



*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you;  
I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.  
And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees  
and be careful to keep my laws.*

Ezekiel 36:26-27

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Some Scripture quotations have been modified to make them gender inclusive or to fit the context.

# THE KICK



## THE KICK

There's a treadmill in the basement now used for hanging clothes while they dry. There's a membership at the gym known to be active only because the credit card is charged every month. There's a Bible on the bedside table; it's underneath the remote control. There are three books on the shelf in the living room; they're unread, but they look smart. There's a six-month supply of multivitamins in the pantry bought to initiate a multilevel business that came and went. There's a leather journal in the desk with one used page dated three years ago—the day a decision was made to keep a journal.

We know the drill. Something gets our attention. Maybe it's something we hear or read or watch. Maybe it's a friend. Maybe it's a good day. Maybe it's a bad day. Maybe it's something we've thought of for years and finally get around to taking a step toward. It can be any number of things, but whatever it is, something gets our attention, and we want one thing: We want to change. We're inspired. We're fired up.

We're on a kick.

The kick lasts about a week. By week two the kick tapers. By week three the kick is over. At the end of week four we're reminded of the kick when we open the credit card bill and see the purchases that funded it.

It came. It went. Nothing really changed. It was just a kick.

So let's be honest.

You hold in your hands something that may one day represent another kick in a line of kicks. One day you may pull it from your shelf and remember your God-kick. You'll think back to when you attended that church, met a few people, and got involved for a season. It felt good. It felt like the kind of thing you should be doing. It worked for a bit. Eventually, though, that "new car smell" wore off on the whole thing, and it was back to normal.

It came. It went. Nothing really changed. It was just a kick.

## KICK OBSERVATION

Let's make an observation about kicks. Some won't like the observation. They won't like it because they think most everything's worthwhile. Yes, life is richer when we follow through on our kicks, but this misses reality. Reality is this: Some kicks don't matter much.

We may in fact have richer lives if we'd not dropped out of the racquetball league, forgotten about the interest in medieval literature, or neglected to actually read the book on solving the Rubik's cube blindfolded. These kicks may have been fun and interesting and good. Even more, some of them would

have held greater value than others. But make a list of our kicks, and a great many of them came and went for one important reason: We didn't care that much about them. Actually, this could be said better: We didn't care enough about them to push through the pain of truly accomplishing what we'd briefly hoped to accomplish. This, of course, isn't true of all kicks, but it is true of a great many.

Which leads to an essential question only you can answer. It's a question you're encouraged to sit with for a while. Quick answers are often cheap answers, and cheap answers nearly ensure this will be another kick. Let the question soak and simmer. Be honest with yourself. Be honest with those around you.

Ask yourself this: *Do I really want to do this?*

To answer this question honestly you must know what "this" is. The pages that follow are for that very purpose. Think of this as kick-protection.

## THE VISION

Kick-protection is most effective when we know and embrace the vision. We push through the pain of taking the Spanish class because we want to realize the vision of speaking Spanish. We push through the pain of consistently going to the gym because we want to realize the vision of a healthy body. We push through the pain of getting the degree because we want to realize the vision of a new vocation. Knowing and embracing the vision is essential to kick-protection. It is for this very reason that so many people rightfully reject religion. Religion is rejected because they either do not see a meaningful vision or the vision they do see is repulsive to them. Let's consider each of these.

Consider the lack of a *meaningful* vision. It's not that the church on the corner is doing anything inherently wrong; it's that we wonder if it's doing anything at all. Once a week, the parking lot fills with cars. The cars come, the cars go, but nothing really changes. The world is still spinning out of control. All over the globe people are experiencing real suffering. There's war, starvation, disease. There are political problems, corporate problems, community problems, family problems. Individuals struggle with depression, anxiety, loneliness, fear. There's suffering among the children; there's suffering among the middle-aged; there's suffering among the elderly. It's pervasive. It's very real, and it's very painful, and that church on the corner seems so terribly irrelevant to it all. It sucks up time. It sucks up resources. Maybe people feel better about themselves for an hour each week, but is it really doing anything meaningful in light of the world's realities? If the vision, the end result, is depth of involvement in a pathetic expression of religiosity that does nothing for the real issues of our world, then there are better ways to invest our time and resources. There's nothing in that sort of vision to make this any more than a kick, if it is a kick at all.

That's the *meaningless* vision. Let's consider the *repulsive* vision.

Maybe we were channel surfing and landed momentarily on a religious program more interested in our wallets than our well-being. Maybe it was that co-worker so quick to quote his favorite verses but so slow to help in a time of need. Maybe it was that prospective spouse who attended church on Sundays but whose destructive habits ruined any hope of a lasting relationship. We've seen hypocrisy; it's troubling, and we want nothing of it. Such falsehoods bring questions. Does following God mean I'll be one of those Bible-thumpers always asking for money? Does professing Christ mean I'll be loudmouthed with advice and slow to act with compassion? If I follow Christ, am I going to be judgmental and intolerant? The questions are legitimate. If following Christ means we will become something we find revolting, if that's the vision, the end result, then why would we do it?

We wouldn't.

We'd run.

## THE KICK

We'd do anything and everything, but we most certainly wouldn't do that.

And yet despite each of these known visions, the *meaningless* and the *repulsive*, you're reading this page. Why? What's the vision? What has your attention? Is it inspiring enough to keep you in the game? Will it motivate you to push through the pain associated with most any meaningful endeavor? Many visions could be suggested. Let's consider two. Let's go inside. Let's go outside.

