Summary: Seeing where we have been helps us to know where God is leading. We tend to be strangers to ourselves, being only vaguely aware of our past and the forces that shape us and very selective in recognizing the presence of God in our lives. There are places in our history where we prefer not to visit. Often, if we have had a conversion experience later in life, we tend to divide life into BC (before Christ)—[time] that was wasted and no longer matters—and our converted life, where all things are new. The truth is that God all along has permeated our lives and experiences, and that the whole of our story is holy in spite of sin and failure, for it is a story of redemption. In this lecture, we will discuss the theology of our story, the family and ecclesial contexts in which we were formed for good and ill, and the foundational fact that God has and continues to draw us to a great and purposeful end—our perfection.

Welcome to our first lecture in our Life Mapping course. Life mapping is a method by which we become aware of our past and the forces that have shaped us; and we will show you later how this is done. For now we will just say that life mapping is a way to put together our life story; and the whole of our story is holy in spite of all the brokenness, sin, and failure, for it is a story of redemption. Nothing in our lives, even the most painful things, is wasted in God’s economy. He is the master of bringing good out of the bad. To explore our past is absolutely critical to understanding ourselves and God. In a way, it is a way of “doing theology” by studying the “book of our lives.”

Spiritual Formation Is Relational

Life mapping is the first step in our spiritual formation at CUGN, and therefore we need to have a clear idea of what spiritual formation is and what it is not. First of all, it is not something that we do in isolation. In the Western culture of which I am a part
of, we suffer from the disease of rampant individualism. We think intuitively as an “I” and not an inclusive “we.” If I am to grow, then I must do it alone with my Bible, books, and in my prayer closet. Now there are certain things I must do alone, but biblically speaking, spirituality is fundamentally a communal affair. We become whole beings only to the extent that we are genuinely interconnected with others. This is why we ask you to commit to a mentoring relationship at the outset of your program with CUGN. Moreover, this is why we do our life map, to see and acknowledge how God has used others in our family and ecclesial communities to shape us in spite of our individualism.

Amazingly, our spirituality is formed by our relationships, both good and bad. We readily understand the influence of good and godly people in our lives. However, we are equally formed by bad relationships, even abusive relationships. In fact, all of us are in “dysfunctional” relationships, because we are all sinners. When the Bible portrays its characters, it does so in the most open and revealing way, hiding nothing. The fact is that God places us all in imperfect relational environments, all with certain strengths and weaknesses, and forms us through it all. Imperfect families, whether biological or spiritual, are never excuses for isolation.

Example: Jacob—Let us view him with a cold, objective eye. What we find is not at all pleasant. He is a man of strife. He cheats and robs from his youth. He cannot be trusted by anyone, especially those in his own family. His attachment to Rachel because of her fine looks suggests that he may be (may need to make it a little less certain) superficial, hopelessly led about by his senses. Indeed, he seems to set her up as an idol, and likewise, after her death, her sons Joseph and Benjamin. He is incapable of loving his wife Leah or showing her sons common respect. There seems to be little to draw God or man toward him. It remains a mystery for the ages that God favored Jacob over Esau or anyone else for that matter. Chaos swirls about him; he is the very hub of his household misery. Let us here revert to a colloquialism so as to describe this man: We would call him a jerk. When we hear the noble and august phrase “the God of Jacob,” it really means “the God of the jerks!” How many of us have Jacobs in our family systems? How many of us are Jacobs?

Example: Jacob’s family—The most startling thing about this family is its profound worldliness. They seem capable
of every crime. At times the brothers appear more like a roving gang of vengeful thugs than Abraham’s offspring. Once Simeon and Levi butchered all the males of a town, while the other brothers plundered it because of the rape of their sister Dinah. Even Jacob was upset over this, not because of the violence, but because it placed him in danger with the inhabitants of the land. Plainly, these people are wicked. However, it is equally plain that this family is categorically different than the rest of humanity, in spite of their immoral behavior. They were the children of Abraham through whom God was to reach the world with His love. They were God’s elect, His special people upon whom His thoughts and affections rested.

The point in all of this is that we are necessarily part of imperfect systems of which we are imperfect members. God’s intention is not to “save” solid and decent individuals out of it, like Joseph, and condemn the rest. Rather, God uses Joseph to save the brothers, and Joseph’s own spiritual completion depended on the decisions and enlightenment of his brothers. Spirituality does not happen in isolation.

