As a pastor, it always makes me happy to see a believer growing in Christ. The Christian life is not meant to be stagnant. Quite the opposite, in fact. The writer of Hebrews says it takes ongoing effort; we must “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (12:1). And one of the most important functions of the church is to be a safe and supportive place where we run this race side by side.

It’s been my privilege to have friends in ministry with whom I share the path of faith—friends to pray, learn, and share life with. I’ve seen firsthand that practicing these things together in the church can be powerful for everyone. And in keeping with our theme for 2019, The Whole Church, we want to help you experience, and contribute to, the very best that church life has to offer.

In the next few months, we’ll show you how some of the most important tools for discipleship—prayer, Bible study, and relationships—are part of a healthy Christian community. Join us as we look at some ways you can grow along with your brothers and sisters in Christ.
Disciplined people command our respect. We revere Olympic athletes for the years they sacrifice to demanding training schedules. Military personnel leave us in awe of their unrivaled precision and excellence as they move in unison. However, while we’re impressed with the fruits of discipline, we’re rather reluctant to implement it in our own lives. Why? Perhaps it’s because the word itself sounds like punishment, or because we don’t want to set ourselves up for failure. And this is only compounded by the shame we heap on ourselves and others for not trying harder.

Such thinking is especially problematic when it comes to our spiritual lives. For more believers than would care to admit it, maintaining consistent faith practices like praying and reading the Bible is a struggle. And we tend to think that if we simply had more discipline, that wouldn’t be the case. But be honest—is that line of thinking working for you?

What if we shifted our mindset from discipline to delight? Delight is about rediscovering wonder where we previously saw only obligation. Delight marvels at mystery and indulges curiosity. It awakens more desire for God and tempts us toward deeper love for Him. In short, delight energizes us. And that’s indispensable in our pursuit of God.

In this second volume of our Whole Church Guide, we’ll look at three core spiritual practices—prayer, biblical study, and discipleship—and discover how delight can transform our experience of each. It’s time to replace our to-do lists with something infinitely more satisfying: joyful reverence.
Before we clasp our hands and bow our heads, we first have to wrestle with an uncomfortable question: Why pray? It’s no secret that God already knows what we need before we even ask Him (Matt. 6:8), so why should we bother petitioning or telling Him anything? If we’re honest, it can feel a little superfluous.

But that’s true only if you think of prayer as a transaction—our words for His blessing, provision, and protection. Though God showers us with all that and more, prayer actually is much more about tuning in to God and His kingdom. When we pray, we’re not a child on Santa’s lap, listing wishes—we’re more like Mary seated at the feet of Jesus, simply enjoying His presence.

Nearly every state in the U.S. has banned texting while driving. And for good reason—turning your attention from the road to your phone, even for a moment, can cause serious accidents. So, if it’s not only illegal but also downright dangerous, why do so many of us routinely risk life, limb, and litigation for messages that can probably wait?

Because we crave constant connection. For the vast majority of us, true loneliness seems a fate worse than death, which is why we risk the latter to avoid the former. In this age of modern communication, we’ve convinced ourselves it’s possible to satisfy that deep hunger through texting and all manner of apps designed to keep us staring at a screen, waiting for a response.

But what if we took a moment to examine this bottomless need instead of rushing to fill it? Where would that lead us? In short, back to our Creator. God is the one who designed us to be in constant communion with Him—in fact, that’s what eternal life is. You may be wondering how we can experience it this side of heaven, and the answer is simple: prayer.

As the body of Christ, we can’t afford not to be in communication with the body’s Head—Jesus Christ. Nor can our spirits survive the onslaught of this fallen world without that sustaining, divine connection. Perhaps in the past it has felt like a chore for you, but now’s the time for a renewed vision of prayer.

Use this prayer, or let it inspire one in your own words, as you move through the weekly reflections in the following section.

