

ENOUGH ALREADY

How Simply Using Silence and a God-Centered
Approach to Scripture Fosters Discipleship

E M I L Y L A W Y E R

Enough Already.

***(How Simply Using Silence and a
God-Centered Approach to Scripture
Fosters Authentic Discipleship)***

*ENOUGH ALREADY: How Simply Using Silence and a God Centered Approach to Scripture
Fosters Authentic Discipleship*

By Emily Lawyer

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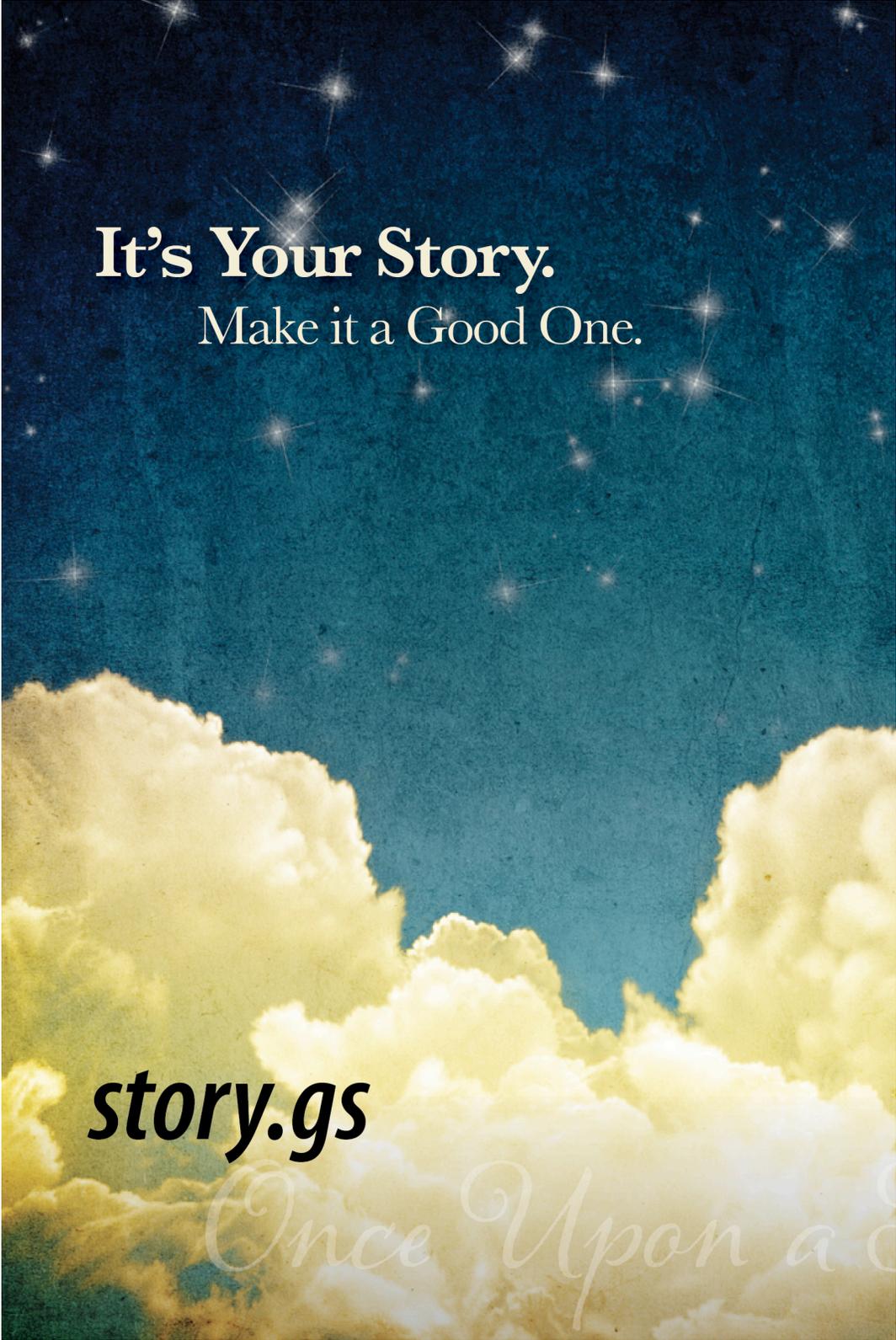
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Once Upon a Story

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“How do we deepen our love for Christ? Not by trying harder, but through a process of inner transformation, primarily by meditating on His life here on earth so that we can understand how ‘wide and long and high and deep’ is God’s love for us.”

Developing Intimacy with God
--Alex Aronis

Section 1:
Why Should I Use a New Approach?

Intro

“If your revelation hadn’t delighted me so, I would have given up when the hard times came” (Psalm 119:92 MSG)

We all know we should read our Bibles. We all know that finding time for a bit of silence and solitude is good for the soul. But how many people do you know who actually do that? Despite numerous encouragements and consistent pleas, how many of us actually open the Bible more than the one day a week we’re sitting in church, if even then? We all know of the life-changing power in those pages, and probably foster a healthy respect for Scripture, but how do we get to the point that we’re consistently rooted in the Word? How can we develop a healthy practice of simply listening to God? My goal is to convince you that getting there isn’t as complicated as it may seem.

I should start by hitting the rewind button to a little over three years ago. Seemingly overnight, my world started to fall apart. I suffered the one-two punch of job loss and grueling health problems that sent me spiraling into a dark night of the soul. The crisis of faith stemmed from the fact that I couldn’t understand why God would allow this deep valley when I had been serving Him so faithfully in the ministry for the past five years. He owed me more after all I had sacrificed for Him! But though I came dangerously close many times, I just could not run away. I would brazenly tell people that I was furiously shaking my fist at God with one hand and white-knuckling my Bible with the other. Despite my rage, frustration and pain, I remained tethered to His side.

Some might attribute my fierce devotion to my church upbringing. However, we’ve all read the statistics that people who grew up in the church are now leaving it in droves despite that foundation. Others may say it was my determination and willpower. I know the depths of my frailty much too well to give an iota of credit there. To find the real answer, we need to take one more small step back on the timeline.

