



S E R G E

S O N S H I P

3 R D E D I T I O N

SONSHIP

Serge



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SONSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Sonship*, a training tool to encourage you to greater faith, repentance, and love. The course is designed to promote ongoing renewal in your life, relationships, and ministry. Our prayer is that Christ will greatly bless and encourage you as you work through this course.

By way of introduction, we'll summarize the course in four points. These four points are foundational themes to the material, and you'll find the course often returning to them:

1. CHEER UP! THE GOSPEL IS FAR GREATER THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE!

The gospel is the best news we could ever hear. The gospel is about Jesus Christ and his power to transform our lives and relationships, communities, and ultimately, the nations. Through this gospel, we are freely given a new identity—an identity not based on race, social class, gender, a theological system, or a system of rules and regulations. Rather it is a new and perfect identity based solely on faith in Christ, an identity that defines every aspect of our lives. We are now forgiven, righteous, adopted, accepted, free, and heirs to everything that belongs to Christ. So even our sin, weakness, and failures do not define who we are. Because of this good news, we no longer have to hide from our sin and imagine that we have it all together. God knows and loves us as we are, not as we pretend to be.

Receiving and resting in the truths of the gospel translates into a Christian life of joy, peace, freedom, and love. Therefore, the gospel also gives us a new way to live and relate to other people. It frees us from sin's stranglehold on our lives, liberates our conscience, and releases us from

living according to the principles of this world. Since our new identity and new way of life is based solely on faith, the gospel excludes all manner of boasting and arrogance. Everything we have has been given to us—thus it is called the gospel of God’s grace (Acts 20:24). Moreover, this gospel has continual and daily applicability. It is not only relevant to us when we first believe, but continues to work in us and through us as we continue to believe. This continual life of faith visibly expresses itself in love (Galatians 5:6).

2. CHEER UP! YOU ARE WORSE THAN YOU THINK!

One of the great hindrances to Christian growth, healthy relationships, and strong communities is a life of pretense—pretending that we don’t struggle with a multitude of sins, such as self-righteous attitudes, foul tempers, nagging anxieties, lustful looks, controlling and critical hearts, and a general belief that we are better than other people. Part of the good news of the gospel is that it can change our selfish desires to be right, look good, be in control, and gratify ourselves. Faith in the gospel transforms even good desires that have started to rule our lives and thus have gone out of bounds.

One chief prayer that speaks to our need is found in Psalm 139:23–24: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Because our sin is a block to intimacy with God and others, we need God’s Spirit to show us our many fears and offensive ways. One way to promote this is to invite the insights of others, encouraging them to speak into our lives. The goal is that we repent and be led in the way of Jesus, and grow in our intimacy with him. Our goal is to live a life of repentance and faith—recognizing that when we live by unbelief, we are doing nothing less than trusting in something or someone other than Christ for life, happiness, security, respect, love, identity, fulfillment, and significance. Belief in the gospel tears down these false trusts in our lives, whether we’re putting our faith in a system of rules or laws (legalism) or in something like food or sex (licentiousness).

Points 1 and 2 above work together in a cyclical fashion. On the one hand, none of us wants to look at our sin without having a firm foundation in the gospel, so it's essential to constantly saturate ourselves with the gospel, and grow in knowing its great riches. On the other hand, we'll have a small view of the gospel if we do not continually see the depths of our sin. The gospel cannot soak deeply into us unless it's addressing our ongoing need for it.

3. CHEER UP! GOD'S SPIRIT WORKS IN YOUR WEAKNESS!

In addition to our new identity, we have been given the Spirit, who is more than sufficient to lead, guide, and empower us in our new life. Often, we think that the great problem in our lives is that there is not enough power available to change our lives and relationships. There is, however, more than enough power available, for the power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us (Ephesians 1:19–20). Nevertheless, this power does not work automatically; it is at work in those who believe. So the Spirit works through repentance and faith. To live by faith is to live by the Spirit, who brings about the obedience God is looking for.

