



Developing a Discerning Heart

God's Transforming Work in Our Lives



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Course Objectives

When you have completed this course, you will be able to

1. reflect on your relationship with God and describe some tools for deepening your relationship with him and relying on him for your growth in Christ-like character
2. articulate God's design for people created in his image and the damage resulting from man's sin and rebellion against God
3. describe what God accomplished for you through Jesus Christ, by his life, death and resurrection
4. explain your new identity as a child of God and give examples of ways that your new identity affects your thinking, emotions, and choices
5. convey the resources God has given you so that you can live your life in a way that pleases him
6. determine the false wells you have been relying on and commit yourself to turning to the true source of living water
7. evaluate lies you have been believing and exchange these lies for the truth of God
8. assess your growth in Christian character during your time of study
9. encourage other women to work through some struggles they may be having and apply truths from God's Word

Workbook Icons



Making It Your Own

These boxes contain a question or material that focuses on course content. Written responses are required and should be recorded in a separate notebook.



Personal Reflection

Reflections give an opportunity to reflect on scriptural truths or character traits as they relate to one's walk with God. The focus is on personal application. A written response may be requested.



Adoration

These instructions are designed to worship the Lord with reference to course content. The focus is on God. No written response is required.

Lesson 1: Foundations

Lesson Outline

Women of Discernment
God's Design
 Growth in Community
 Capacities of the Heart
 Motivating Force
Safeguards in Community

Lesson Objectives

When you have completed this lesson, you will be able to

1. summarize a biblical support for understanding yourselves and others
2. understand the importance of growth in community
3. distinguish the relationship of thirst to the three capacities of the heart
4. identify safeguards for small group sharing
5. recognize the need for the Holy Spirit to be an active part of the growth process

Women of Discernment

Hannah walked out of the café in total embarrassment. Why did she share her background with Myriah? Myriah had looked at her with such compassion and warmth that much of her past, the facts she worked so hard to cover up, came tumbling out. What must Myriah think of her now?

Hot shame washed over her. How would she face that woman again, knowing she knew about the abuse in her background? Surely, Myriah now thought of her as a tainted and damaged woman. Surely, she wondered how Hannah could ever be a successful Bible study leader with that upbringing and background.

When we spend any amount of time talking to people, we quickly find out that their lives are complicated and messy. They may be facing difficult situations in a number of areas: family, careers, finances, or health. Some face deep disappointments or loss in relationships with spouses or children. Others long to be married but do not have the opportunity. All women at some level have dreams that feel unattainable or insecurities that feel crippling. Every woman at some time fights feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction. How does our Christian faith relate to the problems we face in life? How does it change the way we live and respond to tough situations? How do we enter other's messy lives and encourage them in their walk with Christ?

These are not simple questions, and there are no simple answers. Truly coming alongside others requires biblical discernment. What does it mean to be women of discernment? Proverbs 20:5 says, "The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out" (NIV). The author describes the intentions of the human heart as *deep waters*, a phrase which speaks to the human struggle to fully comprehend how our hearts reflect both our beauty as image-bearers of God and our brokenness as sinners.

**"The purposes of a person's heart are
deep waters, but one who has insight
draws them out."**

Proverbs 20:5 (NIV)

The Bible is a book about people—real people—who faced the same kinds of problems that people face today. They encountered grueling hardships, difficult relationships, financial uncertainty, oppositional people, and relentless temptations, just like we do. No book is more realistic or honest about facing the harsh facts of life than the Bible. The same God, who was available to the people we read about in the Bible, continues to be available to us as well. The Bible provides guidance for understanding people and wisdom for how to live. It was inspired by the God, who designed and created us and knows what is best for us. It is our guide for walking in truth.

The material we will study together is based on biblical principles that will help us understand how to become both a strong and a compassionate woman—one who effectively deals with life's problems and moves with confidence in God into the messy situations of people's daily lives. A woman of discernment is aware of her own desperate need for God while still serving others by pointing them to him. She is not afraid to say, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts" (Ps 139:23, NIV). The more we understand how we are designed (what some term a *biblical anthropology*), the more God can use us effectively in helping others.



