

A photograph of a dirt path winding through a dense forest. Sunlight filters through the trees, creating a warm, golden glow. The path is covered in fallen leaves and surrounded by lush green foliage. The text 'THE PATH' is overlaid in the center, with 'THE' in a smaller font above 'PATH'.

THE
PATH

HOLISTIC CHRISTIAN GROWTH

ABRIDGED EDITION



INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Life is a journey, and we find ourselves walking unique paths along our journeys. Our paths are not static, but ever-changing, as they course their way through seasons and storms. The path we walk will vary from others' paths, though we all walk through trials, disappointments, surprises, and joys. We may have wandered off the path, or stopped to take a nap. Some of us have been following Jesus on this path for decades, and others are just beginning.

Along the way, God ensured there would be a host of characters throughout His word who we can look to and connect with along the path. Abraham, facing an unknown future; Joseph, mistreated by his very own; Moses, running away from problems; Hannah, wrestling with the ache of emptiness in her heart; Elijah, stuck and burned out; Martha, worried and distracted; Mary, asked to surrender her plans to God; Peter, excitable and impulsive, and the list goes on. All these show us that with God's love and truth, led by his Holy Spirit, we can be brought to a place of a greater, more refined faith and deeper joy. No matter where you are on your journey, may you find, recognize, and more fully enter the presence of God as you enjoy what Jesus called, "life to the full" (Jn. 10:10).

Our journeys follow all types of terrain. Sometimes we feel the stretch of a steep uphill climb and can grow weary and fall. There are times we are unsure whether we can go any farther, longing to find a sanctuary. We might also lose our way, thus fearing we won't make needed progress as fast as we think we should. The path may suddenly grow dim, seemingly surrounded by such dense fog that we can't find our bearings and must wait till it lifts. And who likes to wait? We will often face "unknowns" on our journey, where we find the territory unfamiliar. We may have even walked a path before, in another season. But, if the same path is snow-covered, it can appear different.

Thankfully, there are also times when the views along the path take our breath away. We delight in the gentle breeze behind us, seemingly carrying us forward as we walk. Praise God that throughout this journey, He promises to accompany us with His Spirit, providing love, fulfillment, guidance, and companionship.

Throughout this program we will use the metaphor of a path, as we walk with the risen Jesus toward mountaintops and through valleys, deserts, winding loops, obstacles, and unplanned routes. We will learn to feel His presence more keenly as He walks with us, guiding and molding us to be the fullness of who He created us to be, no matter what we face along the way.

Along our paths, we can also become disconnected to the why behind our journeys, feeling like there must be something more. We can tire of "quiet times" and go through the motions, feeling like God is far away or disappointed in us. We may at times feel like we take two steps forward and three steps backward, hearing from ourselves or from others that we need to walk faster, climb harder, and do better. When this happens, we often depend on ourselves or others, holding on by sheer willpower, which lacks transforming power. For instance: Perhaps you have trouble forgiving someone. You then try harder to be nice and avoid saying negative things, but you just can't seem to drop that bitter posture. What if, instead of you *trying harder* to love them, God actually changed your heart from within so that you truly *do* forgive them? The Spirit helps us become a person who doesn't just go through motions, but changes our inner desires.

This series of lessons was created to help us learn how to allow God to transform our hearts from within. Spiritual formation has become a popular topic of late, but what is it?



READ 2 CORINTHIANS 3:13-18

Spiritual formation often implies the practice of spiritual disciplines, but it involves much more. Ruth Haley Barton defines spiritual formation as **"the process by which Christ is formed in us for the glory of God, for the abundance of our own lives, and the sake of others!"**

Our formation begins with the ways we view God and His Living Word, Jesus. Thus, we will engage with God through His Spirit, learn from biblical examples, and engage in spiritual reflection, or soul work. While Bible study is always needed for our growth, without spiritual reflection, it can become like another classroom, filling our head with knowledge while missing our hearts. Spiritual reflection, or soul work, is a way of

1 Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), pg. 15.

engaging with scripture. We will practice making space in our mind and heart to engage with our amazing God, learning to both recognize and enjoy his presence in our lives.

As we begin section one in *The Path*, we will “behold,” reflecting on ways we view God and ways we view ourselves, discerning why this is the needed starting place on our paths. In section two, we will “encounter,” readying our hearts for the journey, cultivating intimacy with him, and encountering his grace in even greater measure as we engage with God’s promises. In section three, we will see how God “renews” us through recognizing and overcoming barriers that stand in the way of his desire to transform us. We learn to more clearly hear his call as we look forward with fresh faith to the remainder of our journey, joining with God in his desires for our life. In the last section, we will explore how to “live” in God’s plan to help us grow through our relationships in the body of Christ and our call to joyfully shine God’s light in the world while using the gifts he has given us. We will also explore options to develop spiritual rhythms that will sustain us for the long term as heavenbound pilgrims.

Finally, take note that this book works in tandem with individual and group activities that shape our walks with God. First, there will be a midweek worship gathering focused on a specific set of themes drawn from that week’s section. After this gathering, each disciple will complete *Soul Work* that corresponds to that section. Through *Soul Work*, the Spirit equips us to be responsive to God’s wisdom as we learn along *The Path*. Specifically, *Soul Work* includes a prayer prompt and spiritual exercises that each disciple carries out on their own. It also includes a set of group discussion questions that guide family group gatherings dedicated to that week’s section of the book. The combination of midweek worship, individual disciplines, and group-based mutual encouragement and prayer provide a strong and healthy basis for Spirit-rooted growth.



BEHOLD
SECTION ONE

📍 READING P.9

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📍 GROUP WORK P.22



BEHOLD

Section One

As we journey as disciples of Jesus, we long to behold His glory. We are filled with hope because we serve a God of limitless love. The scripture that began our introduction (2 Cor 3: 13-18) refers to Moses, whose face shone brightly as a result of talking with God and receiving two tablets of the covenant on Mount Sinai (Ex 34:29-35). For Moses, the sojourn to the Promised Land began with a spellbinding encounter with God. He climbed to the top of a mountain and there entered the presence of God. As witnesses to God's presence we, like Moses, become filled with a sense of awe and appreciation, along with a desire for that which is holy.

We often begin our spiritual journeys understanding our need to seek after God, which is true. But we need to know that long before we seek God, he has been seeking us (See Isaiah 30:18). God provoked Moses' curiosity by calling him from a burning bush. God was waiting for Moses on the mountain, and God is always eager and waiting to connect with us. His desire for relationship and his desire to communicate love is evidenced since the creation of humankind. The God we behold is not to be appreciated from afar but is deeply personal and seeks to be welcomed.

At the same time, perspective makes a huge difference. As we behold God, we can often have a distorted view of who he is. Distorted views of God create obstacles that hinder the growth of our relationship with him and other people. If we view God as one eager to find what we do wrong, or one who doesn't connect or engage beyond leaving some directions, or one who is demanding and difficult to please, we will not want to be in His presence.



READ 1 JOHN 4:16B-19

God's love gives life, lavishes us with grace, opens the door to life through his Son, and grants us the opportunity to "see God" in our relationships. God's "complete" or "perfect"

love casts out fear (1 John 4:18); therefore, it draws us *toward* rather than *away* from God. A fear-based relationship blocks the intimate relationship God desires to have with us. God desires to remove the causes of sin within us, the false idols that we take on when trying to fill a void that only his love can fill. He desires to do in us and for us that which we cannot do without him.

HOW DO YOU VIEW GOD?

Our views of God vary, and some of us have a harder time accepting him as a God of love. Review the traits associated with two different views of God as profiled in the chart below. As you compare these traits and dispositions, reflect on whether you view God more as a distant judge and evaluator or as a seeking, relationally engaged God.² The goal of this comparison is to highlight the great difference that our view of God makes to how willing we are to lean in and be attentive to God.

| PRIMARYLY JUDICIAL | PRIMARYLY RELATIONAL |
|--|---|
| Arms folded and closed off with a stern face | Arms wide open and smiling |
| Watches from a distance | He is present, within me |
| He gives out work assignments | He asks us to join Him in what He is doing |
| He expects us to reform ourselves | He works together with us and in us for change |
| Judges our behavior | Understands our weakness |
| Angry, demanding of us | Loving, giving to us |
| Gives us rigid standards to fulfill by ourselves | Gives us the desire to live well |
| We must earn His approval as servants | He delights in us as His children |
| Mostly disappointed in us | Wants to be with us |
| Spiritual growth from trying hard | Spiritual growth from engaging with God |
| Primarily about doing the right thing | Primarily about receiving and giving life |
| Commanding/demanding | Mentoring/healing/restoring |
| Life is one big divine test | Life is an ever-growing experience of God |
| Salvation story is primarily about our sin, the punishments we deserve, and God's pardon | Salvation story is primarily about a relationship with God that was broken and being restored |

God is beyond human understanding, but thankfully, we can note something of his awesomeness by observing the wonders of his creation.

BEHOLD OUR AWESOME GOD

The journey we are on *starts* and *ends* with the Creator God who seeks after us. It is only appropriate for us to slow down and stand in awe of Our Father, the Maker of life in all its exquisite forms and varieties. James Bryan Smith, in *The Good and Beautiful God*³, implores readers to see God by thinking of him as a great artist and themselves as the art student,

² Table revised from David Takle, *Forming: Change by Grace* (High Point, NC: Kingdom Formation Ministries, 2019), 30.

³ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love With the God Jesus Knows* (Westmont, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 54.

noticing carefully every detail of the artist's work. *Beholding* God is a transformative way of "seeing" God. In the Bible, we encounter the word "behold" when we are called to pay attention to what God is doing with openness, curiosity, and eagerness. God's greatness is everywhere. Just look at your hands. Though you've been on the earth for a few decades at most, your hands contain molecules made 13 billion years ago! And did you know that the skin in the very palms of your hands, under a microscope looks like the rugged, mountainous terrain of the Himalayas? If we are willing to stop and behold God, the reminders of his greatness are inescapable.

When we begin to "see" God hidden in plain sight we change, understanding more fully that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. When we see God as One so beyond our comprehension, it changes us. Indeed, when we *behold* God we realize we have something much greater than our circumstances to give. We are part of a much bigger picture—one that God understands even when we do not. This gives us confidence as we continue on the path.



REFLECTION

Let's take a moment to reflect. Get in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and take a few slow deep breaths, inhaling through your nose, exhaling (like a sigh) through your mouth. Notice your body and your mind beginning to relax. Using your breath in this way literally helps open up your brain waves to receive and reflect. As you take these breaths, respond to the following prompt:

- To go deeper with God, reflect on times you were filled with awe as you encountered God in some way. Maybe it was something you encountered in nature, or an experience in which you saw God move in ways beyond explanation, or when you experienced something deeply meaningful to you.

As you remember two or three instances of awe, further note how they have given you a deeper appreciation of God. You might want to give these moments of awe a name, so that you can recount these experiences when the journey gets hard and you don't see a summit that showcases God's beautiful plan. How did recounting these moments make you feel?

THE SPIRIT AND THE SON

We cannot accurately behold God without viewing him as the Father, Son, and Spirit. In this chapter, we beheld our Father's everlasting and creative love. Before we travel further down the spiritual formation path, we must take an awe-filled look at the Spirit who transforms us to reflect the image of God's Son along this path. The Spirit's ultimate purpose is not to captivate, entertain, or generate pleasant feelings but to lead us deeper into our journey to reflect the image of the Son (Rom 8:29) in love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, and all fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22,23).

THE SPIRIT: OUR AGENT OF TRANSFORMATION

The scripture we referenced, in 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, tells us that our gradual transformation into the image "of the glory of the Lord" is from "the Spirit." As we seek to be spiritually formed, it is ironic that the Spirit of God is an oft-neglected reality in the journey of many Christ-followers. Too often, we view the Spirit like a backup energy drink or shot of adrenaline, to use when we can't move further. The Spirit, who is also God, is so much more.

Jesus describes the Spirit as our helper and comforter (*parakletos*) who guides, teaches, reminds, gives wisdom, tells us what to say, hears, interprets, speaks, and glorifies (see Jn 14-16). In John 14:15-21, Jesus' insistence and even excitement at the special, unbreakable

bond between Father, Son, Spirit, and his followers is contagious. The Spirit remains at work in the lives of Christians, teaching, reminding, advocating for us, and enabling us in ways that include and move beyond human reasoning and book-smart teaching. No matter how well we know the Bible and things about God, without engaging the Spirit, the Bible simply becomes a source of very important information—a collection of rules, moral claims, and stories. But the Spirit lives with us and speaks to us through Scripture! These are divinely revealed words that form part of the foundation of our relationship with the One whom we are called to follow. We have greater access to Jesus living in us through the Spirit than those who walked with Him physically. This is mind blowing!

The Spirit takes us beyond the ability to muster up our willpower to love “because *God’s love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us*” (Rom 5:5, emphasis added). Beyond intellectual understanding, Christians are called to learn to engage God’s Spirit of love as the transforming, personal presence, and power that it is. By stilling our hearts and spirits, we give room for the Spirit to dwell and move. Without stillness, we cannot consider lilies of the field (Mt 6:28) or compare God’s love to sheep beside green pastures and still waters, as David did while out in the fields (Ps 23). This can be difficult for our Western, scientific minds. Tim Soeren describes this phenomenon:

It sounds so simple to learn to pay attention to how the Spirit is working in my life and neighborhood. But the truth is that few of us have been taught to make this our default position. In fact, it might just be the single greatest challenge we have as Christians living in a post-Christian culture. We live and breathe in a culture that has roundly rejected the idea of God’s agency in our everyday life. We have moved beyond it as we’ve moved beyond the horse and carriage. The ideas that God is real—and good—and still active are concepts we have essentially rejected in our everyday lives. But as Charles Taylor notes, we are still haunted by the sacred.”⁴

The Scriptures are full of passages, from Jacob’s vision of ascending and descending angels (Genesis 28:12), to Elisha’s prayer for his servant to see the horses and chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:16,17), to the numerous visions in the Spirit-propelled mission of the Book of Acts (e.g. 7:55; 9:1-19) containing references to faith-filled, “spiritual eyes” that see the heavenly dimension of reality. Artists, musicians, and poets, throughout the scriptures and even in the modern era, help us develop spiritual vision that uncovers this other dimension. For instance, the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning strikes the perfect chord:

*Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*⁵

May we learn to “take off our shoes,” and experience God’s presence as we walk the paths of our lives.

