

INTRODUCTION
First Things First
Part 1
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Today we begin a new five week series called “First Things First.” First Things First is actually a 28-day Bible study on Christian growth for new believers.

As we have reviewed the context of this booklet we felt led by the Spirit to not limit this booklet to new converts alone but ask everyone in the church to commit some daily time to take a lesson a day and have this book together. The reason why is first of all some of you do not have a solid foundation for what you believe. You’ve come to Christ, you’ve had an experience with Christ but there has been nothing given you that will help you get some meat to grow in your Christian life. So we’re doing this for you.

Secondly, there are some of you who have broken off of through lack of habit, through failure of one kind or another to maintain personal daily devotions, personal time of prayer with the Lord. The Lord has become distant to you. We see this as a way to help re-pattern you to get you back into the necessary discipline of what it means to be a follower of the Lord. We believe this will help you do that.

Thirdly, since we’re going to be using this booklet in the future for all new converts we want everyone in the church to have the experience personally of working through it. When you lead somebody to the Lord or when you know somebody that’s come to the Lord you’ll immediately have something to put in their hand. It won’t be something that is foreign to you. You’ll be able to say, I’ve gone through this myself and I know the kind of help it’s going to give you. I know the kind of help it was to me. I believe as we look toward the future and what God wants to do through us as a church fellowship that he wants us collectively as a body to be a soul winning church as well as a teaching church.

We, at this moment, are looking at the scripture where Jesus said to the disciples, “Follow me and I will make you to become fishers of men.” The only kind of fishing that these early disciples knew since they were commercial fishermen was net fishing. They were used to catching lots of fish and catching fish in schools. Sure enough in the book of Acts the early church when we see evangelism taking place what do we find? We find multitudes of people coming to the Lord.

Do people feel, when they see the multitudes coming, that they’re lost and out of place and the church is getting too big and those kind of things? Not at all. They’re being added. These multitudes are being added to the church. They’re finding a meaningful place of service and fellowship and involvement.

I wanted to begin this series with my usual teaching kind of message. That’s what I feel God has called me to do – take a scripture and teach from it. Seek by the spirit to apply it to everyday life. I wanted to talk to you today about priorities. We’re going into a “First Things First” series and it would be appropriate if we evaluate the priorities in our life. But the more I sought to get a message in this area the more nothing came. Lord, what would you have me share?

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And the Lord, while in prayer, gave me this vision and I felt he wanted me to share it. I've never in my whole life preached a whole sermon on the basis of a vision. I'm cautious about persons building things from visions. Visions unless subject to the word easily go astray. But I believe that this vision came as it unfolded over a matter of hours in my life that it is corroborated by the word of God. Eventually as we come to the close of it I will point to a scripture that indeed specifically establishes the vision and its biblical reality.

I want to share with you that vision and I want you to keep an open heart. I want you to not just hear my words but visualize in your own mind what is being seen. Strive not so much as to hear the words as to say the picture that the Spirit is causing to come forth in these moments.

The Lord showed me a person wearing a sign and the sign simply said, "Nobody cares." I do not know who that person was because the visualization of their presence came in the form of a small scrawny tree. This tree was located adjacent to busy boulevards of life. Teeming human traffic. Teeming human hurrying life going past this little scrawny tree.

Your life expressed in this tree is undernourished. In fact the trunk of this tree was so small I could wrap my fist easily around the tree – a thin little thing. The branches of this tree came out like dying, dehydrated, twigs with just enough life in them to keep them supple but on the verge of becoming brittle and broken. Because the tree is so straggly and scrawny only here and there is there a leaf. And that leaf seems to be hanging on for dear life.

Everyone is hurrying by this tree. Cars are whizzing by. Bicyclers, joggers, everyone is whizzing past. You, the tree, long for someone to spot and be present to you. But you are sandwiched on a small, narrow, green swatch parallel to a crisscross network of roads and paths. All of them are busy and no one has time. You have hung a placard around your tree that simply says, "Nobody cares."

You can tell it on your countenance. If people only have the time they can see that you are dying inside. You feel like you're shriveling up. Even the sign that you wear has not brought anyone to you.

