

LIVING STONES:

THE MAKING OF AN ETERNAL FELLOWSHIP

A study of I & II Peter, I, II, & III John, and Jude by Becce Bettridge

LEADER'S GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Living Stones: The Making of an Eternal Fellowship* Leader's Guide. The following material will help you effectively lead your group in this study and have some fun doing it!

The leader's notes are designed to help you lead the discussion and activities for each lesson in this nine-session Bible study. The lessons are designed to last between 60 - 90 minutes depending on the length of time your group devotes to discussion, sharing, and prayer. This study has been developed and is distributed by PFR for the purpose of mobilizing leaders who are biblically faithful and missionally minded. It is intended for use with groups that desire to develop a closer relationship to God and to each other. You may wish to encourage other groups in your congregation to consider using this study as well.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study is to set a scriptural and experiential foundation to help each participant understand that through God's loving action, Christians are chosen by God, anointed by the Holy Spirit, and appointed to participate *with others* in God's great, active, and eternal plan for humankind. As a way to help each person access their own experience of being a "living stone," participants will be given opportunities to reflect on their faith story in light of their participation within God's eternal cathedral—his Church.

In addition to this overall objective, a more specific objective for each lesson will be given in this Leader's Guide as part of each lesson's preparation material.

OUR METAPHOR

Stones and rocks are used over and over in Scripture as metaphors for the faithfulness and durability of God and the firm foundation of Jesus Christ. In 1 Peter 2:4-5 stones are also used to describe the God-built edifice of Christian people who are his Church—a living cathedral spanning time and space. "Come to him, *a living stone*, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like *living stones*, let yourself be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2:4-5)

Living Stones: the Making of an Eternal Fellowship is a study that concentrates on this cathedral whose architect and builder is God by using the whimsical (although not perfect), metaphor of building with stone to describe how Christians participate in God's eternal dimension. God is creating his Church in the world stone by stone, person by person, year in and year out. Although human-built stone buildings last a long time, the Church built by Jesus Christ will outlast the oldest of human stone structures. The Christian Church, built with "living stones," is the spiritual reality of the Apostle's Creed when we say we believe "in the holy catholic (universal) Church, the communion of saints."

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Living Stones: the Making of an Eternal Fellowship can be used in a variety of ways depending upon how your group likes to study Scripture. Some groups like to "do their homework" and come prepared for class by having already looked up the scriptures and answered the questions. If this is your group's preference, additional discussion suggestions can be found in the Leader's Guide for each lesson. If your group prefers to work through each lesson together, suggestions for how to facilitate this method are also given.

STUDY OUTLINE

Each lesson in *Living Stones: the Making of an Eternal Fellowship* consists of five parts: *Introduction*, *Setting the Stones*, *Using the Plumb Line*, *Placing the Capstone*, and a *Closing Hymn*.

The Introduction

The Introduction will make use of our metaphor as it relates to the topic of each lesson.

Setting the Stones

Setting the Stones is the hard and dirty work of placing one stone on top of another to form a stable rock structure. In this section of our study, students will inductively search scripture to look for both the original intent of the authors for their First Century readers, as well as God's word today. In order to be able to read particular texts in context, students will often be asked to study a larger section of scripture which sets the context of the text under consideration.

HINT: Although a specific question about the author's original intention may not occur (using these exact words) in each lesson, it is always a fruitful discussion to compare how the author's original intention might compare to the manner in which Holy Spirit spoke to each student during her study.

For Group Study

HINT: If your group likes to work through the lesson together, I suggest you divide the large group into smaller groups of two or three and have each small group study a particular passage in order to bring their findings back to the large group. Because this inductive study section will often result in a list of words or phrases, I suggest the leader use a white board or large newsprint to collate the findings of each small group. Seeing the work of each small group listed together gives the entire group a deeper understanding of our authors' intended message as well as the variety of ways the Holy Spirit is speaking to the members of your group.

HINT: If your group comes with their lesson already complete, the leader might list on a white board or large newsprint the answers each member discovered during her personal inductive study.

Sections marked *"For further or group study also consider the following texts,* can be used with either method described above. The material following this phrase will be additional (but no less informative) texts which give a broader scope of the topic under consideration in each lesson.

Using the Plumb Line

Using the Plumb Line helps the craftsman build a structure which is straight and true. This section of our study will give each student an opportunity to reflect on, and tell the stories about, what it has meant to her to be a "living stone" in God's cathedral.

As a leader, you will find that this section may prompt some excellent and in-depth sharing within the group as group members are encouraged to share a part of their faith story they may not have articulated before.

HINT: If you have a large group, you might consider dividing your group into smaller groups of three or four so that each person is able to tell her story if she desires.

HINT: As a leader, you will want to give ample permission to anyone who does not want to share. A fun way to facilitate sharing might be to have some "talking stones" ready so that each speaker can hold the stone while she tells her story. When she is done (or when the leader calls "time's-up") the speaker can pass the stone to the person on her left. If the next person does not want to share, they just pass the stone on.

Placing the Capstone

Placing the Capstone beautifully completes the building project when the craftsman sets the final stone on top of the structure. In each lesson, several reflection questions are given to consider. The questions (each different in nature) either reflect back on the scriptures studied, or give the students a venue to notice where God is doing some masonry in their life today.

This section offers some personal journaling opportunities and can be handled in a variety of ways in your group.

HINT: As leader, you may want to pick one question and ask for volunteers to share what they have written. Or, if your group works the lesson together, you might ask people to spend a few minutes writing a response to the question of their choice and then sharing if there is time.

HINT: Some people love to “journal” and others are resistant. It can be helpful to suggest that each student direct her writing to God as if in a letter. Depending on the comfort level your group has with each other, this section can provide some interesting discussion as people take the time to notice what God is doing in their lives.

The Closing Hymn

The Closing Hymn presents either a hymn of the church, a gospel song, or a Psalm in which rocks or stones are used to describe God and/or our relationship with him.

HINT: As leader, come prepared to have your group either listen to an audio rendition of the song suggested (all of them can be found on the internet), or sing along with someone who is prepared to play the song on an instrument. If all else fails, you will find the words to each song in this Leader’s Guide along with a short history when it was available.

HINT: When a Psalm is used, I suggest that the Psalm be used in an antiphonal manner with a number of participants getting a chance to read. You will want to pass out reading parts or assign them ahead of time.

FORMAT FOR LEADER’S GUIDE

In formatting the Leader’s Guide I have simply taken a digital copy of each lesson and added my comments and hints (**in bold**) as well as the actual scriptural passages referenced (*in italics*). I have used the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), but feel free to use your favorite translation. In a number of places I have highlighted the texts in which you will find material to answer the questions asked. My comments will never be exhaustive or totally complete, so please work through the lessons yourself and let the Holy Spirit guide you as you study Scripture along with your group.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In our study, the lessons will contain scriptures from each book we are studying. It is recommended that before you begin Lesson One, each person in your group take the time on their own to read through 1 and 2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude in their entirety. They are short books and this reading will give everyone in the group an overview before studying the specific texts found in each lesson.

HINT: Two books that you might consider reading in preparation for this entire study are: *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* by Rowan Williams and *Simply Christian: Why Christianity makes Sense* by N.T. Wright. Both of these books are filled with surprising and wonderful apologetic discussions of our faith and address the core issue, with understandable language and ideas, we will be working with in our study. I loved them.

YOUR ROLE AS A LEADER

The goal of a good group leader is to be a *facilitator* of learning. Such a role encourages discussion, questions, sharing, and honestly exploring together. The best learning takes place when participants discover truths for themselves and then seek ways to apply them. The antithesis of this teaching style is the “big jug—little mug” approach, which assumes the group “teacher” imparts the wisdom while the “students” eagerly absorb it. Such a style might be appropriate for certain classes, but not for a study that considers such personally important topics as will be covered in these sessions. Let people search within their own heart and mind. Let them offer their own insights...ask their own questions...pray their own prayers. Because ultimately, this study is intended to help each participant individualize the insights and apply them in their own life.

Therefore, in leading this group, be a co-learner; enter into the activities, the reading, and the discussion. Ask the questions yourself. Struggle with the issues yourself; apply the scripture to your own life. As you do, you will find that the entire group will follow your example.

HAVE SOME FUN!

The use of a metaphor like stones/rocks lends itself to all kinds of fun if the leader takes the time to prepare. Here are a few suggestions:

- Serve rocky-road ice cream at one of your meetings.
- Have a craft time during which students use markers or paints to decorate a stone they will keep as a paperweight and reminder of God’s faithfulness.
- Serve “stone soup” at one of your meetings. Do you remember this children’s story? If you don’t, someone in your group will.
- Have some holiday drinks “on-the-rocks.”
- Bring in pictures of old stone buildings (from around the world or in your community).
- Have students bring pictures from their travels of stone buildings they have visited.
- Have your group purchase, and inscribe with an appropriate scripture, a garden rock for your church gardens.
- Organize a stone wall or stone house tour as an outing for your group. What local history can you uncover?
- Does your church have a “corner stone”? Learn the history and share with your group.

You can see a little creativity goes a long way!

Contacting the Author: If you would like to have an e-mail conversation with me or set up a time for a phone conversation, please feel free to e-mail me at beccebettridge@rockisland.com

LESSON ONE: LIVING STONES

Objective:

The objective of this lesson is, first, to help students identify in Scripture the action of God to choose people as his own. To see for themselves that God's Word tell us that Christians have been anointed with his Holy Spirit and appointed, by God, to be *with others* as they live out their faith in this world. It is very important to realize and affirm that only through the power of God's Holy Spirit living in them are God's people able to live in a way that please God.

Second, an additional purpose is for each student to have the opportunity to reflect on their own faith story in light of their participation in the Church and to remember at least one time when they experienced being used by God with the Holy Spirit working in and through them in such a way so that they were "at their best," and/or most fully themselves in service, (which is God's desire for each of us).

In addition, there are several opportunities to reflect on their current church experience.

Finally the closing Hymn (Psalm 18) demonstrates how God, as "rock," is a prominent metaphor in Scripture.

HINT: It might be interesting as you being this study to bring in some pictures of stone buildings from your community, or famous stone buildings around the world (e.g. Westminster Abbey, Lincoln Memorial, etc.). Ask your group what they know about this structure and who built it. What stories do the stones have to tell?

Lesson One

There is a settler's cabin not far from my house: I could probably find out from county records who he was and when he lived here. Was he a lone hunter, grubbing a corn patch along the creek, or did he raise a family here in this lost hollow? I don't really want to know his name: his are the hands that set these stones one upon the other in a sparse and unforgiving land before my century was new. No one living near knows of a cabin site here. They speak of others long vanished, of a small mill dam down creek, washed out now, and traces of old roads and creek fords and meeting houses. Nothing is left of this man who set the house among the forest. *Nothing but the stones.* (Charles McRaven)

Nothing is left to commemorate this settler's life, writes McRaven, "Nothing but the stones." Have you ever wondered what will remain of your life when you are gone? "Nanna," my ten-year-old granddaughter whispered to me with urgency in her voice, "I just realized I am going to die someday and I don't want people to forget me." Sometime during childhood each human being wakes up and realizes that they are finite—that their body will someday die. Most of us spend a good deal of our time on earth wanting to be remembered and so we seek significance in our work, our family, our possessions, or the use of our time. These are all fine ways to spend our life, but they just do not give us the sense of personal spiritual durability that God designed into our soul. We lose our job, our kids grow up and move away, no one wants all our "pretty things" when we move into assisted living, we get too old to volunteer, and it feels like there is little left of us.

HINT: Are there folks in your group who can relate to the above paragraph? Do they have a redeeming story to tell? This might be a place to beware of stories against "ungrateful daughters-in-law" who don't want to deal with mom's old furniture ☺.

Therefore, when Peter comes to us with a totally different picture of what constitutes personal permanence, it is surprising. It is not, as we suppose, our individual accomplishments that give us durability. It is our connection with God and with others. Peter offers his readers the opportunity to take off their self-focused, time-bound spectacles in order to view the massive and eternal cathedral of God's people into which they are being built as "living stones." It is as "living stones" they will find permanence.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourself be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4-5)

What is the job description of a stone? Peter, John, and Jude see the church as a community in which each person gives into the common life the strength and gifts that God has given to them. This God-built-cathedral is not a pile of unrelated rocks randomly heaped together, but a planned structure made up of stones whose unique connection in Jesus Christ holds each other up.

HINT: Before you begin *Setting the Stones*, this might be a place you, as leader, can share some of your answer to *Using the Plumb Line* and how your experience of being "at your best" in the "fellowship of believers" has changed you. Be brief. Your sharing at this point may encourage others later in the study.

Let's begin our study by looking at the properties of this building, and how God fits the "living stones" together.

Setting the Stones

The following scriptures describe how "living stones" have individual significance. They also describe the mystery of the church, in which each stone finds its unique place as part of God's great, eternal cathedral united in Christ. "Jesus remakes the people of God not simply by binding lots of individuals to himself and then introducing them to each other (although there is an element of that)" (Williams 101). Jesus transforms people by changing their very nature. Jesus infuses believers with *his* light and life so the life within each person combines to become the lifeblood of the entire community of faith.

Chosen and Called

Read the following texts and list the phrases each author uses to let his readers know they have been particularly chosen by God to be "stones" in his cathedral. While you make this list, pay attention to how God's Spirit might be speaking to you, today, through your response to these scriptures. Put a star by those texts that "speak" to you and your situation today.

