

Welcome to the Crossings Church Living Generously Devotional Book. Please allow me to provide a few suggestions and a bit of information to help you get all you can from your reading and this campaign.

1. This book is written in advance of a special contribution that will be collected on Sunday, April 19, 2020. This contribution is the Crossings primary means of funding our Columbia, MO, church plant. The first one hundred fifty thousand dollars collected will fund the Columbia team with any remaining funds invested strategically in the Crossings Church Wentzville to facilitate its continued growth and future church planting abilities.
2. This guide is designed to help you evaluate your generosity in light of the teaching and character of Christ. The ultimate goal is a transformation of your heart and character that will result in a transformation of your giving. We sincerely believe that the Crossings Church can reach this goal if each member will commit to asking and allowing God to change their heart. The two greatest benefits of this campaign will be changed hearts and stronger faith.
3. Remember the “three R’s” ... Reading, Writing and Arithmetic! Read each devotional in order, on a daily basis if possible. As you read take notes, writing down your thoughts and answers to the questions at the end of each article. If you will do this it will add to your development as a disciple of Christ and it will add to the final total of the special contribution.
4. Know that the “devotionals” in this book alternate in focus. One day is designed to be a challenging and inspiring look at specific biblical verses, and the following day an inspiring and challenging look at God’s work in the lives of your fellow disciples. One day is more textual, the other more testimonial. Both are important, as they combine the life changing gospel and the gospel of changed lives.
5. Finally, remember that the writers see themselves as ordinary member’s, not outstanding authors. Also keep in mind the books are compiled by volunteers, not paid editors or publishers. In other words, please overlook any typos or grammatical errors that might divert your focus, choosing instead to look at writers and God’s intent. Please do not allow the insignificant to keep you from seeing the significant. Your grace is appreciated!

Thanks again for taking the time to read and reflect. It is our prayer that God will be glorified, his Kingdom expanded, and your heart developed because of your investment.

Because of Christ,



Robert Cox
Senior Minister

PS. If you happen upon this book and are not a member of the Crossings Church, please consider the providence of God and the need at hand.

WEEK ONE: FAT OR SKINNY

- Monday: Fat or Skinny-Giving God Our Best - Juan Black**
- Tuesday: God Gave Me a Family - Summer Black**
- Wednesday: The High Price of Selfish Living - Tim Pruitt**
- Thursday: God Gave Me A New Identity - Devin Durbin**
- Friday: Your Great Mite - Mark Henman**
- Saturday: There's No Such Thing as A Free Ride - Jess Henman**

WEEK TWO: DREAM OR REALITY

- Monday: The Reality of Your Heart - Kerry Cox**
- Tuesday: Pinch, I Must Be Dreaming - Eliza Sidartawan**
- Wednesday: Careful Thought, Examine Yourself - Tom Wade**
- Thursday: From Half Empty to Overflowed - Brian & Leah Williams**
- Friday: What A Man Saw Blind - Ben Mullins**
- Saturday: A Generously Different Life - Mitch & Melissa Heady**

WEEK THREE: RICH OR POOR

- Monday: Jesus: Became Poor for Us, Become Poor For Him - Craig Davis**
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WEEK FOUR: SECURE OR SUSCEPTIBLE

- Monday:** Christ or Cash: Do I Trust Him? - RJ Catizon
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WEEK FIVE: BLESSED OR BARREN

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- Wednesday:** Sow What? - Fran Adair
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- Friday:** Get the Scoop - Laura Atkins
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WEEK SIX: HOPE & A FUTURE

- Monday:** Then & Now & Later - Janice Wade & Jess Williams
- Tuesday:** Faith & Deeds - Brett & Ashlin Maessen
- Wednesday:** Leaders & Followers - Macky Shedd & D'mitri Lewis
- Thursday:** Starting & Finishing - Norita Cox & Giang Mullins
- Friday:** A Bitter Sweet Separation - Kerry Cox & Ben Mullins
- Saturday:** Old Dreams & Young Visions (Joel 2:28) - Robert Cox

Week 1, Day 1

FAT OR SKINNY - GIVING GOD OUR BEST



Juan Black

*A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the Lord's table may be despised. When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the Lord of hosts. And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the Lord of hosts. Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised. But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the Lord of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the Lord. Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations." **Malachi 1:6-14 ESV***

Why is it so difficult to give our "first fruits," our very best? Is it because we believe it is the only means by which we live? Could it be that we are just proud that we worked so hard to earn and build it that it is scary and painful to simply lay it down on an altar to be burned? Chances are, the answer varies from person to person, but the root issue is likely the same. No doubt this is the exact same dilemma the Israelites faced. They justified to themselves that it was acceptable to offer what Malachi calls blind and polluted animals on the altar as a sufficient offering to God.

You have likely heard that it is "better to give than to receive" and this is true, but it does not tell us what we should give. You may feel compelled to help or give, but chances are, more times than not, we do not give our first and certainly not our best. We often give what is 'left over' or what we can 'afford' not realizing that A) God has greater plans to use what we have more than what we are capable of, and B) What we

have, we were blessed to receive from God in the first place. What we have belongs to God and it's simply on loan.

Once again, the Israelites had become complacent and had forgotten the blessings they continually received from God. Malachi, the Messenger, is sent to reel in the selfish and hardheaded Israelites. He goes to them to make it clear that their sacrifice should be in reverence of God. He reminds them that they would never think of being so disrespectful to earthly rulers and questions why they would behave this way before God.

If we take a closer look at ourselves, we may find that we are not so different from the Israelites. Satan will allow us to pretend that our lame sacrifice is “ok” or “enough” rather than being willing to give what God truly deserves. We, too, are tempted to deem our sickly, spotted, scrawny sheep as worthy to go on the altar as if God would not notice their abnormalities. God asks for our best – period – and anything else is sub-par.

As we prepare over the next few weeks for what will be a time of growth, sacrifice, and giving, it is my prayer that the members at The Crossings will see what is at stake (no pun intended). Yes, there are some financial goals that we aspire to accomplish, but it goes much beyond that. It is my prayer that our hearts are met with gratitude and thanksgiving that causes us to evaluate the condition of our sacrifice. Not only in this campaign, but in our walk with God all around.

The Israelite's sacrifice diminished over time. They gave less and less, to the point that God was so angry he had to send Malachi to correct what the book of Malachi calls their "despicable" offering. I pray that our Church never displeases the Lord in this way. Our lives have been blessed beyond measure. There are many stories of redemption and grace within our church body. We must never forget that God not only demands but deserves our very best.

Most will remember the months that led up to the church plant close to sixteen years ago. Some will remember the time spent to develop spiritually, the hours spent remodeling a place to meet, and the dollars that were spent so that the Church could be effective and to make long lasting impact in the lives of others. God is waiting and willing to bless the future of The Crossings and the churches we plant. He will do this when we examine our offerings and chose to give the best.

Q. Do you believe that God is pleased with your sacrifice?

Q. In what areas of your life do you need to give to God better than what you have been?

Week 1, Day 2

GOD GAVE ME A FAMILY



Summer Black

I would not be able to write this story if it were not for the generous grace of God and a group of followers who chose to live and give generously." Growing up, I didn't know my family was broken. I was unaware of the deep loneliness each of us carried. I thought all families lived like we did. Divorce was normal. Marriage was not. Drug use and dangerous relationships were a daily occurrence. Feeling safe and secure was something elusive I only saw in the movies. Deep down, I knew there was something missing. As I grew into my teens I started thinking about God and wanting something more than what I had. I hoped He was real and that there was a really good explanation for why all these things happened. But internally I came to a pretty concrete conclusion that the abandonment, abuse and loneliness was evidence that I didn't deserve a different life. It was me. I was inherently broken.

God gives the lonely a home. He leads prisoners out with joy, but those who turn against God will I live in a dry land. Psalms 68:6 NCV

It was at this time in my life that God used another person to connect that lonely girl with a home. I got connected with His people, His word, and His plans for my life. It was the beginning of a journey that I am still on 20 years later. I have learned that God is good even when life is not. I learned that when people live apart from what God intended for their lives other people also suffer the consequences. I was suffering the consequences of my parent's choices, just like they suffered the consequences of their parents. I deeply desired to finally break the cycle.

It was in the youth group that I met my husband Juan. If you don't know his story...it is very similar to mine. Filled with addiction and abandonment at every turn. God gave us the desire to break the cycle and ironically, he chose to put two broken people together to do so. This sounds like a recipe for disaster, right? Well, if I'm honest, it hasn't been easy. But when you surrender to Christ's way of doing things...it doesn't matter how broken you are. He will bring healing and beauty. Not just because He loves us and wants to give us a good life. But because He wants His glory to be shown through our changed life! He heals and blesses us so that we can bless others! He put people in our life who gave to us generously! Over the last 15 years of our marriage people have given of themselves generously. Sometimes that meant dropping off a bag of groceries when money was tight, and we weren't sure how we would make it. Other times it meant showing up at our house to help us work through struggles in our marriage and give us guidance and wisdom. When we first got married and only had one car, someone picked me up and took me to work every day for a year! When I needed help getting a loan for beauty school, someone cosigned on a loan for me to be able to go. Over the years as we experienced the heartbreak of infertility, Gods people were there. When we finally got that first positive test, we had been longing for years to see they were there to celebrate with us! Shortly after, as we lost our baby they cried with us, prayed with us, and brought meals. Over the years to come as we saw the loss of three more babies the generosity and support continued. When we adopted our son Jaden, it was a long and at times scary process and we never had to walk it alone. When Jaden was born, the nurses were amazed

at the amount of people who showed up to celebrate him. And after God blessed us with a full-term pregnancy years later with our daughter Elli the same support was shown for her!

God's people didn't just love us, they have given generously to our family over the years. From the beginning of my walk with God 20 years ago...investing in my mom, my little sister, and my dad! Whether it was right away, 7 years later, or 17 years later, God and His people didn't give up on them. Getting to watch the healing in their lives and watch them give generously has been one of my greatest joys! My sister is a faithful follower, with her own little family now, and a beautiful story of Gods redemption in their lives. Her and her husband Mike serve in our campus ministry. About 5 years ago I got to watch a long-answered prayer of 17 years as my dad gave his life to Christ. My parents are now faithful servants at our Collinsville church. They give generously wherever there is need. It's so cool to see more of my family being served, loved and given to in Illinois. Because of the generosity of others, my nieces and nephews get to come to church, camps, and Cross-Chats. Youth leaders are investing in them and sitting down to show them the scriptures and how God wants to use them to do great things. With Gods power and grace along with the generosity of His people I know many more lives will be saved. He will break the cycles in the families of many people. This is just a glimpse of the ways God and His people have been generous in my life over the years. As we call our members to generosity and dream for our next church plant, I encourage you to think of how God has rescued you, given you hope, and the ways he has blessed you.

"I will bring burnt offerings to your house; I will offer you what I promised. I will give you what I said I would when I was in trouble... Come and listen, all who honor God, and I will tell you what he has done for me. I cried to him for help; I praised him with songs. If I had ignored my sins, the Lord would not have listened to me. But God has indeed heard me; he has listened to my prayer. I praise God, because he did not reject my prayer or keep back his constant love from' me." Psalms 66:13-20 GNB

Q. How has God and His people been generous?

Q. What will you give God in return?

THE HIGH PRICE OF SELFISH LIVING



Tim Pruitt

*Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man." 2Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. 3In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. 4And Abel also brought an offering-fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, 5but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So, Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. 6Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 7If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." 8Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. 9Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" 10The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. **Genesis 4:1-10** (NIV)*

Have you ever bought something that wasn't worth it? You were so excited about it until it you realized it was useless. We see something and we do everything we can to get it. It doesn't matter who or what we run over to get it. In the end we often feel empty and alone. Living your life only looking out for yourself destroys what really matters.

When you live selfishly

YOU LOSE AMAZING RELATIONSHIPS

Cain lost every relationship he ever had. I cannot imagine losing everyone. That had to be horrible. He probably destroyed them well before he had to leave. Selfish people aren't usually defined by one event but a lifetime of selfish events. Selfishness also destroys future relationships long before they even begin. We can look at Cain and say we would never do that what he did but we continually take from others and never give back. If you live like this, you will never have amazing relationships.

YOU LOSE CLOSENESS WITH GOD

Cain loses again but this didn't happen after one event. He had been giving God less than he could for a while. In verse 5 it says that God found favor with Abel AND his sacrifice but did not with Cain AND his offering. It wasn't just some leftover scraps of barley God wasn't pleased with. It was Cain character and heart too. God was still trying to give him a chance, but his heart was too selfish, proud, and hard. He walked away from God because of his selfishness. He destroyed his closeness with the one who could make him whole.

YOU LOSE YOUR PEACE OF MIND

When you live selfishly you are never satisfied. You are never happy. You are never content, and you never will be. You will always want more. Cain was good at what he did; Cain had good crops. The problem with Cain is that he wanted to keep it all for himself. He literally gave his crop scraps to God. He was always looking out for what he could get or save and didn't care about God or anyone.

We often do the same thing. We have a nice house, awesome cars, we are well-dressed, have fancy phones, big screen TVs, kitchens full of food, and take glamorous vacations. But we all want more. We want the next best thing. We hold on to our stuff for dear life. We hold onto it thinking it's going to give us life. It doesn't. It gives us false security in a false God.

No one wants to be Cain. We all want to be Abel, but the truth is we struggle with being like Cain. We all have extremely selfish tendencies. So how do we get back what we have lost through our selfishness?

LIFT OTHERS ABOVE YOURSELF

Think of what others needs even if you must sacrifice all you want for them to have it. Always put their needs before your own. But wait "what about me?" Hopefully someone else thinks of you. You just find a way to lift up others. Dream for what you can do for others. Then do it. This is incredibly satisfying.

GIVE GOD YOUR BEST ALL THE TIME

We must quit finding our scraps and handing them to God. We think that because we give a little money to the church or time, we have met our quota; GOD doesn't think so. Look at what God says in 2 Samuel 24:24, "But the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the

Lord my God that cost me nothing." God wants your best. God wants your sacrifice to cost you something. Be proud of what you give to him.

LET GOD CONTROL HIS STUFF, NOT YOU

All the stuff you have, it's not yours. Any good gift you have was given to you by the grace of God. Let god use it how he sees fit. Let God use your house, cars, land, and your stuff. I've seen God do great things through ordinary people who choose to live unselfishly. Selfish living does have a high cost. You may not know it until it's too late.

Q. What have I lost due to my selfishness?

Q. What do I own that I value the most?

Q. Would I give it up for the benefit of others?

Q. What are you sacrificing for God this week?

Week 1, Day 4

GOD GAVE ME A NEW IDENTIFY



Devin Durbin

From a young age we are taught to fit into certain molds. Expectations are placed upon us, however intentional or unintentional. Sometimes, these expectations originate from within and are self-inflicted. They're born from an image of self that has been fractured and distorted by this broken world that we live in. Growing up we have expectations, sometimes they are built from the good examples that we had. A parent who overcame an addiction, abuse, or some other trial in their lives. While most of our expectations are infected by the bad decisions, mistakes, and negligence of someone that was/ is important to us.

I grew up a child of divorce like many people my age that were raised up in the 90's. While my parents did the best they could to raise me, internal and external forces affected me. My self-image of was damaged. Which is sad when you think about what God says about us in Genesis.

"Let us make man in our image and likeness..." **Genesis 1:26 NLT**

And what is said about us in **Luke 12:7 NLT** "Yes, God even knows how many hairs you have on your head. Don't be afraid. You are worth much more than many sparrows."

There are many more places in the bible that God tells us explicitly that we are important. That we are **CHOSEN** (1 Peter 2:9). Nothing should stand in the way that we view ourselves, because God made us from nothing and breathed life into us. So why did that come crumbling down? At the start, it's because of the examples that we had, and in my life I had a lot of bad guidance and example, while well intentioned at times led to the outlook that I have had to fight for the better part of the last 22 years.

A Broken Identity

The issues of my parents' divorce didn't initiate my problems, it only compounded an already existing problem. The world as we know is flawed. My parents being young, and not having a strong Christian community, had issues of relating. This would form the foundation leading towards a broken marriage, that would ultimately lead to me having problems with relating to others. My father, doing the best that he could, worked hard, provided, and tried to give me the best life he knew how. He ended up dating a woman who would cause a lot of hardship on me.

While at home I was having trouble behaving, I would be mocked and made fun of for getting in trouble at school, struggling to make friends, wetting the bed, and just being what many people would have considered weird - I was ostracized and made fun of at school for a lot of the same reasons. At home I wasn't getting the attention that I needed or being taught how to be a man or to have relationship with people. I tried telling my dad my problems, but not being able to portray them well, I was taken to counseling and kind of written off. The only person that he seemed to care about was his second wife.

This, as I've come to realize, set the stage for a lot of my issues of identity. Quickly and with the changing of the times and the internet I began struggling with my gender identity. I thought that maybe if I had been born a girl I would have gotten the love from my dad I so desperately needed, and so often our struggles and the desires of our hearts become twisted by a relationship that if it was handled in a Godly way would have been healthy.

My biggest regret from dealing with this was that I internalized and never once mentioned this to my family. Because as my path had shown - no one was going to help me and that I was on my own. This led to years of pornography addiction (as living on the internet and trying to discover why I wanted to be a girl led to many dark corners of the internet). In college it led to me drinking, smoking weed, and contemplating suicide. All because "my heart" thought the way to being free was to stop being me, and to become someone else entirely. Someone who was loveable, someone who could make everyone happy, so I could be exactly what I thought my dad wanted.

The bible talks about this in **Jeremiah 17:9** (ESV) "*The Heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*"

An Identity Restored

I carried the weight of all that with me until I came to the Crossings. I knew of God and had been raised in a Baptist church. What I had heard is that God hated people like me, at least the God that people seemed to act out for. So, I left that behind because I couldn't reconcile God with the image I had of myself. I was a sinner. I was the sinner, and nothing about this person that I was could be reconciled with that God.

My future wife and her ex came to the Crossings before me, and over time she would tell me about this Church, and I could tell that she was different. I could tell that everyone there was different. I came to visit a few times and people started loving me for who I was and asking about who I wanted to be. I, of course, didn't tell a lot of people what I was struggling with, but over time and after many times of blowing her off I eventually came to school at Lindenwood where I began studying the bible.