This thin little tree is so vulnerable that when somebody on the path next to it gets careless and kicks it, it hurts. It hurts terribly. You feel like it's just a matter of time if the kick hurts you it's just a matter of time before something big really comes along and knocks you over. There are grown men who feel that way. Nobody cares. You're big and strong on the outside but within you feel like the tree, barely alive by the side of the road. You've reacted with hurt to the sign that nobody cares and to try to get somebody to care, to even hold you, you have done things for which you are ashamed. You feel either good for nothing or only good for the money that you have. You have a feeling of exploitation. "Help me! Will somebody please help me?" You're crying out in anguish but everybody is rushing by.

There are young people who are sending out a signal. "Can't you tell by the way I'm acting that I'm lonely, that I hurt? Don't you know that I wouldn't be in to what I'm into if somebody cared?"

There are Christian men and women whose spiritual strength is at an all time low. You've gone through some deep things and the help and the solace you expected others to provide you has not

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materialized. It has left you weak and helpless and hurt. You're so hurt you despair. You feel abandoned. You're consumed with sorrow for yourself so you wear that sign, "Nobody cares." When anybody rushes by your tree they can tell nobody cares. Nobody you feel has the time to really stop and be with you. You're just one more spot on the landscape. If you're here fine. If you're not, no one will particularly notice that your place is vacated.

As this vision unfolded and I pondered the meaning of the existence of this tree, I saw coming up over the hill a group of big strong burly men with shovels in their hands. My initial response was one of gladness. "The shovelers are coming to transplant the tree! They're going to dig you out and transplant you to a more wholesome and perhaps an even more quiet place. You need out of here," seems to be the idea and the shovelers have come with their shovels and they're going to get you out.

What is there then about me that thinks when these transplant diggers show up? Why when I'm initially glad to see them, do I suddenly despair at their presence and wish they had never come? I should be glad that they have come to take you to a better place. But I fight the prospect of your being removed. You're crying out, "Dig me up! Take me to a better place." You see the shovelers. "I want to be away from all the traffic, the hurrying people that don't care, that never stop to talk. Get me out of here." Why do I not want these shovelers to take you?

Then the thought comes to me. It's a painful thought. Is it because the busy boulevard, maybe this church and the nobody-cares tree is a member within and I don't want to see you dug up?

This church, friends, is a busy church. It's southern California. That's one reason why it's busy. Everybody is overextended. To live in southern California means to be busy. Two parents working, single parents working, or work two jobs, or go to school and work a job. Single parents working, going to school, attending to social life, trying to raise children. Little kids up at the crack of dawn, off to day care centers, home to fast food, TV and bed. A million things for everybody to do. Not enough time. Rush. No time for prayer or quiet. Rush and rush again. The church is just one more thing to add. It's difficult in the modern church to even get volunteers because the load that people are already carrying is so overwhelming that to add one more thing seems to me to be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

Church is so we can get the feeling for that tree by the side of the road, the church is just like all the rest of society. It'll take from you while you're useful and when you can't contribute any more it won't even notice you. "Lord, I'm resisting the shovelers. Lord, you can't let them get moved because that will mean I've failed and I can't fail. Pastor George Wood cannot fail. I'm so busy. Lord, are these shovelers from you?"

Gradually in my spirit I assent that these shovelers are from the Lord. Let them dig the tree.

But the Lord says, "No, I did not send the shovelers to transplant the tree. It matters not whether the tree is a member of this church. The problem is that the tree has false hope. It thinks the shovelers are going to find better ground for it. But they're only going to move it to another busy intersection. Nothing's going to change. They're just going to take the scraggly tree and put it somewhere else where it's still going to be a straggly tree. The problem is not the busy boulevard the tree is by. It's within the tree itself. I'm going to change the tree right where it is."

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Then I saw as this vision continued behind the shovelers on the outer circle, on the outer periphery of the vision were men with axes. They were the cutters. You could tell by the giant axes in their hands. They wanted to get to that tree and cut it down. But they were on the periphery of the tree. They were on the outside behind the shovelers because God was not going to let them cut down the tree, Nobody-Cares. "I let the transplanters near," says the Lord, "but not the cutters." The Lord is protecting the tree.