Furthermore, this power of the Spirit is made manifest in our lives through weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9; 13:4). We take the weak position when we have let go of our righteousness and strength, our claims to health and happiness, and our overarching claim to lordship over our lives. Thus, those who hold on to their righteousness and strength will find little power in their lives. Of course, this is further good news. God delights to use the weak and inadequate things of this world to accomplish his great plan for the world. With Paul, we can delight in weakness, for then we are strong, and God is glorified. The result is a wonderful freedom to forget about ourselves and stop wondering whether we have enough abilities, knowing that God uses and empowers the weak.

4. CHEER UP! GOD'S KINGDOM IS MORE WONDERFUL THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE!

The kingdom of God is the new and final age that began with the coming of Jesus. His kingdom is not part of the present age—an age where the flesh reigns; where people are divided, relationships are broken, and suspicion and competition predominate; where money, sex, and power are abused; where leaders are first and servants last; where behavior is controlled by law, and identity is defined by race, gender, or social standing; and where gifts and resources are used for the advancement of oneself. Rather, the kingdom of God is the new age. It is the age of the Spirit (Matthew 12:28). It is the age of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). The kingdom of God is about the renewal, restoration, and reconciliation of all things, and God has made us a part of this great story of salvation.

It is about the restoration of relationships, justice, and equality; about freedom from every lord except Jesus; about reconciliation, forgiveness, and the defeat of Satan. It's about compassion for the poor and powerless, about helping those who are marginalized and rejected by society, and about using our gifts and resources for the advancement of others. It's about new communities and the transformation of society and culture, so that race, gender, and social class no longer define identity, nor are they used to control and divide. For Paul, to preach the gospel is to preach the kingdom, is to preach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:24–27).

The gospel sums up the whole message of good news that he brought to the nations—particularly to the downtrodden and powerless. And since it is good news, our response to the message of the kingdom is to be one of repentance and faith (Mark 1:15).

USING THE SONSHIP MANUAL

There are three main parts to the course:

1. This manual
2. Audio lectures
3. A discipling relationship (the most important part of the course)

Each of the manual's sixteen lessons are divided into seven parts, which consistently follow the order listed below:

1. Lesson title
2. An introductory quote taken from the lecture
3. Lesson goals (in the right margin)
4. A reminder to listen to the lecture
5. An outline of the lecture, including any diagrams used, with space available to take comprehensive notes
6. Homework, consisting of:
 - A memory verse for each lesson (Note: memory verses for the entire course are included in Appendix C at the end of the manual.)
 - Approximately a dozen homework questions and various sections of teaching content (Teaching content is introduced by a large asterisk.)
 - A reading that relates to the topic of each lesson
7. A list of the various assignments to be checked off as you complete them

BEFORE THE COURSE BEGINS:

1. Recruit a prayer partner.

Prayer is essential, for God's work is not accomplished by simply taking a course, but rather through his Spirit in response to believing prayer. Commit yourself to praying, and to recruiting at least one prayer partner to pray for you throughout the duration of the course. Having a prayer partner is important, so choose a person who'll take this commitment seriously. Pick a person with whom you can communicate openly on a regular basis. Quite a few assignments will involve your prayer partner, and you'll need to update them after every lesson, letting them know how to specifically pray for you and how their prayers are being answered.

As a suggestion, when you get started, ask your prayer partner to pray Psalm 139:23–24 for you throughout the course: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

2. Read through the book of Galatians in Appendix A.

Reprinted from *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson, this translation of Paul's book refreshingly underscores many themes of this course.

FOR SMALL GROUPS—WHAT TO EXPECT

1. Expect struggle . . .

and don't be surprised to find that your group is a mixture of enthusiasm, hope, and honesty, along with indifference, anxiety, skepticism, guilt, and covering up. We're all people who really and truly need Jesus every day. So expect your group to be made up of people who wrestle with sin and have problems—like yourself!

2. Expect a group leader . . .

who desires to serve you, but who also needs Jesus as much as, and in some ways more than, you do. No leader should be on a pedestal, so

expect that your group leader will have the freedom to share openly about his or her own weaknesses, struggles, and sins. Pray for your group leader regularly, and give your support and encouragement.

