

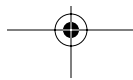
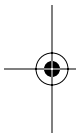
## INTRODUCING *Study & Meditation*

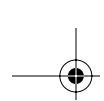


**H**ave you ever wondered how God changes people? Maybe it seems as if old habits never change no matter how hard you try. Maybe you've become discouraged with your lack of growth into Christlikeness. You know that you are forgiven through Jesus' suffering on the cross, and you realize that you are totally accepted by God on that basis. This is wonderful. And yet your desire to live in a way that pleases God somehow constantly falls short of the mark.

God desires to transform our souls. This transformation occurs as we recognize that God created us to live in an interactive relationship with the Trinity. Our task is not to transform ourselves, but to stay connected with God in as much of life as possible. As we pay attention to the nudges of the Holy Spirit, we become disciples of Christ. Our task is to do the connecting, while God does the perfecting.

As we connect with God, we gradually begin acting more like Christ. We become more likely to weep over our enemies instead of discrediting them. We're more likely to give up power instead of taking control. We're more likely to point out another's successes rather





than grab the credit. Connecting with God changes us on the inside, and we slowly become the tenderhearted, conscientious people our families always wished we'd become. This transformation of our souls through the work of the Holy Spirit results in "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

God does in us what we cannot do by trying to be good. Trying to be good generally makes us obnoxious because it's so obvious that we're only trying. The goodness doesn't come from within ourselves. When we do succeed at being good, we subtly look down on those who don't do as well. Either way, we remain focused on self instead of on setting our hearts on things above.

Connecting with God, then, is important. But what does connecting with God look like? Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we copy Jesus in behind-the-scenes, everyday activities he did to connect with God. As we let these activities become habits, we slowly become "trained" to have the heart of Christ and behave as he did. These activities are spiritual disciplines, also called spiritual exercises or strategies.



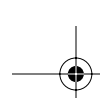
## How Spiritual Disciplines Work

We connect with God through spiritual disciplines or exercises. Study and meditation, the topics of these Bible studies, are two of them. Other disciplines include solitude, silence, worship, celebration, prayer, listening, service, secrecy, reflection, confession, fasting, simplicity, community and submission. These exercises are studied in the other Spiritual Disciplines Bible Studies. Still other disciplines can be used, some of which are written about in the classics of the faith and others God will show you. Henri Nouwen said that a spiritual discipline is anything that helps us practice "how to become attentive to that small voice and willing to respond when we hear it."<sup>\*</sup>

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<sup>\*</sup>Sources for quoted material can be found at the end of the guide.





How do spiritual disciplines help us connect with God?

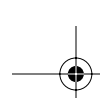
- They build our relationship with God as we acquaint ourselves with the ways of God. (It's possible, of course, to do these disciplines in a legalistic way and never bond with Christ.)
- They build our trust in Christ. Some of the disciplines are uncomfortable. You have to go out on a limb. You try fasting, and you don't die. You serve someone, and it turns out to be fun and enriching.
- They force us to make "little decisions" that multiply. Your little decision to abstain from watching a television show helps you to deny yourself and love others in all sorts of ways.
- They reorganize our impulses so that obedience is more natural. For example, if you have a spiritual discipline of practicing the presence of God, you may learn to automatically pray the breath prayer "Into thy hands" when someone opposes you. Without your realizing it, your opponent is no longer an adversary, but a person God is dealing with or perhaps even speaking through in some way.
- They help us eventually behave like Christ—but this is by God's miraculous work, not our direct effort.
- They teach us to trust that God will do the work in our inner being through the power of the Spirit (Ephesians 3:16). Your spirituality is not about you; it's the work of God in you. You get to cooperate in God's "family business" of transforming the world.



## How We Get Spiritual Disciplines Wrong

Spiritual exercises must be done with the goal of connecting, not for any sake of their own or any desire to check them off a list of "to do"





items. If you read your Bible just to get it done, or because you've heard this will help you have a better day, you'll be anxious to complete the Bible study questions or to get to the bottom of the page of today's reading. But if your goal in Bible reading is to connect with God, you may pause whenever you sense God speaking to you. You'll stop and meditate on it. You may pray certain phrases back to God, indicating your needs or your wishes or your questions. You may choose to read that passage day after day for a month because God keeps using it to speak to you.

After such a session, you will have a stronger desire to connect with God. That "little choice" you made to connect will leave you slightly different for life.

The exercise or discipline is beneficial because it helps you practice connecting with God. If you want to play the piano well or swing a tennis racket well, you have to practice certain exercises over and over. Good baseball players train behind the scenes by practicing their batting day after day, with no crowds watching.\* That's what spiritual disciplines or exercises are about. If you can hear God in Bible study and meditation, you'll more likely hear God in a board meeting or an altercation with a recalcitrant teen when passions run high. In life with God, we get good at connecting on an everyday basis by devoting time to developing the skills needed.

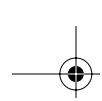
## The Disciplines of Bible Study and Meditation

The techniques of Bible study are familiar to many—observing the facts of Scripture, interpreting it in light of its historical and biblical context, and thinking of ways to put it into practice. Meditation on Scripture, however, is very different. Here's a comparison.

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\*This comparison originated from and is expanded in Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 3.





In the Study Method, You . . .	In the Meditation Method, You . . .
dissect the text	savor the text and enter into it
ask questions about the text	let the text ask questions of you
read and compare facts and new ways of applying facts	read to let God speak to you (in light of facts already absorbed)

The Bible doesn't instruct us on how to meditate for the same reason it doesn't instruct us on how to fast. These were common spiritual disciplines of the day that folks already knew how to do, or they knew other folks who did. Through the ages, the mechanics of meditation have been kept alive mostly through monastic communities. The two most common methods of meditation are presented in sessions 5-6.

Bible study is an excellent way of setting oneself up for meditation because through it you come to understand the main point of the Scripture. Still, study does not rule meditation. God may help you choose an obscure word in the passage to ponder or point out a side-line character for you to identify with. Each time you meditate on the passage, it's likely to be different because you will be in a different set of circumstances.

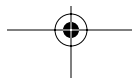
## How Do These Studies Work?

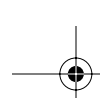
The studies in this guide examine reasons to study and meditate, their effects, and how to do them. Each session includes several elements.

**Turning Toward God** presents discussion or reflection questions and exercises to draw us into the topic at hand.

**Hearing God Through the Word** draws us into a study of a related passage of Scripture with questions that connect it to life and invite us to reflect on what God is saying.

**Transformation Exercises** are activities or thoughts to experiment with in order to experience the spiritual exercise studied. At the end of the study, look at these exercises and choose the one that fits you best,





according to your personality or your current needs. Think of a time to try it on your own, and report back to the group the following week.

Perhaps you'll read the exercise and think it's too elementary or too difficult for you. Adapt it as needed. Or maybe you think you can guess what you'll experience, so you don't have to do it. The point is to experience it. Go ahead and try.

### Using These Studies in Retreats

These studies work well for an individual taking a personal retreat. Simply do the studies at your own pace, and do not rush them. Allow enough time to do the transformation exercises as well. Don't feel you have to do all the studies. In fact, you may wish to focus only on one discipline and use only those studies.

A group wishing to explore certain disciplines can also use one of these studies the same way. Be sure to allow time for participants to do the transformation exercises. Some exercises may be done as a group. Others may be done individually, with group members reporting back to each other about how they heard God during the exercise.

For either type of retreat, allow plenty of time for pondering. May these studies help you move a few steps closer to living your life in union with God.

