discuss ways you can support and encourage one another before concluding your time together in prayer.

Group member I will contact:

Day/time when we will have a video call:

“IF I DID ONLY WHAT I WANTED TO DO, I WOULD NOT BE OBEDIENT TO THE CREATOR. SOMETIMES HE WANTS US TO DO CERTAIN THINGS THAT WE MAY NOT FEEL LIKE DOING. WHEN IT COMES TO WHAT GOD ASKS OF US, WE NEED MORE THAN GOOD INTENTIONS—WE NEED TO FOLLOW THROUGH FULLY.”

- John Wooden

Getting Started

You've probably heard about good intentions and how they ultimately don't help you move in a purposeful direction. While it's important to be intentional, the follow through—when, where, and how you take action—makes the difference between something intended and something accomplished. Plans are important, but it's just as important to be able to break down plans into smaller, doable action steps.

If you've ever built a deck or renovated a kitchen, then you know planning is crucial to success. The same is true if you've ever managed a large project at work, planned a large-scale event, or launched a new initiative. But in any of these situations, that requires more than the big-picture plan. You have to connect the big-picture goal with detailed steps to get there. Knowing how and where to focus your time, energy, and resources makes a huge difference in the success of your final results.

So you know you need follow-through to make a vision come alive—but what does that look like as you pursue your divine purpose? Figuring that out can seem frustrating and unclear. Your purpose may seem big and far-reaching and yet a long distance away from the realities of your daily life. You may be in a season of life that doesn't seem conducive to what's required to pursue your purpose. Or your resources may seem too limited for you to follow the path you believe God wants you to follow.

However, while you may face these challenge, but the keys to pursuing your purpose are ultimately faithfulness and perseverance. In more than one of the parables Jesus told, he emphasized the importance of faithful stewardship, of making the most of what God entrusts to us. We're called to invest what we're given in order to make the most of it—not play it safe and keep status quo.

Jesus said, “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much” (Luke 16:10). In other words, don’t assume that in order to live out your purpose you need more time, money, or resources. Instead, consider how you’re presently using what you have. You’re called to do what you can to fulfill your purpose regardless of where you are in your life right now. Certain things you can change or adapt, and others you will have to trust God to change or provide. In the meantime, you continue to trust him and to persevere, faithfully stewarding what you have and waiting patiently for opportunities to maximize your impact.

No matter how well you plan, without following God’s power and guidance, you won’t be able to live out your purpose. But without a plan, you’re not being a good steward, no matter how passionate you may be about your faith and your mission. Putting your purpose in action requires both planning and doing, aligning what you believe with the choices you make and the steps you take each day.

Checking In

Go around the group and check in by answering one or both of the following questions:

- Do you generally like to plan out the details of a trip or project? Or do you tend to improvise more and fly by the seat of your pants? What are the advantages and limitations of each approach?

- When you think about putting your purpose into action, what thoughts and feelings rise up within you? Excitement? Uncertainty? Fear? Something else?

Exploring the Big Idea

You are a creature of habit—all humans are to a large extent. The odds are high that what you do today reflects much of what you did yesterday and predicts what you will do tomorrow. So much of what we do each day relies on the habits we've formed. A study at Duke University found that about 40% of the behaviors people do each day results from habits and not conscious decisions.⁴

Those repetitive tasks form a kind of default autopilot that frees up our brains to deal with other matters. This is why you may not remember brushing and flossing this morning or the route you took to work because you did them just like you do them every day. Maybe you stop at the same coffee shop most days because it's convenient and you like how they prepare your favorite beverage. You get the idea.

At some point, though, you made choices about practicing those habits and repeated them intentionally until you didn't have to think about them anymore. The Greek philosopher Aristotle observed that “we are our actions,” which certainly includes what we repeatedly do. Chances are that you probably have **many habits in your life that work well for you**, such

⁴ “Habits: A Repeat Performance” by David T. Neal, Wendy Wood, and Jeffrey M. Quinn, accessed December 5, 2024 at <http://dornsife.usc.edu/wendywood/research/documents/Neal.Wood.Quinn.2006.pdf>

as those related to daily hygiene and grooming, how you get to work, what you have to drink most mornings. You might be in the habit of eating certain foods, for better or for worse, and exercising regularly.