This course is designed to encourage us as women to grow in our understanding of God and in our understanding of ourselves through the examination of Scripture. We will look at truths that are essential to understanding who we are. We will consider false beliefs that we may have. We will examine the damage of the Fall that affects every human being, the scope of salvation that was accomplished on the Cross, the new identity in Christ that is given to all who believe, and the resources of God that are given to us to become more like his Son. As our own relationship with God grows deeper, and we begin to see real change taking place in us, we will find that God will use us to help and encourage others in their walk with God.

Our sessions focus on solid biblical concepts and their application to life. A facilitator will be there to serve as a helper and a discussion leader. Her role is to encourage good discussion and interaction with the truths and concepts presented in the study material and to help you consider the implications of what you are studying. We encourage you to think through the teaching, examine the biblical passages, and test the principles that are presented. We will have opportunity to interact with one another as we seek to discern and apply what we study to the various situations we will discuss.

This course is designed for you to do a significant amount of study on your own before coming to the class. Then we will come together as a group for a rich discussion based on the Scriptures we have studied and the material presented in this workbook. In order to maximize what you learn, answer the questions and think through the applications before coming to the training.

We encourage you to

- find a time and a place where you can be quiet before God
- ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thinking and to help you be completely honest as you work through the Making It Your Own exercises
- read the materials and the Bible passages carefully and listen to what God may be saying to you

Our goal is to become women with discerning hearts. Developing a discerning heart is a lifelong process, and God uses many people and a variety of circumstances along the way to bring us to deeper spiritual maturity and greater usefulness in God's kingdom. We invite you to join us on the journey, as we grow together and become more and more the women that God is calling us to be.

1.1**Making It Your Own**

- A. What are some examples from your own life that have required God-given discernment?
- B. How has the Bible been a resource to help you respond to the everyday problems around you?
- C. What are some ways the Bible can be effectively applied to our everyday problems?

God's Design

God designs mankind in his image. Because of the Fall, we all fall short of God's glory (see Rom 3:23). But before the world was created, God planned to send a Savior who would redeem his people (see Eph 1:4-10). Through the wisdom of God, a woman of discernment understands that humans are at the same time gloriously designed and undeniably broken. She comprehends that this is true of her own heart and of all human hearts because of choices we have made to walk apart from our Creator. The woman of discernment is convinced that hope for restoration comes through a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, who not only redeems but also sends his Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth (see Luke 19:10, Gal 4:4-5, John 16:13). She envisions a day when all people who choose the redemption of Christ will walk victoriously in the fullness of their original design.

Growth in Community

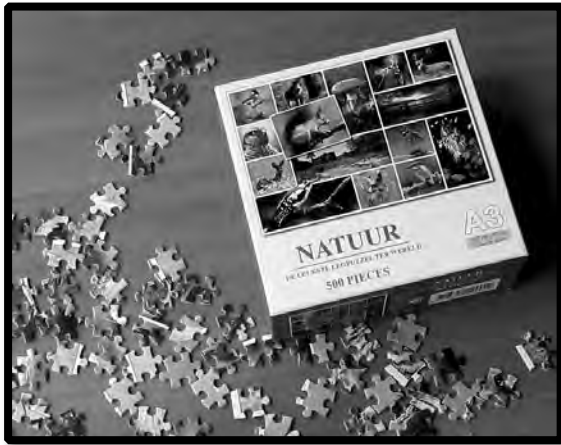
In the meantime, God walks with us. He also gives us the body of Christ to help us grow into Christ-likeness. There are numerous injunctions in Scripture that demonstrate that God intends growth and care to occur within the body of Christ (see Rom 12, Eph 4-6, Col 3). God even uses our hardships to help others: [God] "Who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Corinthians 1:4). Galatians 6:2

says, “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” We are called by God to offer hope and life to others ... but how do we do that effectively?