HINT: The following are the texts to which the lesson refers. They are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). You may want to also look up the scriptures in a variety of versions. One of the best places to find a large variety is at www.biblegateway.com. To assist you with your preparation, I have highlighted the verses I used to choose this text for review. You may find other verses within these scriptures which also address the question.

1 Peter 1:1-2

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, 2 who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

1 Peter 1:18-21

18 You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. 20 He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. 21 Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

1 Peter 2:4-5

4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight and 5 like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:9-10

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,* in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1 John 2:20-21

20 But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. 21 I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth.

For further or group study also consider the following texts:

1 Peter 5:13-14

13 Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark. 14 Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

2 Peter 10-11

10 Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. 11 For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

What do you discern about God's building plan through your examination of these texts?

HINT: The idea that God has an eternal plan to choose, anoint, and appoint people to do his work here on earth is utterly amazing, and yet here it is in black and white right in front of us. In addition, by participating in God's plan we are richly blessed with his mercy and salvation.

HINT: Two books that you might consider reading in preparation for this entire study are: *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* by Rowan Williams and *Simply Christian: Why Christianity makes Sense* by N.T. Wright. Both of these books are filled with surprising and wonderful apologetic discussions of our faith and address these very core issues with understandable language and ideas. I loved them.

Which texts did you star?

HINT: Take some time for students to be able to share the verse(s) they stared * and to share why they chose those specific texts.

Instruction and Encouragement

Christians need encouragement. We need to know we are not alone in our struggle to live faithful lives; we are part of God's cathedral. Such encouragement was a motivating purpose for Peter, John, and Jude in writing their epistles. In addition to encouragement, these apostolic authors also gave believers instructions on how to get along with one another so the structure of their community would not crumble.

As you read the following texts, look for encouragement and instruction as to how to live faithfully, with others, as a believer in Jesus Christ. Write out several of these phrases.

HINT: Take time to write out several of these phrases and be prepared to share (if need be) what you found encouraging. Here is a good place to compare what the author wanted to communicate to his original audience and what we modern readers receive by way of encouragement.

3 John 1:1-8

1 The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. 2 Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul. 3 I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely, how you walk in the truth. 4 I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth. 5 Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; 6 they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; 7 for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. 8 Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.

Jude 1-2

1 Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ. 2 May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.

Jude 20-24

20 But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; 21 keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. 22 And have mercy on some who are wavering; 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies. 24 Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, 25 to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

For further or group study also consider the following texts:

2 John 1:1-6; 12-13

1 The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth, 2 because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us for ever. 3 Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, in truth and love. 4 I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. 5 But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love

one another. 6 *And this is love that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—you must walk in it.*

12 *Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.* 13 *The children of your elect sister send you their greetings.*

In his letters, what type of “living stone” did John suggest brought life to others?

What practical evidence do you discover that speaks to the belief that the Christian church is more than just a collection of individuals?

HINT: This is a good place to list out some specific verses and a word that summarizes the intent of the verse.

HINT: John and Jude talk about the care we give other believers to help them along their spiritual journey. “Be hospitable,” they write, “Have mercy” on those who are struggling in their faith. Mercy and love for one another seem to be the order of the day. They also talk about how they (the authors) love and want to encourage and teach those to whom they write.

How might this insight pertain to your current context? Ah...be prepared for some interesting answers here.

Using the Plumb Line

Often a crumbling stone wall will catch our attention because it is not doing what it was meant to do. On the other hand, a sturdy, functional stone wall may go unnoticed or be seen only as backdrop to a flowering garden. This is often the way it is with the Christian communities of which we are a part. We see and remember the seasons of brokenness more readily than we remember the spiritually flourishing times when our Christian fellowships were “at their best.” In his book, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations*, Mark Lau Branson describes how he helped First Presbyterian Church, Altadena, California—a congregation of Japanese immigrants and their Japanese/American descendants. Branson wanted to understand and clarify the congregation’s sense of mission and purpose; and so, rather than focusing on where they saw the church falling short, he asked members of the congregation to share their memories of those times when they felt “most alive, most motivated, and most excited about their involvement in the congregation” (xi). By shaping the conversation around what was right rather than what was wrong, the congregation and its members were able to see a way forward for their church by taking the best elements of the past and creatively imagining them into the future.

What about you? When have you felt “most alive, most motivated, and most excited” about your involvement in a Christian community? Write a brief description of that time by including:

- What was happening?
- How were you involved?
- What was it about your involvement that brought life to you?
- How did you experience God using you to bring life into that situation?
- Does remembering this experience help you feel more like a “living stone” in God’s cathedral?

HINT: If students have not come to group prepared, answering this question may take some encouragement. You might consider asking several members to read ahead and come prepared to share their story. This will encourage others. You will get more concise stories if you follow the outline: 1) What was happening? 2) How

were you involved? 3) What was it about your involvement that brought life to you? 4) How did you experience God using you to bring life into that situation?

- In what way does this experience of being a “living stone” compare with your experience in your Christian community at other times?

HINT: This is a key question because it encourages students to compare their own experience with the experience Peter, John, and Jude wanted their original readers to experience. It also usually surprises people when they see how they were used by the Holy Spirit.

Placing the Capstone

Reflect on one or more of the following questions.

HINT: Each of the following reflection questions seeks a different kind of “knowing.” The first, is knowing more about the use of stones and rocks in the Bible. The second is a fun way to see how being like a rock can be good for our spiritual growth. The third is less personal and allows for reflection about the student’s current church experience.

Have you ever had the experience of being in an old stone building that seemed to have “speaking rocks;” a place where you might say, “If these stones could only speak, they would tell amazing stories”? Throughout the Bible, stones are used to witness human events (e.g. Genesis 28:18-22; Exodus 31:18; Joshua 24:27; 1 Samuel 7:12-14; Matthew 3:7-10; Matthew 16:18; Luke 19:37-40; Revelation 2:17). Look up some of these verses. How are stones used as reminders of God’s faithfulness?

What is the job description of a stone? Why do you think Peter chose this metaphor?

What God-given dynamics do you see in your congregation that support “living stones” holding each other up?

Closing Hymn

Nothing out of the ordinary here. Maybe try various translations, or pick 5 verses out of the entire Psalm. Maybe have the group read some of the verses together like a choir...use your imagination 😊.

Psalm 18

To the leader: A Psalm of David the servant of the Lord, who addressed the words of this song to the Lord on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul. He said:

I love you, O Lord, my strength.
The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.
I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised,
so I shall be saved from my enemies.

LESSON TWO: THE FOUNDATION—GOD

Objective:

Because of who God is, those who are in a life-giving relationship with God will (by the very nature of that relationship) reflect God to those around them. The inductive part of our study (*Setting the Stones*) will provide biblical evidence for an “if/then” logic which underpins our faith. The objective of this lesson is to give the student the understanding that how we live out Christ’s life in us, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is of ultimate significance, not just for ourselves, but for those God brings into our life. In this lesson, students will be given the opportunity to remember how God used other Christians to draw them into a saving relationship with himself. The student’s understanding that they are part of God’s eternal “living stone” cathedral becomes even more obvious as they see how they are linked with others who have shared God with them...and to those with whom they share God.

“I’ve included a lot about footings because this base is necessary for the really fine and strong wall.” (Charles McRaven)

HINT: Here again is a place where you, as a leader, can set the tone for your meeting by *briefly* ☺ sharing from your *Using the Plumb Line* answer regarding someone who made God real for you and how that happened. The people who introduce us to Christ are some of the most significant people in our lives, yet sometimes we have not thought about them (and how they fit into our salvation story) for years. If your group is one that likes to do the lesson together, this will also set their mind on who those people have been in their life.

The foundation upon which our Christian faith is built is this: there is one, true, living God. God is so big, strong, faithful, trustworthy, and loving that he is the foundation of everything, including our lives. Yet, this same (very big) God expressed himself with a free outpouring of love in such a way that he remains in a close, vibrant relationship with his creation, and, in particular, human beings made in his image.

The Bible never argues for the existence of God. From Genesis through Revelation, writers describe their conflict with God and express their anger and doubts about God’s purposes in the world, but there is *never* any doubt that God is fully present, sustaining our very existence with tenderness and mercy. God is described in Scripture as our lover, one who seeks our friendship, and one who knows our beginning and end, and every step in between (e.g. Psalm 139).

Peter, John, and Jude are writing to people whose understanding of God is being confused by false teachers describing a god distant from human life and sufferings. In their letters, the apostles describe God with words that open up the possibility of a personal relationship not with metaphysical abstractions. They also teach that our faithful and trustworthy God is calling a people to himself; a people who can, with God’s help, also be faithful and trustworthy with one another.

This is actually quite a serious point about where belief in God starts for a lot of folk. It starts from a sense that we ‘believe in,’ we trust some kinds of people. We have confidence in the way they live; the way they live is a way I want to live, perhaps can imagine myself living in my better or more mature moments. The world they inhabit is one I’d like to live in. Faith has a lot to do with the simple fact that there are trustworthy lives to be seen, that we can see in some believing people a world we’d like to live in. (Williams 21-22)

Setting the Stone

Remember that the original readers of our epistles were being confused about God's nature and his intention to be in relationship with human beings. Read the following scriptures as if you were seeing them for the first time—as if you were uncertain about what to believe about God. As you read, create two lists; 1) what you learn from these texts about what God is like and 2) the ways in which these authors explain how God's people reflect this same God in their daily lives.

HINT: In the following section, I have highlighted in two different colors some of the scriptures you might use in your inductive study. I am sure you will find others. In your preparation, you might want to create a list on a separate paper that gives a summation of the text and the reference. For example:

What is God like?	How do God's people reflect God?	Scripture Passage
God is holy	We are called to also be holy because God is in us. Holy in our conduct, acknowledging God's rule in our life.	1 Peter 1: 15, and 16, 17
Jesus was destined from the very beginning of the world to reveal God to us and through Jesus we can learn to trust God.	Because Christ has revealed God we can be "renewed" and given new life. Because of this <i>new life</i> , there is the possibility that we can actually love others. Through our obedience to God's truth and his word this amazing transformation occurs in us.	1 Peter 1:20-23

God: Our Foundation 1 Peter 1:14-25

14Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. 15Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; 16for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.' 17 If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. 18You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, 19but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. 20He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. 21Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God. 22 Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. 23You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. 24For 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, 25 but the word of the Lord endures forever.' That word is the good news that was announced to you.

1 Peter 2:18-25

18 Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. 19For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. 20If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. 21For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 22 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' 23When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. 24He himself bore our sins in his body on the

cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. 25For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

1 John 4:7-21

HINT: Although this is a long text the concept is wonderfully simple:

What is God like?	How do God's people reflect God?	Scripture Passage
God is Love	Because God lives in us we can love other people...and need to spend some time actually working this out in our real life with real people.	1 John 4:11-12

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. 17Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19We love because he first loved us. 20Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

2 John verses 4-6

4 I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. 5 But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another. 6And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—you must walk in it.

For further or group study also consider the following texts:

1 John 3:11-24

11 For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. 12We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. 13Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. 14We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. 15All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. 16We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? 18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22 and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24All who obey his command-

ments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

3 John verses 5-8

Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; 6 they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; 7 for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. 8 Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.

Jude 1-2

HINT: In this text we learn both about God and about ourselves (as we reflect God) through Jude's references to what God has done for us. For example: God is a "caller" of people, therefore we are a sought people, etc., God is full of love for us, thus we are his "beloved," God keeps us safe for Jesus, therefore we are able to be in relationship with him.

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James,

To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ: 2 May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.

Jude 20-25

HINT: Here again a reference. What is God like? God gives eternal life (v.21)

20 But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; 21 keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. 22 And have mercy on some who are wavering; 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies. 24 Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, 25 to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

Reflecting on these two lists, what correlation or cause/effect do you see between them?

HINT: Sometimes it is very helpful to see an "if/then" relationship with God and our life of faith. As in the sentence "If God is Holy, then we are called to be like him and reflect his holiness to others" Although how to be holy is worked out through an on-going, lifelong learning curve, just knowing that there is a kind of mathematical "if/then" logic to our faith gives us the hope that the power to be holy, and the desire to please God, does not come from us but is written into the very nature of our faith. I find this incredibly encouraging.

HINT: As you lead the discussion on these texts try not to let the strength of the scripture get watered down by our so-often failed attempts at "being good and doing the right thing." Rather, focus on the promise of the Holy Spirit's help found in these texts. At least for me, my greatest failures in trying to be holy have been the result of trying to change my life through the sheer force of my will, rather than asking for, and then cultivating a willingness, to let God do the changing.

Why might this information about God have been especially important for people living under political or religious persecution?

HINT: This question deals with the stress of life and how it affects our walk of faith.

Write out a particular passage in which you find hope that God's people (you, as well as the early believers) can reflect God's love and presence to others.

HINT: If you have time, ask students to share their passage and WHY they find hope for themselves in this Scripture.

Using the Plumb Line

HINT: All of these questions can lead to some interesting and deep sharing. If you have a group of more than six, you might consider dividing up into smaller groups in order to give folks enough time to tell this part of their story.

If your group does the lesson together, it might be helpful to devise a way for students to meditate on their answers before sharing them with the larger group. I have found that giving this time encourages the introverts to speak. The quick-answer folks are almost always your extroverts (who tend to figure out what they think by talking...I know...I am an extrovert ☺). So don't shy away from times of reflection before jumping right into a new section of this study.

