



# NEW LIFE

## *Next Steps*

A GUIDE FOR THE UNCONVINCED,  
THE CONVINCED AND EVERYONE  
IN BETWEEN

# *Introduction*

You're reading this because something is stirring. Maybe you're exploring faith for the first time. Maybe you walked into church out of curiosity, obligation, or quiet desperation. Maybe you've been a follower of Jesus for decades and you're ready to go deeper. Wherever you are, this guide is for you.

In John 3, a man named Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night with questions he can't quite put into words. He is not a skeptic or an outsider – he is one of the most religiously accomplished men in Israel. And yet something has driven him out of his house in the dark to sit at the feet of a rabbi from Galilee. Whatever religion gave him, it wasn't enough. Interestingly, Jesus doesn't give him a program or a list of rules. He tells him something far more disorienting – and far more liberating: you need to be born again. Not improved. Not renovated. Born again.

That conversation is where this guide begins. John 3 is the foundation – three passages that walk you through what the new life actually is, where it comes from, and what it costs to receive it. We'll follow Nicodemus through his confusion, his questions, and finally to the moment where the gospel lands: God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. By the end of Part One, the question on the table is simple and unavoidable – have you been born again?

Part Two moves into Romans 12, which is where the new life gets lived. The apostle Paul opens with a single word – therefore – and everything that follows depends on everything that came before it. The mercies of God, received by faith, now produce a life that looks different: a mind being renewed, a body offered in daily worship, a community marked by genuine love, and a visible conduct that overcomes evil with good. Romans 12 is not a list of rules for self-improvement. It is a portrait of what a Spirit-filled life looks like from the outside – in your inner world, in your relationships, and in the hard places where transformation is most tested.

John 3 and Romans 12 fit well together because the new birth and new life in Christ are inseparable. You can't have one without the other. This guide is an invitation to understand both – and to let them do their work in you.

Use this as a digital workbook. Work through it with a friend. Let it be a conversation between you and God about what comes next.

## WHERE ARE YOU?

Take a moment to honestly identify where you are right now:

- **EXPLORING** – I'm curious, but not yet convinced.
- **BEGINNING** – I believe, but I'm just getting started.
- **RE-ENGAGING** – I've drifted and I'm ready to lean in.
- **GROWING** – I'm following Christ and want to go deeper.
- **LEADING** – I'm ready to invest in someone else.

PART ONE

---

# THE NEW LIFE

*What just happened?*





# REBORN

## *A miracle, not a makeover*

Nicodemus was a Pharisee – a teacher of Israel, a man of position, learning, and moral discipline. If anyone had earned their way to God, it was him. And yet he comes to Jesus at night, drawn by something he can't fully explain, asking questions his religion hasn't been able to answer.

Jesus doesn't ease him in gently. He cuts straight to the heart of it: "You must be born again." Nicodemus pushes back – "How can a man be born when he is old?" – and his confusion is honest. This doesn't make sense on human terms. That's exactly the point.

The new life isn't something you generate or achieve. It is something God does in you by His Spirit. The wind blows where it wishes – you can't see it, but you can see what it produces. The new birth is like that. Invisible in its origins, undeniable in its effects.

### **JOHN 3:1-8**



"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

# EXAMINING THE TEXT



## **Bible Study Skill: Ask the Basic Questions**

The first move in Bible study is simply paying attention. Before you interpret anything, just observe – read the text like a detective. The most basic questions are: Who is here? What is happening? When and where does it take place? What is said, and by whom? These questions sound simple. They're not – most people skip them and jump straight to meaning. Train yourself to slow down and see what's actually on the page.

**Read John 3:1-8 again slowly and answer these questions in your own words:**

Who is Nicodemus, and how does John describe him?

.....  
.....

When does this conversation happen, and why might that detail matter?

.....  
.....

What does Jesus say Nicodemus must do? What is Nicodemus's response?

.....  
.....

What image does Jesus use at the end of the passage? What point is he making with it?

.....  
.....

## **► Deeper Into the Text**

**Nicodemus has everything religion can offer — and still comes to Jesus in the dark.** What does that tell us about what religion, on its own, actually produces? Achievement and spiritual life are not the same thing. Nicodemus has climbed every rung available to him and arrived at the top still unsatisfied. The darkness he comes in isn't just fear of exposure – it's the honest darkness of a man who has done everything right and still senses something is missing. Religion can produce morality, discipline, and status. It cannot produce life.

