



STEP BY STEP

STEP 1: POWERLESSNESS & DENIAL

WE ADMITTED THAT WE WERE POWERLESS, THAT OUR LIVES HAD BECOME UNMANAGEABLE.

Welcome to Step by Step. Each Saturday night we'll focus on one or two of the twelve steps, as illustrated in Scripture. We'll go step by step, from one to twelve, and we'll group a few of them together towards the end. Each night either myself, or another speaker, will teach on the step for the night during the worship service, and 12-step groups will meet before and after the service to spend some quality time in discussion about how that step applies to our lives. The 12 steps will be our framework and the renewing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ will be our focus. Let's review the steps:

1. We admitted we were powerless over our problems—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

What we'll be doing throughout this study is exploring practical ways to live life in the Spirit—full of love, joy, and peace while also learning to turn away from destructive habits and lifestyles that lead us in the opposite direction. We base this out of the idea that our lives work from the inside-out. A life full of the fruit of the Spirit comes from learning to turn to God to meet our needs and desires. A life full of sin is a result from turning to other things to meet our needs. We long to be comforted, to feel secure, to be in control, to be approved of by our peers, to have a purpose in life, etc. Rather than turn to God for these basic needs, we turn to things of the world, that will never ultimately satisfy. Some examples of how things in our life affect us and fail us:

Relationships: Family upbringing, significant other's neglect, anger, criticism; misbehaving kids, boss at work, aggravating colleague, in-laws, siblings, people in general (their actions, opinions), physical abuse, sexual abuse, poor role models. . . **Possessions:** Car, house, computer, washing machine, lawn mower, anything that can break/malfunction, lack of possessions, not enough money to make ends meet. . . **Health/Fitness:** Sickness and disease, food cravings, PMS, menopause, old age, injury, panic attacks, depression, anxiety, bad genes, death. . . **Work/career:** Lack of time, exams, lack of sleep, job concerns, job dissatisfaction, cooking, housekeeping, finances, Monday mornings. . . **Addictions:** Alcohol, dope, porn, casinos, etc. Never enough, inevitably leads to physical, financial, emotional, and spiritual death. . . **Religion:** going to church every Sunday, reading the bible in a year. . .

We turn to these different things, not because we're bad people or that we that we have some secret desire to be constantly disappointed. Rather, we are born with some basic needs like comfort, security, approval, control. These good desires in us, when unmet, become powerful forces that cause us to act in ways that we do not want to. We unconsciously make harmful and sinful choices to meet the deep unmet desires within us. We are powerless over them. Galatians 5:16 says, "Walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." The first step to begin walking in the Spirit is to admit that we are not in control. . . that we are powerless and not the ultimate manager of our lives. There are three aspects of step one that we will look at. 1) We tend to want to be in control. 2) We are not as in control as we often like to think. 3) God is in control.

Admitting that we are power-*less* is the first step to finding the true purpose and fulfillment that God intends. I see two primary ways of working this step. The first is when we are at rock-bottom and there is nothing else we can do but ask for help. And there some here tonight who looked up and bottom hit you! There is somebody who can only get two weeks out of a month's worth of food stamps, and whose paycheck is spent the day before you get it! I'm here to tell you that when your money is getting funny and change is getting strange, you may be down, but you're not out. There's somebody else who was on the top of the world a week ago, but since then the work you had dried up, the girl you had walked out, and your dog is even feeling sorry for you. You were climbing up but got knocked down. Tell your neighbor, "You're down, but not out." Down is the new up. Powerlessness is the first step to freedom. Sometimes God has to take you down, before He takes you up. Anything worth having is worth fighting for. You wouldn't be who you are today if you hadn't walked through some valleys, if you hadn't hit some bottoms. Sometimes God has to prepare us for what He has in store. Because if it comes too easy, we forget where we come from and forget how we were lifted up. But when you have to struggle a little bit, and you're crying through the midnight hour; when you've been through some rough times, people walk out on you and somebody stabs you in the back, or the dope isn't doing for you what it used to, that's when you hit rock bottom. . . Some of you have been there. Hear the good news of the gospel: Jesus came down off of his throne in heaven to suffer and die so that you can be lifted up. And when you get down on your knees and admit that you're powerless, He will give you power. Even when you're tired and can't get up on your own, the gravity of heaven will pull you up and give you the strength to get through one more day.

But this isn't the only way to work the first step. Maybe you aren't at rock bottom. Some of us actually don't have a problem with substance abuse or have a lot of sobriety and lead pretty stable lives. No fear, you can practice Step One as well. Here is the good news for those of you in that category: it's worse than you think, your life is far more out of control than you realize. Yet the other side of the coin is that God is in far more control than you and I can imagine or understand in this lifetime. Step One is admitting that we're powerless, whether things are going good or bad, and acknowledging that we are not the true manager of our lives and destiny. I've experienced both ways of working Step One and I think it might even be easier when we are on rock bottom. Because when things are going well, I think I'm in control. And I'm not alone. In Genesis 2 & 3 we read a story of how humanity has always longed to be in control. Turn to the first book in the Bible if you have one with you and think through the story of Adam and Eve with me.