THE SPIRIT LEADS US TO REFLECT THE IMAGE OF JESUS

Since Jesus is the exact representation of God, we can behold him more closely and become even more amazed as we see love in the flesh. Jesus, God in the flesh, was also filled with the Spirit. His ministry began as recorded in Luke 4:18-19, where He read from Isaiah’s prophecy concerning Him:

⁴ Timothy Soerens, *Everywhere You Look: Discovering the Church Right Where You Are*, 38, quoting Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press), 2007, 593.

⁵ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (NY: C.S. Francis, 1857), 276.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

As God in the flesh, Jesus set us an example of how to follow God, paving the path as the way, truth, and life (Jn 14:6). He is the bread of life, the living water, the light of the world, the Good Shepherd, the vine that gives life, and the resurrection and life (Jn 6:35; Jn 7:37-39; Jn 8:12; Jn 10:11-12, 14; Jn 15:1; Jn 11:25-26). As we follow Jesus along our paths, we discover that his teaching, his life, and his presence allow us to find meaning, to come alive, and to affect and infect (in the healthiest ways) those whose lives we touch.

THE CRUCIAL SHIFT: FROM WHO I SAY I AM TO WHO GOD SAYS I AM

While we behold God, in awe of who he is, it is also important to gain a clearer view of our identity, both how God sees us and how we see ourselves. It is common practice for many of us to define our identity by what we do, what we have, or what others think of us. Thus, when we encounter difficulties or changes in what we do, what we have, or what others think of us, we begin to question ourselves, unsure whether we can continue the journey. We may think that others will do it much better than we can, and perhaps we are not meant for this path. Or we can think we know how to do things much better than others. Words or situations we encounter cause reactions that come out both toward ourselves and others. Our identity, often unbeknownst to us, carries leftover pain, trauma, grief, conflict, insecurity, and discouragement, often stemming from dysfunction in our families, both physical and spiritual.

It is not surprising, then, that we all encounter identity crises. Some of us were raised in deeply challenging circumstances, and others in healthy families. Either way, we all carry identities that try to take the first place before our God-given identity. Regardless of background, our Christian life journey challenges our sense of identity.

After Moses beheld God, he then journeyed down the mountain where life got real, quickly! Fresh from the summit, he witnessed impatience, grumbling, idolatry, deceit, and opposition, challenging him to the core. Can you relate to “real life” happenings after a mountaintop experience? Our “full of awe” can quickly turn to “awful.” However, God had been preparing Moses, helping him to discover his identity, which in turn helped him in his upcoming journey with God. God, throughout your life, has also been preparing you. As Paul describes in Romans 5:1-5, sufferings don’t simply remain sufferings. In God’s hands, they can be turned into the first step toward character, perseverance, and hope.

Perhaps we feel like we are worth little, or feel the need to excel to be accepted. We may struggle with pleasing people to appease our lack of confidence in our identity. Such deep-rooted tendencies in our lives often stem from unresolved convictions about our true identities and our acceptance of who God says we are—his beloved. This identity crisis has appeared since the beginning of humankind, passing through generations of misguided perspectives and practices. We can learn of identity struggles from numerous men and women in the Bible. For example, Moses lived as an adoptee between two cultures (Ex 33:14-16) and had to learn the link between our identity and God’s visceral presence. Or, consider Naomi, who as a widow changed her name from Naomi (pleasant) to Mara (bitter), only to rediscover God’s steadfast love and provision through a great challenge.⁶

In *40 Days of Decrease*, Alicia Britt Chole writes, “For the faithful Christ-follower, self-con-

⁶ The impact of identity, especially on Moses and Naomi, is taken from Jeanie Shaw, *What Now, God?: Finding God in Transitions* (Spring, TX: IP, 2023)

cept is inextricably connected to God-concept. We are valuable because God is the Creator. We are forgiven because God is redeemer. If God is not who we thought he was, then who are we?"⁷ Let's not shortcut the time we need to understand who and whose we are.

It takes time to quiet and empty ourselves enough to allow God's loving presence to show us where and who we really are, recalibrating our identity. When we really believe that God's presence is with us, our identity more closely aligns with Him. He is with us. We are with him. He is around us, surrounding us, and most importantly *in* us. God's presence living within us changes everything about our identity. We bear his image. His presence must wrap its way around our hearts and minds, enveloping our souls in such a way that when we are asked, "what do you do for a living?," we realize that this question has little connection with our gifted identity. We can feel confident and assured that God's presence with and within us changes everything. Indeed, it is crucial to remember that we are created in the image of God, and God saw humankind as the pinnacle of creation. Not just good, but very good. With human beings made in the image of God in creation, God deems it *very good*.

It is easy to hold to a narrative in our relationship with God in which we recognize and acknowledge our sin, accept that we are responsible for Jesus' death, wave the white flag of surrender, and then get baptized. While we need to understand our need for Christ's atonement, we can easily hold an unhealthy, underlying narrative that begins and ends with "I am bad." Grace then means "I am lucky Jesus died for me, because I am so bad." This sense of inherent badness blocks us from experiencing the freedom and life to the full we read about in scriptures. From as far back as the Garden of Eden, humankind has tried to cover up their sin with FIGS (fear, insecurity, guilt and shame), rather than allowing themselves to let God's love and presence cover them. When this happens, we can get stuck in a spiritual rut. The unintended self-focus, even self-loathing, only gets stronger as we try to fend off the fear, insecurity, guilt, shame, and "do betterism." We sin, we feel guilty, we are ashamed, we try to repent, we have to do better. Oh, and Jesus died for us, so we don't have to be that way anymore. We try harder, but it's only a matter of time before the cycle repeats. But Jesus died to set us free? Why are we enslaved to this cycle?

If we resist listening to his truths, we can remain caught up in the internal chatter or merry-go-round of self-accusation and self-defense. It will help to become aware of "I am" statements and stories which we believe and that we might use to push Jesus away. Perhaps you have said something like this to yourself: *I am stupid. I am all alone. I am not enough. I am not loved. I am an outsider. I am damaged. I am rejected...*

Contrast those with the truth of what God says about you. (See "*I Am*" Affirmations on the next page)

The Bible says what God made is very good. The Scriptures teach us we are fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps 139:13-14). Sin *keeps* us from being the *very good* and *wonderfully made* persons God created us in His image to be. Thus, repentance can now be seen as a joy, desiring to be the *very good* and *wonderfully made* person God created us to be. This brings joy, hope, expectation, restoration, and peace. This is, indeed, good news. With this understanding, our focus shifts from ourselves and guilt to the wonder and glory of God and His goodness, grace, the wonder of His creation, His love for us, and His desire for us to be our best. It seems a subtle shift, but it makes a huge difference in our view of ourselves, of others, and of God.

With this shift, we also learn to see others as treasures created in the image of God, rather than first viewing them as "bad" with the need to face their sin, be sorrowful, and realize how bad they are. When we first "behold" another person not as a project, but as a treasure, made in the *very good* image of God, we will value and respect them, knowing that God wants them to be all he created them to be. Sin always stands in the way; thus, repentance helps others, along with ourselves, become all God intends for them and us to be. This is *very good* news.

7 Alicia Britt Chole, 40 Days of Decrease: A Different Kind of Hunger. A Different Kind of Fast (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 21.

“I AM” AFFIRMATIONS

“I am” affirmations are not to be confused with “I AM.” We are never declaring that we are God. Instead, we’re claiming the promises in the word of God and claiming what God has already told us. Though we could include many more, let’s consider ten identities God gives us.

I AM A CHILD OF GOD (1 PET 2:9, GAL 4:5-7, JN 1:12, ROM 8:14-19)

I AM PASSIONATELY LOVED (ROM 8:38, PS 56:8, IS 43:4)

I AM A NEW PERSON IN CHRIST (2 COR 5:17, IS 43:18-19)

I AM REMARKABLY MADE (PS 139:14, PS 139:1-24, GEN 1:27)

I AM VALUABLE (1 PET 1:18-19, JN 3:16, PS 56:8)

I AM CHOSEN (JN 15:16, 1 PET 2:9, EPH 1:4)

I AM WRAPPED IN GOD’S ARMS/WINGS (PS 91:4 TPT, IS 25:4)

I AM HEARD (PS 116:1-2, 1 JN 3:22)

I AM ENOUGH (2 PET 1:3, 2 COR 3:5, COL 2:10)

I AM NOT ALONE (DT 31:6, IS 54:10, PS 48:14, PS 46: 1-2)

Recent discoveries have shown what God has known all along—our thoughts can alter our brains, thus renewing our minds. With the progress of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), we now understand that our brains are malleable and changeable. We can, in fact, change our brains! Neuroplasticity is the brain’s ability to change and adapt in structure and function in response to experience. One such aspect involves our thought life. Research tells us that every day we have approximately 70,000 thoughts and 90% of those thoughts are the same ones we had the day before.⁸ No wonder God calls us to watch our thoughts.

OUR SEASONS AND STAGES

We’ve heard it said many times: *context* matters. It is important to realize that we have different seasons of life and stages of our spiritual journey that affect the ways we view ourselves and God. When we consider our life seasons and spiritual stages, we can better understand our thoughts and actions along our journey. It helps to be able to say, for example, that God finds ways to draw near to us and shine through us as we enter parenthood for the first time, or as 30-something newcomer to a certain city or ministry, or as a teen or college student on the verge of graduating, or as an empty nester, retiree, caregiver, or experiencing new health challenges. It also helps to acknowledge, as we discern our particular stages of spiritual growth, whether we are learning to appreciate God’s amazing mercy and wisdom, or embracing a deeper, selfless surrender and peace, or seeking to consistently serve and build up others. This is something we cannot do on our own. This is best discerned with God’s Spirit.

While we are free to make choices of what we will and will not do in our respective life situations, the choices should be made *because of* who we are, not to *determine* who we

⁸ Kent McKean and Heather McKean, *The Metanoia Method: How the Brain, Body, and Bible Work Together* (Mind Change, LLC.), 157-158.

are. It is out of the fullness of God in us that we can give to others. John Kronstadt, a nineteenth-century monk, illustrates this truth. In recounting his story, author James Bryan Smith shares about a man who had a tremendous impact turning around the lives of addicts:

Alcohol abuse around him was rampant but the other priests would wait for the hurting to come to them rather than go out to them. John, compelled by love, would lift the hungover and foul-smelling from the gutter and cradle them in his arms as he told them, "This is beneath your dignity. You were meant to house the fullness of God." That describes you and me. Knowing this is our true identity is the secret to walking in holiness.⁹

It takes decisive work to accept our identities as God's beloved. If we don't do the soul work necessary to wrestle away our long-held functional (or dysfunctional) identity and exchange it for our God-given identity, we will continually default to our old views when the journey becomes challenging. It happened when Moses reacted with anger before he spent time in Midian, and it happened with Naomi "Mara" before she reclaimed her identity with God on her journey home. God was working behind the scenes, through the lineage of the daughter-in-law she loved and cared for, to involve her in the grand redemption story that led to Christ.

We may forget who we are, but thankfully God always knows who he is and works on our behalf, even when we cannot see it. Naomi never saw Jesus' birth, the ultimate goal of our redemption. Moses never entered the promised land, but he spoke with God and walked with him. God works on our behalf because he knows who and whose we are.¹⁰ So, regardless of what happened or happens, each and every one of our lives matter deeply to God's ongoing purpose.

9 James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (Westmont, IL: IVP, 2009), 162.

10 Shaw, *What Now, God?*

NOTES

SECTION ONE
BEHOLD

SOUL WORK
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SOUL WORK

SOUL WORK

Soul Work is meant to be a time for deepening convictions and expanding awareness. Take time to allow God to work through these exercises to draw you closer to him and hear his “gentle whisper” (1 Kings 19:12). This soul work will help you behold God, be grateful for God, and also examine where you are in your thinking. They will also help you discern if deeper, intentional conversations are needed.



GPS JOURNAL P.20



INTENTIONAL CONVERSATIONS P.21

PRAYER PROMPT

Heavenly Father, Creator of all life, I come before You in awe of Your majesty and the beauty of Your creation. I pause to behold Your handiwork—in the details of nature, in the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, and in the example of Your Son, Jesus. Lord, open my eyes to see You in every moment, to recognize Your presence even in the ordinary, and to grow in awe of who You are.

As I reflect on moments when I encountered Your greatness, I recall times of awe and wonder: [take a moment to name and reflect on two or three moments when you were deeply moved by God’s presence]. Thank You for revealing Yourself to me in such powerful ways. I ask that You help me to carry these memories with me, using them to strengthen my faith when the journey becomes challenging.

May Your Spirit guide me, teach me, and remind me of my true identity as Your beloved child. Help me to cast aside all false narratives and to embrace the truth of who You say I am.

EXERCISE 1: GPS JOURNAL

Due to the fact that gratitude and awe hold such an important place in forming our desire and love for God, we offer a simple exercise that can have a major impact on our spiritual well-being when practiced over time, the GPS Journal.¹¹

This exercise works best if you dedicate a journal exclusively to recording your GPS. Each day, or in a defined weekly pattern, you will record as many lines as you'd like of the following:

- G** Gratitude: write down things for which you are grateful on that day, week, or in your life as a whole. They could be small or large in scope and as specific or general as you'd like.
- P** Positive truths that God says about you: this may arguably be the most challenging part since we tend to self-criticize or condemn more easily than accept the loving truths of how God views us and even allow ourselves to admit what we really are good at. The next chapter will help in this area.
- S** Things that make you Smile: Again, this could be big or small, from the present day or week or life as a whole.