**Monthly Prayer**

Heavenly Father,

I thank You for always being present. I am so grateful that in You I have constant support and connection, and that You are ever listening. Lord, I confess that I need Your help to discover delight in prayer once more. I ask You, Holy Spirit, to guide me in finding the words, posture, and attitude that most reflect Your heart. My desire is to commune with You, building our relationship as I align myself with the words “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Amen.
EVEN THOUGH YOU’VE LIKELY never heard the word, you’re probably just as glossophobic as the rest of us—that is, you’re afraid of public speaking. It’s bad enough when you’re presenting to a boardroom, but sometimes being asked to pray in front of other believers is the most anxiety-inducing situation. Pressure’s on.

But it doesn’t have to be. When Jesus taught on prayer, He specifically told the disciples to pray in private, which He Himself did on a regular basis. When you’re alone, start by concentrating on aspects of God that you adore, and relive your favorite encounters with Him—times He’s revealed Himself or met your need. There’s no rush to move on from adoration, but if you have requests, begin presenting them one by one, and imagine placing each in the outstretched hands of God. Again, take your time. Get comfortable in His presence, knowing you have an attentive and compassionate audience of One.

TRY THIS

Use your imagination to shift from a to-do list mindset to a delight mindset. What would it be like to sit beside Jesus? Try to envision the scene in as much sensory detail as possible.

KEY VERSES

“DRAW NEAR TO GOD AND HE WILL DRAW NEAR TO YOU.”
—JAMES 4:8

“ONE THING I HAVE ASKED FROM THE LORD, THAT I SHALL SEEK: THAT I MAY DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE, TO BEHOLD THE BEAUTY OF THE LORD AND TO MEDITATE IN HIS TEMPLE.”
—PSALM 27:4

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ What do you think David meant when he wrote, “To behold the beauty of the Lord” in the verse above? How could you incorporate that practice into your daily prayer life?
ANGELS SOFTLY STROKING HARPS, perched on fluffy clouds—that’s pop culture’s version of heaven, but it’s not found in the Bible. In the book of Revelation, John witnesses lightning, incense, and fantastic creatures—a scene wherein angels and saints constantly intercede and worship God together. What if we could join this mesmerizing display of devotion?

The answer is, we can—in a way. We can’t recreate God’s awe-inspiring throne room, but we can still experience the glory of corporate prayer. For centuries, Christians have emphasized praying as a community, lifting up their voices as one to the Father. And it’s something that we need, perhaps more than ever, in our hectic daily lives.

While spending time alone talking with God is essential, there’s something powerful—and sacred—about joining with others in prayer. And the more intentional we can be about this, the better.

KEY VERSES

“Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray.” —LUKE 5:16

“When you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” —MATTHEW 6:6

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Have you ever realized that God considers praying in secret to be worthy of reward? How does that impact your understanding of solitary intercession?
TRY THIS

Pray through the psalms as a community. Select passages for the group to use each day at the same time—that way, even if you are praying privately, you’re still unified by saying the same words simultaneously.

KEY VERSE

“TRULY I SAY TO YOU, WHATEVER YOU BIND ON EARTH SHALL HAVE BEEN BOUND IN HEAVEN; AND WHATSOEVER YOU LOOSE ON EARTH SHALL HAVE BEEN LOOSED IN HEAVEN. AGAIN I SAY TO YOU, THAT IF TWO OF YOU AGREE ON EARTH ABOUT ANYTHING THAT THEY MAY ASK, IT SHALL BE DONE FOR THEM BY MY FATHER WHO IS IN HEAVEN. FOR WHERE TWO OR THREE HAVE GATHERED TOGETHER IN MY NAME, I AM THERE IN THEIR MIDST.” —MATTHEW 18:18–20

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

In the passage above, how does the promise of Jesus’ presence change the way you view corporate prayer settings? Does it energize you?

The Ultimate Conversation, Charles F. Stanley
These are the sights, sounds, and smells of Clarkston, Georgia. Said to be the most diverse square mile in North America, this “small-town” city is home to over 40 different nationalities. Many non-profit organizations are invested in helping these refugees get on their feet—and most do within three months. But a refugee’s greatest needs are relational and spiritual, which take time to fulfill. Many of Clarkston’s residents grew up in countries without Christianity, and some have never heard the name of Jesus.