## LET'S GO INSIDE

There's something deep within us we cannot deny. Explain it? That's nearly impossible, but we know what we mean. Deep within us there is a hunger, a thirst, a craving for something great, something grand. We survey the world around us, and we genuinely wonder if anything will truly satisfy this inner-thirst. It's not that there aren't good things around us. There are many good things we do, things we enjoy. Even more, there are things we've yet to do and hope to do with our lives. These are both real and good, but then we pause.

We pause and we wonder about that deep inner-longing, that thirst, that hunger. We know instinctively that it will take more than another buzz, another thrill, another adventure, or another win to truly satisfy that deep inner-craving. There are so many good things, but where's the great thing? Where's the reality that goes beyond the fleeting nature of life, the here today and gone tomorrow? Where's something I can count on, trust in, rest upon? When am I going to experience a peace independent from the ebb and flow of daily living? When am I going to sleep deeply not because things went well that day, but because there's a deep inner-contentment that transcends my circumstantial ups and downs?

What's the vision? It's a vision of peace, a vision of contentment, a vision of rest for our souls. It's a vision of ourselves in touch with the greatest and grandest of all realities, the reality of our Creator. It's a vision of drinking deeply from a well that touches more than physical thirst; it satisfies the thirst of our souls. We see ourselves in the future, and we are whole. We're not so naive as to believe this vision will be fully realized in an instant, or even in a lifetime, but we do believe it can be *ever-increasingly* realized every day, as we *ever-increasingly* experience the Almighty. We long for ever-increasing joy, ever-increasing peace, ever-increasing satisfaction, and ever-increasing contentment. Something in us instinctively knows that real life is not a life of striving. Striving and straining rob us of life, which drives our inner-conviction that we must draw near to the Creator of life.

That's the inside vision. Let's go outside.

## LET'S GO OUTSIDE

The world is full of controversy, but there's at least one point of agreement. No matter the generation, no matter the political party, no matter the ethnicity or religious persuasion, there is agreement on one critical observation. Some will find the observation pessimistic, but realism, not pessimism, is the intention. A brief survey of the daily news or a casual consideration of the people around us makes this observation abundantly clear. The observation is simply this: Something is off in this world.

A peace agreement settles one war while another war is just beginning. A vaccination eradicates one disease while another disease begins to spread. Wedding bells announce the beginning of a new family while the fall of a gavel announces the end of another. It's not that life is absent of pleasure or that there are not seasons of great goodness, but all is not well in the world. All is not well when children die of preventable diseases. All is not well when unfounded hatred drives one ethnicity to rid its region of another. All is not well when pain and suffering so often drown out laughter and joy.

Awareness of this reality brings us to an essential question. It's a question often used to accuse our Creator, but one we must not just throw out as an accusation but ask genuinely. We ask with conviction and with passion, "What are you doing about this, God? What is your solution? The world is spinning out of control; what are you doing?" When asked with genuine interest and humility, when we truly seek an authentic answer, maybe there will in fact be a response that is not just satisfactory, but maybe there will be a response that is profound.

What's the outside vision? It's a vision where we do something. It's a vision where our lives make a meaningful difference in the lives of others. It's a vision where we don't just complain about the world's pain and suffering, but where we roll up our sleeves and make a meaningful contribution to the world around us. Now that might not sound unique. That might sound like one of countless solutions competing for airtime today. In a sense, that's true. There are many good and helpful solutions at work in this world today. The vision we will encounter is not intended to minimize the good work done by the many leaders and organizations seeking to bring health and healing to the world's problems. But with that said, there is an undeniable uniqueness to our question. We are not just asking for a good and decent solution, but we are going to the Author of life to learn about life. We seek to discover what the Creator of the world is doing about the suffering in the world, and we are open to the possibility of a grander vision conceptualized before the world began. It's a vision where we help people with their surface problems; it's a vision where we get to the root of the problems. We give the thirsty a cup of cold water, both literally and spiritually, and we also build a well, both literally and spiritually. Maybe there's a plan unfolding. Maybe the origin of this plan precedes the beginning of time. Maybe we could participate in this plan.

All this, the inside vision and the outside vision, leads us to the way of Christ.

## THE WAY OF CHRIST

Christ had a way of cutting through religious clutter. On one such occasion he was asked to highlight Scripture's greatest commandment. His response was both simple and profound.

*Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40).*

It all hangs on two hooks: Love God and Love People. Christ's response was so simple and so profound his critics had nothing to say. Not only does Scripture tell us that the one who questioned Christ agreed with Christ's response, but we are also told that "from then on no one dared ask him any more questions" (Mark 12:34). The response brought silence to the debate...sort of.

The critics agreed in theory. They did not agree in practice. One such example speaks boldly.

Christ is standing beside a well. A woman walks up. He's without a bucket, and he asks her for a drink. She's taken aback. Jewish men do not speak to Samaritan women. The conversation then moves from physical water to spiritual water. In that movement, a vision is cast, a vision for the way of Christ.

*Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life (John 4:13-14).*

He does not tell her how. He does not tell her what she must do. Very simply, he offers a vision. He lets her know that her inner-thirst, the thirst that has driven her life to relational chaos, can be satisfied. She can love God. Even more, he lets her know that not only can she have her own thirst satisfied, but she can become a spring of living water refreshing the parched lives around her. She can love people.

What would the critics say now? A woman with tainted Samaritan blood and the impurity of five failed marriages can drink deeply from God's spring and become a spring bursting with eternal refreshment reviving the thirsty world around her?