As we know, a GPS helps us get to where we want to go. Likewise, a regular practice of GPS will also help us to get to where we want to go spiritually—more intimately connected with our Father, as well as more fully convinced of God's perfect love for us and the life to the full He desires for us.

¹¹ Kent McKean and Heather McKean, *Mind Change Handbook: The Companion Guide to Mind Change*. (Mind Change, LLC, 2019), 25-40.

EXERCISE 2: INTENTIONAL CONVERSATIONS

1

In the following week, take time to ask God to help you explore the most basic assumptions, of any kind, which form the basis of your view of God and yourself. Create two columns dedicated to your view of God and your view of self and write your responses under each one. Feel free to erase, rewrite, and adjust. Pray throughout for clarity and honesty. Use the “Views of God” comparison chart and the “I am” Affirmations to guide your thoughts.

2

Contact a trusted friend and discuss the top two or three assumptions or views you identified in your prayerful exploration. Discuss what you are learning and pray together for God’s help to release the lies and affirm the truth.

IMPORTANT NOTE REGARDING MENTAL HEALTH

Our view of God can be clouded by our past and current mental health challenges. If you feel unequipped to work through certain burdens, traumas, or losses, perhaps you would benefit from intentional exploratory conversations with a professional counselor. Examining your past can help understand the unhealthy thinking that we learn from our past experiences and then we can replace them with biblical views.

If you feel that you could possibly benefit from exploring your mental health with the help of a trained professional, please go to page 80 in the appendix of this book to watch a video and learn more about a variety of faith-based resources of professionals that could help you.

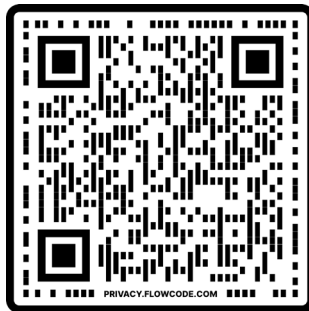
SECTION ONE
BEHOLD

GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
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GROUP WORK
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GROUP WORK



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

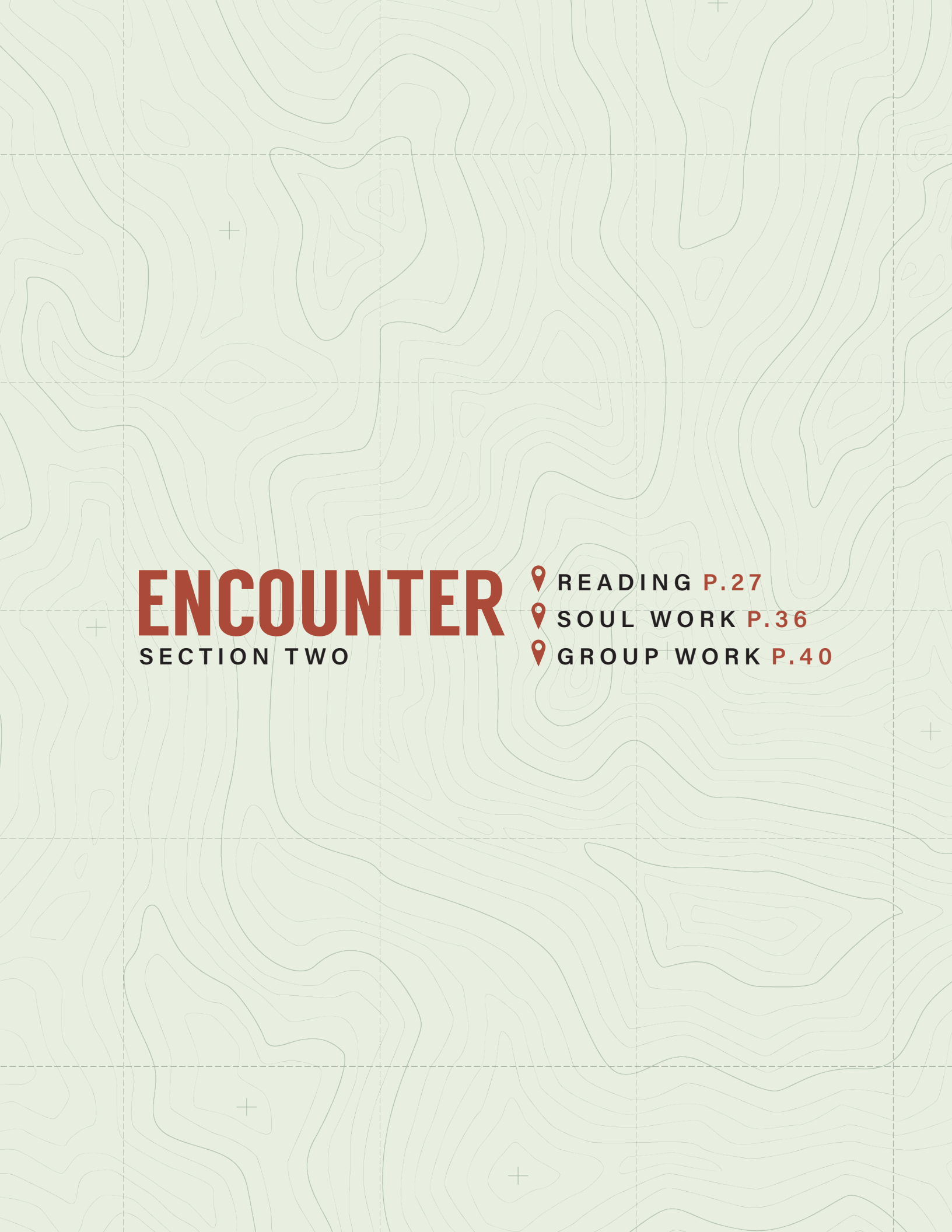
1. What impacted you most about this chapter?
2. What steps can you take to better understand your identity?
3. God cares for you as a whole person and desires for you to live life to the full. To raise your holistic awareness of different areas of your life, taking this life assessment test can be insightful. Take this assessment with your family group.



Scan this QR Code to take the assessment. (The assessment is free with an optional course on goal setting. Don't feel compelled to purchase the course.)

Based on the life assessment, what areas are stronger and what areas need attention? Recognizing a couple of key areas of life will only help us become more aware of how God can help us more specifically.

NOTES



ENCOUNTER

SECTION TWO

📍 READING P.27

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📍 GROUP WORK P.40



ENCOUNTER

Section Two

Continuing along our life path, we will surely come to forks in the road, as well as places where the path feels long and monotonous. At times, God seems silent here, and we wonder where he is. We face times that are so difficult that we feel we can't breathe, and then begin to question the love and power of God as well as our own faith. We might believe he interacts with others, but we find ourselves repeating the psalmist's words, "when can I go and meet with God" (Psalm 42:2). As we contemplate this struggle, let us again visit Moses.



READ EXODUS 33:7-11, 17-18

The biblical training in our family of churches features a strong focus on consuming vital information. Our love of the Bible and desire to follow it is a strength. Yet, in the strengths, we can be left with a hunger for a deeper experience of God. We ask with longing, like Moses, "God, show us your glory." We desire to see his face and to deeply feel his friendship.

CULTIVATING INTIMACY WITH GOD

Let us begin our exploration of intimacy with God with a prayer from Scripture, found in Ephesians 3:15-19 (NLT, emphasis added):

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. *May you experience the love of Christ*, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

An important first step for greater intimacy with God involves emptying ourselves of distractions, making space to receive. What does it mean to *experience* the love of Christ we find in these verses? We accept as fact that God loves us, but what might it mean to experience that love? To do this, we must come to the scriptures open and ready to yield, receive, submit, humble ourselves, and let God speak to us and then *respond* obediently.

We often focus on our responsibility to seek God (and of course, there is truth in our need to seek God), yet, the message of God throughout the Bible, from the beginning in the Garden, through the desert wanderings and on to the latter prophets, and climaxing in Jesus, is that God is seeking us. The difference may seem subtle, but one focuses on our effort, the other on God and his love. We often connect *doing more* with *being more pleasing to God*, and this tempts us to wear our busyness like badges of honor. We can think, "If I am not 'doing what I should be doing,' I must work harder, pray harder, study more, and make it happen." This posture misses the starting point: a trusting and receptive heart.

LEARNING TO RECEIVE GOD'S ABUNDANT LOVE

Only out of our abundance can we give. An important question to consider as we read and interpret scripture is: Do we make space to *receive* from God? The difference in reading to receive looms large when compared to mastering Scripture, or knowing information and trying to do right things. The ways we approach these differences show us whether we seek to function *out of* our relationship with God or if we try to *function ourselves into* a relationship with God? Does the way we journey down our path come from the fullness of God we feel, or do we try to make ourselves, through working harder or doing more things, seek a closer relationship with God?

There is an old saying: "Happy cows give lots of milk; happy chickens lay more eggs." These are actually not just sayings but are scientifically proven facts. But often, we as Christians can feel dry and unproductive, living out another old saying, "You can't squeeze blood out of a turnip" (no matter how hard you squeeze). We cannot give what we do not have. And conversely, we give what we have. Remember, we love because we are first loved. Our first priority is always to be filled up with the perfect love God has for us.

As practiced "doers," often praised for our "doing," receiving from God can be a difficult posture to embrace. Even if we have a healthy family background, when we think about what God might say to us concerning our relationship with him, it can be hard to accept that he would say, "I love you, I like you, I enjoy being with you, and I care about you." And even more so for the person who did not experience feeling "beloved" in their home, or who has been treated with prejudice or "less than" as a result of ethnicity, gender, or social standing. It can be hard to accept an identity as God's beloved rather than "we are what we do, have, or are what others think of us."

In our culture, we tend to start with what we need to *do*. To keep giving, we rarely start with square one, *receiving* love. Many, even longtime Christians, have little knowledge of how to experience the love of God. Deep down, they feel they aren't that lovable. We think that maybe God *has* to love us because that's his obligation, but not his desire. Or, we can feel like this discussion of experiencing God is unnecessary, emotional talk, and we just need to get down to work!

SLOWING DOWN AND OPENING UP

To receive from God, we must make space in our hearts and minds. The Scriptures as a whole teach that this begins with slowing down, clearing out the clutter, and opening up. We must make mental and emotional space to hear God and encounter God. You will likely notice that stillness is hard. There is a reason God called for Sabbath rest, and God Himself took Sabbath rest. So, how can we ever hope to experience God without intentional rest? Before beginning their ministries, we note again and again people's time in the wilderness and in the

desert, where people wrestled with and/or experienced God before they even began their doing.

We live our lives at such a pace that we don't easily *experience God*, in the sense of *encountering and beholding the best, deepest, or most significant parts of life with God* with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. We are better at knowing and doing. We must take time to slow down and reflect, or else:

- How can we, with Jesus, consider the lilies of the field?
- Or notice, like Isaiah, the trees of the field clapping their hands?
- Or watch, like David the sheep in green pastures by still waters?

Receiving, as we read, reverses our role from being the subject who controls things to being the object of the loving purposes of God. This brings a fundamental shift from being our own production to being God's creation.

It is hard to read the Bible in order to enter a relationship and receive. It is easier to take away a list of *to-do's and not to do's*, leaving us burdened rather than refreshed. When we quickly gravitate to the things we need to do, we operate backward. If we allow the Spirit to fill us with "streams of living water," then the things we *do* spring from *who we are becoming* from the inside out.¹²

Amazingly, God created our brains in such a way that even the structure of our brains can change when we meditate. Meditation is simply the practice of thinking deeply or focusing one's mind for a period of time. We are meditating all of the time, but upon what are we meditating?



REFLECTION

Let's take time to practice a meditation that brings us into God's truth through the Word.

Read out loud these offerings from Jesus, describing His life-giving gifts to us. Listen with your heart open to receive. First, take a few breaths. Inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouth like a sigh. With each breath cycle allow your exhale to extend a little longer than your inhale. This helps your body, mind, and spirit be ready to receive.

- Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat? Come buy wine and milk, without money and without cost. (Is 55:1)
- Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Mt 11:28-30)
- Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (Jn 6:35)

Can you feel the difference between reading for knowledge, reading for doing, and reading to receive? All are needed, but it is easy to neglect the latter.

¹² Jeanie Shaw, *The Way Global Ministries Renewal Workshop*, Jan 13, 2023, "Reflection and Receiving," <https://youtu.be/qHae8URWOVY>.

Something amazing happens when we begin to receive the goodness of God. When we allow ourselves to *receive* that living water and take in the bread that fills us, contentment follows. This is more than a theological understanding. Receiving is a heart experience. As we allow the Good Shepherd, the one who knows us to carry us close to his heart, we become more confident in this love. Out of this comfort, assurance, love, and hope our souls are not only filled, but they begin to *overflow*. This won't happen until we receive, unwrap, and possess these precious gifts as our own. God is an amazing gift-giver. When we allow ourselves to know that these gifts are really ours, our perspectives change. This shift has far-reaching effects. We now see life from a different dimension.

Without dwelling or "soaking in the Word," we are left with a hunger and thirsting for more of God. Knowledge and practice cannot bring the full expression of God. Receiving while reading and interpreting scriptures allows one to see themselves as the object of God's love and creation. When we hear and read to *receive* the living water and to *partake* of the bread that fills the soul, our souls are filled.¹³

FILLING OUR SENSES

When we lose a loved one, we don't miss the facts about them or what they accomplished. We miss seeing their face, their unique expressions, sitting across a table with them having conversation, laughing or crying with them, their hugs, their smell, their words of encouragement, and even their quirks and idiosyncrasies. We miss the touch of their hand, their affection, all meant to communicate *I'm here. I'm your best friend, I love you and love walking with you. I treasure you.* The words we most remember are those that communicated love. Oswald Sanders writes:

The starvation of the imagination is one of the most fruitful sources of exhaustion and sapping in a worker's life. If you have not used your imagination to put yourself before God, begin to do it now. Imagination is the greatest gift God has given us and it ought to be devoted entirely to Him.¹⁴

When we read through the Bible, it is hard to miss that God thinks humans need more than words, but also images, poetry, and symbols. It is one thing to intellectually understand God loves all people, including you; it's another to imaginatively receive the love of God whispered to your heart.

