

WEEK ONE

A Spiritual Experiment

I GOT THE idea for the Jesus Experiment several years ago while writing a book based on Jesus' leadership style. After completing the manuscript, I knew I had overlooked something significant. All my research hadn't turned up what I sensed was the most important piece of the puzzle.

And then I asked myself, *In what ways do I want to be like Christ?*

That's when it dawned on me that if I want to be like Jesus, I need to *feel, think, speak, and act* like him—as a devoted disciple. It's not that I want to change my personality or become another person. Instead, I want my feelings, thoughts, words, and deeds to be so guided by Jesus that I experience the abundant life he offers.

I asked myself, In what ways do I want to be like Christ?

We see the concept of discipleship in other relationships as well.

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For instance, all three of my sons are writers. From their youth, I've coached them and edited their work. Each one is currently writing a book. When they send me pages to read, nothing encourages me more than to see how they've grown as writers. I often recognize myself in their word choices, the cadence of their prose, and their humor—or attempts at humor. I am their teacher, and they are my disciples. As writers, they want to be like me while developing their own voices.

As disciples of Jesus, we want to be like him. We want his life and teaching to shape us so our lives reflect his. We want others to hear in our words and see in our deeds the life of our Teacher and Lord. To facilitate that kind of life, we need something that will enable us to put into practice what we know and are learning about Jesus.

Yet we always face the same shadowy opposing force: *fear*.

Fear

Before I began writing about the Jesus Experiment, it was only an idea; I had nothing to fear because the idea required nothing of me. I could sit around my office, pondering the concepts and stories. But when I decided to write the book, I realized I would first have to *live* the experiment. There would be no room for philosophical musings. I would have to set up the lab, run the test, and evaluate the results in my own life.

What if it didn't work? What if I didn't complete it? What if I failed? What if Jesus' claim failed?

I had never had second thoughts about writing a book. It reminded me of my desire to bungee jump. I've openly told friends, family members, and readers of one of my books that I'd like to leap from a bridge and experience the exhilaration of free-falling fast and far and then feel the bungee cord slow my descent before it launched me up with even greater velocity. Just the thought trig-

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gers a mild adrenaline rush. But knowing I want to bungee jump doesn't scare me. Not until a friend actually takes me up on my offer to go bungee jumping and we set a date will I be afraid and have second thoughts.

Part of the reason the Jesus Experiment concerned me is that I knew it would quickly expose how unlike Jesus I am. Though I desire to be more like Christ, my human tendency to remain stuck is strong. Like everyone else, I'm comfortable with the status quo. I have attitudes, habits, and ways of speaking and acting that give me pleasure and calm my nerves—almost like pacifiers—and I don't want to let them go. My fear of rejection and shame prevents me from going into more detail here, and it's this tendency to cover up that reminds me, even as I write these words, that I am still very much *unlike* Jesus.

Becoming like Christ is a lifelong pursuit . . . and God can accomplish powerful transformation in our lives.

But that doesn't mean the Jesus Experiment won't work. It only means I have to confront my fears and remind myself of Jesus' promise to give abundant life. If you're feeling similarly apprehensive, I understand; but don't let that hold you back. Let's face it, becoming like Christ is a lifelong pursuit, and something we won't fully attain until he appears and we see him as he is (1 John 3:2). But in the meantime we can be moving in the right direction, and God can accomplish powerful transformation in our lives. It all starts with a simple desire to become more like Jesus and a willingness to *live* the experiment.

A few weeks before I started writing, I knew it was time to give the Jesus Experiment a try. I decided that, for one day, whenever God's Spirit brought it to mind, I would ask myself eight questions:

1. How would Jesus *feel* in this situation?
2. What would Jesus *think* in this situation?

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3. What would Jesus *say* in this situation?
4. What would Jesus *do* in this situation?
5. How do *I* feel in this situation?
6. What am *I* thinking in this situation?
7. What am *I* saying in this situation?
8. What am *I* doing in this situation?

At the end of the day, I was encouraged. Seldom had I felt such a real-time connection with Jesus. Throughout the day, as I compared my feelings, thoughts, words, and deeds to his, the differences in our attitudes and actions became clear. Then I asked God to transform me to be more like Christ in my responses.