**Jesus tells a highly educated man that he needs to be "born again." Why is that the most destabilizing thing he could have said?** Because it makes all of Nicodemus's credentials irrelevant. You can't leverage a birth. You can't study your way into it or earn it through performance. Birth happens to you – it is entirely outside your control. Jesus isn't asking Nicodemus to do better. He's telling him the whole project of self-generated righteousness has to be abandoned. That's not an adjustment. That's a death before a resurrection.

**Why does Jesus use wind as an image for the Spirit's work – and what does that mean for us?** Wind cannot be controlled, predicted, or manufactured – but its effects are undeniable. Jesus is telling Nicodemus – and us – that the new birth is not something we manage or produce on a timeline. God moves where He wills. What that leaves us with is not passivity but humility: we don't generate life, we receive it. The only posture available is openness.

**What does it mean that "flesh produces flesh"? What is Jesus diagnosing about the human condition?** No amount of human effort produces a different kind of life than the one you started with. You can discipline flesh, educate flesh, and moralize flesh – but you cannot Spirit-ify it. The diagnosis is total: the problem isn't that we need improvement, it's that we need a different nature entirely. That's not a problem self-help can fix.

## ► You Can't Birth Yourself

*"The problem with self-made men is that they worship their creator."  
(Anonymous)*

There's something deeply American about the idea of the self-made man. Work hard enough, discipline yourself enough, improve enough, and you can become whoever you want to be. It's a compelling story. It's also, when applied to the spiritual life, completely wrong.

Nicodemus is the original self-made man of the New Testament. He has done everything right – studied, practiced, achieved, climbed every rung of the religious ladder Israel offered. By every external measure, he is the most spiritually accomplished person in the room. And yet something in him knows it isn't working. Something has driven him out of his house in the dark to sit at the feet of a rabbi from Galilee.

Jesus doesn't congratulate him on how far he's come. He tells him he has to start over.

This is not a metaphor for self-improvement. Jesus isn't telling Nicodemus to try harder or add better habits to his routine. He is telling him that the entire project of self-generated righteousness is over – not because Nicodemus failed at it, but because it was never going to work. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." No

amount of effort produces a different kind of life than the one you started with. A man cannot birth himself.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it plainly: "A man is not a Christian because he decides to be one. He is a Christian because God has done something to him."<sup>1</sup> The new life isn't a renovation project. It's a resurrection. And the only one who raises the dead is God.

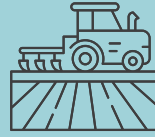
The good news is that what we cannot do for ourselves, God has already done. The same Spirit who hovered over the chaos in Genesis and brought forth creation is the Spirit who brings forth new life in the human heart. You don't control the wind. But the wind moves.

**Notes:**

1. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 33.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What brought you here — to this church, this guide, this moment? What are you looking for?
2. Have you ever tried to be good enough for God? What did that cost you, and where did it fall short?
3. Has there been a moment or season where something genuinely shifted in you spiritually? If so, what changed? If not, what do you think is standing between you and that?
4. If the new life is something God starts — not something you earn — what would it look like to stop striving and start receiving?



# RECEIVED

## *This cannot be earned*

"How can these things be?" Nicodemus is still stuck. And honestly, that's a reasonable place to be. Jesus is telling him that everything he thought he knew about how to stand before God has to be reconsidered. His learning, his lineage, his law-keeping – none of it can produce the new birth.

Jesus points him backward to a strange story from Israel's history: the bronze serpent lifted up in the wilderness. The people were dying from snakebite, and God told Moses to lift up a serpent on a pole – and anyone who looked at it in faith would live. It's a strange image. But Jesus says He will be lifted up in the same way, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.

The new life is received through faith – through looking to Jesus and trusting that what He did is enough. It cannot be earned, worked for, or achieved by moral effort. Nicodemus needed someone to explain this to him. We all do.

### **JOHN 3:9-15**



"Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'"

# EXAMINING THE TEXT



## **Bible Study Skill: Look for Emphasized Words and Key Terms**

Once you've asked the basic questions, the next move is to look for what the author is emphasizing. Watch for words that repeat. Watch for terms the author seems to load with meaning – words that carry more weight than they appear to at first. In John's gospel especially, terms like believe, testimony, heaven, and receive are doing serious theological work. Slow down when you see them.

### **Read John 3:9-15 again and answer these questions:**

What word or concept appears more than once in this short passage?