This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.

1 CORINTHIANS 2:13

God is no less accessible to us today than He was in biblical times. In fact, because his Spirit lives in us, he is even more accessible and present. As we learn to receive, consider ways our God-given senses can assist us.

SIGHT

The Psalms recount the beauty in nature and creation. What a gift it is to be able to view the wonders of God. It is a wonder of its own that we can see at all. Most of the terms we use for knowledge and understanding draw on this sense, such as "I see what you are saying." We have already spent time "beholding" God in section 1. Besides this, notice how many times

13 Jeanie Shaw, *What Now, God: Finding God in Transitions* (Spring, TX: IP, 2022), 130-132.

14 Oswald Sanders, *My Utmost for His Highest* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1935), 42.

Jesus taught spiritual lessons that directed his hearers' actual visual attention to their surroundings: lilies of the field, fig trees, soil, a pearl, human beings in need, fish, bread, sheep, skies, and many other things. With this sense, we are gifted with the amazing ability to appreciate the breadth, shape, colors, and hues of all the things God has made by simply using the two eyes in our heads.

Furthermore, light holds a very special place in our spiritual vocabulary. 1 John 1:5 reads, "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all." By referring to the brilliance and even deep satisfaction that a ray or glimmer of light brings to darkness, this verse highlights just how lost, hopeless, and even distraught we would be without God's "shining" presence and character. Every experience of God's complete goodness and every instance of beauty observed is something worth "seeing" from our very depths, even if we could not physically "see." Vision, of both the physical and spiritual variety, is a special avenue to intimacy with God.



READ EPHESIANS 1:17-19

SOUND

It takes time and practice to develop ears keen to hear God. Henri Nouwen counsels, "We all have strong resistances to listening. First of all, we find it very hard to create empty spaces in our lives and to give up our occupations and preoccupations, even for a while. We suffer from a fear of empty space. We are so concerned with being useful, effective, and in control that a useless, ineffective, and uncontrollable moment scares us and drives us right back to the security of having something valuable to do."¹⁵

Music, throughout scriptures and in our lives today, remains such an important part of experiencing God. While we can hear beautiful philharmonic compositions, we cannot hear so many of the harmonies constantly playing in God's creation. We don't hear the orchestra of vibrations that the elephants create as they communicate with one another across miles through the pounding of their feet. We don't hear about the hidden life of trees as they communicate danger to one another (yes, it's a thing, just read *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from A Secret World*.) As we walk in nature and intentionally listen, we will likely hear more from God's orchestra than we have previously heard and experience God in deeper ways.

TASTE

Jesus often spoke of banquets, and the star of banquets is food. I appreciate that Jesus even used taste to help us experience Him. The Bible speaks often of the sense of taste, even relating to reading the Word.

Taste and see that the Lord is good

PSALM 34:8

How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth

PSALM 119:103

How might we experience God more fully through taste? Perhaps we can linger at the taste of our food a little longer and slower, appreciating the God-given gift this is, and that he feeds us well.

¹⁵ Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2006), 18.

SMELL

In the Old Testament, smells were often associated with worship. In Malachi 1:11, the offering of incense was associated with worship, since God commanded Moses to burn it in the temple. Scholars who support this practice believe that here, a half century before Christ, Malachi prophesied that incense would be burned by the Gentiles in their worship, as Israel had done. Our olfactory senses connect to memories. Do you remember the smell of your grandparent's home, a favorite family dinner, the cologne of your first love, the smell of poverty, the smell of bread baking? The smell of a freshly bathed baby? Or, the smell of the baby who needs to be freshly bathed (also unforgettable)?

I call to you, LORD, come quickly to me; hear me when I call to you.
May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.

PSALM 141:2

TOUCH

Jesus knew the power of touch as he touched the leper (Mk 1:40-45), rubbed spit on the blind man's eyes (Mk 8:23; Jn 9:6), washed his disciples' feet (Jn 12:1-17), held the children (Mt 10:13; Lk 18:15), and was moved by the woman washing His feet with her tears. He let Thomas touch his wounds (Lk 24:39), and noticed that power had left him as the woman touched the hem of his garment (Mk 9:21). Touch is a powerful experience. God was known as one who longed to gather his beloved under his wings; sheltered, and carried close to His heart. We find examples in the old and new covenants. (Ps. 91:4; 17:8; 61:4; Mt 23:37). Jesus compares the wind to the moving of the Spirit, knowing that wind is only felt by air waves that touch our skin. He holds us by His right hand according to Is 41:13; 46:4; 49:16; Ps 27:10; 63:8.

Experience God more fully, and enjoy the journey as you experience him through sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, feeling the streams of living water flowing from and through you. It's exhilarating, it's refreshing. However, to be sustained on our journeys, we need more than experience. We also need to hold to the promises of God.

Peter offers us an astounding truth in 2 Peter 1:3 (NIV, emphasis added):

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

Did you get that? Because God became human in Christ, we can participate in the divine nature through Christ. He became human so we could become divine. To be more fully sustained by what God provides in our "spiritual pack," we'll explore the depth of God's promises, learn how to rely on them to navigate challenges, trust in his provision, and move forward with confidence, knowing we're thoroughly equipped (2 Timothy 3:17) for the journey ahead.

DESIRES AND EXPECTATIONS, HUMAN AND DIVINE

The strength we need to continue on the path requires us to understand how to recognize and employ the precious goods God has placed in our hands. First, we must explore what shapes our expectations and desires, and then examine those expectations considering a renewed understanding of God's promises and faithfulness. We are not just exploring what we *know about God's promises*. We must also determine what we *want* and whether we have allowed God to shape these desires.

None of us can hold on to God's promises when our own desires resist them. As we will

learn, our deepest desires often shape our views of God's promises and his will. Those expectations and desires are intimately linked to our greatest joys and delights, and our disappointments. Some of these disappointments stem from unmet expectations, and when left unaddressed they accumulate and become heavy loads that slowly but surely diminish our joy, faithfulness, and intimacy with God. We continue to agree with what we know are God's truths and wisdom because we *know* they are right, but inside we find ourselves drawn to other sources of satisfaction and fulfillment.

This conflict creates a dilemma: we can express agreement with all kinds of spiritual and biblical principles, but we often *obey our pain*. This is similar to muscle memory, where our initial, automatic reaction is often a (protective) reflex. We know in our minds what the better or best response should be, but the threat feels immediate. Our disappointment and the need to respond to the threat runs deeper than the "biblical principle." King Saul offers a sobering example. A brief read of 1 Samuel 18:6-13 tells us that from the day that Saul viewed the greater praise directed at David as a threat to his own worth, Saul kept this pain in the center of his life. As he was prophesying in his own home, Saul's deep fear and anger moved him to attack David (verses 10 and 11).

In contrast, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises, and he shows us how to live in complete trust that God's promises will be fulfilled. God does not want us to carry frustrations in the depths of our heart; rather, he wants us to gain a faithful perspective of his character, allowing him to shape our own desires and wills. This will prove to be a source of peace as we draw near to God in full confidence before we encounter inevitable challenges on our paths.

TRUTHS, PRINCIPLES, AND PROMISES

Sometimes, we can take a *general truth* about life as if it were a promise of God that is fulfilled in every possible life situation. For instance, Proverbs 22:6 states, "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it." As with all the proverbs, this is a wise and general truth. This does not mean that it is an ironclad promise or universal law. Proverbial sayings require discernment to be understood and correctly applied. The Proverbs are meant to communicate principles. Proverbs 22:6 urges the reader to engage with their young in some regular and sustained instruction concerning a specific way of life (even possibly vocation) that they won't easily forget or reject as they grow. We know that there are many who reject such a way of life, *but* there will be very little chance that this way of life will be embraced if parents give *no* such instruction.

We must apply discernment and attentiveness to understand and apply the proverbs and other teachings of wisdom. Some sayings appear to be straightforward contradictions, such as "Do not answer a fool according to him folly, or you yourself will become just like him" (Prov. 26:4) and the verse that immediately follows it, "Answer a fool according to him folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes" (Prov 26:5; see also 23:31-23 and 31:6-7). Notice that both are very clear about the actions prescribed and the expected results. However, we must consistently encounter these kinds of situations to know when one option is to be preferred over another.

Second, we may also be tempted to read a passage that appears to tell us that a certain set of circumstances or happenings will come to pass, without considering the *conditions* necessary for this situation to materialize. We cannot accurately predict what God will do every time, as we have blind spots, and we are not God. There are some things we do not understand, or we miss their meanings, because of language and cultural practices so different from ours. In James 5:15, it can feel like a promise that if we ask elders to pray and anoint a sick person with oil, they will get well. We obviously do not know the full understanding of this practice, though oil was often used for medical reasons and prayer does make a difference. But, there are other truths that exist. Evil persists in the world, and our fallen world ensures bad things will happen. No one escapes death. We await the day when Jesus returns

to make all things new. Until then, God allows things to happen we don't understand, even though he can and does work with us through them toward the renewal of all that is good. As N.T. Wright observes, we are collaborators with God as *he works with* those who love him for good.¹⁶ But the good we are working toward doesn't always feel good now. Ultimately, a Christian will be healed, it just may not be in this physical lifetime.

Only through the resurrection of Jesus was death defeated, so that we can enter eternal life through him and be together when he returns to make all things new. No matter what we experience here, we can be assured of God's perfect faithfulness and consistency of character. Jesus demonstrated that for us, as Jesus made God known. We can confidently affirm that God is completely devoted to love, peace, justice, forgiveness, and kindness, from one generation to the next.

CONTROL OR TRUST? SELECTIVITY AND MANIPULATION

So what does this mean for us? How do we know the difference between our desire for security and confidence in God and our desire to control or manipulate God? If we select a verse that communicates a resolute action of God to rescue or act on behalf of God's people, should we consider the context and the purpose that God's actions served? Exodus 14:14 tells us, "The LORD will fight for you; you need only be still." However, three chapters later, Israel was commanded to actively fight and defend itself. In fact, as we get deeper into the journey of Israel in Exodus, there are numerous instances of specific actions and decisions that Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and others must undertake to abide in God's great mission to mold the people of Israel into a people of promise, that is, a "holy nation." Let's also make sure to be aware of any tendency to invoke a promise of God as if we could summon God to do something as we wish and when we wish—like a genie in a bottle. We may also be tempted to impose a timeline on a promise or assume that the intended audience is an individual person rather than an entire people, such as that of Jeremiah 29:11. Yes, God does have a plan for each one of us, but God is also working to include each person in the larger plan of a people made for his glory. This plan does not have a precise timeline known to humans.

Ultimately, we are not called to *use* promises to bend God's will to our own, but for us to more thoroughly trust God and align our wills and desires with that of God. Jesus remains as the best model for our understanding of God's faithfulness. Although Jesus is, amazingly, *the* fulfillment of God's promises, he did suffer hardships, losses, and all manner of challenges with which we are familiar. In fact, "during the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:7-8).

ACCEPTING HIS PROMISES

Jesus is a remarkable example of the kind of promise-driven, hope-filled, and worshipful reliance on God that we often find in the voices from the Psalms. Jesus, our pioneer on the path of life and perfecter of our faith, shows us joyful and complete dependence on our Creator, the One who knows how to fill us, love us, mold us, and transform us as we continue forward on this trek for life. This is the posture that will lead us to discern and accept God's will with joy and peace.

"PRECIOUS AND VERY GREAT PROMISES"

Now that we have identified several ways of misusing or misunderstanding God's promises, we also need to understand how very precious and great his promises are, as revealed

16 N.T. Wright, *Into the Heart of Romans: A Deep Dive into Paul's Greatest Letter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2023), pg. 158.

through his unchanging character. To help us understand this, slowly read through each of the following passages of Scripture. Try to sense the common threads that work their way through these verses. What do they tell you about God's character and purpose? Keep in mind that the context for each of these verses may not be readily apparent unless you are familiar with each letter or book in which it is found. Nevertheless, taken together, these passages tell us that there are some vital actions that God is ready to carry out in *many* different life contexts for the sake of his good, redemptive work in and through us. What are they?



REFLECTION

Read the following passages and identify the promise you intend to impress upon your mind and heart:

- **DEUTERONOMY 31:6**
- **PSALM 103:10-12**
- **HEBREWS 13:5**
- **ISAIAH 40:28-31**
- **I JOHN 1:9**
- **JUDE 24-25**

Among the many things that may be said about God based on these selected texts, a few are obvious: God is *amazingly faithful*. God is fully committed to what is best for us and intends to bring about as much good as possible. This commitment is grounded in an unbreakable and abiding divine love. God is not fickle and does not run out of energy or passion in this covenant relationship. Although he does not control our responses, God longs to bring his children home. God's character of complete and wholehearted devotion is exactly what we need to experience freedom and joy, even in deeply challenging and excruciating circumstances. We need Jesus, we need his promises, and we must rely on his Spirit to bring them to life.

SECTION TWO
ENCOUNTER

SOUL WORK
SOUL WORK
SOUL WORK
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SOUL WORK

SOUL WORK

The following exercises are meant to deepen your intimacy with God and help you to trust his promises that shape your desires and bring you into greater unity and peace with God.



CONVERSATIONAL PRAYER P.38



ROCKS OF REMEMBRANCE P.39

PRAYER PROMPT

READ PSALM 139:1-10

In verse 7, the psalmist asks two questions: Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

While some may have read this psalm in a fearful way such as God is watching you and you can't get away, this song denotes deep trust in God's intimate love and care for us and the presence of his Spirit surrounding us.

