

The Seven **I AM S** of Jesus



(HOW JESUS MEETS YOUR DEEPEST NEEDS)

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faithALIVE³⁶⁵
Living God's Best Every Day

TABLE of CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	5
Where is God? The Story of “I AM”	6
Let Jesus Fill Your Deepest Needs: How to Use this Book ...	11
WEEK 1 “I am He”	15
Day 1 Rejection	17
Day 2 Coming Clean	21
Day 3 Lover of Her Soul	25
Day 4 Quenching Your Thirst	29
Day 5 Finding God	33
Day 6 A New You	37
Day 7 Entering the Story with Jesus: a spiritual exercise	41
WEEK 2 “I am the Bread of Life”	43
Day 8 Fulfillment	45
Day 9 Filling the Void	49
Day 10 No Earning Required.....	53
Day 11 Proof	57
Day 12 Better than Bread	61
Day 13 Feasting Instead of Snacking	65
Day 14 Feasting Through Fasting: a spiritual exercise	69
WEEK 3 “I am the Light of the World”	71
Day 15 Blinded	73
Day 16 Into the Light	77
Day 17 Blinded by the Rules	81
Day 18 Missing Pieces	85
Day 19 Exposure	89
Day 20 Wide-Eyed	93
Day 21 Prayer of Examen: a spiritual exercise	97
WEEK 4 “I am the Good Shepherd”	99
Day 22 Fear Factor	101
Day 23 Unchained	105
Day 24 A Strong Grip	109
Day 25 Pride in Ownership	113
Day 26 Eternal Perspective	117
Day 27 Hearing the Voice	121
Day 28 Lectio Divina: Praying the Word a spiritual exercise	125

WEEK 5 “I am the Resurrection and the Life”	127
Day 29 I Need a Miracle	129
Day 30 Confused	133
Day 31 Perplexed	137
Day 32 Restoration	141
Day 33 Change of Heart	145
Day 34 Witness	149
Day 35 Keeping the Sabbath: a spiritual exercise	153
WEEK 6 “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”	155
Day 36 Purpose	157
Day 37 Finding Your Way	161
Day 38 Walking the Talk	165
Day 39 Knock, Knock	169
Day 40 Protected	173
Day 41 On the Road Again	177
Day 42 My Personal Compass: a spiritual exercise	181
WEEK 7 “I am the True Vine”	183
Day 43 Significance	185
Day 44 Stay Connected	189
Day 45 Joyfully Humbled	193
Day 46 Abiding in Christ	197
Day 47 A New CEO	201
Day 48 Joy-Full	205
Day 49 Celebrating Jubilee: a spiritual exercise	209
Day 50 A Long Walk with Jesus	213
Beginning Your Journey with Jesus: a prayer of salvation	217
Small Group Bible Studies	
Study 1 “I am He”	220
Study 2 “I am the Bread of Life”	222
Study 3 “I am the Light of the World”	224
Study 4 “I am the Good Shepherd”	226
Study 5 “I am the Resurrection and the Life”	228
Study 6 “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”	230
Study 7 “I am the True Vine”	234
About the Author	237
Faith Alive 365 Resources	238

Where is God? The Story of “I AM”

“Where did God go?” He had been the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He had protected them from extinction during an extensive drought. He had given them most-favored status with the Egyptian rulers and free land in the fertile Nile River delta. God was good to them, with the emphasis on the word “*was*”.

It had been generations since God had revealed Himself to His people like He had to their ancestors. Sure, they had been protected. Certainly life had been good for them. They had prospered in the Nile Delta and over the generations what originally had been a family of seventy had now become “exceedingly numerous.” But times had changed.

A new dynasty had emerged in Egypt, a dynasty with no connection to and possibly no knowledge of Joseph, their ancestor who brought them to Egypt and protected them. Under the new rulers, Hebrews were seen as a threat to national security, which led to the loss of their most-favored status. The new Pharaoh, eager to establish his dynasty and make a name for himself, recognized an opportunity and turned the Hebrews into a slave labor force.

Now the Hebrews were suffering under their forced labor. But that was the least of their woes. A great evil had been decreed against them. To keep the Hebrews from growing even more numerous, Pharaoh had ordered the death of every newborn male and made it the patriotic duty of every Egyptian to see to it that this edict was carried out. These were terrible times for the descendants of Abraham. Ages ago, God had been good to them, but where was God now?

Far out in the desert wandered a grizzled, solitary man. His skin was rough and leathery from decades of living in the desert. His face was

wrinkled, at least what little you could see of it peeking out from his long, bushy and graying beard. He lived a difficult life, but that was okay. He was alive and he shouldn't have been.

He was a Hebrew, one of those children who should have been killed at birth. His mother, however, kept his birth secret. When she could no longer keep his existence quiet, she placed him in a basket and set him afloat in the river, trusting him to the God who once was, but seemed to be no more. It was there in the river that the daughter of Pharaoh found him and adopted him as her own son, naming him Moses.

This grizzled man, who now wandered alone in the desert with only sheep to keep him company, had once lived a life of royal luxury. But that was decades ago, before he murdered an Egyptian and had to run for his life.

As Moses was growing up in Pharaoh's household, the tension between his Hebrew heritage and Egyptian upbringing grew stronger. It finally reached a breaking point when Moses witnessed an Egyptian brutally beating a Hebrew. In that moment, Moses snapped, and in anger he murdered the Egyptian slave driver. It's somewhat ironic that at the moment he fully embraced his Hebrew heritage, he had to run away from it.