THIS was who God really was, people didn't make fun of me for not knowing how to do something. People showed me how to be strong, how to have proper relationships. I saw grown men cry about the issues that were going on in their lives. I saw men playing with their kids, making sacrifices to build relationships that were deeper. I saw people not afraid of admitting they were wrong - explaining to people why things are the way that they are instead of just saying "Because I say so"

I had been afraid of starting a family, even though I had always wanted to, but struggling the way that I did I didn't think it was possible. Porn had so rattled my mind and my heart, my desires to be someone that I wasn't, broke me. But with patience and guidance, people showed me his word. Through their generosity and their giving I was shown the truth. I finally could look in a mirror and see Devin as a man.

Continued Restoration

We have plans for ourselves - but those plans don't always pan out. To be honest, it's a good thing. God's plan of restoration and His way are so much better than anything that we could have come up with for ourselves. I was on a path of destruction - a path that would have led to deep depression - abuse physical, mental, sexual you name it. I still have to fight my addiction to pornography, cross-dressing, and fight my tendency to shut down and not feel my emotions, or to connect with people. It's easier now though, because of the people that I have surrounded myself with, who have challenged me to be better.

I'm married now, serving in our media ministry and Game Plan ministry here at the Crossings Church Collinsville, that was graciously given to us by donors. People have given their time, their money, and their hearts to make this vision of reaching people in Collinsville a reality. If people hadn't taken the time to do the same for Wentzville - I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have healthy relationships, I wouldn't still be here, and I am so grateful to God and his provision and his timing that has rescued me.

There's a song by Andrew Peterson a singer/songwriter that I know many of you have heard about if you've been around Robert or Kerry for any amount of time. It's called Family Man and I think it sums up a lot of what I said in this.

"I am a family man / I traded in my mustang for a minivan. / This is not what I was headed for when I began. / This was not my plan. / I am a family man. / But everything I had to lose / Came back a thousand times in you / And you fill me up with love / Fill me up with love / And you help me stand / Cause I am a family man." And in the outro of the song he says *"This is not what I was headed for when I began / this was not my plan. It's so much better than."*

And it really is so much better than.

Week 1, Day 5

YOUR GREAT MITE



Mark Henman

*Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on." **Mark 12:41-44***

This passage has challenged me for a long time. All my life, since I was old enough to sit up on my own in a church pew, I've given money to the Church. My parents drilled that into me as far back as I can remember. Even as a kid, I put money in the collection plate every Sunday. My parents gave me the money to put in there and I dutifully dropped it in.

As I got older and got a job, I kept on putting in money every week. Now it was my money, not my parents' and even though I tried to be generous with my giving, I can't say I ever gave like this poor widow. I always gave what was left over and kept back what I thought I needed.

The excuses abounded when I read passages like this one that implied (but not commanded) that I give all. Shouldn't I be able to enjoy the money that I worked so hard to earn? After all, the money I had was a blessing from God. Besides, I tithed regularly, wasn't that enough?

It's also easy to distance myself from this widow for I have a great deal not-in-common with her. I'm not a woman. I'm not (very) old. I'm not widowed. I'm not Jewish, and I am not down to my last two pennies. She and I don't really relate to each other. So maybe this passage didn't really apply to me. Right?

Maybe what strikes me the most in this passage is what I expect Jesus to do for the woman, He doesn't (or at least if He did, it wasn't recorded). The "fair" side of me wants Jesus to perform a miracle: to tell her to go home and look in her favorite cookie jar and she'll find enough money to live on for the next year. But He doesn't, He doesn't help her at all. He allows her to give all she had to the house of God, and to go home empty handed. This really cuts to the core of our expectations of God. We'll give to him as long as we see and feel the blessings coming back to us. But to give everything, when we're at the end of our rope, and not expect anything in return is just too much for us sometimes.

Answer these questions honestly at first glance, don't think long just write down the first thing that comes to mind.

Q. Have you ever "given all" in any part of your life? Your time, your relationships, your marriage or your money? When?

Q. When you have given, what have you expected God to do for you in return?

Week 1, Day 6

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A FREE RIDE



Jessica Henman

Then Jesus called for the children and said to the disciples, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children." Luke 18:16

I would not be able to write this story if it were not for the generous Grace of God and a group of followers who chose to live and give generously.

When I was a little kid, my dad worked on a railroad and my mom was a restaurant manager. God was not a part of our lives. My parents came from backgrounds that included addictions, abuse, mental illness and a lot

of hopelessness. My dad struggled to control his anger, and my mom had so much fear and pain in her life that she had a complete nervous breakdown when I was two, that rendered her temporarily paralyzed and unable to speak. At the time, they were the over-achievers in their families because they were employed and not in jail. It's easy to see the path my life was on.

When I was three and my sister was five, an employee at my mom's restaurant named Johanna invited my sister and me to ride the bus to her church. This church had an amazing bus ministry - 4 buses, lots of volunteers riding with the kids, teaching songs, and doing silly things like having singing contests and horn• blowing contests in the church parking lot (it was always a treat to ride Mr. Stingley's bus with the ah-000-ga horn). Johanna never could have guessed the effect that invitation would have. Within weeks, my mom decided to study the Bible and give her life to God. After some violent opposition, my dad broke down and joined her. For the next couple of years, even though my parents became faithful followers, my sister and I rode the Joy Bus. For part of that time my parents were volunteers on the bus. On that bus I learned what joy was, and that adults besides my parents could love me extravagantly. I learned that love for God could include silliness and noise, while I learned about David and Goliath, Creation and other Bible stories. Through the bus ministry I met Mary Jett, who took me home sometimes and fed me grilled cheese sandwiches and showed

me how to pick blackberries in her backyard. About the only thing I remember about the church building was that it had red pews and red carpet, but I can tell you all about bus number 4 and the people who rode it, the songs we sang, where we parked near the giant oak tree, and what I learned there.

Way back in 1978 someone in a church in Xenia, Ohio decided to give to a bus ministry. They paid for gas and insurance and boring things like oil changes. Those gifts changed the lives of a little three-year-old girl and her family. I never knew the terrible life my parents had known in their childhoods. Our family discovered a purpose to life. My parents became foster parents and sheltered 25 children, then I followed in their footsteps and became a foster parent too. I became the first person among my aunts, uncles, cousins and parents to graduate college, then went on to become a missionary to the Soviet Union. My children can't even imagine a family of abuse and addiction, because they are a generation removed from that reality.

These days at the Crossings, you'll find me hanging out with our "bus kids". It might be hugs as they run, or walk down the hall, doing homework at New Heights, or teaching them in class. Or it might be at my house learning to cook an apple pie or riding together to Cross Chat. However it looks today, it started with a ride on a bus.

Q. Who will be able to point back to you as the person who sacrificed so that they could have a different life? Will there be anyone? Why/ Why Not?

THE REALITY OF YOUR HEART



Kerry Cox

*"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. ¹⁵ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm- neither hot nor cold- I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. **Revelation 3:14-18***

One of the craziest things about our current society is how people self-diagnose their ailments! People listen to their friends, the Internet, and self-pronounced experts to decide what is going wrong with their health. The problem with this is, more times than not, our sources nor we have a clue what we are talking about. There are some things that are just better left to the experts.

We all have those people in our lives that point out our weaknesses. There are some people we respect and respond well to, while others we ignore. The difference between these types of people is whether or not we trust their motives and wisdom. In Revelation 3 God's people cannot argue with their diagnosis, they are faced with reality because the message came from THE physician. The report they receive was not the kind of report you want to hear from your doctor, in fact, it is the kind of results that bring you trembling to your knees.

They find that they have a major heart issue. God lets them know he knows them and what they do; his diagnosis cannot be denied. The funny thing is he already knows that they are going to be in denial! He even tells them the excuses they are going to make to convince themselves they are ok ... You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' This is like us going to the doctor and having every symptom for cancer, the doctor runs the test and confirms we have cancer, and our health is in decline yet we look at the doctor and say, "I'm healthy as a horse!" They are spiritually dying! They are spiritually bankrupt yet when God points out their empty accounts and unpaid debts, they argue with him. God looks at them and says, "But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked!" He wants them to know how serious the circumstances are. He doesn't just give them a poor spiritual credit rating; he says they are wretched and pitiful! Who doesn't love to hear those words in connection with their spiritual condition!?!?! He also tells them they are blind and that they cannot even see that they are so broke someone has taken the very clothes off of their backs! God is not playing ... he wants them to the reality of their hearts!

Look at what God offers these people! He wants to give them everything they are lacking but their disease of the heart keeps them from attaining! He says I want to give you gold and not just any gold but pure refined gold. This would cure their poverty. He also wants to clothe them in white garments; there is no need for them to be naked. Finally, God wants to give the salve for their eyes so that they will no longer be blind!

God has so many gifts he wishes to bless us with, but he cannot give us a new heart unless we will change. When someone gets a transplant, they have to sign documentation stating that they will live in such a way to not damage their life-giving gift! God wants you to have a new heart and the amazing life that comes along with it but it requires us to acknowledge where we truly stand, it requires repentance. Look at verse 19, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent." God loves us and want us to be blessed. We must not only repent but must be zealous about our condition. Some of you are on the verge of a spiritual death! Be vigilant in your repentance. Realize that without God we are poor and desolate. Without Jesus you were miserable in the mud and the mire of your old life. Stop living in denial and get real! Have you found your true wealth in God? Have you let him make you rich, clothe you, and heal your blindness?

Q. What is the true condition of your heart?

Q. What do need to do to go from "spiritually poor, naked and blind" to rich in Christ?

Week 2, Day 2

PINCH, I MUST BE DREAMING



Eliza Sidartawan

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. **Acts 2:42-47***

I would not be able to write this story if it were not for the generous Grace of God and a group of followers who choose to live and give generously.

I remember the very first day I entered the church what would soon become a dream fulfilled that I didn't even know I had. I was a very shy 9-year-old and I remember walking into the children's ministry at The Greater Alton Church. All the kids looked so excited and like they really belonged. I was full of fear and didn't even go to class my first several weeks. I felt deep down that I couldn't and wouldn't belong. I knew no one and was awkward in new situations. My awkwardness hasn't really changed ha-ha, but the feeling of belonging has. Not because of something I did, but because of the love in the church sent from God.

Soon, I started making relationships and so did my parents. I learned that the seemingly put together and happy people I saw, didn't really have it all together- but they had God. Which was a relief because I saw that change could happen and it really did. With a lot of hard work, faith, and tears my parents found sobriety, an imperfect but healing marriage, and a real relationship with God. Because of that, eventually so did I. It really did feel like a dream coming true, both at home and church.

Three years later, the church plant was being sent to Wentzville to start The Crossings. My parents decided to take the leap of faith and go. I didn't quite leap like they did. I was comfortable, happy, and in a place I belonged. I didn't want to change. Looking back on it now, I am so grateful we went anyways. It was a huge change, but one that led me to finding my own faith. I got baptized on the last Sunday before the church plant was sent out. Things didn't feel right overnight. I had a bad attitude and was often angry. I'm so grateful my youth leaders and parents didn't give up on me and continued pouring love, grace, and truth into my hard heart. I can often forget about that bitter, lonely pre-teen- but when I remember her, I remember to give that much more grace to those struggling to find their faith and footing. And to be grateful for the results the church plant brought to my life and many others.

Fast forward- I went through high school and was blessed to have RJ and Ashlee as my youth leaders. I got to watch true love and discipleship happen. It wasn't easy and magical all the time- I experienced a lot of grief, betrayal, broken relationships, and more. But I can see how God was working in all of it.

In college, I made so many strong friendships in the campus ministry. Ones that challenged me to be more than the “church kid” and to rediscover my passion for God and people. After working through A LOT, I got asked on a date by a guy who was one of my very best friends. I looked at my past mistakes and relationships and didn’t think I could have all that great of a man in my life. Again, God proved me wrong and a dream came true in marrying my husband, Aldo. We got married and I remember on our honeymoon sending in the paper saying we would love to go on the church plant going out to St. Louis. It was scary and a different feeling as an adult. After being involved for many years in Wentzville’s awesome New Heights Program, we signed up with the intent to start a New Heights Program in the Innerbelt. After saying yes, we found out that we would be doing that, but also being small group leaders. Yikes, we were not prepared for that! Luckily, neither were Jesus’ disciples when he called them, but he took their willing hearts and worked. Just like he did for us.

Nearly 6 years later- Aldo and I are coming up on our 7th anniversary, we have 2 amazing little boys, a small group full of faithful disciple makers, a ministry that’s spreading hope, and so many friends who help us navigate life every day. When I get to work with the kids in our church, I am reminded of that little girl who felt so lost a lot of the time. My dream is that I can give hope back to these kids and people. Life isn’t perfect, I can for sure tell you that, but it’s full and it’s blessed. I wouldn’t know any of it if weren’t for so many people who believed in the dream and supported it spiritually, physically, and financially.

At the Innerbelt, I also get to be the treasurer. I get to see where the money goes. I had no idea what it takes to keep the church running and growing. To see people being so faithful and generous so that money can go to ministries that are healing people, to events that reach the community, to a building that many people get to step into and feel loved and full of hope, and much more. If it weren’t for the generosity of the church, personally I don’t know where I would be, but I know I wouldn’t be living the dream I am and getting to look forward to the dream that is in heaven one day. And I know countless people who our churches have gotten to meet, study with, and disciple who wouldn’t have that hope either. Our generosity is like a ripple effect, big or small it matters and changes the course for many.

I can’t wait to see what God does with the church plant to Columbia. I have all the faith that it’s going to be amazing and so influential. Knowing that I can be a part of that hope with generosity and that you too can contribute to a dream that goes so far beyond yourself, is pretty special. Participating in this cause is really like living out the Acts 2 life.

Q. What dreams has God made come true in your life because of those who sacrificed previously?

Q. What can you do in this campaign to fulfill the dreams and prayers of those who need hope?

GIVE CAREFUL THOUGHT, EXAMINE YOURSELF



Tom Wade

*In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to... the governor of Judah... and... the high priest. This is what the Lord Almighty says, "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built.'... "Is it time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin? Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the Lord. "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home; I blew away. Why?" Declares the Lord Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountain, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands." **Haggai 1:1-11***

Six times in the two chapters and forty verses in the book of Haggai the phrase "give careful thought to your ways," is repeated. Like my father would say to me as a child, "You better watch yourself, boy. You're cruising for a bruising," this got my attention immediately, as I did not want a bruising, and I started examining my attitude and actions right then and there. How much more, then, should we give our attention immediately when the Father of our souls gives such a warning?

God's house, the temple, the place where His presence dwelt, the building to house His glory, was in ruins. God had brought His people back from captivity, from slavery in a foreign country, blessed them with material success, and they had gotten preoccupied with building their own houses. They were using His blessings to build fancy, expensive "paneled houses," for themselves, and neglected His. Because of their misplaced priorities, God had begun to withhold His blessings, and the people were experiencing dissatisfaction (verse 6). This pattern is repeated in the New Testament.

Matthew 6:33, *"but seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well."*

God promises that if we will put Him and His kingdom, the church, first, He will provide all we need. The parable of the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price in Matthew 13 teaches us that God's kingdom is only found when we sacrifice all to have it. God wants our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 10:30).

Why these commands and exhortations? Because we struggle with putting God and His kingdom first, with building our houses first, with making our lives better and fancier, at the expense of God's house.

It is our natural tendency, and like the Jews in Haggai 1, we will forfeit our blessings and experience dissatisfaction with life.

Ask yourself where is God's house, His kingdom, His church is on your list of priorities? Do you plan your budget around your tithe first, or after all the big bills are paid? Do you figure your tithe after all the bills, big or small are paid? Do you not plan at all, and just give whatever is left-over after you pay the bills and keep some walking around money for yourself? Do you plan your tithe off the gross amount you earn or off the net after all withholdings are taken out? That is, federal and state taxes, social security, health insurance premiums, unemployment insurance? All these things are taken from your check for your benefit and you never see the money, yet it is money you earn. Do you tithe the gross? Do you plan for things to make your life more pleasant and fun, making sure you can afford them? Like new cars, when the old one still runs fine? New furniture because the old is a little worn looking but still serviceable? The newest TV, video game, or phone or tablet, because you need it? Eating out because you just feel like it? Planning for your retirement at 55, so you can enjoy life. All these things are not wrong, in and of themselves. God has surely blessed many of us with them, but they become wrong when they are put first before God's house, kingdom, church, and people. The Crossings Church is growing, being blessed by God. The nation of Israel grew, blessed by God, and then were un-blessed, if there is such a word, because they put their house before His. Give careful thought to your ways, and your wallet, so that He will continue to bless and more people are saved and more churches planted, to His glory!

Q. Do you truly give careful thought to your ways?

Q. Do you plan so that you can be generous?

Week 2, Day 4

FROM HALF EMPTY TO OVERFLOWED



Brian & Leah

We would not be able to write this story if it were not for the generous grace of God and a group of followers who chose to live and give generously. My wife, Leah, and I have been married for close to ten years and have 2 incredible children. We feel blessed beyond belief and truly believe if God and his people had not stepped in when they did, we would not have the life or marriage we do. We are both products of divorce, yet had very different experiences that led us to where we are now. I (Brian) grew up in a broken home with a mom who tried her best to provide and give me everything I wanted. My dad walked out on us very early in my life. He has been in and out ever since. I spent most of my childhood pretending I was someone else. I wasn't the most social of kids and kept to myself. When I would branch out, I lived in fear of rejection so "go with the flow" was my attitude. That got me in trouble from time to time, but for the most part, I was a good kid in a decent home. Church was part of my childhood mostly because I think it made my mom feel better. We attended a very large church that we could walk in, walk out. That's how I have spent most of my life walking in and walking out because that is easy. Emotional attachment leads to hurt. When things get rough you walk away. As much as that sounds like the key to happiness I can tell you from experience, it's not. At twenty years old I could count my friends on one hand. Then I met a guy who wouldn't let me walk away. Every excuse I had he had a solution. When I lived too far away, he gave me a place to stay. When I had "other" plans he would say, "What about after?" He came to me and showed me in God's word what a man looked like. That I could have everything the Bible says if I became a man after God's own heart.