Now considered part of metro Atlanta, Clarkston was founded back in the 1800s when the railroad came through—and right in the center of town was Clarkston Baptist Church. After building a new sanctuary in the ‘50s, the church experienced three decades of high attendance and expansion of its facilities. That is, until the city was designated for resettlement and refugees began pouring into the neighborhood. “I wish for all the world I could say that Clarkston Baptist Church lifted their eyes and said, ‘Praise be to God, the nations have come,’” the congregation’s current pastor, Trent Deloach, says. “[But] that is not what happened.”

In the ‘90s, members began to disappear from the pews, and the congregation dwindled from 500 to 50. The church, which had been a fixture in the community for a century, was left with three choices: Shut down altogether, sell the property and move elsewhere, or merge with another church. To their eternal credit, the few but faithful remaining members took a step of faith in 2004 when, after much prayer, they asked a local Filipino congregation and a recent African church to join them. The church’s current pastor, Trent Deloach, says: “We are a church that is a place to call home.”

A Syrian woman in a hijab carries bags of groceries from the Halal market to her apartment complex. Along the way, she walks past a Nepali restaurant where Bollywood movies play on a small TV next to a Hindu shrine. Around the corner, an energetic Ethiopian woman runs a small shawarma shop all by herself. “You work too much,” her customers tell her. “I know, I know,” she responds, waving her thin arm. When the weather is warm, every playground in the area is filled with children who call out to each other in different languages while the mothers stand chatting off to the side, babies on their hips.

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by Stefani McDade | Photography by Audra Melton
HAVE YOU EVER EARNESTLY PRAYED for divine intervention only to have your hopes go unfulfilled? Jesus can relate. In Gethsemane, the Son of God pleaded with His Father to divert His path away from the cross. But God didn’t answer in a way any of us would have wanted—not if we were the one kneeling in that garden, and not in our everyday lives.

When God doesn’t save us from heartbreak, what then? Human nature pushes us to fix, fix, fix, but some things can’t be repaired—they must simply be lamented. And God commands us to do this as a community: “Weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). We’re not meant to carry the heavy burden of grief by ourselves. Remember: Not even Jesus could bear His cross without the help of the man who carried it on His behalf. What could it look like for our communities to help shoulder the weight of unanswered prayer in such a way that it leads us to trust in God for His redemption?

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Let’s go back to how modern technology has revolutionized our ability to communicate. If we stop and think about it, all our apps and social media can make us feel as if we can be everywhere at once. With Skype or FaceTime, for example, you can attend a meeting in a faraway country while simultaneously texting a friend in another city. We’ve come to believe that we can be omnipresent, and the price of that illusion is, ironically, omni-absence—never fully being present anywhere with anyone. But prayer is doing the exact opposite, and that’s why it’s so profound.

Prayer is the practice of un-fracturing our attention and simply being with God, the only truly omnipresent one. This month we approached the subject from the lens of presence, not performance. Before diving into how we pray, we explored why we pray—both as individuals and as communities. And we embraced the opportunity to shoulder the burden of unanswered prayer, weeping with those who weep.

As we shift our focus from prayer to Bible study, remember: The pressure is off. This divine relationship requires some discipline, but it’s a burden made easy by our delight in the Lord.

TRY THIS

Look for people within your local church who are heartsick from unanswered prayer. Sacrifice some of your time and comfort to come alongside them in their pain without requiring that they suddenly cheer up or feel better.

KEY VERSES

“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN, FOR THEY SHALL BE COMFORTED.” —MATTHEW 5:4

“We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” —ROMANS 8:28

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” —REVELATION 21:4 (NIV)

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

How do the verses above help you face the reality that not all of our hopes will be fulfilled this side of the grave?
The more we saturate our minds with the Word of God, the more we will become familiar with God’s way. If we omit His Word in our prayer lives, we miss the ultimate blessing of prayer – Knowing God.

— Handle With Prayer, Charles F. Stanley
THINK OF YOUR VERY FAVORITE MEAL. Now, imagine a beloved celebrity or personal hero coming to share it with you—what part would you cherish the most from the experience? The food? Or your dinner companion? Chances are, it won’t be the food, no matter how beautiful and delicious it might be.

