

SESSION 3

TRADING THE IMMEDIATE FOR THE ULTIMATE

*The important thing is this: To be able at any moment
to sacrifice what we are for what we could become.*

CHARLES DU BOS, *APPROXIMATIONS*

Group Discussion: Checking In (5 Minutes)

Welcome to Session 3 of *Altar Ego*. A key part of getting to know God better is sharing your journey with others. Before watching the video, briefly check in with each other about your experiences since the last session. For example:

- What insights did you discover in the personal study or in the chapters you read from the *Altar Ego* book?
- How did the last session impact your daily life or your relationship with God?
- What questions would you like to ask the other members of your group?

Video: Trading the Immediate for the Ultimate (11 Minutes)

Play the video segment for Session 3. As you watch, use the accompanying outline to follow along or to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

Notes

Throughout biblical history, people give in to their fleshly desires: *I deserve this. I need to get what I want. If it feels good, do it.*

“For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world. And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever” (1 John 2:16–17 NLT).

Two big problems when people have an entitled ego:

1. They want what they want now, not later.

Example: the prodigal son (Luke 15)

2. They are willing to trade the ultimate for the immediate.

Example: Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25)

People do this every day; they let their immediate desires overcome the longer-term benefit.

Learn to do two things:

1. Trade the immediate for the ultimate.

“Better to be patient than powerful; better to have self-control than to conquer a city” (Proverbs 16:32 NLT).

When you know who you are, you'll sacrifice what you want, to become who God really wants you to be.

You'll often overestimate what you can accomplish in the short run, but you'll almost always underestimate what you can accomplish in the long run.

2. Seek God until his desires become your desires.

“Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4).

Group Discussion (40 Minutes)

Take a few minutes to talk about what you just watched.

1. What part of the teaching had the most impact on you?

The Cookie Game

2. Craig described how he teaches his kids the benefits of delayed gratification by offering them a choice: one cookie now or three cookies if they wait an hour.

Thinking back to what you can recall about yourself as a young child, how do you imagine your five-year-old self might have responded to the cookie game? As an adult, would you say your tendency has changed or mostly stayed the same?

3. Which statement below best describes your typical thought process when you do choose immediate gratification? If you can think of any, share an experience from the last day or two that illustrates your response.
- I prioritize:** This is important. I want this more than anything else right now.
 - I rationalize:** What I want is so reasonable and normal, it would be practically unreasonable and abnormal not to have it.
 - I romanticize:** If I have this, I will feel happy and complete.
 - I globalize:** Everyone else has this, so I should have it too.
 - I exceptionalize:** I know I shouldn't have this, but these are special circumstances.
 - I "justifize":** I've had a hard day/week/life. I deserve this.
 - Other: _____

The Entitled Ego

4. When we are operating out of an entitled ego, we allow our feelings to become reasons that justify our desires; and our desires demand satisfaction — now. Here is how the apostle John describes this kind of mindset:

For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this

world. And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever (1 John 2:16–17 NLT).

In his letter to the church at Galatia, the apostle Paul contrasts this entitled ego mindset with what we might call the altar ego mindset:

So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions (Galatians 5:16–17 NLT).

- The passages make a distinction between entitled ego desires (that come from the world) and altar ego desires (that come from the Spirit). Overall, to what degree would you say you are aware of the source of your desires — as coming from the sinful nature or the Spirit — when you have to make a choice about something you want? For example, are you very aware, somewhat aware, or unaware? How does your level of awareness tend to impact your choice?
- The Galatians passage describes the two kinds of desires as “forces that are constantly fighting each other.” Briefly identify an area of life and an issue in which you experience this kind of battle between your desires. For example, it might be an issue related to your finances, health, or relationships. If you were to characterize your choice as trading the ultimate for the immediate, what would you say is the *ultimate*, and what is the *immediate*?

- In the moment, what is it about your *immediate* that makes it seem worth the trade? What are you afraid of missing out on, or how does the thought of not having what you want impact you?
5. Choosing the ultimate over the immediate requires exercising self-control. The author of Proverbs writes:
- Better to be patient than powerful; better to have self-control than to conquer a city (Proverbs 16:32 NLT).
- Losing self-control leaves you as helpless as a city without a wall (Proverbs 25:28 CEV).
- On the video, Craig noted characters from the Bible who paid a high price when they failed to exercise self-control: Eve chose the forbidden fruit; David chose adultery; Moses chose murder; Esau chose a bowl of stew.
- In each of these stories, how do you recognize the dynamics of power and helplessness the Proverbs writer describes? In other words, how did what initially seemed like an exercise of power ultimately render each person helpless?
 - In the moment when you are tempted with a choice between an immediate and an ultimate, which option makes you feel more powerful? Why?

Take Delight

6. In the Galatians 5 passage, Paul says that the Spirit gives us desires. It is a truth the psalmist already knew well:

Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4).

The psalmist proposes a win-win exchange — delight for desires. The verb translated “delight” is the Hebrew word *anag* (aw-nag’). It conveys the idea of indulgence, being pampered, and taking great pleasure in something. The invitation is to luxuriate in the Lord, to discover that “true self-fulfillment does not lie in a preoccupation with self but in selfless preoccupation with God.”³

- Briefly describe an experience of delighting in another person — a time when you were utterly captivated and wanted nothing more than to be with him or her. For example: holding a newborn, playing with a young child, falling in love, talking with someone who thoroughly fascinated you.
 - Using your experience as a reference, how would you describe what it means to delight in the Lord?
7. Take a few moments to reflect on what you’ve learned and experienced together in this study so far.
- How has learning more about developing an altar ego impacted you?