Offer God a prayer of praise in response to this psalm, with specific attention to the questions regarding the Spirit's presence.

For further reading: 1 Cor 2:9-10, Lk 2:27; 4:1; 24:28-32; Rom 8:14; 1 Kgs 19:11-13

EXERCISE 1: CONVERSATIONAL PRAYER

Conversational prayer is a life-giving practice, helping us to grow in intimacy and depth with God. In conversational prayer, we listen to God. We hear God in his Word, but also through promptings, things he puts on our hearts, comfort that we can't explain, and urgings and connections that cannot be explained without the Spirit's involvement. Stillness and reflection are part of listening. We reflect by actively seeking, sensing, receiving, and being led. It's not passively waiting for something to surprise us, but more approaching God in the demeanor of a student, eager to learn. Communication involves noticing internal reactions and responses that reveal what is in our heart and mind.

Communication also involves learning to verbalize our thoughts and impressions, writing or speaking out what comes to mind, much as we see in the psalms. Words are important in conversational prayer. They give substance to our impressions and help us focus and use all our mind in the process. As we do this, we can feel like we are being led through a fog. As we search for and find words to capture our impressions, the fog often lifts. Conversations with God can be described as active spiritual reflection, with the expectation that God will speak to us, allowing the Spirit to teach us about life in the kingdom of God, revealing the Word and our heart at the same time, allowing the Spirit to show us deeper understanding of the text, and allowing the Spirit to reveal and internalize His truth. It helps to begin by focusing on short passages or phrases, what has been described or termed "sacred listening."

Conversational prayer helps keep our relationship with God growing and dynamic. As we know from the experience of conversing with somebody regularly, we remain much more lovingly attentive to them as we practice communication at different points throughout the day.

HELPFUL QUESTIONS:

- God, what do you want me to hold on to from our time together?
- How can I act on this?
- What do I want to come back to again, to further explore?

WAYS TO RESPOND:

- Enjoying the moment – reflecting and letting things sink in
- Prayer that we may be led to thanksgiving, praise, intercession, repentance, renunciation

TAKING ACTION SUCH AS:

- Contacting and connecting, forgiveness/amends, serving/giving, memorize verses, post a note to keep the thought visible, share with others.

EXERCISE 2: ROCKS OF REMEMBRANCE

| | | |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| REVEALS | SEALS OUR INHERITANCE | GUIDES INTO TRUTH |
| COMFORTS | HELPS IN WEAKNESS | INTERCEDES |
| KNOWS OUR THOUGHTS | TAKES OUR UNSPOKEN PRAYER TO GOD | GIVES GIFTS |
| FILLS | POURS LOVE INTO OUR HEARTS | GIVES LOVE |
| GIVES JOY | GIVES PEACE | GIVES PATIENCE |
| GIVES KINDNESS | GIVES GENTLENESS | GIVES GOODNESS |
| GIVES FAITHFULNESS | GIVES SELF CONTROL | GIVES ALL KINDS OF GIFTS |
| UNIFIES | COUNSELOR | ADVOCATE |
| TEACHER | AGENT OF CHANGE | BRINGS REPENTANCE |
| DWELLS IN US | REMINDS US | FILLS US |
| GIVES WISDOM | EMPOWERS | HELPS US IN WEAKNESS |
| WASHES | REBIRTHS | RENEWS |

As you view the chart, you will see some of the attributes of God that fill us with assurance in the face of life's uncertainties. Pick one that first stands out to you, "gathering" the rock. While holding the rock, meditate on what this means to you and help make you feel on your journey. As you hold the rock, ask the Spirit to make you more aware of the divine presence and let yourself release the burdens you carry to the Spirit's care.



SECTION TWO
ENCOUNTER

GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These group discussion questions are meant to be done after a short devotional with your family group.

You are invited to share what you learned from the prayer you wrote in response to the prayer prompt with the group.

1. What feelings emerged as you intentionally heard the scriptures read out loud with the intent to receive from God?
2. What bodily sense has most helped you to experience God? How might you incorporate other senses to deepen your experience of Him?
3. Based on the chapter text, what is one way you have decided to further “soak” in the Word?
4. Considering your family relations, how has your relationship with your father, mother, or caretakers enhanced or limited your intimacy with God?

NOTES

RENEW

SECTION THREE

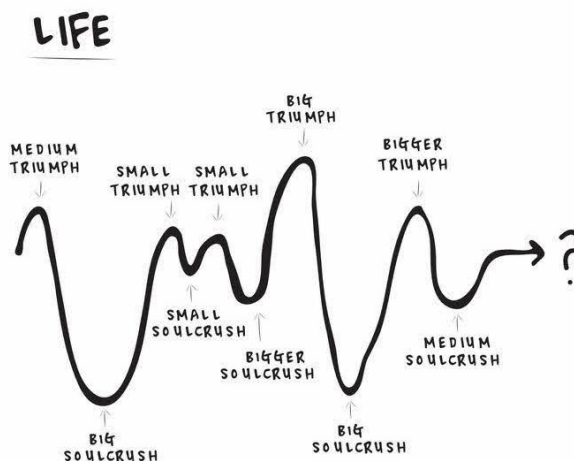
- 📍 READING P.45
- 📍 SOUL WORK P.54
- 📍 GROUP WORK P.58



RENEW

Section Three

Our paths can get complicated. As we have held on to our faith, trying hard to follow Jesus, we may wonder why we encounter so many hardships. We may have thought our Christian journey should be more of a straight path and steady ascent, but, actually, it looks more like what is depicted here.



Take heart. You are not alone. About a third of the entire book of Psalms expresses deep sorrow, grief, regret, loneliness, and regret. These songs express intense emotions, real human struggles, and the anguish experienced by the people of Israel as they lived out their faith individually and corporately. The poetry and hymns in the scriptures touch our souls more than the narrative.

Consider Psalm 22:2-6, as the Message translates it.

Doubled up with pain, I call to God all the day long. No answer. Nothing. I keep at it all night, tossing and turning.

And you! Are you indifferent, above it all, leaning back on the cushions of Israel's praise? We know you were there for our parents: they cried for your help and you gave it; they trusted and lived a good life. And here I am, a nothing—an earthworm, something to step on, to squash.

PSALM 22:2-6 MSG

RESILIENT FAITH

We should not be surprised at the difficulties we experience. Jesus taught that we would have troubles in this world (Jn 16:33), and each day has enough trouble of its own (Mt 6:34). However, it's easier to read these teachings than to walk faithfully through the troubles. (Spoiler alert: Jesus also said to take heart. He has overcome the world.) David, in the psalms, vulnerably gives language to the emotions we often carry. Sometimes, we try to just tough it out without vulnerably noting, expressing, and lamenting our deepest thoughts. However, when we don't address our troubles, we will find it difficult to overcome them.

VULNERABILITY AND SONGS OF LAMENT

David teaches us how to be honest, and how to lament. Not only does he teach us the value of vulnerability through expressing pain, but he also teaches us the importance of emotional expressions such as those elicited through music and poetry. We can become so busy that the arts, God's gifts of creativity, find no place in our lives. We can learn from the psalms ways to express pain through avenues that words alone can't express, reaching into our core "feeling channels" of our hearts. Imagine watching a movie with no soundtrack. We would miss so much of the intended meanings and emotions. God created harmony, which we find displayed throughout his creation. It's music, art, and poetry that often help us lament, find comfort, and bring us to joy. Consider making a playlist of music that calms, inspires, and increases your faith. Get out in nature. Hear the birds. Listen to the wind, feeling it on your face. Cry with the setting sun.

Walter Bruggemann, in his book *The Message of the Psalms*, traces the movement of life's challenges through seasons of orientation, when things are stable, to disorientation, when life falls apart or changes, and then on to reorientation, where we can once again find peace. This cycle of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation can serve as a helpful tool in our growth, and we can trace the psalms through each of these stages except for a few, such as Psalm 88. In this psalm, the songwriter does not yet reach reorientation and is "just being real" in despair. Sometimes we get stuck, and our journey takes a bit longer than we wish.

JOB GETS REAL

In the biblical account of Job, we find a man attacked by the evil one, suffering intensely. In a matter of days, his whole world falls apart. Job was a man of integrity, who knew God and whom God knew. They trusted each other. Job's responses to his extreme adversities can teach us to be honest with God. Gut-level honesty. He did not hold back expressing to God (and his friends) how he felt, while at the same time he realized God was God, and he was not. He also had a keen sense of his own identity, in that he held to his convictions and never lost his integrity. He had questions for God that God did not answer, which can be hard for us to understand.



READ JOB 10:1-10

This, dear friends, is a snapshot of lament. Through it all, Job holds to his integrity, even though he loathes the day he was born. He also tells God that God doesn't understand him, because God is not human.

We don't know for sure, but perhaps God remembered Job's words nearly six hundred years later when God became flesh and dwelt among us in the form of Jesus. Now, He would truly have eyes of flesh and see as mortals see. Jesus "gets" us, because he experienced all human emotions and was acquainted with grief, thus, He can understand us and accompany us through the healing process. In fact, he is the balm for our soul. He knows we also need other people to come alongside us, as we were made for relational connection. If we don't vulnerably address our broken places honestly and healthfully, we will get tangled and stuck in negative emotions and false identities. Jesus was vulnerable yet confident of who He was, and so can we be, if we understand where we come from, where we are going, and that we are God's beloved.

We can only attribute such pain to our fallen world and death as a result; however, death is also a portion of God's grace to carry us beyond this broken, hate-filled, sin-filled, fear-filled, broken world. Only Jesus could/can fix this by defeating death and allowing us to be imperishable as we pass through death (1 Cor 15:50-52). God had such compassion that He lowered himself to have eyes of flesh and mortal days, feeling and experiencing our humanity. This is love.

Job named his physical and emotional pain as he described in detail his suffering, loathing the day he was born. He did this out loud, because it was recorded for all to know. I believe he sets us an example of an *honest relationship* with God. Relationships require honesty and vulnerability, yet we can become expert "stuffers" before God, thinking he does not want to hear. What kind of relationship withholds vulnerability?

PUTTING OUR LAMENT INTO WORDS

In lament, putting our hurt into words with God—perhaps even our hurt *toward* God—helps us get in touch with what is really going on in our hearts. Often, it is when we try to describe our pain in prayer to God or when sharing or praying with a friend that we get in touch with our emotions, and the tears begin to flow. It is hard to go there, because it feels weak and vulnerable, and it tempts us to feel we should be stronger. In *Getting Your Life Back*, John Eldredge challenges readers to name things in prayer: "Come into this hurt, this feeling of abandonment, this numbness... or whatever stands in the way of intimacy. But decide, 'I will here, in this, love you!'"¹⁷ This seems like a helpful practice. Can you name your emotions to God, or do you tend to deal with him concerning facts? Try naming your fear, insecurity, loneliness, anger, and hurt. Only then will you also be able to name your joy, comfort, security, gratitude, laughter, and healing.

Lament, or grieving is part of God's plan—so it's not only okay, but necessary. Lament takes intentional time and effort. It is hard work, but as God's image bearers we are meant to grieve. God grieves, and God rejoices. We experience emotions because we are made in his image. We know that Jesus wept, and we likely even memorized that short verse in the Scriptures. He mourned, he grieved. In the Bible, grieving was accompanied by visceral activities such as fasting, tearing clothes, wearing ashes, singing songs of mourning, and crying loudly. Eventually, mourners find rest for their souls by turning to God and deepening their faith. The psalms of despair have silver linings—"But God." When we find ourselves lost on the path, thirsty, cramping, and feeling despair, we need to remember that God will hold us tightly.



READ PSALM 73:23-26

¹⁷ John Eldredge, *Get Your Life Back: Everyday Practices for a World Gone Mad* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2020), 99.

While the previous scripture is faith building and comforting, the scriptures that precede these show the heart struggle to get to this place of trust. Notice that the psalmist was not afraid to vulnerably express his struggle.



READ PSALM 73:2-5, 13-17A

Keep going until you enter the sanctuary of God. This sanctuary is not a church auditorium, but the safe, strong hand of God.

GOD SEES US AND PROVIDES FOR US IN THE WILDERNESS

We learn from many biblical characters like Job of their journey through orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Hagar is another such example, as she was mistreated and felt despair as she was sent away to the desert, two times. In her second desert wandering, just as she could not bear to watch her son die as they ran out of water, God showed up again, as he had the first time when she named God as she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me" (Ge 16:13). She named God, the God who sees. He still sees.

As Hagar vulnerably laments her abandonment in the desert, God helps her gain reorientation as once again she sees the God who sees her. In this second encounter with God, the well that could quench Ishmael's and Hagar's thirst was not visible to Hagar while she was in distress; yet the same God who saw her continued to see her and hear her cries. God sees and hears us, but we do not always see and hear him. Her eyes had to be opened to see God's provision for her. She had lost sight of the well where God had seen her. In both encounters, her heart and eyes were opened to God's loving care for her. When her eyes are opened, she encounters God, who tells her not to be afraid and to "lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." Her reorientation with God also brought restoration to her relationship with her son. Reorientation often brings healing to stressed relationships.

Hagar's life reminds us that God hears and knows the distress of His children, no matter what happens. He cares, always. Even if God had not provided the well and Ishmael had died, the story would not have been over, because there is eternal life for those who belong to God. However, for this purpose, God would have Ishmael live. God was keeping a promise. He always does.¹⁸

For us, transformation takes place when we believe that God sees, hears, and cares, even when his answers are not as we wish. Transformation comes when our eyes are open to see what God provides for us, no matter how painful the situation. He always provides through his Spirit what is humanly impossible. When we open our eyes to see God (Ephesians 1:17), like Hagar, we find the well of living water that God has so graciously supplied. We must trust his love.