Such is the way of Christ.

The way of Christ is not an irrelevant solution making us feel better for an hour on Sunday but doing nothing for the reality of our complicated lives. The way of Christ is also not a plastic religiosity producing revolting expressions of greed, selfish ambition, and judgment. The way of Christ is radical. The way of Christ is transformative. The way of Christ promotes soul satisfaction and life transformation. Realizing the vision of the authentic way of Christ may in fact be worth the pain of bringing that vision into reality.

But make no mistake, there is pain.

If we are to follow the authentic way of Christ, if we are to genuinely love God and love people, if following Christ is to become our reality and not just another kick, then one thing must be true of our experience. An early traveler on the way of Christ put it like this:

*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:2).*

We are not called to a life of conformity. We are called to a life of transformation. This transformation comes about by the renewing of our minds and trains us to discern the will of God, the way of Christ. The Greek word underneath this call to transformation is *metamorphosis*. If we are to follow the authentic way of Christ, we must love God, and we must love people. If we are to genuinely love God and love people, then we must change from the inside out. In a word, we must **morph**.

## MORPH

What is *Morph*? To morph is to become like Christ, to become a person liberated by love for God and inspired by love for people. We call this morphing because it is a process, but it is a process where transformation genuinely happens. We change. Yes, morphing happens over time, but it does in fact happen. We do overcome. We do experience healing. We do become more like Christ. We do this not by skimming the surface but by going, with Christ, to the depth of our inner-person and then working our way out to daily living. We go deep into ourselves; we go deep into Scripture.

Which is exactly what *this Morph* experience is designed to facilitate.

As expressed here, *Morph* is a four-module relational experience designed to inspire a lifetime of transformation. It is an experience reflective of the way of Christ.

- Module One: Love God
- Module Two: Build Character (an application of Love God)
- Module Three: Love People
- Module Four: Be Christ's Body (an application of Love People)

Each module is eight weeks, and each week involves some mixture of five possible categories. All five categories will not be represented each week, but familiarity with the five gives an important overall perspective of how this experience works. The five categories are...

- Readings
- Morph Me
- Conversations with God

To make the most of this experience, let's briefly consider the categories.

## **FIRST CATEGORY: READINGS**

Each week will begin with a reading intended to stir both the heart and mind. These readings are designed to take about fifteen minutes, but you're encouraged to read slowly. Read with a pen in hand. If a particular passage of Scripture is referenced, and it gets your attention, open the pages of Scripture and read the passage in its fuller context. Linger. Those who let the fifteen minutes linger to thirty minutes or more will, no doubt, gain greater insight and awareness for themselves and the others in their group.

## **SECOND CATEGORY: MORPH ME**

The second category is titled Morph Me. The Morph Me category is emphasized in the *Love God and Build Character* modules. These exercises will vary, but they are designed to personalize that week's experience. It's too easy to read something or study something and nod with agreement. Morph Me takes you through exercises to both reveal and train what's genuinely happening in your life. These will be both probing and practical. Some weeks, there will be exercises geared to peel back the layers of life to find out what's really going on. Other weeks will address practices to be incorporated into daily living to bring about lasting change.

## **THIRD CATEGORY: CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD**

One of the more profound aspects of walking with Christ is the ongoing presence of God in our lives. Throughout this *Morph* experience, you are given guidance to inspire and strengthen daily conversations with God. This guidance will not be the rote sayings of heartless prayers. Rather, these Conversations with God will involve both talking and listening. We will listen to God through Scripture, and we will listen to God by training our ears for the presence of his Spirit. Week two of this module will give greater explanation, but for now, know that *Morph* is designed to deepen your own personal interactions with God. This will take time and energy, as most conversations do, but imagine what it will be like to be ever-increasingly conversing with God. Of all you could gain from *Morph*, if truly engaged, this will no doubt be the most profound.

## **FOURTH CATEGORY: CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE**

The fourth category is Conversations with People. It is not possible to go through *Morph* alone; it is a relational experience. This relational aspect can be a formalized small group, or it can be as simple as gathering a few friends and agreeing to go through this together. At the end of each week, there are conversation guides to deepen your discussions.

The following are suggestions depending upon your circumstances:

► Small Groups (five or more people)

Small groups come in different shapes and sizes, but a typical small group will have five to twelve participants. Throughout *Morph*, small groups are encouraged to meet as a group every other week, and on the off week, to meet in subgroups of two or three people (three is preferable). We refer to these subgroups as Running Partners. This will be new to most groups but is highly encouraged. This smaller gathering will personalize the conversation. A degree of personalization

### **THE KICK**

can and does happen in other settings, but there's something powerful about getting together with just two other people and hearing how each individual is interacting with that week's experience.

Different groups will do this differently. Some groups will have the Running Partners meet on their own time at the place of their choosing. Other groups will prefer to have all Running Partners meet in the same location at the same time, perhaps at a house or coffee shop, but simply meet in different areas so as to not distract one another. Either way is encouraged.

Included in each week's material are conversation guides. These guides are geared to either Small Groups or Running Partners. *Take note that Week One is geared to Running Partners, Week Two is geared to Small Groups, and it goes back and forth in that rhythm.* Also, you're encouraged to mix the Running Partner relationships for each eight-week module. This will not be possible or beneficial for all groups, but when possible, it is encouraged.