1) WE LONG TO BE IN CONTROL

God created a garden full of trees with good fruit to eat yet warned them, *You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die.* But Eve and the snake got talking and before she knew it, eating that fruit sounded like a pretty good idea. So she took it and ate it and gave some to Adam who ate as well. Why did Adam and Eve sin? Robbyn Abedi, in a bible study called *Gospel Transformation*, helped to turn me on to a different way of looking at this story. What if they felt that God was holding out on them? What if they didn't believe God had their best interests at heart? That would probably lead them to want to be in control. Adam and Eve ate the fruit and now this power-seeking is part of our nature. So many times we feel like God is holding out on us and if only He would (fill in the blank), everything would be better. We desperately seek ways to be the god of our lives to make sure we find happiness and peace. We even come to

believe that we have power over our own lives to bring that about. But if we lift ourselves up, we've got to keep ourselves up. But if we turn to God, when we are in that bottom place and admit our powerlessness, He will lift us up on wings like eagles! And we will not grow faint because God's power does not run out and He will not let us down! When God starts something as Alpha, He finishes it as Omega. When you admit that it was not by your power that you got where you are, then you can know that it is not by your power that has to keep you there! But if like Adam and Eve, you feel like God isn't enough, you will seek to control things and manipulate and lift yourself up. Whether it surfaces as pride or low self-esteem, we all share some element of wanting some control. When we realize that we are not as in control as we would like to be, it often results in turning to other things, even things we know will kill us, forbidden fruit. In any given situation, I am less in control than I think I am. Yet, the good news of the gospel is that when I realize that, and turn to a power greater than myself, I am on the road to recovery.

A few years ago I got to a bottom place where I was ready to work a thorough Step 1. I realized that a lot of my trouble centered around my pride (some would have called me an ego-centric jerk). My Spiritual Director helped me to realize that my pride was a way of trying to feel in control. When life dealt me a tough blow or someone mistreated me, I would inflate my ego (and deflate theirs) to make me feel better about myself. Do people say you're prideful & arrogant? Could that be an indicator that you really just want to be in control? Or do you struggle with low self-esteem? This too is a symptom of wanting to be in control. Imagine someone who has had a rough life and internalizes the abuse and hurts as being her fault. She blames herself and feels responsible for fixing herself and others. This person struggling with low self esteem also just wants to be in control. If something is someone else's fault, then she can do nothing about it, but if she takes ownership, she can make changes. Yet this results in a really low self-image. Whatever your tendencies and patterns happen to me, we all struggle with the same problem.

2) WE ARE NOT AS IN CONTROL AS WE LIKE TO THINK

As much as humanity has always longed to be in control, the reality is that we're not. Tell your neighbor, "You are not in control." And one of our main problems is that we tell ourselves that we are. Rather than admitting our powerlessness, we believe that we've got this. Tell your neighbor, "You don't got this!" How did Adam and Eve respond when they sinned? They tried to cover up and hide from God in shame. Denial and deceiving ourselves is at the root of humanity's sinful nature. Adam and Eve responded to their sin by hiding so that God wouldn't see their sin. How did that work out for them? You and I try to hide as well, whether it be through driving a certain kind of car or dressing in a certain way so that no one sees the real me. Or escaping into a bottle of gin thinking that if you don't see straight others won't see you either. It's a defense mechanism that helps us to deal with the fact that we are not in control. In what areas are you trying to cover yourself and convince yourself that you are in control? It could be your job (I know I have worth based on how much I make). Or maybe you find yourself exaggerating a little about how gifted & talented you are (people will like me if I am really good at something). It could be how much you know the Bible (everyone will know that I'm not a sinner if I quote Scripture).

Like Adam and Eve, we cover ourselves up by justifying our actions or judging others who seem to be worse off than us. Through these self-deceiving practices we come to believe that **we are all-powerful**. Adam and Eve ate the fruit because they wanted to be god-like, then they hid to avoid the reality that they are not God, then they continued to cover up by rationalizing and pointing the finger. The first step is to stop hiding and denying and admit that you are powerless, that you are not God and that in many ways your life is unmanageable without His

