

LOVE THE LORD



Lesson Eighteen - How can I renew the way I see myself and my life story?

August 2023

Summary of key points

- Our life narratives are the stories we form about ourselves, our relationships, and life in general.
- They determine many of our life decisions.
- They are usually influenced by the world and our experiences.
- There are eight major sources of influence that help steer our life narratives: family, authority figures, bitter experiences, childhood memories, worldly sayings, stereotypes, media, and witchcraft (with sample life narratives for each source).
- We need to trust God to write our life narratives for us, rather than determine them for ourselves.
- We all need to renew our minds with the Holy Spirit's help.

Watch the lesson online

<https://youtu.be/YH3PDzGV9hQ>

Transcript

Welcome to lesson 18 of Love the Lord where we look at the life narratives that lead us to sin against God, and against others, and even against ourselves. You will probably need more than one hour to go through today's lesson. Please also prepare something to write with to record your reflections and answers.

Let us begin by inviting God to speak to us personally through this study. Please follow along as we pray together. Click pause at any point if you need more time.

First, let's thank God for His perfect character and will for us.

Next, please tell Him about the things that have been stressful and ask for His help and guidance.

Let us lay down our burdens of sin and confess the ways we have sinned against God and against others, and ask for His forgiveness.

Please confess the ways others have sinned against us, and forgive them in Jesus' name

Next, let us ask God to purify and open our hearts to receive His teaching.

Finally, please repeat these words, “In Jesus’ name, I silence all distractions and voices that are not from God. Amen.”

Let us begin the lesson for today. How can I renew the way I see myself and my life story?

We all have expectations:

1. How will our lives turn out?
2. How should people treat us? How should we treat them?
3. How does one define success?
4. What roles do we play in this life?
5. What impact should we leave behind?

Our answers to such questions will form the basis for our life narratives.

The topic of life narratives is a big one. So, we encourage you to hit pause whenever you feel the need to slow down and reflect on your own life.

In general, our life narratives create expectations on how we should live and interact with people. They reveal our desires and fears, and influence our decisions. As a result of our life narratives, we tend to place labels on other people and on ourselves, some of which will eventually become self-fulfilling. This is one example of how our life narratives can lead to unintended or unwanted consequences. We also experience tension or stress when we don’t adhere to our life narratives or meet our own expectations.

Our inner vows are one type of life narrative, but life narratives in general cover a much wider scope. Put it in another way, life narratives are the stories and beliefs that we tell ourselves about life, people, ourselves, and even God. They may not always be based on truth.

In fact, many life narratives have to be based on the assumptions we make, because no one has the full picture of all things at all times - except God. Nothing is hidden from God.

Hebrews 4:13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable. (NLT)

If we remain unaware of our life narratives’ influence on our thoughts and our desires, or if we hold on to them too tightly in our hearts, our life narratives will determine the course of our lives.

Proverbs 4:23 Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life. (NLT)

Let's take some time to give you an opportunity to review your life narratives. Please prepare something to write down your answers to the following questions.

1. What does a successful life look like to you?
2. Which types of people make you feel uneasy or unsafe to be around?
3. Do you feel like you need to hide parts of yourself?

Please click pause here and take as much time as you need to reflect on your answers and write them down.

Welcome back. Did it take you long to think of your answers? Or did you instantly know what your answers would be? Whichever the case, the answers you gave would give some indication of your narratives on life, on people, and on yourself.

1. Based on what we think a successful life should look like, we will start to form life narratives about our priorities and values.
2. Based on what we think about the people who are safe or unsafe to be around, we will form life narratives about the type of relationships we want or do not want.
3. Based on what we think we need to hide about ourselves, we will form life narratives about our self-image.

Our life narratives will determine the types of jobs that we desire, how we view money, the types of people we choose to be friends with, and who we may subconsciously write off before we even get to know them, and who we see as ideal life partners.

Our life narratives influence what we think about our families, and how we see our futures with or without them, where we choose to call home, and what goals to make.

They also influence what we share on social media and the clothes we will wear, and so on...

Life narratives also play a part in our mental, emotional, and physical health. If we believe that everyone suffers a terminal disease after they turn 50, for example, we will literally programme our brains for sickness in life.

Now, let us proceed to the second part of this exercise. Please review your written answers again and reflect on how your life narratives came about.

1. Are they based on something someone told you or were they formed out of your own experiences?
2. Are you conscious of them on a day to day basis?
3. What are some unintended consequences of your life narratives?

