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There's a treadmill in the basement now used for hanging clothes while they dry. There's a membership at the gym known to be active only because the credit card is charged every month. There's a Bible on the bedside table; it's underneath the remote control. There are three books on the shelf in the living room; they're unread, but they look smart. There's a six-month supply of multivitamins in the pantry bought to initiate a multilevel business that came and went. There's a leather journal in the desk with one used page dated three years ago—the day a decision was made to keep a journal.

We know the drill. Something gets our attention. Maybe it's something we hear or read or watch. Maybe it's a friend. Maybe it's a good day. Maybe it's a bad day. Maybe it's something we've thought of for years and finally get around to taking a step toward. It can be any number of things, but whatever it is, something gets our attention, and we want one thing: We want to change. We're inspired. We're fired up.

We're on a kick.

The kick lasts about a week. By week two the kick tapers. By week three the kick is over. At the end of week four we're reminded of the kick when we open the credit card bill and see the purchases that funded it.

It came. It went. Nothing really changed. It was just a kick.

So let's be honest.

You hold in your hands something that may one day represent another kick in a line of kicks. One day you may pull it from your shelf and remember your God-kick. You'll think back to when you attended that church, met a few people, and got involved for a season. It felt good. It felt like the kind of thing you should be doing. It worked for a bit. Eventually, though, that "new car smell" wore off on the whole thing, and it was back to normal.

It came. It went. Nothing really changed. It was just a kick.

KICK OBSERVATION

Let's make an observation about kicks. Some won't like the observation. They won't like it because they think most everything's worthwhile. Yes, life is richer when we follow through on our kicks, but this misses reality. Reality is this: Some kicks don't matter much.

We may in fact have richer lives if we'd not dropped out of the racquetball league, forgotten about the interest in medieval literature, or neglected to actually read the book on solving the Rubik's cube blindfolded. These kicks may have been fun and interesting and good. Even more, some of them would

have held greater value than others. But make a list of our kicks, and a great many of them came and went for one important reason: We didn't care that much about them. Actually, this could be said better: We didn't care enough about them to push through the pain of truly accomplishing what we'd briefly hoped to accomplish. This, of course, isn't true of all kicks, but it is true of a great many.

Which leads to an essential question only you can answer. It's a question you're encouraged to sit with for a while. Quick answers are often cheap answers, and cheap answers nearly ensure this will be another kick. Let the question soak and simmer. Be honest with yourself. Be honest with those around you.

Ask yourself this: *Do I really want to do this?*

To answer this question honestly you must know what "this" is. The pages that follow are for that very purpose. Think of this as kick-protection.

THE VISION

Kick-protection is most effective when we know and embrace the vision. We push through the pain of taking the Spanish class because we want to realize the vision of speaking Spanish. We push through the pain of consistently going to the gym because we want to realize the vision of a healthy body. We push through the pain of getting the degree because we want to realize the vision of a new vocation. Knowing and embracing the vision is essential to kick-protection. It is for this very reason that so many people rightfully reject religion. Religion is rejected because they either do not see a meaningful vision or the vision they do see is repulsive to them. Let's consider each of these.

Consider the lack of a *meaningful* vision. It's not that the church on the corner is doing anything inherently wrong; it's that we wonder if it's doing anything at all. Once a week, the parking lot fills with cars. The cars come, the cars go, but nothing really changes. The world is still spinning out of control. All over the globe people are experiencing real suffering. There's war, starvation, disease. There are political problems, corporate problems, community problems, family problems. Individuals struggle with depression, anxiety, loneliness, fear. There's suffering among the children; there's suffering among the middle-aged; there's suffering among the elderly. It's pervasive. It's very real, and it's very painful, and that church on the corner seems so terribly irrelevant to it all. It sucks up time. It sucks up resources. Maybe people feel better about themselves for an hour each week, but is it really doing anything meaningful in light of the world's realities? If the vision, the end result, is depth of involvement in a pathetic expression of religiosity that does nothing for the real issues of our world, then there are better ways to invest our time and resources. There's nothing in that sort of vision to make this any more than a kick, if it is a kick at all.

That's the *meaningless* vision. Let's consider the *repulsive* vision.

Maybe we were channel surfing and landed momentarily on a religious program more interested in our wallets than our well-being. Maybe it was that co-worker so quick to quote his favorite verses but so slow to help in a time of need. Maybe it was that prospective spouse who attended church on Sundays but whose destructive habits ruined any hope of a lasting relationship. We've seen hypocrisy; it's troubling, and we want nothing of it. Such falsehoods bring questions. Does following God mean I'll be one of those Bible-thumpers always asking for money? Does professing Christ mean I'll be loudmouthed with advice and slow to act with compassion? If I follow Christ, am I going to be judgmental and intolerant? The questions are legitimate. If following Christ means we will become something we find revolting, if that's the vision, the end result, then why would we do it?

