

Life Without Lack

Study Guide for Individuals and Groups

Session 1 – Opening Prayer and Introduction

General Guidelines and Suggestions

While the material presented by Dallas Willard in *Life Without Lack* is quite accessible to the thoughtful reader, it nonetheless calls for adequate time to read and digest, as well as for discussion in a group context. Groups will need to decide the best pace and how much material will be covered at each meeting. Some groups that meet weekly may decide to devote two weeks to each chapter. Others may meet less often and seek to cover an entire chapter when they meet. There is no right or wrong way. God will use a wide variety of approaches, as long as our hearts are open, and we devote sufficient time and energy. As Dallas often said, our redemption by God is not a matter of earning, but it does involve our grace-aided efforts.

The following guidelines were designed for groups of six to eight people and two-hour sessions.

Finally, you are encouraged to read over each session's questions *prior to* reading the associated chapter. This will allow you to be alert to the questions that are being asked.

Opening (30 minutes)

Begin each session with these three activities:

1. Slow recitation of Psalm 23.
2. Reading of Dallas's Opening Prayer (xiii), followed by 30 seconds of silence.
3. Brief "Response Reports": Each person shares a brief, 2–3-minute statement of how the chapter affected them and what kind of personal response it seemed to call for. These are not, at this time, for discussion, but simply as a way of becoming reoriented to the material and encouraging everyone to engage in the discussion to follow.

Discussion (60 minutes)

Using the questions of the Study Guide as the basis for discussion, allow each member the opportunity to share his or her response to each question. There will normally be four to seven questions for each chapter, so plan on spending an average of ten to fifteen minutes per question.

Conclusion (30 minutes)

End each session with these two activities:

1. Each person identifies one thing they would like God's help with in relationship to that week's topic. Like the Response Reports, these should be brief, 2–3-minute statements, allowing everyone the opportunity to share. If someone is unsure what they need help with, that in itself is worthy of help!
2. Either the leader or someone chosen for that week will close in a general prayer appropriate to the material discussed.

Opening Prayer (xiii)

Personal Study

Imagine that you have come to listen to Dallas teach on the Shepherd Psalm. After a few words of greeting, Dallas announces that he is going to pray. He says you can bow your head or keep it upright, you can close your eyes or leave them open. All that matters is that you listen, that you open your heart to the God with whom he is going to speak on behalf of everyone who is gathered together at that time. With this image in mind, pray-read the prayer found on page xiii, out loud and slowly, as Dallas prayed it on the first night of the set of talks that form the substance of the book in your hands, *Life Without Lack*.

After the prayer, you may want to simply sit in silence for a few moments. What comes to mind? How have the words of Dallas's prayer touched you? Write down your thoughts here.

Group Discussion – First Meeting

If you are going through the book in a group, you may have decided to begin your sessions by having one person pray the prayer out loud, followed by a time of silence. At the first session, the group may want to have each member share their written thoughts, or what came to mind at the moment.

Introduction (xv–xxii)

1. "One of our greatest needs today is for people to really see and really believe the things they already profess to see and believe. Knowing about things—knowing what they are, being able to identify them and say them—does not mean we actually believe them. When we truly believe what we profess, we are set to act as if it were true. Acting as if things are true means, in turn, that we live as if they were so" (xv).

As Dallas goes on to point out, "'The Lord is my Shepherd' is a sentiment carved on tombstones more often than a reality written in lives" (xvi). As you consider more generally what you think about God, what are some things you know you are supposed to profess, but are not so sure you really believe? What is it about the way you live that raises doubts? Do you have some ideas as to why there may be discrepancies in your life?

2. On pages xvii-xx, Dallas offers brief comments on each of the phrases that make up Psalm 23. His observations are made from the perspective of one who actually believes—and knows by experience—what the psalmist claims. Read prayerfully through these, asking God to speak to you, and make note of one or two that particularly stand out as relevant to you, either because of your familiarity with the experience, or because you wish it were true.