Please click pause again and take as much time as you need to write down your answers.

Welcome back. What do you notice about your life narratives? Has there been only a single source of influence or have there been many? Do some sources have more power over your mind than others?

How many of your life narratives are based on the Bible? Or have your life narratives been predominantly influenced by this world?

The Bible instructs us to “live in this evil world with wisdom, righteousness, and devotion to God.”

Titus 2:12 And we are instructed to turn from godless living and sinful pleasures. We should live in this evil world with wisdom, righteousness, and devotion to God, (NLT)

We should not “copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform us by renewing the way we think. Then we will learn to know God’s good and pleasing and perfect will for us.”

Romans 12:2 Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. (NLT)

Do you remember the earliest time you began to form your thoughts about yourself and your life? Prenatal research has shown that you probably formed them even before you were born.

Inside the womb, we had the ability to feel our mother’s emotions and be affected by how she felt. We began to form impressions about what it means to be alive. If our mothers were highly stressed and unhappy while pregnant, we would have picked up on her stress hormones and emotions, and probably felt that “the world outside is a very stressful place.”

By 18 weeks, our hearing would have been fully developed and we would have heard whatever was going on outside. If our parents shouted loudly at each other often, we would have heard it all clearly. We may have come to believe that “This shouting feels so stressful and out of control. I need to be careful to avoid shouting.”

Prenatal research also shows that we began to feel, hear, learn, form memories, and develop habits while inside the womb. So we see that some of our life narratives probably began before we were even born.

Later on, they may have been reinforced by our own personal experiences, such as if our parents kept on fighting and mom continued to be unhappy. Or we may have picked up new life narratives on our own, such as through personal experiences at school, in the playground, or with our extended families.

We also learn about life from others and are influenced by this world much more than we realise. We tend to think that we are self-made men or women, but in reality, we are products of this world, conditioned into thinking certain ways by our families, culture, country of origin, politics, church, media exposure, and so on.

To illustrate, let's take a look at some of these influences in more detail. Because our influences are so varied, we will not be able to cover every single one of them. We will touch on those that we tend to hear about more frequently.

Our family and our culture form the foundation for most of our belief systems. If our parents value money highly, for example, we will subconsciously place a higher value on money too. If our parents had some unresolved bitterness, they may sow some of that bitterness into us. We may become embittered too. Our elders pass on core family values and beliefs from one generation to the next, sometimes without any questions asked. Here are some examples.

1. "Family always comes first."
2. "Always obey your elders, whether they are right or wrong."
3. "Work hard and you will achieve anything you set your heart on."
4. "Don't let others take advantage of you."
5. "We must pay respects to our (dead) ancestors."
6. "Everyone in our family gets sick and dies young."

Let's take a short pause here and consider some of the unintended consequences of such narratives. Do they make it easy or difficult to prioritise and obey God's commands? Or do they lead us to sin against Him? Do they lead to emotional freedom or anxiety? Do any of them sound enslaving?

Perhaps this is why Jesus told us that in order to be His disciples, we will need to hate whatever our family members stand for by comparison. This is the cost we will have to pay for following Him. The question is, are we willing to?

Luke 14:26,28 "If you want to be my disciple, you must, by comparison, hate everyone else—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. But don't begin until you count the cost... (NLT)"

Another way our elders or other authority figures influence our life narratives is by showing us what they think about us, either directly through their words or implicitly through their actions. Let's illustrate this with a few examples.

Many children grow up in households where both parents spend the majority of their time at work, coming home with little energy left. Young minds will not understand the pressures their parents face outside the home and may mistake their absence as indicating that we are not worthy or important enough for their time, affection, and play. Or perhaps we were molested by an older person. Or our grandparents, uncles, or teachers may have carelessly made statements such as “Don’t be naughty!” or “You’re so clumsy and silly.” This may leave an impression on us that we must be bad, even though that was not what they meant. But because we looked up to them and valued their opinions, we believed whatever they told us, both positive and negative. Let’s look at some examples of life narratives that may arise.

1. “I am not good enough”
2. “I am dirty and defiled.”
3. “I’m stupid.”
4. “I am not able to make the right choices.”
5. “I am defective. There’s something wrong with me.”
6. “I am unwanted.”

