

The Inside of the ~~CUP~~ WATER BOTTLE

LIVING from the INSIDE OUT



The Inside of the Cup Water Bottle: Living from the Inside Out
Copyright © 2025 by Jeanie Shaw

All rights are reserved. No part of this book may be duplicated, copied, translated, reproduced, or stored mechanically, digitally, or electronically without specific, written permission of the author and publisher. Published in association with Theatron Press.

ISBN: 978-1-958723-72-2.

All Scripture quotations, unless indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV), ©2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Cover design by Roy Appalsamy and interior layout by Toney Mulhollan.

About the author: Jeanie Shaw is a teacher and communicator of spiritual growth, with a heart for helping others encounter God in everyday life. She received her master's in Christian Spirituality and Formation from Regent University and her doctorate in Spiritual Formation and Discipleship from Nazarene Theological Seminary. Jeanie serves as a Christian life coach, teacher, and spiritual director, journeying alongside others as they navigate both the beauty and the brokenness of life.



THEATRON
PRESS

www.ipibooks.com

Contents

Introduction

Workbook for Teens	5
--------------------------	---

Section I: Foundational Core

1. Who Is God Really?	7
2. Does God Really Want to “Friend Me”?	13
3. Who Am I Really?	18
4. Motivation and Core Values	23
5. When Life Just Hurts	30

Section II: Barriers and Opportunities

6. The Freedom of Forgiveness	34
7. Called and Capable: What God Sees in You	38
8. The Journey Isn’t a Straight Line	43

Section III: Practices, Integration, and Pathways

9. We’re Better Together	46
10. Gratitude—Seeing God in Everything	49
11. All In—A Life with Jesus	52

The Inside of the ~~Cup~~ Water Bottle:

Living from the Inside Out

Introduction:

Hi. I'm Jeanie!

When I go to Starbucks, I just give them the name “Nana,” because most people misspell my name. I am a Nana, and five of my grandkids are teens. I don't feel old, but to you I might seem ancient. I do know most of the teen vocabulary, but don't worry, I won't use it. I still get around, work out at the gym, and swim laps. I write books and poetry. I was married a long time, but sadly, my husband died several years ago. He had an awful disease, and I learned a lot through that difficult time. Now, I live with my two dogs, who are both quirky, but really sweet.

I was baptized when I was thirteen years old, so I've been a Christian a very long time. I knew it was a lifetime decision, and though I certainly haven't lived it perfectly, I am still following Jesus with my whole heart. At first, I thought a decision to become a Christian would keep me from having fun or would make me feel guilty when I did.

I was wrong.

I have come to know God as the One who really loves me and will stick with me through thick and thin. He will never die or leave. He was with me when I was struck by lightning and when I was held at knifepoint while threatened with a lot of bad things. He has been with me through all kinds of hard things, including losing my parents, my husband, and my two closest friends. And, he has also been with me through amazing joys and things I never thought possible.

I love the life I live with God!

I didn't have a teen ministry when I was a teen, and I never did a series of Bible studies, even though I knew a lot about the Bible. Somehow, Jesus still accepted me, loved me, and walked with me through all my ups and downs. I have attended church meetings since I was a week old. I knew I loved God and knew Jesus loved me so much that He died for me, and I also knew I needed His forgiveness.

I also knew that following Jesus was a huge decision, even though I was scared. God doesn't expect perfection, and *He loves me not for what I do, but for who I am*. That took me a while to believe.

Even though I'm now 71 years old, there is still so much to learn! I love learning, and I even went back to school to get my doctorate in Spiritual Formation, so I guess that makes me Doc Nana! I'm excited to share some of the things I've been learning—things I

wish I knew when I was your age. This book is the teen version of my book *The Inside of the Cup: Spiritual Formation from the Inside Out*. But let's be honest—most of you probably use water bottles, not cups. So, I gave the title a little update. If you've read this far, I hope you will keep reading!

In the chapters following we will consider:

- Who is God to you, really... and what do you believe about Him?
- How do you see yourself (which can get complicated since that can get confused with how you think other people see you)?
- What motivates you to be who you were made to be, including your purpose and calling?
- The ups and downs we face in life, including some hard stuff like pain, shame, and fear. (It's not always pretty, but remember, God isn't about looking for perfection! He is looking for a friendship with us, and we'll talk about what that means.)
- More about relationships and how to have healthy friendships.
- Ways we approach life—big picture views.

There is not a right or wrong way to read this book, so feel free to follow along at whatever pace works best for you! I've included spaces for journaling. If you aren't a journaler, I still encourage you to take some time to reflect on the questions. I'm thankful you are taking this journey with me. I pray that every person who reads this can discover a deeper understanding of God and how He loves YOU! Let's get going!!

Chapter 1: Who Is God Really?

When I was in first grade, I ran away from school.

Yes—ran away. On purpose.

It all started on a Monday, which was lunch money day. Every Monday, we were supposed to bring our lunch money for the week and hand it to the teacher first thing in the morning. But this Monday, I forgot mine.

Panic set in.

In my six-year-old brain, this was a serious offense. I imagined I would be sent to the principal's office... maybe even locked in some sort of school jail. I didn't know what the punishment would be, but I was sure it was coming—and it wouldn't be good.

So, I did the only logical thing I could think of:

I turned around, walked right back out the school doors, and ran all the way home.

Then I hid in the garage.

I had no plan beyond that—no food, no escape route. Just fear, and a firm belief that mistakes were not okay.

A neighbor saw me sprint into the garage and told my mom. She came and found me, gently asked what was going on, and reassured me that I was not in trouble. She took me back to school. When we got there, my teacher smiled kindly and told me something like, “You can always tell me if you forgot something. It's okay.”

That day, I learned something important:

I had assumed punishment.

But what I found was grace.

Looking back, I wonder—why did I assume the worst?

And what does that say about how we see authority... or even God?

Some people picture God as distant. Others think He's watching for mistakes. Some treat Him like a vending machine—or a demanding boss. How we see God changes everything about how we respond to Him. When we get the wrong picture of God, it's easy to want to run away, shut down, or try to earn His approval. But God wants more than performance—He wants to fill you up with something better.

What's in Your Bottle?

Nearly everyone carries a water bottle now—Stanleys, Hydro Flasks, sticker-covered Nalgene bottles. It's sort of like they're a fashion statement, sports equipment, and a survival tool all in one. We take them everywhere, refill them constantly, and kind of panic when we forget them.

What if your view of God is like your water bottle—something you carry with you constantly, whether you realize it or not? And what's inside that bottle? Is it full of clean, refreshing truth about God? Or is it a little murky, based on fear, confusion, or half-truths? Jesus is way more concerned with what is “inside of our cups” (our lives) than what they look like on the outside. He even taught about that, telling the Pharisees that if they cleaned the inside of the cup, then the outside would be clean (Mt. 23:26). We grow in our relationship with God from the inside out.

This book is about checking what's in that bottle. What is inside? Because what you carry with you about God will affect how you live.

Let's look at some of the different ways people view God—and how those views shape our relationship with Him.

But first, let's start with the big question:

Who do you think God is?

Not who your parents say He is. Not what you think you're *supposed* to say. Not even what your church might teach. I mean really—deep down. What kind of picture comes to your mind?

A bearded old man watching from the clouds? A cosmic cop waiting to catch you messing up? A super holy Being who likes boring music and wants you to stop having fun? A distant force you sort of believe in but don't really think about unless things go wrong?

Or maybe God feels like more of a myth—like something people made up to feel better. Or maybe you want to believe in God, but you don't feel anything.

Wherever you are with God, you're not alone. And you're not weird. But here's the truth:

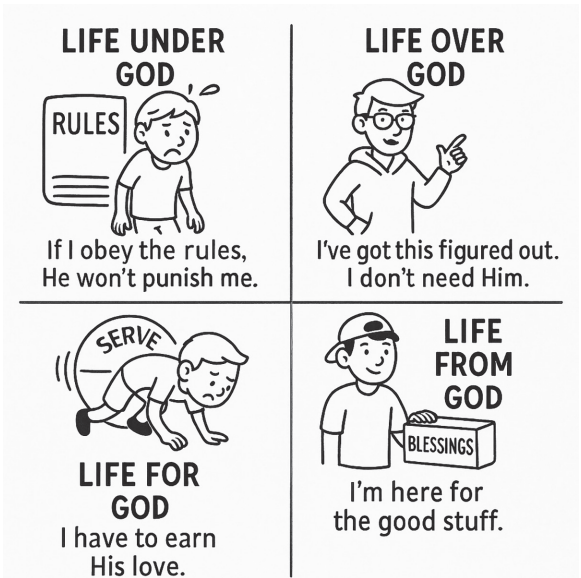
How you see God shapes everything.

What you believe about God will affect how you see yourself, how you treat people, how you pray (or don't), and what you think life is really about!

If you've ever wrestled with your image of God—if you've questioned, doubted, or been bothered by things you've heard or read...you're not alone. Asking good questions doesn't mean weak faith. It means you're thinking deeply and honestly, which is exactly what God invites.

