

Crafting Your Spiritual Action Plan

A neat little guide to crafting your personal plan to tap into God's strength and power for your spiritual, mental, and physical self.

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with Harry Sheppard (and a little artwork from Alice Sheppard¹)



¹ On the artwork, if you like the style you see, reach out to Alice at ShepsSillyShoppe on etsy.com.

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² Please note a few things about the picture on the title page that will guide you through this booklet and life. First, there is an archway to walk through. Visualize yourself standing before it, deciding whether to go through it into a spiritual way of thinking and becoming. Second, note the foundations and the keystone at the top. Working this guide will help ensure these are both consciously firm, sturdy, and useful. Third, note the pathway weaving through the forest. It is wide enough for two to walk in the darkness around you on a pathway of Light...if you open yourself up, decide, and put in the work.

Booklet Summation and Opening Questions

Let me launch your reading of this guide by providing a few answers to questions you³ are at least lightly pondering as you decide whether to keep this book in your hands or virtually set it down. First, the why (or reason) you should work through this guide is that it will open the heart of your soul to grow closer to God. Second, the way (or how) you will proceed is by reading Scripture and contemplating how it applies to you. Third, the outcome (or what you will achieve) is the creation of an actionable plan that connects God to you, your thoughts, and your day-to-day actions. If you read, contemplate, and execute on the suggestions in this guide you have the opportunity to allow God to transform your life for you, Him, and others.

To get started, consider the Scripture below. The italicized text is from the Christian Standard Bible as related by Jesus in John, Chapter 15, Verses 5 and 7 - 9. Read it, consider it, and at least try and finish this opening section of the guide if you are so curious and led in your mind and heart/soul (the deeper part of you, your “gut” if you will).

I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this; that you produce much fruit and prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love.

As stated above and will be stated a few more times, this booklet, or spiritual action plan (SAP), is intended to be a straightforward way for you to explore what it means to do your part to align all of your life, each day, to the thoughts, words, and actions God desires for you (spiritually, mentally, and physically).

If you are a Christian, these verses and the related concepts are likely somewhat vaguely familiar though you may feel stuck from time to time in your spiritual growth (this is okay!). If you are

³ Please note, I use “I/you” language for clarity and to drive self-reflection. All of the “you” language applies to me also if I hold the mirror of the Spirit up to my face too!

not a Christian, things might feel a little askew to you (this is okay!). In either case, at least consider the questions below. If you are satisfied with your answers to them, then maybe you can move onto something else. If you are not satisfied with your answers, I encourage you to press on for another few pages at least.

- If you are a Christian, are you living a life worthy of the gift God has provided of being a vine on God's branch? Are you receiving the fullness of his living sap flowing through you in ways that bring you joy, bring Him pleasure, and help to others? In what ways, yes...and in what ways, if you are honest and open minded, no?
- If you are not a Christian, have you ever tried to live life as if there is a God who is a Personal Being that cares for and is in charge of everything (including you)? In what ways have you lived this life beyond moral philosophical ideals that make you "generally a good person"? Are you putting your faith and current/future destiny in this possibly unstated or unexplored thought without trying another approach?
- For everyone, imagine for a moment your own death, that transition from this existence to the next. What do you want a Personal God to say to you about how you lived your life? What do you want your friends and family to say about you at your funeral? What legacy do you want to leave behind in your own words? Ponder if the spiritual, mental, and physical activities you do each day support these desired words and ultimately life outcomes.

In addition to the questions I want to spend a little more space commenting on this passage (do your own meditation on it as well as leverage other commentaries...there are many online), and a few items of note.

First, you can hopefully see where the concept of the Spiritual Action Plan (SAP) stems from (get it, stems??? Ah, but I digress 😊); namely, this is you doing your part of surrendering and accepting the flow of life transforming sap that Jesus provides you so that you may be a healthy branch in his vine bearing the fruit He wants you to in this world.

Second, Jesus mentions or alludes to a few roles and their responsibilities/actions: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and you. God is mentioned as the gardener who will do the maintenance on the

branches of the vine. Jesus is specifically noted as being the vine himself. The Spirit is the means by which the branches (you, me) are given what you need to stay in Jesus and Him in you so that you can produce fruit. This view of the Trinitarian reality is enough theology talk for now, but it could be important for your contemplation depending on your presuppositions.

Third, Jesus intimates that God as the gardener will do pruning so that each branch can produce the right amount of fruit. This is not a fire and brimstone scare message, in fact, if you open your Bible you will see I excerpted some of this passage to make it seem even less so. Nevertheless, pruning is just part of the way for those who believe and those who choose not to believe. It is a matter of fact to Jesus as He points out from and through the Scriptures. It does not exclude a re-grafting into the vine if a branch withers or falls! It does indicate, however, the seriousness with which Jesus wants you to hear and act upon this message.

In summary, be excited that God in his Trinitarian wisdom is concerned for your wellbeing and your living out of his will. He wants this relationship to be “pura vida” (pure life) full of vitality for you, Him, and others. Remain in Him and do so by acting as He wants. Let’s keep learning one way to carry this calling out (crafting an SAP and working it daily) and do our parts through his strength and power...his ever-flowing sap!



Why Work Through This Guide?

This guide offers “real talk” as the kids say today, derived from Scripture and my life experience that will engage you to know more about God, others, and yourself through the creation of a Spiritual Action Plan (SAP) to utilize daily (and adjust periodically) in setting your most crucial priorities and tasks. Your SAP is a tool for you to use to follow his words by remaining in Him through all of the life elements you can influence; namely, spiritual, mental, and physical.

The “real” piece of this booklet comes in the form of the prayer, contemplation, and discussions you will have reading through it along with the discipline of doing right by God as He leads you toward his will for your life. In short, you will make the time by reading, planning, and acting on this effort worthwhile, not by my words on the page, but by your intended connection to Him. I can simply point at Something/Someone Greater...don’t look at my finger or hand, look instead to what I am pointing toward.

Specifically, for the reader who is still perusing who is not a Christian, but also for all readers...

As you think about turning the page and going further, ponder a few more questions before you do so...please note, these are not lightweight questions. You may think to yourself as you read them, “I’m too young to consider the answers to these things”, or, “I’m too old to possibly change my ways based on my answers”, or even, “These things are just too deep for me...I live in the moment as a common-sense type person”...no matter your seemingly logical excuse, do realize that you ask and answer these questions everyday whether you want to admit it or not. Our answers are in our plans, words, and actions no matter what you might actually take the time to reflect upon and contemplate. So, indulge me and yourself and take a few minutes to consider these three simple (but not easy) questions...

You’ve answered these questions and their derivatives shown below before, possibly without knowing. Now, contemplate them again consciously and answer them, knowing fully the daily choices and consequences of these actions and non-actions before you. From here your Spiritual Action Plan will begin to foment.

1. **Why** do you exist (or, why were you created)? Two reasons that I believe to be true...to provide glory to God and to ensure your eternal salvation, your eternal life. He reveals the answer here to you in so many ways (The Spirit, Scripture, Tradition, Community, the wonder of his creation, the list could go on...) but resp assured He wants you to know Him and He wants to know you now and forever. He simply asks for acknowledgement in, surrender to, and acceptance of Him.
2. **How** do you live out the answer to this why question? You cooperate with God through faith in his Son and obedience to his teachings in the Spirit. Keep in mind, while helping you develop a daily set of actions in alignment with the answer to this how question, you live it out through the things He has given you and the strength He provides...your free will is important here, but so is your surrender to and acceptance of his power and help which is so much closer than you could ever imagine.
3. **What** things should you do each day to make the previous two answers real? This is God's will and providence. He knows it, you can seek it, but it will often prove amazingly mysterious in the moment. Looking back through our memories and properly using our imaginations can help. The key is to put his will first which will align your how's and let you live a why based existence...remember, it never hurts to ask Him what He wants you to do!

So, let your journey begin if you want to firmly live out daily and consciously the answers to all of these questions for the moment and for your earthly existence, doing so via the way of life. The way of death answers these questions differently and leads to frustration, worry, pain, addiction, and, quite simply, troubles you cannot overcome by your own will, desires, and ego.

May you be blessed in this journey that can transform your life no matter where you are starting from! Do not hesitate to reach out and let me know how things are going or if you have questions at yourspiritualactionplan@gmail.com .

Week 1: Getting Started

You will see this is called Week 1. The crafting of your Spiritual Action Plan is divided into 7 weeks of guided study, prayer, and thought. There is also some bonus weeks in the Appendix if you want to go further from my guidance or your own. I highly recommend you take a weekly approach to it to allow God to work within you. He is outside of time, it is actually part of his creation, and He reveals things to you often in quiet moments that this approach allows.

What Is the Point?

Let me relate a little story of how simple yet powerful this action planning can be. There is a small town in Ohio where an old gentlemen lived who always had food available for any who would stop by. He'd serve children and adults alike never asking for anything in return and maybe not even sharing any lore or wisdom. He would just have something ready for any who knocked on his kitchen door. He'd do so under a simple sign that read, "God first. You second. Me third."

One day, when he was very old, the town wanted to honor him with a picnic at the park where others who he had served could serve him. He would have nothing of it! Eventually, some old men of the town came over to see him and simply pointed to his sign and indicated that this is the something the "you" wanted to do for the "me." In other words, going to this picnic was like his daily life, putting his spiritual principles into practice once again. After a quiet moment of reflection he agreed to go to the picnic and good food and fellowship was shared by all.

This is a perfect example of an SAP in practice. This man's SAP was simple and straightforward, yet his entire day and thought processes were intertwined with his view of how he was called to live with "first principles first" in his daily actions of planning, cooking, and serving. The sap of Jesus flowed so strongly through this way of thinking, being, and acting that only an appeal to what he taught through his actions could change his mind on something that seemed foreign to him but really was not.