When a woman opens her heart to us and begins to pour out the various aspects of a difficult life problem, it sometimes feels as if she has dumped a two-thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle in our lap and wants us to unscramble the confusing picture. We have this large pile of bits and pieces of information, emotion, circumstances, and past choices. How do we start to sort it all out? We hardly know where to begin!



When we sit down to work a jigsaw puzzle, first we place the box top in a convenient, visible place. Then we take a long look at the picture on it. Next, after we turn the many pieces right side up, we begin to sort through the pieces in light of the box-top picture. Often we look for the pieces that have a straight edge because we have learned from experience that those pieces form the outer rim of the puzzle. Then we begin to sort the pieces into colors. These broad categories give us a place to begin to put the rest of the puzzle together.



Our hope is that, as we complete this course, we will develop a clearer biblical picture of how people were designed by God before the Fall (the box-top puzzle picture) and some sense of the kinds of straight edges, or categories, we can look for as we sort through the many confusing details of a person’s problem. As we develop an understanding from the Bible of how people are designed, we can be assured that there is biblical support

for entering the sanctuary of people’s hearts. Certainly we would not expect to become professional counselors after such a brief study. However, we can learn how to more effectively enter into people’s lives, peer-to-peer, and direct them to God as they deal with the normal challenges of life.

One of the keys to ministering effectively to others is to develop relationships with other godly individuals who will

challenge and motivate us to walk in God's ways. God says that we are to be women who sharpen one another (see Prov 27:17) and spur each other on in godliness and wisdom.

In the Bible Paul and Barnabas are peers who serve in ministry together and have the kind of relationship where they can encourage and challenge each other in their walk with God. Paul also has a mentoring relationship with Titus and Timothy. He passes along his knowledge, vision, insights, and skills that will equip these younger men to have effective ministries of their own. Is it not ideal if each of us has a Barnabas working beside us, a Timothy developing under our oversight, and a Paul leading us into greater maturity? These are the kinds of relationships that help us learn how to live out our faith in the way God designed for us.

**"Iron sharpens iron,
and one man sharpens
another."**

Proverbs 27:17 (ESV)



We have a powerful resource in the Bible. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16, NIV). By his power, he "... has given us everything we need for a godly life" (2 Pet 1:3, NIV). We can be trained to be instruments in the Father's hands.

1.2**Making It Your Own**

- A. Take five minutes and write down two or three life experiences where you received comfort from God and others.
 - 1. What did you learn about God as a result?
 - 2. What did you learn about yourself?
 - 3. What comfort can you offer to someone else as a result?
- B. Think of several older (in faith or age) women you know who have had a significant influence on your life, whether they are Christians or not.
 - 1. What was it about them that impacted you?
 - 2. What would you like to emulate about them?
- C. Consider the younger women in your life.
 - 1. How are you encouraging a younger woman to grow in faith?
 - 2. What opportunities could you take to get to know one of these younger women better?
 - 3. What do you think you could do to help some younger women to mature spiritually?

Capacities of the Heart

When God designed us in his image, it is clear that the heart was of critical importance to him. Proverbs 4:23 says, “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it *flow* the springs of life.” The heart is mentioned over seven hundred times in Scripture. Closer examination of the references to the heart reveals that it has several internal capacities.

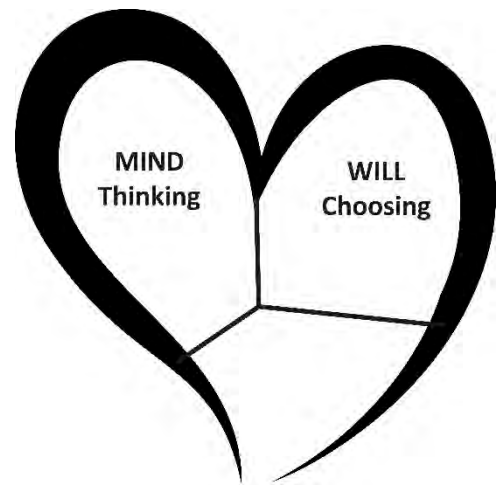
Mind

First, the heart's capacity to think is highlighted in Genesis 6:5: "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the *thoughts of his heart* was only evil continually" (emphasis added). In Job 22:22 we are commanded to "lay up his words *in your heart*" (ESV, emphasis added). The mind is the capacity referred to in Psalm 15:2: "He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, and speaks truth *in his heart*" (emphasis added).