.....  
.....

Jesus distinguishes between two kinds of things – what are they, and why does that distinction matter here?

.....  
.....

What does Jesus claim about himself in verse 13 that no one else could claim?

.....  
.....

What Old Testament story does Jesus reference? What does he say it points to?

.....  
.....

## **► Deeper Into the Text**

**Jesus says "you do not receive our testimony." What is the difference between not understanding something and refusing to receive it? Why does that distinction matter?** Understanding is a matter of the mind. Receiving is a matter of the will. Nicodemus isn't confused because he lacks intelligence – he's a theologian of the highest order. What he lacks is willingness. Unbelief is not primarily an intellectual problem. It is a disposition of the heart that uses intellectual questions as cover. The question worth asking is not just "do I understand this?" but "am I resisting this?"

### **Why does Jesus establish his own authority before pointing to the cross?**

Because everything that follows depends on who is speaking. If Jesus is just another teacher – a wise rabbi with helpful insights – then his death on a cross is a tragedy, not a salvation. But if he has descended from heaven, if he has been where no human teacher has been, then his words about eternal life are not interpretation or opinion. They are testimony. The cross only saves because of who is on it.

### **The bronze serpent is a strange image for salvation – a symbol of the very thing that was killing people, lifted up as the cure. What does that tell us about how God works?**

God doesn't always work the way we expect. The serpent on the pole was foolishness by human logic – why would looking at the thing that bit you heal you? And yet that is exactly what God prescribed. The cross follows the same logic. Jesus becomes the curse in order to break it (Galatians 3:13). The instrument of death becomes the instrument of life. Salvation has always looked scandalous from the outside.

### **The only move required in Numbers 21 was to look. What makes that so hard – and what does our resistance to it reveal?**

Looking requires admitting you've been bitten. It requires acknowledging you can't heal yourself. For people like Nicodemus – and like most of us – that admission is the hardest part. We would rather do something, earn something, contribute something. Simple trust feels too passive, too undignified. But the simplicity is the point. God designed it so that no one could boast about how they were saved.

## ► **The Look That Saves**

*"We are too Christian really to enjoy sinning and too fond of sinning to enjoy Christianity." (George MacDonald)*

Most of us understand, at least intellectually, that Christianity is about grace. We know the vocabulary. We can explain justification by faith. And yet if you pay close attention to how most people actually relate to God on a Tuesday afternoon, what you find is not rest. What you find is effort – a low-grade, mostly unconscious attempt to stay on the right side of God through behavior management. We know grace is the answer. We just can't quite stop performing.

This is what makes the bronze serpent such a strange and clarifying story. The Israelites are dying in the desert – their own rebellion has brought judgment – and God's prescription is this: look at a serpent on a pole, and live. No sacrifice. No ritual. No penance. Just look. The people who looked in trust, lived. The people who couldn't bring themselves to do something so simple, died.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that He is that serpent. Lifted up on a cross, of all things. And the only move required is the same one – look and believe.

Thomas Chalmers famously argued that the only way to stop loving the wrong things

is to find something better to love. You don't displace a lesser affection through willpower — you displace it through a greater one.<sup>1</sup> The reason so many people can't stop performing for God is not that they love performance too much. It is that they have never really looked at the cross long enough to be captured by what they see there.

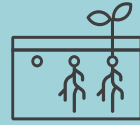
The cross is not a transaction you acknowledge and move on from. It is the fixed point around which the entire Christian life orbits. Every time the performing starts again, the answer is the same as it was at the beginning: look. Turn your gaze from your record and fix it on His. He was lifted up so you wouldn't have to be.

**Notes:**

1. Thomas Chalmers, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection* (1825).

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Is there a gap between what you know about God and how you actually live? Where does knowledge stop and trust begin for you?
2. What would it look like in your daily life to simply trust that what Jesus did is enough — not as a concept, but as something you actually rest in?
3. Where are you still trying to earn something from God? What would it look like to let that go?
4. Who helped you understand the gospel? Is there someone in your life right now who needs you to do that for them?



# LOVED

## *God's initiative, our response*

Most people have heard John 3:16. Few have felt the full weight of it. It is one of the most quoted verses in history precisely because it captures the entire gospel in a single sentence: God loved, God gave, whoever believes, will not perish, but have eternal life.

