

6 EXPERIENCING JESUS DAILY

IN THIS LESSON YOU WILL STUDY THESE QUESTIONS:

- What is prayer all about?
 - How is a committed follower of Christ different from one who is not?
 - What keys exist to understanding the Bible?
 - What role does the Holy Spirit play in our lives?
 - Can anything be done to make church attendance more meaningful?
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If you said the prayer at the end of the last chapter and meant it with all your heart, you truly have become a new person—not because I say so, but because the Bible says so. All your sins have been forgiven because God always keeps His word. Christ has come into your life. Not only that, you are really on your way to spending eternity with the Lord. You have every right to be full of joy!

It is only natural that you will want to experience more of Jesus and follow His guidance. People have many interesting ideas about how to determine what is best for their lives. Many believe in some undefined force called “luck” to lead and guide them. If they feel lucky, they might buy a lottery ticket. They base decisions on so-called “lucky feelings.” Others go to fortune-tellers or psychics. Large numbers of people are hooked on horoscopes. You do not need to rely on any of these things.

According to the Bible, we do not have to just drift through life. God wants us to have clear direction. In Ephesians 5:17 we read, “This is why you must not be thoughtless but must recognize what is the will of the Lord.” As a Christian, have confidence that God has a plan for your life—one that is very exciting and fulfilling. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God says, “Yes, I know what plans I have in mind for you, Yahweh declares,

plans for peace, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). You should be thrilled about discovering your God-given destiny.

PRAYER IS INDISPENSABLE

Prayer is a vital part of the process of experiencing Christ and receiving guidance from our Father in heaven. Philippians 4:6 says, “Never worry about anything; but tell God all your desires of every kind in prayer and petition shot through with gratitude, and the peace of God which is beyond our understanding will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.” We need to talk to God about all that is on our hearts. That means we should request His help when we feel overwhelmed by problems and need guidance. Feel free to talk to the Lord in normal, everyday language. James writes, “Any of you who lacks wisdom must ask God, who gives to all generously and without scolding; it will be given” (James 1:5).

Sadly, prayer is the last thing some people want to do. They see it as a last resort or something you do only in a church building. However, prayer should be a regular part of our lives. Daily prayer draws us closer to the Lord and strengthens us. As we pray, we find ourselves exercising faith.

Let me suggest that you find a quiet place to go to daily for prayer and spend five minutes talking to God. Thank Him for His many blessings. If you have failed Him in some way, confess that to Him. If you have needs, present your requests to Him. If you are concerned about others, take their problems to God too and ask Him to bring about positive change. If you are sick, ask Him to heal you. It has been said that “daily prayer is the gymnasium of the soul.”

I guarantee that soon you will find that five minutes of prayer per day is not enough and you will begin to want to spend even more time talking to God. Also, be sure to spend some silent moments in prayer. Prayer is two-way communication. God may also want to impress His thoughts on your heart. Listen when He reveals himself.

GOD WANTS YOU TO LIVE A NEW KIND OF LIFE

In Romans 12:1-2 the apostle Paul reveals an important key to the Christian life. He writes,

I urge you, brothers, remembering the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, dedicated and acceptable to God; that is the kind of worship for you, as sensible people. Do not model your

behavior on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and mature.

What key are we referring to? It's godliness. Godliness basically refers to being God-centered. It also carries the idea of living in a way that pleases the Lord. As Christians we are called to love God with all our hearts. This love is demonstrated daily by a life of obedience to the Lord's commands. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

Paul compares living a godly life to the Old Testament concept of offering a sacrifice. In obedience to the law of Moses, the ancient Israelites slaughtered animals and presented them to God as sacrifices. As the blood of innocent sacrificial animals was shed for their sins, repentant Israelites could rest assured of God's forgiveness. These sacrifices pointed the way to the final sacrifice Jesus would make on the cross for our sins. No more animals need to be offered now. He paid the price for our complete forgiveness.

However, godliness implies that we offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices. This is a new concept. How do we do this? Our lives are to be holy and pleasing to God. We cannot live like we did before knowing the Lord. The transformation must start with our minds and be reflected in our attitudes and behaviors.

