

Lesson 2

WHAT KIND OF A FATHER IS GOD?

Introduction

For some of us, the word *father* brings back memories of warm bear hugs, laughter, and security. For others, *father* triggers complex feelings and painful recollections. The following story was written by a woman who courageously overcame childhood experiences that might otherwise have blocked her ability to receive the love of her heavenly Father. Her hope-filled witness reminds us that we all can find our way to Abba, Father, no matter what our experience of *father* has been.

I grew up in a house with a cinder block fence in front. The fence was four feet high. One day when I was still young enough to be looking up at that fence, my father set me on top of it and told me to jump to him. Little as I was, I knew he would not catch me, and I told him so. He assured me again and again that he would catch me—that I could trust him—that he would never let me fall. We must have argued back and forth for at least five minutes. Finally, I gave in to his request. I still wasn't sure he would catch me, but the hope that he might catch me impelled me to take the risk. I launched myself into the air with arms outstretched and hopes high. Dad stepped aside at the last minute and watched as I hit the grass. Then he leaned down over me, put his finger in my dirt-smearred face, and said, "Don't ever trust anybody!"

Many women have had horrible experiences with the men in their lives—men who should have loved them and protected them, but who hurt them, neglected them, or used them instead. I can relate to these women. You might be wondering how I ever learned to trust my heavenly Father. I wonder the same thing. I think that, through many traumas, the Father hid my heart in His hands. I don't know how He did it, but I know that He did it. I did not escape my youth unscathed, but the Father has made provisions for me to heal and find wholeness. I have walked a journey of discovery about the person of God. Like most people, I projected my earthly father onto our Lord. Little by little, I

have come to know God better. Little by little, He has granted me the grace to strip away my misconceptions and replace them with the truth about my heavenly Father's character.

I know that some women cannot imagine a heavenly Father who is safe, loving, and protective of them. Their image of masculinity has been so perverted and disfigured that they are unable to open their hearts to anything masculine. I believe this is one of the reasons that the Father gave us a heavenly mother. Intimacy with the Virgin Mother is a safe and sure way to the heart of God. If past wounds keep you from knowing God's love for you as His beloved daughter, cling to Mary as you study the character of God the Father.

God's desire is for our earthly parents' love to be a taste of the unconditional love He offers us. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reflects on how we are to respond when they have failed to love us well:

The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father. (CCC 239)

As you study this lesson, ask the Holy Spirit to use the knowledge in your head to ignite the truth of God's boundless love for you in your heart.

Day One

GOD IS LOVE

Read 1 John 4:16.

1. This Scripture passage tells us that God is _____.

2. First Corinthians 13 tells us what love is. If God is love, then a description of love is a description of God. List the characteristics of love/God (from verses 4–6). Some of the virtues are stated in the negative. Write each virtue as it is described in the Bible, and if it is stated negatively, rewrite it in the positive. For example, *doesn't lie* would be written as is, and then restated as *honest* or *tells the truth*.

A.

B.

C.

D.

E.

F.

G.

H.

I.

3. List the things love/God does (from verses 7–8). Again, write them as they are described in the verses, and then restate them in the positive, where appropriate.

A.

B.

C.

D.

E.

Go back and circle all the qualities and actions of God that you find difficult or impossible to rely on. Write them in the space below:

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Give Him the chance to reveal Himself to you.

When important people in our lives fail to love us well, we often allow those experiences to cloud our impression of who God is and how He loves us. The truth is, God's love is perfect, never failing, and ever enduring. Take some time to reflect on the qualities and actions of God that you find difficult to rely on. Ask Him for the grace to separate your experiences of faulty human love from your beliefs about God's love. Ask Him to reveal Himself to you, and for grace-healed eyes to see Him as He is.

Day Two

GOD IS FAITHFUL

1. Read Isaiah 49:13–16. What do you learn about God's faithfulness from these verses?
2. Read John 3:16–18. Why did God the Father send Jesus into the world? What was His motive? What does this reveal about God the Father's heart?

3. God cares about you personally, so much so that “even the hairs of your head have all been counted” by Him (cf Luke 12:7). According to CCC 27, “The desire for God is written on the human heart because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself.” Why does God continually draw us to Him? What does God want to give us? See CCC 27 and 30.

