

MORPH: BUILD CHARACTER

A RELEVANT FAITH

Some say faith is irrelevant. Let's be honest. From a certain vantage point, they're correct.

Faith is irrelevant when nothing changes. There's no gain from church involvement, reading Scripture, prayer, or engaging experiences like *Morph*, when we have no intention of being any different from our engagement. Why go through the motions if we lack distinction from the world around us? Christ said as much: "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot" (Matthew 5:13, TNIV).

We could leave it at that if irrelevance, salt that isn't salty, was the only weakness of professed faith. Unfortunately, it is not. There is a second condition that may be more destructive. This is the professed faith that dramatically changes a person's life, but the change is not for the better; it is for the worse. They were jerks before they professed faith, then they got religion, and now they're jerks armed with doctrine. They'll gladly unload their newfound convictions on anyone within earshot. Pity their neighbors. They're in for a ride.

So yes, from a certain vantage point, faith is often perceived as irrelevant at best and dangerous at worst. And yet, you know this, and you're reading this page. Why? Why pursue something often misapplied, if applied at all? Why not get on with your life, chalk this up as something you tried but didn't work, and do something different? You alone can answer this question, but it's hoped that you're here for the richest of reasons. Yes, from a certain vantage point faith is irrelevant, but there is another vantage point, and from this perspective, faith is profound.

There is a rich and resonant faith inspired by authentic love for God. This is the faith that brings liberation and transformation—it builds character. The addict gains self-control. The bitter become forgiving. The greedy abound in generosity. The fearful grow in courage. The weary rest peacefully. The self-absorbed discover the people around them. The anxious display uncommon degrees of patience. The despondent develop joy. The soft gain fortitude. The harsh grow in gentleness. For these reasons, this module was created.

With that said, a distinction must be made. *Morph: Build Character* is not about change. In fact, if it were about change one would rightfully question if this module was informed by Scripture. Contrary to popular opinion, the emphasis of Scripture is not an emphasis on change. Change is not central to Scripture's message nor central to this *Morph* experience for the very simple reason that change is impossible. We can try to change, but it doesn't work. We may get excited for a day or a week, but in time, we're back to old patterns and nothing has really changed.

Scripture does not call us to change.

Scripture calls us to die.

We die to an old life so that “*just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life*” (Romans 6:4). For some, this distinction seems trivial, a play on words. The objection is understandable. How is it that we’re not about change or teaching change when we talk about change on nearly every page of this book? Dig into life and dig into this experience, and you will discover not a mere play on words, but a profound reality that must be seen in context. This reality is very different, and even opposed, to simply applying a new method to change oneself. Authentic change happens not by tweaking our exterior, but by recognizing and living in accordance with the miraculous work of God in our interior. We change because he changes us.

So central to this experience is an experience with God. This is not a self-help study. This is an experience to further inspire and equip an authentic relationship with God for the purpose of experiencing his transformational presence.

Which leads to an important reality.

Most important to this *Morph* experience is not the readings, not the exercises, and not the topic of any particular week. Each of these meets a critical purpose, and if they were not important, we would not do them. But most important to this *Morph* experience is acquiring or increasing your taste for God. If through this experience you acquire or increase your passion for the presence of God, this experience will be exceedingly worth the effort.

And, yes, God is an acquired taste.

Describing God as an acquired taste may sound odd, but it’s an accurate description of a common experience. Tastes that are acquired are often met with confusion. *Why would anyone like this?* we think. Little by little our tastes then change. In time, the taste is acquired and we wonder how we ever lived without it. Most don’t instantly take to God. Those who acquire the taste, though, thirst for God in ways they did not previously expect. This is not to say everyone’s experience with God works this way, but the experience is common enough to acknowledge it for consideration.

Acquiring and increasing this passion for God can happen anywhere through this experience, but one place we are most explicit about it is through the Conversations with God. As with *Morph: Love God*, throughout this module you will be asked to engage God on a daily basis. These conversations are more than just information. They are intended to be relational, you and God talking together in a manner that honors your unique design. There is no perfect template that applies to everyone, so the template provided is intended to give plenty of breadth for personalization. You are asked and encouraged to make these moments reflective of your unique design and the current realities of your life. And more specifically, you are asked to listen for God’s voice through a letter written nearly 2,000 years ago.

ROMANS

If reading ancient mail sounds irrelevant to the current realities of your life, know that it can be. It can be a complete waste of time. To make matters worse, most of us lack time to keep up with our own mail and e-mail, so it’s understandable that we lack inspiration to read someone else’s mail who has long since died and who knew little to nothing of our fast-paced culture. And yet, for some reason, Paul’s letter to the church in Rome has been read countless times, again and again, down through the ages. It is heralded as deeply profound and unique to other letters written from the very same pen. Yes, he knew nothing of handheld computers and airplanes traveling at supersonic speeds, but by revelation from God’s Spirit, Paul’s letter offers piercing insight into the reality of our souls.

Why Romans? Consider a seemingly passing thought in this letter’s opening. It’s easily missed but key to understanding the unique opportunity before us...

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I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) (Romans 1:13, TNIV).