In the spring of 2008, I found myself frustrated by the lack of response from the church where I served on staff in northern Virginia. I discovered that even

though people had accepted God's amazing gift of salvation, their hearts were still only partially full, and, in fact, most were running right above empty. Even worse, I was goading them to give more than they had by serving week in and week out to get a fledgling church plant up and running. Many had been church-going Christians for years, but over and over I encountered men and women experiencing a huge gap between head knowledge and a heart knowledge that led to authentic life change. Truth be told, I was in the same predicament myself, but at that point harbored too much pride to admit it.

Around the same time, I had been meditating on a book called *Developing Intimacy With God* that heavily drew from Brother Lawrence's *Practicing the Presence of God*. This ancient monk's practice of appreciating God's character in Scripture was profoundly resonating with me. On top of that, God had stirred a conviction in my heart that I needed silence. I knew the rigors of ministry in current culture and the accompanying noise were suffocating intimacy with my Savior. Not coincidentally, at a conference in April of that year, I heard a well-known church leader speak about his practice of "doing quiet time together," which only reinforced what I had been sensing in my spirit. Something clicked and I knew exactly what I wanted to do. Sitting in my office after arriving home, I typed up a one-page plan outlining a new discipleship process that was radically different from anything I had ever led. (I have a long history of making decisions based on my naivete, and this one was no different!)

We started with just a couple of groups. Only women, about four or five in each, armed with their Bibles and a journal, and a leader who had no idea what she was doing. This was going to be messy. However, the Holy Spirit began to work in such supernatural ways that I was thrilled about my lack of expertise. It got me out of the way, which, incidentally, is a central tenet to this method. The process was as plain and as simple as this:

Step 1: Pray for God to show us what He wanted us to see.

Step 2: Choose a passage of Scripture.

Step 3: Silently read looking through the lens of "What does this make me appreciate about God?" and then journal that truth.

Uncomplicated. Pure. Elementary, even. But it worked. So well, in fact, that people began to take away an incredibly sophisticated and mature reading of Scripture every time we met in spite of my deficiencies. On their own, they were uncovering and internalizing profound truths such as:

- *I appreciate that God says exactly what I need to hear, and is courageous enough to say it. (Luke 11:27).*
- *I appreciate that I can give up control, because the Lord will fulfill His purpose for me (Psalms 138:8).*
- *I appreciate that God feels the same emotions I do (Luke 10:21).*
- *I appreciate that God makes up for my inadequacies and stands in the gap for me. (2 Cor. 12:10).*
- *I appreciate God because He appreciates me (John 3:16).*

Eventually, we grew until approximately 80 percent of men and women in our church were involved in a small group using this approach, and not only that, they became excited about reading the Bible!

Any time someone tries to implement change, you encounter resistance, and this was no different: “Where in this process do you have people apply the truths to their lives?” “When do you talk about how we need to be and do better?” I didn’t have a good answer to the questions. All I knew was that I felt burdened to share what He had been teaching me and for the first time since the beginning of my career in vocational ministry, I was witnessing and experiencing authentic change. People began to believe emotionally instead of just intellectually, and hearts were starting to be filled.

Including my own. Filled to overflowing with a love for God that ran so deep—with a trust in God’s faithfulness to prove so rock-solid, with a belief that His nature is only capable of giving His very best—holding so steady, that a year later, when everything collapsed around me, I was able to “stand firm and remain standing” (Eph. 6:13).

Let me be blunt. I didn’t want to write this book. I hate writing. It’s like war for me. Insecurities I didn’t even know I housed started surfacing the minute I began this endeavor. But God very strongly impressed upon my spirit that I had to be obedient in passing along what He’s taught me. It just wasn’t an option to keep this to myself and my own little circles. I have absolutely zero interest in

self-promotion, but rather a ferocious desire to promote the strength of this method to usher people into a more dynamic relationship with God than they've ever known.

To make things as logical and as applicable as possible, I've divided the reading into two sections. The first section lays out my reasons supporting the strength of and need for quiet and a concentration on who God truly is. The second section, while beneficial to anyone, is written specifically for those of you in vocational ministry who might be interested in implementing this approach. It includes a more detailed description of the process and how it plays out in a church setting.

My prayer is that regardless of the category you fall into, once you read about this, you will find a fresh love for Him, and that your newly ignited passion will birth in you that same compulsion to spread the Word.

Chapter 1: Why Silence?

“If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom” (Job 13:5)

During the very early stages of implementing this technique, it seemed that God felt I needed to be taken down a few notches. That came in the form of a friend who was encouraging me to add something new to my spiritual repertoire. Something I had never tried before, but that she was sure would be deeply sacred and life-altering.

So, I took the bait—and checked myself into an overnight nunnery.

Two blocks from Capitol Hill sits a charming three-story townhouse operated by sisters of the cloth for people who need to clear their minds, who need to “get away from it all” to focus on God.

This was the plan: I was going to fast from food, from technology and conversation while sequestered in my convent. It was going to be fantastic! And since I already had so much practice being quiet before God and mentoring people to do the same, I should be able to handle it, no problem. Right? Thus, I embarked on the most miserable 24 hours I’ve ever endured.

I quickly discovered that the person with the serious problem was myself. Not my flock. And if leaders replicate like self, then I was the Pied Piper escorting everyone right into a nervous breakdown. During those painful minutes where time seemed to stand still, God first opened my eyes to my dependency on activity, both kinesthetic and sonic. It took several more years for Him to successfully reform that, but the dam broke that night. He had my attention. Briefly, here’s a quick peek into that agonizing time:

Sept. 21, 2008, 8 p.m.

I’m at the Madonna House in D.C. right now. I have to be honest, God ... I am a little afraid of this 24 hours of solitude. So...here we go. Hour 1.

Sept. 22, 2008, 10 a.m.

Well, so far I've managed to do nothing but sleep. Now that I'm awake, this is getting really difficult! Finding out just how much value I put in activity and being "busy." My first thought this morning was that I needed something to entertain me ... tv, computer, anything but reading the Bible or praying! Why is that?! I think I've made a god out of being comfortable ... of being in a continual state of happiness. Not joyfulness, but happiness. I'm to the point where everything I have to eat, read, do, watch needs to be entertaining or perfect enough that I never have to experience boredom or pain or loneliness or fatigue. How in the world can I really know where I'm at as a person if I'm not in touch with that?

11 a.m.