STEADFAST AND READY AMID THE CHALLENGES

Hagar was not alone. Most men and women of God described in the Bible spent time in the desert. Adam and Eve had to leave the garden. Abraham wandered in the desert, Moses wandered in the wilderness, and Naomi wandered back to her homeland. Let's not forget: Jesus went to the wilderness immediately after his baptism and before beginning his ministry. We may also forget that Paul spent three years in the desert after his conversion and before beginning his ministry to the Gentiles.

Why spend time in the desert? For most, it seems the desert allowed them to wrestle with who they were and who God is, readying them for the next steps on their path. In fact,

¹⁸ Shaw, *Finding God*, 50-55; 65-78.

Paul seems to have stepped onto this Christ (and cross) shaped way through a very unique set of circumstances. Converted from being an ardent persecutor of Christians, he learned to persevere and find wholeness in Christ in all kinds of settings across the Roman Empire. His epistles shine as powerful testimony to a life that imitates Christ's perseverance. Thus, if we feel we are in the desert, we have good company there and can be hopeful of what God is producing in us in the process. The God who saw and heard our forebears will continue to do so with us when our paths feel like the desert.

Take to heart all that you've read in this section. Read over the following verse excerpts from two of Paul's writings (or, if you prefer, read the entire verse), pausing after each one to pray about the portion cited.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:8-9 - "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed."

Prayer: My Father, I felt afflicted when ____, but I was not crushed.

PHILIPPIANS 2:13 - "for it is God who works in you..."

Prayer: My Father, I thank you that I am not alone and that you are at work with me and in me. May I embrace this incredible truth when I __.

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-13 - "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances..."

Prayer: Generous God, I am least content when ____. Teach me true contentment from the inside. I will entrust myself to you in the most trying of situations so that I can see how you supply peace and mercy and glorify you.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO FORGE AHEAD?

IDENTIFY YOUR "NON-NEGOTIABLES"

It is one thing to remain steadfast on the path. It is another to become stronger as we walk it. God sees, hears, sustains, and also builds our resilience and stability *for the long haul*. We know we will be tested, but with God, we can even welcome the tests (just see James 1:2-3) and gain greater clarity as we go through them. Depending on our season of life, we may find that we need to strengthen convictions we originally formed many years ago or form new convictions to meet a new challenge that once was not so demanding. These convictions are "non-negotiables," the core convictions, values, and practices necessary to remain on the path with Christ, despite the appeal of detours, smoother paths, or flatter surfaces that require less effort. We can also call these the "anchors" that keep us solidly standing in awe of God.

In Luke 4:1, Jesus is literally sent into the desert of Judea by the Holy Spirit for a clear purpose: There, he established certain "non-negotiables," or essential convictions regarding how he would live his life and mission. The challenges Jesus faced in the wilderness are different versions of the same ones we face. Read the rest of the gospels (or Hebrews 4:15-...he was tempted in every way that we are, yet was without sin). Recounting the temptor's tactics with Jesus, Luke 4:1-5 shows us the wonderful fruit formed by holding scripture so deeply into our hearts and minds that it shapes our reflexes, our most deeply held assumptions, and our most basic thoughts about life.

Jesus would not negotiate with Satan about the basics, and neither should we. If Jesus had succumbed to these temptations, he would have severely compromised God's intent. As God's Son, he has shown us how we can resist the tests and remain anchored to God's will. With each test we face on our paths, when we feel depleted and vulnerable to the voice

that says, “just quit,” that’s when the Divine Voice calls to us. This is where the truths we have been learning and practicing come to our aid. They center us by helping us seek the God who seeks us, speaks to us, bolsters us, and keeps his promises. *Our non-negotiables, our core convictions and practices rooted in audacious and trusting faith, will determine our lifelong followership.* These keep us attuned to God’s voice and aligned with his power, not our own.

EMBRACE GOD’S WORK TO MAKE YOU WHOLE

Even though it may seem unbelievable, God seeks to renew us inwardly “day-by-day” (2 Cor 4:16) with “ever-increasing glory” (2 Cor 3:18). God renews us as we continue along on our quest, not just at the beginning and the end of the path. He transforms us to fully and beautifully reflect his image as we walk along the path. Each time we take new steps on this path we can become more whole in Christ, learning to love as he loves. The term for “mature” in the New Testament, *teleios*, also means “complete” or “whole.” The process of being conformed to the likeness of the Son of God is a process toward greater wholeness in God. God takes what is fragmented, partial, or disintegrated, and brings it together into a mosaic of divine artistry. It is no wonder why some writers have compared our lives in God to the crafting of a kintsugi bowl.



The Japanese art of Kintsugi repairs broken pottery with gold.

The Japanese art, known as Kintsugi, involves taking broken pieces of a vessel and putting them back together using gold, thus making the vessel look different, but more beautiful and valuable than it ever was before. Imagine that you are admiring a valued bowl that you keep displayed on your shelf when someone or something knocks it off the shelf, shattering it into many pieces. While it would be tempting to cry, get angry, and throw it away, Kintsugi offers another option. Picture in your mind’s eye gathering the broken pieces, representing experiences of your life, the parts of the path on your journey that caused pain to the point you wanted to quit.

In your mind’s eye, attach your experiences of brokenness to each piece of the bowl now laying on the floor. Maybe the pieces take the form of loss, rejection, disappointment, abuse, addiction, loneliness, or physical, mental, or emotional challenges. These are broken pieces, waiting to be transformed. Next, imagine the original potter or designer coming alongside you. As you hand the designer the broken pieces, the designer helps you put it back together, using precious gold. Though the vessel is not exactly the same as it once was, you marvel at its beauty, and that this exquisite creation was made from your broken pieces. God, through

Jesus and with the power of the Spirit, can turn our weaknesses into strengths, and through the cracks now filled with gold, let the light of Christ shine through us. Amazing.

JOIN GOD'S DREAMS

Along with this faith, walking forward on the path involves letting God's dreams become ours, partnering with God rather than asking God to bless my plans. Motivation that willingly joins God in his work rather than asking God to join us in ours comes from a different place. A moving and inspiring song, a favorite in our church, is entitled "Men Who Dream." The lyrics express a passion for seeing souls saved, a needed passion. We enthusiastically sing the words, "There's a God who shares our dreams." While it is a wonderful, inspiring song, if the verse was reframed to state, "We serve a God whose dreams we share," how might that change our focus? What is the difference between joining God in his dreams and asking him to join ours? Do you see the difference? The first subtly takes over control. Motivation built on God's dreams becoming ours is so much deeper and more sustainable than asking God to join ours. And, how God desires for us to join him in his mission in the world.¹⁹

In Acts 2:17, God initiates a new chapter towards the fulfillment of the vision of salvation and transformation of which the prophets spoke. Repeating the words of Joel, Peter recounts, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams." These are inspiring words for men and women, young and old. These Spirit-inspired dreams come in various forms for men and women of all ages! Although they are not a blueprint for what *will* take place, they do include definite attitudes, convictions, and rhythms that will mark your life.

As in any walk on a path or trail, the impending twists, turns, rises, and falls are not obvious. There is a certain level of uncertainty built into the entire adventure. However, this uncertainty does not nullify a vision of who you are and will be while walking along with Christ. Even if you are familiar with the contours of a trail, that does not mean you know all of what you will encounter. Moreover, the Spirit-inspired dream of who you will be and how you will serve on this path, how you will respond to adversity, and how you will view others and give of yourself to them in order to fulfill God's good purpose is meant to be a source of overwhelming joy.



REFLECTION

Open the scriptures, and open all of your mind, heart, soul, and strength, listening to what God's Spirit inspires within you. Prayerfully consider your family, small group, ministry, workplace, neighborhood, and city. Ask God to help you see each one through his eyes. What dreams are awakened or stirred regarding these relationships and places? Who will you be (or become) in these relationships and places? After writing some brief notes about this, pause and pray over this question:

If you wake up tomorrow and live life to the full in Jesus, what would that look like?

After this prayer, jot down the significant ideas and images of inspiration that came to you.

FAITHFUL TO WHOM?

Vigilance will be needed throughout our spiritual journeys, lest we be caught in the "self-reliance trap. Self-reliance tempts us to believe we know exactly how to move forward

¹⁹ Jeanie Shaw, *Jesus the Master Teacher: Transforming Our Hearts* (Spring, TX: Theatron Press, 2024), 21-22.

on an intellectual level, then it is up to us to make it happen. It tempts us to faith have in our own passion and determination, rather than humility and Spirit reliance. Timothy Soerens speaks to this phenomenon with a challenging thought:

I can easily take this world-changing hope and make it useful. I don't need God to actually be at work in people's lives. I just need a meta story so I can get it to work. I'm in charge, with a newfound theological energy that leads me to be the savior. When I have the story but don't need God to be active in it, I have way more agency and know that at the end of the day this was my work.²⁰

In stark contrast, the faith that Jesus teaches us to have is audacious and gives itself over to God's overwhelming goodness and compassion. This faith is *all about God*, not about *our ability* to have faith or to strain ourselves to "feel" faithful. God is the one in whom we trust on this great quest for life. And on this basis of love and faith in the completely Faithful One, we live into Spirit-inspired dreams.

Before concluding this section, pause for a moment and look at the notes you wrote down in response to the previous reflection. Let's take one more step and write a response to this question: *What dreams are you willing to actively pursue?* Thankfully, just "a mustard seed of faith" (Matt. 17:20) is required to walk toward the fulfillment of a God-inspired purpose. As in any path, one step forward, however small, is still going in the right direction. God delights to receive even these small morsels of faith and do good with them. If we keep offering these little deeds with whatever measure of faith we have, rather than turning away in frustration or waiting for some "special" opportunity, great things can be built by the hands of our mighty God. Not only that, but our faithfulness will grow and we will be energized from within to continue to clear away all the debris and set our gaze on the pioneer of our faith, Jesus. Ultimately, we are thankful that our long term integrity in pursuing a Spirit inspired vision is something we can pursue with confidence. As Paul prayed, so do we: "May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (1 Thess 5:23b-24).

20 Timothy Soerens, *Everywhere You Look: Discovering the Church Right Where You Are* (Westmont, IL: IVP, 2020), 41, quoting Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press), 2007, 593.

NOTES

SECTION THREE
RENEW

SOUL WORK
SOUL WORK
SOUL WORK
SOUL WORK
SOUL WORK
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SOUL WORK
SOUL WORK
SOUL WORK

SOUL WORK

The following Soul Work immerses you in deeper, resilience-building, prayer exercises. The Psalms are our doorway and model for an honest, open, engaging, adventurous, and transformative relationship with God. Taking cues from the powerful ways that the psalms directly and personally address our faith in every way through every challenge, these exercises equip us to do the same on a daily basis.



BECOME A PSALMWITER P.56



GOD DREAMS P.57

PRAYER PROMPT

Prepare 5-10 scriptures that inspire you to be resilient. Pray through them and have them ready when you are tempted to give up, are going through a hard time, or feel tired of walking the path toward Christ.



EXERCISE 1: BECOME A PSALM- WRITER

If you have never done so, try writing your own psalms to God. You need not show them to anyone, but the process itself may prove helpful. Not only do the writers' songs express their emotions, but they elicit ours as we get our souls wrapped around them. God knows we need to emote, so please "psalm away."

Often, times of deepest lament allow us to most closely feel the hand of God. When we grieve and the tears flow, our hearts go through many workouts. As they empty, they also grow with more room to expand. God will, time and again, show us that His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. Prayer is the crucible to change us, helping us to see not the scope of our problems, but the greatness of our God.

EXERCISE 2: GOD DREAMS

Spend 15-30 minutes dreaming with God

Take some time in your week to write down what dreams God is putting on your heart. What is God calling you to? Ask God, "What new dreams are you calling me to?" Then write down what the Spirit puts on your heart. Don't limit what you write down by saying to yourself, "that can't happen." Just write down what God puts on your heart without any judgment.

SECTION THREE
RENEWED

GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions are meant to be discussed in your family group after a short devotional thought to foster growth in resilience and faithful dreaming.

1. Identify your “anchors” or “non-negotiables” that direct your spiritual growth. These could include your core convictions concerning faith, family, emotional health, physical health, relationships, vocation, and all aspects of your life.
2. Hagar’s journey illustrates the cycle of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. How do you personally navigate seasons of disorientation or hardship, and what role does faith play in bringing you back to a place of peace or reorientation?
3. Think about your spiritual legacy. Acts 13:36 tells us: *“Now when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep”* What might your life look like for it to be said that you served God’s purpose in your lifetime? What kind of posture toward God would be needed for this to be said of your life? If you have a difficult time thinking of your spiritual legacy, consider asking the Spirit to reveal more of this to you, as well as trusted friends.
4. In what parts of your life do you want to take action to live the life of abundance that Jesus desires for you?
 - Emotional health
 - Spiritual health
 - Physical Health
 - Career
 - Family life
 - Relationships
 - Fun/Hobbies

NOTES



LIVE
SECTION FOUR

- 📍 READING P.50
- 📍 SOUL WORK P.72
- 📍 GROUP WORK P.76



LIVE

Section Four

We walk on a path *alongside others* as we are formed into the image of the Son. We need them and they need us, as members of the same body (See 1 Cor. 12). As we seek to embrace our freedom and gifts for relationships and ministry centered in Christ, we will explore ways to vulnerably give and receive, learn together, and share one another's burdens. In an age of busy and highly individualistic lifestyles (and distractions), God offers us the unique gift of companionship. He has placed us together in a spiritual family to face challenges that, if left on our own, can result in complacency, burnout, loneliness, hurt, or disappointment. Thankfully, we can grow *within* the body of Christ as we learn new postures and habits with and for others. Together, as we summit toward our goal of eternity with Jesus, we can walk joyfully side by side, helping and encouraging each other. We also can be a trail guide to others that are beginning to walk the path. This is an honor and joy to which Jesus calls us as we continue in his Spirit-led ministry in our world. Ultimately, we aim for our relationships, our mission, and our rhythms to be part of one seamless whole.