Now Moses was leading his undernourished flock of sheep up a mountain in hopes of finding better pasture and an escape from the unrelenting desert heat. As he climbed, something caught his attention. He squinted as he looked in that direction. "That's odd," he thought, "that bush looks like it's on fire."

He looked to the right and left for signs of someone who would have started a fire, but saw no evidence of another living soul. He looked again. Now the bush was burning even brighter. "How could this be?" he wondered, "The bush should be burned up by now."

Moses headed that direction to get a closer look. He didn't know it, but his next step was going to radically change his life. That's the way it is in life – sometimes your next step will be a life-changer, but you don't know this until after you take it. Moses took a simple step, and suddenly a voice spoke.

"Moses!" No one knows what Moses' response was to this sudden

The Seven I AMs of Jesus

voice out of nowhere, but it's doubtful that "startled" would be an adequate description.

"Take off your shoes for the ground you are standing on is holy." Moses didn't argue. Then, just in case Moses hadn't figured it out, God said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." In other words, "I am the God who *was*; the God of your ancestors."

God told Moses that He was aware of the suffering of His people and had heard their cry. Moses' eyes must have widened in shock when God said that He was sending Moses back to Egypt, back to the place of his failure, back to the person he feared the most – the Pharaoh – in order to secure the release of Pharaoh's slave force. Moses' head must have been spinning.

The enormity of God's assignment for Moses began to sink in. As Moses went into planning mode, one big question pounded in his mind. "What if I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your Fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

Modern English translations of scripture fail to capture the force and meaning of the question. Moses isn't asking simply for a name. God has already identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses knows who is speaking to him. When Moses asks for a "name", Moses is really asking God to identify His character and ability.

From the Hebrew's perspective, God had seemingly been missing for generations, possibly centuries. He is the God who *was*. Moses is concerned that the present day Hebrews would not be very confident in a God who had let them suffer. When Moses says, "What if they ask your name?" the meaning is, "What if they question your (and therefore *my*) authority?" The force of the question is a skeptical "What can God do?"

God seems to be sympathetic to the question. There were no peals of thunder or flashes of lightning, no "How dare you question God!" declarations. God's answer was simple and profound.

"God answered, 'I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'' (Exodus 3:14).

The Story of "I AM"

The meaning is simple. God is saying, "I am present!" To translate this in grammatically poor English, God is saying "I *is*," or "I am the one who always *is*."

God went on, "Say to the Israelites, '*Yahweh*, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob —has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation" (Exodus 3:15).

Yahweh is a variant spelling of the Hebrew for "I am". However, in Hebrew the vowels were left out of the word Yahweh because it was believed that this name was too holy to pronounce. A rough English equivalent of the word would be YHWH. English Bibles simply translate the word as "the LORD" using small capital letters. In Exodus 3:15 we see God adding this name to His title as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In other words God is saying, "I am not just the God of the past. I am the God who is present. I have always been present and always will be present. I AM!"

God is ALWAYS present! That is a profound statement.

Think about the implications. There is no place you can go where God is not present. There is no struggle you fight where God is not present. There is no temptation you face where God is not present. God is present in your marriage, in your home, and in your neighborhood. God is present in your schools. God is present in your work.

God is present in your failures and in your triumphs. God is present in your fears and your courage. God is present in your illnesses and your health. God is present when you are at your best and when you are at your worst. God is present in every step you take. Imagine how profoundly different your life can be if you are aware of and confident in God's presence? That is what this devotional is about. It is about improving your awareness of and confidence in the I AM.

Now fast forward to New Testament times. It had been 400 years since the last prophecies had been spoken in Israel – 400 difficult years. The glory and power of the nation was long gone. They had been conquered and ruled over by Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and now Romans. Once again,

The Seven I AMs of Jesus

God was missing. The presence of I AM was no longer being experienced. God had become distant. Even His name was too holy and awesome to pronounce.

It was into this scene that a carpenter, somebody of no importance from the backwoods town of Nazareth, stepped forward and said “I AM.” With these words, recorded in the Gospel of John, Jesus revealed himself as God, not a God who was distant and unapproachable, not a God who had nothing to offer, but the God who is present, a God who can meet our deepest needs, a God who can fill the empty places in our life, a God who can fill us with His presence.

Who is God to you? Is He a God who *was*? Is He a God who is missing? Is He a God who is distant or frightening? Is He a God who isn't big enough for the problems you face? Is He a mystery, a historical curiosity, a psychological crutch, a figment of imagination, a fairy tale?

Now consider this: Who are you? What is your greatest need? Do you feel a need to belong? Are you looking for a sense of fulfillment? Are you spinning your wheels looking for some direction? Do you feel insecure? Are you bored? Do you feel like you haven't accomplished much? Are you looking for an opportunity to make a difference?

In this devotional, you will come to know the I AM, Jesus, as he reveals Himself to us in John's gospel. To those needing acceptance, Jesus says, “I am He.” To those hungering for something more in life, Jesus says, “I am the Bread of Life.” To those feeling lost, Jesus announces, “I am the Light of the World!” To those who feel insecure, Jesus tells us, “I am the Good Shepherd.” To those who are hopeless, Jesus declares, “I am the resurrection and the life!” To those looking for a purpose, Jesus says “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.” And to those who are dried up and feeling insignificant, Jesus proclaims, “I am the vine.”

We invite you to open this book each day to discover the presence of Jesus, the great I AM, and experience the profound difference He will make in your life.