AHHHH! It's only been one hour?! I am a mess! How did I let myself get to the point where I can't let time pass by? I am wishing my life away by filling it with all this activity. Makes me wonder how much space I'm actually leaving for God. I'm filling up every single second to be "productive," but is any of that activity really producing anything? **Other than producing a dependency on more activity?**

What made that respite so excruciating? Why is silence so threatening to us? Isaiah 30:15 says, "... in quietness and trust is your strength," but as a society, even those of us entrenched in Christian culture have surrounded ourselves with anything we can find (and are constantly inventing more) to divert us from those nagging questions running through our heads. We will settle for whatever can distract us from facing the hard questions head-on that lead to purification of our hearts and minds.

As C.S. Lewis so creatively wrote in the conversation between the senior demon Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood in *The Screwtape Letters*: "Music and silence—how I detest them both! How thankful we should be that ever since our Father entered Hell—though longer ago than humans, reckoning in light years, could express—no square inch of infernal space and no moment of infernal time has been surrendered to either of those abominable forces, but all has been occupied by Noise—Noise, the grand dynamism, the audible expression of all that is exultant, ruthless and virile—Noise which alone defends us from silly qualms, despairing scruples, and impossible desires. We will make the whole universe a noise in the end."

Eugene Peterson says of David's wilderness exile in *Leap Over A Wall*, "... there are things we can only experience in silence and solitude." That certainly proved true for me during my time at Madonna House. Not only was I forced to tackle my dependency, addiction even, to activity, I remember God impressing at the same time that my vision for my life was too small. It seemed like a paradox. How could He be leading me to slow down and yet dream of accomplishing more at the same time? It was His way of starting the process to get me to surrender to the idea of letting *Him* really take over. To letting Him work through me to do more than I could ever hope for or imagine, if I would just say "yes."

I would never have heard that if I hadn't forced myself to be quiet. I would have been too afraid. Silence is a scary thing, you know. When we're quiet, the volume of those voices of self-doubt, unbelief and fear escalate to a deafening scream. In the early stages of compiling this book, a writer friend of mine recommended *The War of Art*, by Stephen Pressfield. Pressfield expounds on all the ways we are blocked from reaching our fullest potential and are kept from becoming who we were born to be. Mr. Pressfield isn't a Christian, but in his book he somehow managed to brilliantly decipher what happens when we allow Satan's scheme of noisy distractions to overtake us. Our destiny is at stake. Who God created us to be and what He's created us to do is at stake. Most importantly, His glory is at stake.

Austin Phelps, a minister from the mid-19th century (which had much less societal clatter than we deal with now, yet apparently still recognized the threat) affirms that idea in *The Still Hour* - "It has been said that no great work of literature or science has ever been produced by someone who did not love solitude. It is also a fundamental principle of faith that no tremendous growth in holiness has ever been achieved by anyone who has not taken the time frequently, and for long periods, to be *alone with God*".

By adopting the method outlined in this text, we can begin to practice the discipline of stillness that leads to us living the life God desires for us. Even if it's just 10 minutes to be "alone" with our Heavenly Father, while sitting in a room with others in a small group, the dependence starts to wane. The spell is broken.

Every big change starts with taking one small step, then taking that step over and over again until it becomes part of our lifestyle, and this is no different.

I'll be brutally transparent. Even though God began to break this addiction for me through my convent experiment, I still struggled. But He cared too much to let that continue to hold power over my life. I heard someone say once that we have a proclivity to find our identity in those areas where we feel the most righteous, and that God will tear away those areas because He loves us too much to let us keep them. That's how much value He placed on my learning to just "be" instead of always trying to "do." What I didn't realize was how much pain was involved in Him ripping off the Band-Aid.

Just a year later, in summer 2009, I began to experience health problems including dizziness, muscle twitches and fatigue. For eight long months, I chased down an elusive answer while my health continued to decline. By God's grace, I finally found a doctor who gave me the crushing diagnosis: Lyme Disease. As I went through the arduous, seemingly never-ending years of treatment, I questioned God over and over again as to why He would take away my health. I didn't think I had made it an idol! (You know where this is heading) God graciously revealed to me that I had been idolizing the copious amounts I could *do* as a result of good health. My identity hinged on how much I achieved and produced. Arrogantly, I believed I could run and run and not suffer any consequences. Answering "no" to any request was a sign of weakness, and as a woman who prided herself in "doing it all," especially while working in the ministry, a profession that was mainly populated by males, the last thing I wanted to convey was an image of weakness.

It should come as no surprise then, that God used this malady to once more fan into flames the passion I have for this discipleship model, and to usher people into spending time getting to know Him. Not His commands, just Him. As the Apostle Paul says in Phil. 3:8, "What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of *knowing* Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things."

We're reminded in the story of Elijah that God often speaks not in the noise, but in the quiet whisper. We get our best glimpses of who God is when we get

quiet. Psalm 46:10 says, “Be *still* and *know*,” and as we’ll see later, getting quiet is the essential first step in being able to know the true character of God.

Chapter 2: Why The Bible?

*“The Bible grows more beautiful as we grow in our understanding of it.”
—Goethe*

I’m a first-born, which means I always have a book in my hands. I’ll read just about anything, but musings on spiritual development comprise the largest section in my Kindle library. I just can’t get enough. While God has used them in incredible ways to grow me, there’s unequivocally no substitute for the Bible. Hear me again, there is a time and a place for Christian books, for commentary, for divinely written studies. I myself have at times mentioned that I believe certain publications should be canonized into Scripture! But, a subtle lie can creep in if we put our trust solely in those. We can begin to believe that is the only way to hear from God. It’s a grave mistake to shy away from the reality that the effectiveness of a believer’s life in displaying God’s glory is directly related to their time reflecting on Scripture. One direct word from God is often worth more than a hundred from someone else.

Do I really have to make an argument for this? It’s a given. Of course, Christians should read their Bibles. Here’s the problem: Most of us don’t. In an interview with Assist News Service, Ron Rhodes, president of the ministry Reasoning From the Scriptures, quotes a recent poll indicating that 35 percent of born-again Christians do not read the Bible at all. Moreover, Rhodes indicated that among those who say they read the Bible, the vast majority of them only read it during the one hour they attend church each Sunday morning. George Barna, arguably the foremost researcher on Christian practices in the United States, comments on a recent Barna poll: “American Christians are biblically illiterate. Although most of them contend that the Bible contains truth and is worth knowing, and most of them argue that they know all of the relevant truths and principles, our research shows otherwise.”

