

# Your New Journey

This training experience begins with you. You are a very special creation of God, and He values you more than you can imagine. God's plan for you is not merely to save you and enjoy a relationship with you, but to save other people through you. Who you are, and who you are becoming, is important to God and critical to His mission. A significant part of this training is to expose you to God's heart for the world and how He wants to shape you for His work.

Many years ago, I heard someone explain that God begins with a man, gives him a message, and sends him on a mission to produce a movement. Throughout Scripture we find many examples of people God used in this way: Abram, Moses, each of the judges, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul are among the main ones. God uses people to bring about essential changes that affect not just a family or a city, but an entire people group—and in some cases, the entire world. We see this pattern not only in Scripture, but through the pages of history and in our present era. I find it particularly amazing that the sovereign ruler of the universe chooses to use ordinary people to do extraordinary things!

Unfortunately, not all movements persist indefinitely. As a movement progresses, people begin to add structural elements like buildings, rules, and meetings. Over time, people tend to give greater time and devotion to maintaining these structures, and the movement begins to solidify into a monument. If it continues along this path, it will eventually die and become a mausoleum—an empty memorial. For this reason, it is important that we not only start well, but finish well. We must be faithful to Him and remain true to His calling, and ensure that others in the movement do the same.

God's desire for any movement is to bring people to Himself. Our world today is in need of Kingdom movements like never before. Our Heavenly Father is raising up faithful men and women throughout the world who will bring widespread change and direct people back to Him. Remember, every movement begins with God's revelation to just one person—and you may very well be one of those whom God is preparing.

Before we move on, however, let's do a little self-examination. This may seem a bit trivial at first, but there is a reason for this. Bear with me as we consider who you are from, the inside out.

## Who Are You, Anyway?

You have a biological self which is your 'hardware,' complete with various body systems and traits. Your body is made up of roughly 50 trillion cells comprising over 200 distinct kinds of cells. These work together to form 10 major body systems that provide all the functions you need to live.

Your body has a unique set of characteristic traits: height, hair colour and texture, eye colour, facial features, and so forth. You also come with your own set of defects and weaknesses such as birthmarks and blemishes, and more seriously, the propensity to develop cancers or illnesses. Most of your body traits are hereditary and have been passed on to you by your ancestors; you had no control over what you received.

In addition to your physical self, you also have a non-biological self. This is your 'software' which consists of your mind and soul, your capacity to think and reason, and to feel and express emotion. Like your body, your personality is also a unique mix of various interests, dislikes, fears, and so forth. Of course, this includes your sensitivity to God and your spiritual beliefs which we call faith. Many people may say that our soul and our spirit are two different things, but either way, these are both non-biological parts of who we are.

‘Hardware’ and ‘software’ together, we have a complete person—the culmination of God’s creative activity made in His own image. But remember that this is only the beginning, for both the physical self and the spiritual self are subject to external influences from the moment you are conceived. What was created at this point does not stay the same for long, because for good or for bad, we have the ability to change. Physical growth occurs naturally, and this varies according to what we eat and drink, how we do work and exercise, and whether or not we are exposed to harmful events. In the same way, the development of our spiritual self varies according to what we learn, how we process and use that information, and how we adapt to both helpful and harmful experiences. This process of learning and adapting is the direct influence of culture.

## **The Influence of Culture**

Culture is a powerful force in our lives. Many years ago, anthropologist Edward Tylor defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”<sup>1</sup> Culture includes behavioural patterns, music, arts, sports, ideas—essentially, anything of a non-biological nature which we have acquired since birth. We are exposed to cultural elements virtually every moment of our lives, influencing who we are and how we behave. The things of culture are often recorded and passed on in the form of physical mementos such as books or shrines or art forms, and it is these physical relics which provide clues about cultures in times past. Culture in recorded forms can continue to influence people for many generations.