WELCOMED INTO GOD'S FAMILY

Our love for each other is to be the demonstration to the world of the power of Jesus' love and the relational transformation that happens in and among us when we follow him. (John 13:34-35). Amazingly, this love springs from the love that the Father and the Son enjoy, a love in which the entire church gets to share. How astoundingly gracious of Jesus to "give" us "the glory" that the Father gave him (John 17:22).

Established in this love and glory, we can relish in the fact that God has formed a family in and around Jesus. Yes, we make a personal decision to follow Jesus, but we follow him in chorus, not solo. When we are born into Christ, we join a family that shares in God's blessings. At the birth of the church, over 3,000 new family members became part of God's family, the church. They took care of each other's needs, sharing everything in common (Acts 2:40-47).

The Bible is replete with scriptures about the body of Christ (Eph 4:1-16; Col 1:15-20; Eph 1:22-23; Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:12-27). All these scriptures teach us that every person is needed, and we are part of each other, honoring one another, and building up each other. We help each other grow up into Christ. We are taught many ways to be with one another as we strengthen and equip each other to walk our paths individually and collectively. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer asks an important question:

Has the fellowship served to make the individual free, strong, and mature, or has it made him weak and dependent? Has it taken him by the hand for a while in order that he may learn to walk by himself, or has it made him uneasy and unsure?" God intends that we help each other grow up into him so that we can walk the path of our Christian journey.²¹

Our camaraderie is meant to strengthen us along the way.

COMMUNITY AND VULNERABILITY

We will not be able to feel or express the need for others if we are not first able to behold God, understand our identity from God's perspective, learn to be vulnerable, and depend on his completely faithful and life-giving Spirit. Jesus, though perfect, still needed people. While facing his greatest challenge as he prayed in the garden before his death, he vulnerably expressed his need for the support of his friends. In this, he taught several valuable lessons. Jesus, in his humanity, understood vulnerability as he continually gave his heart to people, even those who hurt or neglected him in his hour of need.



READ MATTHEW 26:36-40

In Gethsemane, Jesus taught his disciples the need for vulnerability and trust. Then, while on the cross, he taught perhaps his most poignant lesson. Looking at those who mocked, tortured, and betrayed him, he somehow found the words, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). This requires a level of humility and vulnerability beyond imagination.

Vulnerability can be difficult when we have been hurt in the past, and we can resist opening up our hearts. Frederick Buechner speaks of the importance of recognizing our resistance to vulnerability as he pens, "The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from."²² When we are not vulnerable, we miss out on relational intimacy and transformation that comes from those relationships.

People hurt us. Friends, colleagues, school friends, neighbors, family members, and our church family hurt us. Likewise, we have hurt others. While not the topic of this section, forgiveness is crucial to understand and practice in relationships. Forgiveness does not mean we don't address the hurt or that we need to become best friends with those who hurt us, but we must guard our hearts from bitterness. Without forgiveness, there is no possibility for a new beginning. Jesus shows us how, setting the example for us.

Certainly, the gospel account allows us to enter a story of redemption that ends in eternal life with God. We cannot really appreciate our own worth, gifts, and strengths unless they are mirrored back to us from the mind and heart of another. This begins with God. We see ourselves often through the ways others see us. This is why it is so important to realize how Jesus sees us and our neighbors.

21 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community* (NY: Harper and Row, 1954), 88.

22 Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2010), 46.

After Jesus was resurrected, he chose to entrust his message and ministry to men and women, many of whom had recently denied him. This is a vulnerable trust and can only come from a humble servant who knows who he is, where he came from, and where he is going (Jn 8:14). Humility is necessary for building relationships with others, and to understand this more fully, the beautiful hymn written in Philippians 2 describes this humility. Take a moment to slowly read the beautiful and challenging scripture/hymn in Philippians 2:1-11. As you read, reflect on ways that humility might help you become more vulnerable and allow you to build deeper relationships. Pray for God to reveal to you ways you can practice greater unity and humility.



READ PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

JESUS TEACHES US IN COMMUNITY

Jesus was the master at building community. He knew that the only way the world would see the kingdom of heaven on earth was through the disciples' love for each other (Jn 13:35). He gathered a diverse group to accompany him, so they could learn together from him and each other. As we read the Gospels, we learn to value how the unique background and personality of each disciple placed them in a position to learn from one another. Likewise, listening to and surrounding ourselves with people who aren't just like us helps us to grow deeper in loving relationships. Jesus employed the practice of community discussion, something we are attempting to practice throughout our "Path" journey.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus teaches his disciples in community. He often uses the situations in front of them to communicate something important. For example, in Matthew 15 and 16 we find several occasions in which Jesus and the disciples directly engage with the Pharisees regarding what defiles someone. They also face a deeply challenging trial involving the hunger of thousands of people and must consider how to satisfy this group by putting their faith in the Provider. Both along the way and in separate periods of time, Jesus tells them to *listen and understand*, and then opens it into a discussion during which questions are asked and addressed in a "group teach." Jesus asks rhetorical questions that come up again later that undoubtedly helped them to remember! We might imagine during one of their moments of breaking bread, one of them bursting out in laughter, remembering when they misunderstood Jesus' teaching in such a big way about bread yeast!

We also read of times when Jesus takes the Twelve aside to teach them what would soon happen to him. In Matthew 20, when James and John's mother wanted special privileges for her sons, the others were indignant. It seems, since the group was upset with James and John, that the sons had likely put "mommy" up to this request. Jesus called the group together and taught them about the first becoming last (v.16). Another example of Jesus' many teachings in community comes when Jesus is anointed by the woman at Bethany.²³ Jesus knew he had to broach the topic in a group setting, given that they were so "indignant" about the cost of the ointment (Matt 26:8) that they missed the heart of gratitude and love. They missed the point. Without discussion, we may have never known the meaning of this beautiful act. In the same way, we miss so much when we stay in our own heads, leaving out the importance of community discussion.

²³ This story, remarkably, appears in every gospel: Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-50; John 12:1-8.



REFLECTION

- Consider a time when you have learned something important because of being in a group. How did the group process help you learn? In what ways did the group learning process contribute to camaraderie?
- Do you agree that spiritual transformation is incomplete when we don't learn in community? If so, why? If not, why not?
- If you are an introvert by nature, how might you incorporate group discussions in ways that can enhance your learning and teaching?
- How can you initiate more ways to practice spiritual growth in the community?²⁴

THE COMMUNITY OF US

THE COMMUNITY OF US IS A COMMUNITY OF FREEDOM

Our Western cultural perspective emphasizes the individual's freedom, tastes, lifestyle, and choices, but the Bible embraces a communal way of life. In our culture, it is very hard to understand how being an "us" is more freeing than being an "I." In Southern Africa, this communal, interconnected way of life is known as the *Ubuntu* Principle. Martin Luther King, Jr. described this reality through words taken from his 1965 commencement speech at Oberlin College:

All life is interrelated, and we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be—this is the interrelated structure of reality.²⁵

Not only has research supported the ways in which connection to something bigger than ourselves binds us together for a communal purpose, but it has also shown that it spurs those who see beyond their own situation to act more compassionately and generously toward others.

Imagine a moment on your journey when the entire group is facing some tough terrain. Various backpackers have trouble with the muddy, slippery path and grasp at rocks and fellow travelers to keep from slipping. Suddenly someone blurts out, "Why do I need to be held up by all these people? I want to walk ahead and get to the destination. I just want to focus on what's before me without having to worry so much about all these people." This captures one of the biggest challenges to a relationship-oriented way of life. While this does not sound like words that would be said by someone traveling Christ's path, we are likely familiar with the frustrations that can plant themselves in our hearts and lead to complaints such as *if they only walked at my pace, or they don't know this trail like I do*. These feelings may express a desire for freedom from people, but they do not reflect the freedom of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17) or the "one-another" life mentioned so often in the Scriptures (fifty-nine times, in fact, as a command about how to treat others).

The community of "Us in Christ" frees us from selfishness, isolation, and self-deception, and frees us for love. The way we journey on our path not only affects us, but as we are part of God's family, our journey also impacts others. When we have not "beheld" God or "experienced" deep love with God, we will likely seek to fulfill certain expectations from our family members, rather than give to them out of the fullness of our hearts. Then, their reactions to

²⁴ The sections on Community and Vulnerability, Jesus Teaches Us How to Build Community, and Jesus the Key for Transformation in a Disconnected Society are taken from Jeanie Shaw, *Jesus the Master Teacher: Transforming Our Hearts* (Spring, TX: Theatron Press, 2024).

²⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, 1963. https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf

our reactions tangle the web of unfulfilled longing, diminishing our freedom. When we behold God on our journey, others' reactions become less important. Then we can, like Jesus, freely respond with love.

THE COMMUNITY OF US SHARES BURDENS

We are not meant to carry our burdens or grief alone. Our families can be sharers or victims of our grief. In a family, physical or spiritual, our paths often collide, run parallel, or intersect with others' pain. To avoid collisions on our path, we need to take time to sort out the baggage accompanying our difficulties along the path and learn to listen to ways others are responding to theirs. When we do collide with others walking alongside us (and we will), take the needed time to listen to each other and find resolutions. Don't let elephants sit in the living room, or walk alongside us on the path. Be vulnerable in expressing grief. Pray with each other and offer hope. We all need hope. The phrase, "Be kind. Everyone is grieving," holds much truth.

As we grow together and bear one another's burdens in community, our goal is to do our part in the Spirit to help each other become whole, mature, and complete in Christ. As Paul says with stirring conviction: He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that *we may present everyone fully mature in Christ* (Col. 1:28, emphasis added). As we journey along our paths, let us help each other toward this goal.

FINDING AND SHARING OUR GIFTS

As we travel our paths, we might think of different contributions each person on the journey can offer. How sad, difficult, and boring would life be if we all had one gift. We could not accomplish much. How amazing that God put us together in a way that allows each of us to contribute. The desire to contribute and to be needed is a deep longing within us. The scriptures teach us that we all have something to bring to the community, and one gift is not more important than another.

Often, we see gifts in others, but not ourselves. We can place more value on others' gifts



**READ ROMANS 12:3-8, 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-27,
1 PETER 4:10-11**

than ones we may have been given. Peter brings together all the key ingredients in an uplifting way in 1 Peter 4:10 (emphasis added).

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, *faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.*

Pause on this phrase for a moment: "as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." This is why the church and this world need you to discover and use your gifts. We were each born with specific gifts from God that neither came from us nor are aimed only to edify us. We carry God's transformative grace. God is sharing his grace through us! That's stunning. Not only has God's love been "poured into our hearts," (Rom 5:5), but we are also a channel through which God's grace is shared.

WHAT ARE OUR GIFTS?

The "gifts" referred to in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4 come from the Greek word *charisma*, meaning divine gratuity, a spiritual endowment, and a free gift. We can't earn them; we don't deserve them, but we are to *use* them.

A comparison between the gifts listed in Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12 reveals a key difference:

- Manifestations of 1 Cor 12. The nine gifts listed are associated with the word *phanerosis*.

These are supernatural manifestations of the Spirit at work through a believer. These are not the same as the gifts mentioned in 1 Peter; they aren't the possession of the person.

- Ministry gifts of Eph 4. These gifts are *doma*, like a gift given to us. After Jesus ascended, he presented gifts of *people* who were called and gifted to lead and train the rest of the body of Christ.

The five ministry gifts listed are (written in lower case because they are not titles, but functions):

- The apostle, one who establishes and strengthens churches
- The prophet, one who speaks forth the message of God
- The evangelist, one who is called to preach the Gospel
- The pastor, one who feeds and shepherds the believers
- The teacher, one who instructs believers in the Word of God

These could be called *equipping* gifts, enabling the believers to do the work of the ministry so that the church can function as Christ's representative. 1 Cor 12:28-30 is a conglomeration of the three different categories of gifts.²⁶

The gifts we will discuss in our Path conversations concern the motivational gifts described by Paul in Romans 12.



READ ROMANS 12:6-8

As mentioned above, the word translated "gifts" in Romans 12:6, *charismata*, is the same word (but in singular form) in 1 Peter 4:10. The gifts discussed in Romans 12 are likely the gifts Peter was referring to when he said we were to employ them to benefit one another. These are gifts we possess, which God has built into us to be part of us and to be used for the benefit of others and for his glory. We don't deserve them, but God gave them to us. We will refer to them as motivational gifts, since they provide the motivating force for our lives. These gifts help shape our personalities. There are many tools that have been developed through research to help us determine our leanings, which can be of encouragement as we find ways to use them. When we use our gifts, our actions feel more like pleasure than work because we have been made to embody them. Our *Soul Work* and discussions are designed to help us better discern and understand our gifts and how to use them for the sake of others.

As we grow and become more like Jesus, Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 give us reason to rejoice. He asserts that even our weaknesses can become strengths. As C.S. Lewis stated:

"The more we let God take us over, the more truly ourselves we become—because he made us. He invented us. He invented all the different people that you and I were intended to be. ...It is when I turn to Christ, when I give up myself to his personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own."²⁷

As we give our hearts to each other and love each other through the use of our gifts, the image of Christ brightly shines through us.

²⁶ These categories are described in Don and Katie Fortune, *Discover Your God Given Gifts* (Ada, MI: Chosen Books, 2009).

²⁷ C.S. Lewis, from *Mere Christianity*, as used in "Reflections, Finding Our True Selves," Sept, 2011, <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/reflections-september-2011/>.

TRAIL GUIDES: SPIRITUAL RHYTHMS FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD

God not only wants us to walk our path with confidence and joy alongside others who have embraced this way, he also calls us to be trail guides for others. Trail guides don't have to be experts, they simply have been walking that trail with Christ longer than those that follow or who have never begun. Along the way, we practice rhythms that help keep us in step with his transformative and loving Spirit, strengthening us every step of the way toward our ultimate destination, heaven and resurrection. As we have mentioned at multiple points in the previous sections, to continue on this journey every day of our lives means we are growing ever deeper into wholeness. It makes sense, then, that we are called to meld our spiritual rhythms with our participation in Jesus' ongoing mission to seek and save God's lost children.

