

**This document supports groups studying *Lessons from Afar* in a virtual platform format. The questions and activities for all seven chapters are contained in this one document and can be copied and distributed.**

## **CHAPTER 1 - QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES**

**Relating the chapter's theme to your life:** We learn new things when we move out of our comfort zone. Recall a time when you left a place where you were comfortable to go somewhere much different? What lesson(s) did you learn from the experience?

*Isaiah 6:8—Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"*

*1 Peter 4:10—Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.*

**Directions:** In your notebook, roughly divide the page into four squares. At the top, label the first square **talent, abilities, skills**, the following square **personality traits**, the third square **work**, and the last square **passions**.

*The facilitator guides the group through Part 1 by reading the information for each of the four areas with a sufficient pause so members can record their thoughts.*

**Part 1: Collecting information (Don't edit your thoughts—record whatever comes to mind. Do not be modest)**

**1 – Talent, abilities, and skills** – This can include being musical, working with animals, having writing or math abilities, speaking and acting talent, being skilled in the culinary arts, artistic talent, knowing how to utilize technology, etc.

**2 – Personality Traits** – This can include things like being strategic, compassionate, honest, creative, thoughtful, encouraging, pastoral, and so on.

**3 – Past or present work or projects I have enjoyed** – This can include your secular work, hobbies, things done in the context of your home, or ministries in the church or for charities.

**4 – Passions** – This can include things like your family's welfare, the environment, animals, education, medical research, saving endangered species, veteran issues, women's issues, homelessness, human trafficking, and on and on.

*Complete the following questions using your lists.*

## **Part 2: Making connections**

You have created lists that show how your personality, abilities, and experiences relate to the things which have your interest and attention. Take a few minutes to review each list.

- Decide which talents, skills, and abilities would be helpful if you offered your services in some of the areas of your passions. Circle those that stand out as relevant to service.
- Decide which personality traits would be helpful if you offered your services in some of the areas of your passions. Circle those that stand out as relevant to service.

- Decide which kinds of work experiences would be helpful if you offered your services in some of the areas of your passions. Circle those that stand out as relevant to service.

*Part 3 questions are read aloud, followed by journaling time.*

**Part 3: Discovering new insights (on another page of your notebook, answer the following questions)**

- Are there any surprises or connections you have not previously made about serving God and others that would fulfill and suit your unique talents and personality?
- Did you discover any possibilities for the future (perhaps even in another season of your life)?
- What obstacles are in the way of your acting on some of your passions? How can you pray and think about the obstacles?

## **CHAPTER 2 - QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES**

**Relating the chapter's theme to your life:** Recall times when you were afraid, and God provided you with assurance and peace. Consider the circumstances of one of those times that stand out for you—where and when.

*Isaiah 12:2—Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my defense he has become my salvation."*

*Philippians 4:6-7—Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

**John 20:19-22**—*On the evening of that first Day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders. Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit.*

***The facilitator guides the group through Part 1 by reading the questions aloud with a pause after each question for members to record their thoughts.***

The following questions will help identify fears and how to trust God and let go of the things you cannot control. Think about what made the disciples afraid and what event caused their fears to vanish. What makes you afraid? To help you get to the heart of what causes you to doubt yourself and feel anxious, ask yourself the following questions:

### **Part 1: Imagining**

- What dreams am I not pursuing, what opportunities am I currently passing up, and what projects or activities am I not attempting?
- Try to be specific in naming the fears, such as fear of being rejected, failing, or looking foolish—to name a few.
- Imagine a situation where one or more of those fears became a reality and happened.
  - Could you recover from such a thing?
  - What things might you learn from the experience?
  - In what ways would God be with you at such a time?

***Part 2 questions are read aloud, followed by journaling time.***

### **Part 2: Applying Scripture to your life**

Consider the advice found in the Philippians passage: *but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

- In what ways would following the advice found in Philippians help overcome your fears?
- What changes could you make in your thoughts, prayers, and actions to
- be more closely aligned with the Philippian's passage?
- How do you include an attitude of thanksgiving in your prayers?

### CHAPTER 3 - QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

**Relating the chapter's theme to your life:** Recall a time when you had to change the way you were used to doing something or an idea that no longer fit with your life circumstances. In making the change, what did you lose, and what did you gain?