I (Leah) grew up in a loving and generous home. My parents divorced when I was five and while that was confusing to me as a child, I can honestly say that my parents did their best to put my sister and me above their differences. As I look back at my childhood there is not much I did without. I had everything I needed and most things I wanted. My parents cared deeply for me, and yet, there was still something missing. I was extremely insecure and longed to fit in and be accepted. Unfortunately, this showed up in some really unhealthy ways. In high school, I was a good student and had a lot of friends, but always felt inadequate. To fit in I got caught up in the party scene and drank quite a bit, which led me to make some really bad choices with men. My friendships were shallow, and performance based. I felt like no one truly knew me and if they did, they wouldn't like me. By the time college rolled around I was doing the same old thing and just hoping to feel different. In my first semester at Lindenwood, I was caught in men's housing with alcohol and was expelled from school. I was able to write a letter of appeal and be reaccepted, but from that moment on I knew things needed to change. I tried my very best to change but was still coming up short. It wasn't until I was invited to go to a strange church in Wentzville that I really saw things begin to change. There I met a girl who loved me in spite of my flaws and invested in me even though it was uncomfortable at times. She, along with others, loved me for who I was, but also saw how much more I could be if I surrendered to God and His will for my life. For the first time, I had deep relationships and began to feel full.

Jesus has a way of bringing out the strongest feelings in the people he encounters. In the Bible, the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John give us many different examples. Responses may vary from person to person but are always definitive. The responses may even be completely opposite. For instance, some want to die for Jesus (Peter), while others wish to kill him (religious leaders). Some worship him while others persecute him. Some wash his feet with tears while others pierce his feet with nails.

When it comes to Jesus, there just seems to be no middle ground. You either love him or hate him. Or, as John the disciple writes in the introduction to his Gospel, people either “did not receive him” (John 1:11) or they “did receive him” (John 1:12). Simply, there are only two options: receive Jesus or reject Jesus.

This is not how either of us lived our lives. We thought we could have a little bit of Jesus and a whole lot of what we wanted. As you can see in our stories, we didn't have bad lives and yet we were both unhappy. We had an unfilled void in our hearts. We have been Christians for twelve (Brian) and thirteen (Leah) years now and it has taken constant sacrifice from those around us to bring us to where we are now. Looking back, neither one of us would have even dreamed that this is where we could be, but because we were invested in and shown what it truly means to live an all-in life we are so blessed. We have the privilege of working with the young adult ministry and are trying daily to make an impact and give back what we have been given, although it's a debt we feel we can never repay.

Q. Have you been trying to live a little bit of Jesus and a lot of you?

Q. In what ways have you been holding back giving it all in?

Q. How can you start to change withholding from God and start investing so that you can live a more fulfilled life?

Week 2, Day 5

WHAT A MAN SAW BLIND



Ben Mullins

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. Proverbs 14:12 ESV

In life we are often led by our desires, intentions, insecurities, priorities and an infinity of other things that shape who we are. A lack of understanding of what shapes us and our decisions can keep us from making the right decisions regardless of how good our intentions are.

Saul was a man of incredible potential. Saul had the education, the respect of his peers, the passion to carry out his mission and now he had the authorization from his leaders to go do the most important thing in the world.

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Acts 9:1-2 ESV

Saul had already stood by in approval of Stephen's murder; he had already drug men and women out of their houses and put them in prison in his mission to destroy the disciples and all that they were doing. He did all of this out of the knowledge and understanding that he had, from the zealotry of doing the work of the Lord. Saul had studied and learned under one of the most respected teachers of the law so how could he be so blind to the truth? How could he not see what was happening right in front of him?

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. • Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So, they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. • And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Acts 9:3-9 ESV

The Lord showed great mercy to Saul by causing him blindness and helping him see that the road he was travelling was leading to death. Saul's eyes would not have been opened if the Lord hadn't knocked him off his horse and redirected him toward the true way, the way that Saul was looking for.

Often, we are leading our life in a direction that seems right. We make decisions at work, home, school, without stopping to look in what direction we are heading. We want what is good and what is righteous, but we are so blinded by our desires and the things we want that we stray away from what is truly valuable.

Saul chose to obey the Lord and was approached by the man that God sent to him. The Lord had a plan for Saul which was completely different than what he could imagine. He would ask him not only

to be part of what he was persecuting but to be one of the major players and probably one of the most influential figures in Christianity.

So, Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; 19 and taking food, he was strengthened. Acts 9:17-19

Saul later became the apostle Paul that we know so much about, and who personally I admire very much. The decision Saul made was a difficult one. He chose to be around the people he had hurt and who shivered at hearing his name. Everything that we read in scripture shows that Paul was one who saw the truth and was ready to reroute his life to God's will. He sacrificed his plans because he wanted God's plans to be fulfilled. He sacrificed the prestige and the position that he had, and in the end, he sacrificed his life for what he knew was really valuable.

When thinking of the dreams and direction we want our lives to take we need to be ready to make corrections and to realize that even though our heading seems right, we want God to make the correction that he needs to. Paul only became who he was because he was willing to see the truth through his blindness. God will ask us to sacrifice the plans that we have made so that His plans are fulfilled.

I don't know about you, but I would rather God's plans work out instead of mine. When I think about the plans I had when I came to the Crossings, to stay here for a couple of years and then go back to Brazil, I am amazed to see how God's plans were much better. To be able to come to the Innerbelt and serve with people I love. To be able to do the work I know God wants from me is a fulfillment of what I believe I've always wanted.

We have an opportunity to show God that we truly want to head in his direction. Don't make God knock you on your rear to get you headed the right way. God is the provider and will surely bless those that are heading toward him. Let's trust God giving what we can in this journey that is our true purpose.

Q. Does your direction reflect what God wants or are you on a personal path that leads to destruction?

Q. What is the vision and the dream in the direction you are going?

Week 2, Day 6

A GENEROUSLY DIFFERENT LIFE



Mitch & Melissa Heady

We would not be able to write this story if it were not for the generous Grace of God and a group of followers who chose to live and give generously.

Mitch:

As a very closed off, angry, and arrogant person I made it difficult for those around me to love me. At a young age my parents were divorced, and I traveled from Iowa to Missouri throughout the year.

My father and mother were Alcoholics, so I grew up with a ton of instability. Most of my life, I felt alone and desperately wanted to find something to make me feel whole.

My mom jumped from relationship to relationship, leaving me in the back seat. I would watch as she gave her heart to man after man, while drowning away her sorrows in alcohol.

When I was nine my stepdad, at the time, introduced me to porn. Through it, I learned to fill the void of loneliness. Porn became a friend that comforted me when I was sad, mad, or empty. My senior year of high school, my mom moved out of our house and left me alone, with nothing. I lived like that for almost a year. I had gotten injured while doing sports and by the end of my senior year, I was super depressed. I began to drown my own sorrows in alcohol, weed, and partying. One week after graduation, my Dad drove from Missouri and made me move with him, for good.

My dad pushed me to go to college, so I applied at Lindenwood University. There I met a group of people that helped to change my life forever. At first, I kept them at a distance and hid so much of myself. I was afraid of them knowing who I really was. I didn't want them to know that under my tough image, I was weak, misguided, and had no idea what I was doing. The thing is, my actions didn't keep any of them from showering me with love. They opened their homes and took time away from their families to spend with me. They taught me what it was to care for people and showed me how to deal with my past. They taught me that I could fill the voids in my life with God, instead of porn & substances.

TC Brown was one of those people that never gave up on me. He dug his feet in the ground and pushed through wall, after wall. He showed me consistency and grace, by doing so, he helped me to find balance and security in God. At first, Danny Langford made me feel uncomfortable, because he wouldn't stop loving me as if I was his own son. He softened my heart every time he gave me a hug or sent me a text to see 'how I was doing'. He showed me the love of a father like I had never experienced. Kerry Cox was another man who was there for me. No matter what, when I need him, he has always shown up.

Melissa:

When I was a year old, my parents got a divorce. At three, my mom was remarried, and my family grew from three kids, to six. I remember feeling lost in the mix of six kids; leaving me feeling that I needed to have something to make me matter. There were so many of us in our home, that it was hard to feel like I fit, or feel secure. It was easy for me to do what I wanted, whenever I wanted, and nobody would ever really notice. Looking back, I think that's why it was so easy for my neighbor to get close with me. Many of my younger memories are vague, but I remember him playing games with me that kids shouldn't play. I remember feeling like something just wasn't right. As a result, I was a young girl crying herself to sleep at night, and nobody noticed. My whole childhood became me just wanting to fit in enough, so that people wouldn't really see how sad and broken I was inside.

I never had real friends, only acquaintances. I tried hard in everything I did whether it was art, school, or sports; I tried to do it all. When I was a sophomore in high school, I was introduced to a group of followers who were dedicated to showing all people God's love. At the time I believed that I was not worthy of love or acceptance and hated who I was. I kept the people around me at a distance, in fear that if they got to really know me, they would never like who I was. I was mean and lashed out at the girls who wanted to help me see God, for who He really was. The day I walked through those church warehouse doors, it was like I was finally seen, really seen... It was so scary for me. I was emotionally unstable, had no confidence in myself, and I was not a good friend. Despite these things, the people at the Crossings loved me through it. They shared everything with me and got to know who I was, in the depths of my heart. Even when I couldn't fully see it, they knew God could make someone so fragile, whole. Ashlee and Katie both volunteered to give me rides to and from Cross Chats. We would together, have sleepovers and they would even pay for my food when I didn't have the money. I experienced this and have seen it repeated on countless occasions; people sharing everything they have with one another, which was something so foreign, but so crucial to me.

Us together:

After many years of life lessons and so many people sacrificing their time and money to love us, God has transformed and blessed our lives in so many ways. We have a chance at a healthy marriage, that doesn't end in divorce. We can avoid that heartache, because we have people who are willing to fight with and for us.

Mitch and I now serve in the adult ministry. He can help guys around him who struggle with feeling lonely, or struggle with porn addictions. I get to use my struggle of insecurity to relate to hurting women around me, and in my small group. Our lives with Christ haven't been perfect. Right before the previous "Living Generously campaign", Mitch and I went through the loss of a baby as result of an ectopic pregnancy. We have gone through job changes, the creation and loss of a business, loss of family members, and moments that have felt so low.

Waves have hit us hard, and Satan has longed to use them to ruin the good things God has and is doing in our lives. But God has always shown us His love through his people and the sacrifices they have made. Those sacrifices leave us knowing we are loved, through the most difficult of times. My heart has felt so low and sad at moments, but in the end, God has blessed our lives tremendously. My natural instinct is to recluse, to feel like, 'it's not fair'. Why should I continue to serve? In the end, I know God doesn't call me to sit and pout when things don't go my way. I don't have to that lonely girl that I was as a child. I get to love my kids, the kids around me, and the people He has placed in my life. God has given us two beautiful boys that we get to teach and cultivate the love of God too. He has given us new jobs, that we don't deserve. He has given us a church community, that truly loves God, and blesses our lives in all sorts of ways. Our deepest desire is to love God and have a great

relationship with Him, to service and sacrifice for Him, even in the hardest of times. We are so grateful for the chance to give back to a God who has given us so much.

Q. Do you identify with Mitch or Mel? Do your hurts push you to pour into others like theirs do?

Q. What ministry do you give sacrificially to at the Crossings?

Week 3, Day 1

POOR JESUS- BECAME POOR FOR US, BECOME POOR FOR HIM



Craig Davis

*⁷You people there are leaders in so many ways - you have so much faith, so many good preachers, so much learning, so much enthusiasm, so much love for us. Now I want you to be leaders also in the spirit of cheerful giving. ⁸ I am not giving you an order; I am not saying you must do it, but others are eager for it. This is one way to prove that your love is real, that it goes beyond mere words. ⁹ You know how full of love and kindness our Lord Jesus was: though he was so very rich, yet to help you he became so very poor, so that by being poor he could make you rich. **2 Corinthians 8:7-9** (TLB)*

One of the things I love about our church is that we are real! Members of The Crossings are taught and consistently challenged to ensure that our lives match what God's word says. I feel proud of the fact that our church really does excel in so many ways; our faith, learning, enthusiasm, and love for each other. It makes me grateful to be a member of this congregation. It's clear that The Crossings is really a place where lives are being changed daily. That said, I wonder if we truly excel in the spirit of cheerful giving.

What does a cheerful giver look like? These verses explain it clearly. A cheerful giver looks like Jesus. Jesus modeled generous giving by setting aside everything he had in heaven to come into the world as a man and suffer unspeakable agony to give us peace with God. It was the greatest gift that ever could be given. Through his gift, we are cleared to receive great spiritual wealth -- i.e. that we can have a relationship with the Creator himself! You see, our Lord sacrificed his heavenly riches to ensure that we could have heavenly riches.

Imagine the tremendous resources that would be available in God's kingdom if every Christian modeled Jesus' generosity!

God calls us to this level of generosity! I for one, don't find it easy to excel in the spirit of cheerful giving. Like so many other areas of my life, I must do what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10:5, and "take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ." Before we started talking about the special contribution, I had many plans ... I had plans for home improvement projects, plans for purchases, and plans for saving. My first reaction to this contribution was not characterized by cheerful giving. However, God has been working on my heart consistently and I have chosen to take my selfish thoughts captive and make them obedient to Christ.

As I look back on what God has blessed me and my family with, I know that God calls me to be a cheerful giver... I know that God calls me to sacrifice. So then I must make a choice, is what God blessed me with worth the sacrifice? I know that beyond a shadow of a doubt, it is!

Now, I challenge you to do the same time. I know that we are not a church full of members with large bank accounts. I realize that most of us will have to make sacrifices in the coming weeks. I understand that giving to this cause, will cost you something. But, will the cost be worth it? I believe it will. I believe that lives will be changed in St. Charles County, in communities along the Innerbelt, in the

metro-east, and now in Columbia. Beyond that, I believe that our hearts and lives will be changed by learning to sacrifice and having a spirit of cheerful giving!

Q. What was your first reaction upon learning about the special contribution and how does it compare to having a spirit of cheerful giving?

Q. How have other's sacrifices benefited you?

Q. What sacrifices might you be called to make over the next few weeks? Commit to pray about them daily.

Week 3, Day 2

OUT OF THE POORHOUSE



Maria Brown

I would not be able to write this story if it were not for the generous grace of God and a group of followers who chose to live and give generously.

Some of my earliest memories are of me clinging close to my parents as we waited in the long, long line for our check at the welfare office in East St. Louis. I learned in some ways early on that money was evil and illusive and came in the form of food stamps and welfare checks. Money (and the lack of it) always seemed to revolve around everything, and happiness along with it. As I grew, I began to realize that I needed to make something of myself or I would end up stuck and sad just like my family. I always thought if I could get enough money and become successful enough, then life would be easier, I wouldn't have as much to worry about... but I felt like that would never happen.

As a school kid I was often ignored or mocked because of my thrift store clothes (when it wasn't cool yet) and the fact that I lived in a trailer. As a teen, I tried to mask my feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth with success in school, the dance team and boys. If I could give the illusion that I had it all together and was desired, then maybe magically it could come true. So, I had learned quite well to cover up my background. The burden of our low financial status, my Dad's development of Schizophrenia and his apathy in my life when I was a teen was wearing me thin. I couldn't wait to bust out and leave home.

The freedom of my first year of college built me up enough before I was torn down again. My Dad's official diagnosis of Schizophrenia added more on my heart of this destiny of a hopeless girl born and bred messed up. My own bad decisions weighed on me as well, including an impure and failed relationship and an inappropriate photo of myself on the internet. I was increasingly embarrassed of my life as I felt increasingly hopeless to be able to find my true purpose and happiness. I felt like I was suffocating.

Then one night I went to this Root beer Kegger in the backyard of a church with mud wrestling to boot! What a strange and amazing place that God and his people used to lure me in. I couldn't deny the love and purpose. It was refreshing and engulfing. That campus event cost money (I surely didn't pay to go!). People invested in that crazy event because they knew it could help change lives, of which I am proof! Because of those generous sacrifices of time and money, I am here. I was reached by many disciples my age and studied the Bible with Ashlee Catizon (Cox at the time). Reaching out to a college student can definitely cost money! And time! I could tell that these students knew they owed it to God to live their lives generously and to sacrifice for a chance to help a lost little girl like me break a hopeless cycle.

"But those who are in need will always be remembered. The hope of those who are hurting will never die." **Psalm 9:18** NIRV

The way so many members of the church, young and old, graciously lived a life of generosity for God touched me to the core. God laid that initial church plant on my heart. I was young in many ways, being

a baby Christian for only two months when the church plant team was announced. I could barely believe that God could use this insecure little girl to do something significant and amazing for him! I did have tremendous hope- hope because of the love and sacrifice of others.

God had shown me there was a need and a dream, not only for my life but for many others who needed His hope. Being a poor college student, I sacrificed money- leaving a state school to attend Lindenwood University cost me many thousands of dollars in loans (which i am still paying those darn things!). But I knew it was all worth it to show other college students that their lives were about so much more!

Then time came for the St. Louis Innerbelt church plant! Honestly, I was in a different spot in life. TC and I bought a house and had two young children. We were in good spots with our jobs. Life was more stable. Shaking things up and sacrificing wasn't appealing. All that surrounds moving is expensive. But, in my comfort I had to think back to how and why I was given this life. How could I try to greedily hold onto it? I knew the days of sacrifice, risk and boldness weren't in the past but needed to continue to be had! It was time to grow more into maturity and help lead the way as an adult.

Through many trials and joys God has shown to me over and over again the importance of living a life fully devoted to God, willing to sacrifice time and money and whatever it takes to give someone a chance to take the hope of The Lord. Now, after helping lead out the Innerbelt church plant and cheering on the Collinsville plant and Columbia to come, I can't wait to help change more lives like TC's and mine have been! I have learned that earthly riches do not compare to being rich in the love of God and storing up treasures in heaven. I am challenged every day to know that the sacrifices should never stop so the blessings in our lives and others' will keep on flowing!