Skye Jethani, in his book, *With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God*, offers helpful considerations for ways we view and respond to God. While there are some healthy ways to view life *under* God, *from* God, and *for* God, Jethani highlights some common obstacles to building a relationship with God. Here are a few ways people (maybe even you) view and relate to God. See if any of these sound familiar:

Different Ways to View God	What We Tell Ourselves	How This Affects Our Thinking
Life <i>under</i> God	"If I obey the rules, He won't punish me."	Turns God into a boss who demands performance
Life <i>over</i> God	"I've got this figured out—I don't need him."	Makes God irrelevant, like a system to control
Life <i>from</i> God	"God should bless me if I believe hard enough."	Turns God into a vending machine
Life <i>for</i> God	"I must serve Him constantly to be worth something."	Makes us believe our value depends on what we do for God—not who we are to Him.



But, since the beginning of creation, God shows He wants to be *with* us in relationship.



Have you ever been misunderstood? Maybe someone thought you were angry when you were just quiet. Or they assumed something about you that wasn't true. That can really mess up a relationship.

Sometimes, we do that with God. We misunderstand Him. We think He's distant, demanding, or disappointed—when really, He's inviting us into a relationship.

You may never fully understand God (none of us will!), but when you see Him through Jesus—kind, close, and full of love—you get the clearest picture possible. Let's keep looking for that picture.

Try This:

Circle the view of God that you've held the most.

Underline the one you *want* to believe more deeply.

Write one sentence to God in response. Be real.

A God of Blessing

What are words that people have said to you that mean a lot and make you know you are valued?

Maybe you have read stories or seen movies of people texting last words to friends or family because they are in danger and are afraid they won't see them again.

Or, when there is someone you want to be friends with, sometimes the first conversation tells you whether that person feels safe and can become a good friend.

Have you ever thought about God's first and last recorded words to people? It might surprise you to learn that they were blessings. Blessings aren't spells of protection or words to magically make something good. They acknowledge what is already good. The first recorded words of God to humans were a blessing:

"God blessed them and said to them..." (Genesis 1:28)

And the final words of Jesus? "When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven." (Luke 24:50-51)

A blessing.

And the final scripture in the Bible: A blessing.

"The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen." (Revelation 22:21)

God's first and last recorded words are blessings. That tells you something. He's not distant or harsh. He's good and acknowledging that we are created in His image. He looks at humans and said what He created was "very good." And He wants to live with us—not to control or use us, but to be in relationship. To bless us.

Who is this God who loves and blesses?

A Glimpse of God's Holiness

We might hear or say the words, “Holy cow!” “Holy crap!” “Holy cannoli!”

What in the world does holy even mean? The Bible often uses the word to describe God: holy. It means set apart. Different. Not like everything else or anything else. Not in a weird, untouchable way—but in a breathtaking, beautiful, powerful kind of way.

God's holiness doesn't mean He's distant. It means He's the source of everything good. That's why being near Him changes us. When we begin to see Him clearly, everything starts to shift. We stop settling for watered-down versions of life. We want more of what's true.

Question: *How would you describe a watered-down version of life? What would it mean to settle for a life that's full, and not watered down?*

How can we know what is true about God?

Jesus: The Clearest Picture

There's a line in the Bible that says Jesus is “the exact representation of God's being” (Hebrews 1:3).

So if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

And what do we see in Jesus?

- He welcomed the people everyone else avoided
- He healed hurting people
- He cried when His friend died
- He challenged fake religious stuff
- He forgave His enemies
- He let kids crawl all over Him

Jesus wasn't afraid of real life. And He didn't come to crush people. He came to show what love actually looks like.

In His own words, Jesus said:

- “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”
(John 10:11)

- “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry.” (John 6:35)
- “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness.” (John 8:12)
- “I am the resurrection and the life.” (John 11:25)

So no, God isn’t trying to make your life boring. He isn’t mad at you all the time. And He isn’t standing by waiting for you to fail.

God is better than we think. And He actually wants you to know Him.

Question: *What does it mean when Jesus says he is a good shepherd? What would that look like in my life? What do I think He means when He says he is the bread of life that keeps me from going hungry? What does it feel like when I am in the dark and find light, and what does Jesus mean by saying He is that light?*

Pick one of these descriptions of Jesus and put in your own words what this means to you.

Next up: What in the world is a relationship with God?

Chapter 2: Does God Really Want to “Friend Me”?

God wants more than belief—He wants relationship. But what does it mean to be in relationship?

That means communication. Connection. Honesty. Love.

And like every real relationship, it can include joy, anger, anticipation, even disappointment. That’s okay. You don’t have to be perfect or have all the answers. You just have to be *with* God. He wants you to know Him for who He really is, and He wants you to let Him know the real you...no filters.

Question: *What do I think it would look like to have Jesus as a true friend, a real relationship?*

What Was God’s Original Plan?

Before anything went wrong, God created a world filled with beauty, rhythm, and purpose. He made light and oceans, stars and animals—and then He created people. Not because He needed us, but because He wanted us. To be with us. To share love.

The Garden of Eden, where the first humans lived, was more than a paradise—it was a place where God walked with humans. No fear. No shame. No hiding. Just relationship. God gave them everything they needed to thrive, and one boundary. That boundary wasn’t to control them, but to protect them.

That’s what we often forget. God’s commands aren’t about taking away freedom. They’re about protecting love.

When we live with God—when our bottle is filled with His presence—we experience the life we were created for.

What Gets in the Way?

Before we talk about what breaks the connection, let’s think for a second about what a *real* relationship actually looks like. Relationships involve communication. Listening. Speaking. Feeling safe enough to be honest. They include emotion—joy, disappointment, love, and even anger sometimes. In a real relationship, you care about the other person. You show up. You want to be known.

A relationship with God can be like that, too. It’s not about religious performance or

simply “going to church” or being part of a youth group. It’s about connection. God is not distant or uninterested. He feels joy when we come close. He cares about our pain. He gets angry at injustice. And yes, He even feels grief when we turn away.

God doesn’t want something *from* you—He wants *you*.

So what gets in the way of that? Often, it’s our fear that thinks God is against us. And then we pull away, do our own thing, and miss the mark of God’s goodness for us.

Did you know that the word for missing the mark is “sin”?

Sin isn’t just about breaking rules. The word is an archery term and actually means “missing the mark.” It’s like aiming for something good, but veering off course. Sin isn’t about God trying to spoil the fun. It’s about the damage that happens when we choose things that pull us away from love, truth, and wholeness. When we veer off course.

We were made in God’s image. Very good. That’s how He described humans. Sin and the forces of evil try to take us away from that image, while God is always trying to get us back on track!

Appealing but Hurtful

Here’s the hard part: sin is appealing sometimes. If it weren’t, it wouldn’t be a problem or tempt us to miss the mark of God’s plan for us. Temptation to sin is sneaky, whether it appears in the forms of things like gossip, lying, sexual immorality, drunkenness, and pornography. These try to sneak in and tell us we need them to feel complete or accepted. The enemy of your soul doesn’t want you to know the real God. There’s actually a spiritual battle going on—a tug-of-war over your heart. Temptation doesn’t cause us to miss the mark. We miss the mark when temptation causes us to quit caring the most about living in God’s perfect plan and protection.

But here’s the better part: God wants you. He longs for relationship with you. He wants to complete and protect you. He loves you. For real. And He’s not waiting for you to be perfect. He’s simply waiting for you to come close. He wants to fill your heart and soul with the peace, love, and joy only He can bring in a relationship with Him. Sin is about breaking relationship and missing out on the protection, love, and goodness God wants you to know.

Question: *Do I see God mainly as punisher or One who truly wants to protect me?*

Muddied or Clear Reflection?

Think about what happens when you lie to a friend. Or when someone cheats, gossips, or betrays trust. The relationship doesn’t just feel awkward—it feels broken. There’s distance. Mistrust. Hurt.

That’s what sin does in our relationship with God. It creates a barrier. Not because God storms off, but because we’re turning away from what brings life and love.

God talks about sin not to control us, but to protect us. He knows what hurts us, what hurts others, and what keeps us from becoming the full, overflowing, living-with-purpose kind of people we're meant to be. And while He doesn't want us to hurt other people, He doesn't want them to hurt us either! He's talking to all of us.

Sin drains the bottle. It contaminates the water. It stops us from being the clean, clear reflection of God's image we were created to be.

Choosing Clothes

Imagine standing in front of two closets. One is full of trendy outfits that turn heads—but when you put them on, something starts to feel “off”. The fabric itches. It clings in the wrong places. And worse, it slowly starts to weaken you from the inside out. That's what it's like when we “wear” things like anger, pride, or lying. They might feel powerful at first, but they break us down. The other closet might seem less flashy at first glance, but everything inside fits just right—and makes you stronger. These clothes are labeled with things like compassion, humility, patience, and love. In Colossians 3:1–17, Paul tells us to take off our old selves and clothe ourselves with this new way of life. When we do, we not only feel more whole—we help others feel it too.