Culture plays a huge part in what we learn, how we are treated by others, and how we act and interact with other members of society. As we have said, the influence of the world around us begins at birth (and in fact, there is evidence that we are influenced in utero), and this is a process called imprinting. If you are a parent, you know that children learn things very quickly—in fact, they learn many things merely by seeing and experience long before they receive verbal instruction. This remains true even into adulthood, and we must bear in mind that people learn best from modelling, experience, and practice rather than merely being told. Over many years, these influences combine to shape and mould our inner self, creating a lens through which we see and evaluate the world around us. The result is what we often refer to as our worldview.

One of the spiritual characteristics of people is our belief system. Inside of every one of us is some level of God-consciousness, and the universe around us beckons us to seek for Him. But for the most part, religious understanding is learned. You didn’t inherit your spiritual belief as a part of your biology—you learned it through various levels of imprinting and instruction. Think about it: Muslim babies usually become Muslim adults, and Catholic kids grow up identifying with the Catholic faith. If a Muslim baby is adopted into a Catholic family, that baby will most likely grow up fully embracing Catholicism. People learn about faith and religion, and these things become deeply ingrained.

As young people grow up, they sometimes break free from these learned patterns when they make a conscious decision to believe something else. This is essential in becoming a disciple of Jesus. We don’t just fall into authentic faith, or inherit it, but we choose it. If you are a born-again follower of Jesus, were you born into the Kingdom at birth? Certainly not. You had to make a choice to accept the gift of salvation and to follow the teachings of Jesus. This has given rise to the saying, “*God has no grandchildren.*” We all have to choose for ourselves.

## **The Rules of Society**

Everyone is influenced by his or her surrounding culture, but not all our cultural acquisitions are

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1 Tylor, Edward. 1920 [1871]. *Primitive Culture*. New York: J. P. Putnam’s Sons. Volume 1, page 1.

true or healthy. Cannibals raise children who have the habit of eating human flesh, which is neither a healthy societal practice nor a part of God's design. A less extreme example would be one's attitude toward women. We know that in Jesus' day, women were treated more like property than fellow humans; this is still true in some cultural groups today, and the trait gets passed on generation to generation.

Another example in our social sphere today would be whether someone talks to strangers. In many parts of Africa, one can approach a total stranger and engage in conversation comfortably. In European countries, people tend to be much more reserved, talking with strangers only for functional purposes. This is held as sort of an 'unwritten rule' that gets passed on like other traits. Hundreds of such unwritten rules exist, bringing various challenges to the task of sharing the gospel message. These become limiting factors to the gospel because they restrict how people interact and communicate.

As we study the life and ministry of Jesus, it is interesting to note that He was willing to break many of the unwritten rules of His day. Take for instance his interaction with the woman at the well of Sychar (John 4). What rules did He break? Several, in fact: talking with a woman, showing friendship to a Samaritan, and getting close to someone with a markedly bad reputation in town. Breaking these rules not only gave Him opportunity to witness and reach this woman, but to open the floodgates of faith in this little Samaritan town.

Pause for a moment and think of some of the unwritten rules of the people group where you are living now. What are things that people feel they must do, or the things they must avoid doing? If you are going to reach a lot of people with the gospel, you must be willing to break a lot of unwritten rules. Your challenge is to determine which ones to break and which ones to obey. Look over your list carefully and ask yourself, *"What are the unwritten rules that I must be willing to break in order to influence the people around me?"* Along the same lines you must also consider, *"What unwritten rules must I leave alone?"*

Depending on the rule, you will find that people actually don't mind a rule being broken. For example, if you speak to someone on the train it may seem a bit uncomfortable at first, but then they quickly feel at ease with the conversation. The woman at the well initially questioned Jesus, but beyond this initial shock, she seemed pleased to talk. However, it won't take you long to find that some people get upset when you break even a minor unwritten rule. This is one of the risks we must take if we wish to impact our people group. Their response may be as simple as ignoring you, or as severe as an outburst of anger. The reasons for such conflict trace back largely to how people develop in their view of themselves and how secure they feel in who they are.