This is a helpful way to think about our experience with the Bible. The Scriptures are a lavish feast, one that God invites us to return to over and over again to sustain our spirits. But the lasting joy of this meal centers around the who, not the what. God calls us, the whole church, to His banquet table so that we might find nourishment in His words and refreshment in His presence.

“Good is the enemy of great,” right? According to author Jim Collins, it is. He opened his best seller Good to Great with the now famous line. And judging by our culture’s desire to optimize everything in our lives from workout regimens to relationships and professional networking, we agree: Why settle for good when we can have great?

That’s the foundation of the booming self-help industry right now. People in the U.S. spend upwards of 10 billion dollars a year to improve their lives, and a good chunk of that goes directly to purchasing books on the subject. While many of these titles live up to their promise of teaching us to be and do better, the best-selling book of all time isn’t about optimization—it’s about transformation.

As the divinely inspired, inerrant words of God, the Bible can and does help us, but it’s not a self-help book. Yes, it instructs us in the ways of righteousness, but it’s not primarily a how-to manual, nor is it simply a guide to the Christian life—it’s so much more than even the sum of those things. What if we approached this ancient, foreign manuscript not as just another book, but as a feast?

Throughout the pages of Scripture, God has set a magnificent spread before us. And if we want to partake, we must come to His table hungry. Not doing so would mean malnourishing ourselves, and that has an effect on the body of Christ. For the sake of both our own spiritual health and the world’s, we must take our seats. And we must feast.

Heavenly Father,
Your holy words are such a gift to me. I long to see Your face within the pages of my Bible, to know You better through the stories and letters, the books of law and wisdom.
I acknowledge that there’s so much more to You than meets my eye—I stand in awe of You, Lord. Holy Spirit, I pray that You will be my guide as I dive into Scripture with eyes and heart wide open.
Amen.
Anyone who has been reprimanded for eating sweets before dinner can relate to Proverbs 27:7—“One who is full loathes honey from the comb, but to the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet” (NIV). We know how to come with an appetite to a family supper, but how exactly do we come hungry to the banquet of Scripture?

In a word, humility. While growing in wisdom and knowledge is noble and even necessary for Christlikeness, we must never approach God or the Bible as if we have it all figured out. No matter how much we feast on God’s Word, we’re never above relying on the Holy Spirit.

**TRY THIS**

Imagine what it would have been like to share a meal with Jesus. Place yourself at the Pharisee’s house in Luke 14 or the wedding at Cana in John 2. You can use a journal or notebook to keep track of your thoughts as you picture the experience from start to finish.

**KEY VERSE**

“If it is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’” —Matthew 4:4

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

Usually we interpret Jesus’ rebuttal to Satan’s temptation in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11) as contrasting the nutrition of literal bread with the spiritual nutrition of the Bible, and that’s true. But there’s more—pay particular attention to how the Lord phrases it: “every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.”

- How does Jesus’ wording emphasize the relational nature of our interactions with Scripture?

- In what way does this help you picture God as the host of a magnificent feast?
TRY THIS

Pride has a way of sneaking up on us and dulling our senses to what God might be saying. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal where such an attitude might be hindering your exploration of Scripture.

KEY VERSES

“And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” — Micah 6:8

“When pride comes, then comes dishonor, but with the humble is wisdom.” — Proverbs 11:2

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.” — John 5:39-40

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ How does Jesus diagnose the Pharisees’ problem in the above passage from John?

→ What if they had approached the Scriptures with humility—do you think their experience with Jesus could have been different?

NO ONE IN HIS NATURAL MIND wakes up thinking, Oh goody, I get to humble myself today! Humility costs us in things like power, pride, and prestige. But it also rewards us with an unexpected gift: wonder. And that is essential for studying God’s Word.