(Colossians 3:1-17, selected)

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things ... sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed... anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Journal Prompt:

Think about the “clothes” you've been wearing lately—your attitudes, words, or actions. Are there any that feel like they don't fit who you really want to be? What would it look like to take those off and put on something new from God's closet? Use Colossians 3:1–17 to help you imagine your new outfit.

God longs to protect us—which is why He keeps lovingly calling us back when we miss the mark. But how do you know when He is calling you? How do you see Him when

you can't physically see Him, text Him, or touch Him. He is always here, desiring our friendship, but sometimes, if we aren't aware, it's easy to miss His presence. So how do we become more aware?

Where Awe and Gratitude Come In — And the View from Space

It's hard to know someone if you're not paying attention.

That's why awe matters. I mean *really* awesome. NO CAP. (sorry, it just seemed to be the right word here) Awesome is so much bigger than a really good slice of pizza, a great sports play, or an influencer's makeup routine.

You ever stand under the stars and feel small but safe? Or hear a song that makes your chest ache in a good way? Or laugh with your best friend and think, *This. This is good.*

Those are moments when your soul is remembering something true. You were made to live connected to beauty, to joy, and to the God who created all of it.

Awe is simply paying attention and letting yourself be amazed—by the ocean, by someone's kindness, by the fact that you're breathing right now.

It's not just feelings. It's real stuff. And when we *take time to practice it*, we slowly start to change the way we see.

Astronauts sometimes talk about something called the “overview effect.” When they look at Earth from space, they say it changes them. They realize how small they are, but also how connected everything is. Boundaries disappear. All the fighting and comparing and proving ourselves seems kind of... silly. They come back different.

That's awe. It reminds us we're part of something much bigger—and Someone much bigger—than just our day-to-day stress. It reorients us toward wonder, truth, and trust.

Journal Prompt:

God is always near, but sometimes we miss His presence because we're distracted, discouraged, or unsure what to look for. Use the following prompts to help you reflect on how God might be calling you—even when He feels invisible. Reflect on these:

- A time I felt like I messed up, but God still loved me was when...
- I think God might try to get my attention through...
- One place I feel closest to God is...
- When I slow down and pay attention, I notice God's presence through...
- I want to be more aware of God by...

Final Thoughts

God is not a myth. Or a mad judge. Or a cosmic killjoy. He's the One who made you,

sees you, loves you, and wants to walk with you.

You don't have to fake it. You don't have to get it all right. You just have to be willing to ask:

God, who are You really? And do You want to know me, too?

Stop and Think:

- What do I *really* believe about God?
- Where did those beliefs come from?
- Have I ever experienced a moment of awe or unexpected joy that made me think about something bigger?
- What would it mean if God really is love—and wants to be close to me?

This is just the beginning. Next up: *Who am I?*

Chapter 3: Who Am I Really?

If we began with the big God question, here's the next one: Who are you?

Not your grades. Not your Instagram bio. Not your reputation or your family role. Who are you, *really*?

This is one of the biggest questions you'll ever wrestle with—especially as a teenager. Because let's be honest: the pressure is real. You're told to be confident but not cocky. Be yourself, but also fit in. Stand out, but not too much. Be chill, be deep, be successful, be liked.

It's exhausting. And confusing.

The Identity Trap

Here's the deal: when we don't know who we are, we look for something or someone to tell us.

Sometimes we think we *are* what we do:

- I'm an athlete, an artist, a nerd, a straight-A student, a mess-up.

Or what we have (or don't have):

- I'm popular. I'm poor. I've got looks. I'm smart. I'm anxious. I'm "too much."

Or what other people say:

- You're dramatic.
- You're hilarious.
- You're just like your sister.
- You're not enough.

But none of that really answers the question, does it? Because it keeps changing. People's opinions shift. Your moods change. Your achievements come and go. If your identity is based on things that move, you'll always feel a little lost.

Think about it:

- Have you ever just gone along with the crowd?
- Did you change how you acted or spoke just to be accepted?
- How did it make you feel afterward?

When we don't know who we are, we become who we think others want us to be.

We put on a front. We act fine when we're not. We try to be "on" all the time. We mold ourselves to fit whatever version of us seems most likely to succeed. We try to become

what we think will make others like us.

Why? Because vulnerability feels scary. Rejection hurts. Being left out stings. And so we adapt, hoping someone will tell us we matter.

The Foundation: You Are God's Beloved

Let's go back to the beginning. Before you were born. Before you achieved anything or failed at anything.

God made you.

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made..." (Psalm 139:13–14)

You are made in the image of God. That means you reflect something of Him just by existing. That's not motivational fluff—that's truth.

And here's more: when Jesus was baptized, a voice came from heaven that said,

"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17)

This was before Jesus had performed miracles, before His public ministry. God was already pleased.

That's what it means to be beloved.

You are not the labels others stick on you. You are not your achievements. You are not your screw-ups. You are God's beloved child.

Remember those water bottles people carry? Some of them are dented, covered in stickers, and beat-up—but they're still carried everywhere. They're reliable. Personal.

Think of your water bottle like your soul. What's inside matters. And when it's empty, cracked, or filled with stuff that doesn't belong, you feel it. God wants to fill you from the inside out with truth and love.

Even when you feel overlooked. Even when someone leaves you out. Even when you doubt yourself.

You are not a mistake. You are chosen by God.

The only One who will never leave you or forget you is God. And when your identity is anchored in Him, you won't be swept away when people disappoint you—and they will.

What the Bible Says About Who You Are

You might not always feel these things, but they're true:

- You are God's workmanship (Ephesians 2:10).
- You are chosen (1 Peter 2:9).

- You are fully known and deeply loved (Psalm 139:13–14).
- You are never alone (Hebrews 13:5).
- God has you engraved on His hand (Isaiah 49:16).
- You are someone God delights in and sings over (Zephaniah 3:17).



The Bible says you are engraved on the palm of God’s hand (Isaiah 49:16). That means you matter deeply to Him—so much that He carries you with Him always.

If God had a tattoo on His hand that reminded Him of you, what might it look like?

Use your imagination:

- What colors or symbols would represent who you are?
- Would it be a name, a picture, a word, a phrase, or something only you and God would understand?
- What does it say about how He sees you—even when you forget who you are?

Draw it, describe it in words, or both. Then write a short reflection:

- Why did I choose those images or words?
- What do they remind me about my identity in God?

And now imagine.....*God is singing over you.*

What kind of song would it be?

- A chill indie ballad?
- A rap verse with your name dropped in the beat?
- A heavy metal riff that shakes the ceiling?
- A country song with just enough twang to make it feel personal?

God’s song isn’t about impressing anyone—it’s about celebrating you. Not the version you perform, but the you He created and loves. What lyrics might be in His song of love for you?

The whole story of Scripture is about a God who invites us to live *with* Him—and when we live *with* God—trusting, walking, depending—our identity starts to settle. We stop performing. We start resting in who we are. God’s beloved.

God doesn't just tolerate you. He treasures you. And when you build your identity on His love, it doesn't crumble.

Letting Emotions and Approval Lead

It's easy to let your emotions define you. If you feel anxious, you think you *are* anxiety. If you mess up, you think you *are* a failure. If someone doesn't want you, you think you must not be worth much.

But feelings, while real, are not always true.

Your Creator gets the final word about who you are—not your emotions, not your peers, not your social status.

And not your social media feed.

It's wild how much we care about likes, follows, and reposts. We know it's just an app, but still—when you post something and it doesn't get much response, it can feel like you didn't matter that day. Why is that?

Because deep down, we're all looking for approval. We want to feel seen and valued.

But here's the truth: social media approval is a moving target. It rewards the version of you that gets attention, not necessarily the real you. And if you build your identity on that, you'll end up feeling hollow, anxious, or fake.

God's approval doesn't work that way. He sees you fully, loves you deeply, and isn't waiting for a better version of you to show up. You don't have to earn His attention.

Knowing who you are in Him frees you from living for likes. You stop chasing approval because you already have the approval that matters most.

But let's be real: caring more about what God thinks than what your friends, teammates, or followers think? That's hard! Really hard...and it can feel lonely.

It takes courage to care more about faithfulness than fame, to choose what honors God even when it's not trending. But when you're rooted in your identity as God's beloved, you'll find strength to be real instead of performing for others.

You're already known. Already loved. Already enough. And you don't have to edit yourself to stay that way.

So Who Are You Becoming?

God doesn't want you to stay stuck in shame or confusion. His Spirit (the part of Him He leaves with us here on earth) actually wants to help you grow into who you were created to be—from the *inside out*.

This isn't about faking perfection. It's about becoming someone rooted in truth of who God says I am.

Ask yourself:

- Who or what am I letting define me right now?
- Where do I feel pressure to perform or hide?

- What would it be like to actually believe I am God's beloved?
- How much pressure do I feel to succeed, achieve, or impress?
- Who am I if I'm not "good" at something?
- How would knowing I'm secure in God's love help me follow Jesus without fear?

Take some time to write thoughts:

Because when you know who you are, it changes why and how you live.

You follow Jesus not to prove something, but because you trust the One who made you. You choose what matters not because you're afraid to fail, but because you're loved no matter what.