Here's an example: That afternoon, a driver cut me off on the freeway. My immediate impulse was to camp on the horn—not as a safety warning, but as punishment. But then I asked myself the first four questions. I had to admit Jesus likely wouldn't get annoyed at something so trivial. Nor would he think badly of the offending driver, swear under his breath, or honk his horn. I quickly asked the next four questions and was surprised that the process itself actually settled my spirit. I had made a conscious decision to identify with Jesus and allow him to change me.

Delays and Distractions

I continued the experiment for about a week, until I got distracted. In the back of my mind, I knew I needed to get back on track, but it was always *tomorrow*. And then concern arose as I realized I might not give the experiment a fair shot because of old patterns and habits and the natural force of inertia—an object at rest tends to stay at rest.

It reminded me of a night, many years ago, when my eldest son, Ryan, was a toddler. I was lying on the floor in our home in

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Houston, throwing a tennis ball against the wall and catching it. My wife watched me for a moment and then said, “You’ve got to quit doing that, Bill.”

“Why?” I said as I continued to toss the ball against the wall—a bit higher this time.

“Because you’ve got a son who follows your example, and I don’t want him throwing tennis balls in the house.”

“But I want to throw it,” I said, like a child told to stop playing in the mud.

“Bill, you need to grow up.”

That hit a nerve. Something inside told me she was right, but I didn’t *want* to grow up. I wanted to keep throwing the ball against the wall. As Cindy stood there, I felt a mixture of certainty and loss. I knew I needed to act like a grown-up and the ball-tossing inside the house would have to stop. I also felt as if a part of me were dying, like I was a boy about to lose an arm—or, if not an arm, at least the freedom to use it to throw balls in the house.

I felt a similar reluctance at the beginning of the Jesus Experiment. Even though I knew it was time to mature in my faith, I was afraid that becoming more like Christ would mean giving up things I enjoyed. Frankly, I wasn’t sure I was ready.

If you want to become more like Christ and experience the abundant life he promises, you must change.

Here’s the simple truth about the Jesus Experiment: If you want to become more like Christ and experience the abundant life he promises, you must change. You can try to delay it by clinging to old habits and attitudes, and you can always find reasons for putting it off until tomorrow. But be honest: Do you really want to stay the same when Jesus offers so much more?

Once I got past the initial resistance in my heart, I needed to overcome several other obstacles. The first is what I call tapping blue jays—the mental and emotional noise that pecks away at my

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resolve by distracting me. Just the other day, while I was working in my home office, there was a blue jay on my roof, banging away on an unshelled peanut he'd taken from the bird feeder on the back deck. It was the sort of tapping that can't be ignored, especially if you know the damage a jay's beak can do to a wood-shake roof. I had to get up from my desk and scare the bird away.

Tapping blue jays are any distractions that draw us away from what we should be doing. For me, it's the tendency to take the path of least resistance. Though some people regard me as highly motivated and disciplined, I realize such a perception is based on the part of me they see. I know there's another part they can't see—a part I don't want them to see. It's the part of me that puts off doing things I don't like to do until the last minute, even when there is a price to be paid for inaction.

Cindy observed this trait during the first few months of our marriage, while we were students at the University of Texas. After I had dropped a Greek class for the third time, she called me on it. I gave some lame excuse about getting behind because I was sick, but she saw through my cover-up and said, "The truth is, you're a lazy bum."

Looking back, I think she was partially right. I'm not a bum, but I can be lazy—especially when it comes to my spiritual life. Though I'm fairly consistent in the disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, and Scripture memorization, there's another side that resists any work involved in knowing Christ better. By that, I mean taking what I learn from the Bible and diligently applying it to my life. I'm painfully aware the religious leaders who opposed Jesus were well versed in the Old Testament. They took pride in their highly disciplined religious lives. But they didn't know God and hadn't integrated what they knew from the Scriptures into their lives. One of my fears as I approached the Jesus Experiment was that my laziness would prevail—that I would prove to be unwilling to cast aside the delays

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and distractions and do the daily work necessary to achieve the desired results.

Breaking Down Barriers

The point of this discussion isn't to identify all the potential barriers to the Jesus Experiment, whatever they may be for you. It's to discover how to break them down. For me, it took remembering how I had overcome laziness in the past.