My background is in education, so permit me to draw a parallel. Look at any schooling system. At a very young age, we expect students to start reading books

on their own. To start working through math problems on their own. In fact, one could argue that a good teacher challenges her students by giving them material that might even be slightly above their current skill level for the sole purpose of stretching them. She's still there at the ready to be used as a resource, and enjoys helping them, but the responsibility to learn falls as much on the student as the teacher.

Somehow, when it comes to studying the Bible most people stay in the equivalent of spiritual "kindergarten" for years. It pains me to admit that those of us who serve as leaders in the church shoulder much of the blame. Maybe pride is the culprit? We who possess more of an intellectual bent like thinking we're a little smarter than the average bear sitting in the pews. Maybe it's lack of trust that the Holy Spirit can enlighten someone's mind without our help? Maybe it's the enemy's lies to Christians who haven't been to seminary or gone through theological training that they're not capable of understanding the Bible so why even try? I recently encouraged a wonderful woman who shied away from this technique because, in her words, "I'm not that deep." Satan knows the tie between the power of Scripture and sanctification, so He's working as hard as he can to keep us away using any means necessary.

Whatever the reason, we've succumbed to his sham, and as a result we have hordes of people sitting in our churches living a Christian life that shows remarkable similarity to someone who doesn't know Jesus at all. God did not send His son to die a horribly gruesome death for His people to still be in that kind of captivity!

I contend that people can better understand (and are therefore more likely to implement) a truth that they've discovered themselves. Instead of just head knowledge, truth internalizes into what they believe in their hearts. Sometimes leaders and teachers in the church buy into the fraudulent thinking that we're the ones in control of people growing. We make ourselves responsible for people understanding a new spiritual principle because our fleshly, insatiable desire for affirmation likes to believe at times that we are the ones who control someone's life change. We perpetuate the thought that it was because we said just the right word or offered the perfect verse. Often, God *does* use gifted teachers to reveal

truths and facilitate growth. But a truth from God that someone discovers on his/her own carries much more weight. How many times have we all said, “That’s just a lesson I had to learn for myself”? This follows the same standard.

The most daunting part for anyone, church staff or not, in implementing this routine is that it demands relinquishing so much control to the Holy Spirit. Just like most changes in the Christian life, this method requires a step of faith. The good news is, it’s also how God works the most incredibly because we depend on Him for every single stride. Not only that, He gets every single bit of the credit, and is made more famous as a result.

If you pastor a church, this discipleship practice also exposes where your congregation is spiritually. You can’t draft the course for where you want to go unless you know where you are, and this technique helps locate that starting point.

My experience has shown that most Christians have a far shallower pool of understanding God’s Word than we think. I assumed that people in my ministry held a much larger back catalog of biblical wisdom than they actually did. In reality, most (even those who had been Christians 10 years or more) rarely, if ever, read the Bible, which plays right into the statistics. I routinely encountered men and women who had never even tried to read their Bibles on their own, finding it too intimidating, and therefore were content to try and absorb whatever they could once a week from the pulpit.

They knew enough to espouse on the Ten Commandments, tithing and the dangers of sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll, but that was about the extent.

Even then, many spoke of the Word as only a list of God’s directives they *should* do, yet found themselves in the self-flagellating cycle of try, fail, try harder and fail again. All the while reflecting on how disappointed God must be. In one group where I introduced this procedure, a suburbanite mom told me, “I have enough to feel guilty about in my life. Why would I read the Bible just to feel more?” It was an eye-opening time for me that delivered a disheartening blow. God’s Word is so much more than just a rule book. It’s the Story of a Living God who breathes His life into us through the pages of His inspired Word. So, when we set apart time to deliberate on Scripture, we can enjoy a meaningful encounter

with His overwhelming, all-encompassing love for us because He is *there*. In the words and on the parchment. Getting to that point is possible through a God-Centered approach to reading the Bible, just as it was for that suburbanite mom, who, a few months into this new regime, remarked that she now never felt as close to God as when she was reading His Word.

Chapter 3: Why A God-Centered Approach?

“The recurrent error of our technologically conditioned age is to look for what’s wrong in our lives so we can fix it There ARE things wrong that need fixing, but the Christian life starts at the other end—not with us, but with God.”—Eugene Peterson

By now we can all agree that spending more time reading the Bible is a necessary endeavor. We can probably also all agree that the thought has crossed our minds that it’s just one more thing to add to the already overfilled to-do list. The fact is, we all find time to do things we deem imperative or worthwhile. Chances are, reading the Bible doesn’t fit either one of those criteria for most of us, and reflecting upon Scripture may invoke the same lack of excitement as grocery shopping or paying the bills.

I think that disdain partially stems from the reason that people might conjure up enough self-discipline to sit down and read, but leave feeling either no change or even more discouraged and defeated than before. So, we do what all good Americans do. We work harder. However, buckling down and forcing ourselves to engage in Scripture can work for a time, but eventually falls short.

Embarking on any new behavior certainly requires willpower as part of the equation, but there’s more to it than that when it comes to shaping a consistent practice of encountering God. Plus, I have to suppose that when God came up with the plan to give us His Word, He didn’t envision us gritting our teeth just to get through it.

Why? What’s causing the gap? Let’s examine the tactic adopted by most of the population when sitting down to read the Bible. We think, “Ok, what do I need to take from this to help me behave better? How do I apply this to my life to become more holy?” That’s not a terrible approach. God certainly did include guidelines in His Word for our lives, and we are all broken and in need of repair. Yet the Scripture is meant to give us so much more.

To quote Alex Aronis again, “The vast majority of Christians focus on their need to improve themselves rather than on God’s gracious acceptance of them.” As offspring of a performance-based society, we see good behavior as the way we can experience God. We have the mentality of, “Thank you for what you’ve done for me, God, now look what I’m going to do for you.” In fact, an overwhelming majority of self-identified Christians (81 percent) contend that spiritual maturity is achieved by following the rules in the Bible. Barna (2009 Research Finding). The path doesn’t stop with knowledge of how to tow the line, yet that’s what most of us see as the ultimate goal.