But notice what drives this. It isn't your searching. It isn't your moral record. It isn't your church attendance or your good intentions. This is God's initiative, rooted in His own character and not in anything you brought to the table. The new life begins not with your reaching up to God but with God reaching down to you.

And yet – there is a response required. Jesus speaks of light and darkness. People who love darkness avoid the light because the light exposes them. Coming to the light means coming honestly, without pretense, willing to be seen and known. The new life doesn't let us hide. It calls us out of the shadows and into the open.

### **JOHN 3:16-21**



"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

# EXAMINING THE TEXT



## **Bible Study Skill: Look for Contrasts and Comparisons**

Good writers – and the biblical authors are great writers – use contrast and comparison to sharpen their meaning. When you see two things set against each other, slow down. The author is doing something deliberate. Ask: What two things are being compared or contrasted? What is the difference between them? Which side does the author want you to land on?

### **Read John 3:16-21 and identify the contrasts:**

List as many pairs of opposites as you can find in this passage.

.....  
.....

What is the stated purpose of Jesus's coming into the world (v. 17)? How does that contrast with what you might have expected?

.....  
.....

What does Jesus say determines whether a person is condemned or not (vv. 18-19)? What is the standard of judgment?

.....  
.....

What is the difference between the person who "loves darkness" and the one who "does what is true" (vv. 20-21)?

.....  
.....

## **► Deeper Into the Text**

**John says God "so loved the world." What kind of world is he talking about – and why does it matter that the love came first?** The world John describes throughout his gospel is not a world reaching upward toward God. It is a world in rebellion, actively preferring darkness. This is not a love that responds to lovability – it is a love that creates it. God doesn't love us because we are worthy. We become worthy because He loved us. That reordering is everything. It means that your

standing before God is not based on your record, but His character.

**Jesus says people are "already condemned" before they ever reject him explicitly. What does that reveal about the default human condition?**

Condemnation is not what happens to you when you reject Jesus. It is the condition you are already in apart from him. Faith is not what creates the danger – it is the exit from it. This is a harder word than most people want to sit with, but it is also a clarifying one: the gospel is not an optional upgrade for people who want a better life. It is the rescue of people who are already drowning.

**The people who avoid the light do so because "their works were evil." But is the problem really what they've done – or something deeper?**

The darkness people love is not just the cover for bad behavior. It is the cover for the self. To come into the light is to be fully known – not just your actions, but your motives, your secret life, the version of yourself you've never shown anyone. What people are protecting in the darkness is not a list of sins. It is their autonomy. The light would not just expose what they've done – it would expose who is in charge.

**The person who "does what is true" comes to the light "so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God." What does that phrase mean – and what does it say about who gets the credit?**

The person who comes to the light is not coming to display their righteousness. They are coming to have it made clear that whatever good exists in their life is not their own achievement – it is the work of God in them. Coming to the light is an act of surrender and attribution. It is saying: whatever is true and good here, He did that.

## ► The Night Shift

*"We are all like the moon – we have a dark side we don't want anyone to see."  
(Mark Twain)*

We are remarkably good at managing our image. Social media has made this into an art form, but the instinct is as old as the Garden – the moment sin entered, Adam and Eve reached for fig leaves. Something went wrong, and the first human response was concealment. That reflex hasn't left us. Most of us have become expert curators of a version of ourselves we're comfortable showing the world, while the parts we're less proud of stay carefully out of frame.

Nicodemus comes at night. John never wastes details. Night in his gospel is always more than a time of day – it's a moral condition. Judas walks out of the upper room to betray Jesus, and John simply writes: "and it was night" (John 13:30). Nicodemus is a man operating in the dark – not because he is evil, but because he is hidden. His questions are too costly to ask in daylight.

Most of us understand this more than we'd like to admit.

The problem with living in the dark is that the thing you are hiding is not protecting you. It is slowly defining you. The secret you've managed for years, the version of yourself you've never let anyone see – that gap between the public self and the private self creates a kind of low-grade loneliness that no amount of connection can fix, because the people around you are connected to a version of you that isn't entirely real.

Jesus tells Nicodemus – and tells us – that the new life moves in the opposite direction. "Whoever does what is true comes to the light." Not because exposure is comfortable, but because hiddenness is its own kind of death. And what awaits in the light is not a courtroom. It is a room where you are already known, already loved – where God did not send His Son to condemn the world but to save it.