What exactly is wonder? It’s related to curiosity, but it’s not focused on solving riddles and mysteries. It’s more a form of astonishment—an openness to the presence of God and the possibility of adventure or the surprise of revelation. Approaching Scripture with wonder is like walking into a room where a table is spread with beautiful foods of every kind and knowing we’ve been invited to partake. It’s simply delightful.
Knowledge is a form of power. Yet that power isn’t always wielded in a peaceful, productive way. Nowadays people often research just for the sake of combat, arming up with facts and figures to take down their opponents. And if we don’t look carefully, it could seem as though the Bible encourages us to do the same.

After all, in Ephesians, Paul instructs believers to take up “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (6:17). But we must remember that sword’s intended target: Satan. If we read Scripture only to weaponize it against people, then we misunderstand what the Bible is for and what Jesus wants from us as messengers of the gospel: to bring hope and healing.

TRY THIS

Take time this week to stop and wonder as you read the Bible. Write down every question that comes to mind during your study—but don’t worry about finding the answers. The point right now is to ask the questions and allow yourself to experience not knowing.

KEY VERSE

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, ‘Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, ‘Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.’”

Matthew 18:1-3

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ Picture any small children you may know—how do they respond and interact with the world?

→ In terms of wonder, what do you think it means to be childlike?

→ How can that image help you foster your own wonder?
In C. S. Lewis’s novel Till We Have Faces, the hero of the story comes to the following conclusion after a lifetime of wrestling with the divine: “I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice?”

Likewise, our wonder-filled, humble pursuit of God through His Word is often a struggle for answers to life’s biggest questions, many of which won’t be addressed this side of heaven. But that’s OK—the Bible isn’t a textbook, and we’re not studying for a test. Ultimately, Scripture invites us into the presence of God Himself, the only true answer to our hearts’ longing.

**TRY THIS**

Next time you’re in a tense conversation, shift your focus from arguing to active and reflective listening. In other words, ask clarifying—not leading—questions. And take the time to make the other person feel heard and understood, remembering there is Someone who knows all.

**KEY VERSE**

“**Knowledge puffs up while love builds up.**”

—1 Corinthians 8:1 (NIV)

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

→ In the verse above, what would you say is the difference between “puffing up” and “building up”?

→ What are some ways you can participate in building up your local body with love?
How often do you read your Bible?

Was your immediate thought, Not enough? Well, you aren’t alone—according to research conducted by the Barna Group, more than half of all Americans wish they read the Bible more frequently. So, why don’t we?

Perhaps it’s because we approach the practice with the “good is the enemy of great” mindset. That is to say, unless we’re reading every day for an hour, then it may seem that we’ve failed to hit the mark. And nothing derails a budding habit like a persistent feeling of failure. But what if that whole line of thinking is wrong? Maybe good isn’t the enemy of great.

Take this quote from John Steinbeck’s novel East of Eden: “And now that you don’t have to be perfect, you can be good.” What a relief it would be to approach Scripture with that mindset! Without shame hanging over our heads, we’re free to just be with God in His Word. Presence instead of perfection—doesn’t this sound like good news?

That’s what we focused on this month: how to encounter God through the Bible. We pictured Scripture as a sumptuous feast and learned humility is the way can partake of it. We embraced the glory of wonder and set encountering God as the goal of biblical study.

It may take time to fully adopt this new posture to God’s Word, but that’s perfectly fine—the point is not to rush. As we move on to the topic of discipleship next month, leave the pressure of perfectionism behind. You simply don’t need it anymore.

**TRY THIS**

Spend some time thinking about unanswered questions you may have from reading the Bible. In prayer, bring each one to God—Someone who knows all—and ask Him for a revelation of His presence in your daily life.

**KEY VERSE**

“As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. So Jesus said to the Twelve, ‘You do not want to go away also, do you?’ Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life.’” —John 6:66–68

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- What do you do when studying Scripture creates more confusion than clarity?

- When Jesus first announced He was the Bread of Life, many followers deserted Him because they didn’t understand. But how was the response of the Twelve different? Was their loyalty rooted in comprehension or intimate connection?
THE WHOLE CHURCH: HOW DO WE GROW AS DISCIPLES?