I adopted the image of a weaving for my new life in Southern Sudan. The weaving image made me mindful of the daily practices and ways of thinking that provided balance and support for my spiritual life in a place so far away from home.

*Psalm 16:8— I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.*

*Mark 8:35— For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.*

The following activity guides you to review what you are doing that supports your spiritual and emotional well-being. Record your responses in your notebook.

*The facilitator guides the group through Part 1 by reading each question aloud with a pause after each question for members to record their thoughts.*

### **Part 1: Considering your spiritual landscape**

An appraisal of how your life reflects your values and beliefs helps you recognize the daily practices sustaining your spiritual journey. How do you integrate prayer, study, work, recreation, service to others, self-care, and hospitality into your busy life? There are no right or wrong responses to the following questions. Answer the questions with positive statements about what you are doing in each area and avoid critiquing what you write.

- Prayer and worship - In what ways do you seek God's presence and guidance?
- Study – How do you increase your knowledge of God?
- Self-care and recreation - How do you re-energize and renew? What settings give you joy, and with whom do you like to share them? In what ways do you take care of yourself?
- Work – How do you find meaning in your work? The word "work" can be what you do at a job, volunteering, or the work you do to maintain your home and take care of family and friends
- Hospitality and service to others - How do you share hospitality with others? What do you do to serve others? Service and hospitality can occur in our homes, churches, and local organizations—wherever you are willing to be of service to others?

*Part 2 questions are read aloud, followed by journaling.*

### **Part 2: Thinking about spiritual growth**

Your answers from Part 1 represent the things in your life right now that promote spiritual growth and reflect your intentional seeking of the Holy Spirit. By writing them down, you have become more mindful of your practices.

Review your answers and consider what you might add in the future to what you are already doing.

- Where would you like to put your attention, in what areas do you desire to grow, and how will you better balance the different areas of your daily life?
- What practices and activities are not helping you sustain a balance of mind, body, and spirit?

## CHAPTER 4 - QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

**Relating the chapter to your life:** Recall an experience when something was accomplished because people partnered in the effort?

*Ecclesiastes 4:9-10— Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.*

*Hebrews 10:24-25—And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and honorable deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

**Directions:** In your notebook, divide the page into four squares. At the top of the left-hand square, label it **Mutually give and receive care**. Moving clockwise, label the next square **Receive care**, the third square **Give care**, and the last square **Charities/ministries**.

*The facilitator guides the group through Part 1 by reading each question aloud with a pause after each question for members to record their thoughts.*

**Part 1 – Exploring your "village" of support and interaction with others.  
(Don't edit your thoughts—record whatever comes to mind)**

- In the upper left square, record the names of people you mutually give and receive support and encouragement. These are the people with whom you share joy and sadness and who might do such things as go to a doctor's appointment with you, keep your child overnight, or take you to the airport, and you would do the same for them.
- Moving clockwise, in the next square, record all the people who receive your support but cannot give back to you in a similar way. These might be very young, someone who is an elder, or someone with a health concern.
- In another square, record the names of others who are very generous to you with time and support you in ways that seem to give more to you than you can give to them.
- In the last square, record causes that you support that benefit people, such as the charities you donate, ministries you participate in at your church, and time and resources you give to community things like your library or your child's classroom.

*Part 2 questions are read aloud, followed by journaling.*

**Part 2 – Praying and caring for the people of your village.**

- What words and images come to mind when you look at the four squares and all the people you have named?
- As you think and pray, are there any negative things that come to mind—un-forgiveness, resentment, sadness? Are you willing to turn over those feelings to God?



- What do you think will be the biggest challenges in praying for your village of people? Are there ways to overcome those challenges?

## CHAPTER 5 - QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

**Relating the chapter's theme to your life:** Recall a time when you were discouraged but persevered through whatever the difficulty was. Looking back to that situation, did a sense of God's presence have a part in your determination not to give up?

*Isaiah 40:31*—but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

*Hebrews 12:1-2*—Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

*The facilitator reads the following directions and is the timekeeper for the free-write.*

### **Part 1 – Inviting creativity**

Think about the images from Isaiah 40:31 "...soar on wings like eagles; ...run and not grow weary... walk and not be faint. Choose the image that is the most vivid for you and take a few minutes to free-write about what you chose. Write whatever comes to mind without editing or being concerned with grammatical rules or spelling. When finished, reflect on what you wrote.