Let Jesus Fill Your Deepest Needs

How to Use this Book

Over the next fifty days, we invite you to nourish your relationship with Jesus, to experience His presence and the difference His presence makes. When Jesus fills our lives, He fills our deepest needs. We are not talking about physical needs for food, water and shelter. We are talking about something much deeper, something that still aches inside of us and leaves us dissatisfied even when our physical needs are met. They are the needs for unconditional love and acceptance, a sense of fulfillment, direction in life, security, a second chance, purpose and significance.

Material items cannot fill these needs. Relationships cannot fill these needs. Thrills and adventure cannot fill these needs. People have tried from the beginning of time to meet these needs in those ways without lasting success. These needs signal to us that there is something we hunger for beyond the physical, relational, and emotional. That something is God – a God who is present.

In his gospel, John presents Jesus as God, “who became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). John goes on to reveal the kind of God Jesus is through a series of “I am” statements that Jesus makes. Jesus is the God who is always in the present. He is the great I AM. Each of these statements reveals something different about the way we can experience His presence in our lives and the difference it makes as He meets our needs.

WEEKLY THEMES

Each week you will dig into a new I AM declaration of Jesus, starting with a story that will provide some background to that week’s I AM.

DAILY DEVOTIONS

Each daily devotional will help you understand a little bit more about the

The Seven I AMs of Jesus

declaration and how it is relevant to your life. Each devotional includes a scripture passage for you to look up and read, some teaching and reflection on the passage, and a story from someone who has experienced the difference Jesus' presence makes in their life.

TESTIMONIES

These testimonies are all true. They are from men and women from different walks of life and different parts of the country. They represent multiple ethnicities and range from teenagers to retirees. They are people like you. They are the people you work with, live next door to, and sit near at church – and Jesus is making a difference in their lives. Some of their stories will be about recent, dramatic changes Jesus has accomplished in their lives. Other stories are about the difference Jesus has made as a result of spending a lifetime walking with Him. Hopefully, these stories will inspire you and give you a window into some of the ways Jesus works in our lives. (*Note: If you are reading this book together with your family, you may want to read ahead to be sure the content is appropriate for your younger children.*)

REFLECTION

If you want to nurture and experience the presence of Jesus in your life, we recommend that you do the whole devotional for each day and not just read the stories. Reading scripture is planting God's *living* word in your life – its words bring the power of God into your life. The reflection questions will help you engage with Jesus' presence and make the day's lesson real in your life. Be sure you take time to think about and act on these questions.

THE SEVENTH DAY

A unique aspect of this devotional is the seventh day of each week. On that day you will find instructions for practicing a spiritual growth exercise. The exercises may take thirty minutes to an hour, possibly more if God is doing something special. The investment of time will be worth it. These exercises will help you experience Jesus as the I AM you have been studying about throughout the week. In most cases, these exercises are ancient. They have proven their value over centuries. You will be blessed if you do them and

How to Use this Book

even more blessed if you continue to practice them after these fifty days are over.

SMALL GROUP STUDIES

At the back of the book you will find small group Bible studies for each I AM declaration. This will help you go even deeper into God's word and experience even more of His presence, as you study God's word together with others. It is through the community of believers that we all grow up into Jesus and become mature, being filled with the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:9-16).

SHARE YOUR STORY

If Jesus is present in our lives, then we all have a story to share about the difference He makes. We want to give you an opportunity to share your story to bless and inspire others. Please visit www.theSevenIAmsofJesus.com and share your story – and read the stories others have shared.

THE SEVEN "I AMS" OF JESUS CAMPAIGN

This book will be a blessing just on its own, but it is part of a series that ties this daily devotional and small group studies with seven weekly sermons, so the entire church can study together. Imagine the impact that can have. To find out more about the campaign, visit our website at www.FaithAlive365.com

Week 1

“I am He”

She glanced out the door. The sun was already high in the sky, baking the dusty paths that wound through her village. While the rest of her village took a siesta, she wrapped a shawl around her head and prepared to go out.

The shawl covered her long brown hair so that all you could see was part of her face. In her youth, her face had been smooth and pretty. But now lines radiated out from the edges of her eyes, the result of hard labor and many years spent in the unrelenting sun. But there was something else about her face that could not be explained by the sun or her years of labor. There was no sparkle in her eyes or hint of mirth around her lips. Her face betrayed a sadness born of rejection.

She grabbed her large clay water pot and headed through the deserted streets for the well outside the village. Day after day she made this trek, always during the afternoon heat, and always alone.

The other women of the village would go in the early morning to get water before it got too hot. That was the sensible time to go, but she didn't want to be around the other women. She knew what they thought. She heard what they whispered a little too loudly when she came near.

“The woman's a tramp.”

“Is it true? Five husbands? And none of them could stand her?”

“That man she's with now, she's not even married to him. She'll sleep with anyone.”

The rejection and criticism had made her distrusting and cynical. On the outside she was as tough as her sun-weathered skin. But on the inside, or in quiet moments away from watching eyes, she ached over the pain of her rejection and longed for someone who would value her.

The Seven I AMs of Jesus

She was afraid that if she cracked even slightly, she would fall apart completely. And the sharp-tongued gossips...oh lord, what would they do if they saw her break down? Talk about fuel for the gossip fire. She couldn't show weakness. It would give others an opportunity to take advantage of her.