As Christians we often experience God's faithfulness most clearly in retrospect. It's when we review our lives that we see signs of God's presence along our path. For many years, my husband Joe and I have kept a prayer notebook in which we write down our prayers and the answers as they come. A quick review of this book helps us see how God has answered our prayers over the years, and how people have been brought into our lives to demonstrate God's care for us.

Describe a time when God demonstrated his faithfulness to you. **So many good stories here.**

Although it is in Jesus Christ himself that we come to know God, we often grow in our faith because of the people God brings into our life. Who has God brought into your life who has helped you experience God's love and faithfulness? How did it happen?

HINT: You might explain that it was from this question that you were reminded of the person you told about in your opening comments. Maybe your story will help others remember those people in their life who have helped make God real.

Has anyone ever told you that you made God known to them in some way? What did they say to you?

HINT: People are shy about this, but it is a wonderful affirmation that God is able to use even us to share his love with people ☺.

Setting the Capstone

Reflect on one or more of the following questions.

HINT: Smaller groups may be the key to allow all to be heard. Sometimes it is even nice to ask individuals ahead of time to be prepared to share one of these reflections. This extra time to think over their answers can generate deeper sharing on the part of other group members.

When you look at your list (from Setting the Stone) of the ways in which Christians reflect God in the world, where and how do you see this today?

If demonstrating God's love for others is one of the ways in which we "testify" to God living in our hearts, in what ways have you been specifically and uniquely gifted by God to demonstrate his love?

Is there a situation in your life right now in which you desire to see God at work, in which you long to experience his faithfulness and mercy? Write God a short prayer letter asking for eyes to see his presence in this situation.

Closing Hymn

HINT: There are a number of ways to get information about a hymn. You can use the internet or maybe you have a book in your church library about hymns. If you have access to a laptop computer, you can find a hymn on the internet, download it onto your computer and then bring the computer to your group study. You will, of course, need someone under 25 to do this for you 😊 (just kidding).

Hiding in Thee' was written in Moravia, New York, in 1876. The author, Mr. Cushing writes, "It must be said of this hymn that it was the outgrowth of many tears, many heart-conflicts and soul-yearnings, of which the world can know nothing. The history of many battles is behind it. 'Lord, give me something that may glorify Thee' I prayed, and it was while thus waiting that 'Hiding in Thee' pressed to make itself known."

Hiding in Thee

O safe to the Rock that is higher than I,
my soul in its conflicts and sorrows would fly;
so sinful, so weary, thine, thine, would I be;
thou blest "Rock of Ages," I'm hiding in thee.

In the calm of the noontide, in sorrow's lone hour,
in times when temptation casts o'er me its power;
in the tempests of life, on its wide, heaving sea,
thou blest "Rock of Ages," I'm hiding in thee.

How oft in the conflict, when pressed by the foe,
I have fled to my refuge and breathed out my woe;
how often, when trials like sea billows roll,
have I hidden in thee, O thou rock of my soul?

*Hiding in thee, hiding in thee,
thou blest "Rock of Ages,"
I'm hiding in thee.*

William Cushing 1876

LESSON THREE: THE CORNERSTONE—JESUS CHRIST

Objective:

The objective of this lesson is to see from Scripture the amazing magnitude of Christ's redemptive work and to realize at the same time how each individual Christian has been drawn into God's love through Christ's sacrifice. It is hoped that each student will realize that their faith story is part of what God is doing here on earth.

Lesson Three

The cornerstone is the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation. It is important since all other stones will be set in reference to this stone, thus determining the position of the entire structure. (Wikipedia)

HINT: Do you have a cornerstone in your church building? Are there some old pictures in the archives your students might enjoy? One of the underlying themes of this study is that as a Christian we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. Looking at your own congregation's history (even for just a short time) deepens people's understanding of who they are as a church. Also, this is a lesson in which you might have some fun looking around town for old buildings that feature a cornerstone. Do a little pre-lesson research; I think your students will be interested in your findings.

In a recent letter from PC(USA) missionaries Rich and Marilyn Hansen, Marilyn describes their mission construction work in Ethiopia by referring to Jesus Christ as the "cornerstone" upon which the lives of their students and the church in Ethiopia are being built.

Rich's school, the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology (EGST) is building a new six story building ... but God is also about construction, about building His church, here in Ethiopia, on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. EGST is not just laying the foundation for a new building, but is also about helping students build their lives on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ so that they, in turn, can build the church in Ethiopia on that same foundation.

HINT: You can find out more about Rich and Marilyn by going to <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/missionconnections/hansen-rich-and-marilyn/>

Whether it is in Ethiopia, Evanston, Estonia, or Edinburgh, "living stones" find their position in the eternal fellowship of God's people through their relationship to Jesus Christ, who is its cornerstone.

Peter, whose name incidentally means "Rocky" or "Rock," uses the image of stone as a metaphor to describe the primary position of Christ in relationship to God's people. In a continuation of this same text, Peter describes Christ with yet another experience people have with rocks—we trip over them. Most of us have slammed our foot into a stone and it stopped us in our tracks. Peter describes people who, in a similar way, painfully stumble over their old ideas, as those who find themselves unable to embrace Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of their lives.

Come to him [Jesus Christ], a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight ... For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." To you then who believe,

he is precious; but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,” and “a stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. (1 Peter 2:4-8)

HINT: HERE IS A KEY CONCEPT. Essential to our understanding of church and mission is our belief that, in Jesus of Nazareth, God brought the cosmic, universal Church together with flesh and blood human beings. John and Jude do not use the word “cornerstone” to describe Jesus, but they do give their readers, as individuals and as members in the church, guidance to align themselves with Christ so that the spiritual buildings they are constructing with their lives will be strong and true stones integrated into the construction of God’s eternal cathedral.

Setting the Stone

As you read through the following texts, firm up the stone structure of your Christian faith by listing the cause and effect of what Jesus Christ has done, is doing, and will do.

HINT: There is a lot of work here; you may want to divide these texts among several groups of students giving each group one text to examine.

Example: 1 Peter 1:1-2

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.

Cause: Because we have been chosen and destined by God, sanctified by the Spirit, and sprinkled by Christ’s blood ...

Effect: We are able to be obedient to Jesus Christ.

HINT: You will find various ways to rephrase our author’s affirmations. Don’t limit yourself to the following answers alone. The process of seeing that the actions of Christ have positive results moves the good news of the gospel beyond personal opinion or experience alone. These verses become promises that can be trusted. They open up God’s work in Christ for us to look at in an almost scientific manner: Because of A...then...B.

1 Peter 2:21-25

²¹For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. ²²‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ ²³When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. ²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Cause: Because Christ (the guardian of our souls) suffered and bore our sins

Effect: We have been healed and called to live for righteousness. We are no longer lost.

1 Peter 3:18-22

¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit,¹⁹ in which also he went and made a proclamation to the

spirits in prison,²⁰ who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water.²¹ And baptism, which this pre-figured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Cause: Because Christ (a righteous one) took our place

Effect: We have been brought to God.

Cause: Because Christ died in the “flesh” but was made alive in the spirit

Effect: He was able to make a “proclamation” (some versions say “preached”) to the spirits in prison.

HINT: Here is a text you will find much debated as to its meaning. This we know...that Christ’s death and resurrection were so powerful that it had cosmic effects not bonded by human time. I do not find it very useful to discuss at length texts for which we have no deep, certain understanding. 1 and 2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude have a number of these mysterious texts. I guess in the end, we just submit to, and enjoy, the great mystery of God.

Cause: Baptism is more than just a removal of dirt, but is a response to God from a clean conscience

Effect: It is effective *because of* the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

HINT: When we have a difficult text, I find it very helpful to look the text up in several different translations. This helps me get to the root of what is being said.

1 John 1:1-10

*We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—²this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—³we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.⁴ We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. **5.** This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true;⁷ but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.⁹ If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*

Cause: Because John has had personal experience (seen, touched, heard) of the revelation of Jesus Christ and has been given a message to tell others

Effect: We (as a result of hearing his message) are able to know that God is pure light and we can have fellowship with God and with others because we have been forgiven of our sins only through the power of Christ’s sacrificial blood.

1 John 3:16-20

16 We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17 How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? 18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19 And by this we*

will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

Cause: Because, out of love, Christ laid down his life for us

Effect: We can know what love is. And when we know what love is, we can let it change the way we interact with other people.

Cause: Because God knows everything and knows us better than we know ourselves

Effect: We do not have to beat ourselves up over our short-comings, but can abide in God's love and trust the outcome.

1 John 5:13-15

13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.¹⁴ And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.

Cause: Because we believe on the name of Jesus for eternal life

Effect: We have boldness to come before him and ask for anything knowing that we will be heard. And because he hears us, our prayer will be answered.

HINT: Here again is a promise directly from God's Word, it is a promise we can bring to God when we pray. Why some prayers seem to be unanswered is a mystery. However, we must assume that God is good for his promise. A trip to your church library to look at some books on prayer might be helpful as you lead this discussion. There are many excellent books on prayer, I can recommend *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, by Richard Foster. Also, *Clinging: The Experience of Prayer*, by Emile Griffin.

For further or group study also consider the following texts:

1 Peter 1:18-21

¹⁸You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold,¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.²⁰ He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake.²¹ Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

Cause: Because Christ was destined (before the very foundation of the world) to ransom me from the useless ways of living I have learned from my dysfunctional family (generations back)

Effect: There is enough evidence for me (in my day) to trust God and to set all my hope and faith in him.

1 John 2:1-2

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;² and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Cause: Because the righteous of Jesus Christ atoned for my sin through his sacrifice

Effect: I do not need to be afraid of God (even when I sin) because Jesus is my (and the whole world's) advocate before God.

1 John 4:7-10

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Cause: Because God is love and showed us his love by giving us Jesus

Effect: We can have God's love in us...which is the only way we can possibly love others. His work came first, ours follows.

How would you describe the work of Jesus to a friend based on these passages?

HINT: One comprehensive way to summarize this part of the lesson is to go back to the "effects" and just list them on a white board or a piece of newsprint. Because of Jesus Christ...we are able to know God, we can experience love, we are not lost but have been found, etc.

Peter describes Jesus Christ as a stone over which many "stumble." How do you see people you know "tripping" over Jesus?

HINT: Many members of your class will have dear family and friends who do not follow Jesus for various reasons. It might be an interesting experience to compare the various reasons people give for not believing in Christ with the list of Cause/Effect statements our authors gave to those who doubted Christ in their day.

SUGGESTED PRAYER: It is important not to minimize people's doubts about God and/or Jesus Christ. Who has not had them? But it is also important to know that God is constantly at work drawing these doubters to himself. This might be a good time to stop and pray for those people who are on the hearts of your class members. God is very big. James 5:16b reads: "... The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results." (NLT)

Using the Plumb Line

The cornerstone is the architect's point of reference for the alignment of the entire structure. The cornerstone determines which direction the structure will face when it is completed. In a similar way, a life built on Jesus Christ faces a certain direction, aligned as one loved by God and created to participate with God in his work here on earth. But, like all stone structures, there is a time when the cornerstone is actually set in place. For some of us, our faith story evolves over time, slowly and steadily building us into one of God's "living stones." For others, we can identify the exact time and date we claimed Jesus as Lord in our life. For others, Christ is digging around in the soil of their hearts, waiting for, and creating, a willingness for him to lay the foundation and place the cornerstone. Describe the time (or period of time) during which you gave your life to Jesus Christ and he became your cornerstone. How did this miracle of faith happen for you? If you would not describe Jesus as the "Cornerstone" of your life, in what ways might you be experiencing Jesus "digging around in the soil of your heart" as you explore the possibility of a relationship with him?

HINT: Telling the story about how we came to faith is very personal, but very important to share. You might ask someone (ahead of time) from your class to be prepared to share the beginning of their faith story. Remember this is the story of the beginning...not the whole story ☺. Some of the previous *Plumb Line* exercises may have touched on this part of a person's story, but unpacking their faith story, as we are doing in this Bible study, will help each person see God's hand more clearly. After your "guest speaker" takes a few minutes to

tell this part of her/his story, you might want to divide the class up into groups of 2 or 3 so that each person will have time to share this part of their faith story.

Setting the Capstone

Reflect on one or more of the following ideas.

Create a Spiritual Timeline (see instructions at the end of this chapter) upon which you note the times in your life when you were drawn closer to Jesus Christ. Then take time to reflect on how God is using these experiences to set Christ as the cornerstone of your life.

HINT: This is a great exercise and helps people see God’s hand at work in their life. If your students come prepared to class with their lesson done, you may want to end your time together by taking a short cookie break ☺ and then coming back together and having as many folks as possible share some of the highlights from their Timeline.

As a “cornerstone” Christian, what personal faith story could you share with others in your life who may be “tripping” over Jesus?

Perhaps you are not feeling securely grounded in your relationship with Jesus Christ right now. If this is so ask Jesus to bring to mind those concrete places where he is at work in your life right now ... but you may have failed to notice.

Closing Hymn

In Christ Alone

Visit www.gettymusic.com/hymns-inchistalone.aspx and listen to the lyrics of this powerful song naming Christ as the “cornerstone” of our life.