Reflect on how you felt when you were at your lowest points.

Q. What did others sacrifice to give you hope and new life? Be as detailed as you can.

Q. Of those things you listed, what do you sacrifice for others?

Week 3, Day 3

BATTLE OF SPOONS & LADLES



Lauren & Matt Cauley

*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, [b] being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. **Philippians 2:3-8** ESV*

How AWESOME was Jesus' sacrifice! Jesus, who was equal to God, "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Jesus set an amazing example for us in what it looks like to empty ourselves in a sacrificial way. Through the world's eyes, putting others' needs before your own is crazy. We are all taught to look out for our own well-being. We are taught that nobody else is going to help us and if we want something, we have to take it. Doing anything and everything to better "your own" is not just accepted, but it's expected.

Matt and I fell victim to this way of thinking a few years ago when we were serving in the campus ministry. We slowly became comfortable in our walk with God and we stopped looking for ways to serve and love the people around us. Instead, we became people who were constantly looking to be poured into. Instead of looking for ways to give back to the people who had given so much to us, we were holding onto every little thing we could. We had become self-focused with God and God's people, our relationships suffered, and we had a worldly mindset. We showed up but only to get something, not to give. Our main priority was not what it needed to be. Instead of holding a ladle and serving others, we were holding a spoon and feeding our faces. We were unhappy in many ways. I (Lauren) had just had a miscarriage. Instead of crying out and talking to the women around me, I became numb and hard-hearted. I felt like I couldn't help anyone so instead of trying and talking about it, I just became shut off. At the time it felt like what I had to do to survive, but it was really very selfish and didn't help me or anyone else.

As soon as we started being open and asking for help, and giving back to those around us, an opportunity opened up for us to work with the teen ministry. When I (Matt) was a teen the leaders poured time, energy, effort, and money into us. Now I can give the rides, pay for the meals, and show the love I once received. We now can give back and serve the way God calls us. The other leaders challenge us and are great examples of love and sacrifice. Even though it is a constant struggle to be consistent, we know that the reward is much greater than the cost. The teen ministry challenges our weaknesses and has pushed us to get serious about how we sacrifice our time and money. The teens

can't give back to us in a way that can be measured, but the love we receive from them and the lives we help to change is amazing.

Being able to see God at work in our ministry is something we feel very blessed to be around. We get to see people's lives change in a way they never thought possible. We have seen what our lives look like when we were holding a spoon, and it wasn't everything we thought it would be. There is a direct correlation between our lives being blessed and us holding ladles to serve those around us. Striving to battle our weaknesses and love others as Jesus loves is completely satisfying. Our lives are not what we expected, it is so much more, and it is full of God's blessings.

Q. Are you looking to be fed with a spoon or are you looking to serve with a ladle?

Q. What are the ways you could serve the Crossings Church sacrificially (not expecting anything in return)?

Week 3, Day 4

BLESSED TO BLESS



Karen Glavin

I would not be able to write this story if it were not for the Grace of God and the followers who chose to live and give generously. This is so true! I can't even imagine where my kids and I would be without The Crossings Church's love and dedication to all of us by showing me how to walk with Jesus.

The amount of time and commitment from our leaders continuously amazes me. It would be so easy to go to church on Sunday, go home, and live their lives. That is what I did at my other church from the time I was a child even though I have loved God all my life, I never knew what it was like to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. God was able to bring beauty from ashes into my life, and I in turn get to share it twenty-four weeks of the year with others who have had the same struggles I have had through Divorce Care.

I was married young at nineteen, and all I wanted out of life at that time was to be married, have children, and be a stay at home mom. I wanted to be able to love and serve my husband and children the best I knew how. Sometimes life can throw you a curve ball. As our family grew, our responsibilities grew, we had 4 children and a thriving business that was growing at a very fast pace. Dad wasn't home much; he was working hard growing a business for our future. However, as he was doing that, he was also drifting away from the family more and more. He got very mean and life got very hard. Eventually, he did not want to be there anymore, and it got very ugly.

At that time, we had been married for 18 years. I filed for divorce; it was one of the most painful experiences of my life. I remember looking at my children sleeping knowing that tomorrow I was going to change their lives and the lives of their children forever. In Malachi 2:16 God says, "*I hate divorce*".

Divorce is excruciatingly painful. The counselor I was going to at that time told me that divorce was like going through a death over and over again. The sense of loss of your hopes and dreams gone forever. When you are married and united in Christ you become one. How do you tear that apart? In Divorce Care class, we glue 2 pieces of paper together to symbolize that union. I ask the class to tear that apart. You cannot tear it apart completely. You are always together one way or another.

The devastation of divorce affects your friends and families that now feel like they are in the middle. Many of them will leave, another loss, holiday traditions gone. I will never forget that first Christmas without my children. My dad called me up and told me to get their house immediately after the kids left. He was so afraid for me being alone.

What about the financial devastation? We all know that dealing with money issues brings out the worst in us when we are thinking of ourselves verse what God wants for us. Divorce can bring out a loss of security that results in desperation for money and a desire to hold on it tightly.

A friend once told me about Philippians 4:13, "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*" I really held on to those words. I had never heard that verse before; I wanted to know what this meant and what I was missing. Then God lead my son to The Crossings Church. When I came to see that

he was up to, I was amazed at all that was going on in this little church with what seemed like virtually no budget. The investments in others immediately caught my attention and I stayed to find out more.

I received an individual bible study. I joined a small group and continued attending small groups each week consisting of people who loved me, pray for me, invest in me, taught me to be a better person, and most importantly helped me heal from the trauma of divorce. Janice Wade met with me weekly for a long time to help me grow and trained for Divorce Care Program. What a blessing.

It had been a rough go raising 4 children (and don't forget those teenage years) the last 24 years on my own. I remember coming upstairs from the basement one day feeling devastated, when I got upstairs, I slammed my fist on the table and said God has got this, God will make good of all that we had been through. There were days where we had no food, and someone would come to the door with food. There was one time I will never forget: a friend had introduced me to an owner of an HVAC company; he was a referral partner in her networking group. He eventually worked with me in part of my business. He heard that my heater and ac went out, (I no money) he offered to put in a new system for me. I just had to pay him when I had the money. That is God and his Grace! He takes care of us in our times of need.

It's things like this that excite me about the opportunity to give back so that others can experience these gifts like I did. I have had the incredible opportunity to lead Divorce Care and DC4Kids programs for the last 12 years. God has given us incredible leaders, teachers, and volunteers along way to support adults, children, and little ones. There have also been numerous people who have helped support the program in other ways as well.

This program is referred to as an "emergency room for the heart". I never in a million years thought I would have the honor to serve the broken hearted as I have been able to do. When asked if I would do this, I said NO! I was not qualified. Through the encouragement and support of Janice the program was born. One day I saw this quote: "God does not call the qualified, he qualifies the called." He has been doing that for me as a single mom, as a Christian, and as a facilitator for Divorce Care, etc.

Through the Divorce Care Program 16 marriages have been saved! There are to date 32 baptisms or recommitments, including the members of the class, and their children. It just warms my heart when I look throughout our church and see how God used me to help others lives change. What an honor and a blessing!

Earlier I mentioned money and separating from it when going through a divorce. We hold on to money as a part of who we are - an identity. Did you know that money is spoken about 140 times in the Bible?

I would like to encourage you as you are planning on what you can do and give for the Special Contributions to remember there is a reason money is mentioned so many times. We get to let go and TRUST God that has it just as I had to when I went from being a stay-at-home mom, no additional education, the only work I had done in many years was babysitting, and 4 children ages 14-7 to raise alone. Pray about it and let God move you to what you can do so we can continue to give as we all have been given to, and bring beauty from ashes in the lives of the people in the Columbia area.

My story is not the only one like it, unfortunately. But God is able, Philippians 4:19 promises, "*And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ.*"

Q. What part of your story is God longing for you to be more generous with?

Q. How do you think God could use your generous story to help others?

Week 3, Day 5

THE POOR IN SPIRIT



Wes Woodell

I grew up in a Christian household. My dad was a preacher; my mom was a church secretary. My family attended church every single time there was a meeting or event, and I was taken along with them throughout my childhood.

My parents didn't know it, but at a very young age – three or four years old – I began being sexually abused by some older kids in my neighborhood. That caused a tremendously deep sense of shame to develop within me that only seemed to grow as I got older. That trauma caused me to believe I was inherently bad and unlovable. I didn't understand that feeling that way about yourself isn't normal. I was too young to express myself, and even if I would have had the ability to, I would have been too afraid to do so – so I silently suffered. I just wanted to be loved and accepted, but I didn't think I was worth it, and I didn't believe any of the talk I heard at church about God loving people could be applied to me. Deep down, I secretly, and arrogantly, thought I was a special case.

As I grew older, my behavior began to change. I continued to carry that sense of shame and "unlovableness" into my teenage years, and at fifteen I really began questioning my family's Christian values. I struggled to understand how things like "turning the other cheek," "doing to others as I would have them do to me," and other teachings of Jesus benefitted me in the real world.

At my high school those things just didn't seem to "work", and for an insecure, wounded kid whose greatest desire was to be loved and accepted, I was ready to try something else. I remember making a conscious decision about faith during that time - I decided that all the things my parents had taught me about life (that had mostly come from the Bible) couldn't be trusted. I had to find other sources of wisdom, and who better to listen to than peers who looked like they had it all together or celebs/famous people who appeared to even more?

And so my life went in a completely different direction. I chose not to worry about God and not to worry about the needs of others. I refused to listen to my parents' teaching – that there is a God who is present and who loves me – an important part of my life. Instead, I opted to follow the advice of worldly friends and voices from popular culture. Refusing to accept godly correction led me to do tons of stupid and harmful things I wouldn't have done otherwise. I became addicted to drugs (for years), replaced healthy relationships with harmful ones, and used my gifts and talents to lead people far away from Jesus rather than to Him. In short, I became a destructive force for darkness in the world rather than an instrument of light - all because I allowed myself to be "rich" in unrepentant arrogance and pride and "poor" in humility.

No child ever says, "I want to be poor when I grow up." The word "poor" is almost always used negatively in our culture, so it might surprise you to learn that it's sometimes used positively in the Bible.

In the first part of Matthew 5:3, Jesus says, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit ...*"

The word "blessed" means "happy" or "content," and the phrase "poor in spirit" does not mean weakness in a negative sense. Being "poor in spirit" means a person doesn't have an arrogant self-confidence that disregards the needs of others and their own need for God. Rather, a person who is poor in spirit is aware of their dependence on God for all things - for correction, sustainment, material blessings, and an ability to bless others.

A person who is poor in spirit finds ultimate contentment in faithfulness to Jesus, and nothing else will satisfy like that - certainly not worldly accolades, riches or success. The New English Bible says it this way: "*How blest are those who know of their need for God*" - that captures the thought behind this passage well.

In the latter half of Matthew 5:3, Jesus finishes His thought: "... for theirs in the Kingdom of heaven."

In explaining why, the poor in spirit are blessed, Jesus points ahead to the promise of God about the future. There will come a day when everything around us will be transformed - where everything is made right - no tears, no sickness, no elections, no tyranny - just us, the angels, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in perfect unity and harmony.

It's that future we're to have in mind as we journey through life, and that's really important, because what you think about the future determines how you live in the present.

When I was younger, I nearly wrecked my life because I refused to humble myself enough to believe what God says is true and to follow His words. I was the opposite of "poor in spirit," and the truth is this is still a struggle for me, but I'm aware of it and I'm trying.

If you're anything like me, then you need to know there's only one cure for a lack of humility and dependence on God. The cure is repentance.

Jesus teaches us to be "poor" in arrogance, destructive attitudes, and worldly aspirations, but "rich" in humility, concern for others, and Kingdom-mindedness. He teaches us to orient ourselves toward a future where the only thing that will matter about our present-day riches and possessions is how we use them to build the Kingdom of God.

Are you follow Jesus's teaching to be "poor in spirit" well? If not, today is the day to start!

Q. The second half of Isaiah 66:2 provides a good description of people who are poor in spirit. Is this descriptive of you? Why or why not? What needs to change?

Q. How often do you think about the end of time? How should thinking about eternity with God affect how you use your earthly possessions today?

Q. What specifically is Jesus telling you to change that you are struggling with today, and what are you going to do about it? Share your answer with another person.

Week 3, Day 6

THIRST QUENCHED BY LOVE



Sierra Marcum

I would not be able to write this story if it weren't for the generous grace of God and a group of followers who chose to live and give generously.

"Jesus answered, everyone who drinks the water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." **John 4:13-14**

When I think of the woman at the well; sinful, impure, and desperate for anything to quench her thirst, I can't help but think of myself. I also can't help but feel an immense amount of hope when I see the way Jesus pursued her, taught her, and loved her through it all. I'm grateful to say I have seen the same thing played out in my own life!

I remember being a lonely and broken 13-year-old girl who would do just about anything to fill the void in her heart. Growing up, I experienced several things that left me feeling empty and hopeless. My mom was a drug addict who abandoned our family, only to make appearances that often left me feeling more hurt and broken than I was before. I remember one incident with a boyfriend of hers that seemed innocent to me at the time but ended up taking my innocence away. After my mom left, my dad moved several different women in and out of our home. My dad's longest relationship was with a woman who struggled with alcoholism, who made sure to let me know that I was unwanted and unworthy of love.

I decided to find love on my own terms. At 13, I discovered online dating. I began talking to and meeting up with multiple men I met online. By the time I was 14, a naked picture of me went around the school and my virginity was taken by a 20-year-old man who wouldn't take no for an answer. I felt dirty, hopeless, and ashamed. I continued messing around with anyone who would give me attention. At a point in my life, I was dating two guys in the same school and consistently meeting up with several other men that I met online. As you could imagine, church was the last place I expected to find love and acceptance... But isn't that how God works!

During my Sophomore year of high school, I was re-invited to Cross-Chat (I had previously come around in middle school with Mallory Smith. I will never forget the way she loved me and wanted better for me; I definitely think this made me feel less shameful about stepping foot in a church again). Through many bumps in the road and lots of tough love, I decided to commit to God at the end of my Sophomore year of high school.

I remember several significant things that allowed me to break free from my old life, and to believe that God could use a broken, sinful, messed-up girl like me. I remember being loved when I didn't deserve it and being forgiven more times than I can count. I remember spending 5 out of 7 nights a week at my youth leader's house because I had never been single, and I was afraid I would sneak off and do something dumb if I was home alone. I remember Jennah Wise being open with me about the mistakes she made and where she came from, and I remember feeling hope for myself when I saw her have a

happy, fulfilling marriage and family. I remember thinking that if God could love her and use her through all her mistakes, maybe things could be the same for me.

To this day, not only Jennah, but several people have served and loved me. Every break at school, there's always someone willing to open their home to me. I never have to worry about finding somewhere to go. With this, I not only have a place to sleep, but a family to be a part of. I get to see cycles broken and I get to learn how to put God first in marriage and family. I've been given more rides than I can count (I'm not the best driver...), and I've had more people in my corner through the good and bad seasons of my life than I could have ever imagined.

More has been done for me than I could ever write or attempt to. But one thing I know for sure is that the living water God has to offer is the only one that satisfies. It is the only one that truly quenches thirst, and our cheap substitutes will only hurt us and leave us searching for more. I'm so grateful that God saw me and all my sin, and still chose to pursue me. When I first wrote this devotional, I ended it with "I've been single and pure for five months now and, honestly, I can't believe it!" Six years later, I've remained pure, but God has blessed me with a relationship that is centered around him. And I still can't believe it! I couldn't be more grateful for the grace of God, and the people who met me at the well to let me know that there was so much more. Now it's my turn to do that for someone else!

"Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" They came out of the town and made their way toward him." John 4:28-30

Q. How does it feel to know that God will pursue you?

Q. Do you constantly thirst for more or has God satisfied your thirst? Why/Why Not?

Week 4, Day 1

CHRIST OR CASH: WHAT DO YOU TRUST?



RJ CATIZON

As a child, do you remember running and hiding behind something? Something that you thought would protect you from harm. I did. My family would tell stories of how I would run and hide behind chairs or couches to protect myself. I see my three children growing up and I watch them take off running and hiding behind or underneath something to try and protect themselves. It's pretty amusing to watch. As an adult, I have come to realize that there are still things in life that will make you want to run or hide. We don't necessarily run and hide under our blanket, but we do run to other things to find security. The world is full of hiding places; places that we are sure will protect us but in fact end up bringing us more harm. It isn't as amusing to watch this behavior when it is an adult.

*The name of the Lord is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe. The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it a wall too high to scale. Before a downfall the heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor. **Proverbs 18:10-12***

I like the way the Message paraphrase renders this passage... The rich think their wealth protects them; they imagine themselves safe behind it... Is this passage saying that the rich are wrong or evil? No, in fact, that isn't the lesson at all. This very topic is again addressed in 1 Timothy 6 when Paul states that, "*the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.*" Did you catch that? The "love" of money is the root of the problem, not the money itself. Proverbs 18:11 points out that it is our response to money that can be damaging. Putting your trust in money, into worldly possessions becomes shaky, unstable ground. Funny, the very things we run to expecting to find security end up being the most unstable. When trouble comes, we run and hide behind that which our money can buy. In Proverbs they did just that, they believed that building high walls and buying weapons for protection against the enemy would bring them security, but the outcome was far from that.

Everyday our faith and security in God is tested and we become susceptible to the LIES from the evil one. Lies that say, if you have a bigger home you will be happier. If you had a nicer car you would have more respect. If you have investments and a savings account, you will be free from worry. The writer of Proverbs says that these things are intended to keep us running away from God and the security He provides. Rather, we run around in circles building up that which is only temporary. It is a lie that I must battle against every day.

Growing up not having much money left me feeling that I wasn't worth much. I didn't have the nicest house, or the fanciest car, or name brand clothes. I couldn't afford to do some things that other kids were able to do or have. It made me feel that if I did have those things, I would be more secure with myself and with what I lacked. I remember wanting money so badly that by the age of 14, I already had a job lined up to start when I turned 15. Sure enough, as soon as I turned 15, I went and got a job permit and took it up to the Pawnee Food Center so that I could finally start making money. I thought that finally I would have some security. Finally, I could buy the things that would make people like me. Finally, I would be worth something. I thought that it would be my protection against all the bad things in my life, I thought that I could hide behind it.