So, she – a reject, a cast-off, a five-time loser – walked down the path alone, tough but weary. Then she hesitated. A man was sitting at the well. He looked Jewish. “That’s just great,” she thought, “there’s nothing worse than a Jew to remind me of my rejection.”

Jews considered Samaritans to be traitors to the faith (it’s a long story). They had rejected the Samaritans in every possible way for so long that a simmering hatred existed between the two. It was astonishing that a Jew would even be found in Samaritan territory. Usually they would spend an extra day of travel going around Samaria rather than stepping one foot inside country.

Fortunately, she didn’t have to worry much about this man. He wouldn’t bother to speak to her. Jewish rabbis made it a point of pride never to talk to any woman in public, and certainly not a Samaritan woman. It was yet another rejection to add to her pile.

Showing her tough exterior, she completely ignored the man as she walked up to the well and started to draw water. She assumed he was also ignoring her, as if it were some kind of contest to see who could do the best job of ignoring the other. But then...“Oh my God, did he just speak to me?”

Her life was never going to be the same.

Day 1

REJECTION

In the Word

Read John 4:10-14 and Revelation 22:17

The woman at the well knew the pain of a lifetime of rejection. She was thirsty for acceptance and love but saw no hope of ever experiencing it. She was labeled. She couldn't escape who she was. Then one day she met Jesus, and their meeting wasn't by chance. Jesus had been waiting for her.

Jesus not only knew when this woman would be coming to the well, He knew everything about her. He knew about every hurt, wound and rejection she had ever experienced. He knew she was thirsty and that He could offer living water – forgiveness from her past, a love that would heal her emotional scars, and a new life with new purpose that could start immediately. That's a drink that refreshes.

Jesus knows everything about you as well. On the cross He felt every wound, hurt, rejection and sin that's been done against you, and that you have done to others. And now He's waiting for you to come to the well of His life and drink His living water.

Jenny Harmon's Story

Jenny is quick to share how unworthy she feels. "God has blessed me in so many ways – in fact, it's almost embarrassing to talk about all of the blessings. I feel so unworthy of them." Because of these deep feelings of unworthiness, learning to receive God's good gifts has been a journey for Jenny.

The Seven I AMs of Jesus

From the time she was a young girl, Jenny was told that she wasn't good enough. She needed to change and to be more like someone else. "God wired me to be a feeler," she says, "and that didn't bode well in my family. I cried easily, and they would make fun of me for that." With emotion in her voice, Jenny admits that "I never felt loved for who I was. That planted seeds of rejection in my heart that I carried with me into relationships with friends and on into being a teenager trying to navigate the boy-girl thing."

But even though she struggled with feelings of rejection as a child, Jenny doesn't blame her parents. They were married very young – her mom was 16 and her dad was 17 when they got pregnant with Jenny's brother. "They were just kids raising kids, and they did the best they could with what they had to give," she shares. Jenny is amazed that they were able to keep their marriage together as long as they did, divorcing when she was nine. But although she's grateful for all they were able to give her, Jenny still sees the source of her self-esteem issues arising from the messages she received as she was growing up.

Somewhere deep inside, though, Jenny knew that what her parents were telling her was wrong. She attributes this awareness to her accepting Christ at a very young age. Her family didn't go to church, but they allowed Jenny to attend church with a neighbor family. They were "a vibrant, amazing, Jesus-loving, people-loving family," she says, "and they poured God's love into my life." They told Jenny about Jesus, and she immediately responded. "As soon as I found out about Jesus, I wanted him."

At the age of five, Jenny prayed to receive Jesus into her heart. She laughs now because she remembers thinking that Jesus was actually living physically in her heart. She pictured him on a tiny rocking chair, sitting in her heart and going everywhere with her. So even though she had negative influences coming from her family, she carried with her the truth that God loved her.

Years went by and Jenny married Joel, a strong and loving Christian man, and together they started a family. As Jenny grew in her faith and healed from the wounds of the past, she was determined not to let her dad negatively affect her life any further, since he was always the one she

Day 1

struggled with the most. “I always loved my dad,” she says, “but in his brokenness he was abusive in some ways.” So Jenny would spend time with her dad, but she was careful to put boundaries on their relationship because he still had the ability to hurt her deeply.

At the age of fifty, her dad was diagnosed with the early onset of Alzheimer’s disease. At the time, he was going through his fourth divorce, so he was all alone. Two years after the diagnosis, Jenny’s brother died unexpectedly, leaving Jenny as her father’s sole support. Jenny was willing to shoulder the responsibility of power of attorney, and she continued to visit him regularly, but she was unwilling to let him or his illness destroy the healthy place she was experiencing in her life and family.

His illness continued to progress over a number of years, and then one day as Jenny was driving in her car, she felt God speaking to her heart. “I knew it was totally out of His love for me,” she recalls. “He told me that if I didn’t do something quickly about my relationship with my dad, I would regret it for the rest of my life. After losing my brother, I knew that voice of truth was right. I regretted not spending more time with my brother and I knew I would regret it if I didn’t do something with my dad.”

So Jenny and Joel arranged for her dad to move in with them. Jenny felt confident that God was leading her to do this, but she had fear about telling her dad the plan. He had always resisted help in the past. She remembers being terrified the day she went to share the idea with him.

Normally, because of his illness, it would take her dad awhile to recognize people. But on this day he recognized Jenny the minute he saw her. “There you are,” he said. “You’re the one. You’re the one I want. I love you. I love you more than anything else in the whole wide world.” Jenny was floored. Not only was this type of sentiment uncharacteristic for her dad, but he had also been losing his ability to string together more than a couple of words at a time.