3. Expect the Holy Spirit . . .

to be the one ultimately responsible for your group's growth, and for the change in each person's life. Relax and trust him.

4. Expect your group's agenda to include . . .

an open, give-and-take discussion of the lecture, readings, and especially the homework questions and answers for that lesson. Also expect times of prayer at each gathering.

5. Expect confidentiality . . .

and be prepared to make a commitment that anything personal mentioned in your group must be kept in confidence, and not shared with others. Gossip will quickly destroy a group.

Session

1

ORPHANS, OR CHILDREN OF GOD?

A believer is living as an “orphan” when he or she has somehow lost touch with the grace of God. In isolation from the promises, the orphan has developed a small view of Christ and a small view of the gospel. In contrast, a believer is living as a son or daughter when he or she is walking in faith, and living according to God’s promises. Sons and daughters have a large Christ and a large gospel.

GOALS:

- To know that we are beloved, adopted children of the King
- To recognize that we are prone to trivialize the gospel, harden our hearts, and isolate ourselves from God and other people
- To understand that God invites us to confidently face our fears about life, and the worst things about ourselves, trusting solely in his righteousness and his promises as our Father

>>> LISTEN TO MESSAGE 1

MESSAGE OUTLINE

1. We are no longer slaves, but sons and daughters of God (Galatians 1:3–5; 4:4–7; 6:14).
2. What has happened to all your joy (Galatians 4:15)?

3. We trivialize the gospel when we trivialize our sin.
4. We are to live by faith in the promises of our heavenly Father (Galatians 4:4–7).

5. The way up is the way down (James 4:6).

HOMework

Name:

Due:

Memorize:

Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

—*Galatians 4:6–7*

Complete the following questions and exercises:

1. Complete the “Orphans, or Children of God?” exercise at the end of this session. Write your impressions below.

“**Adoption is a family idea**, conceived in terms of love, and viewing God as father. In adoption, God takes us into His family and fellowship, and establishes us as His children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the father is greater.”

6. As you start this course, where would you like to see God change you? Write down at least three specific areas. In addition, ask your prayer partner to pray about these things.

We often think that a lack of joy is a result of our circumstances—irritating people in our life, lack of money, or bad health. The message, however, speaks a lot about joy and how it is rooted in who Christ is and what he has accomplished for us. When we discover a lack of joy within ourselves, the reasons may be varied. Like the Galatians, we may lack joy because we've forgotten what Christ has done for us, and have been abusing law by forcing, compelling, and judging others. We may lack joy because of fears that encompass our lives, such as fear of the future or fear of failure. We may also lack joy because we've failed, been exposed as a failure or fraud, or been attacked with criticism and condemnation.

7. Identify and describe an area of your life where you sense a lack of deep, spiritual joy. Why do you think you've lost this joy?

The message also addresses our need to seek approval from people. We do this in many different ways. We try to perform well to please family, friends, or coworkers. Or, we try hard to cover up our bad performances by concealing the whole truth. We may use laughter and humor so people will like us more. At times, we may also use flattery, subtle boasting, or fishing for compliments. Some of us withdraw and become quiet, while others act outgoing and important—all in order to “score approval points.” Whatever the case, approval-seeking is an attempt to prove to ourselves, others, and even to God that we’re okay.

8. Think of two recent examples when you've sought the approval of other people. What were the circumstances? What did you do?
9. How are we acting like spiritual orphans when we depend on the approval of others?

10. As you reflect honestly on your life, do you live as though you really believe God approves of you? Explain your answer; try to think of both positive and negative examples.

David writes in Psalm 139:23–24, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” It is significant that in a psalm about intimacy with God, David ends with a request that God search out his fears and offensive ways. David realized that as he sought to experience the intimacy God created for us to enjoy with him, two obstacles in particular stood in the way: (1) his many fears, and (2) his offensive ways. Yet David could see neither his fears nor his offensive ways on his own. He needed the Holy Spirit to search him.