Remember creating, maintaining, and living your Personal Spiritual Action Plan will guide you if you let it, systematically, into the insights and experiences God has willed for you, daily tasks to support these, and ultimately a closer relationship with Him.

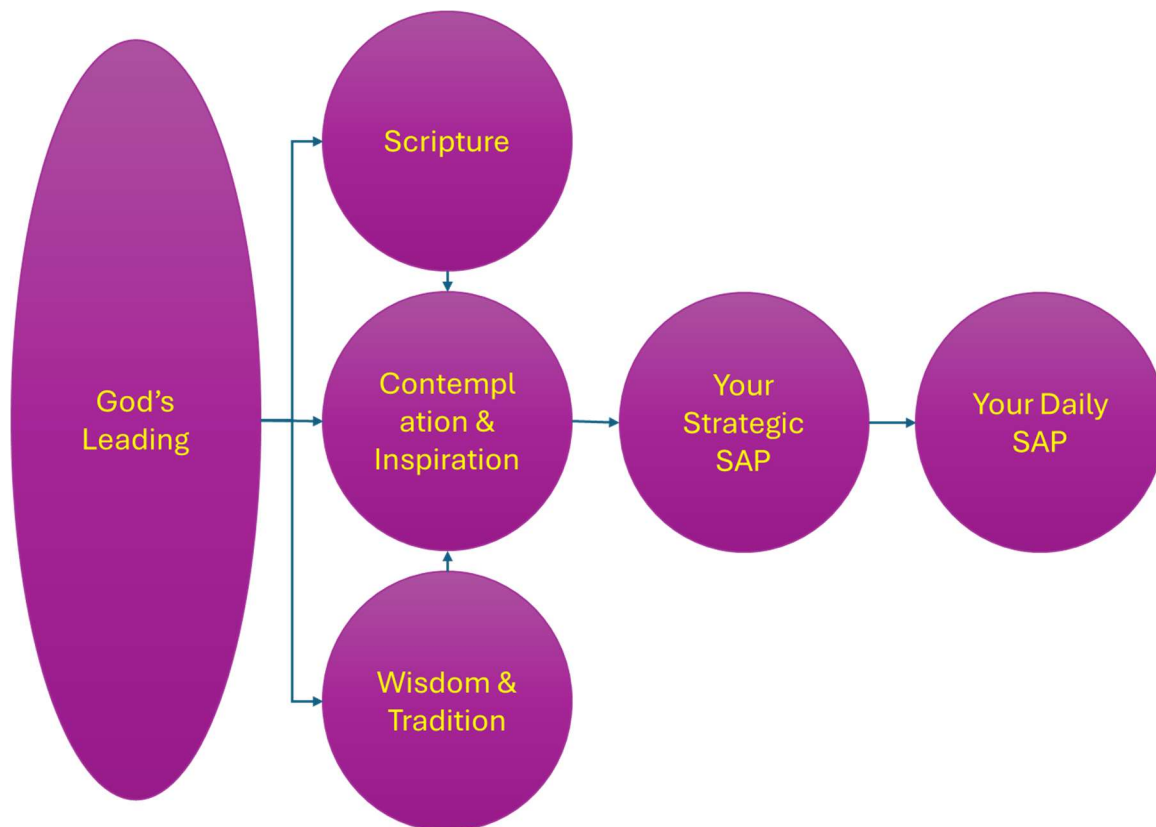
I will guide you through a series of contemplation exercises that are from the Bible. From these you (and maybe your small group) will develop your own SAP that you can strive ceaselessly to enact while simultaneously keeping your focus on trust in an All-Loving God who cares about you and wants to hear what you care about and why.

So you can begin with the end in mind, below are the contents of the deliverable (SAP) you will ultimately create. I cannot force you to do this and then truly get the benefit by using it and making it part of your own life discipline, but I can promise from experience, you will get out of it what you put in as God blesses you, not necessarily with material things, but with a spirit pressed down and overflowing.

Your Personal SAP will have a few standard sections if you follow my suggestions (but feel free to deviate if you have a better approach!)

- Your SAP Strategy
 - Big Themes...these are the major areas you feel called to focus upon. You can write them inspirationally or simply as a word as they are just meant to be a few things that focus your attention and permeate your life for the time being, your current season of life. For example, you might be compelled to write something like, “I want to be a prayer warrior for the Lord of Armies everyday of my life.” Or, you simply might write, “prayer life.” Either is okay.
 - Big Spiritual, Mental, and Physical Goals...these should be a layer down from the themes and correspond to what you want to think about, research, practice, etc. in the next month or two. Somewhere in the neighborhood of seven to eight is probably enough to handle here. These should roughly be spread out across things clearly of the Spiritual side of life, the Mental or mind/reason elements, and Physical or bodily traits
- Your Tactical SAP

- Daily Aligned Actions...these are the tasks (prayer, exercise, reading, social fellowship time, etc.) you will do each day that you layout and can put a checkmark next to when you accomplish them. These likely number in the area of 15 – 25 specific things might change daily and should be recorded in the morning or the night before. Don't be concerned that one day has too much and another too little...think instead in terms of harmonizing the tasks across the categories over time.



If you are interested in building your own Personal Spiritual Action Plan (SAP) as described above, please keep reading through each of the “Week” labeled sections. The contents for these are as follows:

- Week 1: Getting Started (some re-orientation on the focus of the book to allow it to sink in a bit more and related concepts).

- Week 2: Peter's Priority Virtues (this is the first section that has you delve into Scripture to contemplate elements you may want to include in your own SAP...it starts with some writings from Peter, one of Jesus' first followers).
- Week 3: The "Commandments" of Jesus (a deep dive into the Sermon on the Mount and how Jesus wanted us to process it).
- Week 4: Jesus on Prayer (more thoughts from Jesus to include, specifically on prayer, in your SAP).
- Week 5: Message to the Churches (messages to the churches mentioned in Revelation that will hopefully inspire some SAP input for you).
- Week 6: Crafting Your SAP Version 1 (your first chance to bring it all together into a usable SAP).
- Week 7: Reflection, Contemplation, Action (a week of thought, discussion, and prayer before implementation of your SAP).

Thoughts for Groups and Individuals

You may be working through this book by yourself or in a small group. It should fit both styles and you can adapt it further to a mixed approach of individual and group. No matter, here are some brief guidelines to get the most from it as you go through it.

For Group and Individual Readers

- Get a notebook (aka, journal) so you can record some specific things and some thoughts you may have as you go through it. Keep the end in mind...you will be putting together your own Spiritual Action Plan.
- At the very least, record your answers to the contemplation questions provided within the chapters.
- As you complete each small chapter over the next several weeks, go back through and make note of any words or concepts that jump out at you so you can research them, talk about them, and have them for later.
- Be thinking and jotting notes as you go for your own SAP...this will be the capstone effort to get the most from this book.

Groups

- See the above list as these all apply.
- The leader or facilitator should faithfully make notes and come prepared with some opening thoughts from the previous session.
- A conclusion should be offered with any specific next steps for the group beyond working through the next chapter.
- Plan on ~30 to 45 minutes per session for a group of five to seven engaged folks.
- Whiteboards, flip charts, internet/display is totally up to you, but everyone should have a copy of the book.
- In terms of timing, if your group is trying to go through the entire book in a reasonable period of time, follow the contents through the weekly plan which will take you about 7 – 8 weeks.

Individuals

- Most of the content above applies to the individual too with a special emphasis on the use of a notebook to keep track of your contemplation question answers, and list ideas/research tasks.
- Keep an additional section in your notebook on things you want to talk to someone else about. Support and “eldership” on spiritual development is always a good thing.
- You recommend you follow the weekly schedule as described and not rush through it to provide time for contemplation, research, and quiet “lightning bolt” moments.

A Few Definitions I Use

I intentionally steer clear of critically important theological topics in this booklet. I may have opinions on certain things and these certainly show through in my writing, but I don’t want to get bogged down in things that are better left to far more learned men and women.

This is meant to be a booklet of action, leading you to pray and contemplate enough to be led by God to the things you should be doing in your life to cleave closer to Him and produce more of his fruit in your thoughts, words, and deeds.

That said, I do want to cover briefly a few topics that are contained in the warp and woof of the writing.

Theology

Strictly speaking, this is the study of God. There are of course various types and disciplines within this that are of much greater import than the pejorative nature of counting the number of angels which can stand on the head of a pin.

Know that you are all active and living theologians whether you admit it or not. You each have a conception of God that plays out in your spiritual, mental, and physical lives. These will vary to some extent even from those in the same denomination brought up in the same training.

You will see me variously refer to the following conceptions of God in the English language which I believe are in alignment with the teachings as expressed in the Bible and Traditions (old and new).

God = the Father, the creator and sustainer of all that exists.

Jesus = the Son, a “part” of the Father who perfectly harmonizes God and Man together and who took upon Himself the justice owed to humanity for our sin/sins.

Spirit = a “part” of the Father and the Son who lives within you and you within Him comforting you and guiding you through things seen and unseen.

The Trinity = The three in one expressed in the very limited words above and who is the ultimate representation of that which cannot be properly described, as God is so much more than you could ever ask for or imagine.

I also believe in angels who follow God’s will and help you as they are directed. On the flip side of this coin, I believe there is a devil who also has fallen angels that thrive in evil and disharmony trying to cause you pain and thwart the will of God though they cannot do so eternally, but only for a time (and only if allowed to by God).

Ultimately, you have a God who created you one way, namely, to be in close union with Him. You chose and choose a different way through disobedience (sin: transgressions, debts, willful, ignorant, etc.). Only He could set things right again and did so through the sacrifice of Jesus and the continued presence of the Spirit which allows you to grow closer to Him as you explore and make a decision to trust Him to redeem you and lead you in this life and the next.