When Jenny told him that they would be selling his home and he would be coming to live with her family, he responded, “I’m so proud of you – that’s a real good idea.” Again, Jenny was blown away.

Most Alzheimer’s patients tend to become angry and even hostile as their illness progresses. But Jenny’s dad went the other direction, becoming

The Seven I AMs of Jesus

kinder and gentler. From that day on, he never went back to being resistant or cranky. He continued to be loving.

God gave Jenny a small window of time where her father was still able to verbalize his love and tell her the things she had always longed to hear him say. It brought deep healing. Her dad only lived for another six months after he moved in with Jenny's family, but it was a sweet time for her – a true blessing from God. And in his final days she saw her dad reach out to God. Jenny is filled with hope that she will one day see him in heaven.

“I feel so unworthy,” she says, “and that’s the point. That’s why I need Jesus as my Savior – because I *am* unworthy. I am God’s child and He loves me and He’s pouring out his blessings on me. And it blows my mind.”

Make it Personal

- Have you experienced a rejection in your life that still leaves a hole?
- How do you react when you are rejected? Have your reactions been healthy for you and those around you?
- How many different ways did Jesus show acceptance to the woman at the well? Do you feel accepted by Jesus? How does that influence the way you live?
- How do you view God? Do you live in fear of His rejection or in gratitude for His love? What difference does it make?
- How has Jesus spoken to you in this devotional time?

Prayer

Dear Jesus, thank you for accepting me just as I am and offering your unconditional love, even though I don't deserve it. Please heal me from rejections of the past and help me to offer your acceptance and love to others today.

Day 2

COMING CLEAN

In the Word

Read John 4:16-18, Proverbs 28:13 and James 5:15-16.

Technically, she told the truth – she had no husband. But she tried to conceal the fact that she'd been married five times and now had a live-in boyfriend. Everybody in town knew. She probably single-handedly kept the gossips in business. But this stranger, who was treating her with such respect, didn't need to know that truth. It would ruin everything.

But Jesus did know the truth. The woman listened in horror as He spelled it out for her. Then she waited for the punch line – the condemnation and rebuke that were certain to come.

There are few things more terrifying to us than transparency, taking off the mask, being seen for who we really are. Why are we so afraid? We all know the answer. We're afraid that if people really knew us, they would dislike us. We might even dislike ourselves. So we put on our masks.

Yet as terrifying as transparency is, there is little that is more exhilarating than having someone know who you really are and still accept and love you. Suddenly you are free. The experience is life-changing.

Jesus had pulled the woman's mask away, yet there was no hint of rebuke, disapproval or judgment. What a different feeling it must have been for her to be known yet still accepted, with no more pretending

Steve Padilla's Story

Early one morning, Steve opened up his garage and surveyed its contents. It

The Seven I AMs of Jesus

was a disaster area, the result of years of accumulation without organization. As Steve looked around he thought, “This is a picture of the condition of my soul.” He decided that it was time to reclaim his life, and the place to start was in the garage.

Steve began pulling things out, organizing as he went, sorting out what needed to be kept and what needed to go. After hours of work, his garage was completely empty and swept clean. Everything was on the driveway, organized and ready to go back neatly back into place. Steve felt good. He had just taken the first step to organizing his life...until he noticed the termites. He couldn't put anything back in the garage until the termites were dealt with. His organization project was stalled on the driveway.

That's when it hit him. Through his garage project, God was teaching him a lesson. Steve realized that his real problem wasn't a cluttered soul. His real problem was the termites in his soul – sin. But just like he had to get everything out of the garage to discover the termites, he was going to have to get his sins out into the open in order to get rid of them. It was time for him to come clean. It was time to make some calls.

From the time Steve first heard about Jesus as a young adult, he has fervently and passionately served Christ. But there was one part of his life that Steve had not yet allowed Jesus to transform. In fact, it never occurred to Steve that this was an area of sin in his life.

Steve was a people pleaser. He craved the acceptance and congratulations of others and made it his mission in life to make others happy. Steve found it virtually impossible to say no, so his need to please became an increasing burden in his life. But Steve didn't want to let this burden go. He craved hearing people say, “Good job.”

As a musician, Steve loves using his talent to serve God. And Steve was experiencing a lot of success. He was touring the country playing with a Christian recording artist and he loved it. “I felt like I was doing what God intended for me to do.” But he was working like crazy.

He was a band member, manager and promoter, in addition to his full-time job as music director at his church. People were telling him, “You're doing great. Keep it up,” and then they would ask him to do even more. Steve was the “go to” guy. You could count on him to get it done.

Day 2

Because he was serving God, Steve reasoned that “This must be what God wants. This is what I was made to do. I’m here to make others happy.” In reality, he was burning out. But he kept going.

Steve discovered that drinking alcohol helped him pretend everything was okay, plus it gave him energy to push his limits. So as people peppered him with accolades, saying, “You’re doing great...keep it up,” he kept doing more. The more he did, the more he would drink. But Steve was adept at keeping his mask on. No one knew how much he was drinking, because he successfully kept it hidden from everyone.

Eventually, Steve recognized he had a problem, but what could he do about it? He kept telling himself “I have to keep going, I can’t let anyone down.” The breaking point came when he got into an argument with a band mate, and no matter what Steve tried, he couldn’t make that person happy.

Steve’s whole identity was founded on making people happy. But on that day, for whatever reason, he was disappointing someone. It was the breaking point for Steve, and he went outside and sobbed. He finally realized that he couldn’t keep going.