Likewise, our sins are like Post-it notes written on our backs—everyone else can see them, but we can’t. The speaker states that the way to invite the Spirit’s power into our lives is by first being severely honest about who we really are. However, if we cannot see what we’re like, we need to ask God and invite others to speak into our lives, instead of responding with our usual defensiveness. To receive God’s grace, we must be in a position to receive this grace—a position of humility (James 4:6).

11. Where do you think the power for spiritual transformation comes from? How do we access that power?

In preparation for Session 2:

Begin “The Tongue Assignment.”

for one week, do not:	
gossip (or spread a bad report)	defend yourself
complain	boast
criticize	deceive others
blameshift (or make excuses)	

As you do this exercise, keep the following passages in mind:

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29).

“All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness” (James 3:7–9).

READ

My Father's Shirt

The Holy Spirit really dealt with my husband and me at the *Sonship Week* conference in answer to many prayers. I am seeing that as good as theology and teaching techniques are, it is the Holy Spirit alone who changes my heart. He tears down the idols and pride and replants the simplicity of faith in Christ. I realized that my greatest sin was unbelief and lightly esteeming all God has given me in Christ.

One day when I was very young, I saw my older sister hanging up my father's white business shirts on the clothesline to dry. I was suddenly filled with the urge to hang up one of my daddy's white shirts. He was my daddy too, and I was his daughter; I loved him in my childlike way and wanted to express it. I couldn't reach the clothesline—it was too high, but I saw a wheelbarrow in the yard and its handles were just the right height for me. I didn't notice how rusty it was and I rather joyfully clothes-pinned the wet shirt to the handles.

When my dad got home and saw the shirt on the wheelbarrow, he became very angry with me and punished me severely for ruining his shirt. I had not realized the impact that event and others like it had made on me. However, as I was repeatedly convicted during the *Sonship* conference for not believing God concerning his delight in me and in the gracious nature of my relationship with him, this memory returned to me. Now, you cannot hardly get through twenty-four hours of a *Sonship* conference without realizing that your own heart is as murderous as anyone else's—so I wasn't primarily focusing on only being the innocent victim of my father's cruel anger.

As I remembered these scenes from the past, I saw that through the years I had not believed that my Father in heaven was any different than my earthly father. I had not listened when he described himself. In short, I hadn't believed the gospel, that by faith in Christ and his perfect atoning sacrifice, he now loves me, and is forever for me and delighted in me. In Christ, he has made me beautiful and pleasing to him forever.

So the next morning I told our counselor that I thought I was beginning to understand. I told him the memory and said that I guess if the Father saw me standing next to the wheelbarrow with the ruined shirt on it, he would forget the shirt and hug me. “You still don’t understand fully,” Jeff said. “God would not overlook the shirt, but take it, put it on, and wear it to work. And when someone commented on the rust marks, he would say, ‘Let me tell you about my little girl and how much she loves me.’” I was overwhelmed with that realization.

I am beginning to realize that my Christian life has been a continual effort to earn God’s pleasure by “getting the shirts hung up right.” God would answer if my prayer was right. God would smile upon me if my theology was correct. And since I knew how I had failed day by day in my works, I sort of snuck them up on the line and tried to be away when God got home, so to speak. Someone at the conference said something that seems to apply here. He said, “God will not despise the tainted love-gifts of the sinner who looks to Jesus.” My entire Christian life had been oppressive. I did not know how to live day by day without an overwhelming sense of failure to perform up to what I thought God demanded. With that came a sense of God being disappointed and even disgusted with me. How overpowering it is now to realize that because of Christ, I can experience a daily freedom to move out into people’s lives. I can love others. I can obey God with my heart because I don’t fear that he will be furious with me if I “get the shirt a bit rusty.” There is a freedom to love that I have not known since the moments before my father got home that day long ago.

I have been thinking of the “rusty shirt” and the parable of the talents. The two servants, who loved their master and trusted in his good will, served him energetically. They were not driven, but the very fact that they believed him to be what he was (faithful and generous) moved them to use the talents to the best of their ability. It was, however, the legalist—the one who viewed the master as a hard man—who hid his talent. My unbelief has led me to talent-burying. It is the fact that my Father delights even in rusty shirts that moves “this most flinty heart of mine” to really desire a life disciplined to seek him and find him, and by his power at work in me, to live a life of faith expressing itself in love.