And that's an identity no one's opinion can take away!

Next up: What drives you? Let's talk about motivation and core values.

Chapter 4: Motivation and Core Values

Let's get real: Have you ever done something just because of who might be there? Maybe you showed up to an event because your crush would be there—or maybe you skipped something because of who *wasn't*. That's motivation.

Or maybe it's more like: "I better not eat that leftover sushi before gym class," or "If I don't study, I'll feel sick walking into that test." Motivation isn't always about what we want. Sometimes it's what we want to avoid.

But here's the question: *What actually motivates you long-term?* And is it enough to help you become the person you want to be?

Short-Term Push vs. Lasting Drive

If you're anything like most teens raised around faith or church, you've probably felt motivated by a mix of:

- Trying not to disappoint people
- Wanting to "join the teen group"
- Hoping to stay out of hell
- Wanting to be seen as "good"

Some of those might work for a while, but they won't last. Here's why: they're mostly external. They're about pressure, not relationship. Obligation, not love.

And when pressure is your motivator, burnout is inevitable. It might be a trend, but it won't last.

When Love is the Why

1 John 4:19 says: "*We love because He first loved us.*"

That's the motivation that *actually* lasts. Love—real, deep, unconditional love—is what anchors you when things get hard, messy, or confusing.

God isn't asking you to prove yourself. He's asking you to know Him. To trust Him. To walk with Him.

Jesus didn't invite His disciples into a self-improvement plan. He invited them into friendship.

So what if we started asking:

- Do I follow Jesus because I trust His love?
- Or do I feel like I have to earn my place?

Rowing vs. Sailing



Have you ever been sailing, or at least watched someone sailing a boat? Or have you watched or been part of a crew team? Picture the differences between moving forward in a sailboat and in a rowboat.

Rowing is all about effort— as in trying hard to be more loving, more faithful, more godly. Sailing is about catching the wind of God’s Spirit and letting God empower your transformation.

Most of us default to rowing. We grip the oars and strain. But real change doesn’t come from rowing harder. The Spirit of God who wants to live in our hearts gives us the power to become what we were created to be.

Romans 8:11 says:

“The Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you.”

If we believe that, we can have access to the most powerful source of transformation there is. And if we don’t? There’s no reason to fake it.

The Resurrection Changes Everything

The resurrection isn’t just a church story. It’s the turning point of history. If Jesus really rose from the dead, then:

- He has power over death and darkness.
- His Spirit can bring life and power to your soul.
- Your story isn’t limited by your failures.

If He didn’t rise, then honestly—why bother with any of this? But history and faith point to a risen Christ. And if that’s true, it changes everything. I remember the days before I was baptized, mulling this over in my mind. *If it’s true, it changes everything.* I decided to stake my life on that truth, and in nearly sixty years as a follower of Jesus, I have never regretted that decision!

Not Just What You Do—Who You Become

Most of school and extracurricular life is focused on what you’ll do someday. Career. College. Skills. But here’s the bigger question: *Who do you want to be?*

That’s where core values come in.

Your core values are what you live by when no one’s looking. They shape your reactions, relationships, choices, and habits. They’re the “why” behind the “what.”

Jesus didn’t just teach rules—He taught values. Check out the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12.

- Blessed are the poor in spirit (*those who know they need God*)
- Blessed are the peacemakers (*those who help people get along and forgive*)
- Blessed are the merciful (*those who show kindness instead of judgment*)
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (*those who deeply want what is right and just*)

And then the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-25.

- Love, joy, peace
- Patience, kindness, goodness
- Faithfulness, gentleness, self-control

These are not personality traits. They're *formation traits*. They're what the Spirit grows in us when we walk with God. God gives us those, we just need to walk with Him. But what does it mean to walk with Him?

It means caring about the things He cares about, and caring about Him so we will intentionally learn these things.

What if we spent as much time learning these traits as we do on our homework, our sports, our college resumes? Or even our games or scrolling? Can you think of ways to practice this in any way like we practice things like soccer or violin? What might "spiritual formation" study groups with friends look like, as you think about study groups for math or science?

Core Convictions: What Happens If You Don't Start There?

If you don't begin with deep convictions—about who God is and what you believe about that—life will pull you in a thousand directions. When hard stuff hits, you'll flail. When success comes, you might lose yourself chasing what doesn't matter.

Building core values isn't about control—it's about *clarity*. And when your clarity is rooted in relationship with Jesus, your values grow deeper.

Here's a helpful filter:

Do my values reflect the kind of person Jesus is? Or am I mostly focused on achievements and appearances?

And, *why* does this matter?

Write down some of your core convictions. Things you really believe:

- Who is God to me?
 - What is my truest identity?
 - What is my main purpose in life right now? What do I want it to be?
 - How do I define my moral compass...my understanding of right and wrong?
 - What do I believe about my gifts (the things I do well)?
 - What do I believe about the importance of learning?
 - What do I believe about caring for God's creation (my body as far as health, exercise)? The planet?
 - What do I believe about the value of each person including those who aren't like me, those who are mistreated?
-
-
-
-

Values: The Topic of Sex

Let's talk for a minute about sex. It's something most teens think about—and for good reason. God made us with strong desires and real feelings.

But before we talk about boundaries or choices, let's go deeper. To the *why* behind it all.

God's Good Plan—Rooted in Relationship

God has always desired relationship with His creation. Not just to be believed in or admired—but known in a real, relational way. And, He knows us so well. Jesus echoed this when He said:

"I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." (John 10:14–15)

In fact, John 17:3 tells us, "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

Wait, what? Eternal life is more than pearly gates? We don't have to wait for eternal life until after we die?

That's right. Eternal life is about *knowing God*. A relationship with God is something that physical death cannot take away.

So what does it mean to know God, and for Him to know us?

There's a Hebrew word in the Bible: *yada*.

It means *to know deeply*—through experience, connection, and the senses. It’s used to describe the kind of deep relationship God desires with His people and shows up nearly 950 times in the Old Testament. So, knowing God and being known by Him must matter!

Yada is also the same word used when the Bible says, “Adam knew Eve”—here referring to sexual intimacy. This use of *yada* (know) makes clear this is not something casual or disconnected, but rooted in covenant love—the kind of committed relationship God created marriage to be.

Enjoying Good Gifts in the Right Context

Yes. God made sex to be good—just like He made sunsets, oceans, campfires, and French fries.

- Sunsets are stunning—but stay in the sun too long and you get burned.
- Oceans are calming—but a huge wave can knock you under.
- Campfires smell great—but get too close and you can get burned.
- French fries are delicious—but live on them, and your body will rebel.

All of these are *good gifts*—but even good things can hurt us when used outside their intended purpose.

Sex is meant to be enjoyed—but only thrives when kept within the boundaries God designed for it: the lifelong, loving commitment of marriage. That’s where it’s safest. That’s where it’s most meaningful. That’s where it reflects the kind of love God has for us. Otherwise, we miss the mark!

Why This Matters

In a world full of porn, sexting, crude jokes, experimentation, and pressure, it can be hard to trust God’s design. But I promise—it’s not just about rules. It’s about *relationship*.

God isn’t trying to take something good away from you. He’s offering something far better.

Real intimacy. Real knowing. Real love.

And real protection for your heart, body, and future.

This is hard.

God’s design for sex—and for all our choices— isn’t always easy to follow, especially when emotions run high and friends say, “*Do whatever feels right.*” But God doesn’t leave us to figure it out alone. He doesn’t just give us boundaries—

He gives us help. This isn’t a self-help chapter. It’s a *Spirit-powered* invitation. The Spirit of God doesn’t yell at you to do better. It desires to live in you. It whispers truth. It strengthens. It reminds you of who you are.

You are:

- Loved
- Known
- Called
- Empowered

And that’s where it all starts.

Not with pressure or fear—but with knowing God and being known by Him.
That’s how your deepest values take root and how real transformation begins—
from the inside out.

Pause and Reflect:

- What motivates me most right now? (Be honest.)
- What are some core values I want to hold onto, even when no one’s watching?
Why are they important to me?

- Where do I feel pressure to be someone I’m not? How can God’s love help anchor my identity?
- When it comes to things like sex or relationships, what messages am I hearing from the world? What would it look like to trust God’s design instead?

- How might knowing God—really knowing Him—reshape how I make decisions about my body my boundaries, and my relationships?
- When have I sensed the Spirit whispering truth to me—or reminding me of who I really am?

-
-
- Which of the Beatitudes or Fruits of the Spirit do I most want to grow in?
 - How would my life change if God's love became my core motivation?

-
-
-
-
- What kind of person do I want to become—and what values will get me there?
 - Thoughts:

Next up: Let's talk about how forgiveness shapes us—and why Jesus came to make all things new.

Chapter 5: When Life Just Hurts

This chapter is for every teen who's ever whispered, "I'm fine," but really wasn't.