When he got home, he dumped out all of his liquor, joined Celebrate Recovery, and started taking the necessary steps to become sober. Then one day he decided to clean out his garage, only to realize that he had to come clean himself. He stopped working on the garage and started making calls. The termite problem in the garage would have to wait until tomorrow.

Steve had already confessed to his family, but now he started calling friends and coworkers. He told them about his problem with people pleasing, about his drinking and his deception. He asked for their forgiveness. “My friends and family responded with incredible graciousness,” Steve says, “and I felt like someone had just walked by and knocked an incredible burden off my back.”

Later that evening, Steve returned home from meeting with some friends he had confessed to. As he pulled up, he noticed that his son had cleared out an area of plants next to the garage and was pouring oil on it. It was the spot where the termites were living. His son, without being asked, had diligently worked to pull out the plants and clear the area so the termites could be destroyed.

The Seven I AMs of Jesus

Suddenly, Steve had another picture of what God was doing in his life. Through his son's actions, God was saying, "Steve, as you admit your sin and get it out into the open, my Son will tear out the sin's bitter roots and destroy them." Steve got out of his car and gave his son a big hug and said, "Thank you. You've just given me the greatest gift of my life." Steve had just experienced God's grace in more ways than one.

Steve had thought he was doing work for God, but in reality, work and the approval it brought him had become his gods. While working for God, Steve had been growing farther away from God, until he opened up the garage door to his soul and came clean.

Make it Personal

- Do you find it hard to confess your sins to another person or to admit that you did something wrong? Why?
- Is it possible that the masks we wear to keep other people from seeing the truth can also prevent God from transforming us? What mask might God be calling you to remove today?
- Why is church the place where we feel we have to pretend the most? Can the situation be changed?
- What has Jesus done that makes it easy to take off your mask with Him and come clean? What can you do to make it easier for others to do the same with you?
- Why is coming clean a relief? When is it not a relief? Do you need to come clean of something?
- How has Jesus spoken to you in this devotional time?

Prayer

Dear Jesus, thank you for the forgiveness and freedom you offer. Please show me where I need to come clean today, and give me the strength to surrender my masks. Help me accept your forgiveness and live in the freedom of that forgiveness today. Amen.

Week 2

“I am the Bread of Life”

If someone had told him about it, he would have said they were lying. But he had been there and saw it for himself. With his own hands he helped deliver basket after basket of food to thousands of hungry people. Yet how could it be? There had only been a few loaves of bread and a couple of dried fish. But the pieces of fish and bread kept flying into the baskets from out of nowhere, and people kept eating until they were full. In fact, after everyone ate their fill, there was still food leftover. It was a miracle.

Twenty-four hours later he was still trying to digest what he had experienced, literally and figuratively. He knew he shouldn't be so surprised. This wasn't the first miracle he had seen. But still, every time he thought he had seen it all, Jesus pulled off something even more impossible. What would come next? Healing a blind man? “Ha!” he thought, “that would be something to see.” Then he laughed at his unintentional pun.

He looked over to where Jesus was standing. Once again, there was a large crowd surrounding him. What were they talking about? They seemed agitated and Jesus seemed to be unsuccessfully making some kind of point. His stomach growled. “Unbelievable,” he thought, “I'm already hungry. I wonder if I can get Jesus to pull a sandwich out of thin air?” He smiled again and then stood up and moved closer to Jesus to find out what the commotion was about.

“What? Am I hearing that right? These people are asking for more bread?”

“Sure we saw the miracle and ate the bread yesterday,” they were saying, “but we're hungry again. What else do you got? Really prove to us that you're the Messiah.”

The Seven I AMs of Jesus

“Unbelievable,” he thought as he shook his head, “What will it take to satisfy them?” His stomach growled again as he walked over to Peter. “Hey, all this talk about bread is making me hungry. When’s Jesus going to take us to lunch?”

Day 8

FULFILLMENT

In the Word

Read John 6:25-36.

The crowd had just experienced the feeding of the 5,000 the day before, and now they were hungry for more. The miracle was great, but that was yesterday. “Show us something else.” “Wow us again.” “Moses provided manna every day for forty years. Can you top that?”

In the same way, we always want just a little bit more. “Just a little bit more” and we will be satisfied. “Just a little bit more” and we will obtain that elusive thing called fulfillment. It all leads to a life of selfish, and often self-destructive, striving. At best, we end up filling our lives with stuff, yet we still never feel full-filled. Is it possible that we are looking to the wrong things for fulfillment? Is it possible that the fulfillment we hunger for comes from a different source?

The crowd wanted more bread. They had seen the physical miracle but missed the spiritual truth. When Jesus said, “I am the bread of life,” He was saying that fulfillment has a spiritual, not a physical source. We are full-filled only when we are filled by the presence of Jesus.

Steve Lindner's Story *(Part 1)*

When Steve got out of the car that morning his only expectation was to enjoy a round of golf. Instead, a journey was set in motion that radically changed his life.

Steve's friend had invited him to fill out a foursome. While they were

The Seven I AMs of Jesus

on the first tee, he heard his friend talking to the other two guys about a group they were in together. Steve was curious. So as they golfed, Steve asked his friend about the group. “Oh, it’s just a group of guys who get together to talk about their problems,” his friend replied. “Why? Do you want to come?”

Steve was intrigued. Underneath his façade of confidence and success, he had too many problems to count. A group where he could talk about his problems with other guys might provide the help he needed. Should he risk trying it?