These truths are beautifully summarized in this commentary on John 3:16 by Father John Bartunek:

“God loved the world so much that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life.” No hidden agenda, no selfish undertones—pure generosity. This is the heart of God, of the Lord who longs for our friendship. Only when a Christian internalizes this fundamental and overarching motive of God does Christian discipleship really begin to mature. This is Christ’s revolution. That disinterested, self-forgetful love has the power to overcome all evil and renew every human heart and the human race as a whole.¹

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . He is FOR YOU.

We question a person’s faithfulness to us when we sense that his or her motive in the relationship is self-seeking. When we recognize that someone is really out for him- or herself, we know that a time may come when we end up hurt or betrayed. This is why it’s so important for us to recognize that God’s desire for us is utterly pure. He is not self-seeking. He has proven on the cross that His love for us is selfless. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13) Take time to reflect on how Jesus proved His faithfulness to us on the cross. Thank Him for resisting the urge to call down legions of angels to rescue Him. Thank Him for staying there until your freedom was won.

¹ Father John Bartunek, *The Better Part* (Hamden, CT: Circle Press, 2007), 819.

Day Three

GOD'S HEART IS REVEALED BY JESUS

Oftentimes, we think of God as a harsh father—one who judges and condemns—while we see Jesus as the tender one, the merciful one, the approachable one. But the truth is that every gentle quality we see and experience in Jesus is true of God the Father as well. “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.” (Hebrews 1:3)

1. In the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, Saint John Paul II writes, “The light of God’s face shines in all its beauty on the countenance of Jesus Christ, ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15).”² How do the following verses confirm that Jesus is a true representation of who God is? See John 10:30, 10:32, and 12:49–50.
2. What gets in the way of our experiencing an “intimate and vital bond” with God the Father? See CCC 29 and share any insights from your own experience.
3. According to Colossians 1:15–22, who makes forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation with God the Father possible? How was this achieved?

[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in [Jesus] were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created by [Jesus] and for [Jesus.] [Jesus] is before all things, and in him all things hold together. [Jesus] is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he himself might be preeminent. For in [Jesus] all the fullness [of God] was pleased to dwell, and through [Jesus] to reconcile all things for [God], making peace by the blood of his cross (through

² John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 5.

him), whether those on earth or those in heaven. And you who once were alienated and hostile in mind because of evil deeds, [Jesus] has now reconciled in his fleshly body through his death, to present you holy, without blemish, and irreproachable before [God]. (Colossians 1:15–22)

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Your Father wants to embrace you tenderly.

We imagine that God's disapproval of us brings separation, but in reality, whenever there is a chasm between God the Father and us, it is because we have rejected Him. We do not trust Him, and we act apart from His loving guidance. Yet God waits for us, and He thirsts for our friendship. Spend some time contemplating any distance you might be experiencing in your relationship with God. Have you been too distracted by worries and busyness to open your heart to Him? Is there a sin you need to confess? Have you been confused and wrongly assumed that God didn't want to draw close to you? Be assured, He loves you and waits for you. Jesus has made a way for you to go straight to the heart of God. Don't let anything or anyone hold you back from Him.

Day Four

GOD LOVES US AND HATES SIN

Many accounts in the Old Testament teach us that God will not tolerate sin. He lays out serious consequences for those who disobey His commandments. How do we reconcile this image of the “fire and brimstone” God with the loving Father we have been learning about this week?

Imagine you have a little girl who is the love of your life, and one day she disappears. You go to great lengths to find her. You search for days, frantic with despair that you might never see her again. You agonize over the loss of your precious daughter.

When you finally find her, she is dirty and smelly. She is covered with cuts, sores, and bruises. Your little girl is crawling very slowly as she approaches you. She is burning up with fever. What will you do? You will wrap your arms around her, carry her safely home, bathe her carefully and lovingly, treat her wounds, and then take her to the doctor. If medication is prescribed, you will purchase it and give it to her exactly as the doctor instructs, because you want her restored to full and vibrant health. It's not

that you don't love her the way she is—you want her to be healthy and whole *because* you love her.

Now try to imagine that when you find your baby girl hurt, infected, and sick with fever, you see a hungry lion stalking her little body, pacing in the shadows, ready to pounce. This is why she used her last bit of strength to crawl away! If you can get the lion to come after you, perhaps she can escape. What will you do?

What does God do?