HINT: I love this song. If you can get a recorded or internet version of it for your listening pleasure, I recommend everyone sit back, close their eyes and let the words and melody of this song flow into their hearts.

In Christ alone my hope is found; he is my light, my strength, my song;
this Cornerstone, this solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm
What heights of love, what depths of peace, when fears are stilled, when strivings cease;
my Comforter, my all in all—here in the love of Christ I stand.

In Christ alone, Who took on flesh, fullness of God in helpless Babe.
This gift of love and righteousness, scorned by the ones he came to save.
Till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied;
for every sin on him was laid—here in the death of Christ I live.

There in the ground His body lay, Light of the world by darkness slain;
then bursting forth in glorious day, up from the grave He rose again!
And as he stands in victory, sin’s curse has lost its grip on me;
for I am his and he is mine—bought with the precious blood of Christ.
No guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me;

from a life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny.
 No power of hell, no scheme of man, could ever pluck me from his hand;
 till He returns or calls me home—here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

Keith Getty and Stuart Townsend © 2001 Kingsway Thankyou music
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Your Spiritual Time Line

Drawing a spiritual time line helps you focus your attention on the big picture of your life. It also helps you see those special times when you were drawn closer to Jesus Christ, as well as the times you might have felt spiritually isolated. When you have completed your time line, take a few moments to reflect on how God has used these experiences to set Christ as the cornerstone of your life.

Begin by reading Psalm 139

1. Make a horizontal line across a sheet of paper. Mark on this line those events you consider most meaningful in your life (i.e. a move your family made, college, wedding, birth of your children, death of a loved one, etc).
2. With a different colored pen or pencil, use the same time line to mark those times in your life you would consider spiritually meaningful or significant. These experiences can be either positive or negative.
3. Reflect on how God has used these experiences to set Christ as the cornerstone of your life.
4. Write down several insights you have gained by this exercise.

HINT: This is the kind of exercise that can take all day, or just a few minutes depending upon the reflection of the student. It might help your class become enthusiastic about this exercise if you, as leader, have already done your Timeline and can demonstrate by sharing some of the moments in your faith story God brought to mind. Also, this is an excellent opportunity to have a quiet person in your group share some of her story. Ask her ahead of time so she is able to think about it. As leader, it is always good to "share the wealth" so to speak.

LESSON FOUR: GOD'S WORD IS AVAILABLE AND RELIABLE

Objective:

The objective of this lesson is to understand that the Bible really is an incredible gift given to us by God. Without it, we could not, nor would not, know about God and the saving work of Jesus Christ. Our faith depends upon its information. But our saving knowledge depends on the Holy Spirit breathing the flame of faith into our hearts and minds so that we can understand. We do not worship the Bible, but the God it reveals. Also, within this lesson are opportunities for class members to think about their own experiences with the Bible and the part it has played in their faith journey.

HINT: As a fun way to begin this class, you might try to find a copy of Aaron Tippin's 1997 country western hit song *You've Got to Stand for Something*. After listening to the song you might ask class members what they think the song is about, or how they related to the message of the song.

Lesson Four

"Always have help when you load large stones, if for no other reason than to dig you out from under whatever might fall on you." (Charles McRaven)

HINT: This opening quote speaks to the reality that we grow in faith and the knowledge of Scripture in community. From our early days in Sunday School (if we were blessed with this training) to our current discipleship practices, we learn and grow best when we do it with others.

Do you remember the children's song based on Jesus' parable about the wise man who built his house upon the stone and the foolish man who didn't bother to find anything stable and just put his house on the closest sand pile? *The wise man built his house upon the rock The rains came down and the flood went up ... and the house on the rock stood FIRM!* (Can you still do the hand motions? 😊) But then young minds are introduced to spiritual tragedy. *The foolish man built his house upon the sand ... and the rains came down and the flood went up ... and the house on the sand went SPLAT!* After the intriguing terror of this possibility we were given hope as we were lead into the third verse: *So build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ ... and the blessings will come down ... the blessings will come down as the prayers go up ... etc.* Amen and hallelujah! Help found us!

In addition, millions of children learned the song ... *the B-I-B-L-E. Yes that's the book for me. I stand alone on the word of God, the B-I-B-L-E.* Children, as well as adults, find comfort in knowing that there are places of safety, places where they can find help and guidance. Scripture is just such a place.

The first century spiritual climate was very similar to our own in that people practiced an individualistic religion of personal preference. They could pick and choose from the spiritual smorgasbord of cults and deities they felt most met their personal tastes and needs. As long as you worshiped the Emperor and the statue of Caesar, you could add any local deities and no one cared. "Whatever is true for you" was as common then as it is now. Peter, John, and Jude, however, make a remarkable assertion: Jesus is Truth and we can tell you about him! What these men said about Jesus is as surprising as it is life-giving. Jesus made God visible and tangible. Our authors set forth this amazing reality: we humans do not need to search out the truth about God by ourselves ... we have help. God has not hidden his truth; we are not left to grope for it blindly, guided only by our private speculations. God has given his truth so that we might continually read, study, and apply it to our lives. The living word of God, found in scripture, is the help we need so that when the rains *do* come, and our house gets wobbly, we will not be trapped under the fatal weight of some fallen stone of our own making.

But *help* comes from another source as well. In addition to the testimony of scripture we also have the church, the Christian community to guide us into a life with Christ. We can stand on the strength of the B-I-B-L-E because someone took the time to teach us. Even John Calvin, a prominent 16th century reformer wrote on the importance of the church as the place to teach and learn God's word. The following is a summary:

By faith, the Gospel of Christ becomes ours and we are made partakers of the salvation and blessedness procured by Jesus But we stand in need of external helps by which our faith may increase and make progress. Thus, God has given us the church in which He has deposited this treasure The church is God's bosom into which He is pleased to collect His children and in whose aid and ministry they may be guided and receive maternal care until they grow into the perfection of faith. (Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion IV: I Summation)

Setting the Stones

Benefits of Scripture

Peter knew God had given him a message to pass on to the followers of Jesus Christ. As you read these verses, list some of the benefits Peter mentions when the knowledge about Jesus Christ, available through scripture, is incorporated into a believer's life.

2 Peter 1:3-8; 19-21

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.⁴ Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature.⁵ For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge,⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness,⁷ and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.⁸ For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ...¹⁹ So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.²⁰ First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation,²¹ because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

HINT: Like a strong wall built on a strong foundation, growth in our walk with God depends on knowing something about God.

How We Learn

We often learn something new by connecting it with information we already know. The first readers of these letters would have known what we call the Old Testament. In the following texts, how do Peter and John link their new message about Jesus Christ with their reader's prior knowledge of God?

Reread 2 Peter 1:12; 19-21 to look for this information.

12 Therefore I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you. 19-21 So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.²⁰ First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own in-

terpretation,²¹ because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Also read 2 John vs. 1-6.

The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth,² because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever:³ Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, in truth and love.⁴ I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father.⁵ But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another.⁶ And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—you must walk in it.

HINT: Both Peter and John encourage their readers in what they already know and are already doing. While at the same time, they lead them one step further into a deeper understand by adding more knowledge about God and their response to God.

Says Who?

John is also adamant about God's message. Read the following texts and 1) note by what authority John claimed to be God's messenger, and 2) give a summary title to each.

1 John 1:1-4

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—² this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—³ we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.⁴ We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

HINT: Have some fun here as people come up with creative titles for these verses in which John claims authority because of the physical experiences he had with/of Jesus.

1 John 5:6-12

This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.⁷ There are three that testify:⁸ the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree.⁹ If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son.¹⁰ Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son.¹¹ And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Describe how knowing the truth of Scripture provides a firm foundation.

HINT: Saint Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033 - 1109) wrote, "Nor do I seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand. For this too I believe, that unless I first believe, I shall not understand." Faith and belief interact as a circular experience rather than just a linear one. Yet the power to put the entire process into motion comes from the Holy Spirit. We are given faith so that we can believe and understand...and belief and understanding seem to expand our faith and so on.

How can this firm scriptural foundation help a Christian stand firm in a pluralistic or antagonistic culture?

HINT: This question gets to the heart of this lesson. How does knowing Scripture actually help us on a practical, everyday level in our families and communities (and culture in general) which are becoming less and less Christian. Try not to move too quickly over this question with pat answers. *Using the Plumb Line* and the second question from *Setting the Capstone* will help open up some experiences of “standing firm” if people are willing to share. Again, if you complete this lesson together as a group, it might be nice to have asked a member of your class to come prepared to share an experience from their life in which they have had to stand firm (even if that meant saying and or doing nothing).

Using the Plumb Line

Every Christian comes to a point in their faith journey, a moment of real honesty with themselves, when they finally affirm that they *are* going to trust the Bible as God’s truth found in his written Word. For most of us, this affirmation (and reaffirmation) happens many times as life’s challenges shake our foundations. As you think back over your life’s journey, you may be able to point to certain scriptures that “carried you through” difficult seasons. Describe one such season and how the Word of God ministered to you and gave you strength and direction. As a reminder, take time to write out that scripture passage.

In Hebrews 10:23-25 we read “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.²⁴ **And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,²⁵ not neglecting to meet together**, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” As we think about the help given us to “be guided and receive maternal care until [we] grow into the perfection of faith” as Calvin put it, describe ways in which being part of your community of faith has strengthened you through various seasons of your life.

Setting the Capstone

Reflect on one or more of the following questions.

Aaron Tippin’s 1997 country song *You’ve Got to Stand for Something* echoes the Apostles’ message with the words, “You’ve got to stand for something or you’ll fall for anything.” In a pluralistic world what **practical, everyday difference** does it make *to build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ*?

We are to build our spiritual “house” on God’s firm foundation of Jesus Christ. This requires that the Bible be our guide. This divine guidance can manifest itself in our lives in both obvious and subtle ways. Just getting out of bed on Sunday morning and going to church regularly has become a unique and counter-cultural Christian distinction in many of our communities. Describe an experience in your life in which you had to choose to act in accordance to your Christ-centered beliefs in spite of pressure to do otherwise. What happened? Did you mark out certain biblical passages to help you make your decision? How did you feel before you made your decision? How did you feel afterward?

Closing Hymn

“How Firm a Foundation” was first published in 1787 in *A Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors*, which was edited by London pastor John Rippon. The melody is an early American tune, and the author of the text in Rippon’s volume is only marked as “K.” There are a number of potential authors, including John Keith, who was the music director at Rippon’s church.

Much of the hymn is taken almost directly from Scripture. Verse one sets the stage, encouraging believers to find refuge and a firm foundation in God's word. Verse two comes from Isaiah 41:10; verses three and four come from Isaiah 43:2 and 2 Corinthians 12:9; and verse five points to Hebrews 13:5. God's word is the sure, solid foundation for our lives

HINT: Look at the second and third stanzas of the first verse of this old hymn. I admit, I never really looked at these words in the light of God's gift of the Bible...don't know where my brain was. Cool isn't it?! 😊!

How Firm a Foundation

How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord,
is laid for your faith in his excellent word!
What more can he say than to you he has said—
to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

“Fear not, I am with you, oh, be not dismayed,
for I am thy God, and will still give you aid;
I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand,
upheld by my gracious, omnipotent hand.

“When through the deep waters I call you to go,
the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
for I will be with you your trouble to bless,
and sanctify to you your deepest distress.

“When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,
my grace, all-sufficient, shall be your supply;
the flame shall not harm you; I only design
your dross to consume and your gold to refine.

“The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not, desert to his foes;
that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.”

John Keith 1787

LESSON FIVE: HOLY LIVING

Objective:

The objective of this lesson is to help students understand that in pursuing the “holy life” we will find God and our true selves. God’s “holy life” is the kind of life we can fall in love with as it becomes alive in us minute by minute, day by day through the most ordinary means.

Lesson Five

I cannot emphasize enough that building with stone is a craft to be undertaken by degrees, learning as you go. And you must go slowly. Aside from being hard, dirty, and often dangerous work, constant demands are made on your judgment, common sense, and artistic ability. One stone is not like any other stone in the world: each has its own challenge. You’ll spend a lot of time trying and rejecting stones from your supply pile before you find the right one for each spot. Often you’ll have to make it fit by shaping it with a hammer and chisels or by using two instead of one. (Charles McRaven)

HINT: Your study group has been together now for several weeks and I hope are getting the connection between the metaphor of building with stone and our Christian life experience and journey. I love this McRaven quote as it relates to the Body of Christ and our efforts to live a holy life. It might be interesting to begin class today by having class members compare/contrast their personal experience of growing in their faith with what McRaven describes as “hard,” “often dangerous,” demanding work.

“Christian people are ‘holy’ simply because they have been adopted by God into a relationship, into a family which calls God ‘Father’” (Williams 112). But the process of having our identity shaped as God’s children takes a long time—like building with stone, it goes “slowly.” Peter, John, and Jude have confidence that their readers desire to live into ... out of ... and through their relationship with God; they want to live holy lives in Christ. But, the apostles also know that these young Christians will need help. John clearly states what a life pleasing to God looks like and how it happens with his frequent use of the word “abide.”