Up to that point in his life, Steve had been living a selfish and prideful life. He would use anyone and do almost anything to get ahead. It didn’t matter if he lied, did something unethical, or even hurt people – so long as it got him what he wanted. He thought that having a “me first” attitude was the only way to get ahead in life. Instead, it was destroying his life.

Steve brought his “me first” attitude into his marriage. His wife and kids weren’t a priority. The success he was experiencing at work fed his ego, so work was his priority. His family was secondary to his pursuit of success, and the happiness he believed success would provide.

“Thanks to me, my family was dysfunctional,” Steve shares. “But since life was all about me, I no longer wanted to be part of the dysfunction I created. So, I left my family behind.”

After awhile, Steve remarried. Before the marriage, he said to his fiancée, “You know how I am. So, by marrying me you’re accepting who I am and not expecting me to change, right?” She said, “Yes.” But since life was still all about Steve, his new marriage was destined for the same outcome as his first marriage. Only six months after the wedding, they were in counseling.

Yet the dysfunctional family Steve had left in his wake and the struggles of his current marriage were only the beginning of his problems. Added to that were all the lies he had told along the way to get ahead. All that lying and deceit had now become a giant boulder teetering precariously over his head. One slip, one lie exposed and the whole thing could come crashing down on him. It was becoming exhausting to maintain all the lies.

Steve decided that the best solution to dealing with all these problems

Day 8

was to run away from them, literally. He bought property far from his home where no one knew him. By moving there, he thought he could distance himself from the lies and all of his other problems and start fresh. But a question kept nagging at him. “Once you get there Steve, what then?” His subconscious was trying to tell him what should have been obvious – his real problems were internal and they would follow him wherever he went.

So when Steve heard about a group of guys who met to talk about their problems and was asked if he wanted to come, his thought was, “YES!” But what he said out loud was a more subdued, “I might give it a try.”

The next morning, his friend picked him up and took him to an office complex where twelve guys were gathered. They opened in prayer and then started talking about what God was doing in their lives. Steve wasn’t prepared for that. “They’ve sprung Amway on me,” he thought in shock. “My friend has pulled a bait and switch.” Steve would have never agreed to come if he knew that this was a faith-based group.

However, he was stuck there because his friend had given him a ride. So he listened, and once he realized they weren’t trying to sell him anything, he became captivated by the sharing.

He started attending the group every week, and when his friend asked if he wanted to go to church with him he said “yes” to that as well. As Steve describes it, it wasn’t long before “God started turning me inside out.”

Four months went by, and one day Steve found himself on the elliptical trainer at the gym, reading the book *Man in the Mirror*. He was reading a chapter about having a personal relationship with Jesus, and it struck him, “I don’t think I’ve ever had that kind of relationship.” He reflected on that for the rest of the day, and then the next morning, while he was in the shower of all places, Steve prayed and committed his life to Jesus.

Steve has become a completely different man since then. His selfish, prideful, “me first” ways were thrown out as he started to follow Jesus. “Now I’m a better husband, a better father, and a better businessman,” says Steve. “I can’t imagine having a better marriage or better friends.”

Prior to following Christ, Steve used people to help himself get ahead. Now, he serves people to help them get ahead. “I never gave even a dime to help out anyone,” he shares. But now Steve leads the way in helping his

The Seven I AMs of Jesus

church serve the community, from feeding the homeless to serving local schools. Serving has given Steve a joy and peace he tried to find with his “me first” approach to life but could never obtain.

The ripple effects of Steve’s transformation have also transformed his family. Steve was sad about the fact that he had long ago burned the bridges with his children. He had little hope of helping them past the dysfunction he had created in their lives. But the change in Steve’s life created a change in his relationship with his children, and now Jesus is making a difference in their lives as well.

Steve wants people to know that, “No matter what you’ve done, it’s never too late. If God can wait patiently until I was fifty years old and then take someone as evil as I was and radically transform me, then I’m here to tell you it’s not too late for you. God can also transform your life and allow you to help transform the lives of others.”

Make it Personal

- How have you tried to obtain fulfillment? Or maybe another way to ask the question is: what are you trying to fill your life with?
- Do you have your own version of a “me first” attitude? In what areas? What damage has it caused?
- Bread is a basic staple of life. It is called a “filler”. What can Jesus, the Bread of Life, fill your life with?
- Do you need to make a change in your approach to being fulfilled? Why? How will you do it?
- Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? If not turn to page 217 To find out how you can have this kind of relationship.
- How has Jesus spoken to you in this devotional time?

Prayer

Dear Jesus, I know that fulfillment can only be found in you. Please help me live out the truth of that today, and seek you first in everything. Amen.

Day 50

A LONG WALK with JESUS

Over the past fifty days, you have learned how Jesus' presence meets our deepest needs. Slowly and purposefully, Jesus has been revealing to you not only who He is, but the difference He makes. Jesus declares that He is the I AM, the God who is present and whose presence makes a difference. He is:

- The I AM, who offers us His presence and unconditional love
- The Bread of Life, whose presence fills and fulfills us
- The Light of the World, whose presence brings clarity and direction
- The Good Shepherd, whose presence makes us secure
- The Resurrection and the Life, whose presence give us a second chance and a new life
- The Way, the Truth, and the Life, who tells the truth about the way to life, purpose and God
- The Vine, whose presence fills us with joy and enables us to be significant

That is the difference Jesus makes as we nurture His presence in our lives.