Let’s pause here and consider some of the unintended consequences. How will most people deal with such inner insecurities? Can you give any examples? How will such narratives impact the way we relate with people and with God? Will we be able to readily accept God’s love and grace? Are such narratives enslaving and destructive?

Feel free to click the pause button to take as much time as you need to work through your answers.

Welcome back. Perhaps this is why God, who is our one true eternal Father, warned us not to put our trust in mere human beings, even if they are people we look up to and respect. We come under a curse when we put our trust in someone’s opinion, particularly when they are not led by the Spirit of God. God is the One who created us. He is the only Authority who can tell us who we are.

Jeremiah 17:5 This is what the LORD says: “Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans, who rely on human strength and turn their hearts away from the LORD. (NLT)

We should never make any human being equal to God. God wrote our DNA and has many wonderful things planned for us for His glory. When anyone judges us based on their own limited human understanding, they are in reality, judging God’s handiwork. We ought to forgive them for their ignorance.

Psalms 40:4-5 Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD...Many, LORD my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. None can compare with you... (NIV)

Everyone has felt used, overlooked, betrayed, and abandoned at some point of our lives. In response to deep pain, we may start to form certain negative expectations of life in general. These are usually led by our sinful nature. So, we judge, condemn, hate, and draw up simplistic caricatures about our lives and about people in general. Here are some examples.

1. “People just use one another. No one really loves.”
2. “Men are not trustworthy. Women are controlling.”
3. “Most marriages end in divorce, so will mine.”
4. “No one ever listens. No one truly understands.”
5. “Good things never last. Bad things always happen.”
6. “The world is a dangerous place.”

Do any of these sound familiar to you? Our thought patterns are more common than we realise. But just because they are common doesn't mean that they are true for us as believers.

Let's take a short pause here and consider some of the unintended consequences of such judgments. Will such statements lead us to God's peace or will they sabotage our chances of experiencing His joy and peace? If we think “Nothing good ever happens to me,” for example, we may subconsciously reject the Holy Spirit's assurances of God's love because it sounds too good to be true. We can make many statements about our lives that are based on our bitter and sinful perspectives, rather than God's truth.

The Bible warns us that when we rely on our sinful nature, we will reap what we sow. Let's illustrate this with an example. Let's say that our bitter root judgement is that “authority figures are always so controlling.” As such, we will instinctively pre-judge and pull away from people we view as authority figures, such as our parents, coaches, and supervisors at work. This only tempts them to see us as lazy and defiant, so they work harder to get our attention and cooperation, thereby reinforcing the very feeling we want to avoid — that they are always overbearing and controlling. We cannot see that we had contributed to the issue in the first place.

Galatians 6:7-8 Don't be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. (NLT)

The Bible has strong warnings for us when we behave in this way. It says that when “we say people are wicked and should be punished, we condemn ourselves because we do the very same things.” By trying to avoid being controlled, for example, we end up trying to control how other people behave towards us. We will reap what we sow because we only end up doing the very same things we condemn others for.

Romans 2:1 You may think you can condemn such people, but you are just as bad, and you have no excuse! When you say they are wicked and should be punished, you are condemning yourself, for you who judge others do these very same things. (NLT)

As a result, we deprive ourselves of the peace of God. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to “think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise” so that “His peace will guard our hearts and minds.” As we have seen from previous lessons, how we think will certainly affect us emotionally and physically too. We can damage our brains by thinking bitterly about other people and our circumstances. Brain scans show that those with repetitive negative thinking patterns experience a greater decline in their cognitive ability and memory, compared to those who see life in a more positive light.

Philippians 4:8 ... His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus... Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. (NLT)

This is just one example of how a “poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble us.” Our ability to make sound judgments and honest friendships is greatly undermined by our bitter root expectations. They tend to lead to bad decisions that bring on more anxiety, more grief, and more bitterness.

Hebrews 12:15 ... Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many. (NLT)

Another example of bitter root expectations is the way we assign certain expectations to ourselves based on bitter childhood memories. Here are some examples.

1. “Speaking up always gets me into trouble.”
2. “I am always the odd one out in any group.”
3. “No one will speak up for me or protect me.”
4. “I am the perpetual loser. I never do anything well.”
5. “I am always the one who has to sacrifice for other people.”
6. “I have to fix things before everything falls apart”

Can we see how we pigeonhole ourselves into certain roles and tempt other people to treat us in the way we see ourselves? If we fear speaking up for ourselves, for example, we may come across as awkward and unintelligible when we talk because we haven’t had the same amount of practice as others. So we reinforce the ways we see ourselves through our own subconscious behaviours. What about you? How do you see yourself? How have you formed life narratives that affect the way you behave with other people?