► Running Partners (two to four people)

*Morph* need not be experienced in a formalized small group but can be experienced by simply pulling together a few friends and agreeing to go through *Morph* together. Similar to what's explained in the Small Group section above, we describe these gatherings of two to four as Running Partners. If experiencing *Morph* with two to four people, you're encouraged to meet weekly. At the end of each week's material you will find conversation guides. You'll notice that the conversation guides are titled either "Small Group" or "Running Partner." This titling is for groups of five or more people, so don't let it distract you. You're encouraged to use the conversation guide for that week regardless of the title.

## FIFTH CATEGORY: WEB

In addition to collaborating with your group, there is a larger *Morph* community online. A simple explanation of *Morph's* Web presence would be to call it a mixture of Facebook and *Morph*. The best way to get into it is to simply get on to it, but the following brief descriptions offer a little insight as to what's available.

### Videos

Each week you'll find a brief video giving depth of insight on that week's topic. You can think of the videos as a coach. This will be done a variety of ways. Some weeks, you'll hear about the thinking that went into that week's topic. Other weeks, you'll hear from others giving their own experience with that week's topic. And other weeks still, simply expect the unexpected.

### Forums

A variety of forums are available at the *Morph* website where you can comment and read comments on a host of topics. Posting thoughts and comments will not only help others, but it will also refine your own thoughts by encouraging you to articulate your experience.

### Resources and Links

Included at the *Morph* website are a variety of resources and links to take your experience deeper. If, for example, you are reading one of that week's Scripture passages and you find it confusing, at the website you'll find a link to that passage where there are online commentaries to read and study. Or if a particular topic speaks to you and you'd like to go deeper with it, at that week's page you'll find links to sermons and articles associated with that week's topic.

## JUST IMAGINE

A few pages back you were encouraged to ask a question: *Do I really want to do this?* Now you're asked to dream for a moment. How might your life be different by engaging Christ through this experience? How might the world be different by an increasingly transformed version of you? Reach within yourself

### THE KICK

and touch that deep inner-hunger. It's the hunger that drives your life. What would it be like to direct that hunger toward the greatest and grandest of visions? What would it feel like to live freely and passionately? What would it be like to be an ever-increasingly positive influence on the world around you?

Well-lived lives do not become well-lived lives by doing nothing. Well-lived lives engage their Creator's grace and live passionately, not passively. The experience that follows is a call to action. It will involve time, energy, and resources. There will be aspects you find invigorating, and there will be aspects that feel like work. The extent to which you encounter Christ through this experience is the extent to which you will experience change. Skim the surface, and it will skim your life. Go to the depths, and it will go to the depths of you. Those who truly engage, those who dig in and make the most of this opportunity will be different. The world will be different, and we will all be grateful this was anything but a kick.

## Week Zero

# GUIDANCE FOR SMALL GROUPS AND RUNNING PARTNERS

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### GUIDANCE FOR GROUPS WITH FIVE OR MORE PEOPLE:

- ▶ **Small Group Rhythm**  
Meet as a Small Group every other week.
- ▶ **Running Partner Rhythm**  
Meet as Running Partners every other week (opposite the Small Group week).
- ▶ **Running Partner Numbers**  
An ideal size is three people (no more than four).
- ▶ **Conversation Guides**  
At the end of each week's material is a conversation guide. Use this guide for both Small Group weeks and Running Partner weeks. The material is designed so that week one is Running Partners, week two is Small Groups, and it then alternates in that rhythm.
- ▶ **Mixing It Up**  
Where possible, mix Running Partners up with each of the eight-week *Morph* modules.

### GUIDANCE FOR GROUPS WITH TWO TO FOUR PEOPLE:

- ▶ **Weekly Rhythm**  
Meet as a group each week.
- ▶ **Conversation Guides**  
At the end of each week's material is a conversation guide. Each guide is titled either "Running Partner Guide" or "Small Group Guide." This titling is for groups of five or more. Ignore the titling and simply use each guide for each week.

**SMALL GROUP AND RUNNING PARTNER GUIDES**

# SMALL GROUP GUIDE

## INITIATE MEETING

- ▶ The reading from this introductory week talked about “kicks.” Describe your last kick and how it went. Did it last long? What came out of the experience?

## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

- ▶ Why did you decide to do *Morph*? What do you hope to get out of the experience?
- ▶ *Morph* is designed to help you become more intentional in your walk with Christ. What about this excites you? What about this scares you?

## PRACTICAL MATTERS

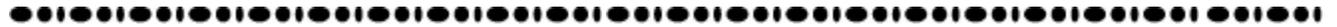
- ▶ Make sure that everyone has a copy of the *Morph* materials and has joined the *Morph: Love God* online group.
- ▶ Exchange contact information with your group members. (See page 13.)
- ▶ Decide on a regular meeting time and make a note of it on page 13. (See page 9 for suggestions on group meeting rhythms.)
- ▶ Pages 5-7 provide guidelines for how the *Morph* content is to be experienced. Look back over these pages and discuss any practical questions that you may have about how to engage the material over the coming weeks.

## RUNNING PARTNER GROUPS

- ▶ If your group has five or more people, break up into Running Partner groups—subgroups of two to three people (preferably three when possible). If your group has four or fewer people, stay together to discuss the following:
- ▶ If you do not yet know each other well, spend some time introducing yourselves.
- ▶ Read the Running Partner Values (page 15) aloud.
  - Which of these values will come naturally for you?
  - Which values will stretch you?
- ▶ Decide on a regular meeting time and make a note of it on page 13.
- ▶ Close your time together by praying for each other in light of the conversation you just had. Pray that each of you will have a personal and powerful experience over the next eight weeks.