"Holding Fast the Faithful Word."
Charles F. Stanley

THE BIBLE IS THE STORY OF GOD'S REDEEMING LOVE FROM GENESIS TO REVELATION. THAT IS WHAT IT IS ALL ABOUT.
We Christians talk a lot about how Jesus doesn’t require us to be perfect. That’s problematic, though, considering His command, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48 NIV). Pretty anxiety-inducing words, right? That’s because we equate “perfect” with “flawless,” but God has a fuller definition in mind.

Fret not—what seems an impossibly high expectation is actually a description of sanctification: the lifelong process of becoming holy. The means to that end is discipleship, an all-encompassing lifestyle whereby we usher one another toward unity with Christ. And it’s meant to be a lifelong pursuit, so there’s no need for anxiety.

How would you sum up Christianity in 10 words or less? Perhaps you’d go with the old standby: “It’s a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” And for good reason—it’s a simple phrase that captures the most important aspect of our faith: our singular devotion to Jesus and the unparalleled importance of knowing Him intimately.

Now, here’s a follow-up question: What do we mean when we say personal? If your first thought was “individual,” you’re not alone. Many modern Western believers think of their faith as a solo adventure, and popular Christian culture largely caters to that mindset. Think of all the ways we can consume our faith (such as sermons and worship) without ever having to interact with someone else. But doesn’t that sound rather impersonal?

It doesn’t have to be. The good news is that God designed our personal relationship with Him to inherently involve other people. Yes, He holds us individually accountable, but even so, our spiritual maturity is a process of interwoven relationships. And that’s what discipleship is all about. It’s so much more than church programming or classes and certifications. It’s so much more than just the exchange of information.

Discipleship is sisters and brothers in Christ building each other up, encouraging one another in their pursuit of God so that we might, together, in all things grow up into Christ Himself (Eph. 4:15). In short, it’s deeply personal.

And we can’t afford to live otherwise if we want to become the pure and spotless bride of Christ.

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And we can’t afford to live otherwise if we want to become the pure and spotless bride of Christ.
TRY THIS

The context surrounding Matthew 5:48 suggests that God’s idea of perfection has much to do with treating all groups of people the same way. With that in mind, invite your community of faith to give you feedback on any areas in which they detect an attitude of favoritism.

KEY VERSES

“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR THEY SHALL BE SATISFIED.”
—MATTHEW 5:6

“How do the two verses above make you feel about Jesus’ command to be perfect? Do they calm your anxiety or exacerbate it? Why?”

HOW-TO GUIDES ARE ALL THE RAGE right now. But unlike changing a flat tire or roasting your first turkey, biblical discipleship can’t be broken down into a step-by-step outline. Yet we still tend to picture it as weekly one-on-one conversations about spiritual principles. That’s not wrong, but it’s not the whole picture.

Think about Jesus and His disciples—sure, there were more formal teaching moments like the Sermon on the Mount, but the Rabbi also ate and traveled with the Twelve, and in the flow of regular life, He taught them not just what to think but how to think. Likewise, the most fertile ground for transformation isn’t scheduled meetings where we present a curated version of ourselves, but rather daily life in community.

KEY VERSES

“BUT WE ALL, WITH UNVEILED FACE, BEHOLDING AS IN A MIRROR THE GLORY OF THE LORD, ARE BEING TRANSFORMED INTO THE SAME IMAGE FROM GLORY TO GLORY, JUST AS FROM THE LORD, THE SPIRIT.”
—2 CORINTHIANS 3:18

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR THEY SHALL BE SATISFIED.”
—MATTHEW 5:6

“BUT WE ALL, WITH UNVEILED FACE, BEHOLDING AS IN A MIRROR THE GLORY OF THE LORD, ARE BEING TRANSFORMED INTO THE SAME IMAGE FROM GLORY TO GLORY, JUST AS FROM THE LORD, THE SPIRIT.”
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**TRY THIS**

Think about how you can open up your life to other trustworthy believers. Are there any aspects of your life that you keep hidden? Ask the Holy Spirit to help you integrate those aspects into your relationships.