A friend of mine recently shared a story from her adult Sunday school class where the instructor asked the attendees what one thing Jesus would say to them if He came to class that day. The overwhelming answer involved some sort of chastisement: “He would tell me I need to do better”; “He would tell me to just work at it a little harder.” Not one person (and most of these were lifelong followers of Christ) said anything about Jesus affirming His fierce love for them. Affirming His joy in them. Lavishing His grace upon them. Not one. How is it that the majority of us see God as that great prison warden in the sky? No wonder no one wants to spend time with Him.

Somehow we’ve missed the vital ideology that change is the byproduct, not the goal. Relationship is the goal. Jesus was people-oriented, not task-oriented. God is not after a bunch of sticklers for the rules. He’s after heart transformation that leads to life change. The kind of life change that never occurs solely as a result of staying inside the lines better than the next guy.

In Revelation, Jesus tells the church in Ephesus that they have lost their affection for Him. At first glance, it confounds logic. We tend to look at outward appearances to fashion an opinion about the soul of a congregation or person. We use level of activity and church attendance as a barometer for spiritual health. The church in Ephesus was a bastion of upholding truths. A model for doing all the right things. And, Jesus commends them for their perseverance, yet He issues a severe warning: “Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love” (Rev. 2:4).

Their hearts were no longer on fire for God. I'm not saying those things aren't important. Certainly, God has important work for us to do as His church. But I would wager that most people are mistaking spiritual busyness as a replacement for relationship with Jesus Christ.

Frankly, this is my story, and maybe explains why adopting this new system shook up my world. I was always the good girl and thus related more with the elder sibling in the story of the prodigal son. I believed that my actions were the ticket to elevate me to a level where God could love me. Oh, if someone asked me outright, I'd deny it, but that persistent, accusatory voice ringing in my head spoke the exact opposite. The truth is that I, just like a prodigal who had wandered and spent more time in a distant land, was searching for something to fill the emptiness I had in my heart. I, like the prodigal, never realized that I had been loved the whole time. And that's what this Bible-reading process can illuminate.

So, this leaves us with the question of how to focus on the relationship. How can we break past the baggage and the deeply ingrained habit of ultimately concentrating on ourselves and our conduct when it comes to our faith? We may opine that He loves us with an intimate love, but how do we get to the point where we start to sincerely believe it? Paul says to "be transformed by the renewing of your *mind*" (Rom. 12:2). He doesn't say to be transformed by doing all the right things. This means that to get to the bottom line, we have to look at what our minds believe.

Think of someone with whom you adore spending time. How do you feel when you walk away? Encouraged? Maybe loved? Inspired? Or validated? The relationship is stronger because you appreciate the characteristics of the other person. Does that describe how you feel after spending time in God's Word? Probably not. Ask most people why they love Jesus, and you'll get a sincere, yet pat answer. "Because He died for me" (I *should* love Him because of that, shouldn't I?). But ask people why they love their spouse, a best friend, or their favorite sports team and a long list of superlatives follows. My theory is that most people who follow God don't even really know who He truly is. We've conjured up what we *think* His character is like, based on our own life experiences, lies we've

believed, or hurts we've harbored, but it looks nothing like the God of the Bible. As a result, we end up in a situation where we're forced to persuade ourselves to love Him.

Please hear me. There's a better way. And it's as simple as looking at Scripture through a slightly different angle. *Instead of focusing on ourselves, we read asking the question, "What does this make me appreciate about God?"*

I want to impress that it is imperative to ask the question, "What does this make me *appreciate* about God," instead of, "What does this *tell* me about God?" You see, we tend to read Scripture through the lens of our own brokenness. Let's take, for example, reading through the Ten Commandments. If I had a controlling father, I'd tend to read God's directives as coming from a place of control. I'd believe that He was just a killjoy who wanted to police my actions to keep me under His thumb. However, forcing ourselves to look at the passage from a mindset of thanksgiving allows us to see all of God's actions through the lens of love, which they have to stem from anyway because that's precisely who He is. God is love. His character is literally incapable of anything unloving.

Look up the word "trust" in the dictionary, and one of the synonyms you'll find is "faith." What happens if you ask most Christians to describe their faith? Generally, they will start to rattle off a long list of things they do, or a record of the rules they keep as part of that faith. Very, very few would equate their level of faith with their level of trust in God. Yet trust is implicit in bringing about sanctification. And you can't trust someone you don't know.

I recently learned that the very first concept a child needs to acquire to be emotionally healthy is trust. Babies still in the womb through about 18 months of age bond with their caregivers to solidify that trust. During that crucial time, the babies learn that their caregiver provides and loves, is caring, is generous, is always there. Babies know their caregivers (and their trust increases as a result) because of time spent together, observing affectionate traits of the parent. Without it, a child's emotional (and possibly mental and physical) development is stunted. Not building that trust hinders every other aspect involved with maturation of growth for the child. The spiritual compatibility is obvious. How many of us are still "infants" in that regard? We may have taken a first step to

follow God and be baptized, but often the growth stops there. We shouldn't be surprised. At the point of conversion, Satan immediately launches into full blitzkrieg attack against the baby amount of trust that has started to grow. My belief is that we never reach that full level of trust because we basically don't know God. We haven't spent sufficient time experiencing His character through focused examination of how He behaves and responds.

The more you know someone, and find good character within, the more you're inclined to trust him. The same applies to our relationship with God. As you start to look at His Word with the intent of learning more about who God is, the more you'll trust what He says about His love for you, about His faithfulness towards you, about His adoration of you. It is virtually impossible to get to know the true God without falling more in love with Him. And the more you believe that He loves you, the more you'll trust and obey. The more we know, the more we love, the more we trust, the more we obey. And *that* leads to massive life change. Transformation occurs from the inside out instead of the outside in.

Additionally, the more you believe in who God really is, the more confidence you will have in Him to work through you to change behaviors. All the more assurance that the Christ living in you can generate life to the fullest, not just in heaven, but here on earth.

It's powerful to watch people begin to break the cycle of sin because they finally discover that God is better. He is *better*. Better than the high that any addiction or self-medication brings. Better than the entertainment provided by Facebook, Pinterest, SportsCenter or Twitter. Better than the affirmation after completing a thousand tasks. Once people have a taste of the unfathomable, abiding joy and peace that comes from developing an intimate relationship with their Heavenly Father, other things begin to pale in comparison.