This filth and sickness is a picture of the sin that infects us. The lion is Satan, and sin is his invitation to approach us. God loves us in the same way we would love a precious daughter. He loves us just as we are, and *because He loves us*, He demands that we be removed from the things that hurt us and can even kill us. He makes a way for us to be clean, healthy, and safe. We can be restored in this way because Jesus got “the lion”, Satan, to come after *Him* instead of us. Jesus suffered and died in our place, in order to offer us a way to escape.

God does not reject us because of sin. He rejects sin because of us. It is true that God hates sin. He hates disobedience because it threatens us, it hurts us, it covers us in filth, and it invites the enemy to draw near.

Read Luke 15:11–32.

1. The prodigal son must have been covered in filth when he returned home. At what point did his father run to him?
2. Was the son completely sorry for what he had done to his father?
3. Jesus is telling us that this is what our Father in Heaven is like when we repent. Is this what you expect from your heavenly Father? If not, what do you expect?

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Don't let sin get in the way of living in freedom.

God loves you but hates sin. Why? He hates what sin does to you. Jeremiah 5:25 says, "Your sins have turned back these blessings from you," and there's nothing God wants more than to pour out His blessings on you. God knows that sin separates you from Him, lessens your love for Him, and ultimately enslaves you. "Do you not know that if you present yourself to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience which leads to righteousness?" (Romans 6:16)

God wants His daughters to be free! That means He wants you to run to Him when sin has entangled you. He wants you to ask Him to wash you clean, to heal your wounds, to give you a fresh start. Your experience of freedom is directly proportionate to the degree to which you take confession seriously. What is holding you back? Turn to Him. He will meet you with outstretched arms of mercy.

Day Five

SAINT'S STORY

Saint Scholastica Outdoes Her Brother

If your scale is broken and you don't know it, you'll think you weigh more (or less) than you really do. And then you will adjust your eating and exercise habits inaccurately based on your belief, causing all kinds of unnecessary turbulence in your life. If only the scale had been accurate, or you had known that it was broken!

The *Catechism* (239) tells us that the scale by which we measure God's fatherhood is broken. We tend to judge God the Father based on our fallible human fathers and what they have shown us about fatherhood. In fact, it should be the other way around:

The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends . . . human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father.

A rightly famous (and true) story about Saint Scholastica illustrates the surprisingly pure goodness and power of God the Father.

Scholastica was Saint Benedict's younger sister. They both grew up in an aristocratic family in central Italy in the late 400s and early 500s. Benedict was given a remarkable vocation: He was the father of Western monasticism. He wrote the rules for monastic life (*Rule of St. Benedict*), which became the basis for monasteries and monastic orders that flourished in the Dark Ages and continue through today. He also founded one of the most famous monasteries in the world, right on the outskirts of Rome: Monte Cassino. (Allied bombers devastated it during World War II, and American benefactors paid for its reconstruction.)

While Benedict was breaking ground on Monte Cassino, Scholastica formed a community of nuns not too far away, using the same rules of life her brother had formulated to create one of the earliest convents in Europe. During the years when their communities were near one another, Benedict visited his sister once a year. At the end of his last visit to her (she died just a little while afterward), she begged him to stay with her that night and continue their lively and deep conversation. He refused, since staying out past sunset would have been a breach of his rules. She insisted (maybe she had a presentiment that she would soon die), but he stubbornly refused. Her eyes flashed, and then she buried her face in her hands as tears welled up in her eyes. Right then, a violent storm broke out. It was so violent that Benedict and his companions couldn't even step out the door; they were forced to continue their visit.

Then occurred a famous little dialogue preserved for history by Pope Gregory the Great, Benedict's biographer. Benedict scolded her, "May God almighty forgive you, sister; what is this that you have done?" Then she raised her head and looked up at him with a mischievous twinkle in her tear-brightened eyes. "I prayed you to stay," she responded, "and you would not hear me; I prayed to almighty God, and He heard me!" Saint Gregory goes on to explain, "No wonder if at that time she were more powerful than he. . . . For according to St. John, 'God is love,' so with good reason she was more powerful who loved more."

When we say that God is Father, too often we think first of the long white beard and the stern, sometimes cold and distant stickler for perfection or enforcer of rules—kind of like Saint Benedict on the night of his last visit to his sister. But the essence of God's fatherhood is found elsewhere. His unlimited power is never, ever divorced from His unlimited goodness and His overflowing, individual love for every single one of His precious daughters.