I did make money, I did get the name brand clothes, I got a nice car and more. Even with all of those desires fulfilled, I didn't find security. I didn't feel better about myself. I didn't find my worth. Just like the passage says in Proverbs, we imagine ourselves protected behind these false and unstable walls of wealth. We think it to be our fortified city that no enemy can climb, and no army can tear down. We think so proudly of ourselves once we amass these riches, all the while not realizing that Satan has a spiritual foothold on us. All the money in the world cannot buy you the kind of comfort and security that trusting in the Lord can give. It's ironic that the God we choose not to trust, is the one who can give us all the comfort and security that we so long for.

The Crossings Church is an amazing place to be, "Where the problems of life, can meet the power of God." I know this is true because it was true in my life. All of that which I worked so hard for, I finally found through encountering Christ. This place has helped to bring the powers of God to a hurting world; it has helped allow God to rebuild so many peoples broken walls in their hearts. Through this place, God has been able to provide a fortified tower for children to run to for safety and protection. All of this is possible through broken people simply choosing to trust in The Lord. It isn't possible through acquiring wealth or items but it is possible by running toward the only true God that can offer you protection and security. I don't have to have it all but God has given me all I need (and some) and that is where my true value lies. As the special contribution approaches, will you choose to trust God and the safety only He can bring?

Q. What are some things you rely on for your security/worth?

Q. If you fully trusted in God to take care of you, how would this change your giving?

Week 4, Day 2

THE LEAST OF THESE



Lindsey Gross

The King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' **Matthew 25:34-40**

I would not be able to write this story if it were not for the generous grace of God and a group of followers who chose to live and give generously. As a kid I had everything I needed and wanted. I was spoiled and never even considered the thought that there were kids who had less than me. As I grew up, I saw reality and while I felt an ache in my stomach for those kids, I was still so very selfish. I became a Christian in the campus ministry at The Crossings in Wentzville. This decision to surrender my life and put God first completely transformed my life, especially my view of money. Before, my resources were solely used for my benefit. Now, they were to be used to bless God and his people. This new view changed my perspective but wasn't truly put into action until starting the Crossings Innerbelt. My husband, Ryan, and I came on the church plant in 2014 as Youth Leaders and soon saw the need for essential items in the teens' lives such things as food, clean clothes, blankets, and toiletries. To us these items are necessary to live as functioning humans; however, many teens need them.

How could I, after being given God's grace which I have not deserved or earned, look at those He loves and not give them the things I know He desires for them to have. God has been so good to us. He has given us resources which in turn allows us to give to teens who have needs. There have been times where I wasn't sure if we would be able to make ends meet, but God has always provided, and I have never regretted being able to show love to "the least of these."

A little over a year ago we were introduced to Jasmine. Her brother had been in our small group previously and from the time we first met her our hearts ached for her. She was easy to love and eventually ended up moving in with us. At first this was an adjustment for our family, but soon we became a well-functioning family of 5. We have loved, cried, and laughed as we have seen true blessings from God since he brought Jasmine into our lives. If we would have thought about the monetary impact of having a teen move in with us, we would have never gotten to embrace the amazing blessings that were in store. From Scripture it tells us, "It is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35)." And this is surely true in my life.

As a teenager I was lonely and looking for approval in all areas of my life other than God. While I had all my material needs met, I was still looking for something/someone to fill the void in my life that left me

wanting more. As I look back and remember those times, I came to find that no amount of money or security could ever fill the God-sized hole I had. Now, as I listen to teens talk at cross chat about their wants and desires, many times they can center around money or things. This allows me to share the answer I have found- those things will never fulfill us; they didn't for me, nor my family. However, we have found fulfillment by choosing to focus on the things of God through filling my house with teenagers who have big hearts and even bigger appetites. One of our favorite things to do is to teach the teens about God as we do our family devotionals and show them God's love through serving our church and community.

James reminds us of the importance of the least of these, writing "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." James 1:27. I would think that God would define "pure and faultless religion" as regular church attendance, numerous converts, or unparalleled scriptural knowledge. Instead, scripture defines it as our service to the "least of these." Following this verse can show up through many actions. If we focus on looking after the "least of these," we'll find ourselves faithfully attending services so we can serve, share Jesus' hope with others, learn scripture so we can grow and provide help to others, give our time through service, and generously offer our money and possessions without hesitation. I'm grateful to be given these opportunities to love and sacrifice for the lost teens in such a way, and I'm excited to continue to see the great examples of sacrifice and giving that this special contribution and church plant will bring! Our generosity will help to build churches that truly serve "the least of these."

Q: How do you really feel about "the least of these?" Confess and ask God to change your heart.

Q: What can you do to serve "the least of these?" What ministry might you be able to connect with to facilitate your service?

Q: Do you have time, talents, money, or resources that you could offer to serve "the least of these?" Commit to giving whatever it is today. Contact your cell leader or a ministry leader to let them know how you will share.

Week 4, Day 3

WHAT THEY REALLY NEED



Hannah Cox

*And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. **Matthew 5:40-42***

I've been through some painful things in my life. Even though it was well over a decade ago when my appendix almost ruptured while I was eight months pregnant being sliced open and following six weeks later a gallbladder removal surgery, I can still distinctly remember the horrific physical pain. It hurt to breath, walk, talk, even sitting down. Giving birth in the middle of this was the least painful part of the whole episode. Vomiting on the regular until I passed out wasn't unusual, and I got to know the hospital staff like the back of my hand. Catheters, blood draws around the clock, IVs, and all that yuckiness that comes from the evil sickness inside. All through this, when I hear the word pain my mind goes directly to my chest. Not necessarily the physical ailment but the heaviness and heartache pain. Sometimes, I think I would rather have the appendix/gallbladder/pregnancy trauma all over again than to feel the stabs of betrayal, heartbreak, and loss. When I am asked to sacrifice a shirt, coat, a mile or two that seems like nothing to give. Ask me to sacrifice my heart over and over again, with no guarantee of return or even the risk of continue damage ... I'm almost paralyzed with anxiety.

Not turning away from someone who wants to borrow my stuff, my money, my house is no biggie! In fact, I'd gladly give you those things. Where it gets dicey is the pain part. My heart's been hurt. So, has yours. Someone was careless with it. They dropped it, trampled it, rejected it, ignored it. It doesn't make sense. It isn't right. It isn't fair. I want to protect it. I want to coddle it, anesthetize it until it's so numb you can dropkick it and it won't feel a thing, and never let anyone borrow it. I did that once, twice, over and over again... and it hurts really bad when it goes bad. You know, you've been there too. But, and it's the biggest one there is, it won't work to keep it to myself. It won't work to keep it to yours either. How do we know? God says, and deep down inside we've seen it and we know He's right.

Selfishness isn't pretty. It's actually down right hideously ugly. That child who hoards all their toys and tantrums when they are forced to share. We cringe at that sight. I have the best toys in the world. Oh, to be loved, forgiven, cared and sacrificed for, held to a high standard, believed in, respected, given gracethese are the coveted "toys", goodies, desires that everyone truly wants and is searching for in this world. I have them and I want to hoard them for myself, wait, no I don't... I want to give them to others. As long as they take care of them and cherish them, as long as they don't throw them back in my face or make me regret sharing with them. These gifts God bestowed upon me when He made me His own are so entangled in my heart that I can't share them with others without sharing my heart.

So where does that leave us? What decision do I have to make? I know there is an entire world looking, yearning, desperate for what God has to offer, and my jagged, broken, mended, imperfect heart calls the shots for how I choose to answer their cries. Do I let the uncertainty of risk, pain, and loss dictate whether or not I give the heart right out of my chest to someone as a lifeline? We get to make sacrifices that save people's lives. It might be the literal shirts they need, the willingness to get my car and drive the extra miles someone needs for the ride, the money to lend, but ultimately, it's my heart they need.

The funny thing about it is that when I do love with reckless abandon, give without getting, and pursue through the muck of life, God blesses me tremendously. The amazing, and I mean, amazing relationships in God's kingdom that I have been blessed with go beyond anything that I could have ever imagined. Seeing someone come back to life, hope light up in the eyes, and change course are the things some people will never get to experience. Watching her walk down the aisle to the godly man of her dreams, hold their baby girl in their arms for the first time, go down into the water and come back up with the biggest smile on their face, or house hunt in a new location for a new church plant are all some of my favorite toys I've gotten to share with some of the greatest people I would have never known if not for someone sharing their heart with me and showing me how to do the same. I beg you to not only share your shirt, your mileage, your home, but share your heart. Someone needs to borrow it. Don't turn them away.

Q. Are you willing to give not only your shirt but your coat, not walk one mile but walk two, are you willing to give your heart?

Q. What areas of your life do you see that you need to stretch and really be willing to sacrifice the extras in?

Week 4, Day 4

GOD GAVE ME HOPE



Mallory Smith

A SPECIAL NOTE: The Crossings Church had the great honor of calling Mallory Smith our close friend and sister in Christ. Mallory served tirelessly as a Junior High leader for nearly eight years. She poured her money, heart, time, and soul into each child that she came in contact with and fought to do so until the day that she passed. After a long, difficult battle with lupus, she met her Creator, the one who changed everything, the one who loved her more than she had ever dreamed of being loved, on June 26th, 2016.

Her legacy of sacrifice, in the most difficult of times, lives on in so many of us. To know her, was to know joy and faithfulness in its greatest form. It is a bittersweet privilege to read and continue to be challenged by her words, life and character...

I would not be able to write this story if it were not for the generous Grace of God and a group of followers who chose to live and give generously. My childhood was full of feelings of loneliness, worthlessness, hurt, pain, shame, and hopelessness due to the physical abuse in my house, enduring sexual abuse, an alcoholic father, and pain medication addicted mother. Still to this day I feel like the most damaging feeling was the hopelessness This prevented me from moving forward and allowed Satan's lies to hold me back from dreaming big or attaining the life God intended for me.

Due to my rough family life I chose to move out and live in a group home at the age 16. This group home started challenging my beliefs that I was unlovable, not worth fighting for, and destined for failure. I began to dream and became motivated to end my family's awful cycle of abuse, destruction, and hurt. Shortly before I turned 18, I left the group home and went to college. With no one to challenge my beliefs or actions it wasn't long before I allowed Satan to once again take over my thoughts. I bought into his lies that I was useless, unlovable, worthless, and that nothing that I did really mattered because I was going to be just like my parents. With these feelings controlling and entangling me, I began to drink, have sex, and started getting involved with drugs. Once again, I hated life, was miserable, and felt hopeless about my future.

Roughly halfway through my freshman year of college my brother reached out to me. At first, I was very hesitant in his newfound faith and truly thought he was naive to believe that God really wanted him to have a good and prosperous life, better yet he wanted that for me. He asked me to go to camping with his church. It's funny now but I went partly because I wanted to disprove him and partly because I had just broken up with my boyfriend and didn't want to be alone. After that weekend I never returned to my old life. I gave up drinking, having sex with random people, doing drugs and started studying the bible. Within two months of that retreat I was baptized.

Even though people had invested in me and loved me I still didn't fully trust people to not hurt, use, or leave me. It wasn't until I heard a testimony one Sunday morning at church about sexual abuse that

I realized that I was never going to have the life God had promised because I wasn't truthful about who I was and had never allowed people to help me with my sexual abuse. One of the scariest, yet biggest turning points in my life, was when I opened up to Kerry Cox about my sexual abuse. I was scared that he, like others, wouldn't believe me, think less of me, or just not want anything to do with me. To this day, thinking of the love, acceptance, and compassion he showed me afterwards still brings me to tears. It was a remarkable feeling to be truly known; for the first time someone knew the ugly me and still loved me, didn't want to use me, and didn't leave me. Most everyone knows that Kerry is a dreamer; that night Kerry helped me to dream for myself and taught me that through God there is Hope. Sometimes you need to borrow a little of someone else's faith, love, and ability to dream until you can develop it on your own. Don't get me wrong I still had a long road ahead of me, but I was moving in the right direction!

Through the love others had shown me, the knowledge gained from Wounded Heart, and the dreams others helped me create I began to realize that my past could help others. Midway through college I began helping with the Jr. High Ministry. I felt very drawn to this ministry because I wanted to help the kids have the type of belief and hope in God to change their future as in Jeremiah 29:11-14.

Before College, because of my past, I didn't want to marry anyone or have children. My feelings changed partly from working through my hurts but also when I would stay with families like the Davis' and Salones' over my breaks from college. It was so neat because I wasn't a visitor, I was family. I used to think I would mess a family up or would marry someone like my father. Through their lives and daily sacrifice, I began to have hope for my future family. A family the way God intended seemed so attainable after hearing where the Davis' and Salones' came from and seeing what they had and knowing it all was from God.

As most of you know, I did get married to Tim and shortly after found out we were pregnant. Our pregnancy was challenging from the beginning. Each appointment brought bad news and left me in tears as the doctors talked about me losing Kole and potentially having Lupus. I was confused and scared to say the least. I believe that God brought people in my life to show me truth and give me hope when I am struggling with seeing clearly and was letting my emotions cloud my thoughts and faith in God. I needed people to not worry about my approval and instead worry about my soul. Although it was hard to sort through my feelings, I came to the harsh reality that whatever the outcome would be that I was still going to love, obey, and trust God. I chose to put my hope in God's promises and believe his word.

Kole, he is crazy, full of energy, healthy, and more than an amazing gift from God. We just got guardianship of our daughter, Shay. She was a Jr. Higher in the ministry that was about to go into the foster care system because she had nowhere to stay due to her parent's bad decisions. The decision was easy us to say yes to her becoming a "Smith". It was easy because other people had taken us in and called us their own, but more importantly God had made me his first ... they just copied the Master. I also have Lupus. There are days that I struggle with not having the energy to move, feel pain in almost every joint in my body, or in my pain wonder, "Why me?" I am sick a lot, but I still want to be someone that can give their hope, love, and dreams for someone to borrow until they are able to attain them. I have found my hope in his promises through his word. I WILL have trials of many kinds, but I will come out on the other end better for them and not decimated. I want to see my trials like James 1:2-4.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters," whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

You see, my trials have been rough, and they will continue to be rough. I know God has some amazing things in store for me, my family, and my Jr Highers. I do not know how much time I have on earth and neither do you, but because of the generous and sacrificial living of others my hope is that one day I will live in heaven pain free and see my kids for eternity. At the end of every day I remember where God has brought me out of with the help of so many of his people living and giving sacrificially. When I sit back and remember where I am and where I used to be, I can't do anything more than to want to give back out of gratitude because they helped me become what God intended all along.

Q. How are you reproducing the hope given to you, to someone else?

Week 4, Day 5

GODLINESS + CONTENTMENT = GREAT GAIN



Ashlee Catizon

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. 1 Timothy 6:6-10

Contentment: the state of being happy and satisfied.

If only I didn't have to study so hard; oh, to be one of those naturally gifted intellectuals.

If only I had a better body.

If only I drove a different car; who doesn't have an auxiliary input these days?!?

If only I had a dog.

If I had a boyfriend/girlfriend. If only I had a husband/wife. If only I had a child. If only I had a better job; then I wouldn't have to worry about money.

If only I had more talents or gifts.

If only...

We will purchase the new shoes we have been dying for, only for them to quickly become "so last year". The house that once fit all of our needs will soon leave you feeling "too confined." Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. I have thought it all.

We live in a society that screams that all of the above will bring great satisfaction and contentment in life. We see it played out all of the time, don't we? The young girl, who set out with talent and good intentions, quickly falls victim to compromise. It isn't enough that she can sing, she must become more desirable. More makeup, less clothing, and sexual appeal to make it in the industry. The actor who started with nothing will soon acquire everything, only to be found alone, breathless in his high-end apartment because the dose was finally too much. The successful businessman who works so hard to obtain the best, only to leave his wife feeling alone and unloved. The mother who struggles and has little becomes consumed into a state of depression because she cannot seem to obtain more. The kid whose relationship with his father is based on his performance in the game, leaving him feeling as if his worth is directly connected to the scoreboard.

The world has set a standard that in "constantly fulfilling ourselves, we will find contentment." Yet as surely as we look around, we can see clearly that this precedent has failed us miserably. Long before

we realized our shortcomings, God had called us out; "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction."(vs9)

Fortunately for us, He doesn't just leave it there. His word comes along and flips our ideals upside down and inside out, but it also instructs and sets us up for insurmountable success in this life.

So how do we avoid falling into the traps of this world? How do we find contentment?

We choose to live selflessly.

"Godliness with contentment is great gain."

The world says that the key to happiness is to "look out for self." God says contentment is in "looking out for others."

The essence of godliness is really that of selflessness. It's a crazy concept, but joy really can be found in the serving of others! The Crossings Church was founded on this very principle. Take a minute and look around; members pick up dozens of children every week, feed them a home-cooked meal, teach them that they are not products of their environment and consistently remind them they are loved. Other ministries "willingly" choose to give their hearts, homes, money and time in the service of crazy high school and college students. They are loved unconditionally and are told of how they are destined for greatness when much of the world tells them they were meant to simply exist. Still, others share their most vulnerable heartaches at the chance it will offer someone similar to them an opportunity of hope and life to the full.

Is it worth the cost? Is it worth the time? I would venture to say all would agree, there is no greater peace of mind found than in the giving of oneself.

Q. Where does your time, your money, your heart go? What ministries are you currently giving to?

We remember that this life is temporary.

"For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. "The world says, "You live for today." God says, "Live with the end in mind."

I wonder how drastically our day to day routine would change if we really lived with the end in mind. Some time ago, this ideal became cemented in my mind and my heart with the passing of my father-in-law. While he lived on this earth, he didn't acquire great wealth or have much to show for his years of hard work. His passing revealed what little value all of that had anyway. Stories of his "sacrifices" filled the memorial service. Jim served every week at New Heights, he took the time to hug and express love in a way many children had never felt. He was labeled "Papa to the Papa-less". He became one of the most cherished "camp cooks" the world would ever know. He was one of the most content men I had ever met. He brought nothing into this world, he took nothing tangible out of it and yet he left countless numbers of us forever changed and better for having known him.