strength. Does anyone know the river that flows through the Garden of Eden? No, it is De-Nile. Through covering up with excuses and the blame game, hiding from God, and covering up their nakedness, Adam and Eve are the ultimate illustration of being in denial. Step One is the opposite of power-seeking and denial. Rather than seeking to know everything, step one is admitting that we know very little. Rather than covering up with fig leaves, step one is metaphorically getting naked. You don't have to giggle, all of us get naked, and I bet some of you have been naked in front of another person. How many of you get uncomfortable even thinking about it? Our nakedness doesn't cover up the rolls. I don't know about you, but I wear certain shirts that make me look good (I'm wearing one today). When we're naked, there's nothing to cover up all of our imperfections and sin. One of the earliest dreams I can remember was when I showed up to Kindergarten, and everybody was pointing and laughing because I had forgotten to put my pants on. How many have had that dream? Yeah, one of our deepest fears is that people will discover our vulnerabilities. Yet the truth of Step 1 is that when we begin to get vulnerable, and share our weaknesses, inadequacies, and reach out for help, we find help. Jesus said, "Seek and you shall find. Knock, and the door will be opened unto you." But you can't knock on just any door and expect a solution. Step one is about knocking on the door to heaven, Jesus Christ.

So stop trying to pry open all those doors all by yourself. Stop pretending that you are all-powerful, don't have any problems, and don't need any help. Stop exalting yourself. Because the bible says that the one who exalts himself shall be humbled. That's what happened to Adam and Eve. They sought to be like god and climbed up the ladder of power only to be knocked down. This is what theologians call "The Fall." Here at Jacob's Well we call it relapse. And seeking power, exalting yourself is a sure strategy for relapse. But the bible says that those who humble themselves shall be exalted. This is a good time to humble yourself. This is a good time to get on your knees and admit to God that you are powerless and that your life is unmanageable! So when I finish preaching and we receive Communion and sing our last song, I hope you don't get up to go smoke, but that you get down on your knees and do business with God. After worship, I hope you'll come to our 12-step meeting to share what's going on in your life. But to truly admit we are powerless and let go of control, it is good to know that God *is* in control.

3) GOD IS IN CONTROL

He knows all of the hurtful, abusive things happening on the planet earth and is actively redeeming and renewing His creation. In fact, God sent his son into our broken world to lead the effort. Jesus came as a light in the darkness to show another way. He didn't lead out of power, control, or manipulation, but instead led by serving those in greatest need. He pointed out that the last will be first and the one who serves most is the greatest of all. At the peak of his life and successful career at age 33, Jesus gave his life as a ransom for others. So in the midst of our suffering and pain, we can turn to One who feels our pain. When we think we have it all mapped out and something threatens our plan, it is wise to turn to the One who holds the cosmos in his hands.

Not just any higher power is in control of the cosmos. For instance, a friend was sharing about a meeting she used to go to where they drank a lot of coffee and had pegs on the wall with all of these different coffee mugs. And in one of the meetings they were talking about the concept of a higher power and someone said that you could even adopt one of those mugs as your higher power. My friend thought about how stupid this was, I mean who would pray to a coffee cup? But they were being really serious about it, so she didn't say anything. Then a while later she was in this same meeting when one of the mugs fell from the hook and crashed onto the floor. It took everyone off guard and

then my friend said, “Gee. . . I hope that wasn’t anyone’s higher power. . .” And no one laughed. So she moved to a different home group where they didn’t take themselves so seriously and even laughed every once in a while.

Turn to the highest power, the Creator and Finisher who has a good ending to this cosmic story. In the beginning, human beings were created in the image of God and lived in paradise—a safe place with all of their needs met. They were given authority over everything in creation except for one thing, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They had millions of choices to choose from of what was good and still they chose the forbidden fruit. They thought God was holding out on something and so they fell. God says, “you wanna be in charge? Good luck.” The word meaning divorce is used. All of humanity is cursed and you and I have inherited this world filled with brokenness and sin.

In Ezekiel 47 and Revelation 19-22, is a prophesy of a renewed Eden. John’s vision is not about playing harps on clouds but of a new heaven and new earth. Right in the middle of the new city of Eden is a river with 12 trees of life. This is not the river of denial, but the river of life. A day is coming when death will be no more! When poverty will be vanquished and cancer, AIDS, Zelweggers, MS will never happen again! God is in control! God’s first plan was His final plan, that we could live in a perfectly ordered place with Him. . . The people of God in the place of God in the presence of God. This is made possible because when things didn’t look like they could get any worse, the Second Adam showed up on the scene, the very image of God, Jesus Christ. He was tempted in the desert and He overcame. He defeated the ancient serpent by giving His life for our sake. Adam was all about getting more, Jesus was all about giving Himself away. Adam denied the truth, Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And when we turn to Him with our problems and our powerlessness, He fills us with His power.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the author of the famous “Serenity Prayer,” was a famous American theologian in the 60’s. He believed all people, rich, poor, or whatever struggle with being dependent and powerless. To end our time together, let’s turn to God with all of what we are learning about ourselves. Using the original version of the prayer made famous by A.A. & N.A, let us surrender our insecurities, and the burdens that are so heavy. In so doing, we acknowledge our powerlessness and that God alone is in control. Let us pray.

God, grant me the **serenity** to accept the things I cannot change,
The **courage** to change the things I can,
and the **wisdom** to wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.