Let me say that I honestly don't think we set out to be narcissistic. Most who are desperately trying to change sinful behavior sincerely want to please God through correct actions. It's just our human nature to make it "all about me." On top of that, His gift of salvation and capacity for absolute love makes us uncomfortable. To enjoy that without needing to do something to earn it is unsettling. In reality, there *is* something we have to do; we have to receive it. We

must accept it. But here's the beautiful part about switching from a self-focus to a Christ-focus. Something amazing sneaks up on you while adopting this approach. Even though you're focused on God, *it eventually still ends up being about you*. Let's say you discovered that you appreciate God is patient. Without even realizing, that epiphany translates to your heart and mind as "God is patient *with me*." Or possibly you take away, "I appreciated that God is generous." Again, that registers as, "God is generous *to me*". It's even further evidence of the passionate, fervent way He pursues us. By keeping our eyes on Him, we become transformed in a way that still massively benefits us.

How does this end up playing out in our day-to-day lives? A.W. Tozer writes, "A low view of God is the cause of a hundred lesser evils, but a high view of God is the solution to ten thousand temporal problems." So much of the Christian walk is directly correlated to our view of God. It affects the way we pray, it determines our willingness to take risks, and it colors our life's work. A woman who participated in my early days of implementing this method is a wonderful example of that. Once God took hold of her heart through His Word, she developed a passion for meeting the needs of the impoverished in her community and created an organization to mobilize help that has now served hundreds of families. Her view of God changed, and now He's using her in ways she never dreamed possible.

Also, looking at God's Word this way cultivates a heart of gratitude, which is essential for greater faith. Being grateful to God diminishes our pride and keeps us aware of His presence, which leads to submission of His will. Furthermore, anxiety and gratitude can't occupy the same place in our hearts and minds. Worry and gratitude can't occupy the same place. Fear and gratitude can't occupy the same place. Reading the Bible through the filter of appreciation and admiration brings peace, hope and joy instead of guilt, shame and embarrassment. A wise friend recently revealed to me two certainties that she always applies to circumstances, "God is big enough, and God is good enough." Almost any fear, doubt or sin can be traced back to the lie that neither one of those is true. Reading through Scripture in a way that supports those truths can be life-altering.

Additionally, our appreciation of who God is and what He's done directly correlates to our ability to worship, both corporately and personally because worship is a response. It's an external manifestation of an internal overflow of thankfulness. Need a little more convincing? A wise and perceptive fellow church member who just adopted this practice pointed out to me that Jesus even treated the Bible this way: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures *concerning Himself*" (Luke 24:27).

Still, the best evidence is insights and stories from people who have made the leap to incorporate this discipline into their lives. Even after years of teaching this approach, I'm still taken aback at how powerfully God reveals Himself to individuals. My pastor shared this story with me from a recent group session, "... but, as we went around the room sharing, there was one gal, Amy, who had just come to our church the past Sunday for the first time with friends. Not surprisingly, she was reluctant to share, since everyone in the room except her friends were brand-new to her. At the very end, after everyone else had thrown something on the table, and we were all just kicking things around, I turned to her and said, 'Amy, did you have anything?' And she sheepishly said one sentence that detonated in me: 'I appreciate that it's not my work that impresses God.' While all the stuff I gleaned was certainly good, and true, and useful—at least I'm pretty sure it was—what Amy shared was exactly what God wanted me to hear that night."

This pastor's anecdote illustrates another positive. When meditating on Scripture this way with others, we *all* grow exponentially. Not only are these deep insights burrowing into the hearts of the individuals who discovered them, granting them an intimate, acutely personal time with God, but in the course of one evening, group members take away valuable lessons from others as well. He wisely pointed out that it's the perfect embodiment of Eph. 2:15-16: "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." God's church is strengthened when we focus on appreciating Him.

I'll conclude with this final quote from Tim Keller: "There is, in the end, only two ways to read the Bible: Is it basically about me or basically about Jesus? In other words, is it basically about what I must do, or basically about what He has done? If I read David and Goliath, as basically it being about me, then the story is really about me. I must summon up the faith and courage to fight the giants in my life. But if I read David and Goliath as basically showing me salvation through Jesus, then the story is really about Him. Until I see that Jesus fought the real giants (sin, law, death) for me, I will never have the courage to be able to fight ordinary giants in life (suffering, disappointment, failure, criticism, hardship)."

When we stop, stay silent, and look upward, we are able to know God and make Him known more significantly than ever before.

Section II:
How Do I Use a New Approach?

Intro

Ok, now we can get down to the nuts and bolts, which is the section you immediately turned to anyway when you picked up the book, right? It's ok. I would have done the same. Permit me just a bit more information first. When I began drafting this book, I decided to write primarily addressing the average reader. I'm so zealous for people to slow down enough to know God's true character that I didn't want to limit my audience.

However, I've mainly taught this in the context of discipleship groups in a church, so I wanted to make sure to include a section specifically addressing that arena. If you're a church planter, or on a church staff, view this as your curriculum guide. I've simply emptied my cup, passing along any knowledge I've acquired and hoping you'll find it beneficial to your own ministry. If you aren't in vocational ministry, I would still encourage you to read the next few chapters. It will prove helpful as you're embarking upon new territory in your personal time with God.

Chapter 1: Your Game Plan.

To recap from the beginning, this approach breaks down into three tasks:

Step 1: Pray for God to show you what He wants you to see.

Step 2: Choose a passage of Scripture.

Step 3: Silently read looking through the lens of “What does this make me appreciate about God?” and then journal that truth.

It’s extremely important to start each session with the prayer, “God, show me what you want me to see.” It seems like such an insignificant request, but the return is immeasurable. Much more than a ritualistic mantra, the simple but sincere words immediately put our hearts, minds and eyes in a humble posture to personally receive and hear from God through His Word. *There’s no magic in the specific statement, but there is great power in that type of recurring surrender.*

You have several options in deciding which passage to read. I’ve led groups where each person worked at their own pace through a one-year Bible reading plan. Ultimately, the goal is to solidify a *daily* retreat with God and His Word. I’ve found that using a reading plan facilitates greater success to that end so you can keep track of where you’ve been reading. It also allows the freedom of reading a few verses or several chapters, based on preference. My only suggestion would be to stay in the New Testament or Psalms for a while to make sure you have “re-wired” your thinking first. At times it proves slightly more difficult to find characteristics to appreciate about God in books like Leviticus or Jeremiah, although it can be done! (You’d also be shocked at how many wonderful traits of God are revealed in the “begat” chapters).