In Chapter 15 of his gospel, John uses the metaphor of a living grapevine branch that derives its life and growth from being part of the larger plant. Our metaphor of “living stones” points us to the same truth: apart from our connection to Jesus Christ we can do nothing. On our own we can never achieve holiness. So “abiding,” whether as a branch on a vine or a living stone in the edifice of God’s design, describes our spiritual connectivity with God and other believers. It is John’s description of life in Christ as we are linked to God in loving relationship. **(HERE IS A KEY CONCEPT) Because we do not have the power to transform ourselves spiritually, it follows that it is absolutely necessary to abide in the Lord if we are to grow in holiness. Progress is made in the construction project (us) because God’s Spirit is *in* us doing the work. Our part is to abide—to stay connected to the Source of our spiritual life. But as you may have figured out, abiding is both passive and active at the same time.**

In Lesson One’s **Placing the Capstone** you answered the question, “What is the job description of a stone?” The act of “abiding” might pretty well sum up this job description as we are part of a community that is built togeth-

er in Christ. As we will learn in this lesson, abiding takes commitment. Like building with stone, abiding constantly demands we use our “judgment, common sense, and artistic ability.” We have to conscientiously examine ourselves and our actions as part of the spiritual process of surrender to God—willingly remaining part of the edifice of God’s love. If you are like me, you’ll often have to allow God to “fit” your life into his ways by “shaping it” with what might feel like “a hammer and chisels.”

HINT: Here is another interesting way to begin class. Place a rock on the table. “What is this stone doing?” you might ask. Then take a few minutes and show some pictures of stone structures where rocks are still not actually doing anything, but because of their placement, they may be part of the structure that is holding up a massive structure, or a bridge. You will have to take some time to look for several pictures ahead of class. The point here is that by itself, a stone is only just itself (although a solitary stone can be incredible beautiful *as part of a larger landscape*), but when placed together, each doing its part, amazing things are able to happen.

Let’s examine what living a “holy life” looks like.

Setting the Stones

HINT: If you do not own a copy of Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, I recommend you get one. He does a wonderful job of opening up texts to help students more easily access Scripture. I like to have my regular Bible and *The Message* open in front of me when I do my Bible study.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates 1 Peter 1:13-16 with energy:

So roll up your sleeves, put your mind in gear, be totally ready to receive the gift that's coming when Jesus arrives. Don't lazily slip back into those old grooves of evil, doing just what you feel like doing. You didn't know any better then; you do now. As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God's life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. God said, "I am holy; you be holy."

The Holy Life

Trying to be “holy” in our own strength is exhausting while we are trying, and impossible in the end. As you read the following “holy life” instructions from Peter, **rewrite them using your own words. Using two different colors, highlight what is our human part of the process of holy living, and what is God’s part.**

1 Peter 1:22-23

22 Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.²³ You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

1 Peter 2:1-3

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.² Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

1 Peter 5:6-10

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that *he may exalt you in due time.*⁷ *Cast all your anxiety on him,* because *he cares for you.*⁸ *Discipline yourselves; keep alert.* Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.⁹ *Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering*

2 Peter 1:3-8

*His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*⁴ *Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature.*⁵ *For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge,⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness,⁷ and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.*⁸ *For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*

For further or group study also consider the following text:

1 Peter 3:8-12

*Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.*⁹ *Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing.* *It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.*¹⁰ *For ‘Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit;¹¹ let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it.*¹² *For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.’*

The Results of Living a Holy Life

The Apostle John gives his readers some plumb lines by which they can measure whether or not their lives exhibit the craftsmanship of Jesus Christ on a daily basis. In your own words, describe the hoped for result of living a “holy life” in Christ which is found in each passage below.

1 John 1:6-10

⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true;⁷ but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.⁹ If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

HINT: Hoped for result might be something like this...(but let folks “use their words” as we say to young children who are learning to express themselves): That we will be so well cleaned up by Jesus that we can live in his light. And because of the very nature of his light, it will shine in and through us for others.

1 John 2:15-17

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; ¹⁶for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.

HINT: Hoped for result: (again, just a suggestion) That the things of this world would not drag us down with their weight and complexity. We want to live into our eternal life right now, walking freely and lightly.

For further or group study also consider the following texts:

1 John 2:9-11

⁹Whoever says, ‘I am in the light’, while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. ¹⁰Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. ¹¹But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.

HINT: Hoped for result: That we can clearly see ourselves, living and growing in a healthy emotional and spiritual way, so that out of our growth we can love others.

1 John 2:2-6

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;² and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. ³ Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. ⁴Whoever says, ‘I have come to know him’, but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist;⁵ but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him:⁶ whoever says, ‘I abide in him,’ ought to walk just as he walked.

HINT: Hoped for result: That when we hang out with Jesus enough, we really get to know him and he changes us deep down inside.

After studying these scriptures, what new insight have you gained about what it might mean for you to “abide” in Christ and how that results in a holy life?

HINT: Here is a place where you can go back and create a paragraph or so out of the “hoped for results” of abiding as we learn what it means to live a “holy” life.

Using the Plumb Line

As far as I can tell, “holiness” has received very bad press over the years. We don’t have any trouble talking about God’s “holiness,” but when we talk about “holiness” in ourselves and other people, “holiness” is perceived negatively—as if it is the same thing as self-righteousness and moral uptightness. We might hear someone say in a derogatory tone of voice, “She acts so ‘holier than thou’ I just can’t stand being around her.” What is this all too human attitude all about?

Partly, I think, holiness is not seen in a positive light because Christians have often acted badly. We Christians have too often thought that certain outward behaviors would somehow make us more lovable to God, and acceptable to others, without our inner lives being changed. We have put on Christian airs hoping that if other people didn’t see what we are really like God wouldn’t either.

But it is not just Christians acting badly that have given “holiness” a bad name. People in general just don’t like moral and spiritual boundaries. The snake in the Garden of Eden convinced Adam and Eve that the good boundaries God set up (because he loves us) were really God’s way of being a major spoil sport. We, too, have been duped into thinking that if we really live as God wants us to, it will take away all our fun ... what a lie! For many, “holiness” has been seen as a sure fire way to a dry, boring, and miserable life.

But then along comes a writer like Eugene Peterson with a reflection on holiness he calls: *Oregano and Crabgrass*

All of us have impulses from time to time to live a holy life – life lived as it should be, life true and good and beautiful, life lived for and in and by means of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. And then someone telephones with an invitation to the football game, or we notice that the salad needs oregano, or the crabgrass in the yard suddenly becomes a pressing priority. We are distracted by the mundane and forfeit, for yet another time, the holy. Or so we assume. And then we find ourselves in the company of the Apostle Peter - a writer who penetrates the surface pieties and shows us what the holy life is really like, that it is the football game and the oregano and the crabgrass that provide the raw material for holiness. Holiness is not being nice. A holy life isn’t a matter of women and men being polite with God, but of humans who accept and enter into God’s work of shaping salvation out of the unlikely material of our sin and ignorance, our ambition and waywardness – and also our loves and aspirations and nobilities, but never by just smoothing over rough edges. Holiness is not being “polished up”. (Peterson, *Living the Message: Daily Reflections* 347)

HINT: I love this quote from Peterson. He lets us know that living a holy life must come in our daily, very ordinary life.

What about you? How would you describe “holiness” of life after reading the scriptures listed in **Setting the Stones** and comparing them with Peterson’s reflection?

HINT: This next question might open up your class for some interesting conversation, especially if they compare Peter’s message with how they were raised, or what people outside the church think Christians are saying about holiness.

Peter’s life was transformed from the inside out as a result of his experience of Jesus Christ. How are you growing in holiness and being transformed as a result of your association with Jesus? Where are you experiencing Christ’s transforming work right now? (This might be a place that feels uncomfortable.)

HINT: These are fairly personal questions. This may be a good place to have asked a member of your class to come prepared to share.

Placing the Capstone

Have some fun ... choose one or more of the following quotations on which to reflect by drawing a parallel between McRaven’s advice to stone masons and your life of “holiness” in Christian community.

“In the course of your building projects you will sooner or later come to stone ... compared with other building material, stone is expensive if you count your time ... it is heavy, but also permanent ... of course you can foul it up [However], even your early efforts will afford you a great deal of satisfaction when you view the structures of plywood and plastic around you.” (11)

“Soft or weak stone has little shear strength and must always be supported. Laid properly, however, even crumbly stone will let you build well.” (12)

“As time goes by, the weight of your wall will work with the flexing of natural forces to shift stress points and, in shifting, the wall becomes more stable if it is laid right. If not, it’ll start falling apart.” (36)

“I suppose you would have to say that there’s some physics involved in dry stone work, but it’s more like plain common sense. If you take time to figure out what has to happen to make a particular rock do what it is supposed to do, you can find a way to make it happen. When you wedge any stone into a wall, do it solidly, since the whole structure above it will be thrown off if the wedge crushes or falls out.” (35)

Closing Hymn

My Hope is Built

My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly trust in Jesus’ Name.

When darkness seems to hide his face, I rest on his unchanging grace.
In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil.

His oath, his covenant, his blood, support me in the whelming flood.
When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay.

When he shall come with trumpet sound, oh may I then in him be found.
Dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne.

*On Christ the solid Rock I stand,
all other ground is sinking sand;
all other ground is sinking sand.*

Edward Mote, 1834

LESSON SIX: SIN—BEWARE OF VARMINTS IN THE CRACKS

Objective:

The objective of this lesson is for each student to understand that when we expose the dark cracks in our lives to the healing, cleansing work of God’s love, Christ transforms us into new people who flourish as “living stones,” in company with other “living stones,” in his cathedral of light. AND THEN because we have been forgiven, we can turn around and forgive others.

Lesson Six

“The cracks between stones will invite every kind of inhabitant ... be aware of the haven you are creating for snakes, spiders, wasps, scorpions, field mice, lizards, and even birds.” (Charles McRaven)

Sin weakens our spiritual structure; it creates “havens” for all sorts of self-destructive beliefs that result in self-destructive behaviors. These are our old self-centered ideas and ungodly passions; anything that makes us less than what God created us to be. Empty places in our hearts create havens within the “cracks” of our lives that harbor soul destroying “varmint” like resentment, fear, self-condemnation, envy, unbelief, arrogance, gluttony, and laziness. **(HERE IS A KEY IDEA) Yet, our authors do not instruct us to heroically overcome our human brokenness with moral striving, self-will, and a list of do’s and don’ts. Instead, they shine the light of God’s healing love on our disordered desires and teach us to surrender ourselves to the Lord with the confidence that Christ’s love will penetrate and remove our darkness, making us whole and new human beings with an eternal life perspective.**

When we expose the dark cracks in our lives to the healing, cleansing work of God’s love, Christ transforms us into new people who flourish as “living stones,” in company with other “living stones,” in his cathedral of light. “But don’t fool yourselves,” warn our authors, because you rarely fool others and you can never fool God; the actual condition of our souls, whether light or dark, will be seen from the outside by both God and other people.

Setting the Stone

In the following texts, we will look at the warnings Peter, John, and Jude give about sin’s destructive energy. They also clearly state that our “inside” person inevitably shines through to the outside. According to our authors, our actions clearly demonstrate the true condition of our hearts. Fortunately for the first century readers (and for us), they do not stop their soul-care with warnings— they assert over and over that God’s love *in us* creates hearts of love capable of loving others.

1 and 2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude are rich with life-giving words explaining God’s plan of love and redemption. First, read the following texts and **list those verses that warn about the destructive nature of sin.**

Sin's Destructive Nature

1 John 1:5-10

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true;⁷but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1 John 3:4-10 (This text is particularly strong about sin. You may want to read it in several translations to clarify John's intent.)

HINT: Here is the New Revised Standard Version (a tried and true classic)

Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.⁵You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.⁶No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.⁸Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.⁹Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God.¹⁰The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

HINT: Here it is from The Message

⁴⁻⁶All who indulge in a sinful life are dangerously lawless, for sin is a major disruption of God's order. Surely you know that Christ showed up in order to get rid of sin. There is no sin in him, and sin is not part of his program. No one who lives deeply in Christ makes a practice of sin. None of those who do practice sin have taken a good look at Christ. They've got him all backward.

⁷⁻⁸So, my dear children, don't let anyone divert you from the truth. It's the person who acts right who is right, just as we see it lived out in our righteous Messiah. Those who make a practice of sin are straight from the Devil, the pioneer in the practice of sin. The Son of God entered the scene to abolish the Devil's ways.

⁹⁻¹⁰People conceived and brought into life by God don't make a practice of sin. How could they? God's seed is deep within them, making them who they are. It's not in the nature of the God-begotten to practice and parade sin. Here's how you tell the difference between God's children and the Devil's children: The one who won't practice righteous ways isn't from God, nor is the one who won't love brother or sister. A simple test.

HINT: It is important when looking at these two texts to remember they come from the same book and are by the same author. For me, Peterson's understanding of the "practice of sin" fits with John's earlier thoughts in 1 John 1:5-10 with the fact that all have sinned and come short of God's plan for them. Two things I know for certain: 1) I have and do sin. 2) Christ is in my heart working full time to transform me into his likeness. For

just this kind of situation, I recommend that as the leader of this lesson you take the time to do a bit a research on this text, maybe come with several translations available.

For further or group study also consider the following texts:

1 John 2:15-17

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world;¹⁶ for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world.¹⁷ And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.