Do you believe, as Saint Scholastica believed, that God your Father hears your prayers regarding the desires of your heart, and He delights in giving you what is best?

Conclusion

“For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Romans 8:15)

“As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.” (Galatians 4:6–7)

I think we sometimes look at Christianity as the way to make sure that we are forgiven. We’re covering our bases so that we are “safe” (as in the baseball kind of “safe”). But when we stop there and go no further, we totally miss out on what God (and Christianity) really offers. What God is truly after is so much more than just forgiving us. He *wants* us. He longs for us to come home to Him, our heavenly Father. Christianity is all about relationship.

When we read the story of the prodigal son, we can mistakenly think it’s all about the son finally coming to his senses and asking for forgiveness. But the real focus of the story is the father’s heart. It’s the picture of the father running to his son the minute he sees him on the horizon. It’s about the compassion and joy and mercy that the father is completely thrilled to pour all over his child. And that is exactly how God the Father feels about you.

You are the daughter of a strong, faithful, totally engaged Father, a Father who loves you too much to ignore self-destructive sin in your life, a Father who made sure you had a safe way to get home to Him even before you were born, through Christ’s death and resurrection.

Your Father is going to go the distance with you. He knows that you need Him for the long haul. You need to be able to count on Him to stay when everyone else leaves. You’ll never stop needing His direction and guidance and parenting. And that’s okay, because His love for you is never ending. His arms are always open. You are His beloved. You are safe with Him.

My Resolution

In what specific way will I apply what I learned in this lesson?

Examples:

1. List the characteristics of God the Father you have trouble relying on. Read this list every day and keep your eyes open to see God loving you in these ways.
2. Make a conscious effort to reject any lies or half-truths that might keep you from trusting God with childlike sincerity. Take a risk and count on the truth about who God is—always faithful and true!

My Resolution:

Catechism Clips

CCC 27 The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for: The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being. For if man exists it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence. He cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and entrusts himself to his creator.

CCC 29 But this “intimate and vital bond of man to God” can be forgotten, overlooked, or even explicitly rejected by man. Such attitudes can have different causes: revolt against evil in the world; religious ignorance or indifference; the cares and riches of this world; the scandal of bad example on the part of believers; currents of thought hostile to religion; finally, that attitude of sinful man which makes him hide from God out of fear and flee his call.

CCC 30 “Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.” [Psalm 105:3] Although man can forget God or reject him, He never ceases to call every man to seek him, so as to find life and happiness. But this search for God demands of man every effort of intellect, a sound will, “an upright heart,” as well as the witness of others who teach him to seek God.

CCC 239 By calling God “Father,” the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children. God’s parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, which emphasizes God’s immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father.

SAMPLE

Verse Study

See Appendix 2 for instructions on how to complete a verse study.

Psalm 68:6 (NAB)

1. Verse:

2. Paraphrase:

3. Questions:

4. Cross-references:

5. Personal Applications:

Write the verse on an index card and carry it with you this week.

Lesson 3

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF MY LIFE?

Introduction

I've always tended toward saying yes to too many things and overcommitting myself. There are times this has made me feel a little overwhelmed. There have also been times when staying busy has kept me from asking the deeper questions and noticing my inner emptiness. A swirl of activity can delude you into thinking that you're really living, when you're actually just running in the gerbil wheel.

I barreled through high school and college, keeping up my pattern of lots of activities and pursuits. Then I got married, moved to Germany, and everything s-l-o-w-e-d down. My husband traveled Monday through Friday, I didn't have a work permit, didn't have classes to attend, and, horror of horrors, didn't have the Internet or cable. And it got very, very quiet. And the questions started coming. "Why am I here?" "What's the point of my life?" "Is this all there is?"

We can ask these questions when we're wiping noses and making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. We can ask them from the corner office in a prestigious law firm. We can ask them when we lie in bed with disease or retreat to our rooms with depression.

Feeling lost and purposeless, feeling bland and too busy for passion, feeling stuck in a rut . . . Is this the life God created us for?

No. An emphatic no. *We were created for more.*

Can you sense a restlessness in your soul? A desire for more? A hunger for purpose? Do you feel that somewhere along the way, you lost yourself?