3. On page xxi, “A life without lack” is audaciously defined by Dallas as “a life in which one is completely satisfied and sustained, no matter what happens. *No matter what happens!*” He explains: “It’s not merely a matter of gritting your teeth and hanging on. It is a matter of real provisions directly from God to you.” Be honest—does this strike you as hyperbole? Why? Can you imagine (or have you ever experienced) “God’s abounding goodness and power *in conditions of complete desolation*”? What kind of provision from God do you need right now? Write that down ... and then ask God to give you what you need, and to use this book to help you taste his sufficiency.

4. As Dallas describes it, Psalm 103 is “an exuberant celebration of God’s sufficiency and abundant goodness” (xxii). After reading through verses 1–5, make your own list of God’s benefits that the psalmist encourages us not to forget. Then think about and write down the things that tend to cause you to forget them. What ways have you discovered that help you remember them?

Conclusion

Identify one thing you would like God’s help with in relationship to the teachings in this chapter, and one truth from it that you are particularly thankful for. Be sure to thank God for that!

Session 2

Chapter 1: God in Himself, Part 1: The Glorious, Self-Sustaining, Eternal Being of the Shepherd

Opening (30 minutes)

1. Slow recitation of Psalm 23.
2. Reading of Dallas's Opening Prayer (p. xiii), followed by 30 seconds of silence.
3. Brief "Response Reports": Each person shares a brief, 2–3-minute statement of how the chapter affected them and what kind of personal response it seemed to call for. These are not, at this time, for discussion, but simply as a way of becoming reoriented to the material and encouraging everyone to engage in the discussion to follow.

Discussion (60 minutes)

1. For Dallas, the portal into the experience of Psalm 23 is our mind: "In his goodness, God has arranged things so we are able to use our minds to understand and enter his glorious and plentiful kingdom" (1).

How much confidence do you have in your own mind—your ability to think and imagine and grasp truth in general, and about God in particular? What has affected your confidence?

2. "The ultimate freedom we have as individuals is the power to select what we will allow or require our minds to dwell upon and think about. . . . The focus of your thoughts significantly affects everything else that happens in your life and evokes the feelings that frame your world and motivate your actions. . . . We have the ability and the responsibility to keep God present in our minds, and those who do so will make steady progress toward him" (3).

What do you find yourself thinking about most of the time? What has been your experience in keeping God present in your mind? What makes that difficult?

3. "Anger and desperation run deep in ordinary human life, which is why people provoke one another the way they do. This fury and despair flow from the hopelessness of their situation. Yet there is every reason for hope if they would just stop looking at themselves and look at God instead. But how do we learn about God? Primarily through the message that came in and through Jesus Christ" (5).

Dallas goes on to discuss the centrality of the gospel in our thinking about God. He describes two different ways of understanding the message of the gospel. What are they? How has your own understanding of the gospel affected the way you think about God and how you live your day-to-day life?

4. In the remainder of the chapter, Dallas is focusing upon the magnificence and grandeur of God as revealed in nature and in God's actions in history. What characteristics of God does he focus upon, and how does being mindful of these aid our experience of a life without lack? OR . . .

On page 19 Dallas states, "It is important to embrace that God's moral absolutes as loving, beneficent, and generous flow out of the plenitude of his being." What is "the plenitude of his being" and what is the relationship between God's goodness toward us and his own absolute self-sufficiency?

Conclusion

Identify one thing you would like God's help with in relationship to the teachings in this chapter, and one truth from it that you are particularly thankful for. Be sure to thank God for that!

Session 3

Chapter 2: God in Himself, Part 1: Living in Mindfulness of Our Magnificent God

Opening (30 minutes)

Same as previous weeks

Discussion (60 minutes)

1. Dallas opens chapter 2 with these words: "Psalm 23 begins with what is surely one of the most audacious assertions in the English language: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.' When you first read this thoughtfully you may be tempted to think, *Is this guy living in the real world?*" If you had to choose only one thing about our world that makes it most difficult for you to believe the psalmist's claim, what would it be?

2. "It's the problem of wrong ideas. As someone said long ago, 'It ain't what we know that hurts us. It's what we know that ain't so.' All the things that we know about God that 'ain't so' destroy our lives, poison us, throw our lives out of kilter, and throw our bodies out of an appropriate relationship to reality. Wrong ideas about God make it impossible for us to function in relationship to one another. We are not able to love one another because we do not have our minds filled with an accurate vision of God" (25).