Q. When this life departs from you, what legacy will you have left behind?

Q. Dream about ways in which your contribution to this campaign could impact the world around you.

Choose Gratitude.

"But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that."

The world says, "It is never enough." God says, "You have more than you need."

We could draw a comparison for every situation that we face in this life. I don't have a nice enough car, while others have no car at all. I do not have a big enough home, while others have no roof at all. I wish my body looked better, while others pray that their bodies were simply healthy and functional.

When I was a little girl my parents started a church with less than 30 people in the basement of a home in Alton, Illinois. You can imagine, there wasn't an overflow of money at that time. Sacrifice was not foreign to our home. I remember my dad wearing the same old tennis shoes for years. At the time, I thought he just really liked those tattered shoes (and maybe he did). I later realized that he didn't get a much-needed new pair of tennis shoes so that I could have my shoes for basketball season.

Looking back at my childhood I didn't always have everything that all of my friends had. Looking back, I didn't need those things. I had parents who loved each other and loved me more than many kids (my friends) would ever know. I had a church family that gave my life more security and joy than the nicest clothes or toys could have ever given. I watched my parents invest in the lives of the helpless and harassed, I watched God use them to help rewrite those stories. These are things that I truly "needed" as a child. These are the things I want my children to find contentment in. These are the things I am grateful for.

God says that contentment is only attainable through Him. What about cars, homes, jobs, savings accounts? Consider those the "perks" that you have been blessed with. With that being said, let us be careful not to forget that those "perks" are expected by Him, to be used for His Glory. If you struggle with feeling discontent in this life, perhaps, you are too fixated on that which you do not need but simply desire. Lack of gratitude will undoubtedly rob you of the joy God longs to provide. Contentment and ingratitude are simply not compatible.

Q. What are some things that you are grateful for?

Q. Take a minute and reflect on all the "extras", the "perks" that you have been given. Which of these could be eliminated so that you may give more to the special contribution?

No greater gain can be found in life apart from a relationship with Christ. As the special contribution approaches, pray that God brings you contentment in that which He has already given. Let that contentment motivate your offering. As for me, I am praying that I am called back to the roots of sacrifice from which I came. I am praying that that legacy is carried on through me, to my children, to our youth ministry, to our church, for many years to c

Week 4, Day 6

A LITTLE WHILE AGO



Jake & Caty Sitton

“In his kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation.” 1 Peter 5:10

We would not be able to write this story if it were not for the generous Grace of God and a group of followers who choose to live and give generously.

Growing up I believe my mom did her best to ensure that I grew up just like other boys. I played sports and ran the streets with neighborhood kids, but as I matured I noticed that my life was lacking something. A dad. My father abandoned our family at a very young age; I was probably between the ages of 7-10. I would come to find out later that he chose alcohol over a relationship with me. I was very sad as a kid because I would watch the fathers of my friends show them love in a way my mother wanted to but truly never could. I didn't really understand the repercussions of growing up without a father until high school. I searched for affirmation any way I could, but it usually filtered down to sports and girls. Just like my dad, I was choosing to find security in things this world had to offer. I dedicated my high school career to playing sports year-round. In my free time, I would use my status as an athlete to jump from girl to girl. I desperately wanted a life that was different than my father lived, but I unknowingly placed my security in the same kinds of things he did. I always wished I could fall off the family tree and start something new and better, but I had no idea how to accomplish it. Luckily for me God opened a door.

By a freak accident, God had me meet a Christian while riding in an ambulance to take my nephew to the emergency room. On the ride this college kid wanted to know more about me and offered me an opportunity to play in a softball tournament with some of his friends. Having a passion for baseball, I could not refuse the offer. Little did I know that I was going to be playing with a campus ministry. This opened the door to a group of guys who would show me what real relationships were like and how they attained them. These guys didn't choose to look for girls, sports, or money to affirm their security; instead they looked for God. I was instantly drawn to them and chose to give the “God thing” a try. Ever since that decision I have made the commitment to never look back because my life has been blessed tremendously. I have had so many people invest their own time, money, energy, and even living situations to ensure that I was taken care of. I will never forget the generosity I have been shown and I continue to strive to be a man of God who can give back to others in the same ways that have made me the man I am today.

Caty

I was fortunate enough to grow up in church and be shielded from the problems that my parents had to endure. Being raised in church definitely had its benefits; I did not have to go through the abuse and neglect that my parents did, and I was raised in a very healthy environment. However, I did not truly know how to put my security in God, but in my family. I viewed my family as my rock and the only

reason that I tried to do the things that God wanted was because that is what my parents told me to do. I also learned at a young age, that I had to be strong and showing that my family had flaws wasn't exactly welcomed. As I got older, my family had hardships like any other family like the loss of relatives, and betrayal by close friends. However, through it all I felt like it didn't matter what storm came our way, my family would stand firm.

After each hardship I noticed my family wouldn't talk about it much, but just continue on our everyday lives. I also saw that my parents started to fight more and sleep in separate areas of the house. Being naïve I just continued to think everything would be okay because my family was always a rock, but it was obvious my family was falling apart. I remember my junior year being told my parents were going to get divorced and with my mom moving out I would have to choose who I wanted to live with. My world seemed to crash; I didn't feel safe and secure but lost and alone. My family was all I ever depended on and now I didn't have that.

Not knowing where to turn, my first instinct was to put my security in a guy and when that failed I thankfully had friends that were willing to give to me very generously. I decided to come to Lindenwood (through some slight motivation of others) and things just seemed to fall into place. I found friends that would stay up with me all night and listen to me cry. People would ask me questions and not let me get away with my perfectly scripted church kid response. I could tell these people genuinely cared about me and wanted to be apart of my life, and I would not be who I am today without their sacrifice.

Jake & Caty

Since being married Caty and I have taken a huge leap of faith to leave the comfort of the Wentzville church and move to Illinois to help lead the church plant in Collinsville. Sacrificing my career to move my family to a new area was not an easy decision. Growing up poor, I never wanted to put my family in a position that they would have to go through the same experiences I did. Yet through faithfulness and an understanding of what "providing" truly looked like in scripture, God has blessed our family much more than I could ever fathom. God has generously given my family such a support system that we could never create on our own. We strive to teach our children what gratitude and sacrifice looks like not through words but through actions. Despite our instability growing up, I am confident that through living generously my kids will have an awareness of what God has blessed them with and in return will look to our example in their own lives. Caty and I strive not only to use our story for our kids, but for the campus ministry we diligently serve. Through inviting college students into our lives and home, we have been able to reach and provide many instances of hope for the next generation.

Q. Has God taken you from instability to standing on a firm foundation?

Q. What did others have to sacrifice to help take you from point A to point B?

Week 5, Day 1

A HEALTHY HARVEST



Danny Langford

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. 2 Corinthians 9:6-11

Is your heart being generous as you prepare for the special contribution? Do you realize that how generous you are will determine the kind of harvest we reap on April 19th? As members of the Crossings Church each one of us has to decide in our heart the amount we are willing to sacrifice to God. This decision not only affects the amount we will give to the special contribution but the future success of our vision and the salvation of countless people.

Generosity is something that doesn't come natural for most people. In my own life I can remember as a teenager wanting to keep my money and allow others to pay my way. I knew if I pretended not to have any money my parents would pay for pretty much whatever I wanted. This habit always left me wanting more and oblivious to needs around me. While in college God began opening my eyes to opportunities where I could be generous.

God is using this time to open the eyes of the Crossings church so we can be generous. There's a great need to be met so others may enjoy the riches of God's saving grace. It's time to realize that someone's generosity has played a part in you having a relationship with God. Think of the blessings you've received from being a part of God's kingdom, certainly you want to pass it on to others.

If you are thinking I don't have enough resources to be generous THINK AGAIN! It's how big of a heart you have not the size of your bank account. God wants us to be generous now not when we become wealthy or financially secure. I haven't met a person yet who was stingy then became generous as they got more money. On the other hand, I have known very generous people who continued to be generous as they are blessed financially.

The question you must ask yourself today is "Am I being generous and sacrificing the way God wants me to"? Remember God is calling you to determine an amount in your heart to give. You must prayerfully determine that amount and do it with a cheerful and generous heart.

TEACHING BY EXAMPLE



Kennedy Cox

Sacrifice has been a large part of my life since I was a baby. Having the privilege to grow up in the church I have witnessed many instances of my family and the people around me pouring into their ministries, even if it meant giving up much. When I was younger, I took many of those great examples for granted, but now that I am older, I recognize the sacrifices much more clearly.

My parents' involvement in the Church and Campus Ministry is one example I have seen of people give everything they have for God. Every week, for years, my house has hosted cell and Cross Chat. At times we had more than one per week! As you can imagine having over 60 college students in one house, twice a week, can take its toll. Little did I know, these were the things that would shape the way I thought, acted, and would develop the purpose I now carry in my life.

Witnessing people coming into the ministry and dedicating their lives to God has been a gift that I will never be able to repay. Unfortunately, this gift has also come with some hurts that were not so easy for me to deal with emotionally. I have seen my share of people walk away from their relationships with God. These were people that I spent much time with and that I loved with all my heart. At times such as those, I would question if the sacrifice were worth it. When I entered the Jr. High/ High School Ministries and now that I am in the Campus Ministry and am bring my own friends around, I have learned to be thankful for all of these things, both the good and the bad. Going through these things helped to prepare and show me how to deal with disappointment but also how to rejoice in the good. If I had been sheltered from those feelings as a younger child, I would not know how to deal with my friends walking away and I would fall apart. Sometimes the result of your sacrifice doesn't always come in the ways you expect. In this experience, the sacrifice prepared me to deal with feeling abandoned or blaming myself and feeling not good enough for people to stick around. I realized from a young age that it was not about me but about people choosing not to give up their own selfish desires or habits for a God that had sacrificed it all for them.

I didn't understand many of the sacrifices my parents made back then. I now get to see my parents and others around me, including myself reap the benefits of such choices. Now when I choose to make sacrifices in my life, it is easier for me to follow through. It is easier to follow through when I can look back and see the pay off in store because of the examples set by others for my younger self.

For example, when I was in middle school, one of my closest friends/mentors was Melissa Heady. Melissa (or Mel) was brought around in the teen ministry, again due to the sacrifices of Ashlee and RJ, my Aunt and Uncle (the high school leaders). After high school Mel went up into RCM, the campus ministry and was poured into. Ever since then, Mel has played a large part in my life. Melissa was taught sacrifice from the same people I was my family and our church. Without those sacrifices I would not have Melissa around to love me, hang out with me and advise me. I can't imagine hanging out with a seventh-grade girl is a top priority for many married adults. I am the oldest of my siblings and the oldest grandkid, I have always had to be the example. Obviously, with this being the case, I never

had an older sister or cousin to really look up to. Don't get me wrong I had great examples in my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles but never any "sisterly" figures. That was until Melissa came along and filled that role of a big sister to me. I am eternally grateful for the relationship that we share, but when I go back to the root of why I have this relationship, it always comes back around to sacrifice.

Growing up, I didn't always get to bed early or have all the "stuff" that my friends had but I had everything I needed and more. The sacrifices made by God, my family and the Crossings gave me more than most kids could ever dream of. I pray that for everything I have been given, will live in a way that shows my gratitude through my own sacrifice.

Q. What kind of legacy will you leave your children? What will they see you sacrificing for?

Q. How much is generosity a part of the dream you have for your children?

Week 5, Day 3

SOW WHAT?



Fran Adair

I grew up in a small town surrounded by cornfields; every road out of town was surrounded by them. Since I had several friends whose families owned farms, I learned the importance of the sowing or planting season. As a kid and teenager, while I knew it was important, I never really took the time to understand all the planning and hard work that it took to have a successful harvest. Plant too late and risk the heat. Plant the wrong seed for the area and have a mediocre harvest. Ignore your fields and risk pests and animals eating it.

Paul says, *“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”* **Galatians 6:7-10**

Most of the time we get so wrapped up in our jobs, families, friends, sports, having a good time, or having cool things that we don't make planting the spiritual seeds of our time, money, or prayers to benefit God's Kingdom our first priority. It's time to start planting with the future teen leaders, children's ministry leaders, campus leaders, or Manasseh ministry leaders in mind. We need to start seeing eternity in sowing spiritual investments instead of titles or our possessions. I wouldn't be here if the people before me hadn't sown to please the Spirit.

Before becoming a disciple, I have had my time of sowing to please the flesh, and I can remember the destruction I caused. I remember feeling alone, insecure, and unhappy because I was so determined to plant things that weren't important. It wasn't until I decided to make God most important in my life that I started to see a harvest that I wouldn't trade for anything.

I married a man who loves God and our family with his whole heart. I always thought that if I got married, it would end in divorce or I'd be miserable. I saw it happen in every marriage in my family, but God has used my marriage in ways I never thought possible. For 12 years we were able to show Junior Highers and teens what a family that loves God first can be like. Chris and I got to invest in kids that had unstable homes, lived in unsafe areas, or had absent parents, and for the past few years, we've been blessed to serve in the adult ministry. But by far, the coolest thing is knowing that my kids won't be affected by divorce like I was.

I got to see my brother, RJ, and my dad, Jim, baptized within 6 months of me deciding to live for God. RJ is now leading a youth ministry and has a marriage that is so drastically different than the ones modeled for us. Dad's been gone almost 8 years now, but I am at peace knowing where he is because you couldn't help but see the seeds he has sown for the Spirit.

With the special contribution coming up, we will have the opportunity to again sow for the future. It's not just money you're giving, it's a chance for others in Columbia, MO to have a relationship with God.

The person reached might be a minister on a future church plant, a worship team leader, or a subtle servant like my dad, so sow joyfully and be excited about the ways God will use your sacrifice.

When you respond to these questions, I encourage you to take an honest look at the things you sow.

Q: Paul says sowing things of the flesh, temporary things, will reap destruction. What temporary things do you struggle with sowing? (momentary pleasures, that promotion, the newest things, popularity, etc.)

Q: What can you do today to make sure you're sowing to reap eternal life?

QUESTIONABLE INVESTMENTS - THEY CAN PAY OFF.



Ryan & Katie Graham

It was beautiful. A two story all brick house. Three car garages. Trees in the front yard, swimming pool in the back yard. It was perfect. Yet even with all the outside beauty, inside was empty. You see it is hard for me (Katie) to remember what my life was like before Christ and I would not be able to write this story if it were not for the generous Grace of God and a group of followers who chose to live and give generously.

I'm sure our stories are not so different from yours. At a young age of 10, I (Katie) thought I had lost my mother. She had two brain aneurysms that required multiple brain surgeries, which left her physically changed and spiritually mad at God. As a little girl I was confused and sad. It wasn't too long later that my father and mother would divorce. I was lonely. And I turned straight to finding some kind of approval or acceptance from men. I blamed myself for my parent's divorce and I desperately wanted to feel loved. I remember walking by tables in my high school cafeteria where boys would be sharing stories of how they physically messed around with me the night before. And in the moment, I thought I had found that approval I was looking for only to be left lonely and ashamed. I was deeply insecure, and I was hurting.

Like Katie, I (Ryan) watched my parents go through a divorce at a young age. Both of my parents got remarried shortly after the divorce and had other children. I also had two older stepbrothers. Being the youngest boy in the family I was constantly picked on and teased. My brothers would call me names like, "Crisco," because I was pale and overweight. They would put me in boxes and torment me, by kicking and beating up the box. I felt alone. I lived with my mother and stepfather, so I rarely saw my real father. My stepfather worked all the time and was constantly out of town for business trips. In high school I was incredibly shy and didn't want to get close to anyone because I was afraid they would make fun of me and beat me up like my brothers did, so I would go straight to class and lay my head down. Right after high school I became a Union Carpenter and was making good money for a teenager. I wanted to get out of my parent's house as soon as I could, so I bought my own home at just 20 years old. I got on with a construction company working 7 days a week. I had money and freedom and I used it on cars, motorcycles, strip clubs, bars, alcohol and women. With all the money and freedom, I had something was still missing. I was lonely, angry, depressed and suicidal.

We were questionable investments, at best. We were high risk with a low chance of a profitable return. We didn't have anything to offer...or so we thought!

No investor would have invested in us, but God and his people did! Although statistics said we wouldn't make it, we took a risk and got married in 2011. Both of us products of divorced families, with no hope of ever having a lasting marriage. God proved us wrong and blessed us with what he knew we needed! We have a marriage that is full of laughter, challenges and joy! We never dreamed we could have a good marriage that could be so full. As leaders in the campus ministry we get to dream with our college students about having a good marriage someday in their future. We get to use our strengths and

weaknesses and give them hope that no matter what they have been shown they can have a fulfilling and purposeful marriage. In just a year and a half after getting married we got pregnant with our first child and we wanted Harper to grow up in a home different than what we had. With stability, love and purpose. But how were two young adults from broken homes going to be able to raise a child in a Godly home? You see we wouldn't be able to sit here and talk about some of our biggest blessings; our marriage and our children, without the willingness of a group of followers who were willing to take a chance on us and invest in our lives. Almost 10 years later of marriage and 2 children, Harper and Gavin have taught us more than we bargained for. They have taught us to risk harder, love harder, and dream harder. We couldn't grasp how much Jesus loved us until we had them. We never knew a love quite like this. Such beautiful, innocent little children teaching us more about ourselves and our God. With tears in our eyes, we just cannot help but to be overwhelmed with gratitude of what God has blessed us with. We feel so undeserving to have been chosen to be Harper and Gavin's parents, but we know we have all the opportunity to teach them as we go and raise them in a home full of guidance and love. We want Harper and Gavin to be drawn to God because of our passion for ministry and what we have done in the kingdom because of the ministry we are involved in. At times, we don't feel like we just have two kids, we feel we have several kids! Our passion is our campus ministry. Every day we get to dream for the future and where we want our ministry to be. Every day we get to be involved in college students lives. We get to dream with them, pray with them, laugh with them, and teach them about God. We are honored to be able to work with some of the most amazing college students. We are blessed to be able to have an impact on our ministry. We see there is a hurting world around us, and we have the opportunity to share where we were before God with our students. We know what it feels like and we have come from where they are. We get to teach them to have a purpose and a plan. We invest in their lives because the investment that others placed in us was profitable. "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. One day a man found the treasure, and then he hid it in the field again. He was so happy that he went and sold everything he owned to buy that field." Matthew 13:44. A group of followers were willing to sell everything they had to invest in our future and the kingdom of God. A relationship with God was worth selling all for. And because of their example we found the treasure.