God is seeking to bring all of his children home. We are also incredibly blessed to be able to be a trail guide for those that are just beginning their journey. By guiding others we deepen our knowledge of the path and the ultimate trail guide, Jesus Christ. The Bible calls us ambassadors, fishers of people, and lights to this world. Because the sharing of our life is a core aspect of our faith, *sharing our faith is one of several spiritual practices* that teach us many new things. The secret of being a trail guide is that you learn more from those you guide than what they learn from you. One could say that the Israelites lost their faith because they weren't sharing it. When they stopped guiding, they stopped remembering and many of them unfortunately left the path. That is why this new covenant is so special: we get to share the path with anyone from the nations that desire life to the full.

FROM THE OVERFLOW

However, clarifying the importance of this calling and privilege to beckon God's children home leads to a question: "I have often done this out of obligation and then only feel depleted. What's the alternative?" As we learn some new rhythms and add fresh practices to the paths we walk, God reminds us to allow the necessary space in our hearts and minds for God's Spirit to refresh our souls. This is a key part of the answer to the question just posed: When we are filled with the Spirit, out of our *overflow* we can pour into others. An overflow that is consistent is more likely when we establish a rhythm. The rhythms of prayer, community, and fellowship give us camaraderie and partnership in a lonely and broken world. They regularly replenish us and thus ensure that we will be able to share from the overflow of our hearts. In short, the response to that common question is to cultivate all that we have discussed in the previous sections: **awe, intimacy, and resilience**. God's ever present goodness, promises, and love are spread abroad through us when these qualities fill us up with God's joy!

As we share God's promises with others, not only can we help others find and begin the path to eternal glory, but we also have the privilege to witness the transformative power of God at work in the lives of others. We are reminded, as we learn from Jesus, to look outward in a spirit of gratitude and joy. We do well to remember the concluding verse of Mark's account of Jesus healing the paralyzed man lowered through a roof: "And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"(Mark 2:12). This man became a walking example and beacon of God's goodness. Every step he took was a reminder and testimony to all the people around him of God's power. Just like this man, we find ourselves walking before many others bearing a beautiful message that calls attention to God's greatness. Think of the many gifts and joys, big and small, that communicate something precious about God to those around you. The connection to our spiritual growth is clear.

KEEP THE SPIRIT IN SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Before taking additional steps toward establishing rhythms of life through certain habits, let's clear the ground of several reservations and misconceptions about spiritual disciplines. First, spiritual disciplines and habits, and the life rhythms they enable us to develop, are not to be found in the self-help section of the library. We can be tempted to find something to add, perhaps a new practice, a new discipline, a new program, a new class; something to add to the "do" and the "know." So, as you pray about the possibilities, perhaps the disciplines we most need are those that empty us, allowing room for the Spirit to show up in our lives. It is tempting to be self-reliant, thinking we grow when we do more and know more. It is so hard to be still and close to Jesus, letting our actions flow from this posture.

Second, "doing" the disciplines will not draw us near to God. Many disciplines can be practiced as forms of achievement. Rather, in carrying them out we are learning to shed fears and attachments so that we *truly desire* to behold God and hear his voice. On this journey, we are not like climbers who rely solely on their bodily strength and stamina to ascend the mountain. Instead, we are like hikers who set a course, ready and prepared, but make sure that the greatest of winds, God's Holy Spirit, guides us along the trail. Our role is to *position ourselves*, hearts open, to catch the Spirit's powerful gusts that propel us forward on the climb. In this regard, Ruth Haley Barton offers wise words about making space for God's Spirit. "I cannot transform myself... What I can do is create the conditions in which spiritual transformation can take place by developing and maintaining a rhythm of spiritual practices that keep me open and available to God."²⁸

For many of us just starting to reconsider our spiritual rhythms, a time of solitude is a great place to start, to listen to God's gentle whisper, which we read about in 1 Kings 19. Try to dedicate fifteen minutes of stillness and solitude for a few days a week, resting both your body and your mind from thoughts that disturb solitude. This is harder than you may think, but helpful to learn to calm your mind and receive God's wisdom. Simply refer to the meditation exercise in Section 2, under the subheading *Slowing Down and Opening Up* (p.29). Using the same approach to your breath and prayer, ask God to direct you in determining what habits would be best to adopt.

HABITS THAT KEEP US IN TUNE WITH THE SPIRIT

When we know that we can walk with God in a way that brings love and healing to all of us, we can feel secure that we'll make it to the end. We will not go off trail, because we cling to the promises of God and our decision to walk with him. We need rhythms, or specific, regular ways to pace our daily and weekly walks along the path. In our physical rhythms, we brush our teeth, eat, dress, take well known routes, and set up weekly appointments that give our life a (somewhat?) predictable pattern. Similarly, there are things we need to do regularly to make sure we remain lovingly attentive to God and others. By "habits," we are not speaking of empty actions that are repeated without conscious awareness or commitment, but *habits of the heart*. There are two sets of habits that aim to keep us in tune with the Spirit's work through us. The first set of habits position us to (1) *avoid or resist* those things that block out the Spirit's voice, while the other set (2) help us *connect* with God and people in situations that we would typically not notice or avoid. These habits help us build a way of life marked by certain Christ-like patterns. Here is a sample of daily and weekly habits of both kinds that you could consider implementing to be spiritually formed in areas of connection and rejuvenation with God and others.

28 Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), pg. 12.

1. Weekly Resistance—Fast from something for 24 hours
2. Daily Embrace—Meal or call to encourage somebody each day
3. Daily Resistance—Read Scripture before using the phone
4. Weekly Embrace—Sabbath time (for a large portion of day) of prayer, reflection, and rejoicing completely centered on God.

Each of us can explore what combination of habits fit our current season and stage of life. These habits are meant to complement, not replace, our more common individual or collective spiritual disciplines, like scripture reading, journaling, praying, congregational worship, participation in Bible discussions, sharing our faith with others and fasting. These habits are also not “yet another thing” to add to all that we are already doing. Instead, they are a different way of devoting the same time, relationships, and opportunities God grants to us. Through resistance and embrace centered on genuine desire to walk with God here and now, we place ourselves in a position to heed God’s presence and respond to the Spirit. These actions put us in a position to undergo heart level change over time and for that we rejoice.

We conclude with this word of praise to God, who has brought us to this point. Relish these words as you take your next steps on the path with God.

And now to him who can keep you on your feet, standing tall in his bright presence, fresh and celebrating—to our one God, our only Savior, through Jesus Christ, our Master, be glory, majesty, strength, and rule before all time, and now, and to the end of all time. Yes (Jude 1:24–25 MSG).

SECTION FOUR
LIVE

SOUL WORK
SOUL WORK
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SOUL WORK

SOUL WORK

The Soul Work in this section aims to help us appreciate our relationships on the path, discover gifts, embrace our life as a trail guide, and implement spiritual practices and rhythms.



GIFT ASSESSMENT P.74



SPIRITUAL RHYTHMS P.75

PRAYER PROMPT



Take several minutes to close your eyes and visualize the faces of each person in your small group, thanking God in advance for the great spiritual breakthroughs God will bring about in their lives. Seek to view them as God does.

As you continue to reflect, prayerfully respond to these prompts concerning your walk alongside others:

- Who walks alongside you on this path?
- What loads do you share with each other?
- How are you helping one another continue on this path?
- What do you feel you most need from others along your journey? Are you aware of what others feel they need?

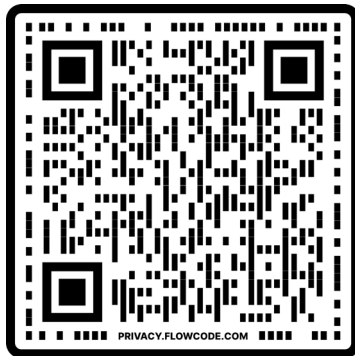


Who do you desire to be a trail guide for? Write these names down and pray over them, asking God to open their hearts.

EXERCISE 1: SPIRITUAL GIFT ASSESSMENT

Ask God to give you discernment as you explore the gifts in the Bible and which gift you believe God wants you to discover or fan into flame (2 Timothy 1:6).

Use this gift assessment:
<https://gifts.churchgrowth.org/spiritual-gifts-survey/>



Read through these definitions and study of gifts. Pray and write down the gifts that you think that God has placed in you through the Holy Spirit. Only after you have completed these initial steps should you take the gift assessment.

EXERCISE 2: SPIRITUAL RHYTHMS

What spiritual rhythms are you going to start implementing in your daily, weekly and monthly rhythm? See appendix for a list of spiritual rhythms and disciplines.



GOD IN THE VERBS P.82



BREATH PRAYERS P.83



SPIRITUAL EXAMEN P.84

SECTION FOUR
LIVE

GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK
GROUP WORK



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions are meant to be discussed in our family groups after a short devotional.

1. Who are some special friends that are with you on the path and what do you most appreciate about them?
2. What habits of resistance or embrace do you want to practice consistently? As you share these resolutions, take note of the possibility of joining with others to practice the same habits together.
3. What might it look like to join Jesus in his mission as an expression of your spiritual formation?
4. What have you learned from The Path course? Share the top 3-5 things you learned.

NOTES

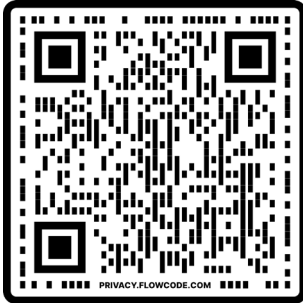


APPENDIX

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

Our emotional and mental health is an important part of our spiritual health and growth as Christians. While not everyone needs mental health counseling, there are some mental and emotional challenges that are better addressed with a behavioral health professional. Here are different resources that can help you to determine if seeing a behavioral health specialist is for you.

1. Short Video on Mental and Emotional Health



2. Christian Mental Health Professionals from a variety of agencies we trust as well as Psychology today.



CROSSPOINT CLINICAL SERVICES

crosspointclinical.org

413-732-7677



INTEGRATED BEHAVIORAL CARE

integratedbehcare.com

978-296-5595



THE WELL BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

thewellbh.com

978-296-5888



PSYCHOLOGY TODAY

psychologytoday.com/us

ADDITIONAL SPIRITUAL FORMATION RESOURCES

Here are two more resources to explore if you desire to dig deeper into spiritual formation and Christian development.



THE WAY

More resources for spiritual formation, counseling, training and development.
thewayministry.global



MIND CHANGE

Alternative methods for spiritual healing.
mindchange.com

GOD IN THE VERBS

Goal: *Expand awareness of God's greatness and deepen your union with God.*

1. Pray for 30 seconds in silence.
2. Take note of the words, especially verbs, that you used regarding God during that prayer.
 - How would you describe some of these words: Bold? Safe? Edgy? Perfect or Imperfect? Are they accurate reflections of how you feel and believe?
3. More generally, what verbs do you often employ in addressing or petitioning God? What nouns or names do you use to address God?

Now, pause for a moment and think more generally about your prayers. What words accurately reflect your vision and life events pertaining to God? What words stir surprise, wonder, awe? Let's carry out an exercise

Read Luke 13:34—"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

To what does Jesus liken himself? Why?

Identify the verb Jesus uses to describe his major desire and lament?

Based on this passage, what noun would you craft as the basis for a prayer to God?

Now read Romans 8:1-4 and follow these steps:

1. Pick out all the verbs with God as the subject. What do these verses say God has done or is doing? Ask yourself: how often do I use these verbs when considering what God is actively doing.
2. Convert one to three of the verbs into a noun, phrase, or title for God. For example, if he has "sent" his Son, you could form the title, "Sender of Salvation." What prayer could you form around this title alone?
3. Develop a prayer practice based on these verbs and nouns. Carry out this exercise three times a week. Greater depth of gratitude and knowledge of God's character will grow.

BREATH PRAYERS

Praying scriptures can be life-giving when in chaotic busyness. As you pray these “breath prayers,”²⁹ you are encouraged to inhale through the nose and exhale through your mouth. Extending the length of your exhale communicates a sense of safety to our nervous systems.

PSALM 9:9

Inhale: The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed,

Exhale: A stronghold in times of trouble.

PSALM 32:7 BSB

Inhale: You are my hiding place.

Exhale: You protect me from trouble; You surround me with songs of deliverance.

PSALM 116:2 NLT

Inhale: Because he bends down to listen,

Exhale: I will pray as long as I have breath.

PSALM 91:1-2

Inhale: Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

Exhale: I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.

PSALM 36:7-8

Inhale: People find refuge in the shadow of your wings

Exhale: I will feast on the abundance of your house.

29 Adapted from Aundi Kolber, *Try Softer: A Fresh Approach to Move Us out of Anxiety, Stress, and Survival Mode – and Into a Life of Connection and Joy*

SPIRITUAL EXAMEN: CONSOLATION AND DESOLATION

Pause at the end of the day, before bed, to reflect for 10 minutes on the following:

FINDING CONSOLATION:

- When today did I feel most touched by the presence of God?
- What events, relationships, or thoughts of the day drew me closer to God?
- When did I feel most free today?
- What was the most life-giving part of my day?
- What was most joyful about my day?

FINDING DESOLATIONS:

- When today did I sense being drawn away from God?
- When did I feel most dissatisfied and restricted today?
- Was there a time today when I felt discouraged?
- What was the most draining part of my day?
- Was there a time today when I felt guilty, ashamed, or lonely?

Surrender these desolations to God, asking him to allow you to be touched by his presence as you sleep and rise.

A BRIEF PRAYER OF EXAMEN

Pause at the end of each day, before bed, to reflect for 5-6 minutes on the following:

For what moment today am I most grateful? For what moment am I least grateful? Or, when did I give and receive the most love today... and when did I give and receive the least love? When did I feel most drained? When did I feel most alive?