**SMALL GROUP AND RUNNING PARTNER GUIDES**

# CONTACTS AND MEETING INFORMATION



## GROUP CONTACT INFORMATION

NAMES	PHONE	E-MAIL
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____
5. _____	_____	_____
6. _____	_____	_____
7. _____	_____	_____
8. _____	_____	_____
9. _____	_____	_____
10. _____	_____	_____
11. _____	_____	_____
12. _____	_____	_____

## SMALL GROUP

MEETING PLACE	MEETING TIME	DATE OF FIRST MEETING
_____	_____	_____

## RUNNING PARTNERS

MEETING PLACE	MEETING TIME	DATE OF FIRST MEETING
_____	_____	_____

**SMALL GROUP AND RUNNING PARTNER GUIDES**



**SMALL GROUP AND RUNNING PARTNER GUIDES**

# OVERVIEW



WEEKLY EXERCISES			
VIDEO (visit website)	●	READING (page 19)	●
		MORPH ME (page 27)	●
			CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE (page 37)

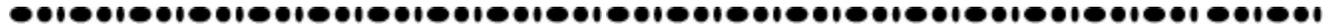
WEB EXTRAS	
Check out RELATED RESOURCES (visit website)	Online <i>Morph</i> community SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS (visit website)

## **WEEKLY OVERVIEW**

Week 1, p. 18

Week One

# WHISPERED WISDOM



## THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH

There are countless distinctions between the wise and the foolish. The Scriptures offer plenty of examples. Common sense helps as well.

The foolish spend. The wise save.

The foolish vent. The wise offer thought-filled words.

The foolish demand immediate gratification. The wise embrace the demands of delayed gratification.

The distinctions are not absolute, but the list could go on, and most can observe a mixture of both wisdom and foolishness in their own lives. One more observation will serve this discussion. It begins with a question.

How do the foolish and the wise handle information they believe to be important?

Much could be said to address this question. Here's a simple thought...

The foolish scream. The wise whisper.

Whisper?

Yes, think about it for a moment. The foolish rant and rave when they think they have something terribly important to say. Yes, the wise may do so when the situation is urgent, when there's a state of emergency, but the wise know the power of a whisper. The wise know when to lower their voice, lean in close, and say something succinctly and with whispered passion.

There's a phrase, a saying, a proverb central in Scripture and central to the Scripture's message. It's not often quoted, but the world would be a better place if we all carefully considered it. It's a simple and memorable phrase, as many proverbs are, and it contains a secret no doubt the author hoped would be whispered from generation to generation.

The first three words alone are cause for pause. These three words start with a phrase that beckons us to lean in and listen attentively.

Read it slowly.

Read it quietly.

Lean in close and hear a few words of whispered wisdom from a wise old sage...

*Above all else... (Proverbs 4:23).*

That's a powerful introduction.

It's worthy of reflection before considering the conclusion of the statement.

Consider this...

This phrase can be used only once. This statement, this introduction, if used more than once, is abused, and Scripture does not abuse it. The phrase may be familiar to you or it may be new. You may know how the statement is completed. If so, pretend for a moment you've never heard it. Let the phrase bounce around in your mind incomplete, and wonder how the sentence will be finished.

Above all else...

What would be Scripture's wisest counsel?

Above all else...

...enjoy your life.

...monitor your health.

...manage your money.

...work hard.

Above all else...

...eat dessert.

...rest well.

...choose friends wisely.

...change the oil in your car.

Above all else...

...eat vegetables.

...marry well.

...smell the roses.

...learn Spanish

Above all else...

There are so many, many good things to say. What's the best thing? What's the thing that floats to the top of the list because it's worthy of the introduction "Above all else..."

It must be a cause and not an effect.

It must be something that touches everything.

It must be at the epicenter of life.

It cannot be peripheral.

It must be central.

It must be real.

It must be something that truly matters above all else.

It must be something to consider very carefully and take very seriously.

What is *above all else*?

Lean in.

Read slowly.

Maybe even read it aloud...in a quiet whisper.

*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).*

What a fascinating observation.

## **THE EPICENTER**

All we do flows from the epicenter of our lives, the wellspring of our lives, our hearts. For good and for ill, our hearts drive us. Years after Solomon's whispered wisdom, Christ offered a similar observation. When speaking of good and evil, he said, "*Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks*" (Luke 6:45).

...the mouth speaks.

Without question, we could play with those words a bit.

Out of the overflow of the heart...

...the trigger is pulled.

...the gift is given.

...the fist swings.

...the corporate ladder is climbed.

Out of the overflow of the heart...

...the car is purchased.

...the friendship is broken.

...the generosity is lavished.

...the gossip speaks.

Out of the overflow of the heart...

...the check is written.

...the song is sung.

...the drink is embraced.

...the job is quit.

Out of the overflow of the heart...

...everything happens.

...good things happen.

...bad things happen.

...life happens.

Why?

It all comes back to the heart, to the epicenter of our lives.

James noticed it. He said as much when he wrote in his letter, “*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight*” (James 4:1-2, TNIV). What’s he saying? It’s an observation. He simply notices the same thing both Solomon and Christ noticed, that fights and quarrels are driven by desires, by hearts.