Q: What do you need to do to invest in your future?

GET THE SCOOP -- THE MEASURE YOU USE WILL BE MEASURED TO YOU



Laura Atkins

"Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." **Luke 6:38**

Some of my favorite memories are making Christmas cookies with my grandmother as a little girl. We would gather up all the ingredients on her long wooden kitchen table with three generations of Schmidt children and grandchildren gathered around. With great excitement, I would hang on her every word as she guided us through measuring each ingredient carefully. One in particular stuck out in my mind - the brown sugar. I can remember scooping deep into the jar to measure out the brown sugar and her instructions were very clear. I was to shake the cup and push it down all the way until it was completely full. Then, when it seemed no more would fit into that one cup measuring bowl, I should add some more and press it down until we had a perfectly packed portion of brown sugar. This is a perfect illustration of what God says will happen when we give with a generous and pure heart. God will give back more than we expect or can even imagine. Just like the brown sugar in my grandmother's recipe, our lives will become so packed with blessings they can hardly be contained.

This passage also says that the measure we use in our giving to others is the one that will be used for us. For most things in life you get out what you put in. You wouldn't expect to work half a day and get paid for a full day, to lose a pound after skipping workouts, or to get an A on an assignment you only did half of. Why then would we expect God to bless a half-hearted offering? Our world often tells us to look out for ourselves and our families and to make sure that we have enough before giving to others. We make sure that we have what we need and then give the extra we have left over. Or, we give things that we don't need anymore. Our prayers even become centered around us asking God to pour blessing into our lives even though we have not followed his commands to be generous in our offerings. According to the above verse, the measure of our willingness to give to others determines what will be given to us.

In my own life, I have seen over and over again that the more I give, the more I have been given. It doesn't always come back to me in the same form I gave it. Giving God \$10 doesn't mean that a check for \$20 will find its way into my mailbox. Taking someone a meal or giving them a ride doesn't always mean that same person will be the one to serve me when I am in need. The overflowing blessings that I receive from God most often come in the joy of seeing those people I have served serving others, and from the blessings in serving to me and my family. God has blessed me with an amazing husband, three healthy, beautiful children, genuine friendships, a rewarding career, and financial security. While all of these earthly blessings are amazing and wonderful, some of the best blessings I have received from God come from the eternal blessings of knowing that people who were once lost now have a relationship with God, the peace of knowing that God will protect and provide for my family no matter what life brings, and the security of knowing that nothing can take

away my place in heaven. If you will commit to giving generously, God promises you that he will respond with pouring eternal blessings into your life that nothing can destroy!

Q. What measure do you use in giving to God? To others?

Q. If your giving was illustrated as a measuring cup, would it be barely filled, overflowing, or somewhere in the middle?

Q. What overflowing blessings have you seen in your life or in the lives of others when they choose to give generously?

Q. How do you think God will view the measure you use in your giving? Is it one that he can bless with a measure that pours over?

Week 5, Day 6

Write Your Own Story

THEN AND NOW AND LATER



Janice Wade & Jess Williams

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building. 1 Corinthians 3:6-9 NIV

THEN - Planting a seed

Janice:

Seeds of fear, doubt, incest, hate, and insecurity were planted in my heart at a very early age. My earliest memory of sexual abuse was when I was four years old, but by then I already knew to be afraid of my father and what he would do to me.

I continued to be afraid and grew up insecure. I was hurt repeatedly by several men, not just my father and became hard-hearted. I believed I was worth nothing and had nothing to give but my body. I was scared to be in a relationship because my body had been used and my heart had been crushed. I was scared to have children because I thought I would be a horrible mother. I did not dream for myself and knew I was a waste of space with no value and no good for anyone.

When I came to church, I was so amazed to be loved and accepted. I was accepted with all my flaws and insecurities and taught that I had value. People began to invest in me right away and planted seeds of faith, hope, and love into my life for the first time. It was exciting, but then I got scared. Scared because they expected me to let down my guard and take risks to plant and water the seeds in others. For this damaged and insecure girl, that meant risking my heart-true sacrifice.

Then I read in the Bible in 2 Corinthians 1:34, *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God." Did you see it? "SO THAT we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we receive from God."* I was given comfort and healing not so I would just be healed but SO THAT I could comfort and help heal others. This verse changed my life because God was calling me to invest in others what was invested into me. I committed to giving back, being open and vulnerable, serving with my money, my belongings and with my time. I started telling my story and praying with and for others like me. It didn't seem like much to give and it was painful at times, but it was just like the mustard seed. Matthew 17:20, *"Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there, and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."* God blessed my sacrifice and it grew beyond anything I could hope for or imagine, and the Wounded Heart for women began. I was terrified and insecure but knew I had to die to myself and give it my all

Then Tom told me he wanted to go on the church plant to Wentzville. I was shocked. I had a ministry and a family for the first time, and he wanted me to pick up and move?! The seeds of doubt and insecurity started all over again, but I began to pray and fast. God made it clear to me that he wanted Tom and me to be a part of this new plant. I knew more sacrifice was required and I had to trust God.

God led me to more women, and I met Jess Williams. I recognized her pain and began dreaming for her, trying to water the seeds of faith, hope, and love that were planted. She didn't believe me at first when I told her that her pain had a purpose and that she would be used to heal others. But that was ok, I didn't believe it at first either. And now look at her growth, her ministry, her helping others to heal and dream. She is a promise fulfilled and The Wounded Heart will continue through her.

Jess

"My spirit is broken, my days are extinguished..." Job 17:1

At the age of 18, I already felt this, my spirit broken and my days numbered to live only with emptiness, hopelessness with no expectations. I came to The Crossings Church and was told about a class called Wounded Heart. I didn't understand what that meant but for the first time it seemed like there was a possible hope for this ongoing pain that was my secret of sexual abuse. I was a place where I could put it all out there; a place where my ugly secrets were more of the norm than the weird or unacceptable. I started understanding that hope and what it meant for me after finally talking about this part of my life for the first time. It meant that I wasn't supposed to be alone. I wasn't meant to just live this life of complacency. With much prompting, I made the choice to take the class...a few times. With each time taking on a new part of the hurt and betrayal that was casted on me by the decisions of another.

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." John 10:10 NIV

When I began to understand the sacrifice, it was for Janice to teach this class over and over with women like me in mind, I knew that this was something I wanted to do in my heart but not in my head. I wanted to someday give up that comfortability and my story in the way that Janice did every time she taught the class and in the way she lived her life. I had no idea what that meant at the time, but a seed was planted.

In 2014 Kerry came to me and asked me to consider going on a church plant, I was stunned and just started crying and then to hear him say he wanted me to lead the Manasseh Ministry was far more terrifying. But here was my chance to test my faith and share that same story in the same way it was shared with me almost ten years before. And with that off I went...heart so full and so ready to be so brave. All those same attributes that I have seen in Janice with the start of every class. In the first six months of being on the plant my health took a downward turn, but my heart wanted to keep leading classes and keep helping those that I saw who were just like me. Over time however, I allowed the passionate seed was planted to slowly be strangled out by my circumstance and self-pity. I soon found myself back at the Crossings Wentzville unsure of what my "purpose" was in my limited physical means and well as a heart that was tired and worn.

NOW- Watering the seed

After some time in Wentzville my health and heart improved. But not without plenty of fight and struggle along the way with the help of my cell leader and many that had helped plant and water my seed of faith since the very beginning. I began putting that heart out there again unsure of what was to come. Then about a year and half after being back in Wentzville with my feet planted under me again God began to show me where I could be used. I received a text from Janice, while at Teen Camp, and she

asked me if I would be willing to help lead the Wounded Heart Class in the Fall. I had those same tears I had standing in front of Kerry years before. Me? Why? Again? Don't you understand we keep trying this and it doesn't seem to work. Why would Janice or God think that I can be used in this same way. I knew it wasn't something that was on my heart in the beginning but maybe just some misguided dream that I could be what those that went before me or I was too sinful or too broke to be used in the same way. After some prayer and talks I said Yes...Again. just knowing that this would be God and Only God that I would put my heart out there again and try my very best to complete this class. But not only did God use me to share my story and help lead the Wounded Heart again, he healed the part of me I never believed wholeheartedly could be. What Janice was saying to me in the very beginning was true, that the pain all of it can be used for good and now I get to see it walking around in the women that God has used me to help in their journey.

"Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." Revelation 14:15

We can be watered and grow in our green house where it is warm and safe, or we can go out to the fields and plant and water so others can receive the blessings I have received. To put ourselves out there, to open up about our pasts and be vulnerable is a daily sacrifice but we are also called to look into our wallets and bank accounts with that same sacrifice and vulnerability.

What are you investing in? Just as Janice invested her heart into me and others with the hopes of a return, a saved soul, and then that soul would hopefully remember the investment made and then RE-invest into someone else, we hope you will make a similar investment. Janice and I hope that you will plant and water seeds in other's hearts and invest into healing and saving souls with the hopes of them reinvesting into others.

LATER - A seed to a plant...

A seed, that was planted in my heart with no clear path other than to follow God, has grown. It has grown into a real live ministry. A ministry that has the same mission to go out and seek and saved the lost to reap the harvest given us. The helpless, hopeless, broken and abused that we have yet to meet but will one day be a part of the saved and we will wonder what life was like before them.

Think of someone you know because of the Crossing Church plant. What is that person worth to you. Write down what you would sacrifice for that person if they didn't know God?

Those people you just named or thought of are the people that are in the Columbia area. They are going to be members of The Crossings -Columbia. They may have a different name but a very similar story. Help us to change the lives of people by giving them a chance to know the same God that not only saved us but gave us an abundant life.

Q. What was that moment when you realized that seed was planted in you to share your story?

Q. Who did you share it with and who do you need to share so that seeds of faith can be planted in them?

Week 6, Day 2

FAITH & DEEDS



Ashlyn & Brett

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds... Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did...As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” **James 2:14-18, 21-22, 26**

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to struggle to put gas in your car, have enough food to last until the next paycheck or will the power still be on the next day? What about what life would be like if you had to ask yourself every day if the life you were living was worth it or if you had anybody that cared about you? You may think these questions are asked only on tv and in movies, but some people have these questions every day, you may even have been one of them. Many times, we look at these people and say, “I’ll pray for them”, or “God is the only one that can help them,” but this is the extent of our hope for them.

Ashlin and I (Brett) have had the opportunity to serve in the campus ministry for the past 6 years with many other students and graduates. During our time in the ministry, we have met many people from all over the world on and off the campuses of Saint Charles Community College and Lindenwood University. Many of these students come to college with the expectation of the next 4 years being some of the best times of their life and during this time they will make decisions that will impact them for the rest of their lives.

Over the past few years, we have seen the lives of the students and heard many of their stories about broken homes, filled with drug and alcohol abuse, divorce, violence, single parents, sexual and physical abuse and much more. It is sad that these students had to grow up in homes that were like this and had to live lives full of hopelessness and brokenness. But it is also inspiring because we get to show them that they can break the cycles of their family and teach them about who God is and the great plans He has for their lives.

Ashlin and I are recently married and during the past year, we have faced many difficult challenges. My brother passed away last October due to a motorcycle accident and then a month later we found out we had been chosen to go on the Columbia church plant. A few weeks later we found out that we were pregnant. Also, during this time we received confirmation that Ashlin had been approved to go to a 6-month training for the Army National Guard. This training is a required part of her contract that must be completed within the first three years after her graduation. During this time, we have seen how God takes care of us when we trust in Him and continue to serve and obey His commands.

One of the ways that we have already seen Him working during the difficult times is that we get to go on the church plant to Columbia. We believe that God will continue to work through us to impact students' lives. We have seen this already happen through the past church plants and the lives that have been changed because of faithful people who continued to obey God.

Q: What moved you to compassion today?

Q: What will you do to make sure your compassion results in action?

Q: How specifically will you be moved to action?

Week 6, Day 3

Followers & Leaders



D'Mitri Lewis & Macky Shedd

D'Mitri Lewis:

As I found myself roaming the campus of Alabama A&M University, it was obvious that there were many things wrong with the world around me. But more than that, there were so many things I sensed wrong within myself. My family and world were in complete shambles following my parents' separation and divorce. I found myself feeling stuck and merely existing. I longed for something to grab hold of that would bring newfound hope and life to the "empty shell" of a person I had become. Here I was in college dreaming like I had since I was a child. I want to do great things and make a difference in the world. Yet, I was unable to see and move past my hurts, confusion, and fear. I was plagued by my family's situation, life's troubles, and my own secret sin. I was desperate for things to be different. I longed to have a purpose that transcended the mess of the reality in my life and in the lives of so many around me. What could I possibly do, and where would I start?

That's when God brought Macky and the wonderful people in the CSO campus ministry into my life. I remember right away observing their boldness and passion for God and others. I was drawn in by the fact that they had the kind of lives I wanted so badly to have myself. I began attending campus ministry events, and as my campus minister, Macky was there to help me discover all of that and more could be found by following Jesus and seeking God's Kingdom first. After studying the Bible with him, I made the decision to become a disciple of Jesus Christ on September 20, 2010. However, as I've often heard Macky say, I had "too much school spirit and not enough Holy Spirit." This is where I ran into one of my 1st major sacrifices as a new Christian. I had to decide who and what I was going to truly live for. Would I pursue my lifelong dream of being an Olympic caliber track athlete and cling to a schedule consumed by school activities to "bulk my resume," or lay those things aside for the mission of Christ and his people? For some time, I allowed my selfish ambition to hinder my connection with others in my spiritual family. This kept me from experiencing God's best for me. But I'm grateful to God for Macky and others who loved me enough to tell me such hard truths. They helped me make tough but rewarding sacrifices for the sake of the Kingdom!

When I look at the relationship God has developed between Macky and me, it has most closely resembled that of Paul and Timothy than any other pair in Scripture. Macky, like Paul, continually extended me the invitation to "Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). However, it wasn't until I humbly responded to his offer with a wholehearted commitment to follow that God, that I was able to be effectively trained and raised up as a leader.

For several years I've shared life with Macky. On a daily basis, I've gotten to watch him deal with tough times with family, working in ministry, and much more. He gave me a real example of something I had not seen before--someone in the church who actually lives differently than the world. He would also open up about his struggles and the continual need to depend on God's mercy and grace. I'm eternally grateful to God for him and others who have been so incredibly generous to me! In 1 Corinthians

10:31-33, Paul highlights doing everything we do for the glory of God, while not causing others to stumble, and always seeking the good of others so that they may be saved. These things are vital in order to live the kind of life God desires as we set an example that others can follow. Although he is far from perfect, I've gotten to witness Macky model in his life the things emphasized by Paul in a way that I've been eager to imitate. I have not met many others who are as bold and passionate as Macky about sharing the gospel and saving the lost as Jesus and Paul did. For a good bit of my life, I've battled timidity and insecurity, but I've learned through Macky's leadership, as my spiritual father, how to have faith in God and love for others that overcome my fears. As a result of the generosity that I've been shown, I have been able to find healing and be changed by the gospel. By God's grace, I have also been able to help numerous teens, college students and others experience the same transformation. There's no way I would be the man of God I am today or able to lead effectively in any capacity apart from following God and godly leaders like Macky. Praise God for blessing me and us all with fathers and mothers in the faith. Their models of Christ-like service, teaching, and love help equip us to be what we need to be in the lives of others!

Macky Shedd:

Our lives are filled with moments that shape us...moments that are forever etched into our memories. One such moment in my life was the birth of my son, Nathan. I remember like it was yesterday. Everyone was gathered at the hospital and eager to find out if we were having a boy or a girl. I remember holding my wife's hand and trying to comfort her. I remember trying not to pass out. I remember praying and eager for our baby's arrival. Then the moment of truth came. The doctor handed me my newborn baby and said, "Here's your son". I remember the joy and excitement as I ran out to announce to family and friends that we had a son. I remember the long embrace I shared with my dad in the hallway as I broke down and cried on his shoulder. They were tears of pure joy mixed with fear and an incredible sense of responsibility. All at once it hit me like a ton of bricks! God had entrusted this little guy to my care. I was no longer just a husband. I was a father.

It was in my newfound role as a father that I would learn my greatest lessons of what it means to live generously and to be a leader in God's Kingdom. You see, an amazing thing about fatherhood is that it is not merely limited to a biological connection. The bible teaches us that we can have spiritual fathers in the faith and that we can be spiritual fathers for others. This is how the Apostle Paul described his relationship with his young disciple, Timothy. Likewise, this is how I think about my relationship with D'Mitri Lewis.

I met D'Mitri when he was a sophomore in college at Alabama A&M University and I was the campus minister. He was a young man that had all but given up on church and God when we met. Like many college students with unresolved hurts, he was hesitant to trust but finally gave our group a chance and started attending our weekly cross chats and devos. It wasn't long before D'Mitri saw something different in us than he had seen in other churches. He saw genuine love and seriousness in our lives about putting God's word into practice. I began studying the bible with him every week and on September 20th, 2010, D'Mitri was baptized into Christ. It is amazing to look back and think about the changes he has made and the transformation that has occurred in his life. D'Mitri went from a timid and confused college student to a bold and effective leader and when I moved from Alabama to Missouri, he became the full-time campus minister in my absence. After a year of serving as a campus minister in Alabama, D'Mitri also made the decision to move to Missouri and is now training and preparing to serve as the youth minister for our Columbia, MO church plant. D'Mitri is a humble and loving servant leader that longs to see lives transformed. I truly look at him as my son in the faith, and I could not be prouder of the man of God and disciple he has become.