The end of the Nicodemus story is found in John 19. After the crucifixion, in broad daylight, in front of everyone, Nicodemus arrives with a hundred pounds of burial spices to honor Jesus. No more nighttime visits. Whatever it cost him, he was done hiding.

The light got him. It'll get you too, if you let it.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

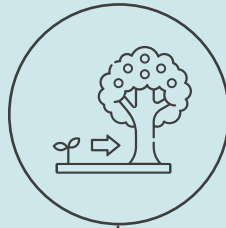
1. When you think about God's love for you personally – not in general, but for you specifically – what's your honest reaction? Does it feel real?
2. Is there an area of your life you're keeping in the dark – something you're not ready to let God or others see? What would it cost you to bring it into the light?
3. Do you tend to approach God more out of guilt or out of confidence that He's for you? What would it look like to approach Him differently?
4. Where is God nudging you to move outward right now – toward a person, a need, a conversation you've been avoiding?

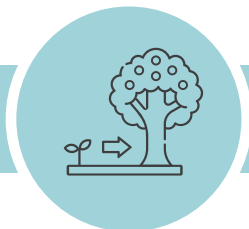
PART TWO

---

# LIVING THE NEW LIFE

*Now what?*





# TRANSFORMED

*The new life begins on the inside*

The new life begins with a new nature – and a new nature has to be fed. Most people who drift from genuine faith don't drift because of a dramatic failure. They drift because of neglect. They stop returning to the things that nourish the life God has given them, and slowly, without noticing, the new growth begins to wither.

Romans 12 opens with a word that matters: therefore. Everything Paul says in chapters 1-11 – about sin, about grace, about justification, about the love of God – lands here, in this call to a transformed life. The new life is not the starting line. It is the engine. What follows is what it produces.

## ROMANS 12:1-2



"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

## EXAMINING THE TEXT



### **Bible Study Skill: Look for Terms of Conclusion and Logical Structure**

The Bible is not just a collection of spiritual impressions – it makes arguments. Words like therefore, but, so that, and in order that are signposts in the logic. When you see therefore, ask: what came before that earns this conclusion? When you see but, ask: what is being corrected or contrasted? When you see so that, ask: what is

the intended result? Tracing the logic of a passage is one of the most underused and most rewarding habits in Bible study.

**Read Romans 12:1-2 and work through the logic:**

What is the “therefore” in v. 1 pointing back to?

.....  
.....

Paul makes his appeal “by the mercies of God.” How does this speak to the character of the God who is asking this of you?

.....  
.....

There are two commands in v. 2 – one negative, one positive. What are they?

.....  
.....

What is the stated result (so that) of the positive command? What does Paul say transformation produces?

.....  
.....

**► Deeper Into the Text**

**Paul grounds his entire appeal in mercy already received – not duty, not guilt, not fear. What does it reveal about a person's spiritual condition if their primary motivation for obedience is one of those other things?** Duty-driven obedience is not the same as mercy-driven obedience – and God is not confused about the difference. When your primary motivation is guilt or fear, what you are really doing is trying to manage your standing before God through performance. That's the old covenant posture. Paul's appeal assumes you already have standing – that the mercies have already come – and calls you to respond out of what you've received, not to earn what you haven't. Where your motivation comes from tells you something about whose gospel you're actually living in.

**Paul says to present your body as a living sacrifice. A sacrifice in the Old Testament was killed. What does it mean to be a living one?** A dead sacrifice is done – it makes its offering once and it's over. A living sacrifice keeps showing up. Every morning is another act of presentation. The difficulty Paul names implicitly is the one every honest Christian knows: living sacrifices have a tendency to crawl off the altar. The call is not a one-time consecration. It is a daily return.

**Conformation to the world happens without decision — Paul says we are pressed into its mold. What are the specific molds you are most at risk of being shaped by right now?** The pressure is not dramatic. It is ambient — the slow accumulation of assumptions about what success looks like, what you deserve, how to spend your time, what is worth wanting. No one wakes up and decides to be worldly. They simply stop paying attention. The question is not whether the pressure exists — it does, constantly — but whether you are noticing it.

**Paul says transformation happens through the renewal of the mind — not through willpower, behavior modification, or moral effort. What does that say about where the real battle is being fought?** The battle for your life is upstream of your behavior. What you think about, return to, dwell on, and feed yourself with is shaping who you are becoming before a single visible decision is made. A person who fills their mind with Scripture, prayer, and honest reflection before God is not just accumulating religious information. They are being changed at the level where change actually happens. Behavior follows belief. The mind is the ground.