You don't have to look far to see hurt. Sometimes, it's obvious—like a fight with someone you trusted, a deep loss, or something someone did to you that still stings. It's friends who talk about you or families that fight and don't get along. Other times, the pain is hidden. You smile at school, text like everything's fine, but inside it's like carrying a backpack filled with bricks—and you can't take it off.

Maybe you've been ghosted by a friend. Maybe someone crossed a line, and you didn't know how to speak up. Maybe you're carrying secrets you're too afraid to tell. Maybe you're just tired.

If you've ever wondered:

- Why do I feel so heavy inside?
- Why can't I just get over this?
- Why do I feel so fake sometimes?

This chapter is for you.

God doesn't ignore pain. He meets us in it. But to find healing, we've got to talk about the things we usually try to hide.

What's Really Going On?

Sometimes what we feel on the outside—anger, anxiety, or emptiness—comes from something deeper. Like...

- Grief, or sadness we don't fully understand and so we haven't named the feelings
- Bitterness that's quietly growing
- Shame we've never talked about

When we don't name our real emotions, they can sneak out in ways that surprise us—through sarcasm, isolation, snapping at people, or just feeling numb.

Here's the thing: these feelings don't make you weak. They make you human. And God doesn't want you to fake your way through them—*He wants to walk with you through them.*

Sometimes we feel shame, and sometimes we carry guilt. God can free us from both.

Shame and Guilt: What's the Difference?

Guilt says, "I did something wrong."

Shame says, "I *am* something wrong."

Shame whispers, *You'll never be enough*. But Jesus says, *You are worth dying for*. Jesus didn't come to shame us—He came to *free* us.

But what do we do with the hurt that still lingers? The questions we're afraid to ask out loud? That's where lament comes in.

Lament: When Life Feels Unfair

Ever felt like screaming into a pillow or hitting a wall with your fist because everything is just too much? That might be closer to prayer than you think.

Lament is a word that may seem unfamiliar, but it's in the Bible a lot. In fact, almost a third of the Psalms are described as laments. And there is even an entire book in the Old Testament named "Lamentations." Lament is the honest communication to God about what feels unfair, what is hard. It's raw. It's how you say to God:

"This hurts."

"I don't get it."

"Why are you letting this happen?"

"I'm having a hard time finding you—but I know.... I need You."

Complaining vs. Crying Out: What's the Difference?

Let's face it: life can be hard. Things go wrong. People let you down. You feel confused, hurt, or angry..

But what do you *do* with all that?

There's a big difference between complaining and lamenting—and God actually welcomes one of them.

Complaining is...

- Talking *about* your problems, but not taking them to God.
- Focusing on what's wrong without asking for help.
- Giving up or blaming everyone.
- Like venting without any hope.

Lament is...

- Honest—but it turns to God.
- It says, "This hurts," and "I still believe You care."
- It asks questions *and* invites God into the pain.
- It doesn't fake being fine—it trusts God with what's *not* fine.

Jesus lamented. He cried out. And He wasn't ashamed to do it. On the cross, He cried out, "My God, why have You forsaken me?" In the Bible, there's a woman named Hagar

who was mistreated and ran into the desert. She cried out, and God didn't ignore her. He met her there. She named him *El Roi*—"the God who sees me."

David, Job, Esther, and Naomi all lamented. They didn't pretend. They cried. They yelled. They asked "Why?" But they brought it all to God, not just to their friends or social media.

Bottom Line:

Complaining distances you from God.

Lament draws you closer to Him.

God isn't scared of your emotions. He invites you to bring your hurt into the conversation—not shut Him out of it.

Your pain is not invisible. God sees. Let Him hear what you feel, even your disappointments and what you don't understand. That's the kind of communication that makes relationships real. When we hide our feelings, it's hard to feel close.

When we talk to God honestly, it opens the door to being honest with ourselves, too.

Vulnerability and the Masks We Wear

God asked powerful questions. When Adam and Eve hid, He asked:

- "Where are you?"
- "Who told you that?"

Jesus asked people who were hurting:

- "Do you want to be well?"
- "Woman, why are you crying?"

He wasn't playing games. He was helping people look inside. You can, too. Look inside and as you do, think about it with God or talk to Him about it.

Have you ever said, "I'm fine" when you definitely weren't?

We all wear masks. We pretend. We perform. We hide.

But healing starts with honesty—with vulnerability.

You don't have to take off your mask with everyone. But do with someone. Especially with God.

Start here:

- What am I carrying that I've never named?
 - Who do I pretend to be so people will like me?
 - What lie do I believe about myself?
-
-

Vulnerability takes courage. But it also brings healing. You don't have to carry it alone. God sees you, walks with you, and wants to heal what hurts.

Try This: Write Your Own Honest Prayer

Start with:

"God, I don't understand..."

or

"This hurts because..."

End with:

"But I know You see me. And I need You."

Next, we will learn how to find freedom through forgiveness.

Chapter 6: The Freedom of Forgiveness

There once was a boy who carried a heavy backpack everywhere he went. At first, it was just a few books titled: *All the Times I've Messed Up*, *Things I Regret*. But over time, he added more books... about the words someone said that cut deep, the friend who betrayed me, the mistakes I can't undo. Some books others snuck into his pack—and he carried those too.

The backpack got so heavy he couldn't run, couldn't play, couldn't sleep without feeling its weight pressing down.

One day, he met someone on the road who looked straight into his tired eyes and said,

“You don't have to carry all that.”

The boy hesitated. “But it's mine. Some of it... I deserve. And some of it... I'm afraid to let go of. If I drop it, will the pain disappear?

Or, will I disappear too?”

The man knelt beside him and gently opened the pack. One by one, he lifted out the burdens. Some, he named. Others, the man simply held.

“I carried this already,” he said. **“Let me carry it again.”**

The boy wept as the backpack grew lighter.

Then the man handed him something new—not a burden, but a feather-light satchel. Inside was grace. Peace. A blank page.

“You're not what you carried,” the man said. **“You're free now.”**

Forgiveness is hard. But carrying bitterness or shame is harder. God doesn't ask us to do what He hasn't already done—He forgave us first.

Forgiveness isn't easy, and without God's forgiveness as our example, it would feel impossible. Without His forgiveness, we would continue to carry heavy burdens. But sometimes it is hard to forgive—because life is often hard and feels unfair. When we don't forgive, it affects the way we think and feel. It can feel hard to let go. It's sort of like eating poison and expecting the other person to die. They may have no idea what we carry, while meanwhile anger and hurt live in our head. When we don't feel forgiven, it can feel like carrying heavy bricks in our backpack.

In the last chapter, we talked about how life hurts.

This one is about what we do with that hurt.

As we dive into this chapter, think about these questions:

- Who might I need to forgive?
- Where do I need to receive God's forgiveness?
- What does forgiveness even look like?

The truth is, we've all been hurt and we have all hurt people. Maybe not on purpose, but we've messed up. And we've hurt God, too. That's why forgiveness isn't just something we give.

It's something we receive.

And that's what the cross is all about.

When we mess up, He doesn't say, "Fix it and maybe I'll love you."

He says, 'Let me carry that so you can be free.'

Forgiveness: Letting Go Without Letting Someone Off the Hook

Let's get something straight:

- Forgiveness is **NOT** pretending something didn't hurt.
- It's **not** forgetting.
- It's **not** saying what someone did was okay.
- It's **not** letting someone keep hurting you.

Forgiveness is about choosing not to carry the weight of what someone did to you forever. It's about putting them on God's hook instead of yours.

Sometimes we think if we forgive, we're saying "It didn't matter." But forgiveness doesn't erase pain—it releases *you* from being stuck in the pain.

Forgiveness Doesn't Always Mean Reconciliation

Let's be clear: You can forgive someone—and still keep boundaries.

Forgiveness doesn't mean you let someone keep hurting you. It doesn't mean you stay silent or small.

You can forgive and also say: "That wasn't okay."

You can also ask for forgiveness...and know God will give it even if a person doesn't.

If someone's behavior is unsafe or toxic, talk to someone you trust. Boundaries aren't mean—they're healthy. Maybe it's a toxic friendship. A parent who keeps yelling. Or someone who crossed a line and never apologized.

The Forgiveness Boomerang

And forgiveness goes both ways. Maybe you need to forgive someone. Maybe you need to forgive *yourself*. Maybe you need to receive forgiveness.

God's forgiveness isn't like a teacher reluctantly giving you a second chance on a test to see if you will pass next time. It's more like a parent rushing in when you're hurt, holding you, and saying, "You're still mine. You're not disqualified. You're loved."

You might think, I don't deserve forgiveness. Guess what? None of us do. That's what makes it grace.

You are not your worst moment. You are not the thing you wish you could undo.

The Good News: A New Start, A New Birth

You are not stuck. Thankfully, Jesus showed us what forgiveness looks like.

Even while He was on the cross He said “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34). That doesn’t mean what they did wasn’t horrible—it was. But Jesus didn’t let their cruelty control Him. No wonder, when Jesus taught His disciples about forgiving others they responded, “Increase our faith!” It’s hard to forgive, especially when life isn’t fair.

Jesus came to make us new. Not polished. Not fake. New.