Anthropology

This is the study of man and touches on things that span Christianity, philosophy, history, and psychology. Once again, you are all armchair anthropologists that reveal your true beliefs in your thoughts, words, and deeds. For our purpose here, I use the following components of an anthropological understanding.

I consider the elements of mankind to be...

- Biology: This is the “stuff” going on inside of you that keeps you alive and functioning at whatever level of physical capability you possess.
- Senses: The five (maybe more???) ways your body understands things happening around or on/in your body.
- Emotions: Feelings that come and go from a variety of places that ultimately cause you to emotive wellbeing or displeasure about something
- Mind/Reason: The command center with its plethora of biology, chemistry, etc. processes that allow you to think through what you are taking in as inputs, do something with it via logic/history/lessons/wisdom, and develop an output of words and actions.
- Memory: The pieces of our experiences our brain stores that can be called upon to ideally learn from and serve as an additional input to the minding/reasoning processes.
- Imagination: Often somewhat directed “what if” scenarios that, in our parlance, are focused on God and his will for the good in our lives and others. This is in dichotomy with the “what if” scenarios that are self-directed and further possibilities of our own pleasure and choosing (think, fantasy in this later regard).

Ideally speaking, the SAP puts you on the path to centering these elements within your heart (or soul) where the Spirit dwells.

References

The careful reader will see the writing in this booklet full of indirect references and allusions to Scripture and various other things in pop culture, history, politics, etc. I will not usually call them out directly instead letting the narrative leading to an outcome be the most important focus. That said, almost all of you have mini super computers at our fingertips, next to you, or in our pockets...use these! If something seems unfamiliar or you have questions about the definition of a word and why I used it, look it up...chances are I used it intentionally with some angle of meaning contained within it.

This goes doubly so for the extremely short look at theology and anthropology above. Tomes have been written and lives dedicated to plumbing the depths of the metaphysical and epistemological meaning of what I expressed as a somewhat intellectually limited butcher using inadequate, dull tools. I hope the above did not throw anyone off but instead offered insight enough to see the why, how, and what of the assumptions (or presuppositions) in the approach.

As mentioned before, feel free to reach out with questions and comments at yourspiritualactionplan@gmail.com.

If You are Ready, Do the Following...

1. Consider your thoughts to the questions above and maybe even some of the initial musings on the sections of the SAP.
2. Pray, meditate, and discuss what you are doing to gain further insight.
3. Make sure you have a document on your computer ready to go or some form of journal to keep your notes in.
4. Dive into Week 2 when you are ready to explore the Bible and gain new ideas of what to possibly put in your SAP at the end of the multi-week study.



Week 2: Peter's Priority Virtues

Introductory Questions

- What does godliness or being godly mean to you?
- On what are you basing a “godly” versus an “ungodly” action? What is the standard reference point to know one from the other?
- To behave according to God's commands (i.e. how He wants you to), how much of these actions depends upon you versus God? How so?

Reading

- 2 Peter Ch.1
- Verses 1:5 – 7

Peter opens the second letter he penned for Scripture with many powerful thrusts, two of these I will focus in on as I get to the lessons for input into your SAP.

First, he talks about the knowledge God has provided you through Jesus. Knowledge is important because it gives you information to understand things differently than you did before you had the knowledge. Specifically, the knowledge God provides comes as a promise of being able to live in the divine nature here and now as opposed to those who live according to the flesh, the world, and its desires. This knowledge provides you a whole new way to look at your own desires and the things you see others doing in the world as a holy God sees them.

Second, Peter indicates that this knowledge, while good in and of itself as believing it provides the basis for salvation in Christ, does not fulfill the promise of the godly life you are called to on Earth. Once applied and put into action, knowledge becomes wisdom which is useful for an abundance of things to be learned and taught to others. For you, the wisdom provided allows for stability and prevents you from falling...falling away from the life you have now been called to and accepted as a new creation.

Let's keep these bookends in mind as you explore the details of Peter's list of attitudes and actions you should be taking as Christians.

Peter's SAP Input

“God” Focused

Faith

- Definition: Faith is being sure of what you hope for and certain of what you cannot see according to the author of Hebrews. You have faith, or belief, in big things and small things. For a big example, belief in God and the power of his saving grace through something that happened 2,000 years ago is faith. It is also faith to believe that the car will start this morning when I turn the key in the ignition though I cannot see all of the parts coming together for it to do so.
- Actions: Faith is in the doing when you act as if something is true. For your purposes in thinking of the Christian life Peter lays out, it is acting as if the Good News is true and the resulting requirements upon you as a believer.
- Question: Is my faith as I want it to be or is it actually in something else besides God and his Word?

Goodness

- Definition: Understanding goodness requires a knowledge of what is good and what is bad. This requires a reference point from which to have a standard. As an analogy, you can look at a map and see how long a hike is and what the terrain requires whether you have been there before or not. You are using the map as your reference point for what is the way and what it entails. As Christians, your reference point is God in his essence as Himself and the ways he has expressed this to humans through Scripture, his actions, and creation. Goodness is the state of emulating what you can know about this standard and how it guides you to behave.
- Actions: There are so many daily situations where knowing the good or right thing is easy to discern. Doing it may be harder, however. There are also many situations where discerning the good takes a bit more spiritual and mental effort as it is not clear cut. It is your responsibility, however, to address these questions head on and take the good or best action as you are ultimately guided by our conscience.
- Question: When in doubt, how do you figure out what is good and then put it into action?

Knowledge

- Definition: This is all about gaining information and knowing how to gain information from the right sources. You've touched on some of these already and will continue to do so throughout the book, but essentially knowledge comes from others, God, experience, and yourself. Sorting through this information to make meaning of it and letting it guide your actions requires wisdom, that is, knowledge properly applied.
- Actions: You are often told to never stop learning. You find this to be true via more static methods (e.g. reading and contemplation), dynamic methods (e.g. listening to and discussing with others), and experience (e.g. succeeding and failing both have knowledge to teach you). This gaining of knowledge can become part of your disciplined life patterns if you choose.
- Question: How do you prefer to learn? Do you have some examples that are specifically poignant for you?

"Me" Focused

Self-Control

- Definition: Self-control is, in many ways, the opposite of impulsivity (thinking and acting rashly). This does not exclude creativity, however, as this implies impulsivity thought about and rightly applied. It does rest upon three key disciplines, however: humility, empathy, and tolerance. Humility is seeing God, others, and yourself in the right way free of personal desires/filters. Empathy is all about walking around in someone else's shoes for a few miles to more deeply understand them. Tolerance is about respecting and engaging with differences between yourself and others. All three of these, well-practiced, lead to self-control, properly applied, and creatively acted upon.
- Actions: Self-control sounds so prim, proper, and Victorian-aged but it does not have to be so when put into action. It really is a creative, vital thinking process leading to right words spoken and right things done.
- Question: How do you view self-control? Why can it be fun to put into practice?

Endurance

- Definition: Endurance is a word you can really start to understand more deeply around mile 80 or 90 of a 100 mile bike ride! It is the focused will of mind, body, and spirit to keep moving forward even though everything within and around you is screaming, “STOP!”. It can also be well learned through less physical activities such as putting in another day at a job you detest. You can audibly hear the “STOP!”, but you find something within you that enables you to press on forward. Endurance is something the Bible tells you that you need as you press on through this joyful, but often difficult, life to reach for the prize of the race well run in his name.
- Actions: The actions of endurance can vary greatly depending on the situation, but the common thread is a marshalling of resources within and without of your own being to keep on pressing forward.
- Question: What is something in your life you have had to practice endurance within? Are you in a situation requiring it right now?

“Other” Focused

Godliness

- Definition: Godliness versus goodness, what is the difference between these two similar words? In short, a lot! Godliness is about understanding, to the best of your ability, the essence of God and how He sees a situation. This seems easy enough to say, until you read a book like Job and hear God speaking of his ways versus your ways. You are the creature and He is the creator. Though you are made in his image and are given much to understand his point of view on things, He is so vastly different than you, the creatures. A brief example without going too far is to consider how God views time. It is not as simple as seeing Him casting a longer view to the concept of time but realizing that He, as time’s creator, is wholly outside of time, his creation. Be careful, you may boggle your mind on this a bit! To the best of the grace given, godliness means taking on his view and attitude and seeing things as He does so that you can act, in your small part, as He would.
- Actions: Let’s continue the mental trip down the lane of otherliness that is godliness and think about how, given what you know (and don’t know about Him), He would act when presented with some of the life options you have. How much different would your daily

choices be if you had the full of mind of God at your disposal in deciding how to put godliness into practice?

- Question: How do you think you might better acquire a workable knowledge of the mind of God?

Brotherly Affection

- Definition: Hmmm...another puzzling phrase given the next quality Peter mentions is love. What is the difference? Without jumping fully into the definition of love, try thinking about brotherly affection in two ways. First, by using a relational or kinship term, Peter denotes a familiarity between yourself and others that goes beyond a pleasant conversation with someone in a grocery store over the ever increasing cost and reducing size of food stuffs. It means a common, shared, mindset that is most often thought of in familial terms. It also reminds you of the words of the old preacher in the musical “Carousel” when he says near the end, “...and try not to be scared of people not liking you, just try liking them instead...” It hints at starting from a mental stand point of liking the other person and seeing something within them even if you have just met them. Combine these together and you get an active liking of someone who you share a bond with...act from this standpoint.
- Actions: If you truly like someone whom you share a common bond with, there is almost nothing you would not do for them. The key is to have the right mental and spiritual mindset for the right physical work, spoken or done, to be worked out.
- Question: How do you go about liking someone when you really, for some reason, not like them?

