

Phase II: in pursuit of a living faith

By and Based on the Books of Robert J. Cormier (www.thefaithkit.org)
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Introduction

Phase I was “Faith Is Easy.” It was a program of spiritual works planned to last a week. If it went well, and you are interested in doing more, you are offered Phase II, which is planned to last a month.

Each of the following four parts is your project for a week. Let’s go to week #1.

Week #1: Climbing the Stairway to Heaven

This is a guide to a climb, a climb of five steps in the direction of life with God. We take one step each day and check it off when we have done so.

Step #1: “There’s more to life than meets the eye” []

Most of the time, most of us live like we drive—seeing things around us, including people, as thing after thing we have to get around. Even when we think and feel, we are hardly paying attention to reality; rather, we are looking at the past or the future, never anything that is real right now in front of us.

This is unfortunate because “creation was signed.” In other words, God made the world and us so that when we look at anything closely, we see that it was made.

Try this:

Look closely at something, anything, and look at its precise shape. Then, while still looking, consider the question, What is shape?

Then look at the object’s color. Don’t just decide what word we might use to refer to its color; but look for what makes this object’s particular color a unique version of that word. Then, while still looking, consider the question, What is color?

Then look at the object and try to notice the littlest details, marks, or blemishes that make it different from other objects of its kind.

Surely by now you see that this couldn’t just be here; it must have come from somewhere. You are experiencing God.

Immediately you win. If you know that God is there, you know that God is God. You know that God is good. Knowing that God is good, you know that He made you not for death but for life, life with Him in heaven. Knowing that God is good, you know that He loves you, and you need only to love Him back. Finally, knowing that God is good, you know that He has

a good reason for anything that happens, that He is using everything that happens to help you to prepare for life with Him.

Step #2: “Pay attention to God” []

We will begin by recognizing that the Person we were looking for in Step #1 was already looking for us. In other words, God is aware of our thoughts and He is always giving us infinite attention.

Most people do not experience this, even those who pray. Most of those who pray are far more intent on what they are asking for than the Person they are talking *at*.

So, this is what I ask:

1) Before you say anything, take the time to become conscious of Him who is listening. Do what we talked about in Step #1; or just be still and concentrate on the present, the time which is passing *right now*. Now, with your mind clear,

2) speak to God out of your heart and notice that you feel heard. Recognize this as an experience of God and also the truth of all we believe.

Finally, 3) once you have expressed what is really in your heart, be quiet. Who wants to converse with someone who always does all the talking?! Instead, just be quiet and God will move your spirit to where it needs to go. Remember, you are made in God’s image and so when you are your truest, deepest self, your mind, made in God’s image, will know what to do next.

Step #3:

“God loves you—the way you want to be loved.” []

Step #3 begins with the observation that the God who looks at us loves us.

In order to understand what this means, we need to get rid of two wrong ideas that many people have:

The first is that God loves them *despite* them. The second is that God loves us like the pope, from a distance and with only a little time to pay attention to any one person.

Let's look at the truth:

First of all, you cannot love someone *despite* them. You cannot love what isn't there. (You cannot love a chair.) You can only love what is lovable. Thus, when we hear that God loves us—and we know that this is true—it means that the soul He sees is beautiful. When we hear that God loves us with His whole heart—and we know that this, too, is true—it means that He has put His whole self into us making us according to His plan.

To think that God loves us like the pope is to think of God as a human person, limited in every way, with only so much to give. But God is infinite in every way. What He gives to another takes nothing from what He gives to you. He could not love you more if you were the only person He ever made. This means that God loves you with the greatest love you can imagine. It means that God loves you—the way you want to be loved.

And how is that? It has four elements. 1) It starts with the person whose love you want. You want this person to be wonderful—beautiful, gifted, good.

2) You are enthralled with this person and so, of course, you need this person to be enthralled with you. This other person is fascinated by you, amazed by your abilities and experience, adoring of your goodness, etc.

3) This person has you on her (or his) mind all the time. They think of you constantly and you know it. Your victories are their joys; your problems are their problems.

And, finally, 4) their love is so deep and so based on the fact that it is *you*, there is no chance that they will ever love you less.

If all of this seems a bit too much, try this; experience your soul:

Tonight, once you go to bed, before you fall asleep, and it is dark and quiet and there are no distractions, think about the simple fact that you are

alive. Say to yourself, “I am”—not “I am this or I am that” but simply “I am”—and think about what you mean when you say it.