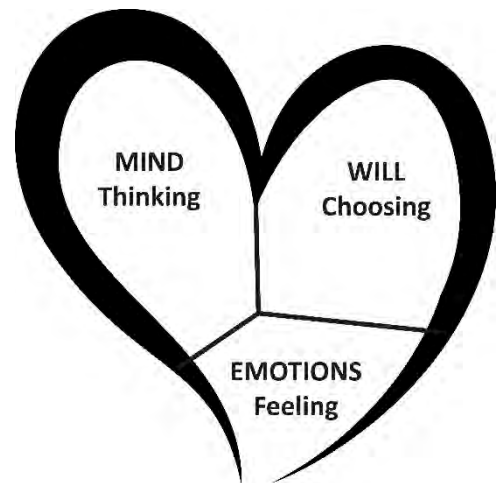
Will

In addition, the heart's capacity to choose and direct our will is emphasized frequently in such passages as Exodus 8:32: "But Pharaoh *hardened his heart* this time also, and he did not let the people go" (emphasis added). Pharaoh chose to refuse God's warnings, and it cost him and his nation dearly. In Deuteronomy 29:18 the choice to turn from God is highlighted: "Make sure there is no man or woman ... whose *heart turns away* from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations" (NIV, emphasis added).

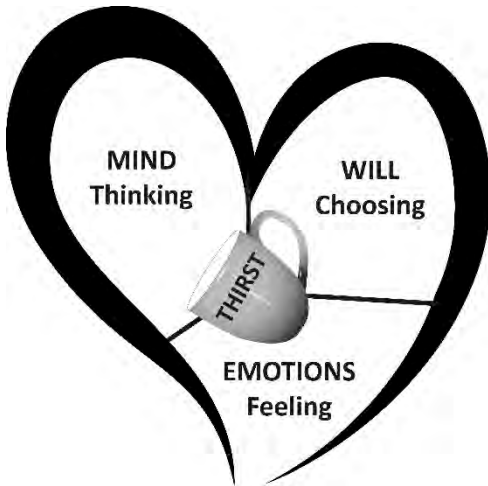


Emotions

Our heart's capacity to feel and experience emotions is frequently referenced in Scripture as well. This ability is seen in passages such as Leviticus 19:17a: "You shall not *hate* your fellow countryman *in your heart*" (emphasis added) and "... he sent the people to their tents, rejoicing and happy of heart because of the goodness that the LORD had shown" (2 Chr 7:10b). Again, examples are found in Job and Psalms: "... And I made the widow's heart sing for joy" (Job 29:13b) and "You have put gladness in my heart, more than when their grain and new wine abound" (Ps 4:7).



Motivating Force



The drive behind these God-given capacities to think, choose, and feel is the ability of the heart to yearn, long for, or thirst. Our thirsts directly impact the thoughts we have, the choices we make, and the emotions we feel. It is the motivating force behind them (more on this later). Job 19:27 says, “How *my heart yearns within me*” (NIV, emphasis added). Psalm 20:4 states, “May he give you the *desire of your heart* and make all your plans succeed” (NIV, emphasis added). Psalm 37:4 declares, “Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the *desires of your heart*” (NIV, emphasis added). And John 7:37-38 reminds us “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink ... rivers of living water will flow from within them” (NIV).

**The inescapable fact is that God places
ultimate importance upon the condition
and direction of the heart.**

A thorough study of the *heart* reveals that many times the Bible refers to our thirst and the three capacities of our heart together to represent our entire inner, intangible world. At other times the Bible refers, as noted above, to one or more of the specific aspects of the mind, will, or emotion individually. The inescapable fact is that God places ultimate importance upon the condition and direction of the heart.