Compassion Given

Even with this clarity regarding the darkness sin brings into our lives, our authors demonstrate compassion for their reader's struggles. In the following texts, **pick out the verses that demonstrate an understanding of our human struggle with inner brokenness.**

1 John 2:1-2

*My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. **But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;² and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.***

Jude vs. 20-23

*But you, **beloved,** build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit;²¹ keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.²² **And have mercy on some who are wavering;²³ save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear,** hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.*

Back to Abiding

Let's go back to the reality of the effect of "abiding" in Christ, studied in our last chapter. Abiding is a way of life that works itself out through the ups and downs of our spiritual journey. Even a simple longing for a new way of life, no matter how weak, is evidence of God already at work. We would not want more of God if the Holy Spirit wasn't already at work. **In the following texts, pick out the verses that give you hope of God's love at work in you, transforming you into "living stones" full of God's love and usable in his cathedral.**

1 Peter 2:1-5

*Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.² **Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and⁵like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ***

1 John 4:7-16

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

For further or group study also consider the following texts:

1 Peter 2:9-10

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Jude vs. 24-25

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing,²⁵ to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

God's Love Changes Us

Finally, pay attention to one more aspect of God's love living in us. It is God's love that changes us so that other people can stand to be around us (just kidding ... sort of). Look at how God's love changes us so that it is possible for God to use us, together with other "living" stones, for his purposes in the world.

1 John 3:18-24

*18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God,²² and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.
23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.²⁴ All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.*

HINT: So much here to give us hope!

3 John vs. 1-8

The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. 2 Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul.³I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely, how you walk in the truth.⁴I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth. 5 Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you;⁶they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God;⁷for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers.⁸Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.

HINT: I think the best way to approach these two questions is to go back over the verse you have highlighted and summarize them. For instance:

After having reviewed these texts, describe what it means for you to “walk in the light?”

HINT:

- **When we humbly admit we are broken sinners in need of God’s light and life.**
- **When we walk away from intentional sin as fast as we can go.**
- **When we believe that the saving work of Jesus Christ is going on in our life.**
- **Etc.**

What does it mean for you to “walk in darkness?”

HINT:

- **When we blame others for our problems and do not take responsibility for our own brokenness and wrong doing.**
- **When we run from the truth.**
- **When we are stingy and inhospitable with the gifts God has given us. Etc.**

Using the Plumb Line

The church is a community of people with a radical message. We announce to the world that, without God’s love, we live in darkness. But praise-be-to-God, our darkness can be placed on the altar of Jesus Christ, and God’s light will permeate our darkness and give us new life.

The church is the most hopeful institution on earth. The church is a miracle in that it provides a community of people who are daily aware of their own unfaithfulness and lack of love and are not afraid to face their failures ... the church does not communicate the *good news* by consistent success and virtue— as we have noticed—but in its willingness to point to God; and repentance. (Williams 152)

Surprisingly, it’s usually much easier to be the one to forgive, than it is to be the one who needs to be forgiven. I learned this the hard way. Several years ago I failed to take appropriate care when packing a set of grand mom’s

best china. Many pieces were broken in shipping that should not have been had I taken more care. At that same time, I was angry with another family member because of an unrelated behavior. When my husband casually said, "Bece, it is hard to be the one who needs forgiveness," I felt "cut-to-the-quick" as they say, because the truth of his statement was so personal.

Can you describe a time when you needed forgiveness and received it? What happened? How were you given grace? In what way did this situation influence how you experience grace and forgiveness from God?

HINT: Having a member of your class prepared to share their story may help open others to share theirs as well. This question asks for a good measure of vulnerability which may or may not be comfortable in your group. This may even be a place where you, as a leader, can share a time when you were forgiven. As part of your story, you might bring along a photo of the person who forgave you.

Setting the Capstone

HINT: Both of these questions will make for good class discussion. In addition to addressing these questions specifically, you might ask your students to reflect on this lesson as it relates back to what it means to live a "holy" life. Also, you might look at how this lesson speaks to the whole idea of living and working together as living stones in God's great cathedral.

Reflect on one or more of the following questions.

What is it like for you to be part of a group of people who, as described by Williams, "are daily aware of their own unfaithfulness and lack of love and are not afraid to face their failures" ... but communicate the *good news* by their willingness "to point to God; and repentance"? How does this awareness work itself out in your personal life, and in your congregation?

In Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation*, she recalls a conversation she had while in seminary. "I remember a classmate of mine, a Lebanese Presbyterian, who threw a theological temper tantrum during his first semester of seminary. 'All you Americans care about is justification!' he howled. 'You love sinning and being forgiven, sinning and being forgiven, but no one seems to want off that hamster wheel. Have you ever heard of sanctification? Is anyone interested in learning to sin a little less?'" (86). What is your response to this statement?

Closing Hymn

HINT: Class is nearly over by the time you get to this section of your lesson. Your class members might enjoy standing up and facing each other across the room for this antiphonal hymn...try something that uses their bodies as well as their mouths 😊.

The following "Stone scriptures" can be read antiphonally:

Group 1: **Genesis 28:18, 22:** "So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it, and said The LORD shall be my God, and this

stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you."

Group 2: **1 Samuel 2:2** (Hannah's Prayer): "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God."

Group 1: **Genesis 31: 44-46**: "'Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I; and let it be a witness between you and me.' So Jacob took a stone, and set it up as a pillar. And Jacob said to his kinsfolk, 'Gather stones,' and they took stones, and made a heap; and they ate there by the heap."

Group 2: **Psalms 62:1-2**: "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken."

Group 1: **Ephesians 2: 19-22**: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God."

Group 2: **Psalms 71:1-3**: "In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress."

Group 1: **Revelation 2:17**: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name ..."

Group 2: **Isaiah 44:6-8**: "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be. Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me?"

All Together: **Isaiah 44: 8e**: "There is no other rock; I know not one."

LESSON SEVEN: TEACHERS—THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Objective:

The objective of Lesson Seven is to help students understand that **WHAT** they believe is important. The nature of what we believe affects our entire life, the big and small parts. The fervor and sincerity with which we believe something makes no difference if the content of our beliefs are false. It is often hard to separate the belief from the one who is doing the believing. If we love and care for someone, we are sympathetic to what they hold to be right and true...yet sometimes our loved ones can be in full denial of truth and become angry with us when we do not accept their worldview as reality. This is where “abiding” in Christ comes into play. When we actively seek God’s presence through Bible study, prayer, mediation, and the spiritual disciplines we expose our minds and hearts (with all of our self-centeredness) to God’s filtration system and he promises that his Holy Spirit will provide wisdom and discernment for our journey. Proverbs 3:5-8 reads

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.

⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.

⁸ It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.

HINT: As leader, you might even begin with a question about why is it important **WHAT** we believe? You might also begin by talking about a teacher you have had who “straightened you out” in some way. Your vulnerability can set the tone for the meeting. Be sure, however, to make your sharing time short and to the point.

Lesson Seven

Be prepared to step nimbly back if you discover the inevitable snake, spider, ants, or wasps underneath the stone. And wear gloves—the thick leather kind. (Charles McRaven)

It is of first importance to our apostolic authors that believers demonstrate God’s love to others. A close second in importance is their warning cry against the false teachers and their foul perversion of the gospel’s good news. The heresy of their day was Gnosticism, a philosophy that splits the physical world from the spiritual world, a belief that allowed Gnostics to sin freely with their bodies without worrying about the damage they were doing to their own spirit/soul as well as damage to those around them in the life of the community. (see **Introduction: 1-3 John** for a more detailed account of Gnosticism).

Simply put, this theological error confused people about the person of Jesus Christ. The overly philosophical abstractions of Gnosticism taught that it was permissible to obey their bodily instincts instead of God’s Word. Gnosticism sucked all motivation to live a holy life out of anyone who wanted to follow Christ with mind, body, and spirit. It also deadened their willingness to allow the Holy Spirit to transform their life. Gnostics didn’t understand the difference between light and darkness. They were not aware of the spiritually destructive influence that darkness actually had over them.

When sin is no longer named as sin, its life-destroying power does not vanish. Evil merely creates the environment where sin's poison can eat away at the foundation of the structure of life until it collapses, both physically and spiritually. Barbara Brown Taylor, in *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation*, claims that honestly recognizing sin in our lives for what it is (i.e. "deadly alienation" from God) is not the bad news of condemnation we so easily assume. Rather, by recognizing our sin, we give space for God's good news and find hope that God will rebuild the tumbled down structure we call "our life." We diminish sin's effect upon us if we view it only as a collection of "bad" behaviors. The influence of spiritual darkness penetrates our very nature prior to Christ's saving and redeeming work.

Abandoning the language of sin will not make sin go away. Human beings will continue to experience alienation, deformation, damnation, and death no matter what we call them. Abandoning the language will simply leave us speechless before them, and increase our denial of their presence in our lives. Ironically, it will also weaken the language of grace, since the full impact of forgiveness cannot be felt apart from the full impact of what has been forgiven. (Taylor 6)

Not naming sin as destructive to every part of our human nature was the grace-neutralizing message of the Gnostic teachers. Peter, John, and Jude bring God's light and life to their readers. The Gnostic teachers deal in death. No wonder each of our authors uses the strongest possible language against them.

Setting the Stone

Discerning False teaching

Gnostics teach that sinful behavior has no long lasting consequences on our lives since our spirit is not damaged by the actions of our physical body. Peter, John, and Jude would have none of this. False teachers are as prevalent today as they were in the first century. In our pluralistic context, the vital task for Christians is to be able to discern truth from falsehood. **Peter helped his original readers, and therefore helps us, by listing three hallmarks of false teachers and their message. As you read through the following texts, fill in the verse numbers that describe each hallmark.**

2 Peter 2:1-3

¹ *But there were also false prophets in Israel, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will cleverly teach destructive heresies and even deny the Master who bought them. In this way, they will bring sudden destruction on themselves.* ² *Many will follow their evil teaching and shameful immorality. And because of these teachers, the way of truth will be slandered.* ³ *In their greed they will make up clever lies to get hold of your money. But God condemned them long ago, and their destruction will not be delayed.*

2 Peter 2: 10-19

¹⁰ *He is especially hard on those who follow their own twisted sexual desire, and who despise authority. These people are proud and arrogant, daring even to scoff at supernatural beings^[c] without so much as trembling.* ¹¹ *But the angels, who are far greater in power and strength, do not dare to bring from the Lord^[d] a charge of blasphemy against those supernatural beings.* ¹² *These false teachers are like unthinking animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed. They scoff at things they do not understand, and like animals, they will be destroyed.* ¹³ *Their destruction is their reward for the harm they have done. They love to indulge in evil pleas-*

ures in broad daylight. They are a disgrace and a stain among you. They delight in deception^[e] even as they eat with you in your fellowship meals.¹⁴ They commit adultery with their eyes, and their desire for sin is never satisfied. They lure unstable people into sin, and they are well trained in greed. They live under God's curse.¹⁵ They have wandered off the right road and followed the footsteps of Balaam son of Beor, who loved to earn money by doing wrong.¹⁶ But Balaam was stopped from his mad course when his donkey rebuked him with a human voice.¹⁷ These people are as useless as dried-up springs or as mist blown away by the wind. They are doomed to blackest darkness.¹⁸ They brag about themselves with empty, foolish boasting. With an appeal to twisted sexual desires, they lure back into sin those who have barely escaped from a lifestyle of deception.¹⁹ They promise freedom, but they themselves are slaves of sin and corruption. For you are a slave to whatever controls you.

HINT: Listed below are some of the texts students might suggest.

1. **False teachers hide heresy with half-truths and deception.** Vs.1,3,13, and 14
2. **False teachers reject the truth found in scripture.** Vs. 1,2,10,11,12, and 15
3. **False teachers act out of their own passion and self-interest.** Vs. 10,13,14,15, and 18

John and Jude were teachers. How would you describe their attitude towards their readers?

1 John 4:1-6

¹ **Dear friends,** do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world. ² This is how we know if they have the Spirit of God: If a person claiming to be a prophet^[a] acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God. ³ But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is not from God. Such a person has the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard is coming into the world and indeed is already here.

⁴ **But you belong to God, my dear children.** You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world. ⁵ Those people belong to this world, so they speak from the world's viewpoint, and the world listens to them. ⁶ **But we belong to God, and those who know God listen to us.** If they do not belong to God, they do not listen to us. That is how we know if someone has the Spirit of truth or the spirit of deception.

Jude vs 3-4

³ **Dear friends,** I had been eagerly planning to write to you about the salvation we all share. But now I find that I must write about something else, urging you to defend the faith that God has entrusted once for all time to his holy people. ⁴ **I say this because some ungodly people have wormed their way into your churches, saying that God's marvelous grace allows us to live immoral lives.** The condemnation of such people was recorded long ago, for they have denied our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

HINT: Both John and Jude seem to feel great fatherly love for those who will be reading their letters. They also seem to hold them accountable (also in a fatherly way) for what they already know about themselves: that they ARE God's children, and they WILL be God's instruments on earth. "Be on your guard" they seem to say. Do not fathers use these same words on occasion? 😊

Jesus Christ—the Essential Cornerstone

Jesus Christ—fully human and fully God—is the stone over which the false teachers stumble. This results in their head-long tumble down heresy’s hill. All three authors vehemently insist that the incarnation and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is *the* essential cornerstone upon which Christianity is built since it is the foundation for all human holiness. **According to John and Jude, what difference does it make to hold to this bedrock belief?**

1 John 2:22-23

²² *And who is a liar? Anyone who says that Jesus is not the Christ. Anyone who denies the Father and the Son is an antichrist.* ²³ *Anyone who denies the Son doesn’t have the Father, either. But anyone who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.*

2 John vs 7-11

⁷ *I say this because many deceivers have gone out into the world. They deny that Jesus Christ came^l in a real body. Such a person is a deceiver and an antichrist.* ⁸ *Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked so hard to achieve. Be diligent so that you receive your full reward.* ⁹ *Anyone who wanders away from this teaching has no relationship with God. But anyone who remains in the teaching of Christ has a relationship with both the Father and the Son.* ¹⁰ *If anyone comes to your meeting and does not teach the truth about Christ, don’t invite that person into your home or give any kind of encouragement.* ¹¹ *Anyone who encourages such people becomes a partner in their evil work.*

HINT: Note here that John uses the word “antichrist” not as a proper name, but in referring to those who are against or “anti” Christ. Apparently, those who were against Christ in John’s day wanted to be followers of God while opposing and denying Christ as fully human and fully God. John is very clear, the Father and the Son cannot be separated. If you do not have both the Son *and* the Father, then you have nothing.