You may ask, "But what happens if I make a mistake in my moral life?" We must understand that, as human beings, we will still blunder from time to time as long as we live in this world. However, we should go to God as soon as we realize we have done wrong. Notice what the apostle John tells us: "If we say, 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves, and truth has no place in us; if we acknowledge our sins, he is trustworthy and upright so that he will forgive our sins and will cleanse us from all evil" (1 John 1:8-9). The godly, prayerful follower of Christ can rest assured that he or she is on God's "radar screen." God has such an individual in sight and knows how best to lead and guide him or her.

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STUDYING SCRIPTURE

Many people, including good Catholics, have never taken time to seriously read the Bible. It is time to open it up and discover the wonderful treasures God has placed there. Some people think the Bible ought to reveal what color socks to wear, what kind of car to buy, or whether to take a vacation to Miami or Moscow. They may even open the Bible randomly and put their finger on a verse and read it, thinking that God will speak to them that way.

Please understand this—the Bible is a book of principles. If you come to God’s Word to find out whether to buy a blue chair or a green chair, or to discover whether to ride the train to work or drive your car, you’ll probably be very disappointed. But if you come to God’s Word to learn the principles of Christian living, you will be richly rewarded. David wrote, “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path” (Psalm 119:105).

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Let me share with you two examples of these great principles. One principle is to always put God first. Jesus said, “Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on God’s saving justice” (Matthew 6:33). What we are talking about here are priorities. One old recipe for rabbit stew starts out with this line: “First catch the rabbit.” In the Christian life, the most important duty is to put God first. Nothing else will work in life unless He is first.

Please take time to think about what you have been putting first in your life up until now. Has it been your job, hobbies, friends, money, or something else? God is not against your experiencing joy in all these other things, but He does not want to compete with anything. He must be first. A lot of questions, or even confusion about God’s will, evaporate when you keep your priorities straight.

Another important principle is discipleship. Jesus said, “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). This principle helps to remind us that as Christians we are called to follow, serve, and obey our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Disciples keep their eyes on Jesus. Their focus is Jesus. He must always be in the picture.

In a Berlin art gallery is a famous painting by Adolf Menzel (1815–1905). What makes the painting unique and interesting is that it’s only partially finished. The artist intended to show Fredrick the Great speaking with some of his advisors. He painted the advisors and background but left

a place in the center of the canvas to paint the king, outlined in charcoal. However, the artist died before he finished the painting, and Fredrick was never in the picture. Always let Jesus be in the picture of your life.

You need to spend time reading and studying God's Word. As I suggested in chapter 2, the Gospel of Mark is a great place to start reading. It is the shortest of the four Gospels and maybe the simplest to understand. Read slowly and interact with the words you read. Ask God to help you understand them. It takes time and effort, but the rewards are certainly worth it.

THE HOLY SPIRIT HELPS US

God is a Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Many verses in the Bible reveal how much the Holy Spirit does for us. Here are two examples: Romans 8:14 says, “All who are guided by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” Jesus says in John 16:13, “When the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth.”

What is the significance of this? You could say that true Christians have an internal guidance system in the person of the Holy Spirit. For many centuries, boats and ships relied on external methods of guidance. Sailors looked at the stars. They followed the shoreline when possible. Then compasses were invented. Later, sailors began to use radio, sonar, and radar to help them navigate. Still, these were all external forms of guidance. However, in the 1950s, a new means of guidance was implemented. It did not require stars, land, radio waves, or anything external to function. This new “internal guidance system” was based on gyroscopes. Because of it, one nuclear-powered submarine was able to leave Hawaii and travel to the North Pole submerged—even navigating under the ice—and then cruise to England still submerged. Think of the Holy Spirit as an internal, living, all-knowing, all-powerful personal navigator guiding your life. Pretty exciting, isn't it!