**KEY VERSES**

“IF WE SAY THAT WE HAVE FELLOWSHIP WITH HIM AND YET WALK IN THE DARKNESS, WE LIE AND DO NOT PRACTICE THE TRUTH; BUT IF WE WALK IN THE LIGHT AS HE HIMSELF IS IN THE LIGHT, WE HAVE FELLOWSHIP WITH ONE ANOTHER.” —1 JOHN 1:6-7

“THEREFORE, CONFESSION TO ONE ANOTHER, AND PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER SO THAT YOU MAY BE HEALED.” —JAMES 5:16

“LET US CONSIDER HOW TO STIMULATE ONE ANOTHER TO LOVE AND GOOD DEEDS, NOT FORSAKING OUR OWN ASSEMBLING TOGETHER, AS IS THE HABIT OF SOME, BUT ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER.” —HEBREWS 10:24-25

**QUESTION FOR REFLECTION**

→ How do the verses above illuminate the need for integrating our communities of faith into our discipleship practices?
TRY THIS

We don’t have to cajole God into spending time with us. In fact, He’s always present, even when we choose not to be present to Him. But being intentional can help us engage more fully. Think of ways you can consciously “host” God through daily spiritual practices.

KEY VERSE

“YET THOSE WHO WAIT FOR THE LORD WILL GAIN NEW STRENGTH; THEY WILL MOUNT UP WITH WINGS LIKE EAGLES, THEY WILL RUN AND NOT GET TIRED, THEY WILL WALK AND NOT BECOME WEARY.” —ISAIAH 40:31

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

→ The Hebrew word for “wait” also has a connotation that means to “lie in wait,” like a hunter watching for a deer. How does that idea cast an active rather than passive tone on the verse above?

→ What would actively lying in wait for God look like in your life?

—“The Cost of True Discipleship,” Charles F. Stanley
**TRY THIS**

List some areas in your relationship with God where you may have opted out of struggle on account of disappointment, confusion, or offense. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you strength and wisdom to reengage.

**KEY VERSES**

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” —James 1:2-4

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” —Romans 8:18

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

→ Looking back, can you see where past struggles have produced good fruit in your life now?

→ How can you lean on your community for strength to continue engaging with God even when it’s difficult?
“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” —Matthew 28:19-20

Making disciples of all nations is no small feat—obviously, because more than 2,000 years later we’re still working on it. But we can’t let the size of the task overwhelm our ability to hear and receive the gift of Jesus’ parting words: “And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Remember: His presence with us is both the means—for what can we do apart from Him?—and the end—because what’s the point of all our discipleship efforts if not to become wholly united with Christ? That’s why we first defined discipleship as the pursuit of sanctification and then expanded our understanding of the process to include daily life in community.

Discipleship is a lifelong journey toward Christlikeness, and it’s not one we can undertake on our own. Certainly, go with God—but also, go together.
No one but Jesus, the only sinless One, could have atoned for all humanity. That’s why we rightly revere His sacrifice on Calvary. But we can’t mistake our salvation as the climax of our Christian experience—it’s merely the glorious beginning of a vibrant relationship with Jesus. Our life in Him is meant to be dynamic, not a simple coasting from year to year while we hold our breath and do our best to avoid sin. Jesus is constantly extending His hand toward us, beckoning His beloved to come closer.

The Lord’s invitation to us is best summed up by C.S. Lewis in his novel *The Last Battle*: “Come further up, come further in!” And that’s what prayer, Bible study, and discipleship are all about—us drawing near to the Lord as He draws near to us (James 4:8).

During these past three months we’ve emphasized delight over discipline, letting the former fuel the latter. We came to understand prayer as a way of experiencing eternal life with God here and now. We RSVP’d to the feast of Scripture, enjoying both nourishment and refreshment in God’s presence. Finally, we accepted the challenge to “be perfect” (Matt. 5:48) by embracing the lifelong practice of discipleship.

No matter how far we’ve come, there are yet more depths of God to be plumbed. And that’s good news—our infinite God provides unlimited opportunities to commune with Him. In the next installment of this Guide, we’ll explore authentic fellowship, hospitality, and what it means to build the kingdom of God.
To be people of prayer, we must give voice to our thanksgivings and praise and open ourselves fully to the presence of God at work in and around us.

—Talking With God, Charles F. Stanley