## ► You Are What You Repeatedly Do

*"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."  
(Will Durant, summarizing Aristotle)*

James Clear sold over fifteen million copies of *Atomic Habits* by arguing something that, once you hear it, seems obvious: you don't rise to the level of your goals, you fall to the level of your systems. The reason most people don't become who they want to be isn't a lack of desire. It's a lack of structure. Goals tell you where you want to go. Habits are what actually take you there.

The church has known this for two thousand years, but we keep having to rediscover it. We live in a cultural moment that is deeply suspicious of routine — spontaneity is celebrated, structure is seen as the enemy of authenticity, and the idea that you should show up somewhere every week whether you feel like it or not sounds vaguely legalistic. The result is a generation of Christians who wait to feel spiritually moved before engaging with the things that would actually move them spiritually.

Paul doesn't tell the Romans to wait for transformation to happen to them. He tells them to present themselves — actively, daily — and to be intentional about the renewal of their minds. Dallas Willard made the distinction clearly: "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Effort is action. Earning is attitude." The spiritual disciplines are not a ladder by which we climb to God. They are the field in which God meets us.

The rhythms that change you are rarely the spectacular ones. They're the ones that happen on Tuesday mornings when you don't feel like it — the prayer that isn't eloquent, the passage you've read before, the community group you show up to

tired. These ordinary moments, sustained over time, are where the Spirit does His most patient and powerful work.

What you return to shapes who you become. Return to the right things.

**Notes:**

1. Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 61.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When you honestly assess your daily rhythms, what are they forming you into? Are you being shaped intentionally or by default?
2. What does it mean practically to "present your body as a living sacrifice" on an ordinary Tuesday? What would that look like for you?
3. Where do you feel the pressure to be conformed to the world most strongly right now? What would transformation look like in that area?
4. What is one rhythm — one regular return — that would most change your life if you committed to it?



# BELONGING

*The new life is never lived alone*

The new life is personal but it is never private. Paul moves from the transformed individual in Romans 12:1-2 directly into the body – the community of people who belong to one another in Christ. This is not incidental. The new life, by its nature, plants you into a family. You were not born again to live in isolation.

Most of us resist this more than we admit. We are drawn to the idea of community while quietly preferring the reality of independence. We want belonging without vulnerability, connection without cost. But the picture Paul paints in Romans 12 is something far more demanding – and far more beautiful – than the version most of us are actually living.

## ROMANS 12:3-13



"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality."

# EXAMINING THE TEXT



## **Bible Study Skill: Look for Lists and Structure**

When a biblical author lists things – gifts, commands, qualities – don't just read through them. Slow down and ask: How many items are there? Is there a pattern? Does the list move from one category to another? Is there a thread connecting everything on it? Structure is meaning. Paul rarely makes lists casually. The shape of the passage is part of what he is saying.

### **Read Romans 12:3-13 and work through the structure:**

Paul opens with a warning about self-assessment. What are the two errors he warns against – and what does he call the right posture?

.....  
.....

List the spiritual gifts Paul names in verses 6-8. Is there anything they have in common?

.....  
.....

After the gifts, Paul shifts to a list of character commands (vv. 9-13). Pick two or three that stand out to you and write them down. Why those?

.....  
.....

What do you notice about the pace of the passage as it moves from the body metaphor into the commands? What effect does that have?

.....  
.....

## **► Deeper Into the Text**

**Paul says sober judgment comes "according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." What does it mean that your faith itself is assigned – and what does that do to pride or comparison?** If the measure of faith you have is something God gave you – not something you generated – then there is no ground for spiritual pride and no excuse for comparison. You are not more faithful than

someone else because you worked harder at it. You received what you received. The only appropriate response to your own gifting is gratitude, and the only appropriate response to someone else's is honor.

**Each gift in the list is paired with a quality of character — generosity, zeal, cheerfulness. Why does Paul insist on the how, not just the what?** Because the body of Christ is not just a task-distribution system. The manner in which a gift is given is part of the gift. Mercy shown reluctantly is not really mercy — it is duty wearing mercy's clothes. Generosity given resentfully poisons what it gives. Paul knows that you can serve the body in ways that actually damage it, and that the heart behind the function matters as much as the function itself.