Moving in the Right Direction

My second point is this: Spirituality is dynamic and must be thought of in terms of movement. We all feel that Christianity should take us somewhere. Now there are various scriptural metaphors to describe this movement, such as growth and bearing fruit and the idea of life as a journey—a very popular metaphor today. Another one is that of an “ascent,” whether it be the mountain of God (Psalm 24:3: “Who shall ascend the mountain of God?”), Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28:12, cf. John 1:51, Nathanael’s promise), or the idea of ascending to the upper room (John 13–17, cf. Luke 22:12). In the biblical world, Jerusalem, or Mount Zion with its temple on the holy hill, was considered the highest and most noble place on earth, in spite of the fact that there were many other higher mountains around. The idea of height here is metaphorical and spiritual. God dwells in the heights. It was a joy and a privilege to ascend to God in worship. Moreover, the metaphor also implies determination and intentionality, for it is not naturally easy to ascend, whereas it is easy to descend.

Whatever metaphor we use, we need to understand that all metaphors have limitations. With regard to the idea of “ascent,”
which I use in the book Jacob: His Family and Yours, we see that this metaphor potentially carries with it negative connotations. Specifically, it may seem to imply spiritual elitism. Spirituality would then appear like a great athletic competition where only a few lone souls ever reach the top. Although Paul uses this metaphor (1 Corinthians 9:24: Philippians 3:14), he would certainly not intend by this that spirituality would become something unattainable for the common herd of churchgoers, who are left to stand far off in the guilty distance either in reverence, indifference, or scorn. And it is quite clear that Jacob’s story will not lead us to spiritual elitism. It is about the ascent of a family, a very dysfunctional family; about ordinary, messed-up people like you and me who find it hard to get along together.

God Is the Initiator

Moreover, we are certainly not suggesting that we can by our own efforts ascend to God. Here a comparison of Jacob’s ladder with the story of the Tower of Babel is helpful (Genesis 11:1-9). Obviously, what the patriarch saw in his dream was beyond our crude conception of a stick ladder with wooden rungs leaning up against a cloud. Most probably it was a ramplike structure with its base set on the earth with its top touching the “heavens.” “Heavens,” of course, should not be understood as a location somewhere “out there” in outer space. Rather, it is a symbol for the spiritual realm where God “dwells.” The ancient inhabitants of Babel attempted to storm the heavens, or spirit realm, by their own power with their own ramp and occult tower. By contrast, God extends the ladder to Jacob by grace when he was least looking for it, and certainly when he least deserved it. This divine act offers hope for all helpless and yearning souls. Babel’s ramp is about human ability and approaching God on our own terms. Jacob’s ladder is about grace, the supernatural activity of God’s Holy Spirit working in our lives, and the divine invitation to aspire to God.

The Honesty Factor

Finally, all talk on spirituality must begin with what is, not what should be. Nothing breeds hypocrisy more than creating a picture of what a “spiritual person” ought to look like, however good this ideal may be, and laying this before all to follow. What usually happens is one of two things. On the one hand, some will look
at this idea as too high to attain and, therefore, despair of ever being spiritual. On the other hand, there are those who will see themselves in the ideal, conforming outwardly to that ideal, but inwardly the soul is in the dark.

For now, we must let go of the illusion that to become spiritual we should be other than what we are. Our tendency is to look at others who seem so pure and conclude that they are naturals at it and that we might as well give up. The good news is that we do not have to “clean up our act,” so to speak, before we reach out to God. In fact, it is God who extends His ladder deep down into the mud of our lives and invites us to ascend. The patriarchal family illustrates this point; it is made up of men and women who (at least in the beginning of their earthly journey) are anything but paragons of godliness. These people, like us, are most diverse and complicated, who simply do not conform to some “heavenly standard” unreachable by the common herd.

So as we embark on our journey together, let us be quite frank about ourselves, even the most “spiritual” of us; we are in the dark about a lot of things. Rather than fear the dark and hide it from ourselves and others, we need to acknowledge it and be transparent before God and those around us. Life mapping is all about being transparent and humble. We are, in fact, a mess in a lot of ways. It is so freeing to see this and to acknowledge it, for in the end it brings glory to God who is intent on bringing us to perfection. Self-knowledge is glorious, even when it exposes our darkness. God’s light shines into our darkness, we comprehend the light, and we are no longer strangers to ourselves.

One of the benefits to life mapping, as we shall see, is that it displays before us the threads of grace in our lives. There is little room to boast, for we see that God has borne us along in spite of ourselves. We see that in certain dark places in our lives, that we tend not to visit out of dread or regret, that God was very much present in all the pain. Again, nothing is wasted in God’s economy; to use another metaphor, He uses everything, even broken stones and chipped bricks, to build us up into a magnificent temple for His dwelling place.