On the other hand, you probably have some habits that are unhealthy and destructive, such as eating that pint of ice cream before bedtime, surfing social media every spare moment of the day, or binge-watching shows you aren't that into. You may have other habits that are more addictive in nature—and more destructive. These might involve gambling more than you can afford to lose, looking at porn, or using alcohol and other substances to help you relax and escape from stress. You may have already recognized the problems these habits are causing or they may continue to be a shameful secret.

Simply put, **habits are automatic behaviors you perform without your brain actively participating in the decision making process.** Most experts believe that we establish habits through a three-step process of cue, response, and reward. The cue simply triggers your brain to go on autopilot by following the established pattern. The cue phase may include a craving as well, a physical, mental, and/or emotional need that the cue trips and that you want to satisfy.

The response follows based on the past behaviors that provided a certain reward, usually including a hit of neurochemicals such as dopamine that makes you feel good. This explains why your brain views this loop as worth storing and repeating in the future. Then when a particular cue occurs, you know something that will make you feel better if you do it—because you've done it before and had it provide some kind of pleasurable reinforcement. Thus, a habit is born that gets reinforced each time you follow this loop.

Habits shape much of how you live your life. So if you're going to put your purpose into action, then you will need to reconsider what you do and why you do it. One of the best ways to gain perspective on which habits are working for you and which are hurting you is to audit your time. Paying attention and recording where your time actually goes each day can help you break time-wasting and destructive habits as well as to establish new productive, healthy habits that align with who you are and what you want to do with your time.

- What are some examples of habits you perform most days? Which ones are constructive and healthy? And which are wasting time and having a negative impact?

- Which habits in your life would you classify as addictions? How did these originally form? What payoff do they provide for you?

Considering the Word

Follow along as your group leader or another group member reads aloud the following passage:

“²⁴Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

Matthew 7:24-27

- How do the habits you form and rely on each day contribute to the foundation of your life? Are your habits providing stability, security, and positive reinforcement of the way you want to live?
- Which habits in your life are hurting the foundation upon which your life is built? Which ones are distracting you from your priorities as well as pulling you away from God and his plan for your life?

- When have you had to change a habit because it wasn't helping you withstand the storms of life? How did you change it?

Discussing the Truth

Like many of us, you may want to put God first in your life and live out your divine purpose as intentionally as possible. But the way you spend your time, money, and attention may not line up with your good intentions. Jesus told a parable about a wildly successful man who focused on acquiring material wealth rather than a spiritual legacy. This man accumulated so much stuff that he decided to tear down his barns to build bigger ones to accommodate all his riches.

But his efforts resulted in losing sight of what was most important—his relationship with God and what God had created him to do: “God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:20–21). We must ask ourselves the question Jesus posed, “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Mark 8:36).

Jesus told another parable that reflects a different perspective on what matters most. In this story a man found treasure in a field and therefore sold everything he had to buy that field: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field” (Matthew 13:44). Learning to focus on your divine purpose will require aligning how you live and use your resources with what God has created you to do.

When you focus on eternal treasure, then you grow closer to God and shine his goodness, mercy, peace, love, and joy into the lives of those around you. You invest in an eternal legacy that will never perish. You serve others in ways that reveal who God is and illuminate the world's darkness with the light of Christ's love.

Investing in an eternal legacy means investing in people. When you consider how Jesus lived during his time on earth and what he valued most, it's clearly on the people around him. Certainly not every relationship you have should be maintained at the same level. You must give priority to the ones that are integral to who God has called you to be and where he has placed you to live out your purpose. You're called to invest in relationships that nourish, enhance, equip, and sustain your authentic self in pursuit of your purpose.

So how do you maintain alignment between what you know is true—who you are and what you're called to do—and how you live your life? One of the most powerful tools is a weekly inventory, an audit of how you spend your time and other resources. Perhaps you've done this kind of inventory before, but you might be surprised how revealing they can be in light of your divine purpose. While there are various ways to conduct your inventory, keeping it simple often works best. Looking back over the past week, use the following questions and categories to help you assess how your time and habits align with your identity and purpose.

- What patterns or theme do I see in the past week as a whole? How would I assess the various habits that are part of the past week?