*Part 2 questions are read aloud, followed by journaling.*

## **Part 2: Applying Scripture to your life**

Reflect and write on the Hebrews passage "*...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*"

- What parts of the race (your life) inspire you? What possibilities are before you that excite you? Your reflections from Chapter 1 about a call to service might help identify the possibilities.
- How can you think and pray about the things you have identified as important in giving your life meaning and joy?

## **CHAPTER 6 - QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES**

**Relating the chapter's theme to your life:** From your own experience, a person you know, or a news story, share an example of someone choosing to accept another who is unlike themselves without being overly critical or making judgments without sufficient information. As a result, what was the outcome?

How do we grow in wisdom? One way is mindfully reflecting on past experiences. Our lives hold lessons and instruction, which can be applied to our present and future decisions and actions. With practice and prayer, we can learn how to hold tension and ambiguity in spiritually and emotionally healthy ways? The following verses from Psalms and James assure us God is the source for our discernment and wisdom.

*Psalm 32:8--I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;*

*I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.*

*James 1:5-- If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.*

In Southern Sudan, I learned about recognizing the dignity of others, gratitude, patience, and God's presence in challenging moments. The following questions invite you to reflect on some lessons you have learned from past experiences.

*Part 1 question is read aloud, followed by time to record memories.*

### **Part 1: Remembering past experiences**

Think of the experiences you have encountered that were challenging for you? In a shorthand kind of way, jot down a few of them.

*Part 2 questions are read aloud, followed by journaling time.*

### **Part 2: Finding wisdom**

- What did you learn about the dignity of others and yourself during the challenging times?
- What lesson about gratitude did you learn from the challenges?
- In what ways did you develop more patience as you worked through the challenges?
- How did God surprise you during the challenging times?

**Relating the chapter's theme to your life:** Think of the people in your life who live in ways that are lights in the world. What are some attributes of someone whose light shines before others?

*Micah 6:8—He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

*Matthew 5:14-16—"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.*

### **Writing a poem:**

The final activity is writing an autobiographical poem using the insights gained from reading the seven chapters of this book. Your poem will be a snapshot of your thoughts and reflections. It is helpful to review the themes of *Lessons from Afar*:

Chapter 1 – Discerning present and future "calls" of service.

Chapter 2 – Recognizing fears and the turning over of those fears to God.

Chapter 3 – Acknowledging the mindful practices that support your ideals and principles and help you connect with God and others.

Chapter 4 – Appreciating your community by visualizing your "village" of support and care and how you can pray for those in your village.

Chapter 5 - Inviting God to be with you in the challenges of your life so that you can soar on wings like eagles, as Isaiah 40:31 tells us.

Chapter 6 – Growing into wisdom by learning from our[MH1] challenging experiences.

Chapter 7 – Claiming the promise from Matthew 5:14-15 that we are the light of the world and that our light shines before men to glorify God.

**Directions for "I Am Poem":** Each line of the poem begins with a prompt that mirrors one of the themes of the chapters in *Lessons from Afar*. Using the beginning words for each line, write a statement that reflects some of the self-knowledge and understanding of God you have gained. Add description and details to the lines of your poem. Be playful and go with your first thoughts.

*The facilitator guides the group by reading aloud each line's prompt and allowing time for members to record that line in their notebooks. A brief time is provided for a quick revision when all lines have been written.*

**Template for "I Am Poem":**

I am (your name and to whom are you related—perhaps up to three or so relationships)

I am called (a present or future call of service. It can be specific or general that addresses a call to family, church, career, organization, cause, or ideal)

I am afraid (can be either tangible or an idea or emotion of something you fear)

I am mindful of God when (a situation or place that allows you to be aware of God's presence)

I appreciate (some of the people who are part of your care and support)

I am seeking God's guidance (your challenges, concerns, opportunities)

I am the light of Christ because (some belief or way that God's light shines from you)

*The facilitator guides the reading aloud of the poems.*

**Final discussion and sharing:**

After reading *Lessons from Afar*, writing your reflections in your journal, and creating the "I Am Poem," how would you answer the following question?

**If you are the light of the world, and the light shining through you is the light of Jesus Christ, what does that mean for your life today, tomorrow, next month, and ten years from now?**

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