### **The Perspective of Self**

One significant characteristic of our nature that colours our worldview is the innate perspective of self. From birth, we are self-centred beings. The newborn is helpless, requiring the assistance of someone else. The entire household revolves around that one tiny person and her needs. When she cries, someone comes running, and she gets used to this lifestyle of being served. Soon, she becomes a raving two year-old who still thinks she rules the house. Why? Because that is how she has been treated from day one. Not much changes through the teenage years unless the parents have instilled values contrary to these egocentric ways.

Now combine cultural understandings with our self-directed nature, and you will surely see why we have such diversity of opinion in the world. Answer honestly: When you visit someone's home or eat in a restaurant, whose cooking do you compare it to? That's right, it's usually our mother's cooking. Instinctively, we reckon her to be the best cook in the world. The way our mother prepared food became the standard by which we measure all other foods, at least during

the early part of our lifetime (later in life, this may shift to our spouse or a favourite restaurant). Why is this the case? Is it really true that your mother is the best cook, or is it just an acquired preference based on our imprinting? This principle is important to understand, because it shapes our judgement.

Consider an instance where one of my colleagues, Gordon, heard for the first time a piano arrangement by composer Sergei Rachmaninov. This piece was being played by a woman, and her beautiful style moved Gordon deeply. Later, Gordon heard that same piece being played again by another pianist, but he didn't like how it was played. "*It's too fast, and I don't like how he plays,*" he complained. But he came to find out that the pianist was none other than Rachmaninov himself—the creator of the piece! Gordon's preference was not that of the composer, but of one who interpreted it differently before he heard the original. His frame of reference was shaped by someone other than the originator of the piece.

We are all subject to imprinting, and what we learn (and often what we learn *first*) becomes our standard of measure by which we judge everything else—whether or not it is correct or in keeping with the intent of the originator. What if our faith, including our spiritual practices, were shaped by this same process? We know that not everything that people believe is true, but because of what we learned from childhood, we accept it as fact. In the the *Share Jesus Without Fear* method of evangelism, one question is, "*If what you believed were not true, would you want to know?*"<sup>2</sup> This opens a door for people to open their eyes and recognise their blind spots, enabling them to discover a new paradigm of belief.

It is interesting to note that while our default setting is the perspective of self, this usually opposes the perspective of truth. The perspective of self is always coloured by our culture and our associated likes and dislikes. It is based in the flesh and in the advancement of self (1 John 2.15-17). One may value truth, but selfish ambition causes us to redefine truth to suit ourselves; we sometimes refer to this as a 'personal truth.' Such an altered truth is a filter which strains out certain real truths, in much the way a turnstile allows only ticket holders to pass through. This perspective shapes our judgements, and consequently, our behaviours.

## A New Perspective

If we want to see unbiased reality, we must learn to look from God's perspective. This is precisely where we must begin with this training experience. We want to look from God's point of view; we want to know the Father's heart, what matters to Him dearly. Let's look at a few examples from Scripture. What did Moses see? As an adult who just learned that he is of Hebrew lineage, he was only looking at himself. He quickly got into trouble and fled for 40 years, and all he could see was trouble back home in Egypt. But what did God see? He saw His chosen people under great oppression, in need of salvation from slavery, and needing to return to the land of promise. Moses wanted to avoid the Egyptians; God wanted him to engage them. In Jonah we see something very similar. God wanted to reach the people of Nineveh, and Jonah adamantly wanted them to perish in their sins.

What did people see in young David? They saw a shepherd boy, the least of his brothers. God saw something entirely different—a man after His own heart and the leader of a nation whose legacy would become the standard of measure for every king thereafter. How about the twelve disciples? Their "reality" was that Jesus was a great leader who would overthrow the shackles of Roman rule and restore Judah's reign, and that they were merely His cronies. God had something different in mind—a vastly different kingdom which would multiply through these men to fill the earth, even under the presence of harsh persecution.

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2 William Fay, *Share Jesus Without Fear* (Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2005).

Let's apply this to your situation today. When you look at your present city or people group, how would most people describe it? On the other hand, when God looks at your city or people group, what does He see? Our vision, like our thinking and our behaviour, is always coloured by our cultural understandings. This limits our view because our fleshly ambitions filter out what God sees; we see only what we want to see, or what we're trained to see. The rest remains an enormous blind spot.