- Which activities are affecting me positively? And which are affecting me negatively?
- How can I change or redirect those activities that are taking too much energy, time, and focus away from my purpose-fueled priorities?

Now dig a little deeper into the past week and consider the above questions for each of the following twelve categories of your life. Some may be more relevant than others but try to be as objective as possible in reflecting on what's working and what's not working in each of these areas of life.

Faith

Social/friendships

Marriage

Attitude

Family

Finances

Work/job

Creativity/play

Online/social media

Physical

Ministry/service

Travel

Your categories may be different, but you get the idea. Some areas usually tend to dominate the others and put our lives out of balance. We all have time wasters that can be eliminated, including work meetings that really don't require your presence or online surfing before bedtime. Making more intentional decisions for the coming weeks can be empowering and help you know you're focusing on what you consider most important—the treasure of your eternal legacy.

Wrap-up Activity

Close this session by going around the group and sharing your answers to the following questions:

- What feelings are stirring inside as you consider what you've learned about the way you're spending your time, energy, and resources?

- What's one habit you know you would like to change or eliminate from your life? What's one productive habit you would like to add?

Closing in Prayer

Go around the group and share one personal request related to what you want to change in your habits and lifestyle in order to live out your divine purpose more effectively. Share any other updates or requests you have and then pray together, both silently as well as aloud as God's Spirit leads you. Give thanks for each man and the ways they have shared themselves and their stories with the group. Pray that God would allow you to continue to support and encourage one another as you make changes in your life to align with who you are and what you have been created to do.

Reflection Exercise

With only one more group session remaining, it's natural to be thinking about what you're learning and experiencing from this group study, what you will take with you, and how you can continue to stay connected with the men in your group and others. You have gotten a good taste of how it feels to be known and accepted by others you trust and to know and accept them authentically as well. Transitioning from a rewarding relational experience can often be tricky. Rather than face feelings of sadness and missing others, you may be tempted to default back into old habits that isolate your heart, suppress your relational needs, and result in unhealthy coping methods.

To help with your transition, spend a few minutes in prayer and ask God to meet you where you are and help you identify and acknowledge whatever you may be feeling right now. Use the questions and exercises below to help you think through how you want to show up in your last group session. Don't forget to write down your responses and anything you might want to share with the group in your final meeting.

- What has disappointed you during the past eight sessions with your group? How can you address or remedy this disappointment in your next session?
- How do you suppose the other men in your group would describe you at this point? How would they say you have changed since the group started?
-

- What has meant the most to you or been especially impactful over the course of your group sessions? How can you celebrate and honor this in the final session?

Reflecting on your relationships with the others in your group, who are the men you want to continue to pursue for ongoing connection and friendship? Choose one of them and set up a video call to share how you're feeling about the group coming to a close. Discuss ways you can realistically stay in touch and the best methods for sustaining your connection and building a stronger friendship.

Group member I will contact:

Day/time when we will have a video call:

**“IF YOU WANT TO GO
QUICKLY, GO ALONE. IF
YOU WANT TO GO FAR,
GO TOGETHER.”**

- African Proverb

Getting Started

Sometimes you may not realize how far you've come.

If you've hiked much, then you know it's not always easy to accurately assess where you are and how much ground you've covered. Depending on the weather and terrain, you might not be close to reaching your campsite or turnaround point on schedule. Or you might be flying along and reaching your milestones sooner than expected.

Your progress also depends on how you navigated any unexpected obstacles or time-consuming detours. When hiking, you often have to backtrack and take another trail instead of the one you planned. Or you might need to replenish your water supply, only to discover your source has dried up, requiring you to revise your route. Regardless of the conditions or setbacks, you do what is necessary to keep going, moving forward toward your destination.

As you complete Session 9, you have similarly covered a lot of ground. You now have a new perspective on past pains and current passions and have discovered connections between them and what God has created you to do in this life. But what's next? Which direction should you take in order to live out your purpose with greater impact? Where is God leading you now? You must now consider these questions as you embark on the next steps beyond your time in this group.

Before you take your next steps and chart new goals, however, it's important to celebrate how far you've come and all you've learned with your other brothers. Whether or not you plan to continue supporting one another in prayer and in friendship, you have the opportunity to bless one another on your journeys. Blessing the other men in your group and receiving their blessings on you carries great power and honors all that God is doing in each of your lives.