Hopefully this book has helped you experience and nurture the presence of Jesus as you have used the tools of Bible study, prayer, and spiritual disciplines. And we hope you have been encouraged and inspired by the 42 people who have shared their personal stories. What Jesus has done for them, Jesus can also do for you.

Now that you've started this journey of letting Jesus meet your needs, we urge you to continue in the same direction for the rest of your life. With every step you take forward:

- Jesus grows in your life a little bit more
- your needs are filled a little bit more

The Seven I AMs of Jesus

- your faith grows a little bit stronger
- temptations become a little bit weaker
- your character becomes a little more godly
- the light of your life shines a little more radiantly

Now, to close, let me tell you my story. It's a story of the difference makes Jesus over the long haul. I pray that it will inspire you to keep growing in your walk with Jesus.

Phil Sommerville's Story

My story is about the blessings that come from walking closely with Jesus for a very long time. In my case, it's been generations.

For some of you, this story will be hard to relate to. It will be so different from the rough and tumble world you have experienced. But what I have found is that my experience is what most people hope they can experience someday. I am here to testify that the life you may hope for is not just a wishful dream. It's real and can be experienced.

For others of you who have not had the dramatic or painful experiences of some of the people you've read about, I hope my story will be an encouragement that you don't need to have a dramatic conversion in order to experience Jesus' presence. In fact, it may be Jesus' presence that has protected you from needing a dramatic conversion.

My parents were more than just church-goers. They had a relationship with Jesus that was obvious. They themselves were products of Christian families as well. My grandparents also had an obvious love for Jesus. As a result, the blessings have cascaded down through the generations. In fact, there have been so many blessings, it's hard to know where to start.

Maybe the most obvious place to see the difference Jesus has made through the generations is in character. Galatians 5 describes godly character, also called the fruit of the Spirit, and lists some of the ways God's activity in our lives will be evident, though the qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. That describes my grandparents' and my parents' lives. They had all of those qualities in abundance, and I believe the reason why is because they had

Day 50

followed Jesus over a lifetime.

My grandparents did more than pop into church on Sundays. They lived God-honoring lives. They prayed daily and read their Bibles. In fact, my grandfather died, leaned back in his recliner, with his Bible across his chest. He had been studying his Sunday school lesson when he passed away.

Jesus shined through my grandparents' lives. There was no quick temper, no heated arguments, no cussing and cursing, no lying or deceit, no overt selfish behavior, and no self-destructive behaviors.

My grandparents were godly people. So not surprisingly, their marriages were blessed as well. My grandparents really loved each other, and it showed in the way they treated each other. They honored each other, served each other, supported each other, affirmed each other, treasured each other, playfully teased each other, and disagreed with each other, but worked it out quickly. In short, they really loved each other.

These are the homes my parents grew up in, and it made a difference in their lives. My parents developed their own, vibrant faith in Jesus, which they nourished daily. They prayed, and studied their Bibles, had Christian fellowship and support, and found ways to serve – from teaching Sunday school to sewing quilts for others.

My parent's character exuded the fruit of the Spirit. I experienced unconditional love, joy, peace (I never realized how peaceful my home was until I grew up and heard war stories from other adults), plenty of patience, kindness, goodness, and everything else, and not just towards me but towards others as well.

Like each of their parents before them, my parent's marriage was rock-solid and loving. Even in their disagreements, or maybe especially in their disagreements, they showed love and kindness towards each other. They were always building each other up.

Because my parents and grandparents lived God-honoring lives, they made God-honoring choices that kept them and their families out of trouble. Because they didn't do things that would be harmful, they were protected from the pain poor decisions cause. Some cynical people might call their life safe and boring. I know differently. I call it blessed.

So that's the environment I grew up in. Looking back, I guess you

The Seven I AMs of Jesus

could call it an idyllic home life, but to me it was just normal. I grew up in a protective cocoon of love that had been built up over generations of walking closely with Jesus. I am the recipient of blessings that have cascaded down from the godly lives of my parents and grandparents.

In some ways, I've been walking with Jesus since the day I was born. But there have been commitment points along the way where I've made that walk personal and have experienced Jesus' presence for myself. When I was seven, I walked down the aisle of my church to personally accept Jesus as my Savior. When I was a high school senior, I started to truly experience the reality of Jesus' presence in my own life. After I graduated, I sensed a calling from God to go into ministry as my profession. But those points, as well as others that followed, were just what you might call an extra nudge or awareness of Jesus, who is always present.

Through a lifetime of walking with Jesus, my own character is being developed and strengthened. My continuous prayer is that my perceptions, attitudes, thoughts, actions and reactions will increasingly be those of Jesus. It is my desire that as people get to know me, they will get at least a glimpse of the real and living Jesus who is in me.

It is His presence that shapes and fills me, protects me and my family, and guides my decisions. Because of His presence I am blessed with:

- a marriage that keeps getting better
- a home that reminds me daily of how good God is
- a peace and joy that defies my circumstances
- a love that I know is special, but has always just been normal to me
- hope that comes from being certain God is with me
- a purpose to help others experience how real God is
- a sense of fullness that I struggle to explain (the best description I've been able to think of is that it is the weight of God's presence serving as a ballast in my life)
- and a legacy that I am passing on to my sons.

That's the difference Jesus, the I AM, makes in a life. It's a blessed life and I can testify that it's real because it is my story – or more accurately, it is the story of Jesus in my life. My prayer is that this will be your story as well and that this book has helped you on that journey.