Please click pause here to take as much time as you need to reflect.

Welcome back. When God calls us His masterpiece, we can fall into unbelief, because our sinful nature will come up with a lot of counter-arguments. Our subconscious minds will resist change because of the energy it will require from our brains. This is why we need God's power and help to transform us anew through our faith and obedience to Him.

Ephesians 2:10 For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. (NLT)

Everyone who follows Jesus cannot stay the same, stuck in our sinful ways of thinking. We are expected to proactively put on our new nature and renew our minds, so that we will choose to follow God's righteousness and holiness. We all need to forgive those who have left wounds on our hearts, minds, and spirits, and repent of our judgements of them in Jesus' name, so that we can begin to experience the new life that comes through the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 4:24 Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy. (NLT)

Once the Holy Spirit has cleansed us of our bitterness, we can bear His fruit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Galatians 5:22-23 But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! (NLT)

We can also pick up ungodly narratives by repeating the statements we hear often. The subconscious mind accepts whatever it hears repeatedly as the truth. So if we keep hearing that a pink-coloured elephant has been discovered in a remote part of India, we will be inclined to believe it, even though we have no way to verify it.

The Bible calls us to be sober-minded and to be as shrewd as a serpent, and to test all things. This means we need to create a Bible-based filter or firewall for all ideas or theories that claim to be true, for example:

1. "Knowledge equals power."
2. "All religions lead to God."
3. "Respect mother nature, she decides your fate."
4. "Listen to your heart and follow it."
5. "Make the most of each day."
6. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

Have you ever repeated such sayings yourself? When we arm ourselves with God's Word by studying it as we are called to, the Holy Spirit will immediately bring Bible verses to our minds to refute any deceptions we come across. He will arm us with God's truth and protect our minds and hearts.

Let us try an exercise here. What are some Bible verses you would use to refute the statements listed? Please feel free to click pause here so you work on this exercise at your own pace.

Welcome back. How did you fare? Were your answers the same as the ones listed here?

1. "Knowledge equals power." | 1 Corinthians 13:2
2. "All religions lead to God." | John 14:6
3. "Respect mother nature, she decides your fate." | Jeremiah 27:5
4. "Listen to your heart and follow it." | Jeremiah 17:9
5. "Make the most of each day." | James 4:13-15
6. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." | Ephesians 4:21-24

As believers, we are called to mature in our personal knowledge of God's Spirit and His Word. This will ensure that we do not remain immature like little children who are easily tricked into believing lies that sound like the truth. As you may recall, deception is often 95% truth, rather than 95% lies.

Ephesians 4:14 Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. (NLT)

Another way we buy into worldly sayings is by accepting general statements about different nationalities, races, ethnicities, and genders without questioning what we hear. We may not think of ourselves as being biased or racist when in actual fact, the stereotypes we make about people are usually over-simplified and even judgmental. Let's take a look at a few examples.

1. "Women make bad drivers."
2. "(My race) doesn't get along with (that race)."
3. "People from (this nationality) are ruthless in business."
4. "People from (this ethnic group) are clever at cutting corners."
5. "(They) are just a lazy bunch of people."
6. "(Their kind of) people never tell you the truth."

Do any people groups come to mind for these examples in brackets? The stereotypes we subconsciously follow can sometimes give us a licence to behave a certain way and sin. Is it true that everyone who looks

the same way always behaves the same way? How would we feel if someone else thought this way about us because we looked a certain way?

Another way we can form subconscious narratives is through the media, games, and advertising we are exposed to. Each sells us a narrative that we can unconsciously internalise if we are not careful. Here are some examples.

1. Games: “I can be anyone I want to be and win.”
2. Advertisements: “Buying this will make me attractive.”
3. Action movies: “One must take revenge to defend one’s honour.”
4. Comedy: “It’s okay to mock people and laugh at them.”
5. Horror stories: “Evil spirits cannot be defeated for good.”
6. Social media: “Everyone looks flawless, compared to me.”

Do you catch yourself thinking such thoughts as well? How do you filter the subliminal messages you are exposed to? Please hit pause here and identify the Bible verses that refute such messages and keep us from falling for such lies.

Welcome back. How did you fare? Are your answers the same as the ones listed here?