Love

- Definition: There is no robbing Peter to pay Paul in regard to this spiritual principle that leads to wise thinking, wise action, and spiritual stability. Love can be defined as the sum total of seeing God, yourself, and others as God has gifted you to see them...harmoniously, holistically, and where they are as a human BEING at this given moment.
- Actions: Once you love someone, you can truly grasp how to put this love into practice for the betterment of yourself, them, and God’s will on this earth.

- Question: How would you describe the embodiment of love in thought and action if you tried to explain it to a 12 year old?

Conclusion

Peter provides a list that is more than a good set of suggestions for living. It is a pathway to a close union with the creating, saving, and sustaining God who derives holy pleasure from getting to know you better and in seeing you do the same. Taking your personal application from this could mean focusing in one of the disciplines and going further with it intentionally or might mean adopting the whole list and being cognizant and disciplined in working them out over an extended a period of time. You need to think a bit further, sift it with the other ideas in this guide, and ultimately come up with a starting point for the time being.

Contemplation Questions

1. Which question above did you find the most compelling or most difficult to answer? What does this tell you?
2. Using you imagination, if you were to sit down with Peter, what do you think he might say to you about items from this writing that should be included in your SAP?
3. How would you explain, using you own vernacular, this passage and its lessons to your family or friends?

Your SAP

“The things I want to remember as I create my own Spiritual Action Plan at this time are...”



Week 3: The “Commandments” of Jesus

Opening Questions

- Have you ever heard a speech or sermon that stuck in your mind?
- Why did it hang around inside of you?
- How did it impact you and what did you think or do differently because of it?

Readings

- The Sermon on the Mount as told by Jesus and recorded in Matthew Chapters Five through Seven.

Commands SAP Input

Moses went up on top of the mountain and came down with the laws of God meant to retrain the Israelites to transition from slaves in an ungodly land to become his people, unique and set aside from all others. Jesus went up on top of the mountain, sat down, and taught his people a message of transformation, building upon the law but written in our hearts, our inner most being. As you read these words, note this theme of internal transformation leading to external action connecting the correctness of the Mosaic Law but transformed because of its heart centered origination.

Jesus begins by sitting down...

The Beatitudes

Jesus begins with what are commonly known as the beatitudes. These are things you can seek in your spirit and you should do so. Consider two examples from this list: first, and an easier one to grasp in terms of pursuing it, is mercy. Mercy means to withhold judgment and apply love to a situation. You can do this daily in small ways and big ways depending on the situation. For example, though you may be a few minutes behind driving to work, you can be merciful in letting an extra car into your lane versus being judgmental in blocking the other driver from merging (even though they should have seen the construction signs and knew you were going down to one lane!).

The second example that you can seek in your hearts and show in your actions is a little more confusing on the surface, namely, seeking after mourning. This seems like something that is more apt to happen to you because of the loss of a situation you preferred whether it be a job, a friend, or a loved one. Think about it from God's perspective, however and the seeking becomes more apparent. You have lost your created union with God because of your inherited sin. This loss was the choice of your race and is also your individual choice each day. You wish it were not so, but when you seek out mourning, the seriousness of this loss becomes apparent and you mourn it and your continued actions that drive you away from the cooperation with God in reestablishing proper union through the work He did on the cross on your behalf.

Ponder each of these attitudes and see how your pursuit of them will result in blessing for your ultimate spiritual union with God along with the actions you can perform internally and externally to make it a reality.

Salt and Light

Jesus continues his teaching by calling his people like Moses did. He is not calling a genetically based race, but people of all tribes and nations. Accept the law He is laying down and his ultimate command to show it to others. This is what God wants and is a requirement for all.

Christ's Place in All of It

Once again, Jesus is still in the introductory phases of his new teaching. He has proclaimed a vision and gotten the listeners' attention. He then specified what people must do once they accept his teaching. Now, He is more clearly connecting the requirements to the things provided by Moses.

He makes it clear that what He is about to say fulfills the law given by Moses in our current Old Testament and provides the directions for the righteous life that God has always desired that you live while on earth as his believers, his people.

Time to Get Honest

Murder, adultery, divorces, telling the truth, loving your enemies...yikes, these sound like great Sunday sermon topics any preacher would want to speak on to attract new believers! Or, maybe not. Jesus describes these as the places you start and then continue from in the understanding of my teaching. Notice the clear yet paradoxically unique distinction in each: “don’t do the evil action” yes/and “don’t do the evil action *in your heart*.” The heart is the place where the sin actually originates and is committed.

The Law as Jesus explains it hinges upon this improvisational technique of “yes/and” in theatrical parlance. When you perform improv on stage, as an actor, you always build upon what your partner is saying or doing to continue the skit. In your pursuit of union with God, you say yes to acting righteously and yes to thinking or being righteous in your innermost being. Overtime, in your pursuit of a greater union with God you will also come to see that living in the yes/and relies not upon your own strength but upon the ample depths He can and is more than willing to provide if you are open to receiving what He wants to bring forth for you to leverage.

More Don’ts...

For someone who demonstrates such love, mercy, and compassion, Jesus sure emphasizes a lot of things not to do (and be)! Now, he goes into some other cheery subjects of don’t give publicly, don’t pray like others, don’t fast as you see others do, don’t pursue the same things as those who seem successful, don’t worry, and oh, in case you forgot my message earlier on mercy, don’t judge!

While I encourage you to dive further into all of these words in this Sermon (and you will do so with the Lord’s Prayer specifically in the next chapter), let’s consider Jesus words on fasting. The easiest part to notice is that He doesn’t say “if” you fast, but “when” you do. This is an expectation that is often overlooked.

That aside, notice the beyond the surface symbolism in his negative and positive instructions. First, it matters not if others know you are fasting, don’t make a show of it. Now, why would He indicate this? Fasting is for God and for you. It is to further your walk together in your heart and not for anyone else to know about, comment upon, or boost you up in some way. You

certainly don't need to hide it, but you should not make it obvious. This Law Jesus is giving is primarily of heart, soul, spirit origins and any external manifestation needs to start there for you to be following it correctly.

The Climax

Now the good pastor is going to go thundering out of his pulpit preaching with a lightening bolt declaring "death comes unexpectedly" and you better follow these commands and be ready! No, Jesus does not end this way. He ends tenderly but firmly inviting you to talk with Him and express what you are feeling and thinking. He also provides a warning not to be dissuaded by teaching that leads any other way but from the heart and into actions. Finally, he encourages you to make a choice in how you live with another promise that if you build your life, internally and therefore externally upon his Law, you will stand up firmly for God in the times of trial that are sure to come.

Conclusion

The only note that is given as to how physically Jesus ended the Sermon is found in Chapter 8, Verse 1...He came down from the mountain, i.e. He must have stood up and walked down and immediately continued his ministry of healing.

For the task before you, you need to see these as commands and specific list items for your Spiritual Action Plans. Incorporating them all at once might seem overwhelming. But, don't think Jesus meant you to do all of these things at once nor did he limit his list of commands to the ones recorded in this Sermon. Do not forget the most important command that was woven through the warp and woof of all of his words: start and end by incorporating these actions in your heart first and then the external actions will follow.

As you come down from the mountain following behind Jesus, enjoy the feelings of having sat at his feet learning, but even more so, realize the firmness of resolve He had for your union with Him through being and acting according to the things He wants and in the way He wants.

Contemplation Questions

1. Put yourself at his feet in your imagination, if you heard these words for the first time, what would your mind be hanging upon?
2. If you could ask Him to clarify anything from the Sermon what would it be and why? Have you considered asking Him?
3. How have you in the past incorporated specific commands or guidelines from the Bible into your own life such as these of Jesus? What were the results? What do you anticipate they might be if you do so?

Your SAP

“The things I want to remember as I create my own Spiritual Action Plan at this time are...”



Week 4: Jesus on Prayer

Opening Questions

- How do you say something you have said many times and bring depth of meaning to it whether it be a prayer, word, phrase, song, etc.?
- Have you ever received something new from something you have often repeated? Why do you think that is the case?
- How do you typically recite or read the Lord's prayer, assuming you do? What does this tell you?

Readings

- Matthew 6:9 – 13 and Ending Blessing (for yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory...)

SAP Input

Much like my review of a few Scripture passages in the preceeding weeks, there are so many potentially powerful words and phrases you often say but gloss over their true meaning and sometimes lessons. For example, let's say you are cheering for your team with a common song or phrase. Here in southwestern Ohio, during football season, you often say, "Whodey, whodey, whodey think gonna beat them Bengals, noooooobody!". This can be shortened to a simple "Whodey" when passing by someone sporting a far too expensive jersey. Not to insult you fans of pro sports, but what when you think about it, you really are simply cheering for a common set of colors embodied in some laundry. The players change. The owners change (well, not in our case!). But the colors stay roughly the same.

That said, you wouldn't walk down the streets singing songs of praise to a nice mauve button down shirt with khaki pants in the same way. So, what do you really cheer for? You are cheering for the common experience. You are cheering for something that is in a small way ours in this region and not someone else's. You are cheering for yourself and pride (or happiness/glee) in what it means to be from around the city of Cincinnati.

Yet, you rarely think this deeply about the words or the meaning behind them. You might get a good feeling of connection, but that is all. Jesus did not want you to pray this way, but He did want to leave you with some common words and turns of phrase that are to go beyond a rote repeating and possible feeling of connection in what is commonly called the Lord's Prayer. Let's take a brief look at it from the point of view of your SAP and the deeper meaning items you can leverage.

Recognition

Our Father who is in heaven...

The prayer begins with a multifaceted recognition of at least three things. First, this prayer is from "you" emphasizing the brother/sisterhood of those saying it. Additionally, since Jesus is saying this prayer, He is emphasizing his inclusion in the Church family as one of you, your brother.