Paul noticed it. He noted something surprising though. Would you not think that a person giving money to the poor does so in love for the poor? Maybe. Maybe not. Paul observed as much in his letter to the Corinthians, “*If I give all I possess to the poor...but do not have love, I gain nothing*” (1 Corinthians 13:3, TNIV). That’s odd. If a person gives everything to the poor is there not love? We know better. Maybe it’s a photo op. Maybe it’s to impress the social circles. Maybe it’s something else, but whatever it is, there’s no question it’s driven by the heart. It just may or may not be a heart for the poor. It very well may be love of power and the drive to get elected. It always looks good on the front page, above the fold, to be face to face with the neediest of people wearing rolled-up shirt sleeves. Photos like that get votes.

Why love the poor when they can be used to get what we really love?

Which gives rise to an incredibly important question and another that must be held at bay and addressed later.

## **SHOULD BE**

There’s a gravitational pull to a question that must patiently wait in the wings. It’s the question of “should.” What *should* be in my heart? Church circles are dangerously good at the *should* questions. We know we *should* have a heart for certain things. That’s good. We need that and will get to it in due course.

But let’s talk reality.

Rather than asking what *should* be in our hearts, let’s find out first what’s already there. What *is* in my heart?

No pretending.

No censoring.

No qualifying.

What *is* in my heart? When the layers are peeled back, what do I discover? Could there be a more important exercise than to address this question? The heart is the wellspring of life. Out of the overflow of our hearts our mouths speak. Should we not know what’s in there?

In a moment this experience will take us to a simple question.

You’ll be encouraged to linger at this question a bit.

The question is coming.

Here’s a preview: What do you want?

It’s coming, but not quite yet.

First, let’s have a little fun.

## ROCK STAR

I want to be a rock star.

I want to be on stage, scream *Hello, Chicago!* and hear the roar of the thousands upon thousands awed by my presence.

I will, of course, use my rock-star status for good in the world. I will raise money for war-torn countries and go before Congress with appeals for the poor. I will entertain the troops serving in foreign lands. I will write songs that move people and cause them to think.

But I must admit...I love that crowd...I want people to camp out all night to get a ticket to my concert...I want to be revered and held in awe...I want to hear the chant...see the throngs of people...and be discussed on the radio.

Sick, you say? Not so fast.

Let's be honest.

Let's be uncensored.

Let's be true to our innermost desires.

Rock star? Not really. I can't sing or scream or jump around like that. I don't look good in tight clothes and wouldn't wear them if I could.

But I wouldn't mind rock-star status at the office.

I work in a cube. I do my job. It's done on time and done well. Does anybody notice? Does anybody care?

Rarely.

No, I'm not the rock-star type, but this world requiring hours of work with nobody noticing isn't the answer either. I'd like to be a rock star around the office. I'd like people to care what I have to say in the meeting. I'd like to get a response when I seek people out above me. Better yet, I'd like for there to not be anyone above me. I'd like to be "The Man." I've never been The Man. I've always had to work for The Man. And The Man doesn't seem to notice me. The Man notices when I screw-up. The Man doesn't notice when I do well. The Man couldn't care less about me. Rock-star status...that'd work.

But maybe not.

I really don't want to work. I really don't want to be a rock star or have rock-star status at the office. It may have intrigued me at one time. Not today. I got over it. I've had blips and bleeps of rock-star status, and I don't really want that anymore. What do I want?

I want to take a nap.

I want a hammock between two palm trees and a little drink in the sand below me that once was frozen and now is melted because I've been lulled to sleep by the sound of the waves.

Forget the rock star stuff, literal or metaphorical, and just give me rest.

I'm tired, and I'm tired of being tired. I just want to take a long nap and be at peace with the world and have the world at peace with me. I just want everybody to leave me alone.

But not everybody.

I'd like to be alone now and then, but I never want to be lonely, and there's a very important difference. Crowded rooms can be lonely. Office complexes can be lonely. Families can be lonely.

## WHISPERED WISDOM

Churches can be lonely. Yes, I'd like some space, and I'd like to be alone here and there, but never lonely. I never, ever intended that.

I don't just want to be *around* people. I want to be *with* people.

I want to know people and have them know me.

I want to love people and have them love me.

I want to serve people and have them serve me.

I want to enjoy people and have them enjoy me.

Maybe that's why I want to be a rock star. It seems like people know them and they know people. It seems like people love them and they love people. It seems like people serve them and they serve people. It seems like people enjoy them and they enjoy people.

But that really can't be it.

That can't be it because the "rock stars" of the world often display, and readily admit, their insatiable hunger for more. Those who achieve rock-star status in their respective fields of interest are not *necessarily* the happiest bunch. Yes, some are, but not *necessarily*. Somewhere along the way there's a disconnect, there's dissonance; there's a disconnect and dissonance between the deep longing in a person's heart and the thing they're looking toward to satisfy that longing.

What's dissonance?

Dissonance is the result of clashing sounds. Dissonance is that state of chaos where longing for resolution is created. It's a longing for the clashing sounds to come together. It's a longing for resonance.

What's resonance?

Resonance is the result of sounds working together. Resonance is when one sound, one longing, matches another and they work together. They resonate.

Consider this...

Resonance is when our stated desires are a healthy expression of our true heart's desire. They work together. They resonate.

Dissonance is when our stated desires are an insufficient expression of the desires of our hearts. They clash. They create dissonance.

## **THE DESIRE UNDER THE DESIRE**

What's with the desire to be a rock star? Is it really the desire to be on stage entertaining throngs of people? Is it really to gain rock-star status at the office because we want to be revered? This could be fun, but is that really what it's about?

Or is it a desire to have a life that matters, a life that counts, a life with purpose?

