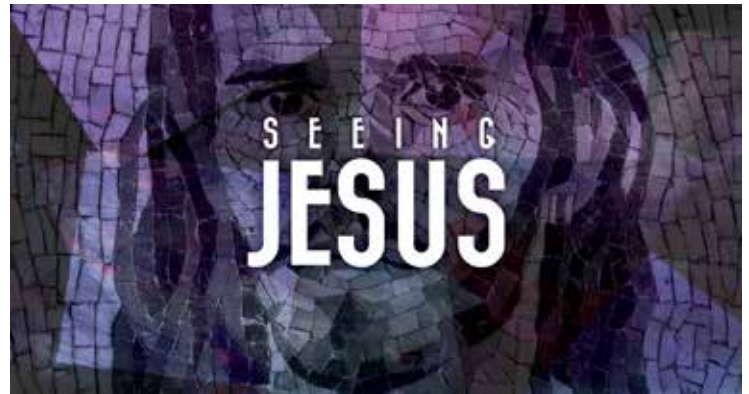


WEEK OF APRIL 30



DAY
1

Practicing the Presence of God

Psalm 34:8

The essence of the Christian faith is that God enters into a relationship with us, as individuals and as a community. That relationship saves us, heals us, teaches us, transforms us, and constantly fills our lives with mercy and love.

The Christian life is one of enjoying God, knowing God, and having the experience of God's presence with you in and through Jesus. Read and reflect on how you experience Jesus with you as you look through the following scriptures.

Exodus 33:12-18. Moses wants to know the ways of God, to enjoy his presence, and to see his glory.

Psalm 42:1, 2, 8. This psalm talks about the deep thirst and longing for God's loving presence.

Psalm 73:23-26. There is nothing more important than experiencing the fullness of God.

Psalm 139:1-18. The reality is this: God is always with you. You are never alone. Your great need is for a heart that is in tune with God's presence, which happens in prayer, reflection, worship, and discernment.

Jesus is the Word of God dwelling with us (John 1:14). The very name Immanuel is God with us in Jesus. Jesus invited disciples to come and "be with him" (Mark 3:13-14). Jesus tells us we are not just servants, but we are his friends (John 15:15). And he promises to be with you always (Matthew 28:18-20).

All this is what you are meant to enjoy. This is what you truly desire. Nothing else can satisfy you if friendship with Jesus is not a constant experience.

How are these passages speaking to you? What do you desire? What will hold you back from your destiny to know, glorify, and enjoy God forever and ever?

The rest of the devotionals this week will give you practical thoughts on how to encounter and experience Jesus, who loves you.

DAY
2

Daily Examen

Philippians 1:9-11

Paul saw his work as getting the church ready for Christ. He is encouraging the Philippians—and us—to aspire to this. We are to aspire to live pure, holy, exemplary lives. You shouldn't read these verses and feel guilty, but you should feel inspired! It should make you want to live this way. What Paul is really describing here is an examined life. A life with purpose.

Just a few verses earlier in Philippians 1, Paul says that he is confident that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion." So, there is a similar idea in this verse as well that God is doing a work in us, and he keeps leading us on to completion.

It's really hard to track change over time, isn't it? When I think about my life, it's hard for me to accurately judge the answers to these questions: *Am I more exemplary than I used to be? Am I more pure than I used to be? Am I becoming more like Jesus?* Answering these questions requires a lot of intentionality. It requires a lot of self-examination.

You really need to build some disciplines in your life that help you stop and take notice of what God is doing. This is where a practice like the daily examen can be helpful. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun writes, “The examen provides a way of noticing where God shows up in our day.”

At the end of each day, pause and ask yourself these four questions (From Calhoun’s book, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*):

- ***For what moment today am I the most grateful? Least grateful?***
- ***When did I give and receive the most love today?***
- ***What was the most life-giving part of my day?***
- ***When did I have the deepest connection to God?***

We aspire to live a life that is pure and blameless. That is a long, slow process. It will last our whole lives. Inch by inch by inch we learn to love like Jesus. The examen is just another tool for your toolbox. It’s another way of aiding you on the journey. It’s another way of marking the distance you have traveled. It’s another way that we partner with the Holy Spirit in our process of transformation.

DAY
3

Listening to Jesus in the Scriptures

Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:1–3; 48:9; 77:11–13; 119:97, 99, 148

The words of God are transformative (Hebrews 4:12; 2 Timothy 3:16). God’s words are truth. They show us the way to live as followers of Jesus.

How we engage with the Bible is vital. We can and should read the Bible for information. We learn truth as we read the Bible. We discover critical life lessons that will give us a better life. And we can move into a more comprehensive study of the Bible where we learn even more truth.

But truth by itself does not change you. It is truth that you understand, accept, receive into your life, and faithfully respond to, that is where transformation happens.

We are to read, study, and think about what the Bible says. And we reflect, meditate, and ponder the personal meaning of the scriptures for us. We hear from Jesus through the Spirit touching our heart with particular truths and the response to which we are called.

We say, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.” Jesus is calling. But what is he calling to you about and why? We pay attention to the words that are stirring and resonating inside us. We search out why those words are stirring us. Jesus the Living Word of God is speaking to you for a reason.

As you read the Bible in this way—reflect, pray, listen, discern, read some more, and continue to consider and ponder—you move into having an encounter with Jesus who is with you in conversation. The Bible and prayer become a personal, intimate, and powerful conversation of hearts. The Bible becomes more of a love letter from Jesus and less of a textbook of religious information.

Jesus says his sheep hear his voice and they respond (John 10:27). This is the heart of all relationships. Talking, listening, back and forth—and the conversation goes on every day. That is the normal Christian life. Every day read the Bible as a conversation with Jesus. Ask Jesus to speak to you. He will.

DAY
4

Simplicity

Matthew 6:19–33

A few years ago, there was a popular book called *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* that was adapted into a Netflix series. The writer, Marie Kondo, outlined a process by which we can simplify our lives by being organized and simplifying our belongings down to those things that are useful and “spark joy.” Naturally, the book and the show were hits. We are all looking to simplify our lives.

Simplicity as a spiritual discipline is about much more than just tidying up. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “To be simple is to fix

one's eye solely on the simple truth of God at a time when all concepts are being confused, distorted, and turned upside-down.”

For Christians, simplicity starts at the center, by having a clear focus. Matthew 6:33 says, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Simplicity begins by focusing on our goal, seeking God's kingdom, and ordering our lives with that focus.

Practicing simplicity is a way to help us connect better to God and the life he has for us. What distracts you from a single-minded focus on God and his kingdom? Is it money and the pursuit of new and better stuff? Is it an overstuffed schedule? Is it buying into our cultural message that the latest gadget will make you happier?

May God give you and me the courage, the wisdom, the strength always to hold the kingdom of God as the number one priority of our lives. To do so is to live in simplicity. (Richard Foster)

Personal Reflection & LifeGroup Conversation

ONE: What practices do you currently do that connect you with God? Is friendship with God a foreign concept to you? How does the idea of friendship with God make you feel?

TWO: How do you go about living an examined life? Do you have any practices like the examen in place in your life already? How do you mark progress in your spiritual life?

THREE: What is your scripture reading life like? Do you read for information or transformation? How do you apply what you read? Do you think that you allow scripture to change you?

FOUR: How well are you doing at focusing on God's kingdom? Where do you need to simplify? How is your schedule? Is there anything you are developing an addiction to? What distracts you from God? How can you simplify your possessions? How can you trim your schedule? What is God calling you to do?