True blessing is more than just saying a few nice words or telling someone what you see in them. Sacred blessing acknowledges the past and anticipates the future while celebrating and honoring the recipient in the present. Blessing another reflects the life and holiness of the journey you're on together.

One of the best examples of blessing can be found in the words Jesus used to describe the master's pleasure in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). After returning home and discovering that two of his servants had stewarded his resources so well that they profited an increase, the master tells them, "Well done, my good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23 NLT). This blessing echoes the words Jesus himself had heard immediately after his baptism by John the Baptist: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17 ESV).

When you bless others, you celebrate how God is working in their lives and how their lives are making this world a better, brighter place. Blessing is not just about telling someone they've done a good job — it's also about affirming that they're becoming a better steward of the gifts God has given them. Blessing your other brothers in this group allows you to acknowledge the impact you are having on one another's lives in ways that will continue for eternity.

Checking In

Go around the group and check in by answering one or both of the following questions:

- How would you define or describe the meaning of blessing based on what you've observed and experienced of it in your life?

- What's one blessing you have received by participating in this group with these particular men?

Exploring the Big Idea

You might recall from your childhood the way your parents measured your growth. They might have taken your picture as you stood in the same place at the beginning of each school year or made a pencil mark on a chart or closet doorway to show your increased height from time to time. Perhaps there were certain activities, like playing on a new sports team or going on a trip, that marked your passage from one stage to another, more mature one. Whatever the case, the purpose was to record and celebrate your continued growth.

Keeping track of your spiritual growth is just as worth recognizing and celebrating. Completing this small group study presents a natural opportunity to assess where you started from compared to where you are now. This recognition and commemoration is not merely a psychological boost or self-help suggestion—it's a biblical tradition.

In the Old Testament, when someone experienced a great act of God, they often built an Ebenezer. Typically, **an Ebenezer** was a grouping of stones, often stacked similar to a cairn, that **signaled to those who passed by that they were on holy ground**. Translated from the Hebrew as “stone of help,” an Ebenezer signifies that **something happened there worth remembering**, that this site serves as **both monument and memorial**.

One of the best known examples of creating an Ebenezer found in Scripture occurs when Samuel defeated the Philistines (1 Samuel 7:10-17, see below). In addition to commemorating

the victory God provided where it happened, between Mizpah and Shen, Samuel also built an altar to God in Ramah, where the prophet made his home. These stones provided a tangible reminder of God's presence and power in the lives of Samuel and the people of Israel. When facing struggles or doubts, they could then see the Ebenezer and remember all that God had done for them.

As you continue creating a new story and living out your divine purpose, an Ebenezer can do the same for you. It can be both an anchor to what God has already done for you as well as a lighthouse signaling you forward. There's nothing magical or idolatrous about an Ebenezer—in fact, just the opposite. Like a cross you wear or a Bible verse hung on your wall, it's simply a symbol of God's presence in your life, a reminder of all he's done and will continue to do.

As you celebrate with your brothers becoming more of who God made you to be and knowing what he's created you to do, **an Ebenezer can provide a sacred souvenir of your group time and your new awareness of your identity and purpose.** You can decide what kind of rock(s) to use, how large to make it, and where you want to place it so that you will see it often, but begin planning your Ebenezer. Sure, it may seem silly or contrived, but it might also be more meaningful than you expect.

As you continue living out your divine purpose, as you overcome more obstacles and challenges, you may want to add stones to this Ebenezer or decorate it (e.g. with paint or marker) in some way. The point is simply to create a worshipful reminder of significant change taking place in your life. More than before, **you know the man you want to be and what God has called you to do.**

- How was your growth measured when you were growing up? How did you feel about having visual or tangible proof that you were taller and more mature?

- How could creating an Ebenezer help you celebrate where you are now as your group comes to a close? What do you envision for this Ebenezer for yourself?

Considering the Word

Follow along as your group leader reads aloud the following passage:

¹⁰ While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the LORD thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. ¹¹ The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Kar.

¹² Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us."

¹³ So the Philistines were subdued and they stopped invading Israel's territory. Throughout Samuel's lifetime, the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines. ¹⁴ The towns from Ekron to Gath that the Philistines had captured from Israel

were restored to Israel, and Israel delivered the neighboring territory from the hands of the Philistines. And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites.