**Paul says "let love be genuine" — the Greek word means unhypocritical, without a mask. What are the specific masks we wear in Christian community, and why do we wear them?** The masks are numerous: the mask of having it together spiritually, the mask of serving without need, the mask of certainty when you're full of doubt, the mask of joy when you're barely holding on. We wear them because Christian community often rewards the performance of health over the honesty of struggle. The antidote isn't just courage — it is a community that has made it safe to be real, which begins with someone going first.

**"Outdo one another in showing honor" — Paul describes a community where the competition runs in reverse. What would it actually feel like to be part of a community where that was true?** It would feel disorienting at first, because it runs so counter to every other social environment we inhabit. In most communities, honor flows toward the top — toward achievement, platform, influence. Paul describes a community where the movement is inverted: where people are actively looking for ways to prefer one another, to attribute worth, to notice and name what God is doing in someone else's life. That community is rare. It is also irresistible to people who have never experienced it.

## ► Crowded and Lonely

*"We are the most in-debt, obese, addicted, and medicated adult cohort in U.S. history, and I believe it's because we are the most lonely." (Brené Brown, Braving the Wilderness)*

We are the most connected generation in history and one of the loneliest. The average person has hundreds of social media followers, a full contact list, and a group chat for every category of their life — and yet study after study shows that rates of loneliness have been climbing for decades. A 2021 survey found that 15% of men reported having no close friends at all, compared to 3% in 1990.<sup>1</sup> We have more connections than ever. We have fewer people who actually know us.

The problem isn't proximity. Most of us are surrounded by people. The problem is

depth. There's a version of community that functions like a highlight reel – we show up, we're pleasant, we keep things light, and we leave having revealed almost nothing. It feels like connection because it has the shape of connection. But it doesn't carry the weight of it.

Paul isn't describing that. He's describing something that costs something – a love that is genuine, not performed; brotherly affection that actually shows up; a community where people contribute to one another's needs not because they have to but because that is simply what the body does. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the difference between the community we imagine and the community God actually gives us: "The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community."<sup>2</sup> We are tempted to hold out for the ideal version of belonging – the people who are easy to love, the group that never disappoints. And in holding out for it, we miss the real thing.

Real community requires you to be known. Not the curated version – the actual you, with the doubts, the failures, the fears you've never put into words. That kind of knowing requires risk. But the alternative is the loneliness Brené Brown is describing: surrounded, connected, and somehow still alone.

**Notes:**

1. Daniel Cox, "The State of American Friendship," Survey Center on American Life, 2021.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 27

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Paul says to "outdo one another in showing honor." When you think about your relationships with other believers, is that the direction things are moving? What would it look like if it were?
2. Do you have someone in your life who is genuinely pouring into you? Do you have someone you are intentionally investing in? If not – what's the honest reason?
3. Where are you participating in the life of the church as a consumer rather than a contributor? What gift are you holding back?
4. Who is the person in your life who is closest to you but farthest from God? What's one step you could take toward them this week?



# SENT

## *The new life moves*

God so loved that He gave. The new life is never passive – it always moves outward. What began inside, in the renewal of the mind, and took root in community, eventually shows up in the world. Not as performance. Not as strategy. But as overflow – the natural result of a life that has been genuinely changed.

Romans 12 ends where most people are most reluctant to go: into the hard places. What does the new life look like when someone wrongs you? When the relationship is broken? When the natural response would be retaliation, withdrawal, or indifference? This is where the rubber meets the road.

### **ROMANS 12:14-21**



"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

# EXAMINING THE TEXT



## **Bible Study Skill: The Full OIA Cycle — Observe, Interpret, Apply**

You've been building toward this.

Observation asks: *What do I see?* Interpretation asks: *What does it mean?* Application asks: *What do I do?*

These three moves work together, and they work in order — you can't interpret well what you haven't observed, and you can't apply well what you haven't interpreted. This final passage is your chance to run all three on your own before we go deeper together.

### **OBSERVE**

Write down anything you notice — repeated words, contrasts, commands, surprises.

.....  
.....

### **INTERPRET**

Choose one command from the passage that seems most counterintuitive to you. Why does it feel that way? What does it assume about how the new life actually works?

.....  
.....

### **APPLY**

Is there a specific person or situation in your life right now that this passage speaks directly to? What would obedience look like — concretely, this week?

.....  
.....