What's with the desire for a long nap on a quiet beach with a melted drink? We welcome these gifts, but we instinctively recognize the limitations as well. Relaxing getaways are one thing; perpetual escapism is another. We balk at a life of running from reality.

Or is it a longing for a well-rested soul at peace in the midst of life's realities?

There are desires that are highly identifiable: the beach, the car, the job, the status.

But slow down. Be careful. Don't be deceived.

These are often the buoys floating on top of the water.

Reach beneath the buoy...grab hold of the rope...take a deep breath...and begin the descent. Hand over hand, follow that rope to the bottom of your heart, and there you'll find it...there you'll find them.

The desires of your heart.

## **BENEATH THE SURFACE**

How do we get beneath the surface?

How do we grab hold of the rope?

How do we go hand over hand to the bottom in search of the real desire?

Consider this...

Consider one powerful little word.

Consider a word that will take you one hand over the other deeper and deeper into your heart.

It's a simple word.

Here it is...

Why?

I want to be a rock star.

Why?

Because I want people to like me?

Why?

Because I want to feel important...to be important?

Why?

Because I don't want to waste my life?

Why?

Because I want a life that matters...a life that counts?

Why?

I don't know...because I want something lasting...something big...something real...something that isn't here today and gone tomorrow.

Why?

Because I'm on this quest...I don't even fully know what it is I'm looking for...but I'll know it when I see it...I'll know it...it's deep within me...I'm seeking it...I'm looking for it...I haven't found it yet...

Now we're getting somewhere...now we're below the surface. Have we hit bottom? Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, we're able to make a critical distinction.

Do I want to be a rock star, or is there something deeper driving me that being a rock star may or may not satisfy?

What is that deep thing?

What is that deep desire?

What is that insatiable hunger?

If the heart is the wellspring of life, it's best we get after these questions.

## HEARTSTORMING

At this point, it would be far too easy to just read these pages, nod our heads with interest, and set them down. But we're not after easy. We want to morph. To morph, we must personalize this experience and get beneath the surface.

It's time to unload.

It's time to peel back the layers of our hearts.

It's time to consider what's really going on in there.

The pages that follow are the beginning of an exercise that will be woven in and out of the coming weeks. It is called *Heartstorming*. Heartstorming is not a fill-in-the-blank-with-all-the-right-answers exercise. It is an exercise where *real* trumps *right*.

Now we get personal.

Now we get uncensored.

Now we get vulnerable.

It gets a little dangerous at this point.

Week One  
Morph Me

# HEARTSTORMING



## THE CHILD

The child picks up the coloring book. She grabs a crayon and flips to the desired page. She starts with purple, then blue, then orange. The strokes are broad and rarely refined. Yes, there are lines, but she seems to enjoy coloring outside these lines. In time, a picture hangs on the refrigerator. It's a beautiful picture, but it's not exactly neat. In truth, it's quite messy.

It's unlikely the exercise that follows will hang on any refrigerator, but there is an important parallel to the child's coloring. Yes, there are "lines" in this exercise, but this is an exercise where you'll be encouraged, in a sense, to color outside the lines. The pages that follow provide lines to color a picture. Not literal lines for a literal picture, but lines in the form of questions. You'll be asked to answer these questions, but these questions are not meant to limit your thinking. They are meant to stimulate your thinking. The exercise won't be complete by just getting through it, by just coloring neatly inside the lines. This exercise will serve its purpose if it assists and inspires you to truly draw the colors of your heart. Limit yourself to these questions and you'll limit the power of the exercise. Be bold. Use broad strokes.

So know this...

For this to work, make it messy. Color outside the lines.

By messy, we do not mean the orderliness or penmanship you bring. You may transcribe every thought with care. By messy we mean your willingness to put your heart on these pages and allow the questions to guide rather than restrict the colors you choose. As mentioned in the Reading, this exercise is not a fill-in-the-blank-with-all-the-right-answers exercise. This is an exercise where *real* trumps *right*.

## FIRST STEP—UNLOAD

The first step is where we unload. It's all about answering a simple question: *What do I want?* You'll be encouraged to answer this question as many times as you possibly can and no less than thirty times.

*I want to get along with my family.*

*I want to be healthy.*

*I want world peace.*

*I want to take a nap.*

Answer with big desires and little desires. Answer with that major thing in your life that you really and truly want. And answer with that little thing you think about every now and then, and when you think about putting it down, you feel a bit foolish...put it down anyway.

Each time, introduce the desire with two words: *I want...*

## HEARTSTORMING

Just get it out there. Put it all down. If you need more space, get additional pieces of paper and fill them up too. Staple them in if you want. Write all over the place.

Don't judge.

Don't censor.

Don't evaluate.

Just make a mess by unloading desires from your heart.

In time, the desires will not flow so readily. It will be harder to think of what to write. Be certain you have at least thirty statements, and when the pen is consistently resting, move to the second step: grouping.

## SECOND STEP—GROUPING

Grouping is identifying related desires. For example, two of the following three could be grouped:

*I want to be promoted at work.*

*I want to be in a job I really like and hope to do for the rest of my life.*

*I want to eat a plate of nachos.*

As you identify each group, put the same symbol by each of the related topics. For example, you might put a \$ before anything having to do with money, or put an \* by anything having to do with personal health. The symbols don't need to mean anything. They're simply a method of grouping related desires. You can use #, \*, -, +, or any other symbol you create.

This takes you to the third step.