I'm sure you can remember a time where you got up in the morning and went to the kitchen to prepare a cup of coffee, and when you looked outside you saw heavy fog. That is a frequent occurrence where we live in London. You can see your car or a few trees, and maybe a utility pole—but everything else is obscured by the fog. You know what's beyond the fog only because you've seen that same view before the fog had fallen. Perhaps you remember travelling to a new place late in the evening and settling in for the night. The next morning you looked out the window, and what did you see? That's right—it was not what you had imagined. You saw a beautiful garden, or a pasture of grazing cattle, or a car dealership, or distant mountains. But whatever was there, you didn't see it the night before because of the darkness. At sunrise, you suddenly had a greater perspective of your surroundings.

The purpose of this training is to help open our minds to God's perspective, much like lifting the fog to provide a more accurate view, or letting the sun rise on a new place. This requires us to do two things: 1) to set aside our cultural predispositions and 2) to look for God's point of view through Scripture. This will be a futile exercise if we don't do *both* things. We must also remember to let Scripture speak to us, being careful not to read culture into it. The Word of God is our primary textbook, and the Holy Spirit is our teacher. That may sound good and right and even cliché, but the fact is that few people truly practice it.

What will happen when you see from God's point of view? Eventually, your old forms and presuppositions will be challenged. You will see cracks in your theology. This won't happen all at once, but it will happen. Old paradigms will begin to crumble, and you will see new ones emerge. I'm not talking about *my* paradigms. No, we must learn together from God, the One from whom spiritual truth originates. In other words, don't take my word for it, or what anyone else says. Test everything against Scripture.

## God-Sized Vision

Another wonderful by-product of looking from God's perspective is that you will experience a much greater freedom as the scope of your world will expand. You will start to see limitations you have been placing on God, or those that others have placed on you. You will acquire a God-sized vision that will vastly overtake your human-sized one. Instead of a heart for your community, you'll develop a heart for your nation or even for the world.

Ian McDermott related a wonderful story that helps us understand this better:

We were talking...to a manager we know who told us a story about his childhood in India. He used to watch the tamed elephants and marvelled that, for such huge powerful animals, they never tried to escape; they were tethered only by a thin rope to a stake in the ground. The secret was revealed when he watched the adults train the young elephants. The trainer would tie one of the elephant's feet to a stake in the ground. The young elephant was not very strong and try as he might, could not uproot the stake or break the rope. So he gave up. As the elephant grew strong he never tried again to break free, and so the result was the fully grown animals were restricted to a small area by a thin rope and a small stake.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Ian McDermott, *Practical NLP for Managers* (Gower Publishing, 1996), 98-99.

Our imprinting and subsequent worldview is much like that stake and rope. We learn our boundaries and then stay within them. This comfortable reality that we come to treasure so dearly actually becomes our own prison.

On May 30, 1792, William Carey presented a message at the Friar Lane Baptist Chapel in Nottingham, England. His text was Isaiah 54.2-3:

*Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your offspring will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities.*

Carey had great vision and he wanted others to dream big as well. While his message was not met with much enthusiasm, he never failed to pursue this dream. His famous epigram, “*Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God,*” has inspired many people to think big. Dreaming God-sized dreams creates in us a passion for the things of the Kingdom of God; it is the fuel that drives us to aspire great things for Him.

### **The Power to Change**

Another advantage to seeing from God’s perspective is that it helps to change our lives. Over the past twenty-some years of full-time ministry, my wife and I have made many mistakes along the way. Here are just a few:

- We let our experience and our education dictate what we do in ministry rather than letting the Word of God be our foundation.
- We rarely shared the gospel message verbally, assuming that people would “get it” by osmosis as long as we lived an exemplary Christian life
- We failed to delegate responsibility to other people. We had servant gifts and just went about serving others without expecting anything from them.
- We allowed ourselves to be limited by our fears, and therefore, we rarely took risks.