Next, this prayer is directed to the Father, i.e. God, in every sense of the word you can understand and articulate in the English language. This is not to box Him in with limited minds and words, but to emphasize his place as above all AND in all in keeping with the theme of the first paragraph, the head of the family.

Third, Jesus recognizes that the Father is in heaven. Again, this is not a limiting statement but one that indicates his proper place as above his creation as its creator.

Praise

Hallowed be your name...

Hallow means to set apart and honor or venerate as holy. Holy is something fully separate, above, beyond, and outside of your control.

Your name is indicative of God's entire essence and the energies that emanate from Him. It is not simply a name like Kevin or Harry, but it connotes the fullness of Kevin or Harry's being, but in this case God, the Father.

In short, when you repeat these words, you are building upon what you recognized and calling a "spade a spade" meaning you are calling God what He truly is with your words and in keeping with Jesus' theme in the Sermon, your heart.

Will and Connection

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven...

Jesus now provides you with something a bit more to indicate about the Father in that He is over a kingdom making him its king and ruler. As the king, emphasizing his will being done over and in his kingdom is a phrase of praise. You will also notice that Jesus emphasizes this kingdom is of earth and heaven, both are his creation and he rules over both.

For our SAP purposes, you have learned thus far to praise God and see your connection to Him in a familial way. Now you get a connection sense of your responsibility as part of his family, seeing that his will is done in you, on earth, and wherever you may be. An interesting translation side note offered only because it may help you read/say this prayer anew, is that "on earth" can be translated as "in earth." What are you made up of in your original creation and even now? You got it...earth, dirt, soil, dust. This is a part of the prayer where you ask our Father to work in you to transform your will, the things you want and desire, to be in alignment with his both now and in the unseen realms.

Our Needs

Give us this day our daily bread...

Connect this to what Jesus says about worry. God knows what you need before you ask but as our Father, our Papa, He loves to hear you recognize it and ask for it. This is our daily bread and

includes things like nutrition, but it also includes everything and anything you need to fulfill his will as He guides you to do so.

Understanding these true needs may come easily to you at certain times in your lives and may take some contemplative and prayerful searching at others. The key from a SAP perspective is that you are seeking out these needs and working at your best to be able to articulate them to God.

Forgiveness

Forgive us our debts as you forgive our debtors...

We are going to intentionally pass over any debate on the words trespass versus debt versus iniquity versus sin, etc. For our purposes, you are asking God, our Father, the King directly because you messed up and ran a bit amok. This is no small thing! Think of it from the ruler of a country/king perspective, asking for forgiveness for erring could result in jail or death if the ruler sees fit in his will.

What's more, He is liable to ask some questions about your request for forgiveness that can get uncomfortable because it is his right to do so. What did you do wrong? How do you know it was wrong? Whom did you hurt? How did it make you feel? What are you going to do differently in the future? Oh, my, asking forgiveness could get a bit messy if God wants it to...but, He doesn't do this to make you feel bad but to help you learn because He is the perfect judge with every right to do so.

When it comes to you forgiving those who may have messed up against you, you are not only asking for the strength to forgive them, which will help them for sure, but you are also asking for the freedom forgiving others brings to yourself. Maybe you are called to ask some of the probing questions God is likely to ask of you, but you should keep in mind you don't do so from a point of perfect control, love, and judgment, but from the same plane of error with which your brothers and sisters reside upon.

Forgiveness is prismatic, offering many different views depending on the angle and light within which you are looking at it. Keep this in mind as you create your first SAP and see what place it might hold for you.

Temptation and Deliverance

And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one...

Hmmm...should you cover the apparently easy or hard part of this section of the prayer first? Let's take the easy approach...Father, don't let the Lower Power overcome You, the Higher Power within you. Wait a minute?!? You thought this was the easy part of it, but by asking this aren't you making the assumption that the Evil One can hold some sort of control or sway over The Perfect One? No, you are not insinuating this, rather, you are expressing a full-fledged faith in God's power to do what you need Him to do throughout this prayer without you articulating it. Think about it from the beginning of the prayer, God is the Father, our Father specifically. His will is going to be done because He is the king, there is no question about this. He is going to provide your needs and forgive you when you mess up. No question about this. Similarly, He will always overcome and overwhelm any thwarting of the Evil One.

Now, the other part about not bringing you into temptation. Why would God do this? Isn't it said that God cannot be tempted and does not tempt? How does this compute? Keep it simple...God knows what you need before you ask Him. This is a reminder to you, the supplicant, of this incontrovertible fact. Without going too far, it might be helpful to put in your mind a few descriptions of the God as He reveals himself in Scripture. He says He created, redeemed, sustained, and provides in accordance with his will. While He is clearly in creation (you included), He is not of it, that is, subject to the same rules with which He the creator imbued within it.

One of the things He created and maintains is this thing you sense and call time. One moment leading to another moment with some things having happened in previous moments (the past) and some likely to happen in upcoming moments (the future). He is an eternal being existing

outside, in his essence, of this thing you call time which seems to be master of all of you. Well, it is not master of Him. He sees things wholly differently than you do or even can.

In this one example of his character, He shows you that things you often brand as incontrovertible in and of themselves are not so for God. Temptation to Him is quite different. It is not something He wants to emanate from the devil nor is it something he wants to have impact you. Look at this part of the prayer as his reminder to you, the pray-ers, of these facts and a call to step up to the faith He wants you to express.

Blessing

For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever...amen.

Jesus did not say these words in the prayer, but it is a traditional way to close it for many. It is a solid end of the prayer, like the shutting of a nice, leather bound back cover of a book, reminding you of what you have prayed. Our Father is in charge and worthy of being so. The simple word, “amen”, means “let it be”. If you close the prayer this way, remind yourself of what you have said and that it will be so in your life and the lives of your brothers and sisters.

Conclusion

And now, thusly begins your retrospection and contemplation. There are many good articles and books to research this prayer further. The above is to get you started and point you toward action you may be called to take in the consolidation of your initial SAP. Thank Jesus for showing you the way and reminding you of the key points of this prayer.

Contemplation Questions

1. What sticks out to you from a close look at the Lord’s prayer?
2. Do you feel compelled to include it in your daily prayers? Or, a part of it?
3. Keeping with the theme of asking Jesus what He meant, is there anything you would ask Him to tell you about further? Maybe you should ask Him?

Your SAP

“The things I want to remember as I create my own Spiritual Action Plan at this time are...”



Week 5: Message to the Churches

Opening Questions

- What does it mean to you to be part of a group or team?
- How do you feel when the team all does well?
- How do you feel when some of the team does well and others do not pull their own weight?
On this later point, how do you know and what do you typically do?

Readings

- Revelation Chapters 2 and 3

Guidance to the Churches SAP Input

It can be a challenge and a joy to be part of a team. A challenge when the team is coming together, setting goals, and preparing to perform. A joy when the preparation and hard work is seen in action.

When I was in Junior High he was on a very challenging and joy-filled (eventually) soccer team. The players each had some individual talent, but they did not respond very well to the coaching. My Pops, Harry, was the Assistant Coach while a man I will call Robert was the Head Coach. The team had a very hard time responding to Robert's guidance for a variety of reasons...they were in Junior High and were more headstrong than soccer field wise to begin with, Robert had a very crusty personality until you got to know him, and no one on the team really stepped up to lead.

Practices usually devolved into a series of laps around the field because no one would listen to Robert. Because of work duties, Pops would often show up late still in suit and tie from the day to be left with a frustrated head coach and a bunch of young teenagers running around the field with very poor attitudes. Harry inserted himself to make peace as he could, but the time soon passed and practice would end with very few individual skills explored and almost no team coherence. It showed in the results on the field on Saturdays for games with a poor record and a

tendency for Robert to be ejected by the referees as his frustration led to outbursts against everyone and everything.

At the end of the season, Robert, to his credit, still saw something in the team that others did not. He entered the team into a tournament where everyone expected a quick exit. Lo and behold something happened. We (Kevin and Harry) cannot quite put our finger on it, but all of that talent emerged into a cohesive unit that ended up winning the tournament. There were high fives and pats on the back all around.

In the early days of The Way, you imagine things were similar. There were lots of individual ideas on how to promote these things Jesus had taught while on earth and, from the glimpse you have in Revelation lots of challenges that were met with various levels of success in Jesus' eyes as He looked on. The churches were founded and growing up in individual cities all around the Mediterranean Sea including in Asia Minor or what is now mostly Turkey. Jesus had a special message for these churches that the Spirit gave to John and he recorded in Revelation with lessons for each of you to consider in your own Spiritual Action Plans and the Plans for your church homes today.

Let's take a look at the themes Jesus communicated via commendations/"at a boys", criticism, and promises for the present and the future.

Commendations

Faithfulness

Jesus was complimentary of several of the churches' faithfulness to Him. These churches knew the Gospel, preached it, and lived it among themselves as a community of believers and in the broader community they live in.

What a joy it must have been to be called faithful. You can imagine the listeners thinking back on the things they were learning not just through Sunday instruction but through the lessons of

life. You must remember that any New Testament writings they had were limited in scope so some may have even wondered about Whom they were being faithful to. The Spirit was certainly working in these early believers for Jesus to say this in individual ways in their hearts and daily practices.

Love

Again, not knowing what Scriptures they had seen and contemplated they certainly knew the importance of love in the stories of Jesus, in the Law and Prophets, and in their own lives. They likely held onto some early creedal statements like John 3:16 as you know it today and had many discussions on how they as believers in Christ could love the world as God did through his entering the world frail but exiting in the most shockingly powerful way possible.

Receiving this from Jesus directly as He watched from Heaven and guided them through the Spirit is enough to put a skip in anyone's step!

Works

You have heard that faith without works is dead, but the word faith itself in Hebrew includes a connotation of acting in trust to what is stated to be believed. It is not an intellectual ascent only...from the beginning, this word means being in action in adherence to what one believes.