God is pursuing you, and He wants to reveal your part in His story. I say *His* story, because ultimately it is all about Him. When we make it about us, we miss the point.

We end up motivated by ego, or people's opinions, and in the end, we're dissatisfied. But if we'll make *His* story, *His* plan, *His* glory the focus, there's no limit to the good He can do through us. And that means a life of fulfillment and deep satisfaction for us. When our ultimate goal is for Jesus to shine brightly into our world, we are free to dream. We can be bold in our hopes. We can put out into the deep, take risks, and really start living.

Day One

THE PURPOSE WE ALL SHARE

1. Read Philippians 3:7–11. Saint Paul wrote this after describing all the worldly accolades that belonged to him. He considered them all worthless (“I have come to consider everything a loss”), because of what higher good?

2. Read 2 Corinthians 5:18–19.
 - A. What ministry has God given us and what message has He entrusted to us?

 - B. Reconciliation is the act of reestablishing a close relationship between parties. This is exactly what Jesus did for us—He opened the way for us to have a close relationship with our heavenly Father. He now asks us to help reconcile others with Him and with each other. This is one of our core purposes in life. Are there any relationships in your life in which God is asking you to be a peacemaker?

3. Read 2 Corinthians 5:20. How are we described in this verse? In order to be true to this description, how should we interact with others?

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . The more you know Him, the more you'll love Him.

Nothing was more important to Saint Paul than knowing Christ. His determined purpose was to continually become more deeply acquainted with Jesus. Every day, he wanted to better know Christ's power and personhood. As he grew in understanding of Jesus, he made it his goal to reflect Jesus to the world. This is God's main purpose for you as well.

To pursue this purpose requires a choice. Worldly accolades satisfy us on some level, but we can't pursue them and also wholeheartedly pursue knowing and reflecting Jesus to the world. We can't do a thousand things well. We have to focus. We have to choose what matters most. These are strong words, but they are true: If we fail to make knowing Christ and becoming more like Him our highest priority, we will have settled for a lesser, shallow existence.

Take some time to prayerfully identify the things that tempt you to take your eyes off your primary purpose (knowing and becoming more like Christ). Is it your reputation? Your desire for comfort? Other goals? Ask God for the grace to put knowing Him and becoming more like Him ahead of all other pursuits.

Day Two

YOUR UNIQUE PURPOSE

Have you ever questioned whether God has a specific plan for your life or if He is too busy with weightier matters to have time for that level of detail concerning you? Be assured—God knows how He wants your life to turn out. His love for you is personal. Your heavenly Father doesn't just look on mankind in general; *He sees you*. He wants you to determinedly pursue the purpose of knowing and becoming more like Jesus, and He wants you to discover the unique contribution He is calling you to make in the world. When He gave out callings and life purposes, *He did not skip you*.

1. What insight do you gain from Psalm 139:13–16 regarding the care God took when He created you?

God's specific plan for your life was put together before you were born, and His plan is *good*. "For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare, not for woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope!" (Jeremiah 29:11)

2. One of the ways that God reveals your specific calling is by giving you spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts (also called *charisms*) are given to children of God to help them achieve the purpose they were created for.³ Read 1 Corinthians 12:1–11 and answer the following questions about spiritual gifts.

Does God want you to be ignorant of your spiritual gifts? See 1 Corinthians 12:1.

Is the same spiritual gift given to everyone? See 1 Corinthians 12:4–6.

Who receives the manifestation of the Spirit? See 1 Corinthians 12:7.

Who is the source of all spiritual gifts? Do you get to choose your spiritual gifts? See 1 Corinthians 12:11.

³ For more information about spiritual gifts (charisms), see siena.org (the Catherine of Siena Institute).

3. What are some of the spiritual gifts listed in Scripture? See Romans 12:6–8, 1 Corinthians 12:8–10, and Ephesians 4:11.

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence God delights in the way He made you.

“For we are His handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them.” (Ephesians 2:10)

What a difference it would make if we got that verse into our heads and hearts and really believed it. We could be world changers in our own little corners if we lived as if Ephesians 2:10 were true, instead of spending all the live-long day dwelling on who we are not and what we don’t have. It’s time to step out and live in the truth that we are God’s masterpieces—His handiwork—and He has created us to make a difference. He’s placed unique gifts into each one of us, and He wants us to use those gifts to help those around us.