Can you think of a time in your life when a wrong idea about God has adversely affected you? Describe it and how a correct view of God turned things around for you.

3. The central, essential truth presented in this chapter is captured in these words: "There is absolutely nothing that God lacks. We must understand this, because the overflowing sufficiency that we will experience when Yahweh is our Shepherd lies in *the all-sufficiency of the Shepherd himself*. . . . What we need, God has—in infinite supply" (31).

What is it about our world and even ourselves that leads us to the belief in God's "all-sufficiency" in himself? (25–31)

4. If Dallas is right, it is possible for you to live without any kind or degree of fear. Why does he believe this? What fears do you have, and what is it about Jesus that, if you think long and deeply about him, will free you from those fears and free you to love with abandon? What place does Jesus play in gaining a deep trust in God's complete sufficiency to meet your every need? (31–40)

5. In Hebrews 12:22–24 we are given a vision “the reality of heaven” (41). What would it mean to your sense of hope, contentment, and fearlessness if this vision of your “location” were to captivate you?

6. If you have not already done so, slowly, thoughtfully, prayerfully read Dallas's “Brief Meditation” on Psalm 23 found on pages 47–48, asking God to speak to you through it. What came to mind as you did?

Conclusion

Identify one thing you would like God's help with in relationship to the teachings in this chapter and one truth from it that you are particularly thankful for.

Session 4

Chapter 3: Why There Are People on Earth

Opening (30 minutes)

Same as previous weeks

Discussion (60 minutes)

1. At the beginning of chapter 3, Dallas poses several questions to you personally: "We believe that people are valuable. But why? Why are *you* valuable? Why are you something that ought to exist, and why is it right that others should help you exist and reach your potential? And why would the magnificent God who created the universe want to be in a personal relationship with you and be your Shepherd?" (50–51). Before reading the chapter, in a sentence or two answer these questions here. You will have the opportunity to answer them a second time after reading the chapter (see question 10).

2. Again, Dallas asks and answers a similar question, this time regarding people in general: "What is it that makes human beings so precious?' It is this: they are capable of being faithful to God and committed to the promotion of good in the world. They are capable of giving their lives for these things, even to the point of dying for them" (56). He expands on this with words both hopeful and sobering: "We have the potential to create something incredibly precious and good, and God is going to bring it to pass. If we miss our chance to participate with him, we miss our chance, but he is not going to be defeated in this. He is going to create a community of loving, creative, intelligent, loyal, faithful, and powerful human beings, and they are going to rule the earth. It is going to come to pass. If you want to be a part of that, just get on board" (57).

What is the effect on you of reading both that you have "the potential to create something incredibly precious and good" and that we can miss our chance to do so?

3. "The obviously well-kept secret of the 'ordinary' is that it is made to be a receptacle of the divine, a place where the life of God flows" (58).

Do these words describe your day-to-day experience? If so, give an example. If not, you may also struggle with doubts about the importance of your place in the world. If you struggle, how does this affect such things as your motivation, energy, and joy?

4. In the section “The Importance of Our Work” (59–61), Dallas distinguishes between having a job and having work to do. What is the distinction, and can you identify the difference in your own life?

5. Speaking in relation to the sin of Adam and Eve, Dallas says that “the effect of the rupture that sin created in the relationship between the man and the woman is this: mistrust, anger, and disappointment became the standard quality of human life” (62–63). Does this strike you as overly pessimistic or as an accurate reflection of the world we live in? How has distrust affected your own relationships with God and with others?

6. “There is nothing that makes God happier than human beings, redeemed by the grace of God, devoting their lives—the moments and hours of their days—to the good of others and of creation, to the glory of God” (66). What are some ways that you can make God happy this week?

7. Thinking back to the first question in this session, what, if anything, might you change about the answers you gave there?

Conclusion

Identify one thing you would like God’s help with in relationship to the teachings in this chapter and one truth from it that you are particularly thankful for.

Session 6

Chapter 5: Trust in God: The Key to Life

Opening (30 minutes)

Same as previous weeks

Discussion (60 minutes)

1. In chapter 5 Dallas introduces us to “one of the three things that must be working within us before we can truly experience the sufficiency of God” (94). What are the components that make up this “triangle of sufficiency” as Dallas calls it, and what do you think about formulas that promise “Do these three things and everything will be okay”?