3. Douglas Carew, “ng,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 3, Willem A. VanGemeren, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 443–444.

- Since the first session, what shifts have you noticed in yourself in terms of how you relate to the group? For example, do you feel more or less guarded, understood, challenged, encouraged, connected, etc.?
- What adjustments, if any, would you like to make to the Session 1 chart that would help other members of the group know how to be better companions for you?

Individual Activity: What I Want to Remember (2 Minutes)

1. Briefly review the outline and any notes you took.
2. In the space below, write down the most significant thing you gained in this session — from the teaching, activities, or discussions.

What I want to remember from this session ...

Closing Prayer

Close your time together with prayer.

Personal Study

● Read and Learn

Read chapter 5 of the *Altar Ego* book. Use the space below to note any insights or questions you want to bring to the next group session.

● Study and Reflect

What have [we] done to ourselves? We've traded the ultimate (God's blessings) for the immediate (our selfish desires). We've given away our birthright for a stupid bowl of stew.

Altar Ego, page 93

1. One of the most vivid examples of trading the ultimate for the immediate is the Old Testament story of Esau. As the eldest of two brothers, Esau's rights as the firstborn — his birthright — gave him significant advantages over Jacob. These included a paternal blessing, leadership and authority over the extended family, twice the inheritance, and special status with God as heir to the covenant promise given to Abraham. In material terms, it might be something like a multi-million-dollar trust fund, title to the family's extensive real estate holdings, and a majority stake in the family business. But in a weak moment, Esau trades it all for the equivalent of a burger and fries.

Read Esau's story in Genesis 25:29 – 34.

Compare and contrast the condition of both brothers at the beginning of the story. What does the text reveal about their *immediate* — what each one wants most in the moment?

The *ultimate* at stake for both brothers is the birthright — a future blessing based on God’s promise to Abraham. How would you characterize each brother’s approach to the birthright and their level of belief in the promise?

The fulfillment of any promise requires waiting. Why do you imagine that Jacob was able to wait but Esau was not?

You might ask, “Who in the world would do something as stupid as trade their birthright for a bowl of stew?” If you think about it, you already know the answer. We do it every single day.

Altar Ego, page 91

2. We all have our Esau moments, times we face a choice between what we want in the moment and the greater thing we could have if we wait. Using the chart that follows, briefly identify some of the issues you face that tempt you to choose the immediate over the ultimate.

AREA OF LIFE	THE IMMEDIATE What I Could Have Right Away	THE ULTIMATE What I Could Have If I Wait
Personal Finances earning, giving, saving, spending, debt		
Physical Health food, exercise, rest, medical care		
Relationships loving words and actions with family, friends, colleagues, neighbors		
Spiritual Life putting God first, regular practice of spiritual disciplines (prayer, study, time alone with God, journaling, etc.)		
Pace of Life sustainability, stewardship of daily time, over- or under-scheduling		
Marriage, Dating, Sexuality intimacy, connection, affirmation, commitment, integrity		

What stands out most to you about what you wrote in the Immediate column? What connections, if any, do you make between Esau’s behavior in the Genesis passage and your experience of choosing the immediate?

Reflect on the promises represented by what you wrote in the Ultimate column. In what ways, if any, do you tend to diminish or disregard the significance of these promises just as Esau “despised” his birthright?

Living with patience is better than muscling forward to demand what you want before the time is right. Self-control often unlocks the door to longer lasting, more meaningful blessings. Patience comes from knowing you already have enough of what you need the most.

Altar Ego, page 100

3. It’s nearly impossible to wait — to say no to the demands of an entitled ego — under our own power. But the promise of Scripture is, we don’t have to do it on our own:

By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his

marvelous glory and excellence. And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share his divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires. In view of all this, make every effort to respond to God's promises (2 Peter 1:3 – 5a NLT).

When we commit our lives to Christ and enter into a relationship with him, we get immediate access to everything we need to live for God. And it's wrapped up in an ultimate promise — that the more we come to know Christ, the more like Christ we will become.

What *immediate* versus *ultimate* temptation would you say is the most difficult for you right now?

When the entitled ego is in charge, we insist on taking, defending, managing, and controlling what we desire. We must have our own way; we must meet our own needs on our own terms in our own timing.

How do you recognize these dynamics in yourself and the challenge you identified?

When the altar ego is in charge, we are content to wait and to sacrifice. We cooperate with God, affirming our trust in his promises. We receive everything God gives as a gift, allowing him to meet our needs on his terms and in his timing.

What do you sense God's loving invitation to you might be in connection with the challenge you identified?

● Guided Prayer

God, thank you for being my ultimate — the merciful God who loves me and wants to give me only good things. I confess that in my day-to-day life, I do still have my Esau moments when I am tempted to settle for so much less. An “immediate” that is especially hard for me right now is ... I find it difficult to resist because ...

I claim your promises that I share in your divine nature and that you have already given me everything I need to live for you. Help me to wait for you in regard to ... This is an “ultimate” that means a lot to me because ...

Lord, I ask for contentment and self-control. I don't want my entitled ego to be in charge; I want you to be in charge. Give me a heart that beats with your desires, an altar ego that lives for you. That is what I want more than anything. Amen.