

## WEEK 3: EXERCISE #1

Can we *really* live for Jesus? Is it actually possible to get beyond our SELF so we can live for Christ? The apostle Paul thought so. Turn in your Bible to Colossians 3:1–2. Read these two verses. Paul teaches in these lines that as we surrender our lives to Jesus, our thoughts and behaviors will reflect that decision. We are to set our hearts, minds, thoughts, and eyes on Jesus. Anything that prevents us from doing so is sin. Sin is anything that separates us from the Lord. The old and dark keep us from the new and light of Christ, and sometimes it is the subtle stuff that does the most damage to our spiritual growth.

### Read Colossians 3:1–2.

Read these two verses aloud.

How does Paul’s teaching work in real life? In your journal make two columns. Make the heading of one column “Old/ Dark.” This column is for those things in our life that keep us from living the way Jesus wants us to live. These are thoughts and habits that have become a barrier to spiritual growth. In this list, include any behavior or thought pattern more focused on SELF than on God or others. Also list mindsets and even hurts that have kept you from encountering Jesus. Be honest. List things you would not normally want to share in church. This is between you and Jesus.

Now move to the second column. Label it with the heading “New/ Light.” Paul tells us that because we have been raised with Christ we are to set our hearts on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand

of God. What are the things you hope for, dream of, look for, see, treasure, desire, give, and love? This list is for the habits in your life that point to Christ. These don't necessarily represent accomplishments so much as efforts or desires to move in the right direction.

Take time right now to complete these two lists. Ask God to reveal to you the places in your life you might not usually acknowledge as barriers or blessings.

## Encounter

Now that you have your list, place it in the presence of God. See yourself sitting before God—the One Who Loves You Most. Hold each item up before Him and ask Him to reveal to you the source of these wounds, habits, or memories. Ask for forgiveness if you need to. Ask Him to give you strength to make changes in your life where they are needed. Ask God for courage and strength to move forward—into the light. Ask Him to forgive you for pitching tents in the dark.

For each item that represents a move in the right direction, give thanks to God for progress. Celebrate with Him those practices, people, and purposes that encourage you to live in the Kingdom of Christ. And acknowledge that even in light of your best and worst, God loves you so dearly. In Christ, there is no shame!

Before leaving this place of prayer, allow God to respond to your prayers by reading aloud the promise of 2 Corinthians 12:9. "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"

# JESUS

ENCOUNTER

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." How does this verse inform your life?

Memorize 2 Corinthians 12:9. You might even want to write it in big letters across the lists you've made, as a promise that seals both the good and bad with God's creative grace.

## WEEK 3: EXERCISE #2

*Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*

—John Newton (1725–1807)

*“John Newton, Clerk; once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.”*

These words are inscribed on John Newton’s tombstone. Newton was the son of a sea captain who joined his father’s ship at the age of eleven. His mother died when he was very young. He led an immoral life, full of rebellion and failure. “He was rejected by his father, in trouble with all his employers, and finally jailed and degraded. In later years he served on slave ships, where he so incurred the hatred of his employer’s Negro wife that he became virtually a slave of slaves.”<sup>1</sup>

His actual conversion was the result of a violent storm in which he almost lost his life. Surviving the storm, John Newton became a minister at the age of thirty-nine. He gave the rest of his life to serving God. During that time he wrote many hymns and never forgot the experience of being shaken to the core when he almost died. He relished the undeserving grace and forgiveness he received for all his sins. John’s heart was profoundly stirred by the fact that Jesus died for him because He *loved* him. In the light of that saving grace, Newton stood amazed.

Read Ephesians 2:8–9. Now read it again, this time substituting your own name for the personal pronouns in the passage (i.e., “It is by grace, *Carolyn* has been saved”). Does personalizing the truth of this passage deepen its meaning for you? How does this message amaze you?

## Encounter

Describe an experience in your life that shook you to the core. Journal the memory of that experience. Where were you in that time of your life? Where was God? What questions were you left with? As you look again at that experience, do you see ways God might have worked positively through that season to build character or faith into your life? Not that God *caused* it, but that He worked *through* it? Where do you sense assurance of God’s presence?