The early Christians would have believed in One God in Three Persons who created, sustained, and redeemed the world. If they believed this deeply and fully (as you should today also), how great were the works that they would have felt confident in doing by their hands, with their lips, and through prayer in their hearts? If God is indeed in charge, as He is, then the confidence to act with this knowledge flows naturally into thinking and doing.

The depth of joy that Jesus Himself recognized their works, no matter how seemingly meager, certainly provided a bulwark to prop up the faith and love these early believers so earnestly possessed.

Endurance

As the beginning of a much more recent famous book states, “it was the best of times and the worst of times.” Jesus never promised an easy road to walk, but He did promise sufficient strength for the journey.

Endurance embodies two things: a patient waiting upon God and his timing for his will combined with an active walking of the path with one foot in front of the other without full knowledge of what might be around the next bend.

Practicing endurance in the visage of earthly life and death is what Jesus asked and is made possible by the strength He provides these early believers and you today.

Criticisms

Falling Away

Jesus is the truth and certainly speaks it. He had to note that some of the churches were falling away and giving into some apparent early heresies related to “fitting in” with the society of the time, namely, idolatrous practices and sexual immorality. Without going too deep on interpretations of what these things actually were, remember the Law of the New Covenant. It begins with sin being in our hearts before it ever leads to actual action.

As a believer in these cities, you can imagine a range of emotions in the new believers when they heard these words of Jesus. First, they likely felt some misplaced anger at Him for moving so quickly into things they need to change as they grasped at straws of ego and self-will. Second, you can see an honest recognition and acceptance of the truth of their falling away even if it was “just” in their heart. Third, surrender, confession, and repentance hopefully followed as their thinking and ways needed to be amended before God.

You can see someone standing up and saying to the group, “Often times, good medicine tastes bad, but will have good results. The Great Physician is trying to heal you if you will only let Him.”

Can you say this today in your own life?

Repentance

The Greeks have a great word for repentance, metanoia. It has the connotation of a continuous turning from one thing and to another. This is what Jesus wants, these believers, and you today, to be turning always toward Him.

The turning can begin inside of you and lead to outward action, or, it can begin with outward action and lead to a change of heart. The decision is often unconscious, but the decision leads to the metanoia Jesus desires as you cooperate with Him in bringing his kingdom into earth as it is in the heavenly realms.

Stand Firm

Building upon endurance, tough times were mentioned for the early churches. Acts describes these as does our reading from Revelation. The prince of this world (satan, the devil, the lower power) hates what Jesus is doing and is certain to tempt, test, and rage against the churches and the believers.

Jesus encourages through criticism to do everything that can be done to stand firm, repent and amend wicked ways, and stay true to the message that the believers and you should hold onto so dearly.

Promises

Being Fed

Jesus will feed you with manna from heaven! What a packed promise He makes. He knows you need to be fed physically and spiritually and promises to do so as He did with the Israelites in the desert under Moses. Stay true, repent, and this will be added to you.

Being Clothed

As well, you will be clothed by Christ! You will be adorned in garments that go beyond anything beautiful you can imagine here on earth. These garments are of pure white as they contain the light of God Himself within them. This is a joyous promise that you can take hope from as you stand firm and endure.

Being in Union with God

A rock with a unique name for you to know only...if this is all you had to go on in terms of God's delight and desire for union with each of you individually, it would be enough. Think about it, though you are a speck of sand on a beach or a mist in a storm, He knows you individually and cares for you enough to want to give you a unique gift that is to be for Him and for each of you only.

You don't serve a nameless void of creative energy as some of the traditional eastern religions propose, but a personal God who knows you better than you know yourself and experiences joy in you coming to recognize and rely upon this fact.

Conclusion

I encourage you to use your imagination combined with the themes Jesus illustrated to the early churches in your own life's experiences. Put yourself in one of these early churches. Imagine what your life was like as you tried to harmonize your vocation, family, friends, and new church teammates. You suspect there were things you were worried about and not sure how to handle. Imagine what it would have felt like to have Jesus addressing you, your city, your church, and

your fellow believers directly. Scary for sure! But, it could also have felt encouraging. Maybe you heard something in your imagination that you need to focus on personally. Ponder this. Maybe you heard something that you would have done for your church. Ponder this too. Take this imagination journey and apply it to where you are today as Jesus continues to see and will for you in the Spirit.

Contemplation Questions

1. If Jesus were to sit you down, what would He tell you to keep doing?
2. What would He tell you to repent and change?
3. What promises can you leverage from these readings in your own imagination to strengthen your hope in Him?

Your SAP

“The things I want to remember as I create my own Spiritual Action Plan at this time are...”



Week 6: Crafting Your SAP Version 1

Have you ever gone on a trek or vacation only to arrive and say to yourself, “Now, what?” All of the research, dreaming, and planning came to fruition but everything you have scheduled to do doesn’t start until tomorrow. What do you do with the suddenly available time to make it a meaningful part of your memories? You could read, go out to eat, walk around a bit, turn on the TV, or just sit there and do nothing. All could be worthwhile and a little downtime is likely not a bad thing.

Now that you have made it this far on looking through different ideas from the Bible possibly pointing you in some directions for your SAP, answering some tough questions along the way, and hopefully recording your thoughts on this journey, now is not the time to kick back and relax. So, the TV option and the nothing options are off the table. Reading more right now likely falls into this category. That leaves you with some walking and some nourishment which is exactly what is called for right now. Grab a moderate, healthy bite to eat, clear your mind, and even pray a bit and then jump right back into the task at hand...creating your own personal SAP.

Let me break the steps down for you. Don’t overthink it. The key principle is to keep it simple and actionable. If you make it so and build it into your regular life rhythm, you will have opportunities to adjust it.

Step 1: Review Your Notes

- Go back through the answers to your questions from the previous weeks’ assignments (remember that journal I asked you to keep handy!). Just familiarize yourself with them. Make no judgments but add anything new that comes to mind.

Step 2: Ask God

- Commit this effort to Him. Surrender your will to Him and ask for his guidance so that you can have a close more pleasing union with Him, for Him, for you, and for creation.

Step 3: Sketch It Out

Draft out the major thematic categories such as you saw early on in the Big Goals across yourself spiritually, mentally, socially, and physically. Here are some suggestive core areas to contemplate, but do not take these as authoritative or exhaustive. No doubt you have identified more of these and have used different words if you have worked the steps in this guide and kept yourself open to the Spirit's guidance. Do not think you need something in each core area category on your SAP.

- Prayer
- Scriptural Reading
- Family/Friends
- Service
- Physical Body
- Mind Care (Senses, Emotions, Attitudes, Reason, Memory, Imagination)
- Choose three to five list items from your notes that correspond to each thematic categories (so, total of 21 – 35, no more). Rinse and repeat until you have things pared down.
- Once you have things pared down, go back through and get it down to one to two items per thematic category. Remember, this is just your first go around at this. You will be able to tweak things in flight and revise things periodically. Give yourself a chance to actually make some changes you see that are important.

Step 4: Put It Aside

- Walk away. Go to sleep. Talk it through with someone (spouse, friend, pastor, etc.). Go back into a nonjudgmental approach and just make notes.
- After this, go back through it one more time. Rewrite it if necessary to match your thinking and language.

Step 5: Action Planning and Action

- Now, take each of your list items and turn it into a to do for the next 24 hours. For example, let's say you have something akin to Pray – Pray Deeply and Daily. Turn this into a specific, measurable task of “Today: Take a step outside and pray for three minutes before breakfast, after lunch, and after dinner.” Put it on your calendar and start doing it.

Step 6: Monitor and Tweak

- Keep turning your list into daily actions and see how you do. Ask yourself, do I need to change something? Does everything feel right? Am I having a hard time sticking to a particular task? Simply do a little analysis.
- After this, make the tweaks to your list and action planning and give it another shot.

Step 7: Relaxed Review

- Every month for the time being, go back through your notes, list, and action plans. For now, just get these things on whatever calendar application you leverage.

Step 8: Begin Anew

- Repeat the necessary steps above and begin anew.

Keep in mind, these first several versions are about progress and not perfection (actually, all of them are like this!). Get things down on paper and get things into motion.

Depending on what you are doing, you may need to talk with those around you about it and its impacts, make adjustments to how you spend your time in other areas of your life (which should be the goal over time anyway), and perform other visible acts which may need some explaining (no need to go into depth unless called to do so though).

Sample Personal SAP for April 2026

Do not feel the need to copy this in anyway! I certainly debated including it, but ultimately thought the risk was worth the reward if it helps someone take the first step.

It is presented only as a starting point for your own SAP. If you have diligently worked through this little treatise, God will have prepared you for a starting point in creating your own...as you do so, simply use this as an inspirational example offered without the need for judgment on your part. Take what works for you and leave the rest. All that needs to be revealed to you for your journey will be in his time.

April Big Themes

- Prayer.
- Virtuous life and holiness.
- Service.
- Family love.
- Physical wellbeing.

April Big Goals

- Prayer: Pray constantly. Incorporate small prayers to embrace his presence throughout the day. Have several times of quiet throughout the day to focus exclusively on talking with my friend, God.
- Holiness: Strive ceaselessly to do the right thing. Focus on surrender to his will and then doing the next right thing in the right way for those around me. Use his example and spend the month in the Gospels as many times as allowed.
- Serve: Spread the Word as He provides the opportunity.
- Social: Be engaged with small groups and share in the fellowship of those striving to incorporate Him into our lives.
- Family: Continue the journey of interdependence, doing those things that make you all better together than you ever could be apart.
- Tent Care: Don't take myself too seriously and have fun!
- Other: Be diligent and disciplined in all I do or say waiting upon Him as I beseech Him for this presence, instruction, and guidance.