Why does it matter that Paul intended many trips to Rome, but as of this writing, had yet to make it? Is there any benefit from his frustrated plans? Actually, yes. Consider this: Paul's letter to the church in Rome is the only letter written by Paul to a church he had yet to visit. The result? The frustrated plans of this most passionate apostle serve a magnificent purpose. Because he had yet to teach them in person, Romans is the most comprehensive and in-depth scriptural teaching on the transformative power of Christ and the Holy Spirit. In this letter, we not only discover how transformation happens, but we discover a deeply loving God who has gone to great lengths to rescue us from destructive living. Other letters from Paul are both deep and profound, but their teaching is narrowed, in all likelihood, because he'd taught them in person. Not so in Romans. In this letter, he begins by introducing himself to a church he had yet to meet, and from there he launches into an unfolding of God's astounding plan to rescue humanity.

With that said, know this: Despite the richness and profundity of Romans, your reading of this letter could *still* be a waste of time, depending upon your approach. You are given Scripture cards with a simple reading plan that breaks Romans into very doable daily readings (along with the website and weekly introductions). This reading plan comes with checkboxes to track your progress. Yes, this tool is helpful, very helpful, but if your reading of Romans becomes an obsession to just get through it, to check each and every box, the impact will be minimal at best. The purpose of this exercise, and the very passion of Romans itself, is the accessibility of God. God is here. By grace, he is with you and in you. Talk with him. Bring your thoughts from Romans into his presence. Let him know your trials and your triumphs. Listen for his voice. If you let this exercise inspire a deep and personal conversation with the God who loves you more than you will ever comprehend, then these Conversations with God will be exceedingly significant, deeply transformative, and an unmatched use of your time and energy.

One more comment on Conversations with God. These exercises continue to encourage the Read, Memorize, Meditate format introduced in *Morph: Love God*. Scripture memory is often viewed as optional in experiences like *Morph*. In truth, this whole experience is optional. You don't have to do this. But if you are doing this, to make the most of it, you will want to do the roll-up-your-sleeves work of Scripture memory. As Romans itself exhorts us, we are "*transformed by the renewing of our minds*" (Romans 12:2). Underneath that word *transformed* is the Greek word *metamorphusthe*. To morph, to truly change, renewing the mind is essential and Scripture memory is a powerful discipline toward this end. If you engaged Scripture memory in other *Morph* modules, and have yet to complete the other passages, you're encouraged to simply begin where we are and memorize two verses each week. You can always step back to previous passages at a later date, but for most, to do more only creates frustration.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

A few important practical suggestions.

To the Newcomers

Morph: Build Character works very much like *Morph: Love God*. If you did not complete *Morph: Love God* before engaging this experience, you will want to complete the *Love God Primer* downloadable on the *Morph: Build Character* online group. This primer gives the essentials for this experience and is important to orientate you to what you will experience in this module. Yes, it will take added investment of time and energy, but make the investment. It's important to this experience.

Daily and Weekly Rhythms

Morph: Build Character is both a daily and a weekly experience. On a daily basis, the above-mentioned Conversations with God are encouraged. If you're new to *Morph*, or if it's been a while, be sure to

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read over the Week Two section of the *Love God Primer* (downloadable on the *Morph: Build Character* online group) to better understand the Read, Memorize, Meditate format encouraged in this experience.

On a weekly basis, there is a brief online video, a reading, and a Morph Me exercise to apply the reading.

Affirmations

A uniqueness of this module is the creation of affirmations. Greater explanation of affirmations will be given throughout this experience, but for now it's important to know how these work with the above-mentioned Scripture memory. As part of *Morph*, you are encouraged to memorize twenty-five passages with each of the four modules (*Love God, Build Character, Love People, and Be Christ's Body*). With that said, in this module, you will find twenty rather than twenty-five Scripture cards. This is to accommodate affirmations. In brief, affirmations are personalized applications of Scripture to our lives. We affirm what we know to be true about ourselves, our God, or other important realities related to building character. Because these affirmations are based on Scripture, you are encouraged to memorize related passages of Scripture coupled with your affirmations. You may end up creating more or less than five affirmations, so view these five open pages either as places to include affirmations or simply passages you would like to memorize.

Running Partners and Small Groups

Morph is an experience that cannot be completed alone but must be done in community. If you're reading this on your own, simply recruit a friend or two, and go through this module together. As with other *Morph* modules, you're encouraged to meet each week, but with groups of five or more, you're encouraged to meet every other week as Running Partners (two to four people) and every other week as a Small Group (five or more people). If your group is four or fewer people, simply meet as a group every week. The conversation guides at the end of each week reflect this rhythm.

Adding New People to Your Group

Because *Morph* is a four-module experience, it's natural to think newcomers can't join your group until all four modules are complete. Such thinking, though, can damage your group. Newcomers are encouraged and can be assimilated in a number of ways. If the number of people you're assimilating is small compared to the number of people in the existing group, simply have them read the *Love God Primer* and jump in. If you're assimilating a group of people that is comparable to the number of people already in the group, consider subgrouping during your group meeting times. If you do so, subgroups can be in the same or different *Morph* modules, it doesn't matter. If they're in different modules, simply bring the group together for times of prayer and community, but have different people facilitate the multiple conversations.

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This *Morph* module is intended to inspire and equip authentic transformation. Those interested in an irrelevant faith, to be pulled out only when convenient, need read no further. Engage this experience not to discover new ways to change your old self, but to discover how to live by grace in the newness of Christ. This kind of change, change from the inside out, is both powerful and profound, and carries not just into the realities of this life, but into the realities of all eternity.