2. What is faith and how do we get it? Also, what are some examples of what we might call nonreligious faith? (94–99)

3. In your own words, define each one of “the three faiths of Job” and describe your own experience with it:
The Faith of Propriety (101–105)

The Faith of Desperation (105–107)

The Faith of Sufficiency (107–112)

Session 7

Chapter 6: Trust Completed in Death to Self

Opening (30 minutes)

Same as previous weeks

Discussion (60 minutes)

1. Dallas begins his discussion of death to self with these words: "In a day and age in which we hear far too much about self-fulfillment and self-promotion, this topic may not sound inviting" (124). Have you had any experience with books or talks or movements that promote your own fulfillment? If so, how did the instruction or guidance affect you and your life?

2. Consider these three statements found on page 127:

- "The nature of the death-to-self experience is that, if we have had the kind of revelation of God that Job had, it happens naturally."
- "Most people do not want God to meet them in that way because they are afraid of losing something they value."
- "Anyone who has had a very deep experience of the gospel . . . is likely, in a very unconscious way, to move toward the liberating truth of the death-to-self teaching."

Assuming that Dallas is correct in his observations, what is it about the gospel properly understood that allays our fears concerning fully surrendering our lives to God? Or put another way, what is the relationship between Job's experience and a person who has had "a very deep experience of the gospel"? How would you describe your own experience with the gospel?

3. "This is the essence of the death-to-self life: that we should no longer live for ourselves, but for him who died for us and rose again" (129). Why is it important that the death-to-self life be defined in this way, in contrast to understanding it as simply saying no to our wants and desires?

4. A central concern of the remainder of this chapter, developed in different ways, is to help us understand that human nature (“the flesh”) has desires that cannot be satisfied apart from God, and that our own well-being, contentment, and ability to thrive depend upon the choices we make to surrender our lives to God. Toward the end of the chapter, Dallas points out that this surrender must be both “once” and ongoing. Here’s what he wrote about the “once” part:

I was once asked if the death-to-self experience is a “once and for all” matter. We must certainly start with a “once,” when we give ourselves up to God, saying, “Lord, by your grace now I am going to surrender what I want to you. I am going to surrender my glory and my recognition and my power to you. Help me!” While the practical working out of this will be progressive, there must be a point in time when we give up our desires to God, and we say, “Lord, you can have anything.” (154–155)

Previous to this he discusses this surrender in terms of taking on the yoke of Christ and then acknowledges that our initial surrender to God might need to be repeated and ongoing:

It is not unusual to find ourselves slipping out from under the yoke, with the self clamoring for us to do this or have that. We may have thought we were fine with surrendering our selves completely, but then realize this is not the case. We should not be taken aback by this; such experiences can give us important insight into how the process of dying to our selves works. We come up against a desire and discover that we are not as willing to give it up as we imagined. This becomes an opportunity to repent and receive further instruction in humility, through the realization that we are more in the habit of getting what we want than we were previously willing to admit.

With these two passages in mind, how does the closing prayer by Charles de Foucauld (155–156) affect you? Have you ever prayed a similar prayer? If not, does it appeal to you? Why? If you have, what has been your ongoing experience with the surrender it represents? What have you discovered about your “flesh” and its desires as you seek to live a life “crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20)?

5. Having read this chapter, what do you understand is the relationship between trust in God and death to self? In other words, why does Dallas believe that trust is “completed in death to self,” as the chapter title states?

Conclusion

Identify one thing you would like God’s help with in relationship to the teachings in this chapter and one truth from it that you are particularly thankful for.