An update: five years later

It is hard to believe that it has been five years since my husband and I attended the *Sonship* conference. Before we attended, I had worn myself out with trying to be a “godly” Christian mother and wife. I always felt that I had to be a better person than I was in order for God to be pleased with me. I had this constant weight of trying to live up to what Christ had done for me—so the Father would not be sorry he had saved me and made me his child. My husband and I tried hard to have a godly marriage and to be godly parents. In our minds, we had this ideal picture of what our family ought to look like. Reality was far different. Soon we were all becoming adversaries. My husband felt that my lack of respect and affection for him ruined his chances of achieving a godly marriage. I felt that if he loved me more and led our family better, then I would be able to do my part in respecting and affirming him. The kids seemed bent on destroying any resolve in us to be patient, kind instructors. We resented them for that.

So, how has the *Sonship* training made a lasting impact on our lives? It showed us clearly the gospel message: that Christ died for sinners—like my husband, our children, and me. He paid the price to get eye level with us and embrace us where we are. The first immediate impact was to take the pressure off. My husband and I were able to repent and forgive each other for the critical spirits we had and the demands we had placed on each other. We could see each other as fellow, forgiven sinners. We also began to learn to accept our children and show them Jesus as the only one who saves us from our sins. The long-term effect has been crucial to us, as we have had to deal with the special needs of our children—physical, mental, and emotional.

Before *Sonship*, we thought we had to have our acts together. We had to know the right thing to do and be able to do it. What a relief to know that God meets us where we need him. I don’t have to know, I can ask. I don’t have to pretend to be strong; I can be weak and come to him. I can admit my weaknesses and my worst, cruel sins, and ask others to pray for our children and me. It is here that we have seen numerous answers to specific prayers born out of our weakness and our sinfulness. What a joy to know our needs are a window to God, not an obstacle that

makes him disgusted with us. We still have much to learn, particularly about God's love for us in Jesus. We stumble instinctively. But we always know who to return to. And that has been as significant a change in us as our initial salvation.*

ORPHANS, OR CHILDREN OF GOD?

Read through the characteristics of an orphan in the left column below. Check off the tendencies you recognize in yourself and underline words or phrases that most apply to you.

In the right-hand column are the son/daughter counterparts to each orphan characteristic. Use the son/daughter descriptions as goals to reach for during the course, and beyond.

* Excerpt from a letter written by an attendee of the *Sonship Week* conference for pastors and their wives.

Orphans	Children of God
I will not leave you as orphans... (John 14:18)	But he has given us the Spirit of sonship and by him we cry, "Abba, Father!" (Romans 8:15)
<input type="checkbox"/> Feels alone. Lacks a vital daily intimacy with God. Is full of self-concern.	Has a growing assurance that "God is really <i>my</i> loving heavenly Father."
<input type="checkbox"/> Anxious over felt needs: relationships, money, health. "I'm all alone and nobody cares. I'm not a happy camper."	Trusts the Father and has a growing confidence in his loving care. Is being freed up from worry.
<input type="checkbox"/> Lives on a succeed/fail basis. Needs to "look good" and "be right." Is performance-oriented.	Learning to live in daily, conscious, partnership with God. Is not fearful.
<input type="checkbox"/> Feels condemned, guilty, and unworthy before God and others.	Feels loved, forgiven, and totally accepted because Christ's merit really clothes him.
<input type="checkbox"/> Has little faith, lots of fear, lots of faith in himself: "I've got to fix it."	Has a daily <i>working trust</i> in God's sovereign plan for her life as loving, wise, and best. Believes God is good.
<input type="checkbox"/> Labors under a sense of unlimited obligation. Tries too hard to please. Burns out.	Prayer is the first resort: "I'm going to ask my daddy first." Cries "Abba, Father!"
<input type="checkbox"/> Rebellious. Resists authority. Heart is hard. Is not easily teachable.	Has strength to be submissive. Has a soft (broken and contrite) heart. Is teachable.
<input type="checkbox"/> Defensive. Can't listen well. Bristles at the charge of being self-righteous (thus proving the point).	Open to criticism since she <i>consciously</i> stands in <i>Christ's</i> perfection, not her own. Is able to examine her unbelief.
<input type="checkbox"/> Needs to be right, safe, secure. Unwilling to fail. Unable to tolerate criticism. Can only "handle" praise.	Able to take risks and even fail, since his righteousness is in Christ. Needs no "record" to boast in, protect, or defend.
<input type="checkbox"/> Excessively self-confident or self-loathing. Discouraged, defeated. Lacks spiritual power.	Confident in Christ and encouraged because of the Holy Spirit's work in her.
<input type="checkbox"/> Tends toward an "I can do it myself" attitude. Is strong-willed, driven.	"I can do all things through <i>Christ</i> who gives me strength!"
<input type="checkbox"/> Unbelieving effort. Relies only on his gifts to get by in ministry.	Trusting <i>less</i> in self and more in the Holy Spirit—a daily, conscious, reliance.