- God searches every heart (see 1 Chr 28:9) and tests every heart (see 1 Chr 29:17) to reveal its motives and directions.
- God tells us to love him with all our heart (see Luke 10:27). Jesus describes this as the greatest commandment.
- God tells us to “watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it *flow* the springs of life” (Prov 4:23).
- God declares those “who seek Him with all *their* heart” are blessed (Ps 119:2).

The heart is our inner self that either worships and serves God or turns away from God to pursue selfish and self-centered directions. Our hearts can be *tender and humble* (see 2 Chr 34:27) or *stiff-necked and hard* (see 2 Chr 36:13). It seems, therefore, that as we better understand our own hearts (our inner world), we can more fully bring them before God as we grow to understand His ways.

For the purposes of our study, we will discuss these capacities separately in order to clarify and understand them. However, we need to realize that because each of these aspects is so intimately intertwined with the other, it is difficult (if not impossible) to truly separate them. They do not fall neatly into categories in our experiences of daily living. As we study, let each of us present our heart to God so that he might continue to transform us to be like his Son.

Safeguards in Community

As we will discuss matters of the heart, which are extremely personal, it is important to talk about some safeguards for our time together. Think about what would make this group time a positive experience for you. What behaviors in the group would make it a safe place to examine your own heart, as well as to enter into the sacred ground of someone else's heart? We will discuss this together as a group, but here are a few thoughts.



Openness and Informality

Our sessions together will be conversational and informal in nature. Please feel free to ask questions as we talk about various ideas. Often when a point needs clarifying in your mind, it most

likely needs clarifying in the mind of others as well. If you raise a question, we can all interact. Our goal is to grow in understanding.

Confidentiality and Discretion

It is important that the things we share in the group remain confidential and are not discussed outside the group. No one will be required to speak about anything she does not feel comfortable talking about, but each group participant needs to know that she can speak freely without worrying about gossip or judgment. The facilitator will be honest and vulnerable in sharing with you what God has been teaching her. Please do not discuss her stories with others as she is committed to keeping in confidence what you disclose to her.

Sharing in the group should be done with discretion. The study session will not be a time for personal venting of grievances or for extensive, individual personal counseling. We will grow together in learning how to share on a deeper level and still maintain loyalty to our significant relationships. Our aim will be to learn from our life experiences, not to assign blame to others or seek support for our views.

Verbal Space and Silence

God made all of us unique, including the way that we process information. Some of us process information externally, in that we gain understanding while we talk. Others of us are internal processors, needing time to think prior to sharing our perspective in a small group. One way to serve the internal processors in our group is to allow for some silence after a question is asked. This will allow time for them to process the question, so we can benefit from their thoughts as well as the thoughts of the verbal processors.

Holy Spirit Guided

It is our firm belief that without the guidance of the Holy Spirit this course will be an exercise in futility. All believers have the Spirit of God dwelling in them and have a valuable contribution to make to the group. It is our prayer that he will lead every aspect of your preparation for this course and will continue to direct you as you interact with the other participants. May God guide us into all truth as we embark on this journey together.

1.3**Making It Your Own**

- A. Proverbs 4:23 says, “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it *flow* the springs of life.” In light of the discussion on the capacities of the heart, what do you think this verse means?
- B. What safeguards are important for you to allow a maximum of freedom in sharing in your small group?

Lesson Flashback

- The Bible provides guidance for understanding ourselves and other people.
- The Bible provides wisdom for how to live.
- God walks with us just as he did with the believers in the Bible.
- God gives us the body of Christ to help us grow.
- We are to watch over our hearts with all diligence.
- The heart has three capacities: mind, will, and emotion.
- The motivating force of thirst impacts all three capacities.
- Establishing guidelines for our discussions provides safety for sharing with one another.

**Adoration**

Take a few moments to worship God for our great salvation in Christ and that he is committed to making you into the image of Christ. Thank him for the promise that he will complete the good work he has started in you (see Phil 1:6).