He invites you into a different kind of life—one where shame and guilt are washed away. A life where you are not alone. A life filled with grace. Grace you receive, and grace you can then give.

God’s Forgiveness isn’t like—and is like....

A lot of people think Jesus came to make us feel bad so we’d straighten up. But that’s not what He did. Jesus didn’t come to shame us—He came to free us from the kind of shame that keeps us stuck.

On the cross, He faced rejection, mocking, and humiliation, the very things that make us feel worthless or alone. The Bible says He endured the cross, scorning its shame (Hebrews 12:2). That means Jesus didn’t let the shame of the cross define or defeat Him—and He doesn’t want it to define you either.

Jesus never sinned. He wasn’t broken or dirty. But He entered our world fully, taking on the weight of our sin and the shame that often comes with it. He stood in our place, not because He was guilty, but because He loves us that much.

God’s forgiveness doesn’t come with a lecture. It comes with open arms.

That’s what baptism is about. It’s not a to-do list or a religious checkbox. It’s a relationship and friendship with God. It’s new birth. It’s stepping into the water and rising up into a new life. Free. Forgiven. Living with the Spirit of God.

The Bible says:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

And in Romans 6:3-6:

“Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Jesus doesn’t say, “Fix yourself.” He says, “Come to me.”

Baptism isn't about being perfect. It's about being new. It's how God says, *You're clean now. Let's begin again—together.*

No wonder Jesus' teachings are called the Gospels. It literally means, "good news." And, this, friend, is very good news.

So go to Him. With your grief. With your bitterness. With your fear. With your questions. He invites: *Come and be made new.*

Pause and Reflect: Don't rush past these questions. Sit with them. Write your thoughts below—or talk to someone you trust.

- What would it feel like to believe that God isn't disappointed in me—but delighted to welcome me?
- What do I need to forgive?
- Is there something I'm still hiding that needs God's forgiveness?
- What does an apology sound like, and why or why not is it important?
- Do I believe God wants me—even with all my pain?
- What if I let him carry the weight I've been holding?
- What would it mean for me to believe I could be made completely new? What holds me back from stepping into that kind of life with God?

This isn't the end. It's a beginning. Jesus is offering you a full cup—poured out with mercy, filled with love.

Let him fill you. Let him free you. Let him love you—all the way to the inside. That's what grace does.

Let's talk next about our calling and purpose.

Chapter 7: Called and Capable: What God Sees in You

Do you ever wonder what God sees in you? What your real purpose in life might be?

What's My Purpose?

A wise man sat on his porch with his dog at his feet, looking out at the fields. Suddenly, a rabbit darted out from the tall grass. The dog saw it and tore off after it, barking wildly. Other dogs nearby heard the barking and joined the chase—but one by one, they gave up. Only the man's dog kept going.

A visitor asked, "Why did only your dog keep going?" The man smiled. "Because he's the only one who saw the rabbit. The others were just running after the noise."

Here's the question: Are you chasing something real—or just following the noise?

It's easy to run with the crowd. To want what everyone else wants. But what happens when that doesn't satisfy? When you realize you're not even sure what you're chasing?

That's where calling begins. Not with noise, but with vision.

God's Call Starts Young

Have you ever wondered, "What's the point of all this?" Maybe you've felt pressure to figure out your future, to make your life count, or to be good at something impressive. It's easy to feel behind or unsure.

But here's a truth not everyone tells you: God doesn't wait until you're older to call you. He doesn't wait until you have a perfect plan, a polished life, or a big platform. He calls you now—just as you are.

And that calling isn't always about what you'll do someday—it's about who you are today, and who He will help you become.

Throughout the Bible, God called young people to do big things:

- **Mary** was likely a young teen when she was chosen to carry Jesus. God trusted her courage, even when others wouldn't understand.
- **Jeremiah** tried to say, "I'm too young," but God replied, "Don't say that. I've appointed you." (Jer. 1:6–7)
- **David** was anointed king as a teen—but still served in quiet ways first.
- **Joseph** received God's vision through dreams while still a teen.
- **Timothy** was told, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you're young." (1 Tim. 4:12)

Even Jesus began teaching in the temple at age twelve. And when He started his ministry, He called teens and young adults to follow Him. Not perfect people—but those willing to grow.

Your age doesn't disqualify you. It's actually a powerful time to listen for God's voice.

When You Think, “Not Me”

You might think, “What do I have to offer?” You're not alone.

- **Moses** said, “I'm not a good speaker.”
- **Gideon** said, “I'm from the weakest tribe.”
- **Esther** was terrified—and yet saved a nation.
- **Paul** persecuted Christians—but Jesus called him anyway.

God has always used people who thought they weren't enough.

He's not asking you to impress Him. He's inviting you to trust Him.

What Does Calling Look Like?

Calling isn't just about your job someday. It's how you live now. It's showing up to school, your family, your community, with your heart open to what God wants to do through you.

Sometimes calling shows up in small ways:

- Sitting with someone who's alone at lunch.
- Speaking up when you see injustice.
- Praying for a friend going through something hard.
- Volunteering without needing to be noticed.

Jesus called his followers to care for the hungry, the hurting, the lonely, the unseen (see Matthew 25:35–40). He still does.

The Beatitudes: A Different Way to Live

Early in Jesus' teaching, He delivered a message that gets to the heart of how we are to live in the Kingdom of God. (That's the life that never ends where Jesus is king.) Jesus described His kingdom with a list that sounds upside-down. These are often referred to as the Beatitudes.

The word *Beatitudes* comes from the Latin word *beatus*, which means “blessed” or “happy.” (God continually wants to bless us!) When the Bible was translated into Latin (called the Vulgate), each of Jesus' statements in Matthew 5 began with *beati sunt*—“blessed are.”

So the name “Beatitudes” basically means:

“The Blessings” or “The Blessed Sayings.”

Why Are These Verses Important?

In Matthew 5:1–12, Jesus opens what has been called His *Sermon on the Mount* with a radical description of what a blessed life looks like—not from the world’s view, but from God’s view.

Instead of saying “blessed are the powerful” or “blessed are the successful,” Jesus says:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit (humble)
- Blessed are the meek (gentle)
- Blessed are those who mourn (grieving)
- Blessed are the persecuted (suffering for doing right)

These weren’t just feel-good quotes. They flipped the script on what people thought success and spirituality looked like as Jesus describes the result of living this way. The poor in spirit and those persecuted will have the kingdom of heaven; the meek will inherit the earth; those who mourn will be comforted, and many more upside-down blessings. The beatitudes describe the kind of person God calls us to be to know the blessings He desires for us.

You won’t hear these values on most highlight reels. But this is the kind of life that changes the world.

When you live this way, the Spirit of God grows fruit in you: Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control.

These things aren’t flashy, but they’re powerful. They shape how you walk through pain, how you treat others, how you forgive, how you listen, how you stay kind when others are cruel.

Think about...

Have I ever seen someone make a difference because they lived out a beatitude or fruit of the Spirit? How does it make them impactful? Have I ever been that person? What beatitude or fruit of the Spirit made me that way in that situation?

From Gifts to Purpose

God created you with a purpose. You have gifts, even if you haven’t discovered them yet.

Maybe you're good at noticing when someone's hurting. Maybe you love organizing things, or music, or taking care of animals. Maybe you're a thinker. A dreamer. A helper. A leader. A listener.

Every one of those is a gift God can use.

When we follow Jesus from the inside out, those gifts become part of our calling. We don't use them to earn love or approval—we use them to show love.

Our “calling” grows as we grow. Sometimes it's quiet. Sometimes it changes over time. But the call to follow Jesus is always with us. We just need to keep hearing and following it.

When the World Shouts...

The world around us says: Be successful. Be popular. Be perfect. Be known.

But Jesus says: Be faithful. Be kind. Be brave. Be mine.

Your calling won't always match what's cool or admired. It might lead you to care about things others ignore. To sit with the kid no one notices. To speak up when others stay silent. To dream of a better world—and actually do something about it.

That takes courage. But you are not alone. He wants to walk with you. Always.

The Voice That Calls You

Jesus isn't calling you to perform. He's calling you to come.

He takes shame and replaces it with grace. He takes guilt and gives you new life. *He invites you into relationship—not a checklist to perform.*

This is why being raised to new life matters. It's not just as a “step” to check off, but is a way of saying, “Yes. I believe. I want to walk with Jesus in new life.” It's not about being perfect. It's about being joined to the One who knows you, sees you, and still says, “Follow Me.”

You don't have to have it all figured out. You just have to say yes.

Reflection Prompts

- What do I care deeply about?
- How do the “upside down” teachings in the beatitudes challenge my values?
- Is there something I feel drawn to change, fix, or stand up for?
- What gifts or passions might God have placed in me?
- Where do I hear the quiet voice of Jesus saying, “Follow me”?

Thoughts:

You're not too young. You're not too late. You're not too broken.

You are called. You are gifted. You are invited.

Remember the rabbit at the beginning of the chapter? Let's always keep it in sight.