We wouldn't.

We'd run.

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We'd do anything and everything, but we most certainly wouldn't do that.

And yet despite each of these known visions, the *meaningless* and the *repulsive*, you're reading this page. Why? What's the vision? What has your attention? Is it inspiring enough to keep you in the game? Will it motivate you to push through the pain associated with most any meaningful endeavor? Many visions could be suggested. Let's consider two. Let's go inside. Let's go outside.

LET'S GO INSIDE

There's something deep within us we cannot deny. Explain it? That's nearly impossible, but we know what we mean. Deep within us there is a hunger, a thirst, a craving for something great, something grand. We survey the world around us, and we genuinely wonder if anything will truly satisfy this inner-thirst. It's not that there aren't good things around us. There are many good things we do, things we enjoy. Even more, there are things we've yet to do and hope to do with our lives. These are both real and good, but then we pause.

We pause and we wonder about that deep inner-longing, that thirst, that hunger. We know instinctively that it will take more than another buzz, another thrill, another adventure, or another win to truly satisfy that deep inner-craving. There are so many good things, but where's the great thing? Where's the reality that goes beyond the fleeting nature of life, the here today and gone tomorrow? Where's something I can count on, trust in, rest upon? When am I going to experience a peace independent from the ebb and flow of daily living? When am I going to sleep deeply not because things went well that day, but because there's a deep inner-contentment that transcends my circumstantial ups and downs?

What's the vision? It's a vision of peace, a vision of contentment, a vision of rest for our souls. It's a vision of ourselves in touch with the greatest and grandest of all realities, the reality of our Creator. It's a vision of drinking deeply from a well that touches more than physical thirst; it satisfies the thirst of our souls. We see ourselves in the future, and we are whole. We're not so naive as to believe this vision will be fully realized in an instant, or even in a lifetime, but we do believe it can be *ever-increasingly* realized every day, as we *ever-increasingly* experience the Almighty. We long for ever-increasing joy, ever-increasing peace, ever-increasing satisfaction, and ever-increasing contentment. Something in us instinctively knows that real life is not a life of striving. Striving and straining rob us of life, which drives our inner-conviction that we must draw near to the Creator of life.

That's the inside vision. Let's go outside.

LET'S GO OUTSIDE

The world is full of controversy, but there's at least one point of agreement. No matter the generation, no matter the political party, no matter the ethnicity or religious persuasion, there is agreement on one critical observation. Some will find the observation pessimistic, but realism, not pessimism, is the intention. A brief survey of the daily news or a casual consideration of the people around us makes this observation abundantly clear. The observation is simply this: Something is off in this world.

A peace agreement settles one war while another war is just beginning. A vaccination eradicates one disease while another disease begins to spread. Wedding bells announce the beginning of a new family while the fall of a gavel announces the end of another. It's not that life is absent of pleasure or that there are not seasons of great goodness, but all is not well in the world. All is not well when children die of preventable diseases. All is not well when unfounded hatred drives one ethnicity to rid its region of another. All is not well when pain and suffering so often drown out laughter and joy.

Awareness of this reality brings us to an essential question. It's a question often used to accuse our Creator, but one we must not just throw out as an accusation but ask genuinely. We ask with conviction and with passion, "What are you doing about this, God? What is your solution? The world is spinning out of control; what are you doing?" When asked with genuine interest and humility, when we truly seek an authentic answer, maybe there will in fact be a response that is not just satisfactory, but maybe there will be a response that is profound.

What's the outside vision? It's a vision where we do something. It's a vision where our lives make a meaningful difference in the lives of others. It's a vision where we don't just complain about the world's pain and suffering, but where we roll up our sleeves and make a meaningful contribution to the world around us. Now that might not sound unique. That might sound like one of countless solutions competing for airtime today. In a sense, that's true. There are many good and helpful solutions at work in this world today. The vision we will encounter is not intended to minimize the good work done by the many leaders and organizations seeking to bring health and healing to the world's problems. But with that said, there is an undeniable uniqueness to our question. We are not just asking for a good and decent solution, but we are going to the Author of life to learn about life. We seek to discover what the Creator of the world is doing about the suffering in the world, and we are open to the possibility of a grander vision conceptualized before the world began. It's a vision where we help people with their surface problems; it's a vision where we get to the root of the problems. We give the thirsty a cup of cold water, both literally and spiritually, and we also build a well, both literally and spiritually. Maybe there's a plan unfolding. Maybe the origin of this plan precedes the beginning of time. Maybe we could participate in this plan.