Immediately you will realize that you are much more than you can possibly put into words. You can say certain things *about* you, but what you *are*, what you are being a person, is much too much to put into words.

Yet, as much as you are now “seeing,” to have a better idea of what God sees when He looks at you, picture a person standing on the sea shore looking out into the ocean. Though what he sees is vast, it is really only a tiny part of what is out there. We can say something similar about what you see when you experience yourself. As vast as your spirit may seem, what you see is only a tiny part of the ocean of goodness and potential that God sees in its entirety.

Step #4: “Even the hairs on your head are counted” []

Our fourth step will begin with a closer look at the fact that God loves us with His whole heart because He put His whole self into making us according to His plan.

Let’s face it: Most of us think of God’s plan in terms of the big and obvious elements of our lives—my birth to these parents, with these eyes, in this country, and, perhaps, my membership in this church.

But God gives infinite attention to every element in His plan. This means that His plan for me is not only that I belong to this church, for example, but that I came to this church today, by the precise route I took to get here, step for step exactly. God’s plan included everything that happened on the way, and everything I saw, including many things I was not conscious of seeing. This means that we should do two things:

- 1) Let us recognize ourselves as a work of art, a work of the most finely crafted art. Let us recognize all that went into making us who we are. Not only was every hair on our head precisely carved, but, since everything that affects us has a history, we were present in God’s work from the beginning of time and in almost infinite incidents. We were a big part of the

reason for God's suffering with all His children in every moment of their most terrible pain.

Then, 2) let us recognize that whenever we sit down, at that moment, we are exactly where we were meant to be; we are exactly on course to the wonderful and important destiny for which we were made. (Tomorrow, of course, it is still to be decided; but right now we are exactly where we were meant to be.) To think of this is to be relieved, and inspired to live better. It is to be inspired to a greater role in the making of heaven than we may have seen coming.

Step #5: "Dream your dreams in joy" []

Our fifth step begins with a look at all we have already experienced. We have experienced that God exists, that He listens to us, because He loves us, because who it is He made us. Experiencing this, one might hope, should give us greater confidence in what to expect once our life here is finished. Therefore, our next step is to think about life with God. And one more time, we can learn from a contrast.

Many people think of heaven simply as a place, a beautiful place, with beautiful weather and no dead trees. Certainly they picture it as a place with no war, where no one is sick or poor. If they have strong opinions about the state of society, they picture a place where certain specific moral evils have been conquered, and everybody now knows better.

But heaven means more than that. We were made to want more than that—we can see this easily if we are honest with ourselves about what we dream (or have dreamt) when no one is looking, and we are looking at the world's richest or most famous.

Let us be honest: These thoughts are already there. Let us add one more: God gives us no good dream that is not going to come true.

Therefore, dream your dreams. Imagine the greatest life you can imagine *you* having—if anything were possible.

Do not limit yourself to what you might do if you won hundreds of millions in the lottery. This might be nice but it wouldn't say anything particularly good about you, or about how others saw you. It wouldn't necessarily give you any particular personal gifts or experiences or success at anything that really matters.

It would be better to imagine the truth: If you had all the wealth you could possibly use, every ability that you might want, and the attention and admiration of everyone everywhere, what would life be like? In heaven, then, what *will* life be like?

Week #2: A Progressive Read of A Practical Creed

This week's activity is a progressive read of A Practical Creed (back cover). On the first day of this week, read the first section (or more if you like). Make a check to show that you have done so. On the second day, read the second section. On the third day, read the third....

We believe in God, and that God made us to live with Him forever in heaven. This is the doctrine: *God made us for life in heaven.* []

We believe that we are here, in this world, to participate in our own creation. God is giving each of us the opportunity to become our own person. This is the reason that we are born unformed, unknowing, and utterly self-centered, and we are called to grow. We are called to grow in the faith that inspires the love which makes us more like God, and prepares us to share God's life as richly as we might. This is the doctrine: *The way to heaven is a life of faith and love.* []

But, even though we are here to participate in our own creation, it is clear that we do not choose everything that forms us as the persons we will be. No one chooses their parents, their birthday, where they are born, and countless other things that affect mightily who they become. To us it is also obvious that God did not make us only to leave us at the mercy of what might happen. Rather, in the act of creation, God put into action a plan for everything that would ever happen, including all the events of all of our lives. He did this knowing how we would respond to these events. In this way, we become the people God wants us to be, while, in the process, each of us still becomes our own person. This is the doctrine: *God guides us according to His plan for everything He sends into our lives.* []