CONTINUED »

Orphans	Children of God
I will not leave you as orphans... (John 14:18)	But he has given us the Spirit of sonship and by him we cry, "Abba, Father!" (Romans 8:15)
<input type="checkbox"/> Tends to be ungrateful. Is complaining, bitter. Has a critical spirit. Tears down others.	Relies on the Holy Spirit to guide the tongue. Praises, edifies, gives thanks, encourages.
<input type="checkbox"/> Tends to point out what is wrong. Is often dissatisfied about something.	Not blind to wrong, but chooses instead to focus on what is good and lovely.
<input type="checkbox"/> Gossips (confesses <i>other people's</i> sins). Needs to criticize others to feel right. Has the "gift of discernment."	Is able to freely confess his faults to others. Is finding that he is often wrong. Is eager to grow.
<input type="checkbox"/> Tends to compare himself with others—leading either to pride or depression.	Stands confidently in Christ. His self-worth comes from Jesus' righteousness, not his own.
<input type="checkbox"/> Feels powerless to defeat the flesh. Has no heart-victory over pet sins, yet has lost her sense of being a "big sinner."	As she rests in Christ, she is seeing more and more victory over the flesh. She sees herself as a "big sinner."
<input type="checkbox"/> Relatively prayerless. Prayer is a last resort. Prays sometimes in public, seldom in private.	Prayer is a vital part of the day, not confined to a quiet-time. Loves to talk to the Father.
<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible's promises of spiritual power and joy mock him. "What has happened to all your joy?"	God's promises of power and joy are beginning to describe him.
<input type="checkbox"/> Boasts. Points out her own accomplishments for fear that someone might overlook them.	Finds that Jesus is more and more the subject of her conversation. She boasts in her weaknesses.
<input type="checkbox"/> Concerned about building a record of deeds that needs noticing and defending.	Christ's righteousness is his "record" so he stands complete in him.
<input type="checkbox"/> Wishes people would see things her way. Needs to be in <i>control</i> of situations and other people.	Becoming Christ-controlled. Loves others in power of the Spirit, not in strength of her sinful nature.
<input type="checkbox"/> Looks for satisfaction in positions, possessions, or pacifiers (idols). Something other than Jesus makes him feel worthy, worthwhile, or justified.	Christ is his meat and drink. God truly satisfies his soul. "[A]nd having him, I desire nothing on earth."
<input type="checkbox"/> Lacks passion to share the gospel, since her Christian life is not really good news. Tends to be motivated by obligation or duty, not love.	Has a desire to see the lost come to know Jesus the way she does. Shares the gospel, even when not under the outward pressure of a program.

Check off the assignments you've completed:

- ☐ Listened to Message 1
- ☐ Recruited a prayer partner
- ☐ Memorized Galatians 4:6-7
- ☐ Completed the exercises
- ☐ Read "My Father's Shirt"
- ☐ Read all of Galatians (See Appendix A in the back of the manual.)