What is holding you back? Are you waiting for the approval of those around you before you live the life God is holding out to you? You don’t need it. God offers you courage and strength. He has got your back. Step out. You don’t have to be anyone other than the woman God created you to be.

Day Three

HOW TO DISCOVER YOUR CALLING

Before we delve into how to discover your unique calling, it’s worth noting that many of us feel so consumed by day-to-day life that we can’t imagine adding some enormous *life mission* on top of everything else. It’s important to remember that God doesn’t want us to live stressed out, overwhelmed, and overcommitted. But He doesn’t want us living bored, numb, and empty, either. Somehow we’ve got to wrestle through the tension that exists when we add to our plates in order to add to the meaning of our lives. It can get a little messy. The alternative—playing it safe and not venturing out into the deep—is the easier option. Living a life that says *yes* to God and His purposes requires bravery. But one day, we’ll be standing before God, and we’ll have to explain to Him what we’ve done with the time, spiritual gifts, and other resources He entrusted to us. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to tell Him, “I stayed as comfortable as I could. I avoided stress as much as possible. I kept things under control.” I want to tell Him that I went *all out*. I want to tell Him I gave it all I

had, that sometimes it made me really tired, but that He was worth every bit of it. How about you? Are you ready to start living the life you were created for?

1. What types of service energize you? Can you think of instances when you've shared your time and talent and received positive feedback about the results?
2. We hear a lot of voices and opinions every day. Because most of us hate to disappoint the people we love, we can spend our whole lives pursuing someone else's dream for us. But living the life that someone else wants you to live (as opposed to the life God is calling you to) will never lead you to your true purpose and calling. Which voices or opinions are pulling you in a certain life direction? List those expectations, and prayerfully consider whether you are pursuing someone else's dream instead of asking God to reveal His plan for you.

“Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.” (Galatians 1:10)

3. Taking a prayerful look at our “pain files” can be one way we discover our unique callings. If you have struggled through a particular circumstance and have seen the difference God has made during that time, He wants to use that for His purposes. What does God want us to do with the compassion and encouragement He has given us in our times of difficulty? See 2 Corinthians 1:3–4.
4. What suffering in the world (and it doesn't have to be far away—it might be in your neighborhood) really wrecks you? What gets you upset enough that you inwardly say, “Something has got to be done about this”?

“You were made for the place where your real passion meets compassion, because there lies your real purpose.” —Ann Voskamp

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Courageously dream with Him of making a difference in the world, together.

There isn't a simple formula to discover your unique calling. It's birthed out of time spent in prayerful reflection on your life. Bring before God your holy discontent, your passions, your experiences, your successes, your seasons of pain. Ask God to take what may seem like random events and to thread them together. Ask Him to reveal to you where your real passion meets compassion.

Day Four

YOU GET TO DECIDE

God created you with a purpose. He identified specific “works” (things that need to be done to help our hurting world) and He put your name on them. He sees all the things in the world that aren't right, and He wants you to do something about it. He gave you spiritual gifts so you could step out and make a difference. But He won't make you accept the call. He gives you free will. You get to decide what you're going to do with what He's given and revealed.

1. When we discover our spiritual gifts (charisms), it can be tempting to use them to benefit ourselves. But who should ultimately benefit from spiritual gifts? See CCC 799 and 800.

“It is a wake-up call, a reminder that we are here for just a moment. How we spend that moment has eternal significance. Wanting more out of life is not about a desire to bring more attention to you. It's about wanting to find a way to do more with your life in a form of worship that ultimately brings more glory to God.” —Jennie Allen

2. If we're going to fulfill our callings while reflecting Jesus to the world, what will our attitude need to be? See Matthew 20:26–28.

3. I'm guessing that you wrote down the right answers to those first two questions. Since they are right in the back of this book, I'll just lay it out here: We are supposed to use our gifts to benefit others and bring glory to God, and we have to have a servant's attitude in order to do it well. So how come so few of us do it? Read John 12:24–25 for insight into this struggle and record your thoughts below.

Saying yes to God—serving for His sake instead of for our own gain—requires a little death. Do you like feeling in control? You have to let that expectation die, because going where God calls you means life gets messy. Do you like it when everyone approves of you? You have to let that die, because I promise you that doing what God asks of you will mean someone in your life will disapprove of your choice. But my sweet friend, if you will let those things die (and allow all sorts of other little deaths that will come along), you will start to truly *live*.