And there is one more basic thing that we believe. God's plan is making us the people, the family He wants us to be. In heaven, we are going to be together. There, just as happens here, especially when people love one another, the goodness of one is going to bring good into the lives of others. In heaven, this means that all of us are going to be richer for the holiness of each of us. And each of us has our job in the formation of our family. This is

what we think of when God's plan asks someone to live a short or faithless life. In the end, we will see what God was doing, and we will be glad. This is the doctrine: *We are going to share heaven as a family where all of us are going to be richer for the holiness of each of us.* []

Because we are going to be a family in heaven, we are in this together here on earth. Thus, God made us with a built-in motive to get together. That's why our lives are richer in every way when they are shared. Our faith is stronger when we share it. We are stronger when we are united. For this reason, we are called to be a Church, one Church, one family in faith. But, if God really wants us to be one family in faith, He had to start that family. A family in faith cannot exist because people just decide to get together. Who decides? Who should listen? Who has a right to speak in God's name on his or her own? The answer: no one. This means that we could not become a family of faith unless God has sent someone to speak for Him. This was the mission of Jesus. In order not just to talk about love but to show it, Jesus was asked not to run when he was threatened and to accept the cross he knew was coming. Since Jesus was the Father's representative, this sacrifice of his life would be God's way of showing us how much He loves us—that He could not love us more! This is the doctrine: *Jesus was sent to teach the truth, to found the Church, and to accept the cross on which he taught and showed us love.* []

But the cross was a very bloody thing to see. And God wanted to give His people a sign of His love that could be seen by everyone everywhere, over and over again. Therefore, according to His plan, Jesus had one last supper with his followers. At this supper Jesus blessed bread and wine as a way to give himself and his mission to these followers. This event was sure to become our Mass. As a meal it helps us to feel that we really are a family, and because of what followed from the first blessing of bread and wine, the bread and wine we again bless offer us the love God showed us on the cross in a way that we can receive personally and even eat so we can know that we can never lose God's love. This is the doctrine: *The Eucharist is the meal we share to be God's family, and it is also God's way to show us again and again the love He showed us first on the cross.* []

Of course, since Jesus was sent to represent the Father, we should expect that everything we know about his life was planned to inspire us. This is the reason that Jesus was born poor, and later betrayed, abandoned, condemned unjustly... and triumphed over all of this simply by bearing it. This is the doctrine: *The rest of the life of Jesus was planned to show us that faith can conquer any adversity.* []

Week #3: Say The Weekly Prayer

The Weekly Prayer is based on A Practical Creed, and it starts on Monday. Read the explanation and say the prayer for each day of week, checking it off as you do so:

God made us for life in heaven.

This first article is especially remembered on Monday since Monday has become the day that feels like the first day of the week.

Dear God,

Make me real. Do not let me waste my life in the illusion that life here will last forever. Let me see that my only hope is life with You so that I will prepare well, live free, and enjoy things here for what they can be. Make heaven the true, great goal of my life, and not just some feeble hope I turn to when everything else is gone. []

The way to heaven is a life of faith and love.

This second article is especially remembered on Tuesday since Tuesday has become the day that feels like the second day of the week.

Dear God,

Let me love. Free me from remaining trapped within myself, caring, really, about no one else, needing, always, to be paid back now, willing, never, to let anything go. May I live as I say I believe: that the purpose of life is love, and that the greatest love is what I do when no one but You is looking. Let me look at others with the compassion with which You look at me; and give me faith enough in myself to believe that my little love is worth offering. []

God guides us according to His plan for everything He sends into our lives.

Wednesday, the middle of the week, is an especially good day to remember this idea which is the central source of every faithful person's peace.

Dear God,

Let me believe what has to be true: that everything that happens is planned by You for our eternal good. Let me be awestruck by what this means about all that has happened to me, and who I am right now. Let me anticipate being grateful for the fruits of the hard things You have sent me; and let me feel what You see: that no one has more reason to be thrilled about being who he or she might be than me. []

We are going to share heaven as a family where all of us are going to be richer for the holiness of each of us.

We remember the fourth basic doctrine on the fourth day of the week. Perhaps God is also suggesting that we see Thursday—with the work week almost over and the weekend just ahead—as a day to renew our attention to our families.