April 1 Actions

- Prayer
 - Leverage the Jesus Prayer (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner), Brother Lawrence (God, all of me is yours. Do with me as you will.), and my Freedom Prayer (Lord, free from the tyranny of the past, the worry and fear of the future, and the attachment of the present) throughout the day in my mind.

- Pray 5 specific times each day (pull aside if necessary, the restroom is an okay place to do this). Before the feet hit the floor, during my run/bike, midday, evening, prior to closing my eyes.
- Think through and express thanks to God. Start with the fact that I'm not on fire at the moment and build from there.
- Read a Psalm or two daily and rewrite it in my own words developing my own psalter to refer to...see where this goes.
- Holiness
 - Memorize Peter's list and look for opportunities to employ these actions.
 - Fan the flames of joy in my heart so that I always have a positive countenance and a smile for every creature I meet.
 - Conduct daily times of Stillness reading Scripture and other writings from Church Fathers.
- Serve
 - Keep my eyes open for the small things I can do like holding the door, picking up trash, helping in meeting prep/tear down.
 - Pray diligently for the right attitude to be in me so that I can prepare and work according to his will in writing and teaching.
- Social
 - Plan for attendance and find a small group near my house of like-minded folks looking for fellowship to grow in our programs of recovery.
- Family
 - Keep up the daily check in discipline with m wife (Mood, Goals, and Gratitudes).
 - Develop plans for the weekend that will be engaging for the whole family.
- Tent Care
 - Have fun in lifting, running, and biking time making it to the old cemetery and waterfall I found on the map for some moments of peace.
- Other
 - Small tasks include writing, cleaning, preparing for long bike journey tomorrow, phone calls, texts, emails, and medical records review.

April 15 Review

- Review how I did against my goals mentally at the end of the day.
- Write down in my journal anything that sticks out as a key lesson or new task but don't feel compelled to do so.

April 30 Review

- At the end of the month, with calendar, journal, and SAP in hand, review progress against Big Goals and adjust as called my daily activities.



Week 7: Reflection, Contemplation, Action

You should be done with the first version of your Spiritual Action Plan and supporting daily actions in whatever format you thought best. Congratulations!

Before you really launch it into action (no doubt, you have started a few of the items on your Plan...I see you and pray for you!), now is the time to instill another discipline, namely, reflection and contemplation on the SAP itself and your observations of your own thoughts and reactions to it.

Schedule some time by yourself and/or in preparation for your small group meeting and think through the following questions...

- What did you find easy about crafting your SAP? What was difficult? Why do you hypothesize that is?
- What did you like about the SAP process?
- What is the biggest barriers to implementing it and how are you going to overcome these?
- Are there things you want to study more in Scripture for your next version?
- Speaking of your next version, do you have a day/time on your calendar to review and reflect on this one in action before creating the next one?
- How are you going to hold yourself accountable to it?
- If you do fall off of the water wagon for a day or two, how will you get back on it and not let the slip up become habitual?
- Do you have any other thoughts you want to capture or things you want to dedicate prayer time to as you get started?

Reflect. Contemplate. Breathe. Pray. Put it into action!



Transitional Thoughts

I labeled this closing section “transitional” as that is the state you are in with your SAP. I encourage you to receive the sap of the vine which you have so majestically been grafted into and truly make this more of a “transformational” opportunity to transcend what you have perceived as your own limitations in the past. I pray you are freed from these thoughts as well as worries and fears of the future so you can live for and with Him in the Spirit in the present.

Practically speaking, you should have a set of daily tasks and a large set of priorities that are guided by the Spirit and that, if you follow through on them, will begin to change your spiritual, mental, and physical nature. Take this opportunity and give it a shot...the only thing you have to lose is a lesson not learned from whether you succeed or fail.

If you have been working this in a small group, hold each other accountable. If on your own, find someone else, if you have not already done so, to help hold you accountable. I likely cannot help with this physically, but you certainly can virtually via our email address: yourspiritualactionplan@gmail.com. Drop me a line and I will get back to you with thoughts, advice, support, or even celebration as you make progress. I'd welcome any feedback you have to offer also.

With all of the said...

May the Lord of All be with you as He surely is!

May you have eyes to see and ears to hear.

He waits upon you and you can assuredly wait upon Him also.

Accept the life-giving sap the Father offers,

Through the work of Jesus, his Son,

And the Spirit who lives within you.

He will be with you always to the end of your earthly days and the beginning of your heavenly ones.



Appendix 1: Possible Scriptural SAP Studies

There are myriad ways to go about continuing your SAP development journey. All of them point back to God and his Word but can emanate from your own curiosity, his leading, and discussions with others. Below is a list of possible SAP topics to study and structure and use as inputs into your own SAP furtherance or small group work. The list is not exhaustive, simply a starting point. Find a concordance, keep a running list, etc. but when you feel led, jump in and study as the fruits will emerge as you draw in more of the life giving SAP of his vine expressed through the Word.

10 Possible Study Topics (of many!)

- Paul's Fruits of the Spirit
- Themes in Psalms
- Themes in Proverbs
- Character Studies: for example, Moses, Daniel, Ezra, etc.
- Do's and Don'ts in Judges
- Key memory verses from each book of the Bible
- The devil's list of preferred vices and how to counter them
- The various names and titles of God
- Types of Biblical literature and why different styles were used
- Early creeds hidden in plain sight in Scripture

Appendix 2: You Can Make a Difference

Your Spiritual Action Plan is for you...at any given point, yours will reflect the leading of the Spirit and the situations you are facing in life. It is precious if you treat it as such.

The outcomes from the things you learn, say, and do through the actions you put into it will become apparent to others over time. This is not a prideful opportunity, but a good chance for you to share the reason for the hope that you have and live by...be prepared to do so when called upon! These words could make a difference in someone else's spiritual journey through life.

A few questions to have your own answers to include...

- What is a SAP? What is it to you?
- Why did you do one and continue to harmonize your life's discipline within it?
- How do you come up with one?
- What are the benefits?
- What are the keys to success and the pitfalls?
- What have you learned?
- How have you seen God working through you differently?
- How do you get started?

We'd love to hear about successes and struggles you have in these discussions as they emerge.

Drop us a line at yourspiritualactionplan@gmail.com.

Appendix 3: Bonus SAP List Materials

These two lists are presented as supplemental material for the effort to craft your first Spiritual Action Plan. Use them as opportunities to learn. Also leverage them as input into subsequent versions of your SAP. As you have stated, these are but two additional examples of the unending wealth of wisdom God offers you in Scripture if you are curious and simply seek it out.

Holy Greetings

Opening Questions

- How do you greet people typically? What do your greetings mean?
- How are you greeted by others? What do you think people mean by their words?
- Have you experienced a greeting from another that had depth of meaning to it? What was it? What did/does it mean?

Readings

- All of the first view verses from the 27 books (especially the ones called epistles addressed to people or churches) in the New Testament.

Greetings SAP Input

Taking an hour or so to read through all of the greetings/openings of these books is definitely worth the read. You believe you will come away with a sense of the depth, love, and meaning behind the words. Having never been directly inspired by the Spirit to write Scripture, you can only imagine what the original authors felt as they thought about their message and dictated or put down their words on (likely) papyrus. Certainly, they felt that the inspiration they were receiving was beyond the normal call to encourage someone and that it would have lasting impact, intended by God to be part of the unveiling of what He had worked out in the early part of the first millennium (as you see it today).

There are so many little nuggets to focus upon in these greetings. You will focus on but seven themes you saw that may inspire you in your SAP journey. To make it more real, these greetings are only 70 generations removed from Jesus Himself walking the earth. If you believe your

family has a little longer average life span than the typical generational calculation (say, 50 years), you are only 40 people removed from Jesus walking the earth. As a reference point, a “small” restaurant has a seating capacity of about 75 people. This should make you realize the encouragement and promises in these greetings are written for you, today, as much as they were 1900+ years ago!

So, our seven focal points for our current study are as follows...

- Narrative of Events
- Jesus and the Father
- Grace, Peace, and Faith
- Saints and Family

...let's spend a few minutes considering each in a larger context and how you can apply these in your own SAP.

Narrative of Events

What makes a story more memorable for most people than a series of facts? I think a story provides a compelling narrative that you can use to form a mental picture helping to see more of the ins and outs of the setting along with the critical factual components. For example, if I say there is a big tree on a hill you might picture all types of things that miss the key points I want you to take away. Instead, if I were to say something like, “It had been a long day filled with troubles at work and home. I took a leisurely walk up a gently sloping green grass covered hill toward the big oak tree and sat down with my back against it letting the cares of the day turn into thoughts on what I could have done differently.” From this short story setting, you get much more than a couple of facts and can even begin to feel compelled to enter into my story...what went wrong? Why am I showing stress about it? Why am I thinking about things I could have done differently? What am I going to think about next? All of these more critical facts to the overall story are now awaiting further explanation in your mind's mental precipice and you are more likely to remember the scene because you can relate to it.

Luke begins his Gospel by saying that he is out to put together a narrative for his dear friend Theophilus “an orderly account...so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” All of the Gospels have the elements of a story narrative describing actions and words but also locations and settings to paint a vivid mental picture of the critical elements of faith that Jesus presented while in his ministry on earth. They might teach theological and moral concepts, but they do so in a compelling, memorable manner.

Being able to weave together a story is certainly a gift some possess, but it is something all of you can get better at and may consider including in our SPA list if you are so inspired. You should be able to attract people to the story of Jesus not through intellectual and factual means alone (though these are important), but through the stories that are told in the Bible AND that are true for you in our own lives.

As an example, you can build a solid testimony of your faith by describing your life before Jesus, your conversion, and your life after Jesus. These don’t need to be flowery, but factual with key narrative elements people can see and feel in their minds’ eye. If you were raised a Christian, maybe the structure is more around what you were taught and how, the way you made it your own, and how you continue to grow daily in your walk.