For further or group study also consider the following texts. Jude indicates that this mysterious battle against sin is also carried out on the cosmic level:

1 John 4:1-3

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,* ³*and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist,* *of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.*

HINT: Again we have this description of a “spirit of the antichrist,” a pervasive spiritual atmosphere opposing Jesus Christ.

Jude vs 5-10

⁵ *Now I desire to remind you, though you are fully informed, that the Lord, who once for all saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterwards destroyed those who did not believe.* ⁶*And the angels who did not keep their own*

position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great day.⁷ Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire. ⁸ Yet in the same way these dreamers also defile the flesh, reject authority, and slander the glorious ones.⁹ But when the archangel Michael contended with the devil and disputed about the body of Moses, he did not dare to bring a condemnation of slander against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!"¹⁰ But these people slander whatever they do not understand, and they are destroyed by those things that, like irrational animals, they know by instinct.

HINT: Whoa...here are some wild texts! It is hard to know what to make of them, but I can guarantee you that many have tried 😊. Jude might be adding these cosmic illustrations to help his readers realize that the battle they fight here on earth, in their life, their families, and communities, is part of a much bigger war being waged...a cosmic war. When we acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, fully human and fully God, we do so along with angels and archangels at our side. (Kind of cool when you stop to think of it 😊).

Standing Up Against Great Odds

You'll handle each rock several times in gathering, hauling, stacking, shaping, and laying it. This weight will mean you need stronger footings and more carefully fitted arches and spans. But this weight will also keep what you build where you build it, against great odds. (McRaven 11)

It will come as no surprise to us that we need an antidote to neutralize the theological poison of false teaching. This is why we are called to turn from darkness to the light by fully abiding in Jesus Christ as living stones. When we abide in Christ, we discover our "living stoniness" as we study God's Word. As we embrace apostolic teaching we discern truth from falsehood no matter how subtle the error. In addition, we start paying closer attention to the life and language of those we choose as teachers in order to discern in them the fruit of a genuine Christian ministry being lived in the Holy Spirit. These are some of the ways we participate in building "stronger footings and more carefully fitted arches and spans" in order that the structure of our life will stay up even "against great odds."

As a reminder of your "living stoniness," write out 1 John 3:24. Can you explain how abiding in Christ keeps you resistant to false teaching in your situation?

²⁴ ***All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.***

HINT: As leader, can you give a personal example of a situation in which you were able to discern that a teacher, or "teaching" just did not seem "right." When listened to, the Holy Spirit within us gives us the ability

to see with “spiritual” glasses things we might not see (or want to see) on our own. Mostly we are able to see into ourselves. How does spending time in God’s company clear our spiritual glasses?

Using the Plumb Line

Who taught you about God? I met Miss Leola at church Bible camp when I was in 4th grade. She was very big woman. She had been a missionary to the Congo. But when I met her, she was home in America teaching little girls, like me, about Jesus. Under her teaching I gave my life to the Lord. During the last night of church camp when she asked which of us girls wanted to give our lives to Christ’s service, I went forward to surrender my life to Christ. I believe much of my life’s structure was influenced by Miss Leola’s teaching.

Being part of God’s “living stone” structure includes the call to teach others about Jesus Christ. This is done in many formal and informal ways. Look back over your faith journey. Who are the people God has brought into your life to teach you about his love and presence? Describe one of these teachers: what was it about her/him that particularly helped you learn?

HINT: This question should bring out some wonderful stories of those who have influenced your class members for Jesus Christ. You may want to divide up into groups of two so that everyone will have time to tell about these dear people in their life.

Setting the Capstone

Choose one or more of the following questions or comments on which to reflect and respond.

Has the Lord used you as a “teacher” to share his good news with others? What has this been like for you? How did you make certain that what you taught was true and life-giving?

HINT: Here again is an opportunity for some people to think about their own call as “teachers.” It might be interesting to have some who answered this question share how they, as teachers, have made sure that what they taught was accurate, true, and life-giving. You might have examples from mothers who taught their children, school teachers, church school teachers, etc.

It is said that during some training programs for bank tellers they are only given authentic currency to study in order that they will become so familiar with the real thing that they can easily spot a counterfeit bill when it comes into their hands. How do you respond to this “real-thing” training and how might it apply to our work as discerning Christians “in training”?

What about Gnosticism today? During the 18th century a popular view of God was called “Deism.” Like Gnosticism, Deism’s God was distant and uninvolved in human affairs. This view has come down to our current century in the rather off-handed way people affirm their “belief” in God. When asked if they believe in God, many will say “yes” but not follow-up their affirmative response with any behavior commonly associated with an active life of faith (e.g. worship attendance, prayer, even thinking about God and our relationship with him). However, if one’s “God” lives so far away and has nothing much to do with us ... what would be the reason to worship him or study his Word?

HINT: Both of the above questions are less personal, but also very interesting. You might ask two or three who answered these questions to share their responses.

Closing Hymn

HINT: This is a great old hymn. Again, you can find many renditions on the internet. If you have no way to play the music, reading it as a poem could be nice. Some of the phrases just jump off the page and grab you and seem to shake you until you “get it.”

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless look to Thee for grace;*

HINT: Is this not our true situation before God?

Augustus Toplady was one day overtaken by a thunderstorm in Burrington Coombe where there is a precipitous crag of limestone a hundred feet high, and right down its center is the deep recess in which Toplady found shelter. In this crag, safe from the ravages of the storm he penned the hymn, *Rock of Ages*, cleft for me. Let me hide myself in Thee.

Rock of Ages

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee;
let the water and the blood, from thy wounded side which flowed,
be of sin the double cure; cleanse me from its guilt and power.

Not the labor of my hands can fulfill thy law's demands;
could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow,
all for sin could not atone; thou must save, and thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling;
naked, come to thee for dress; helpless look to thee for grace;
foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.

While I draw this fleeting breath, when mine eyes shall close in death,
when I soar to worlds unknown, see thee on thy judgment throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.

Augustus Toplady 1763

LESSON EIGHT: STAY ALERT—STAY ALIVE

Objective:

The objective of this lesson is to understand how important an alive, active faith is to our overall spiritual health and well-being. It is easy to get numbed to the dangers of spiritual sleepiness. It is also easy to get so afraid of spiritual failure that we never risk deep and abiding growth. Both ends of the spectrum leave Christians vulnerable to evil's tricks, but by abiding in Christ we are given all the help we need in this life now and the next.

Lesson Eight

"A load of stone isn't as hard to get going as it is to get stopped." (McRaven 20)

"Another handy vehicle is the farm cart or two wheeled trailer pulled by tractor or mule. I advise against moving it by hand when loaded, because it will *always* run over you." (McRaven 19)

"When lifting heavy objects, you must keep your back straight and give your knees and legs the work out Nothing is as unyielding as stone and you don't want to have to enjoy your finished structure from a wheelchair." (McRaven 19)

"Look for copperhead and rattlesnake under rocks, and don't trust anything with a thin neck and large, triangular head." (McRaven 22)

"Don't drop or throw stones onto each other." (McRaven 21)

"Don't steal stones." (McRaven 21)

I am guessing there is story behind each warning, and probably a number of scrapes, bruises, and dangerously close encounters that give weight to his advice.

In a manner of similar urgency, Peter, John, and Jude use strong and direct words to get the full attention of their readers in order to warn them against false teachers, moral compromise, and theological error: "Be on your guard" (2 John v. 8), "Keep alert" (1 Peter 5:8), "Beware" (2 Peter 3:17), and "Stand Fast" (1 Peter 5:12). 1 and 2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude could easily be entitled the "Stay Alert—Stay Alive Campaign" for first century Christians. But if the warnings are intense, the promises are abundant for those who remain spiritually alert: "You will never stumble" (2 Peter 1:10), "God will rescue you" (2 Peter 2:9), and "We look for new hope" (2 Peter 3:13).

When believers attentively practice living, learning, and loving God, following his path, the Holy Spirit equips us with a strong and resilient faith. This, when combined with the faith of others, becomes the very stone Christ uses to build his church. Rowan Williams writes, "If the risen Jesus is not an idea or an image but a living person, we meet him in the persons he has touched, the persons who, whatever their individual failings and fears, have been equipped to take responsibility for his tangible presence in the world" (93). One of the ways we become and remain "equipped" is by *staying alert*.

Setting the Stones

I Urgently Write You

Peter strenuously calls his readers to stay alert by reminding us of all the warnings and advice he has given up to this point in his letters. He also promises that he will NOT stop reminding us of these things. “Therefore, I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you ... I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.” (2 Peter 1:12, 15)

John appeals to his readers to stay alert, calling us to pay attention to what we have learned and already know about our salvation over the long-haul. “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God; so that you may know that you have eternal life.” (1 John 5:13)

Jude beseeches his readers to stay alert, encouraging us to stand firm in our faith, even when it is not easy; “Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” (Jude v. 3)

As you read the following texts, write a brief summary of the specific “stay alert—stay alive” instructions to which believers should pay attention in each warning category below.

Be Attentive to Yourself

2 Peter 3:17

¹⁷Therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, **beware** that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability.¹⁸But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

HINT:

Example: Be very careful that you are not taken in by people who are only following their own lower natures. If you are deluded in this way, it will create havoc and your whole life will crumble. Rather, move toward Jesus Christ and let him do his work in you. If you do this, you will grow both in grace and in knowledge...two very stabilizing elements.

2 John v. 8

Be on your guard, so that you do not lose what we have worked for, but may receive a full reward.

HINT:

Example: With one stupid, self-centered choice you can lose everything...but you don't have to...there is another way that brings a great return on your investment.

1 Peter 5:6 **Humble yourselves** therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.⁷Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

Be Attentive to How You Treat Others

1 Peter 5:1-5

*Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you² to **tend the flock of God** that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, **not under compulsion but willingly**, as God would have you do it—**not for sordid gain but eagerly**.³ **Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock**.⁴ **And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away**.⁵ **In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another**, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’*

1 John 3:16-19

*We know love by this that he laid down his life for us—and **we ought to lay down our lives for one another**. **Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action**.¹⁹ **And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him**.*

You MUST Understand This

1 Peter 5:8

Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour**.⁹ **Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering

HINT:

Example: Come on you guys, there are lots of us in the fight, don't let up now...keep up the fight...steady now...its dangerous out there...but you are not alone.

2 Peter 3:3-7

*First of all **you must understand this**, that in the last days **scoffers will come**, scoffing and indulging their own lusts⁴ and saying, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!’⁵ **They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water**,⁶ through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished.⁷ **But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless**.*

1 John 5:14-15

*14 **And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us**.¹⁵ **And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him***

For further or group study also consider the following texts:

2 Peter 3:8-10

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day**.⁹ **The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you,

not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.¹⁰ But the **day of the Lord will come like a thief**, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and **everything** that is done on it **will be disclosed**.

2 Peter 1:20-21

²⁰**First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation,** ²¹**because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.**

Don't Be Surprised

1 Peter 4:12-14

*Beloved, **do not be surprised** at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, **as though something strange were happening to you.***¹³ *But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.*¹⁴ *If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.*

HINT:

Example: When you suffer because of your relationship with Christ, don't get caught up in thinking something unique is happening to you alone. Look underneath the suffering to see the blessing, the glory, and the presence of God that is surrounding you...now that is something that will give you strength and courage.

1 Peter 5:8-10

⁸*Discipline yourselves; **keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.***⁹ *Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.*

For further or group study also consider the following texts:

1 John 3:13-14

¹³**Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you.**¹⁴*We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death.*¹⁵*All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them.*

Know What You Know

All three of our authors put a great deal of importance on the strength and durability of a faith that is undergirded with a working knowledge of God's Word. In 1 John, the word "know" occurs 39 times. In each of the following texts from 1 John 5 you will find the basis for a foundational Christian belief. Summarize in a simple phrase the Christian reality John gives his readers in these verses.

1 John 5:6-10

Example: Jesus is God

This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.⁷ There are three that testify:⁸ the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree.⁹ If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son.¹⁰ Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son.

1 John 5: 11-13

Example: Believers have eternal life

¹¹And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life ¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

1 John 5:14-15

Example: God Answers prayers

¹⁴ And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him

1 John 5:18-19

Example: Christians do not practice sin

¹⁸ We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them.¹⁹ We know that we are God's children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one

1 John 5:20

Example: The Christian life is the real life

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

As you reflect on the insights and warnings given to first century believers, **in what ways do you see these same warnings applicable today?**

HINT: As leader, it might be helpful for you to have a few examples ready from your own study, this will spark conversation.