Don't waste time saying, "I'm just not sure exactly what God is calling me to do. So I'll just sit here and wait until it all becomes clear." Just step out and serve. Meet the need that's right in front of you, without overanalyzing things. The more you serve, the more you'll begin to discover your "sweet spot"—that place where your passion and compassion meet. So what if some of the ways you've served turned out to be a little disastrous? God sees the intention in your heart. He sees the love that motivated you. Regardless of how it all turns out, you've chosen to step out in love. And that is a life well lived.

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Let Him renew your perspective.

Dear Lord,

If I start to feel that what I offer this world is insignificant and pales in comparison to the great things that other people do, help me to remember that I am significant in your eyes. You see the smallest act of love and it matters. Help me to remember that I'm not valued because of my gifts and talents. That is simply what you pour into me so that I can get out in the world and love people the way you love them. I'm valued because you made me; I'm your beloved daughter, and you don't create mistakes.

On the other hand, if I start to get a little impressed with all that I'm doing and the difference I'm making and the way that people around me are thinking I'm pretty fabulous, help me to remember that any good in me comes from you. Help me to never step out in the name of Christian service in my own strength. May everything I do be done through the inner work of your Holy Spirit with the purpose of bringing attention to You, not me.

Day Five

SAINT'S STORY

Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne Gets Her Wish

God's love is not generic. The Church teaches us that every single human being is created directly by God. Even embryos whose material cells are manufactured in petri dishes receive their eternal souls directly from God's hands; no laboratory can concoct a human soul. As a result, every human being has a unique relationship with God. We each know and love Him as *only we can*. In heaven, each of God's children will reflect His infinite magnificence in an entirely unique way. Here on earth, God addresses us by name, and His Providence guides us to be the singular individuals we truly are.

This is why everyone's calling in life is specific; God doesn't send form letters. He converses with each of us personally and guides us *individually*, even as He works in our lives through the great family of the Church. This truth shines brilliantly in the lives of the saints. Each saint's life reflects the specificity of God's action in a remarkably eloquent way.

One such saint was Rose Philippine Duchesne (1769–1852), who came from a well-to-do French family and had everything going for her. As a girl, she channeled her lively temperament and outgoing personality into all kinds of good deeds: visiting the sick and poor, giving alms, playing school. When the French Revolution broke out,

she ministered to prisoners waiting their turn at the guillotine; she gathered up orphans, taking care of them and teaching them the *Catechism*.

When she was only eight years old, she heard a homily by a priest who had recently been working in the French missions in America. From that moment on, her deepest desire was to become a missionary herself, and to minister to the Native Americans. More than sixty years would pass before that calling would be fulfilled. At twelve, she told her father that she wanted to join a convent and dedicate her entire life to serving the Sacred Heart. Her father would hear none of it. But she persisted, and in the end she won. Her first obstacle was overcome. The rest of her life would be a series of increasingly larger obstacles, all of them overcome by her gargantuan faith and, most especially, her sheer determination—determination flowing from the Word God had spoken in her heart when she was just a child.

Rose tried to reconvene her convent after the French Revolution (the revolutionaries had dissolved all religious houses), but failed. So she invited another religious order to come take it over. After maturing in her own religious training, she and a couple of other nuns set out for America, where she still longed to be a missionary among the Native Americans. She was forty-nine years old. She fell ill on the trip across the Atlantic and almost died before reaching Louisiana. She fell ill again on the trip up the Mississippi, knocking on death's door for the second time.

When Rose finally reached her mission station, in Saint Charles, Missouri, circumstances continued to stymie her. She had to begin her work with apostolates to the white settlers—schools (including the first free school west of the Mississippi) and orphanages, along with the convents needed to train sisters to run them. She did her best to reach out to the Native Americans in her free time, but she only began working with them full-time when she turned seventy-one and was relieved of some of her administrative duties.

Throughout her years in America she suffered every kind of hardship and difficulty—famine, floods, poverty, sickness, the crudities of paganism (the Native Americans used to bring her fresh scalps as a sign of their reverence)—but her prayer and willpower endured them all, and her missionary activity sowed the seeds of the Catholic Church in the Midwest. Today Rose's name is the first inscribed on the Pioneer Roll of Fame in the Jefferson Memorial Building, in Saint Louis, Missouri.