Dear God,

Let me be happy about the truth: that each of us will share equally in all our family gets from You. Let me see clearly the reason this is right: that each of us has played the role in the making of Your family Your plan has given us. Let me understand that Your plan is preparing each of us to see You in a way that no one else will, and to receive from this sight what all of us will need. Make me understand that our future as a family makes sense of everything that happens to us, and that the future importance of each of us in heaven makes sense of the desire to be great that we already have within us. []

Jesus was sent to teach the truth, to found the Church, and to accept the cross on which he taught and showed us love.

Friday, of course, is already the day we think especially about the cross.

Dear God,

Do not let me take the cross for granted. Let me remember the choice that came before it, and the pain that Jesus knew was coming. Let me understand that this choice speaks for You, and the love You feel when You look at each of us. Let me recognize that to become one of us and to give up Your life was the most that You could do that we could see. Let me grasp what the sacrifice of Jesus' life was meant to say: that You put Your whole self into making us so that You could love each of us with all Your heart. []

The Eucharist is the meal we share to be God's family, and it is also God's way to show us again and again the love He showed us first on the cross.

Saturday is often the day we pay most attention to our evening meal; it is also a good time to think about the Eucharist that soon we will celebrate.

Dear God,

Let me recognize the Mass for what so obviously it is—a live presentation of Jesus' decision to accept the cross. Let me see how this act so naturally speaks for You every time it happens. Let me see what You want me to see—the love of the cross presented to me. Let me feel the fullness of what communion is meant to tell me: that what You want is to be one with me, and, one day, I am going to be one with You. []

The rest of the life of Jesus was planned to show us that faith can conquer any adversity.

On the Lord's day we remember especially the Lord's life.

Dear God,

Make me think of You whenever life is hard and I am tempted to think only of me, and to make myself feel sorry for me. Let me recognize the essential similarity between mine and some of the hardships of Jesus' life.

Inspire me as I remember that Jesus took so much worse, had no Jesus to inspire him, and went this way to glory. []

Week #4: Working with The Ten Suggestions

“The Ten Suggestions” appears in various places among this author’s works.

1. Post “A Practical Creed” (back cover) where you will often see it. Read it whenever you have the chance.

Write here where you have put your Practical Creed:

2. Say “The Our Father” every day and mean it. Be aware that when you say “Thy kingdom come,” you are acknowledging that nothing is more important than heaven, and when you say “Thy will be done,” you are acknowledging that God’s plan for you always knows best.

Write here when you will normally say your Our Father:

3. Treat others as you want them to treat you. (In moments of conflict, strive to see the situation from the other person’s point of view.)

Check here if, at least once, you have striven to see a situation from another person’s point of view and this has affected your point of view:

4. Recognize the lack of peace as a warning—our faith is not working.

Check here if, at least once, you have lost your peace and successfully applied your faith to the situation in order to regain your peace:

5. Strive to be honest with yourself about what you’re feeling. Remember, feelings aren’t shameful, but what we do about them can be.

Check here if you have had at least one moment of honesty with yourself involving something you would not normally tell another person:

6. Treat television as the potential addict which it is. Watch as little as you can. Have rules and keep them. Never talk about anything just because it was on television.

Write here your rules for television: _____

7. Keep the two-hour rule, to wit: Leave yourself the last two hours of almost every day to do, or not do, as you wish.

Check here if you agree with the two-hour rule and have come up with a plan to keep it:

8. Get enough sleep. Make choices for this purpose.

Check here if you agree with this suggestion:

Write here your ideal weekday bedtime: _____

9. Come to church. Be as faithful to God as you want God to be faithful to you.

Check here if you agree that it is right to come to church every Sunday:

Write here the place and time you will be coming to church: _____

10. Give back to God sacrificially. And considering the amount that most of us spend on things we do not need, it is difficult to imagine that the traditional ten percent would be too much.

Write here what will be your rule for regular giving: _____

If you would be interested in “Phase III,” go to www.thefaithkit.org/panorama and click on the “Mini-Books” menu.

Do visit Panorama, listen to the audio tour, and consider e-mailing the author for suggestions for further spiritual reading.

A Practical Creed

God made us for life in heaven.

The way to heaven is a life of faith and love.

God guides us according to His plan for everything He sends into our lives.

We are going to share heaven as a family where all of us are going to be richer for the holiness of each of us.

Jesus was sent to teach the truth, to found the Church, and to accept the cross on which he taught and showed us love.

The Eucharist is the meal we share to be God's family, and it is also God's way to show us again and again the love He showed us first on the cross.

The rest of the life of Jesus was planned to show us that faith can conquer any adversity.