Using the Plumb Line

Few people enjoy being nagged or lectured. Yet, as believers we count on the Holy Spirit to “nudge” us into paying better attention to those places in our lives that need God’s special intervention. One of the Greek words in

the New Testament which is translated “repentance” literally means to turn around and go the other way. Look again at the Spiritual Time-Line you created in Lesson Three. When did God speak to you in order to “turn you around” and point you toward his loving presence? Did you experience a “warning” of some kind? Did you “wake-up” in some way? Maybe you were able to pay attention to God’s love at a deeper level and his love changed you. Take a few minutes and describe one of your “turning” experiences and how the Lord grabbed your attention.

HINT: I know I say this often, but having a member of your class ready to share a bit of her faith story as it relates to a “turning” or “warning” may be helpful. Even if we have come to faith early in life, we experienced some sort of “turning.” However, some of the most dramatic stories come from those who came to know Christ as adults.

HINT: Looking Forward to Lesson Nine: I suggest before you end class today you recommend that each class member read (or read together) *Using the Plumb Line* for Lesson Nine. This will help class members have time to think about their answers.

Setting the Capstone

Reflect on one or more of the following questions.

HINT: All three of these questions could produce some interesting discussion in your group. However, the first two might be most appropriate for general class discussion. You might ask one or two class members to share what they wrote and see which question draws the most interest from your class.

How do you determine if someone is telling you the truth or if something you read is reliable? Do you get a “gut-hunch” and go with that? Or, are you are a researcher who checks out the information you receive on the internet or with an expert? Maybe you have another method for discerning good from bad counsel. What is it?

How do you respond to Rowan Williams’ statement: “If the risen Jesus is not an idea or an image but a living person, we meet him in the persons he has touched, the persons who, whatever their individual failings and fears, have been equipped to take responsibility for his tangible presence in the world”?

When individual believers are attentive to our personal walk with God and we take care how we treat others, when we are alert for doctrinal error in the church and the world, and have a good working knowledge of scripture, the entire Body of Christ will benefit from our diligence. Spend some time examining your current life context. Where might you ask God to help you grow so that your presence builds up your faith community?

Closing Hymn

HINT: Before you close your time together with this hymn, you might read the words aloud and ask class members how this hymn speaks to the issues discussed in this lesson.

He Hideth My Soul

A wonderful Savior is Jesus my Lord, a wonderful Savior to me;
he hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock, where rivers of pleasure I see.

A wonderful Savior is Jesus my Lord, he taketh my burden away;
he holdeth me up, and I shall not be moved, he giveth me strength as my day.

With numberless blessings each moment he crowns, and filled with his fullness divine,
I sing in my rapture, oh, glory to God for such a redeemer as mine!

When clothed in his brightness, transported I rise to meet him in clouds of the sky,
his perfect salvation, his wonderful love, I'll shout with the millions on high.

*He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock that shadows a dry, thirsty land;
he hideth my life with the depths of his love, and covers me there with his hand,
and covers me there with his hand.*

Fanny Crosby, 1890

LESSON NINE: VIEWING OUR PRESENT REALITY THROUGH GOD'S FUTURE

Objective:

The objective of this lesson is to understand how our faith is so intensely forward looking, and how we actively keep our face toward God's future while energetically participating in what God is doing in the present. At the same time have each class member reflect on their own experience of Christ's church renewing his world right now.

Lesson Nine

“Once a stone is in place, it just *belongs*.” (Charles McRaven)

A foundational stone of the Christian faith is that Jesus Christ *will* return in glory to establish his kingdom and judge all humankind. While this teaching is a biblical certainty, God's Word leaves many of the details of our Lord's second coming veiled in mystery. We are only given a rough outline as to when and how Christ will return. So what is our chief task as Jesus' followers in this present season? It is to live in the tension between our current reality and the promised reality yet to come at the end of time. We are called to be fully present—every day—while also living in hope of God's final and promised future fulfillment of a new heaven and a new earth. This present/future way of life can only be fully lived in/with the community of other Christians.

We don't learn the truth as isolated individuals The purpose of Jesus' ministry and death and resurrection is to re-create the community of God's people, and the peace that he makes between God and us is a peace that is also made with other human beings and with the creation of which we're a part. We so easily make the mistake of thinking that peace and salvation is first a matter for each one of us alone, whereas the Bible always seems to take it for granted that we receive God's peace and mercy as part of the community that is created by God's word and action. So getting used to the light of [God's] truth is something that we do together as believers. (Williams 100)

A close reading of 1 and 2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude reveal their common intention to discuss with their original readers the specific nature of our Christian hope in God's future. Early believers wondered, as do we, about basic eschatological questions. Is Jesus really going to return as he has promised? How long will we have to wait? In his letters, Peter encourages believers to recognize that God's celestial clock runs on its own divine time schedule (2 Peter 3:8-10). “Jesus *will* return,” he assures them, but don't let a preoccupation with the end of time distract you from being the person God has called you to be in the present moment. The New Testament regularly intertwines our calling to live simultaneously in hope of Christ's return in glory with the daily task of living a holy life here and now. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates Peter's instruction with his usual down-to-earth perspective:

Everything in the world is about to be wrapped up, so take nothing for granted. Stay wide-awake in prayer. Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything. Be quick to give a meal to the hungry, a bed to the homeless—cheerfully. Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around so all get in on it: if words, let it be God's words; if help, let it be God's hearty help. That way, God's bright presence will be evident in everything through Jesus, and he'll get all the credit as the One mighty in everything—encores to the end of time. Oh, yes! (1 Peter 4:7-11)

Throughout our study we have considered how each believer—each “living stone”—has significance in itself. But it's only as each stone finds a unique place as part of God's great, eternal cathedral that the individual stones find our true spiritual home, the place we *belong*. “Jesus remakes the people of God not simply by binding lots of individuals to himself and then introducing them to each other (although there is an element of that)” (Williams 101). Jesus transforms the people within the church by changing our very nature. Jesus infuses believers with *his* light and life so the life within each combines to become the lifeblood of the entire community of faith.

Setting the Stones

As you study the following texts, pay attention to the way in which Christ is able to change a believer's “nature” so that our present life becomes a spiritual preparation for eternal life in our resurrected Lord's living body.

Summarize in a few sentences how, as an essential part of God's cathedral, our strength, as individuals, contributes to the sturdiness of the entire structure of the church.

1 Peter 4:7-11

The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers.⁸ Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.⁹ Be hospitable to one another without complaining.¹⁰ Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.¹¹ Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Example: When we are willing to serve God in all ways through the gifts he has given us, and when we are willing to show love that is full of God's grace, then God will give us the strength we need to serve him, and the words to say when it is appropriate for us to speak. When this combination happens, Jesus Christ is glorified...this build the church.

2 Peter 3:10-18

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.¹¹ Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness,¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire?¹³ But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. ¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these

things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish;¹⁵ and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him,¹⁶ speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability.¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

HINT: Here is the BIG QUESTION! What are we supposed to be doing in the meantime? What does Peter say? We are to strive for peace, live in purity, and be constantly growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ...that's it 😊! Maybe each day we can get up and ask God how we can do these three things this day. And at the end of each day, review how we did. Could it be that with this word of wisdom from Peter we are given directions about how to live as "living stones" built into God's cathedral?

Just an aside...don't you love Peter's (not very subtle) comment about Paul's writing?

For further or group study also consider the following texts:

1 Peter 1:3-9

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,⁵ who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.⁶ In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.⁸ Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 2:11-12

11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.¹² Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

1 Peter 5:1-5

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you² to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly.³ Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.⁴ And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.⁵ In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'

What do our authors tell us about the last days of human history and every person's final accounting before God? Is final judgment something to fear? Again from *The Message*, read Eugene Peterson's description of this cosmic event.

Since everything here today might well be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to live a holy life? Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival. The galaxies will burn up and the elements melt down that day—but we'll hardly notice. We'll be looking the other way, ready for the promised new heavens and the promised new earth, all landscaped with righteousness. (2 Peter 3:11-13)

HINT: I love that part about how we will “hardly notice” because we will be looking the other way ...toward to new earth “landscaped in righteousness.” !!! AMEN

Read the following texts. **In what way do these descriptions of God's abiding love add to your understanding of these future events?**

1 John 3:1-3

See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.² Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him; for we will see him as he is.³ And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

HINT: An example: What we learn in this text is that as “Children of God” we will somehow be like Jesus when He is revealed as King of Glory. This does not sound scary like so many “end-time” descriptions, but more like a family reunion...a place of and time of coming together of those in love.

1 John 4:16-21

¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.²⁰ Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Example: Take a look at all the talk about “love.” Again we are told because of God's love and abiding in us we need have NO FEAR on judgment day. How does this knowledge change the way you think about that time?

1 Peter 1:17-21

17 If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.¹⁸ You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold,¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb with-

out defect or blemish.²⁰ He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake.²¹ **Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.**

For Jesus' followers to flourish in the life of the local congregation to which we belong, we are called to live in the tension between our current and future realities. For this to happen, we need God's Holy Spirit to gift us with the ability to hold in balance our individual strengths and weaknesses along with those of the imperfect Christian fellowship in which we actually participate. Then together, within the fellowship of our church, we fully engage the present moment, while simultaneously yearning for the day of our complete wholeness with Christ in the future.

Reflect on ways you are being called to hold this balance between your current life, and your life to come with Christ. Describe this balance as you experience it.

HINT: Don't skip over this question...it is a kind of "rubber-meets-the-road" type question. How are you, and how are the members of your class being called to hold the balance between our current life and the hope to come. How do we live out our belief that God's people together ARE engaged in bringing his Kingdom here on earth?

Are there any church fights going on right now in your fellowship? What about malicious gossip? Are you looking for new staff and currently in an "in-between" time? Is your church struggling financially? Even in the hard times, we can see and experience God's glory if we look.

Using the Plumb Line

Swallowed Up in Final Victory, Not our Present Failure

As you have probably noticed, the Church in human history is a place where [a multitude of sinful human behavior] goes unchallenged; you couldn't possibly work out what the Church was meant to be from telling the Church's story But Church history or no Church history, we need moments when we can say, 'That's what I mean by Church.' When we say we 'believe in the church' (as in the Apostles Creed), we mean two things. First, we mean that we need a way of thinking about the Church that allows us to say that on certain particular occasions, when the Christian community is doing certain particular things, we know that this is what the Church *really* is, independent of our successes and failures, our efforts or our laziness. Second, we need to be able to tell the stories of the *unexpected* points at which the Church 'comes through.' (Williams 111)

In Ephesians 5:25 we read that Christ "loved the church and gave himself up for her." In the same way that individual believers are redeemed and transformed in Christ, we are also promised that one day the entire church will be transformed. In a separate book written by the Apostle John, he speaks of this future spiritual transformation of the universal church by using the metaphor of "The Bride of Christ" (Revelation 21 and 22). Just as each individual Christian will one day "be like him" (1 John 3:2), so also one day the Bride of Christ, the Christian Church as a whole, will come to fully reflect the perfect beauty that Christ himself will bestow on her at the end

of time. But for now, we as Jesus' followers are only able to reflect a glimmer of Jesus' light in our local congregation. Yet we live in great hope each day, leaning toward that day of splendor when Christ will transform our fellowship in his resurrection glory.

Many of us have stories of church failures, but do you have a story that illustrates a time when "the church came through"? Reflect on your experience and knowledge of the church's history, both personally and historically. Describe a time when a particular church was doing a particular thing of which you can say, "This is what the church *really* is."

HINT: I suggested you look at this question at the end of Lesson Eight so that class members will have time to think about their answers. This may be the best discussion you will have during this study. It provides class members with a chance to look beyond the church's failing to the times when she reflected Jesus Christ most purely.

Placing the Capstone

Reflect on one or more of the following:

Rowan Williams writes, "On the far side of all the testing, the pain and struggle of our history, there is Jesus." What does this mean to you?

How does Charles McRaven's statement, "Once a stone is in place, it just *belongs*," reflect the reality of the church eternal, as well as your local congregation?

Do you think about what it will be like when you get to heaven? Describe some of your thoughts.

Living Stones: the Making of an Eternal Fellowship uses the metaphor of "living stones" and God's eternal cathedral of his people to study 1 and 2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude. How did you relate to this metaphor? Describe any new or expanded insights you received by understanding yourself as one of God's "living stones."

HINT: We would love to hear from you after this study. Please send your answers to this last question to NPWL@pfrenewal.org.

Closing Hymn

The Church's One Foundation

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
she is his new creation by water and the Word.
From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride;
with his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.

Elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth;
her charter of salvation, one Lord, one faith, one birth;
one holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food,
and to one hope she presses, with every grace endued.

Though with a scornful wonder we see her sore oppressed,
by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed,
yet saints their watch are keeping; their cry goes up, "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.

Mid toil and tribulation, and tumult of her war,
she waits the consummation of peace forevermore;
till, with the vision glorious, her longing eyes are blest,
and the great church victorious shall be the church at rest.

Yet she on earth hath union with God the Three in One,
and mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won.
O happy ones and holy! Lord, give us grace that we
like them, the meek and lowly, on high may dwell with thee.

Samuel Stone, 1866

HINT: How about this fellow's name!! 😊