God had given her a specific call—a personal word to her heart. Her hearing and heeding it, despite mountainous obstacles, changed the world forever.

Do you sense God calling you to action in response to a specific need in the world? Have obstacles caused you to question whether following that call is possible? How does the story of Saint Rose Philippine inspire you to persevere?

Conclusion

“Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” (1 Corinthians 13:12)

Your life is not a series of random events. In every circumstance in your life, you are given the opportunity to get to know God a little better, in a unique new way. When you take the time to look for His hand, His mercy, His love, and His healing in every situation, you’ll start to gather a greater understanding of God’s character and heart. This is your lifelong pursuit—knowing God. One day we’ll stand before God, and all those fragments of understanding will come together, and we will “see Him as He is.” (1 John 3:2) And it will be incredible!

But that’s not all. Although God wants us to live with our eyes on eternity—with our focus on the day we’ll meet Him face-to-face—He wants us to use our time here on earth purposefully. He created you for a reason, and He doesn’t want you to miss it. One of the reasons this is so important to Him is because He has work that needs to be done in the world—suffering that needs to be relieved, comfort that needs to be given, teaching that needs to be heard, beauty that needs to be created—and He wants to do these things through His people. He wants to use you to fulfill His plan. Another reason this is so important to Him is that He adores you, and wants you to experience the fulfillment and joy that comes from being a part of His story and running the race He created you for. This is *your* race—not your sister’s, or your mother’s, or your friend’s. *Yours*.

Figuring out which race is meant for you is a messy process. It’s a matter of always growing in knowledge of who God is, and at the same time, growing in knowledge of who you are. This is different from self-absorbed navel gazing. It’s getting to know how you are wired for the purpose of bringing attention to God.

So reflect on the things in life that have been painful. Did God get you through? Did He teach you lessons during that time that you can share with others? Mine that experience. It could be that in the midst of that pain, the seeds of your purpose were planted.

Then take some time to think about the moments in your life when you have never felt so satisfied. Can you remember an experience when you were lost in the joy of the moment, caught up in something greater than you? Make note of that. It may be that your passion was ignited then, and God was calling out to you to keep being His hands and feet in that area of life.

Think about the people who are suffering who just make you ache. Not everyone cares about them the way you do. Could it be that God placed that love and concern in your heart because He aches for them and wants to work through you to help them?

Please don't give up on this journey and just settle for comfortable. And please don't sit on your gifts and your calling because you are afraid that if you step out, you'll be criticized or you'll be too much or not enough. Rise up, and take your place within God's story. Run your race—the race you were created for. Don't miss it. Every moment of your life has meaning. *You* matter. What you offer the world matters. Run your race with your eyes fixed on the finish line, when you'll crash into God's arms, fully known and fully loved.

"The one who called you is faithful and HE WILL DO IT." (1 Thessalonians 5:24)

My Resolution

In what specific way will I apply what I have learned in this lesson?

Examples:

1. I'm going to take some time to prayerfully reflect on my life, listing my passions, pains, and gifts. I'm going to pray about what I think needs to change in the world. I'll ask God to help me to discover the works, the purpose He created me for.
2. I'm going to begin the discernment process to discover my spiritual gifts, or charisms.

3. When I'm tempted to take the easy way out and pursue comfort instead of purpose, I'll ask God for the grace to accept a "little death" in order to experience true growth and fruit.

My Resolution:

Catechism Clips

CCC 799 Whether extraordinary or simple and humble, charisms are graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church, ordered as they are to her building up, to the good of men, and to the needs of the world.

CCC 800 Charisms are to be accepted with gratitude by the person who receives them and by all members of the Church as well. They are a wonderfully rich grace for the apostolic vitality and for the holiness of the entire Body of Christ, provided they really are genuine gifts of the Holy Spirit and are used in full conformity with authentic promptings of this same Spirit, that is, in keeping with charity, the true measure of all charisms.

Verse Study

See Appendix 2 for instructions on how to complete a verse study.

Jeremiah 9:23 (NAB)

1. Verse:

2. Paraphrase:

3. Questions:

4. Cross-references:

5. Personal Applications:

Write the verse on an index card and carry it with you this week.