I felt the Lord say this to the tree, Nobody-Cares "I purpose to make you the Tree Who Cares. You're to become a great and healing tree. A tree with expansive trunk and thick bark and powerful branches and plentiful limbs filled with leaves of green. The busy boulevards of your life need a shady place and I am calling you to that place. Your branches are to become unusual branches for instead of simply remaining on the tree they are meant to be extended living limbs, which reach down and gather in the hurriers-by. Reach down and pick them out of their cars and off their bicycles and out of their jogging path and circle them with your presence. Bringing them into the shade of your presence, which is the shade of my presence. The trunk of your tree will become so large that a kick will not hurt you any more. The reason the kick hurts you now is because your trunk is so small. It hurts because you're so frail. But when you become larger and more expansive in your trunk, a kick won't hurt you any more. In fact, careless people come along and even pull a hunk off the bark of your tree and it won't bother you at all. You won't even flinch because you're going to be a great tree and like the tree in paradise in Revelation you're going to exist for the healing of others."

I said to myself, "But Lord, how will this happen? How can such a scrawny tree grow to such a great spreading tree?" The Lord said, "It is happening even as you see the vision for what the tree needs is a new vision of itself. The tree has thought of itself too long as Nobody Cares. The tree must begin thinking of itself and believing itself and knowing itself to be The Tree Who Cares."

If this is for you, the Spirit is ministering this truth to your heart. You know that this is for you, as I'm speaking. If the spirit is putting this within you, you know it. You have been the tree Nobody Cares and the first thing that needs to happen is God must give you another vision of yourself which is true and which is a vision you receive by faith.

But then I saw another dimension to the growth of this tree that was remarkable. The little pathetic tree began to shed some tears as it became aware of the truth, as it became aware that it was the tree Nobody Cares, it became aware of what God was calling it to. This little tree began to shed from its very few leaves some drops of tears. These tears fell down and watered the soil. They started out as tears of self-pity but soon became tears of forgiveness, forgiveness toward all who had wounded you and kicked you and hurt you. As the tears flowed off the leaves they drained the animosity and the hurt from every pore within your being. They were tears from the heart, as forgiving as the heart of Jesus on the cross.

Then as I looked the tears never stopped falling. In fact, an unusual aspect of this tree as you continued to watch it was it had its own watering system. The tears coming from the leaves never stopped. Only they ceased even being tears of forgiveness and became tears of concern and empathy and intercession for others. The more the tree wept the more it grew. The more the

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tree wept the more it grew. And the more the tree wept the more it grew. Until the tears from its leaves watered its own roots.

Although strangely and paradoxically, those that entered the shade and beauty of the tree never sat on wet ground. But picnicked on dry earth. Green earth, pleasant earth.

Jesus shed tears over Lazarus. He cried over Jerusalem. Hebrews says that in the days of his flesh he offered up prayers with loud cries and groanings. His tears watered the world with healing and forgiveness. The tree on which he died, the tree of No One cares because the healing tree, the tree for the healing of the nations.

What is the meaning of this vision for us as individuals and for us as a church? Lord, why? Why give this to me? Should I share it? If I should, why? I want to speak on First Things First. I want to speak on priorities. Why this vision?

It was as if the Lord was saying, because some people can't do priorities right at this point. When you're hurt it's hard for you to step out into a discipline. Whenever you're depressed, have you found you just can't do anything? You're just immersed in that. You're lost in it. It was like the Lord saying to me, "First things first is to see healing take place in lives that are that straggly and scrawny tree." It was as if the Lord were saying to me, "I'm prepared to do a work in this place but I want everyone together. The 120 were all in one accord. I want everyone together, so that when it happens, when I say to you, go out and possess the land, there won't be anyone left behind. When the visitation of the Spirit comes which I am bringing no one will be left by the side of the road because somebody stole their crutch or they couldn't get going with it.

Thank you for keeping the cutters away. Thank you for showing us the fallacy of the shovelers. Thank you for giving us the truth, that you will renew us right where we are. In the midst of our life, revive thy work in us we pray. Amen.