¹⁵Samuel continued as Israel's leader all the days of his life. ¹⁶From year to year he went on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, judging Israel in all those places. ¹⁷But he always went back to Ramah, where his home was, and there he also held court for Israel. And he built an altar there to the LORD.

1 Samuel 7:10-17

- How does recalling all that God has done in your life motivate you to keep going during hard times? How could an Ebenezer inspire you to persevere?
- What have you overcome with God's help to get to this point where you are now? What victories can you celebrate with your brothers in this group?
- What would be an appropriate Ebenezer for each of the other men in your group? Make suggestions on what you think would help remind them of who they are and what they're called to do.

Discussing the Truth

At this juncture, you know what's true. You are a beloved son of God, a man after God's own heart, eager to grasp more of how he has made you in order to fulfill the unique mission only you can accomplish. Your past pain no longer defines you or controls how you see yourself, others, and God. Your passion, even when mishandled or misdirected, contributes to your fierce desire to be known and to know others. Your purpose has now become clearer and sharper, and you have embraced it in order to serve your King and to enjoy the epic spiritual adventure your life can be when you follow Jesus.

You also know that you're not alone on this journey. You're wired to need relationships—not only connections with family, neighbors, and friends, but also spiritual brothers in Christ, men willing to walk alongside you as you share your lives together. You know that these authentic relationships are not a luxury but an essential part of who you are and what you're called to do. You no longer have to live in fear, shame, and isolation because your brothers in the Spirit now provide other perspectives and remind you of what's true. When you're feeling overwhelmed and weak, they can offer their strength, protection, and prayers.

As your group concludes this study, think about what you want to say to the other men. How do you want to bless them? What can you offer them that's honest, heartfelt, and true to take with them as they continue their journeys? What do you want to make absolutely certain they know about themselves and what you've seen in them and experienced with them?

Take a few minutes and then go around the group and bless each man present. Briefly share your final thoughts about how each man has helped you, with his words and with his presence, during these past weeks. Don't forget to bless

your leaders for their contribution and how they've served you all. Now is not the time to withhold, worry about your words, or pretend to be stoic. Don't try to be sentimental, but do try to be sincere.

- What thoughts and feelings are stirring inside you as this group study ends? Why do you suppose you're feeling this way?

- How are you a better man—more honest, vulnerable, compassionate, courageous—than you were when you began this group? How have the other men helped you be more of the man God created you to be?

- What are some ways you plan to live out your purpose now that you have a clearer idea of who you are and how God has uniquely gifted you? How can the other men support and encourage you beyond the group as you pursue this purpose?

Wrap-up Activity

Close this final session by going around the group and sharing your responses to the following questions:

- Which of the previous sessions had the most powerful impact on you? What did you experience in that session that made such a difference?

- What's one specific goal or intention you're making for remaining connected to authentic community—with these men and with others—moving forward? How would you like the other men to support and encourage you in this endeavor?

Closing in Prayer

Go around the group and share your prayer requests and updates one last time before praying together. Thank God for each man in the group and for the journey you've taken together these past nine sessions. Ask the Spirit to guide and protect each of you moving forward as you pursue living out your God-given purpose. Trust him to keep your hearts connected in pursuit of being all God made you to be.

Reflection Exercise

Now that you've completed all nine sessions, use these final questions and exercises to help you reflect and evaluate your experience and all you've learned. As you will see, you're also encouraged to remain in touch with group members as you continue to support and uphold one another. To help with your time of reflection and assessment, you may also want to review your previous answers by flipping back through the journal or notebook you used for your responses. Begin your time of reflection by stilling your heart before God and lifting up each of the men in your group by name.

- As you reflect on all you've learned and experienced, make a gratitude list of things you especially appreciate. If needed, use these prompts to get you started:

I am thankful for...

When I think about my group, I really appreciate...

Thank you, Lord, for blessing me with...

- How has your relationship with God changed over the course of this group study? What has contributed to this change?

- What will you carry forward from all you received in your group? How can this group experience help you to continue to grow personally and spiritually?

Before more than a week has passed, schedule an upcoming video call with at least two of the other men from your group. Send a text or make a connection with the other men as well. Let them know you're praying for them and share how they can pray for you.