Also, if you think about many of high points of faith in the Bible, quoting Scripture can be goodness and has its place. It can also be goodness if you take these high points and can relate the story of what the Bible says using your imagination for the setting along with a story or two on how you apply this in your life.

No matter how you look at it, the story is the message!

Jesus and the Father

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...” so Paul begins part of his message to the church at Ephesus. This is not the only mention of the Father and of Jesus as his Son. Jesus himself talks extensively on this unique relationship in the Gospels and especially in John.

Paul brings in the Spirit as well throughout his writings including the opening of Romans. Jesus demonstrated his relationship with the Spirit as He breathed onto the Apostles after his resurrection narrative in John.

This foundational understanding of the Trinity and its importance in understanding God as One and Three with no subordination or creation involved like you were is for another written effort, but it is foundational to our faith and has a special message for you in your SAP, namely, the importance of relationships in your being, your nature. If God himself is in equal partnership so should you be!

It is a great mystery for our understanding of God, but not so in our understanding of each other. You are created in his image and this means for you needing to be in relation to one another. Anthony de Mello (see the Appendix on Other Sources) relates the story of a tribe who's worst punishment to be meted out on someone is banishment from the tribe. So ingrained in their culture are relationships that to be banished means certain death. You see it as twofold in this regard: death of the person's spirit because of the loss of connection with others and the resulting physical death from the unfitness a single person has in survival. No human is an island. You need each other.

This brings you to you. You may have a full sense of your Spiritual, Mental, and Physical life components, but do you have as strong of a sense of the need for a robust and healthy relational, community connectedness in each of these elements? Ponder this by observing your thoughts and life in action. Are you placing others above yourself and serving them spiritually, mentally, and physically? This is a great lesson to incorporate into your Plans and Tasks as you reenvision your Christian, whole life.

Remember, love has no greater than this, that a person lays down his life (not just once, but daily) for the life of another.

Grace, Peace, and Faith

A little earlier in this section, you asked you to think about greetings you provide to others. Maybe they are meaningful, and maybe they are currently not, but the New Testament writers abound with heartfelt greetings of meaningful depth to their initial audiences...these still apply to you today. Let you consider each of these from a word origin and definitional point of view before you consider their application.

Grace

Grace can have various meanings in English. For me, it homes as being a gift from God to humanity (without respect to it being earned) but with a special intention. The special intention is our sanctification, repentance, or turning towards God. The gift does not have terms tied to it beyond acceptance and that acceptance bestows upon you a responsibility.

The Greek and Hebrew origins of the word, grace, have simple overtones of mercy, a gift, kindness, and goodwill embedded in them.

Peace

In English, peace drives toward tranquility and serenity. It has a specific focus on freedom...freedom from things that hinder including outward hostilities, but also inward focused things like ill-fitting emotions, thoughts, imaginations, etc.

Both Hebrew and Greek bring forth the same connotations as our English word. This word goes far beyond “no war”, and holistically embodies a state of being that is safe, free, and full of meaning.

Faith

English probably does the greatest disservice to the original Hebrew and Greek intent behind it. Yes, it means belief and confidence without proof, but it also implies obedience. Specifically, obedience to the higher power from which the worthiness of the faith manifests itself.

Faith in the broader sense leads to steadfastness in thought and in action. It is not only an intellectual or emotional consent, but implies something greater to emerge from the outset.

What are you to make of these words used in the opening greetings? I get the sense, and maybe you do too, that they are used with a great depth of meaning that does far beyond the “hi, how are you doing?” you might use in a simple email or when you see a coworker in the morning outside of the breakroom or on the job site. God wanted you to feel, know, and act upon this meaningful depth as you being to contemplate what you are about to read and be challenged with in the Scriptural book itself. He is setting you up from the beginning with not just mere assent but required and inspired action. Keep this in mind as you continue to contemplate their place specifically and more holistically on you SAP for being fully human as He intends.

Saints and Family

Several of the greetings you perused extended the olive branch of the identifiers related to believers in The Way (that is the early followers of Jesus before they were called Christians) being saints and sons or family members.

Saints can sometimes be reserved for men and women of holy renown recognized by a church authority for having lived a holy and uniquely gifted life on earth. The meaning extends to all of you, however, in being friends of God specifically blessed by Him as you do his will. Each day you seek to do his will in the way that He desires embodies this friendship in action.

As Jesus mentions in the Gospels, He has made you more than friends and servants of God, though. You have been grafted into the familial vine, made anew through his blood now flowing within you. You are not distant from God and He is not distant from you. He is our abba, papa, daddy in ways the best earthly parents can only hint at and our imaginations can scarcely envision. He wants to hold you, comfort you, challenge you, and see you grow and develop. This brings Him all worthy joy and He extends a taste of this bread of life to you as his children.

Keep these labels you have acquired in mind as you read further as they also denote responsibility placed upon you in our cooperative, sanctifying walk with Him in this life.

Conclusion

You hope the theme from this list journey is clear, namely, from the beginning of his New Testament words to you, He bestows upon you great gifts and teaches you important lessons. You each have a part to play in the unfurling of his will and a story to tell as you do so. You each have been blessed with realizations and labels with depth of meaning that you did not in anyway earn. Now that you have these, you have a corresponding duty to put them into action.

Contemplation Questions

1. What did you take away from this brief survey of the New Testament greetings?
2. Which parts stuck out to you that you needed to hear right now?
3. What parts do you want to stick out to you as you continue your walk with God?

Your SAP

“The things I want to remember as I create my own Spiritual Action Plan at this time are...”

Majoring in the Minors

Opening Questions

- Have you ever read the minor prophets (Jonah or Micah for examples)? What do you know about their messaging?
- Why do you think they are called the possibly derogatory term of, minor? What might be a better way to express their importance in God’s Word?
- What insights do you hope to gain for your SAP?

Readings

- All of the minor prophets and any introductory materials provided by your Bible (this is probably close to about 100 pages depending on the version you are using for planning purposes).

Prophetic SAP Input

Nahum once said to Obadiah, “Did you see the memo that you were getting paid by the word for our prophetic writings? Moses obviously did!” Haha, a little “minor” prophet humor, because...you know, Moses wrote the first five entire books of the Old Testament.

On a more serious note, the prophets who spoke God’s inspired words of truth during ~800s BC to ~400s BC had many things to say about Judah, Israel, and the surrounding countries that God wanted them to hear in the moment. They also had much to say that foretold and alluded to God’s plan to send Jesus to die and rise in humanity’s place on the cross for our sins and the promised gift of the Spirit that would then live within all believers.

The minor prophets are definitely worth studying in greater depth than they normally are in our Christian education circles. Specifically, they have five things to say about God and his ways that are highly applicable to your SAP. Let’s look at these five summary items from our perspective, and as you do, from your own reading, ask yourself if these are the most critical takeaways for your SAP development and eventual refresh.

First, God is over all of his creation and, no bones about it, in charge. Making this a possible action involves internalizing two perspectives...

- All of the seemingly urgent and important current events that happen should be considered with this in mind. Yes, God is still at work in the ebbing and flowing tides of the countries of our world. As you try and discern meaning from things outside of your immediate control, always consider his ultimate authority.
- The concept of God as creator and sustainer is worthy of research, contemplation, and meditation. Think about it, as the creator God invented things like time which you often consider marching unendingly forward. He is above and beyond and outside of this thing He created called time and can work in it as He sees fit. In your own life, know deeply that there is nothing He cannot say or do because He invented every single thing. Once you have this perspective firmly rooted in your psyche, use it.

Second, God has a plan and is not haphazard in his approaches. He will listen to you for sure and can even make adjustments based on our pleas. He is much more likely to do so if our

beseeking is within the flow of his willing. Knowing his will requires faith and prayer. You can't control his will and you certainly do not want to run counter to it, but you know enough to speak and act in ways that please Him as you avoid acting from our own desires for control which stem from selfish ego.

Third, God loves you and cares for you. He says this multiple times throughout Scripture and the minor prophets are no exception. Though He also is fully just in all He does, there will be downs in our lives, that are within the flow of his will, that pain Him more than they pain you. Talk to Him about these things. He wants to listen and be with you no matter the circumstance.

Fourth, God abhors and detests evil in all forms and magnitudes. He does not overlook things as "not that big of a deal" when you intentionally cut someone off in traffic as you put our needs above that of others. This is still detestable to Him. This should not worry you because of point three and the things in point five, but it should spur you to seek the virtuous life in understanding and in action. You cannot be perfect. No saint ever was, but you can constantly be striving to run away from selfish vice and to godly virtue.

Fifth, you ultimately show our commitment and response to God as He desires through acceptance of Him as He is (awareness) and recognition of our own sinful nature. We are called to repent which means deflation of our own egos, confession of our depravity, a sincere asking for forgiveness, and a continual and intentional turning to his ways of righteousness as He lays them out to us. Yes, this is a one time thing for our eternal salvation, but also implies, as the Greek's call it, and consistent metanoia in our lives (sanctification, turning toward Him, cooperation with Him, however you want to express it).

Conclusion

I don't really think the minor prophets hold the largess of Moses' writings against Him. They were raised on his writings and no doubt appreciated them. God had very important things for them to express in their earthly time that can still resonate for you today if you look for it. Take the time to do so and incorporate the lessons you have been gifted into your SAP.

Contemplation Questions

1. What are the summary themes that emerged for you? Why?
2. Is there one story that stuck out to you? Why?
3. How would you explain their message (that is, what God was and is trying to say through them) to someone with a limited knowledge of the Old Testament?

Your SAP

“The things I want to remember as I create my own Spiritual Action Plan at this time are...”