Other times I’ve guided groups who have all chosen to concentrate on the same passage. For example, the small group leaders at my current church decided to have everyone read the main Scripture passage from the upcoming sermon. It’s

an approach that has worked wonderfully. Recently, a study of II Kings 6 generated the following keen commentary:

- *I appreciate that God is so merciful, even to our enemies.*
- *I appreciate that God honors specific prayer requests, even seemingly crazy, bold requests.*
- *I appreciate that God gives us wisdom in tough situations.*
- *I appreciate that even at what we think is our lowest point, God still has us surrounded by an army.*
- *I appreciate that God sees everything going on, even when I can't.*
- *I appreciate that God is capable of opening my eyes to see things I couldn't see before.*

From a personal viewpoint, I've welcomed the idea because I find myself more invested and engaged in the message since God has already been preparing my heart. Or, you could choose one book of the Bible and make your way through that together.

Whatever your choice, I strongly propose that you begin your journey with the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10. Those four verses perfectly emphasize the need to shift our focus from ourselves and our activity to the Lord instead. Below are a few comments from the first session of an actual group that began using this method. The following responses were drawn from reading Luke 10:38-40 and asking that very simple question, "What does this make me appreciate about God?"

- *I appreciate that He didn't get mad or upset; instead He handled Martha gently. He didn't slam or belittle her.*
- *I appreciate how succinct God is. He gets right to the point.*
- *I appreciate that He assured Mary she was on the right track.*
- *I appreciate that He calls us by name, just like He did for Martha.*

• *I appreciated how even the complaint becomes a teachable moment ... and that Jesus works it so He ministers to BOTH Mary and to Martha in the simple exchange.*

I never cease to be amazed at how quickly people become engaged in the Word this way. That being said, sometimes adjusting to looking at the verses through this different angle takes a little time for some. If you're having trouble with the chief question, "What does this make me appreciate about God?," you can use the following as helper questions:

-What was God's/Jesus' *intent* in saying that?

-What emotion was God/Jesus conveying through that action?

The final step is to journal your findings. I've included some sample journal pages in the appendix for reference, but it's as straightforward as copying the verse and accompanying superlative about God. Again, it seems like such an insignificant effort, but I've found putting pen to paper an essential piece of the procedure. Taking the time to record our discoveries solidifies them in our minds. And, as we discussed earlier, renewing our minds is crucial to transformation.

Chapter 2: How Does This Work in a Small Group Setting?

I know some of you are saying, “But, I can do this on my own.” Granted. But are you? There is value in repeating a practice until it becomes a habit, and sometimes we all need is a kick-start. Having accountability in a group is a great way to get the ball rolling.

There are varying opinions in the Christian world about which group configuration constitutes the most growth. Triads, six couples, no more than 15 people, single gender is better than mixed—the list is infinite. I’m going to leave that to trial and error for your specific situation. That particular detail varies due to seasons in your church. Part of the beauty is this strategy can work for anywhere from two to 20 people, but between 5 to 8 is your sweet spot. It maintains a level of safety that becomes a little more difficult when you get into the higher numbers. Again, the eventual goal is for your congregants to be reading the Bible on their own, every day, outside of group. Meeting together provides accountability to keep up the discipline, and, of course, foster a community where people can support and encourage each other in their walk.

One of my incentives in promoting this so heavily to those of you planting a church is the ease of replication. Since leaders serve more as facilitators than leaders, training is minimal. Obviously, someone with the heart of a teacher and spiritual maturity is ideal, but as long as you have an individual who can explain the technique and gently keep the members on task, the “leader” of the group is really the Holy Spirit. Additionally, the success of the lesson is not dependent upon the cleverness or the ability of the facilitator. It’s dependent upon God—and we can’t get much more able than that. Holding a training session of three to four meetings works well to equip several facilitators at the same time in the initial stages of your fledgling church. Once your groups are up and running, I advise naming an apprentice guide in each group as quickly as possible so that when you’re ready to multiply, you already have leadership ready to go. This technique

is also extremely appealing to someone who may have never even cracked open a Bible before, which may describe the demographic you're aiming for. No limit exists for the goodness of God's nature, so accurate takeaways are infinite. And regardless of prior church experience, that person can enjoy a significant encounter with Him each time.

I also encourage you, at least when you first start, to keep these group sessions at no more than one hour. Can people benefit from hours and hours of fellowship and Bible study? Absolutely. However, one of the benefits of this method is that it allows people to take a small bite, and be immediately satisfied. Many, many people have mentioned that reading the Bible this way leaves them wanting more, which is a wonderful thing, but if your first group meeting goes on into the wee hours of the night, there's not much left to want.

Additionally, in today's culture, everyone is over-scheduled and pressed for time. Proposing one hour a week to make their faith a priority seems doable. It's like a good physical trainer who says the best kind of exercise is "the kind you'll do." Your main goal is to get people to try it. To try reading the Bible on their own and focusing on God. To try sitting in 10 minutes of silence. Let the Holy Spirit water those seeds to grow a soul. Between you and me, they'll never know what hit them.

I've provided a template that lays out step-by-step instructions for establishing your group. You can also tailor the steps to fit your particular situation.

Stage One: Inaugural meeting

- Distribute study guide handout (Appendix I) and explain method.
- Begin with just five minutes of silence, reading Luke 10:38-42 and individually journaling, "What does this make me appreciate about God?"
- Discuss appreciative statements as a group, with members contributing to the conversation as they feel comfortable. If the exchange veers off course—defaulting to a focus on what God wants us to *do* * (which it almost inevitably will, since people are practicing this new technique for the first time)—kindly guide the discussion back to God's character.