For years, I avoided going to the gym and working out. By the time I reached my early thirties, I was in such bad shape that I could hardly bend over and touch my toes. Years of physical abuse from sports had taken a toll. Forced to choose between further deterioration and getting in shape, I decided to meet with my friend Lance Coffel, owner of River's Edge Athletic Club.

"I want to get in shape," I told him.

"How committed are you?"

"Totally," I said with the resolve of an army recruit.

"How much time will you give me?"

I stood tall, puffed out my chest, and said with confidence, "Fifteen minutes, two days a week."

Lance smiled and shook his head in disbelief. He then spent the next hour bringing every muscle in my body, including several I didn't know existed, to the point of total fatigue. When I finally shambled out to my car, my hands were shaking so badly I could hardly get the key into the slot to unlock the door.

For the next week, my entire body scolded me for abusing it. When the pain finally abated, I realized I faced two options: I could either stay in terrible shape or I could commit to working out for thirty minutes, three days a week. The first option didn't sound good, so I chose the better one. As I started regular workouts, something unexpected happened: I saw results, and that made me want

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to work out more. So I upped my workouts to forty-five minutes, and then an hour. Later I added another day per week to my workout routine. Decades have passed, and I've stuck with it.

The pain it took to overcome my laziness illustrates the psychological law of gravity: *A person will continue down a path of destructive behavior until the pain of continuing exceeds the pain of changing.* My suffering body convinced me I needed to get in shape. Knowing that not getting in shape was a worse option,

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I overcame the laziness that had anchored my will and kept me from moving forward.

As I thought about the Jesus Experiment, the tapping blue jays reminded me it would require a level

of spiritual effort I've often avoided. However, I was at a place in my spiritual journey similar to the day when Lance gave me that first workout. Not that I was out of shape, necessarily. But I didn't want to stay in the same place because it wasn't satisfying—it was more painful to remain stagnant than to move forward. I wanted to press on. I wanted to get closer to God and become more like Jesus. I wanted to know the joy of God's transforming work in my life. I would no longer be held back by tapping blue jays or my resistance to investing the effort needed to live the Jesus Experiment. I was all in.

Finding a Role Model

For some people, what it means to become more like Jesus is too abstract. After all, we're not walking with him in the flesh. Sometimes it's easier to see Jesus in other people—people who model Christian maturity. The apostle Paul offered himself as a role model to the Corinthians when he told them, "Follow my example, as I follow

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the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). For me, that example was a man named Freeman Schmidt.

When I was in my early thirties, I moved from Texas to Oregon to become the lead pastor of a church in the Portland area. Freeman, who had previously pastored a thriving church in central Oregon for more than thirty years, was already on staff. He had a full head of white hair, a tender spirit, an ordered life, a loving wife, four children, and an ongoing joy. Most of all, he loved Jesus, and it showed.

As I got to know Freeman, I noticed how different he seemed from other older men. Curious about this, I brought it up one day. “Freeman, it seems that people get rigid and prickly as they get older. But you’re gentler and”—I hesitated because I didn’t want to seem flippant—“godlier. Why?”

Freeman smiled. “Bill, as people age, their true inner self pokes through to the outside. They don’t have the strength to restrain themselves, so you see what they’re really like.”

His words fell into my mind like a seed, which quickly germinated and grew into an insight: I was in the presence of a true man of God. As Freeman continued to age over the next several years, I saw more of Jesus in him. He was the kind of man I wanted to become as I grew older.

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One day, in late winter, Freeman told me he had a fast-growing brain tumor. He said it was terminal and inoperable. The doctors had told him that, as the tumor continued to grow, it would most likely be painless, he would sleep longer and longer each night, and one day he wouldn’t wake up.

From Freeman’s perspective, though this was bad news, it gave him time to get his affairs in order and express love to his family and friends. So Freeman spent the remaining months of his life straightening out his already immaculate garage, making sure his finances

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were settled, giving away his library, playing golf, and hanging out with people he loved. True to the doctor's prognosis, each night he slept a little longer.

I visited Freeman one day in his home, less than a week before he died. He was sleeping on his back, with a pillow under his head and a sheet and light blanket pulled up to his chest. His hands were folded over his stomach. I read to him from the Psalms, but I didn't know if he heard me. It didn't matter; I loved the man and cherished just being with him.