In order to be a good leader, we must first be a good follower. D'Mitri is a great leader today because he was, and still is, a great follower. I feel about D'Mitri the way Paul felt about Timothy. In **Philippians**

2:20-22 Paul says of Timothy, *“I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.”*

Paul identifies three things about Timothy that are common among any disciple that would be a good follower and leader. The first is that Timothy had a genuine concern for the welfare of others. Secondly, he looked out for Jesus’ interests rather than his own. And finally, Timothy was a humble servant. These are the identifying marks of a follower and/or leader that lives generously. This is why Paul says of Timothy that he has “no one else like him”. Let me encourage you to identify the “Paul” in your life and follow them as they follow Christ. And identify your “Timothy” so that you can pour generously into their lives. May God be glorified through us as we follow and lead generously!

Q: How can I be a more generous follower? Leader?

Q: How well do I show genuine concern for others in my life? What are some things that hinder this?

Q: What are some of Jesus’ interests that I have been neglecting in my own selfishness? What changes do I need to make?

Q: Identify some ways I can humble myself and serve more generously in God’s Kingdom.

Week 6, Day 4

STARTING & FINISHING



Norita Cox-Giang Mullins

Norita

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. Ruth 1:1

Read the familiar again...I have heard this for years and as I set out to pen these words a verse, this verse that I had read so many times, jumped off the page. "There was a famine in the land." In 2004 I left the home that I loved. Famine is defined as a deficiency of something: a severe shortage of something. This was occurring in an area unfamiliar to me and that shortage, that deficiency was God. God placed it on my heart to move to this area along with my husband, my daughter and my son and daughter in law, and grandchildren to bring food to the famine-parched land. I had very little knowledge of where this path would lead, just as Naomi and her husband and sons didn't know where their paths were truly leading them. After they had lived in the land for ten years a lot of change transpired. Naomi's sons had married, and then her sons and husband died.

The Crossings Church plant is now almost 16 years old. Wow, so much has happened in those sixteen years, little did we know where God was leading us. Naomi made the decision to go back to her home and leave her daughters-in-law. However, Ruth clung to her and quoted a famous phrase, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. And the Lord deal with me, be ever so severely if anything but death separates you and me." Ruth 1:16-17 Naomi had obviously made a huge impact on her daughter-in-law, which is evident in Ruth 1:9, "Then she kissed them and they wept aloud and said to her, 'We will go back with you to your people.'" Naomi tried to send them back to their mother's home in Ruth 1:8, but they loved her and wanted to go with her. Orpah decided to go back to her home but not Ruth, she went with Naomi. Maybe the difference in Orpah and Ruth is revealed in the verses Ruth 1:9, "we will go back with you to your people" and Ruth 1:16-17, "your people will be my people and your God my God." Not only was Ruth going to make Naomi's people her people, but Naomi's God had become her God.

The impact Naomi had on Ruth is made very clear. A young woman who had another god or no god had come to know the one and only God. A young woman named Giang, from a foreign land who had no god has also come to know Naomi's God in the last ten years. This young woman is now willing to move once again from her home, The Crossings Church, to give that same hope to other young women who have foreign gods or no god at all. This is a home she truly loves but a home she wants to give to others.

Giang

Growing up in Germany as a child of Vietnamese Immigrants I was always unsure of my identity. Although it was the only home, I've known I felt like a foreigner. My heart was not deeply tied to anyone or any particular place because I have been hurt and betrayed so many times. Growing up in a tumultuous home, where I had to be a grown-up, I quickly learned to harden my heart towards all and trust nor love no one to numb the fear and pain.

The Crossings Wentzville was the first and only place that truly felt like home, where I felt safe. There I was taught how God could help me heal from the wounds of my past. I slowly learned who I was in God and that my purpose was to love him and others. Many times, I contemplated returning to Germany because if I stayed here long enough, I would give my heart to these people and their God. I knew I would not be able to leave if I did that. As someone who is a runner, who has never stayed anywhere for longer than 4 years at a time, staying was a great threat that ran in opposition to all my survival instincts. Ruth knew that she found a real home and a great treasure in Naomi and her God. That is why she could not bear the thought of returning to her old land.

When Naomi kissed the women good-bye, they began to cry out loud. They said to her, "No, we want to go with you to your people." The women cried together out loud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law Naomi good-bye, but Ruth held on to her tightly.

Being with Naomi, she learned what it meant to really be loved and cared for. There was nothing that could have kept her away. I have watched many come to God but when hard times hit they left the faith. They sadly returned to where they came from because they were too afraid of the unknown. Instead of moving forward and trusting God they settled and shrunk back.

Soon after Ruth and Naomi arrived in Bethlehem, Ruth went out to gather grains in a nearby field. Boaz the owner of the field quickly took an interest in her and began to reach out to Ruth. ¹⁰ Then Ruth bowed low with her face to the ground and said to him, "I am not an Israelite. Why have you been so kind to notice me?" ¹¹ Boaz answered her, "I know about all the help you have given your mother-in-law after your husband died. You left your father and mother and your own country to come to a nation where you did not know anyone. ¹² May the Lord reward you for all you have done. May your wages be paid in full by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for shelter."

*Eventually, Boaz and Ruth get married, together they fulfilled the prophecy and gave birth to a boy and they named him Obed. ²² Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of David. Who is the forefather of Jesus. **Matthew 1:5-16.***

Norita: I am confident that God will bless Giang as he blessed Ruth. A home where she has found God, with a purpose greater than herself. Like Ruth, Giang wants to die to herself and her desire to stay with her family (the Crossings Wentzville) in order to carry the food to another famine parched area.

Giang: It took the vision and dreams of 35 faithful people 15 years ago to plant the Crossings Wentzville, another 6 years ago 30 more people went out to plant the Crossings Innerbelt, finally three years ago 40 people went out to plant the Crossings Collinsville. This fall we will be able to send yet another group of Ruth's to a famished land desperate for the good news.

Over the past six years, the Innerbelt has become my home. I didn't know what to expect and we had many ups and downs, but I'm so thankful for the investment people made in the church plant. We've welcomed many new babies into the family. Real babies and babies in the faith. Many more Ruth's

have been reached and are learning to become Naomi's. Entire families have been saved and are now living for Christ. I'm awestruck at what God has done through, once broken people, who decided to cling to him and each other. This investment is worth everything because of the rich returns. Nothing else we invest in can save someone from spiritual death. Living life to the full requires giving to the full. I pray that we may become instruments of God's will so that in the next few years we will be able to celebrate the birth of hundreds of newly redeemed lives in Columbia and across all our churches.

Q. Would you be willing to pack up everything and move to another location because it would end famine in someone else's life? Why/Why Not?

Q. Are you helping to end famine in the lives around you where you are? Why/Why not?

Q. What can you do to become more generous so that you can help the starving around you?

A BITTERSWEET SEPARATION



Ben Mullins & Kerry Cox

Thousands of years ago there was a young boy named David. He lived in the country and took care of sheep but that is where the ordinary stops. He was in some way and for some reason drawn to God. He was a young boy for a time, one that fought Lions and bears to protect the sheep to which he was entrusted. God developed this boy into a mighty man who would slay giants and God's enemies in unprecedented swagger. David understood whom God was and that he was not a God, but The God. Many people believe in God and do nothing; David believed and trusted enough to put his whole life in God's hands. Due to David being a man after God's own heart, God arranged for him to be the future King of Israel.

At the same time David was growing up there was a young boy living in the Palace. The boy's life afforded him all of the luxuries you would expect of a prince. He wanted for nothing, except perhaps, a true relationship with someone who could understand him. One might think Jonathan would follow in the ideals of his father, the King of Israel, but their hearts were so very different. Saul was Israel's first King. He had grown to love his power and was willing to do whatever it took to keep his position and authority. No matter the cost he would never let go of the throne. Jonathan, according to the royal bloodline, would be the next king of Israel. The difference between these two men is that Jonathan has not forgotten who has given him the life he leads, Yahweh.

David & Jonathan seemed to be on a collision course that would, in most scenarios, lead to a hatred and disdain for one another. The amazing thing about this story is that instead of rivalry and competition it forged one of the greatest and most famous friendships of all time! David & Jonathan did not hate one another but instead loved and cared for one another as brothers. They were willing to lay down everything they had for one another. This is what the bible has to say about how close these two men were: *...the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.* **1 Samuel 18:1**

When it came to light that David would be the future King of Israel Saul tries to kill David. Jonathan could have turned on David but instead he embraced his brother and the loss of his throne. Jonathan began acting as a spy for David and relays all of his father's plans to his friend. Jonathan literally and figuratively gives all he has to his brother David. *"Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt."* **1 Samuel 18:3-4**

Jonathan's robe signified that he was the King's son and heir to the throne; without hesitation he stripped himself of the robe and his rite and gave it to David. Jonathan also hands David his armor and belt leaving him completely vulnerable. He trusted his brother not to harm and looked to David's safety above his own. His sword also given to David, which may not seem like a big deal but is actually astonishing. Most Israelites used

farming tools to fight. You see, just a few chapters earlier, we learn that there were only two swords in the Kingdom, King Saul's and Jonathan's. The Philistines would not allow the Israelites to have blacksmiths for fear of them making weapons; a sword was rare. Jonathan also gave David his bow. Jonathan was known for being a great archer and during one of David's songs he even writes about this beloved bow, it appears it was something Jonathan loved, a prized possession. Jonathan was a highly skilled and trained warrior. Not only does he give David these items but then follows it up by teaching him how to use the weapons. He gives David the tools, the approval, and the training necessary to take all that was meant for him. He sacrificed everything generously for David.

For these two men there was a great tearing at the parting of their relationship. They knew that things would never be the same again. Both David and Jonathan understood that for God's to come to fruition they would have to part ways. David would eventually become King while Jonathan would die in battle. David so loved his estranged brother that he took care of his family in the years that followed Jonathan's death.

Kerry

For Ben and I there was a tearful parting that occurred almost 6 years ago. We are two very different men, who grew up in different circumstances, but both being taught about the one true God. That same God brought us together 13 years ago not long after the Crossings Church was first planted in Wentzville. From the first night we hung out our souls were clearly knit together. Ben helped me to overcome the angst and mistrust I had developed toward male friendships. Although our parting did not mean goodbye, we had less opportunity to be together since the church plant left for the Innerbelt. We have fought to keep our friendship, but it is definitely somewhat different. Ben and I both knew and believed that this was necessary but were willing to sacrifice because we believe in what God is doing through our churches.

Ben

Moving to the US from Brazil was honestly one of the most scary and risky things I have ever done. Coming to a place where I did not know anyone while wondering what God had planned was nerve racking. I didn't know God was sending me somewhere I would find one of the most significant and meaningful relationships of my life. I've always felt lonely and prayed for true friendship. God set my fears to rest the first night I got here and has blessed me ever since with not only a friend I know loves me, but one that is truly unselfish. He opened up his house and brought me into his life, making me part of his family. My heart was at peace when I realized that he loves me and wants the best for me. The thought of sacrificing time, money, and tears was nothing compared to the idea of sacrificing one of my most important relationships, my best friend Kerry. God has blessed me incredibly here at the innerbelt and although the sacrificing is difficult, God is blessing me with even more brothers and sisters that I love so much and are able to have an incredibly blessed life because we were willing to risk for the God that is always faithful

The sacrifice of things that we love and care about shows God where our hearts are. He wants to open the floodgates and pour the blessings on us, but he needs to know what is truly important to us. Kerry and I have told each other that no matter what happens our love for one another is strong and it won't die, and it hasn't. However, we also understand that we must unselfishly give up our own wants to be able to show those who are still hurting and lonely the love that we have received. Giving up what we cherish is so difficult. No matter if we cherish money, time, or relationships, giving God control of these areas of life can be scary. It is our prayer that during this campaign we will all look into our hearts and ask are we truly willing to lay it all down for God, one another, and the lost?

Week 6, Day 6

OLD DREAMS & NEW VISIONS



Robert Cox

"Then, after doing all those things, I will pour out My Spirit upon all people.... Your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. Joel 2:28 (NLT)

Dreams and visions, in both present and future tenses are what Joel is delivering to God's people. In the first chapter of his book, Joel reveals his dream... a dream of what his audience was experiencing and about to experience in the very near future. While a personally delivered dream from the Almighty seems thrilling, in this case it is more terrifying because the first part of Joel's dream is the stuff of nightmares.

In a moment you will read Joel's words as he vividly describes an impending nightmare. As you read, please remember that while the events are things of the past, they are recorded for today, for us. The Apostle Paul reveals this in 1Corinthians 10:11 with the following words: *"These are all warning markers--DANGER!--in our history books, written down so that we don't repeat their mistakes. Our positions in the story are parallel--they at the beginning, we at the end--and we are just as capable of messing it up as they were."* One doesn't have to jump into the New Testament to understand this "for us" emphasis because in the third sentence of Joel's book he writes; "Tell your children about it in the years to come, and let your children tell their children. Pass the story down from generation to generation." You see, God and Joel understood that those who do not learn from History are doomed to repeat it. Here are some of Joel's words:

GOD's Message to Joel son of Pethuel: 'Attention, elder statesmen! Listen closely, everyone, whoever and wherever you are... " Make sure you tell your children, and your children tell their children, and their children their children. Don't let this message die out. "What the chewing locust left, the gobbling locust ate; What the gobbling locust left, the munching locust ate; What the munching locust left, the chomping locust ate. The fields are sterile. The very ground grieves. The wheat fields are lifeless, vineyards dried up, olive oil gone. Vineyards dried up, fig trees withered, Pomegranates, date palms, and apple trees--deadwood everywhere! And joy is dried up and withered in the hearts of the people. "What a day! Doomsday! GOD's Judgment Day has come. The Strong God has arrived...'food is just a memory at our tables, as are joy and singing from God's Sanctuary. "The seeds in the field are dead, barns deserted, Grain silos abandoned... "The farm animals groan...The cattle mill around. There's nothing for them to eat. Not even the sheep find anything. '

GOD! I pray, I cry out to you! The fields are burning up, the country is a dust bowl, forest and prairie fires rage unchecked. God's Judgment's on its way... almost here! A black day! A Doomsday! Clouds with no silver lining! Wildfire burns everything before this army and fire licks up everything in its wake. Before it arrives, the country is like the Garden of Eden. When it leaves, it is Death Valley. Nothing escapes unscathed. (The Message Paraphrase)

A more complete reading of Joel would reveal that in the middle of all the hopelessness are words of hope. It is as if God is saying, "It's not too late! Come back to me and really mean it!" But what does

it mean to come back to me and really mean it? The answer is important because it is only after this return is accomplished that the nightmare would end and the time of "young men seeing visions and old men dreaming dreams" would begin.

Please allow me, with the help of Joel and the Holy Spirit to answer this vital question. What does it mean for me, for us to "Come back and really mean it"?

1. It means that I allow God to change my heart and not just my actions.

That is why the LORD says, "Turn to Me now, while there is time. Give Me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning. ¹³ Don't tear your clothing in your grief but tear your hearts instead." Return to the LORD your God, for He is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He is eager to relent and not punish. Joel 2:12, 13

As the Living Generously Campaign winds down it is important to remember that the ultimate goal of the campaign was to create a generous heart in each of us. It is also important to remember that a generous contribution is not an acceptable substitute for a generous heart. In Joel's day the "tearing of the clothing" was supposed to be a demonstration of deep, godly sorrow but it had become a substitute for deep godly sorrow. What should have been a reflection of a new and changed heart became a cover for the old calloused heart. With that said, I want to encourage you to be very careful that you don't use a generous contribution to cover up an unchanged heart. Let God change your heart before you change the amount of your contribution.

2. It means that as God changes my heart, I change my actions.

That is why the LORD says, "Turn to Me now, while there is time.... Come with fasting..." Joel 2: 13

In Isaiah 58 we find that God's people had practiced a kind of fasting that only frustrated God. God uses Isaiah to reveal the reason for His frustration and what the people could do to remedy his it.

They come to the Temple every day and seem delighted to learn all about Me. They act like a righteous nation... They ask Me to take action on their behalf, pretending they want to be near Me. ³ "We have fasted before You!" they say. "Why aren't You impressed? We have been very hard on ourselves, and You don't even notice it!" "I will tell you why!" I respond. "It's because you are fasting to please yourselves. Even while you fast, you keep oppressing your workers... ⁵You humble yourselves by going through the motions.... Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the LORD? Isaiah 58:2-5 NLT

What could be done to remedy God's frustration is found in Isaiah's next words.

"No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. ⁷ Share your food with the hungry and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help. Isaiah 58:6, 7 NLT

The kind of fasting that pleases God, the kind that both Isaiah and Joel call for is the kind that causes the "faster" to change their hearts AND change their actions. It's about giving generously and giving up our selfishness because we gave our hearts to God. It's about surrender and sacrifice, and it brings about God's blessing. Both Isaiah and Joel confirm that it not only allows one to dream... it allows God to fulfill those dreams.

3. It means that I do these as an individual and we do them as a united community.

Blow the ram's horn in Jerusalem! Announce a time of fasting; call the people together for a solemn meeting." Gather all the people—the elders, the children, and even the babies. Call the bridegroom from his quarters and the bride from her private room. Joel 2:14

No one should be forced to fast alone. The community is assembled and united because it is how God empowers and blesses. I need your encouragement and challenge as you need mine. No one can be blessed as much alone as they can be blessed together. We are in this together!

From some of his last words (3:14), it is clear that Joel recognizes that many of his people remain undecided and uncommitted; "*Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.*" It is also clear that Joel realized that fulfilled dreams would only come from surrendered hearts.

In Acts 2, hundreds of years after Joel's dream resurfaces with an alternative ending. In the Acts 2 ending, thousands of people surrender their hearts to Jesus and the entire world is blessed.

Joel 2 was a nightmare and Acts 2 a dream come true. but now hundreds of years later you and I stand "in the valley of decision." It is my prayer that you and I... that we, the people of the Crossings will decide to live and give in such a way as to allow God to not only give us a dream and a vision but enable us to see them fulfilled.

REFLECTION/APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Q. In what ways, if any, has the Living Generously campaign changed your heart?

Q. Assuming that your heart has changed, in what ways has this changed your attitudes and actions toward your generosity?

Q. List a few dreams that you would like to see God fulfill that can motivate you to continue to live generously? They may be personal or congregational.