Chapter 8: The Journey Isn't a Straight Line

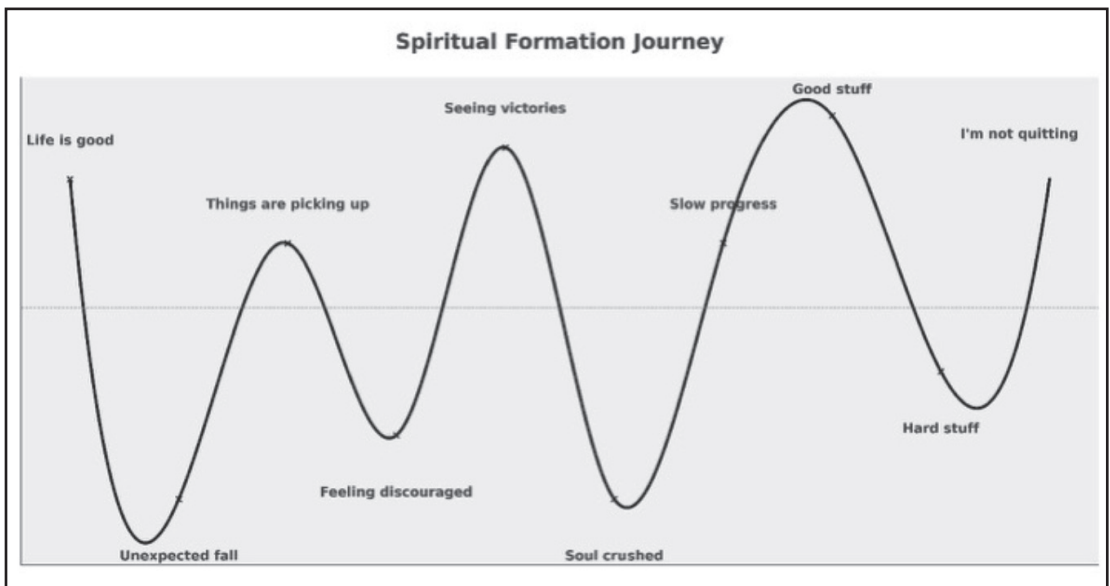
Not Always Up and to the Right

When we think about growing in our faith or becoming who God wants us to be, it's easy to imagine a steady climb. Like a graph going straight up. Always getting better, stronger, holier.

But real life doesn't look like that.

It looks more like hills and valleys. Highs and lows. Sometimes we feel close to God. Other times, we feel lost or tired or like we've totally messed up. And guess what? That's normal.

Your spiritual journey is not broken because it has dips. That's part of the path.



Elijah: On Fire and Burned Out

There's a story in the Bible about Elijah (1 Kings 18–19). He was a prophet—someone who spoke for God—and he had just seen something amazing happen: fire came down from heaven to show God's power. Epic win.

But right after that, things didn't go how he expected. He was threatened, afraid, and ran away. He sat under a tree and wanted to give up. He was exhausted. Depressed. Done. And how did God respond? Not with shame. Not with "Get it together."

God sent an angel who said, "Eat. Rest."

Then later, God came close—not with a big dramatic display, but in a gentle whisper.

Sometimes that's all we need to start healing: a nap, a snack, and the reminder that God is still with us.

For teens, who are often carrying pressure, stress, and not enough sleep—this story is gold. Your struggles don't scare God. He knows what you need, and He meets you in gentle, kind ways.

God Speaks in Whispers

Elijah didn't find God in the earthquake, the fire, or the storm. He found Him in a quiet whisper. And we still can, too.

Sometimes God speaks through Scripture. Other times, through a moment of peace. Or through a lyric, a sunset, a friend's encouragement.

That's why it's important to slow down enough to listen. Because the world is loud. But God's love often comes soft.

The Bible: Our Roadmap and Storybook

The Bible isn't just a rule book—it's a story. Actually, it's a library full of stories, songs, prayers, and letters. Different books, written in different styles, all telling one big story: God's love for people.

It's got:

- History – showing how God worked through real people in real places.
- Poetry – like the Psalms, expressing joy, fear, questions, and praise.
- Prophecies – messages from God that spoke to injustice and also pointed forward to Jesus.
- Gospels – the life and love of Jesus.
- Acts – the story of the early church as led by God's Spirit.
- Letters – written to Christians and young churches, helping them live out their faith in their challenges.
- Apocalyptic writing – like Revelation, filled with images and symbols that show how God is ultimately victorious.

The Bible shows how God has always been reaching toward us, even when people walked away. It's about brokenness, and beauty, and the way God sent Jesus to bring us back.

When you read the Bible, ask:

- What's God showing me about his heart?
- How does this connect with my story?
- How does it help me walk with Jesus today?

Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."

Not a spotlight that shows everything. A lamp. Enough light for the next step.

He's With You on the Road

Jesus didn't just teleport from miracle to miracle. He walked. A lot. Through villages. Along dusty roads. Even after He rose from the dead, He chose to walk with two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). He wanted to talk with them. To know them and for them to know Him.

If Jesus walked, maybe we don't need to rush so fast.

Spiritual formation isn't about speed. It's about presence. Becoming. Taking the next step.

And when you hit a hard season, or feel like you've messed up, or wonder if God still sees you—the answer is yes. Always yes. He sees and hears you.

He walks with you. He waits for you. He whispers your name.

Reflection Prompts

- Have I ever felt like my faith was “stuck” or not growing?
- What are some ups and downs I've experienced lately?
- Where might God be whispering to me?
- What's a picture or place that reminds me God is near?
- What's a verse I want to carry into my week?

It's okay to be in the valley. It's okay to feel tired.

This journey isn't about perfection. It's about walking with the One who loves you.

One step. One moment. One whisper at a time.

And here's the beautiful thing. He doesn't just give you Himself. He gives you people. When you feel low or stuck, He often shows up through a friend who listens, a mentor who prays with you, or a small group that holds you up when you can't stand on your own.

You weren't meant to walk this road alone.

That's where we're headed next: how God forms us not just through quiet moments and personal prayer...but through community.

Let's take the next step—together.

Chapter 9: We're Better Together

You Weren't Meant to Do This Alone

A lot of people say, “Faith is between me and God.” And while that’s true in one way, it’s not the whole story.

Faith is personal, but it’s not meant to be private. Love requires relationship. God’s love is expressed in oneness as the Father, Son, and Spirit. Together as one and expressed in different ways—sort of like fire that has a visible flame, heat that can be felt, and fuel that allows it to exist together. Together, the Father, Son, and Spirit created the world. And us. In God’s image. Made for relationships.

Even Jesus didn’t do life alone. He had close friends. He shared meals, cried with people, prayed with others. If Jesus needed community, we definitely do too.

You were never meant to follow Jesus by yourself.

Real Friends Make You Better

It’s great to have friends who make you laugh, play sports with you, or send you memes. But if you’re trying to follow Jesus, you also need at least one friend who helps you grow in your faith.

- Someone you can be honest with.
- Someone who reminds you of what’s true when you forget.
- Someone who prays with you or encourages you when life feels heavy.

You don’t have to be perfect for each other. Just real. The Bible says, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17).

The Power of a Mentor

When I was 14, I was a new Christian and not sure what I was doing. But I knew one thing: I wanted to grow. So I asked a woman I looked up to if we could spend time together.

Sometimes I helped her with her kids. Sometimes we just prayed. I didn’t know it then, but I had found a mentor—someone who helped me see what faith looked like in real life. And, I had a few friends who also sought to live for God. We talked a lot.

You can pray and ask God to bring a mentor into your life. And if you see someone who inspires you—ask. Say, “Could we talk sometime about faith?” It doesn’t have to be formal. Just intentional.

What Church Is (And Isn't)

Church isn't just a building or a Sunday thing. It's not about sitting in rows or being told what to do.

The church is people. It's a community of Jesus-followers helping each other grow.

You don't have to be in a big group to be part of the church. Church isn't somewhere you go. It's who followers of Jesus are. Two people praying together? That's also church. A group of teens encouraging each other to do what's right? That's also church.

Jesus said, "Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20).

Formed in Friendship

There are more than 50 "one another" verses in the Bible describing relationships for those who follow Jesus. These include instructions like:

- Love one another
- Encourage one another
- Forgive one another
- Pray for one another

You can't do these alone. They're meant for community. For friendship. For walking with Jesus together.

Real community isn't perfect. Sometimes people let us down. But even in the hard moments, God can use others to form us—and use us to love others well.

What Kind of Friend Are You Becoming?

It's easy to focus on what kind of friends we want. But also ask: What kind of friend am I becoming?

- Do I cheer others on?
- Do I bring peace or drama?
- Do I help people feel seen, known, and safe?

You don't have to have all the answers. Just be someone who reflects Jesus with kindness and honesty.

When "Church" Has Been Hard

Some people reading this might feel like church or someone who is part of a church community has hurt them. Maybe you felt ignored, judged, or overlooked. If that's you, I'm sorry.

But please don't give up on what church is meant to be.

The church is God's idea. And even when people mess it up, God still uses community

to heal and shape us. It’s worth finding people who love like Jesus.

And you can help create that kind of space—for others who are also looking for belonging and truth.