**Once more, I'm not saying that's a wrong approach; this is just looking at Scripture through a different lens.*

Stage Two: Second meeting-

- Review method with group members.
- Increase reading/journaling time to eight to 10 minutes of silence. Gal. 3:1-14 works quite well as a text since it emphasizes living under grace instead of the law, which ties in perfectly to the big picture in this approach, or any passage from the Gospels is suitable. At this point, people should bring a notebook or journal to get in the habit of recording their observations.
- Dialogue about discovered truths, encouraging everyone in the group to contribute this time. (Once people have one session completed and are comfortable with the method, they feel a bit safer sharing their thoughts).

Stage Three: Third meeting-

- Review method with group.
- Increase reading/journaling time to 10-12 minutes of silence. Again, anything from the Gospels is suitable, or you could begin using sermon texts as I suggested earlier. Still, if possible, it's wise to stay in the New Testament for the first few meetings to foster the new way of thinking as they examine the passage.
- Dialogue about discovered truths, encouraging everyone in the group to contribute.

Chapter 3: What Do I Do If...?

Q: I still am wary of the lack of action steps. When do we address how Scripture applies to our lives? When does that fit in?

A: I know this is unconventional. I know this is a big change, especially for us Type-A leaders who like to have a bit more control than just turning people loose with their Bibles and only the Holy Spirit to guide them. It's so ... unpredictable! Don't I need to do something to ensure that people will use this to feel convicted and change their behavior? After all, I need folks to want to serve! I need people to give money! If I don't hammer that point home, how will anything happen? Let me assure you, there will be no shortage of reflection and knowing how they've missed the mark for two reasons.

1. Most people, especially Christians, already have plenty of things they know they need to repent from, but aren't able to actually follow through. We spend a good portion of our time feeling guilty about it, but there's no life change. This method allows them to actually bridge that gap and start to gain traction.
2. If people aren't immediately being convicted, as an effect of spending increased time in Scripture (all the while reading with a seeking heart) the Holy Spirit's influence inevitably increases, which *always* leads to conviction and repentance. I've seen it happen too many times.

For those of you leading a group, unavoidably, people will want to talk about the "need to do better." In fact, those who have had the most experience in a church display the biggest challenges because it's such a radical shift. (I fall into that category; it took me almost six months before I became really comfortable reading the Bible this way.) There's no requirement to chastise or cut someone off mid-sentence. We're just trying to reprogram thinking, and for that reason, it helps to stay solely focused on God. I advise you to gently redirect the discussion back to, "What did this make you appreciate about God?" as needed, and people eventually adopt the idea whole-heartedly.

(A little aside to those of you planting a church. As a two-time veteran of church-planting teams, I understand that the very nature of a start-up requires massive amounts of activity. It's all hands on deck and then some. I'm not saying activity is the enemy and is to be avoided. But I am making an impassioned plea that when you are in a season of ministry which requires so much to be done, it's all the more reason to empower your team to work from hearts filled to overflowing with the love of Christ. It's all the more compelling to make sure they are grounded in God's Word and God's all-encompassing, always accepting, life-giving love.)

Q: I'm having trouble sitting quietly during the reading. How do I handle that?

A: Without doubt, you will try to sit in silence, and the enemy will start to hurl every thought possible instead of the desire to focus on the Bible. You will struggle with the quiet. Allow considerable grace here, and encourage others to allow themselves the same. Many find it helpful to designate a few pages in their journal to just write down those distractions, then gently bring their minds back to the task at hand. It's completely normal for the first several sessions to feel like all you're doing is writing down your to-do list during your study time, but eventually, you can train your brain to focus more clearly. God is more than willing to give us the grace to keep our minds on Him, so it's helpful to ask Him for help with that as well.

Q: When will I start to see a difference in my thinking?

A: Be careful of expecting complete life change overnight. Just like any other part of the spiritual walk, transformation takes time. Moreover, none of us will reach the fullness God created us to enjoy this side of heaven. However, most people experience an immediate closeness with God even after the first session, and I have witnessed more radical, lasting heart change with this method than any other I've ever used.

Q: I understand how I can appreciate God in passages like the Psalms when it speaks of His goodness and power, but how do I appreciate Him when I read a hard truth?

A: This ties back to that very short, but moving prayer asking God to open your eyes to what He would have you see. By placing ourselves in a position of openness instead of suspicion that His commands are detrimental to us, we can more easily recognize His goodness in those difficult truths, and consequently, become more willing to obey.

Q: What do I do if I get stuck? What if I can't find anything in the passage that I appreciate about God?

A: Sometimes, certain passages do present a bit more of a challenge. However, I've found that as I use the "helper" questions (*What was God's emotion behind this verse? What was His intent in saying this to us?*) and continually ask God to show me what He wants me to see as I'm reading, an appreciation materializes. At times, you may find numerous examples to journal, while in other passages, only one. Either way, God has revealed Himself and His love to you, and that always constitutes success.

Discipleship Groups Study Guide

1. No. 1 criteria for being a disciple?
-cultivating an ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ
2. Changing self-focus to Christ-focus

“How do we deepen our love for Christ? Not by trying harder, but through a process of inner transformation, primarily by meditating on His life here on earth so that we can understand how ‘wide and long and high and deep’ is God’s love for us.”

Developing Intimacy With God
--Alex Aronis

Step 1 - Always start with the prayer, “God, what do you want me to see today?”

Step 2 - Keep asking yourself, “What does this make me appreciate about God?”

Questions to help

What was God’s/Jesus’ *intent* in saying that?

What *emotion* was God/Jesus conveying through that action?

Sample Journal Page

Nov. 13

Luke 7:13 -*“When the Lord saw her, He felt very sorry for her and said, ‘Don’t cry.’”*

God, I appreciate you for being so compassionate. I appreciate the fact that you were so in tune to her feelings, and even more, cared enough to hurt with her. I also appreciate that you made people your highest importance.

Sample Journal Page

Jan. 5

Psalm 119:143 - *“Trouble and distress have come upon me, but your commands are my delight.”*

God, I appreciate you for allowing me to still have delight, even as I’m going through times of trouble and distress. You truly want to give me “life to the fullest” regardless of my circumstances. Thank you for that gift.

About the Author



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Originally from small-town IN, Emily is now a two-time veteran of church plants in the Washington DC area. She is fiercely in love with her Savior, and has a passion to make God's love more accessible to people caught in the midst of life's chaos.