All this, the inside vision and the outside vision, leads us to the way of Christ.

THE WAY OF CHRIST

Christ had a way of cutting through religious clutter. On one such occasion he was asked to highlight Scripture's greatest commandment. His response was both simple and profound.

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40).

It all hangs on two hooks: Love God and Love People. Christ's response was so simple and so profound his critics had nothing to say. Not only does Scripture tell us that the one who questioned Christ agreed with Christ's response, but we are also told that "from then on no one dared ask him any more questions" (Mark 12:34). The response brought silence to the debate...sort of.

The critics agreed in theory. They did not agree in practice. One such example speaks boldly.

Christ is standing beside a well. A woman walks up. He's without a bucket, and he asks her for a drink. She's taken aback. Jewish men do not speak to Samaritan women. The conversation then moves from physical water to spiritual water. In that movement, a vision is cast, a vision for the way of Christ.

Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life (John 4:13-14).

He does not tell her how. He does not tell her what she must do. Very simply, he offers a vision. He lets her know that her inner-thirst, the thirst that has driven her life to relational chaos, can be satisfied. She can love God. Even more, he lets her know that not only can she have her own thirst satisfied, but she can become a spring of living water refreshing the parched lives around her. She can love people.

What would the critics say now? A woman with tainted Samaritan blood and the impurity of five failed marriages can drink deeply from God's spring and become a spring bursting with eternal refreshment reviving the thirsty world around her?

Such is the way of Christ.

The way of Christ is not an irrelevant solution making us feel better for an hour on Sunday but doing nothing for the reality of our complicated lives. The way of Christ is also not a plastic religiosity producing revolting expressions of greed, selfish ambition, and judgment. The way of Christ is radical. The way of Christ is transformative. The way of Christ promotes soul satisfaction and life transformation. Realizing the vision of the authentic way of Christ may in fact be worth the pain of bringing that vision into reality.

But make no mistake, there is pain.

If we are to follow the authentic way of Christ, if we are to genuinely love God and love people, if following Christ is to become our reality and not just another kick, then one thing must be true of our experience. An early traveler on the way of Christ put it like this:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:2).

We are not called to a life of conformity. We are called to a life of transformation. This transformation comes about by the renewing of our minds and trains us to discern the will of God, the way of Christ. The Greek word underneath this call to transformation is *metamorphosis*. If we are to follow the authentic way of Christ, we must love God, and we must love people. If we are to genuinely love God and love people, then we must change from the inside out. In a word, we must **morph**.

MORPH

What is *Morph*? To morph is to become like Christ, to become a person liberated by love for God and inspired by love for people. We call this morphing because it is a process, but it is a process where transformation genuinely happens. We change. Yes, morphing happens over time, but it does in fact happen. We do overcome. We do experience healing. We do become more like Christ. We do this not by skimming the surface but by going, with Christ, to the depth of our inner-person and then working our way out to daily living. We go deep into ourselves; we go deep into Scripture.

Which is exactly what *this Morph* experience is designed to facilitate.

As expressed here, *Morph* is a four-module relational experience designed to inspire a lifetime of transformation. It is an experience reflective of the way of Christ.

- Module One: Love God
- Module Two: Build Character (an application of Love God)
- Module Three: Love People
- Module Four: Be Christ's Body (an application of Love People)

Each module is eight weeks, and each week involves some mixture of five possible categories. All five categories will not be represented each week, but familiarity with the five gives an important overall perspective of how this experience works. The five categories are...

- Readings
- Morph Me
- Conversations with God

To make the most of this experience, let's briefly consider the categories.

FIRST CATEGORY: READINGS

Each week will begin with a reading intended to stir both the heart and mind. These readings are designed to take about fifteen minutes, but you're encouraged to read slowly. Read with a pen in hand. If a particular passage of Scripture is referenced, and it gets your attention, open the pages of Scripture and read the passage in its fuller context. Linger. Those who let the fifteen minutes linger to thirty minutes or more will, no doubt, gain greater insight and awareness for themselves and the others in their group.

SECOND CATEGORY: MORPH ME

The second category is titled Morph Me. The Morph Me category is emphasized in the *Love God and Build Character* modules. These exercises will vary, but they are designed to personalize that week's experience. It's too easy to read something or study something and nod with agreement. Morph Me takes you through exercises to both reveal and train what's genuinely happening in your life. These will be both probing and practical. Some weeks, there will be exercises geared to peel back the layers of life to find out what's really going on. Other weeks will address practices to be incorporated into daily living to bring about lasting change.