1. “I can be anyone I want to be and win.” | Mark 10:44-45
2. “Buying this will make me attractive.” | 1 Samuel 16:7
3. “One must take revenge to defend one’s honour.” | Romans 12:19
4. “It’s okay to mock people and laugh at them.” | Isaiah 57:4
5. “Evil spirits cannot be defeated for good.” | Colossians 2:15
6. “Everyone looks flawless, compared to me.” | Galatians 5:26

The eighth and final influence we will cover today is divination, which is also known as astrology, fortune telling and witchcraft. Witchcraft is so prevalent that we don’t readily recognise it for what it is. We are told that it can enhance our well being and chances in life, therefore we find it appealing and intriguing. Some of us are just curious.

1 Samuel 15:23 For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you ... (NIV)

We are told that we can ask anything about our futures and control whatever happens to us. At its core, witchcraft is about manipulating our circumstances to our favour. Instead of seeking God for His will for us, we rebel against Him and decide our own fate, or more accurately, we allow some other spiritual power to decide our fate for us. That power is Satan, our enemy.

Satan will deceive us by telling us that witchcraft is only for fun, child's play, and nothing serious, so why not find out more for ourselves? God's Word shows us something entirely different. God takes the sin of witchcraft in any form very seriously and warns us not to prostitute ourselves with Satan or He will cut us off from His people.

Leviticus 20:6 "I will set my face against anyone who turns to mediums and spiritists to prostitute themselves by following them, and I will cut them off from their people. (NIV)

How do we prostitute ourselves through witchcraft and divination? Here are some examples of how people turn to witchcraft so as to find out more about themselves and their destinies.

1. "Based on my star sign, this is my personality."
2. "My astrologer told me I should marry someone older than me."
3. "A spiritual master chose a name that destines me for wealth."
4. "A fortune teller said that to avoid bad luck, I must wear yellow."
5. "A medium said my (dead) mother wants me to go home."
6. "My feng shui master told me to get married by July 1st."

God has determined the days of our lives so as to bless us with His personal presence, goodness, and provision. Satan, on the other hand, is a thief and destroyer. Our enemy will lure us away from God and tempt us to consult evil spirits for our anxieties and desires instead. When we do so, we give our lives away to invisible spiritual forces outside our understanding or control.

Psalms 139:16 You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed. (NLT)

Dabbling in witchcraft, even if we do not take it seriously, will make us detestable to God. It invites curses, sickness, and early death. In future lessons, we will elaborate more on the devastating effects of witchcraft.

Deuteronomy 18:10 ... do not let your people practice fortune-telling, or use sorcery, or interpret omens, or engage in witchcraft, or cast spells, or function as mediums or psychics, or call forth the spirits of the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD... (NLT)

So far, we have covered eight influences that drive our life narratives. Are there others you can think of? What are they?

We hope you see that by basing our life narratives on any source other than God, we will fall into traps that we make for ourselves. God's Word is the only true narrative for our lives and our eternities. We need to hold on fast to Him and His Truth.

Deuteronomy 13:4 It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him. (NIV)

Renewing our life narratives is not just a matter of changing our statements. Rather, it is a matter of a change of heart — where we choose to no longer subconsciously follow the patterns of this world and write the storylines for our lives. Rather, we need to have the faith to trust God to write our life narratives for us.

If you are ready to turn your heart away from worldly influences back to God, this is a good opportunity to ask God for His forgiveness and renounce all the worldly influences that have corrupted the way we see ourselves in our lives. Take as much time as you need to sit in the Lord's presence and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart about how your life direction is meant to be in His hands and not in our hands.

1. Family | "These are my family values and beliefs, so they are mine too."
2. Authorities | "An authority implied this about me so it must be true."
3. Experiences | "I expect this to happen because of what I have observed."
4. Childhood | "I concluded this about myself because of my childhood."
5. Worldly sayings | "Everyone is saying this so it must be true."
6. Stereotypes | "People who look the same way also behave the same way."
7. Media | "This looks desirable and realistic, I want it too."
8. Witchcraft | "I know myself and my destiny through divination."

We will finish today's lesson with two infection questions that you can prepare answers to before your small group discussion. There is also a testimony to watch. We pray that you'll be blessed. See you next time.

Time for reflection

1. Who has been the greatest influence on the development of your life narratives?
2. Would God consider that person/s your idol?

Watch the testimony for this lesson



Personal notes