Session 8

Chapter 7: Sufficiency Completed in Love

Opening (30 minutes)

Same as previous weeks

Discussion (60 minutes)

1. For Dallas, all three components of “the triangle of sufficiency”—trust, death to self and love—are gifts from God given “to the willing, seeking heart through a process in which that willing and seeking is consistent, and even that is a gift” (157). Since this suggests that consistency is itself a gift, what if we’re not consistent in our seeking? Is that God’s fault or ours?
2. Before launching into his discussion of love, Dallas reviews and restates the relationship of trust and death to self (158–159). This is because our ability to love well depends upon death to self, which in turn depends upon trust. In Dallas’s words, “It is essential to remember that Jesus did not give himself up to God in death with an attitude of resignation. He gave himself up in faith, certain that he would rise again and that the kernel of wheat that fell to the ground would bring forth abundant fruit. Death to self is abandonment to God in faith. It is laying down the satisfaction of my desires with confidence in the greatness and plenitude of God” (158).
Why is it important not to confuse faith with resignation as we seek the life without lack? Do you find yourself more often in a state of resignation or of joyful trust?
3. As you read through the group of Scripture passages on love (160–162), take note of what stands out to you and what emotions or thoughts are stirred in you. Are the words more like mirrors in which you recognize your own experience, sign posts pointing to a desired destination, or warnings of impending judgment? Do they feel like the invitations of a loving father, or the condemnations of a stern judge?

4. In defining love, Dallas appreciatively refers to the discussion by John Oord, who distinguishes love from either desire or emotion (166–167). Why is it important that we make that distinction?

5. In spite of his agreement with aspects of Oord’s definition of love, Dallas believes he misses several essential features of love, central to which is the fact that “love is not an action; it is a source of action” (167–168) that arises from a certain kind of person. How would you describe that kind of person? (166–171)

6. “One of the hallmarks of those who live a life without lack is the freedom to serve others” (171). What is the relationship between faith, death to self, and love that makes this true, and how did Jesus demonstrate this freedom to his disciples? (171–175. See also the summary of the “triangle of sufficiency,” 184–185.)

7. As you read Dallas’s discussion of the practical realities of loving particular people in your life (176–184), what was helpful? What was challenging? Did you find yourself feeling hopeful or discouraged, empowered or exasperated? Why?

Conclusion

Identify one thing you would like God’s help with in relationship to the teachings in this chapter and one truth from it that you are particularly thankful for.

Session 9

Chapter 8: All the Days of My Life

Opening (30 minutes)

Same as previous weeks

Discussion (60 minutes)

Dallas Willard was a fan of experimentation in the spiritual life, for experimentation is a form of faith. To try an experiment in prayer or fasting or meditation or spending a day with Jesus is to trust God with the outcome. So, in the spirit of the Twenty-Third Psalm, use the following outline of chapter 8 to help you prepare for your day with Jesus. After each point, write a simple sentence that summarizes a key truth you want to remember as you make your plan. And as you do, keep this essential truth in mind: *“If we are with him, everything is taken care of”* (188).

Section 1: Preliminaries for Going on the Road with Jesus

1. Determining Your Desire (188–189)
2. In a Mirror, Dimly (190–191)
 1. Fact 1: It is okay to be who you are.
 2. Fact 2: What is true about you as a person is also true about your work.
3. Deciding to Do It (191–192)

Section 2: Preview of Things to Come

1. Strength to Please (192–194)
2. Joy and Confidence (194–195)
3. Loving Thy Neighbor (195)
4. Tag—He’s It (195–196)
5. Your Own Personal Super-Assistant (196)
6. Speaking and Hearing (196–197)

Section 3: The Plan

1. The Day Begins . . . at Sundown (198–199)

2. Rest in Faith (199–200)

3. The Day Dawns: Rising with Praise, Petition, and Planning (201–207)
 1. Praise (201–202)

 2. Petition (202–203)

 3. Planning: When Will I See You Again? (203–206)

 4. Honing Holy Habits (206–207)

4. The Day Unfolds (207–208)

5. The Day Concludes—with Grace-Drenched Reflection (209–211)

6. A New Day Begins, and a New Life (211–213)

Conclusion

Identify one thing you would like God’s help with in relationship to the teachings in this chapter and one truth from it that you are particularly thankful for.

If possible, it could be quite helpful—even delightful—for the group to gather again to allow each member who decided to spend a day with Jesus to share his or her experience.

Closing Prayer

On the final gathering of the group discussion of *Life Without Lack*, it may be especially meaningful to slowly and in unison pray the “Closing Prayer” found on page 214.