These were not vicious acts of rebellion against God, but honest attempts to do what we thought were the right things to do based on our upbringing and spiritual imprinting. But they were mistakes nonetheless, and they caused us to be highly ineffective in God’s grand plan. We made many mistakes and will continue to make mistakes as we continue the journey of seeing more fully from seeing the Father’s heart and learning His ways. Yet at the same time, we remember that we are responsible for these errors and will be accountable to Jesus on judgement day.

Take the Pharisees for example. We all know they had a bad reputation with Jesus, but let’s stop and think about their good points. How would you describe them? That’s right, Pharisees were really *good* people! They had strong influence. They taught and led the people. They were faithful in tithing. They kept the law right down to the letter. But pause for a moment and ask yourself, “*Who does this sound like?*” Yes, it sounds a lot like the average Christian today. It’s scary to think, but there is a very fine line between Pharisees and modern-day believers.

Jesus came into the realm of humanity with a whole new paradigm—a new way of thinking. Some accepted it, and others rejected it. To those who rejected it, He gave dire warnings. Those who had high standing and great influence among the people of God, and yet rejected His message, were in even greater danger (Mark 12.38-40; Luke 20.45-47). This is true for us today. We must listen to Him and obey. If we remember how Jesus treated the Pharisees and called them to account for their actions and their attitudes, it should awaken us to the harsh reality that we, too, may be standing on dangerous ground. No wonder these stubborn religious leaders feature so frequently in the scriptural accounts of Jesus, because we must learn to avoid the error of their ways. It is imperative that we take responsibility for the things we do wrong or

incorrectly, especially as it pertains to getting the Great Commission task completed. The souls of men are at stake, and we are responsible.

We have made many mistakes. We have been stubborn and even Pharisaical. But our job as Kingdom workers is not to cast judgement; we leave that task to Jesus. We must be careful not to be critical, recognising that other people may be completely unaware that there is anything different than that to which they have grown accustomed all their lives. In our training, we don't want to criticise what others do or fail to do, but simply to point people back to God and His ways. This training, therefore consists not of the content of material presented, but of the greater task of bringing people on the journey. It's about starting fresh, re-discovering the Father's heart, and learning to do what matters most to Him.

## Moving Forward

What's it going to take to embrace this fresh, new journey to which God is calling us? **First, we must let go of our pride.** What we have learned from such a young age, and to which we have held so tightly for the bulk of our lives, is hard to leave behind. It was this kind of pride that placed the Pharisees in such a contemptible position with Christ. Pride is abhorrent to God, and we must learn to let go and submit to Him. Hebrews 12.1 speaks of one running a race, urging us to offload excess baggage and sin that weighs us down if we expect to win. We can't expect to win the race if we're carrying the sin of pride. We must let go of self.

**Second, we must listen to God's voice.** The prophets were the voice of God in the Old Testament. Jesus is the voice of God in the New Testament. God is speaking to us today, just as He did long ago, to get us back on the path of righteous living and back on track with His mission. Many voices shout to us today, but we must be discerning and hear clearly what He is saying to us.

**Third, we must act.** Hearing is one thing; obeying is another. Paul reminds us that "*the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power*" (1 Cor 4.20, ESV), so we must never fool ourselves into thinking that words are enough. Many of us are wired to act cautiously, waiting until we are 100 percent ready, or fully mature—but the fact is, we'll never get anything done if we wait that long. The urgency of reaching spiritually lost people demands that we put our faith into action immediately. Don't waste one more precious day putting off what you could be doing now.

**Finally, we must allow God to shape us.** Remember, God is not interested only in getting the job done—He is deeply concerned about who you are and who you are becoming. Submit to Him and let Him be the one shaping us, rather than the external forces of culture and society. Resist the urge to depend on old habits and traditions. Taking on Jesus' dynamic mission requires that we be like new wineskins, flexible and willing to conform to His ways of thinking and acting in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Are you ready to move forward? A great adventure lies ahead, but you must be willing to step out boldly. Let's take the journey together, *looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith* (Hebrews 12.2a).



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