Let us be specific now. What does it mean to have the Spirit guide us? Does He always speak audibly to us? Too many people go around claiming, “The Lord said . . .” or “The Lord told me . . .” when in fact the Lord said nothing specifically to them at all. Do not ever get into the habit of talking that way. It borders on sacrilege. Occasionally the Spirit speaks audibly to individuals, but it is not the normal method.

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What does the Spirit reveal to us? Here are four things to keep in mind about the Spirit's guidance:

- Normally, the Holy Spirit's guidance comes as a steady impression that does not leave us. It is more than just a passing whim or feeling.
- The Holy Spirit's impressions on our heart and mind will often guide us away from a dangerous course of action.
- The Holy Spirit's communication will guide us to a place where He can use us. In Acts 8, the Spirit led Philip the evangelist to share the gospel with an Ethiopian traveler. As a result, the Ethiopian believed in Jesus Christ and was baptized.
- The Holy Spirit will give us peace and confirm to us when we are on track in doing God's will. If we get off track, the Spirit will be quick to show us that too.

Ask the Lord to lead you by His Spirit daily and expect His help. As a safeguard, carefully compare any impression you think may be from the Spirit with the principles already revealed in the Bible. If the impression is really from the Spirit, it will always conform to God's revealed will in Scripture.

THE CHURCH

Maybe you have gone to church all your life. Perhaps in recent years you have entered church only to attend a funeral or a wedding. I know many people whose impression of churches in general is that they are cold, empty buildings with little of interest inside. Maybe you find the religious messages by church leaders to be stuffy, irrelevant, and boring. Have you considered the possibility that perhaps it is time to find a new church home?

I want to speak candidly to you at this point, and I hope you will give me a fair hearing. Simply going to confession and Mass as a weekly duty will not satisfy your need to worship God, experience His presence, or learn from His Word. If I were you, I would be very excited about getting to know other people who have experienced the love of Christ and forgiveness in a personal way. I would want to share with them what the Lord has done for me, study the Bible with them, and pray with them.

May I suggest that you visit an evangelical church? I myself was raised in a good Catholic home, but after having a life-changing encounter with Christ, I found that the ancient rituals and rites of my religious upbringing did not encourage my newfound faith and experience. This is not to say

that my appreciation and love for Catholics at all diminished but that I needed something the Catholic Church could not offer. I found people who also experienced the greatest miracle I had in an evangelical church.

What do evangelicals believe? We believe the Bible is God's Word. We believe in the Holy Trinity. We believe Christianity is meant to be an exciting, joy-filled experience. We believe in sincere prayer. We believe in loving people of all races and religions. We believe God wants to perform the miracle of salvation in all people's hearts. We have church leaders called pastors who preach and teach God's Word. We worship on Sundays and have wonderful activities for people of all ages during the week.

FULFILLMENT IN CHRIST

Miracles still happen today! By now I trust that you have encountered Christ personally and know the joy of forgiveness and the hope of eternal life. Being a Christian should not be drudgery. The most fulfilled people I know are those who passionately follow Christ and desire to be in the center of His will. David Livingstone, the famous Scottish explorer of Africa and missionary, spent many years in remote corners of the continent. He was often sick and faced innumerable hardships. Once, he was attacked and mauled by a lion, leaving one of his arms virtually useless. He lost friends and loved ones. Still, he declared, "I had rather be in the heart of Africa in the will of God than on the throne of England out of the will of God."

A FINAL PRAYER FOR YOU

"Father in Heaven, I thank You for my friends who have read this book and received Your Son, Jesus Christ, by faith. Protect, guide, and bless them richly. Let faith fill their hearts daily. May Your love surround them and keep them faithful until their journey on earth is over. Help them to find others who love You and want to serve You. Empower them by Your Holy Spirit so they persevere in difficulty, live a life worthy of You, and boldly tell others about the greatest miracle available to humankind. I ask all this, dear God, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Questions for individual or group study:

1. *In what ways has prayer been meaningful to you?*
2. *How has God been helping you live a godly life?*
3. *What principles of the Bible have helped you?*
4. *Have you experienced the Holy Spirit's guidance and help?
How?*
5. *Do you believe it matters where you attend church?*