### WEEK 3: EXERCISE #3

**Read Genesis 1:3–4; Job 12:22; 1 John 1:5–7; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Revelation 22:5.**

Compare the themes of these passages. How are light and darkness described or contrasted?

Who are the main players in all these Scriptures?

What do you learn about light as you read these passages?

List the places the light shines.

**Read John 3:19–21.**

This passage is in the same paragraph as what is arguably the most recognizable verse in the Bible: John 3:16. And as powerful as John 3:16 is, these verses that follow are every bit as profound and practical. John teaches us here the fundamental truth of light and dark. In the spirit realm, things left in the dark are under the control of the enemy, who loves the cover of darkness. In the dark, he can deceive and lie. Things brought into the light are under the control of Jesus and in the realm of truth. No wonder we're encouraged in the Scripture to confess! Confession isn't about shame or guilt! It is about bringing our weaknesses under the power of Jesus, who loves us and is on our side.

Are there memories or habits in your life still lurking in the darkness?

Can you see how the secrets in your life are controlled by the enemy?

What steps do you need to take in order to bring every part of your life into the light of Christ?

## Encounter

Music can stir the soul in a very tender way. Some songs make such an impression on us that just the tune hummed years later will evoke all kinds of emotion. A love song from our teen years can bring back strong memories beyond the song itself. A hymn may evoke feelings of security if your church memories are warm (likewise, if your growing-up church experience was not so great, a hymn can evoke a visceral reaction).

Is there a song from your early life (sacred or secular) that has strong emotions attached to it—either good or bad? What comes to mind when you remember this song? Is there a song that encourages your spirit? Write the lyrics of that song in your journal and reflect on why it means something to you. If you can, sing it as an offering to God. Thank God for music and art that bring light into life and give expression to our deepest feelings.

### WEEK 3: EXERCISE #4

Our teaching comes from John's Gospel where he tells of a miracle healing by Jesus of a man born blind. Read the whole story in John 9 now. After you read the story, we'll continue with a closer look at the various scenes.

#### **Read John 9:1–12.**

In the culture of Jesus' day, to be blind likely meant being resigned to a life of begging; otherwise, you'd starve. When they meet this blind man, the disciples see the same man on the road that Jesus sees. He is sitting by the road begging, pleading, maybe even desperate. Listening for sympathetic voices, craning for someone nearby who might give him something. This is a man in need. Yet, because of their cultural biases, the disciples who see him have questions but no help. When they look at him, they only see "sin."

Jesus, on the other hand, sees an opportunity for transformation. He talks with him, touches him, then commands him to "go and wash." The man is so transformed by the experience that people who have known him his whole life no longer recognize him. This is the effect of going from darkness to light! The miracle happens in a moment; the effect of this encounter with Jesus will last a lifetime.

Describe the extent of this man's healing. What changes for him the day he encounters Jesus? Think about his lifestyle, his mental state, his relationships, his spiritual life. Think what it meant for this man to go from a dependent life to freedom. Journal the change.

How are the disciples changed by this experience? What perspective shifts do they encounter as Jesus engages this man and heals him? How does that mature their understanding of Jesus?

**Read John 9:13–34.**

In verse 13 we read that the man born blind is still being led by others. We also notice that his life is beginning to change. Light is taking over darkness. Note that his transformation is a process, not an event (sound familiar?).

In verse 14, we find treasure! Here is the reason for bringing the man before the Pharisees. And here is why Jesus uses His own spit. Remember that this miracle takes place on the Jewish Sabbath. One of the oral traditions of the Pharisees—a tradition they elevated to the same level of authority as the Holy Scriptures—was that “they forbade anyone to spit on the Sabbath lest the spit run downhill and make mud.”<sup>2</sup>

And yet, Jesus uses His own spit to heal a man, then He sends him to the Pool of Siloam. This pool is situated right in the middle of the crowds gathered for the Feast. That’s no coincidence! This is not Jesus’ usual, quiet miracle-making. This is Jesus making a point. And making it loud and clear.