THIRD CATEGORY: CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD

One of the more profound aspects of walking with Christ is the ongoing presence of God in our lives. Throughout this *Morph* experience, you are given guidance to inspire and strengthen daily conversations with God. This guidance will not be the rote sayings of heartless prayers. Rather, these Conversations with God will involve both talking and listening. We will listen to God through Scripture, and we will listen to God by training our ears for the presence of his Spirit. Week two of this module will give greater explanation, but for now, know that *Morph* is designed to deepen your own personal interactions with God. This will take time and energy, as most conversations do, but imagine what it will be like to be ever-increasingly conversing with God. Of all you could gain from *Morph*, if truly engaged, this will no doubt be the most profound.

FOURTH CATEGORY: CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE

The fourth category is Conversations with People. It is not possible to go through *Morph* alone; it is a relational experience. This relational aspect can be a formalized small group, or it can be as simple as gathering a few friends and agreeing to go through this together. At the end of each week, there are conversation guides to deepen your discussions.

The following are suggestions depending upon your circumstances:

► Small Groups (five or more people)

Small groups come in different shapes and sizes, but a typical small group will have five to twelve participants. Throughout *Morph*, small groups are encouraged to meet as a group every other week, and on the off week, to meet in subgroups of two or three people (three is preferable). We refer to these subgroups as Running Partners. This will be new to most groups but is highly encouraged. This smaller gathering will personalize the conversation. A degree of personalization

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can and does happen in other settings, but there's something powerful about getting together with just two other people and hearing how each individual is interacting with that week's experience.

Different groups will do this differently. Some groups will have the Running Partners meet on their own time at the place of their choosing. Other groups will prefer to have all Running Partners meet in the same location at the same time, perhaps at a house or coffee shop, but simply meet in different areas so as to not distract one another. Either way is encouraged.

Included in each week's material are conversation guides. These guides are geared to either Small Groups or Running Partners. *Take note that Week One is geared to Running Partners, Week Two is geared to Small Groups, and it goes back and forth in that rhythm.* Also, you're encouraged to mix the Running Partner relationships for each eight-week module. This will not be possible or beneficial for all groups, but when possible, it is encouraged.

► Running Partners (two to four people)

Morph need not be experienced in a formalized small group but can be experienced by simply pulling together a few friends and agreeing to go through *Morph* together. Similar to what's explained in the Small Group section above, we describe these gatherings of two to four as Running Partners. If experiencing *Morph* with two to four people, you're encouraged to meet weekly. At the end of each week's material you will find conversation guides. You'll notice that the conversation guides are titled either "Small Group" or "Running Partner." This titling is for groups of five or more people, so don't let it distract you. You're encouraged to use the conversation guide for that week regardless of the title.

FIFTH CATEGORY: WEB

In addition to collaborating with your group, there is a larger *Morph* community online. A simple explanation of *Morph's* Web presence would be to call it a mixture of Facebook and *Morph*. The best way to get into it is to simply get on to it, but the following brief descriptions offer a little insight as to what's available.

Videos

Each week you'll find a brief video giving depth of insight on that week's topic. You can think of the videos as a coach. This will be done a variety of ways. Some weeks, you'll hear about the thinking that went into that week's topic. Other weeks, you'll hear from others giving their own experience with that week's topic. And other weeks still, simply expect the unexpected.

Forums

A variety of forums are available at the *Morph* website where you can comment and read comments on a host of topics. Posting thoughts and comments will not only help others, but it will also refine your own thoughts by encouraging you to articulate your experience.

Resources and Links

Included at the *Morph* website are a variety of resources and links to take your experience deeper. If, for example, you are reading one of that week's Scripture passages and you find it confusing, at the website you'll find a link to that passage where there are online commentaries to read and study. Or if a particular topic speaks to you and you'd like to go deeper with it, at that week's page you'll find links to sermons and articles associated with that week's topic.

JUST IMAGINE

A few pages back you were encouraged to ask a question: *Do I really want to do this?* Now you're asked to dream for a moment. How might your life be different by engaging Christ through this experience? How might the world be different by an increasingly transformed version of you? Reach within yourself

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and touch that deep inner-hunger. It's the hunger that drives your life. What would it be like to direct that hunger toward the greatest and grandest of visions? What would it feel like to live freely and passionately? What would it be like to be an ever-increasingly positive influence on the world around you?

Well-lived lives do not become well-lived lives by doing nothing. Well-lived lives engage their Creator's grace and live passionately, not passively. The experience that follows is a call to action. It will involve time, energy, and resources. There will be aspects you find invigorating, and there will be aspects that feel like work. The extent to which you encounter Christ through this experience is the extent to which you will experience change. Skim the surface, and it will skim your life. Go to the depths, and it will go to the depths of you. Those who truly engage, those who dig in and make the most of this opportunity will be different. The world will be different, and we will all be grateful this was anything but a kick.