Before leaving, I stood at his bedside, placed my right hand on his hands, and prayed for him, my voice soft in the quiet room. When I finished, Freeman pulled my hand to his mouth. Thinking he was asleep and needed a tissue, I raised my hand and reached for a box of Kleenex. At that moment, Freeman gently, but with

determination, pulled my hand to his mouth and kissed it.

I think of how Jesus honored his disciples on the night before his death by washing their feet.

He never opened his eyes or uttered a word. Yet with that silent gesture, he said all he could about his feelings for me. I leaned over, kissed

his cheek, and told him I loved him.

Reflecting on that moment, I think of how Jesus honored his disciples on the night before his death by washing their feet. Too weak to wash my feet, Freeman kissed my hand. He did what I believe Jesus would have done if he had been lying on Freeman's bed, slowly slipping into death. And in doing that for me, Freeman nurtured my desire to become more like the Master we both served.

When I started the Jesus Experiment, I had Freeman in mind. I didn't know what the outcome of the twelve-week spiritual exercise would be, but I hoped it would move me along the road to being more like Freeman, and ultimately more like Jesus Christ.

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As you begin the Jesus Experiment, I encourage you to look toward a role model for encouragement as you fix your eyes on the Master and seek to become more like him day by day.

Getting Started

When I decided to restart the Jesus Experiment, I wanted to devise a process that could be tried for a *limited* period of time—long enough to test the hypothesis and see if Jesus brings abundant life, but not so long it would be daunting and provide an excuse not to start.

I'm far more likely to continue doing something if I start light and slowly build to a rigorous effort—which is what I did with my workout routine. I also wanted something that would stretch my thinking and challenge me spiritually. So the Jesus Experiment became a twelve-week exercise, centered on one major truth about Jesus each week, based on the following four commitments:

1. *Ask* what Jesus felt, thought, said, and did in a variety of situations.
2. *Observe* your own responses in similar real-life situations by noting what you *feel, think, say,* and *do* when you are self-reliant.
3. *Evaluate* what you would *feel, think, say,* and *do* in the same circumstances if you were abiding in Jesus and following his example.
4. *Apply* a specific plan to *prepare* yourself to *actively* follow in Jesus' footsteps the next time you encounter similar circumstances. You might be tempted to skip this step, but it's the most important. Only through real, concrete steps of faith can we become more like Christ, experiencing the abundant life he offers.

To help you with the Jesus Experiment process, a chart will be provided at the end of each chapter to give you a place to record what you're learning.

What did Jesus . . .	What do I . . .	
Feel?	Feel when self-reliant?	Feel when abiding in Jesus?
Think?	Think when self-reliant?	Think when abiding in Jesus?
Say?	Say when self-reliant?	Say when abiding in Jesus?
Do?	Do when self-reliant?	Do when abiding in Jesus?

Living the Jesus Experiment

Just as conducting an experiment in a lab is different from hearing a teacher lecture about scientific principles or studying them in a book, living the Jesus Experiment will take more than merely reading this book. In order to discover the validity of Jesus' promise of abundant life, you must diligently seek to discover how he felt, thought, spoke, and acted in specific situations, and then determine, by God's grace, to conform how you feel, think, speak, and act into his likeness. This will require effort on your part.

To start the experiment, take a moment to read John 10:1-10 below and answer the questions that follow.

"I tell you the truth, anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber! But the one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. They won't follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don't know his voice."

Those who heard Jesus use this illustration didn't understand what he meant, so he explained it to them: "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers. But the true sheep did not listen to them. Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life." (NLT)

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1. What do you hope to get from the Jesus Experiment? Take a moment and write your answer.

2. How did Jesus compare what he offers to what thieves and robbers do?

3. What do you think Jesus meant when he said he offers “a rich and satisfying life”?

4. What would such a life look like for you? How is your idea different or similar to what Jesus offers?

5. What fears could keep you from living the Jesus Experiment? How will you confront them?

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6. What delays and distractions could keep you from living the Jesus Experiment? What will you do to break down those barriers?

7. What “tapping blue jays” will try to chip away at your resolve and urge you to take the path of least resistance? How will you overcome them?

8. If you're not studying this book in a small group, do you have a friend or two you could ask to live the Jesus Experiment with you? Make a plan to contact them.

9. How would living the Jesus Experiment with a friend help you?