## **► Deeper Into the Text**

**Paul says "bless those who persecute you" — not tolerate, not ignore, but bless. What has to be true about a person's inner life for that to be possible?**

You cannot bless from an empty account. The only person capable of genuinely blessing someone who has harmed them is someone who is himself so anchored in God's love and justice that they don't need to extract payment from their enemy. Blessing an enemy is downstream of a settled soul — one that has genuinely trusted God with the wound. It is not a technique. It is the fruit of a particular kind of rootedness.

**Paul qualifies the call to peace: "if possible, so far as it depends on you." What is he acknowledging — and what does that qualifier protect us from?** He is acknowledging that peace is not always achievable, because it takes two people. Some relationships are too broken, some situations too complex, some people too unwilling. The qualifier protects us from two ditches: the ditch of peace-faking — pretending reconciliation has happened when it hasn't — and the ditch of peace-abandoning — giving up on it prematurely because it's hard. Do everything within your power. Release the rest. That is both honest and holy.

**"Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God." What does taking vengeance reveal about what we actually believe?** It reveals that we don't trust God to handle it. Vengeance is an act of unbelief dressed up as justice. The person who takes matters into their own hands is, at the functional level, saying: God won't make this right, so I have to. The person who releases it is making a declaration of faith — not that the wrong doesn't matter, but that it is in better hands than theirs.

**The passage ends with "overcome evil with good." That word — overcome — is a word for victory in battle. What does it say about the nature of the conflict we are actually in?** Paul is not describing conflict management. He is describing warfare — and the weapon is unexpected. The world expects retaliation. It knows how to absorb hostility and return it. What it doesn't know what to do with is genuine, costly, unrequited goodness. That is the force that disarms. That is what overcomes. The new life, fully lived, is not just personally transformative — it is world-disrupting.

## ► Spend It Well

*"Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself."  
(Leo Tolstoy)*

There's a classic move in Christianity that looks like faith but isn't. You show up to church. You agree with what's preached. You feel convicted, maybe even moved. And then Monday arrives and nothing is different. Same habits. Same priorities. Same people at the margins of your life who never hear anything about Jesus because nothing about how you live has created space for that conversation. The belief is real. The life it was supposed to produce hasn't shown up yet.

James called this exactly what it is: dead. Not struggling faith, not immature faith — dead. A body without breath. The shocking thing about that diagnosis is how many people are living it comfortably, without any particular sense that something is wrong.

Paul describes something different. A life that blesses instead of curses. That weeps with those who weep. That feeds enemies. That overcomes evil with good. This is not the behavior of a person who has adjusted their beliefs. It is the behavior of a person

who has been genuinely changed – from the inside out, starting with the renewal of the mind and working its way all the way to how they treat the person who wronged them last Tuesday.

The writer Annie Dillard put it sharply: "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." The question is not whether you believe the right things. The question is whether those things are showing up anywhere. What does your calendar say you love? What does your bank account say you trust? How do you treat the people who have made your life difficult?

Zacchaeus didn't need a discipleship program. He met Jesus and his wallet opened on its own. The early church didn't debate generosity – they practiced it instinctively. That's what transformation looks like from the outside. It shows up in the ordinary details of an ordinary life, rearranged by Someone who has taken up residence inside it.

A life spent on Jesus and His purposes is the only one you won't regret. Go. Spend it well.

**Notes:**

1. Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 32.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. "Bless those who persecute you." Is there a person or situation in your life right now where this command is directly relevant? What would obedience look like?
2. Where is your faith still theoretical – something you believe on Sunday but haven't let reach your Monday? What would it look like for it to get there?
3. Paul says to "overcome evil with good." What would it look like to take that posture in a specific hard relationship or situation in your life right now?
4. If someone watched how you spent your time and money this past month, what would they conclude you love most?

# *Conclusion*

Nicodemus disappears from John 3 without us knowing exactly how the conversation ended. But he shows up again – twice more in John's gospel. First, he speaks up for Jesus before the Pharisees when they want to arrest him (John 7:50-51). And finally, after the crucifixion, it is Nicodemus who brings a hundred pounds of burial spices to anoint the body of Jesus (John 19:39).

The man who came in the dark ends up standing at the tomb in the open. Something happened. Something changed. He was, by all appearances, born again.

That's the trajectory of the new life. It begins in the dark – with questions, with confusion, with a quiet sense that something is missing. And it moves toward the light – not all at once, not without struggle, but steadily, by the grace of the God who finishes what He starts.

You don't have to have it all figured out. You just have to take the next step – and that next step is in the direction of Jesus.



CITADEL  SQUARE