Let’s Build Something Together

You’re not too young to make a difference. You don’t have to wait until you’re older to lead or love well.

Remember: Jeremiah was young when God called him (Jer. 1:6–7). Mary was likely a teen when God chose her to carry Jesus. Timothy was young when Paul told him, “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young” (1 Timothy 4:12).

You are part of the story now. So find a friend who sharpens you. Be a friend who shines light. And ask God to help you build community where love is real and faith grows deep.

Because we’re better—together.

Search: In your Bible or Bible app, look for the words “one another” or “each other.” Think about what these verses mean and how you can put them into practice.

Reflection Prompts

- Who helps me follow Jesus?
- Have I ever had a mentor? What could it look like to ask someone to help me grow?
- How can I be a better spiritual friend to others?
- What’s something good (or hard) I’ve learned from my church or faith community?



Next up: Gratitude. Because when we grow in community and walk with others, we start to see more of what God is doing—and how much we have to be thankful for.

Chapter 10: Gratitude – Seeing God in Everything

What Is Gratitude, Really?

Let's be real—being told to “be grateful” can sometimes feel annoying. Especially when things are falling apart. But here's the truth: gratitude isn't just about saying thanks when life is good. It's a way of seeing and a way of being.

Gratitude means noticing what's good, even when life is hard. It's not pretending everything's fine. It's choosing to say, “Even in this, I can see God.”

It changes us. It makes us stronger. It pulls us closer to God.

Jesus lived with gratitude. He gave thanks before meals, before miracles, and even in hard moments. Gratitude was part of who He was.

And He's not just asking you to be thankful. He's thankful for you.

Gratitude, Awe, and Praise—What's the Difference?

Let's break it down:

- Gratitude is recognizing what God has done and saying thank you.
- Awe is that deep “whoa” feeling when you realize how big and good God is.
- Praise is showing that gratitude and awe—through words, music, prayer, even silence.

These don't just happen because someone tells you to be more spiritual. They grow as we pay attention to God's presence.

God-filled Moments: Picture, Scripture, Fixture

Here's a way to grow gratitude and awareness in your real, everyday life:

Picture – Notice something around you. A moment that feels special. A kind word. A sunset. A laugh.

Scripture – Let it remind you of something God has said.

Fixture – Let it stick with you. Let it shape how you see your day.

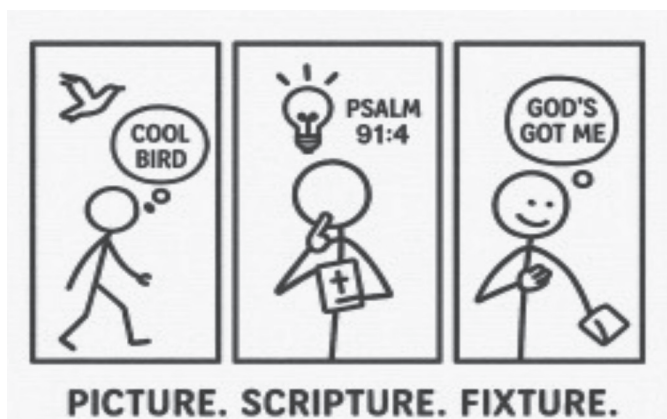
Examples:

- You see a bird soaring and think of Psalm 91:4, “He will cover you with his feathers.” Let this remind you that God watches over you and cares about you.
- You grab that water bottle and remember that Jesus promises to be living water that quenches thirst as John 4:14 states. “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.” As you drink from your water bottle, try to remember who it is that fills your empty places, grateful for the living water only He can give.

- You see someone helping another person or standing up for someone being mistreated and you remember Micah 6:8, “Act justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly.” This reminds you to do likewise and brings gratitude for God’s justice and mercy.

Start noticing. Gratitude grows from paying attention.



Why It Matters

Gratitude does something powerful inside us. It:

- Pulls our eyes off ourselves
- Loosens fear’s grip
- Fills us with peace
- Builds joy (even if we’re sad)

1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, “Give thanks in all circumstances...” Not because everything feels good—but because God is still good.

What If I’m Not Feeling It?

I totally get it. Sometimes life is messy. You might feel mad, numb, or tired. Gratitude isn’t pretending. It’s pausing.

Remember lament? The Psalms are full of honest prayers. Some shout praise. Others cry out, “God, where are you?” Even Jesus, on the cross, quoted from the lament in Psalm 22, finding words to His pain, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

God welcomes honesty.

Start small:

- Thank him for the breath in your lungs.

- Thank him for a safe place to sleep.
- Thank him for a verse that reminds you He's near.

These tiny thank-yous are like bricks that build something strong over time.

A Practice to Try: Gratitude Conversations

Try this:

- Each morning or night, tell God 3 things you're grateful for.
- Say them out loud. Like a real conversation.

It could be:

- "Thanks for giving me a friend to talk to today."
- "Thanks for that moment when the sky looked cool."
- "Thanks for pizza. Honestly."

And then listen. Sometimes, you'll sense a smile in your spirit. A gentle whisper, like: "I'm glad you noticed."

Even in the Hard

Gratitude doesn't cancel grief. You can feel deep sadness and still whisper, "God, thank You for not leaving me."

That's the kind of gratitude that transforms us. It teaches us to trust.

Reflection Prompts

- What's something small I'm thankful for today?
- Where have I seen beauty this week?
- Is there a verse or song lyric that helps me feel peace?
- Have I ever noticed God in something ordinary?

Gratitude isn't about being fake. It's about paying attention.
And once you start noticing—you might realize:
God's been showing up all along.

Next: So what does this have to do with me?

Chapter 11: All In – A Life with Jesus

The Life Decision

Let's be honest—have you ever been halfway into something? Maybe it was a group project you didn't really care about. Or a relationship where your heart wasn't in it. Maybe even your faith sometimes feels that way—one foot in, one foot out.

But here's the truth: following Jesus is not about halfway.

It's a life decision.

Not a club to join. Not a checklist to complete. Not a performance to perfect. It's a heart-to-heart relationship. Real. Deep. All in.



Jesus Was Asked the Big Question

One day someone asked Jesus, “What’s the most important command?” He didn’t give a rule list or a religion manual. He said this:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” ...The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:30-31)

All your heart. All your soul. All your mind. All your strength.

That’s the kind of love He gives you. And it’s the kind of love He invites you to give back.

From Head to Heart

It’s easy to think about God with our head—facts, verses, theology. But a real relationship with Jesus goes deeper. It reaches the heart.

It’s like falling in love—you notice everything: the sound of their voice, the way they light up when you’re around, how you feel when you’re with them.

That’s what it means to walk with Jesus, to follow Him. He doesn’t want your performance. He wants you.

Why This Matters So Much

When we see God as just a judge or rule-giver, we miss His heart. But when we realize He’s the one who sees us, loves us, and wants to be with us—we begin to change.

You don’t have to earn His love. You don’t have to be perfect. You just have to be willing to follow.

Even when it's hard. Even when your friends don't get it. Even when you feel alone.
He goes with you.

This Relationship Isn't Easy—But It's Worth It

Sometimes following Jesus feels lonely. Not everyone will understand. You might feel pressure to hide your faith or go along with the crowd.

But Jesus walks a better path. It's not always easy—but it leads to life.

He brings:

- Light into darkness
- Order into chaos
- Healing into hurt
- Care into apathy

When we say “yes” to Jesus, we're joining Him on His mission in the world. We join Him bringing light to darkness, order to chaos, healing to hurt, care to apathy. We become part of something bigger than ourselves. We walk with Him—and He walks with us, all the way home.

Once, when some people were afraid to follow Jesus, He asked His disciples if they also wanted to leave. Peter answered Jesus, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68)

That's a very important question. Who else has the words of eternal life?

That's what it means to be all in. He's it. This is what matters most.

A Journey begins with a step

This is the journey. A life of being seen, known, and loved by God. Not from a distance. But up close. Not because you're perfect. But because He is.

This chapter doesn't end the story—*it begins yours*.

You were created for a *life with God*. A real, full, all-in relationship. He's not asking for perfect answers. He's inviting your whole heart. So what will you bring?

You have your cup (or water bottle) to be filled by God. With Him, the inside of the water bottle can become like a fountain. As you are filled by God's love, you begin to overflow into the lives of others—inviting, not forcing, them to know God too.

Reflection Prompts

- What would it look like for me to go “all in” with Jesus?
- What do I think is holding me back?
- Who is Jesus to me right now—in my real, everyday life?

- How do I want to grow in my relationship with Him?

No one can walk your journey for you. But you never walk it alone.
Jesus is already walking with you—step by step, all the way home.

Jesus,
You know me. You see my heart.
You walk beside me—when the road is clear and when it's not.
Help me say yes to You again and again.
Give me courage to follow, even when it's hard.
Give me love that goes deep,
Faith that holds steady,
And hope that never quits.
You are the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
So I'll walk with You—
step by step,
day by day,
all the way home.
Amen.



Jeanie Shaw's books are available at
www.ipibooks.com and Amazon.com