The real treasure is not in the healing. It is in the mud and in the Sabbath! “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” That was the irreducible law of the Pharisees. In their quest to keep the laws, they had become blind to the real needs of real people. They’d lost the heart of God in the letter of the law.

Every age faces this danger. In our culture, in our time, what are the risks that might leave us spiritually blind?

What one thing do you know now (that you may not have always known) that has helped you to see?

How might you make the main lesson of this section—that legalism can keep us blind to the needs of others—into a personal prayer? Write that prayer in your journal.

### **Read John 9:35–41.**

Jesus seeks out the man and is now asking the questions. The miracle happened in a moment in the beginning of the chapter but the transformation of his heart was a gradual change as the man born blind began to really see Jesus for who He was.

In verse 37, Jesus says this in response to the man's question about the Son of Man: "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." The Greek word used here for "seen" is *horaō* and denotes the "physical act of seeing and gives prominence to the discerning mind."<sup>3</sup>

*Horaō* is the perfect word for what has just happened. The man now sees in the physical sense of that term, but he also discerns truth as he hasn't before. His blindness was not just physical, for now he proclaims Jesus as Lord and worships Him. His inner eyes have been opened to a revelation of *the* Jesus!

## Read John 3:19–21.

John teaches us that light and dark cannot occupy the same space. Those things we leave in the dark (hoping we can hold on to our old habits and old self) will be under the control of our spiritual enemy. Those things we bring into the light will be exposed to Jesus for healing and transformation.

Given the offer on the table, what keeps people in the dark?

What is keeping *you* in the dark?

## Encounter

Life moves fast. We fill our twenty-four hours and wish we had more. Taking time to enjoy the moment is a rare skill. We are much more likely to go from moment to multitasking. One of the lessons of this story is in the disciples' response to the man born blind. They asked the wrong question about his life. We, too, are prone to ask the wrong questions because we don't slow down enough to see what we're actually looking at. One of the hallmarks of the emotionally mature spiritual life is the ability to slow down so we can be more effective in the things we do.

Today, would you be willing to take ten minutes to enjoy either the sunset or the sunrise? Turn off your phone, set your iPad aside, and simply sit and watch. Then journal your experience. What do you notice about the light and the darkness?

## WEEK 3: EXERCISE #5

Okay, so we've been shaken *and* stirred . . . now what? In our story of Jesus and the blind man, there is a directive. Imbedded in the blind man's healing is the instruction to "go." That's a command for all of us. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus tells His followers to "go and make disciples of all nations." The spiritual equation is this: change = charge. When an encounter with Jesus changes us, we are charged to go and share what we've received. Jesus is ours but not ours to hoard.

Change = charge. As the Word shapes you, how can you live out this spiritual equation in the coming week? Whom can you serve? What can you do together with your group to reach beyond yourselves? One group helped a family move in to their new home (not a family that attends their church!). Another person bought Bibles at a yard sale and gave them away. Two women made casseroles and delivered them to an elderly woman in need.

How will you respond to Jesus' command to "go"? Choose a project that puts you face to face with someone in need. Make it doable (grand plans are wonderful, but seldom make it off the drawing board). Learn the names of those you serve. Stay in touch. Build a relationship.

### Encounter

What key principle have you learned from this story? Write a personal prayer that reflects this principle and your desire to see it lived out in your life.

Note the steps in healing of the man born blind. First, Jesus went to him. Then He struck up a conversation. From there, physical healing

happened. Gradually, the man's heart was changed. The next time Jesus encountered him, the man was able to see Jesus for who He was. Then he worshipped.

What things in your life do you have the power to change? Which of these do you need to seriously consider overcoming for the sake of physical or spiritual health? Eating? Smoking? Language? Jealousy? Anger? What help do you need in order to overcome those habits?

What things in your life do you have no control over? Pray for God to give you peace in the midst of those situations.

Find the Serenity Prayer online (google "serenity prayer") and read it as a prayer today. Print it out and stick it on your fridge or bathroom mirror.