## THIRD STEP—THEMING

The third step is something we call *theming*. Take a look at each group, and see if you can do two things. First, can you give the group a name? And second, can you pull the multiple desires into a single "I want..." statement, a single desire, a theme? For some groups, this will be simple. Other groups may come down to two or three desires. Either way, look for themes, and state the groups in as few desires as possible.

For example, consider the following group:

*I want six weeks off every summer.*

*I want to own a lake house.*

*I want to sleep better at night.*

*I want to go to a movie.*

*I want to not go to work tomorrow.*

Could this group be named? Is there a common desire uniting these desires, a theme? Any number of answers could be given to these questions, but the desires are likely to have something to do with rest or getting away from certain struggles in life. Space will be provided to do something like the following:

*Group name: Escape*

*Group desire: I want rest.*

This leads to the fourth step.

## **FOURTH STEP—BELOW THE SURFACE**

The fourth step is where we pull out that powerful little word: *Why?* The space that follows this fourth step will be a place to state a group's theme, the single desire, and then ask the "*Why?*" question. If the group came down to two or three desires, write each of these desires separately. It's at this point we seek to go from the surface desire to as deep as we possibly can. For some areas, this will be challenging. For others, it will be clear. Some themes may take us to two or three deep desires. That's okay. Let it get messy. Write all over the page and color outside the lines. Don't let the templates provided restrict you. They're there to help, not hinder, the process. Just let the why question take you hand over hand, deeper and deeper, down into your heart. Let this give greater insight into the wellspring of your life, the deep desires that drive you.

## **FIFTH STEP—OBSERVATIONS**

The fifth and final step is simply to make observations. Questions are provided to stimulate your thinking, but by this time you may already have a few growing observations. The observations might be simple and light, or they may be heavy and profound. Put them down either way. Simple observations may prove highly useful as this journey continues. Like a scenic view on a wooded trail, linger at this step. The heart is the wellspring of life. Yes, this exercise will ask you to be more reflective than some are accustomed to being, but becoming a student of our hearts will give critical clarity to realities at the street level of our lives.

In summary, the pages that follow walk through the following Heartstorming steps:

### First Step—What Do I Want?

Answer the "*I want...*" question thirty or more times.

### Second Step—Grouping

Place a simple symbol by related "*I want...*" statements.

### Third Step—Theming

Identify any themes in each group and write this theme in a single "*I want...*" statement.

### Fourth Step—Below the Surface

Take each theme statement and ask "*Why?*"

### Fifth Step—Observations

Make observations about what you've uncovered.

**FIRST STEP  
WHAT DO I WANT?**

**HEARTSTORMING**

Week 1, Morph Me, p. 30

## SECOND STEP GROUPING

Take a look at the previous page, and identify related statements. Create a group by placing a common symbol by each statement that relates (\*, #, @, etc.).

## THIRD STEP THEMING

Use the following to write a theme statement for each grouping.

Group name Escape

I want (theme) Rest

Group name \_\_\_\_\_

I want (theme) \_\_\_\_\_

## HEARTSTORMING

## FOURTH STEP BELOW THE SURFACE

- Briefly restate each Group's theme statement (I want...) in the spaces provided.
- Take the desire as deep as you can with the "Why?" questions. It may take two "Why?" questions, or it may take twenty "Why?" questions. Let the templates provided guide you but not limit you.
- As best you can, in the space provided, describe the deep desire(s) under this group.

**Theme statement:**

I want \_\_\_\_\_

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Deep desire:**

**Theme statement:**

I want \_\_\_\_\_

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Deep desire:**

**HEARTSTORMING**

**Theme statement:**

**I want** \_\_\_\_\_

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Deep desire:**

**Theme statement:**

**I want** \_\_\_\_\_

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Deep desire:**

**HEARTSTORMING**

**Theme statement:**

**I want** \_\_\_\_\_

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Deep desire:**

**Theme statement:**

**I want** \_\_\_\_\_

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**Deep desire:**

## **FIFTH STEP**

### **OBSERVATIONS**

What have you learned about yourself, your current season of life, your hopes and dreams? The questions that follow offer a way of holding each desire up to the light, turning it around, and seeing what you discover.

- Is there an overarching theme uniting all or several of the groups? If so, what is this theme?
  
- Consider a moment in recent days where you had a high degree of frustration. How might it have been related to any of the deep desires you have identified?
  
- Consider a moment in recent days where you had a high degree of satisfaction. How might it have been related to any of the deep desires you have identified?
  
- How do the desires of your heart influence your perspective of what you do with the greatest part of your day?
  
- How do the desires of your heart influence your perspective on God? Do the desires of your heart make you more or less interested in his will?
  
- What other observations have you made concerning your desires?

## **HEARTSTORMING**

Week 1, Morph Me, p. 36

## Week One

### Conversations with People

# RUNNING PARTNERS' GUIDE



## INITIATE MEETING

- ▶ Designate someone to pray. Before praying...
  - Read the Running Partner Values (page 15) aloud.
  - Sit silently for thirty seconds to individually pray and to slow yourselves down.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ What aspect of the reading most captured your attention?
- ▶ By asking “Why?” what deep desires did you discover about yourself?
- ▶ As best you can tell, to what degree will your surface desires satisfy your deep desires?
- ▶ In the fifth step (Observations), you were asked, “*How do the desires of your heart influence your perspective of what you do with the greatest part of your day?*” How did you answer this question?
- ▶ In the fifth step (Observations), you were asked, “*How do the desires of your heart influence your perspective on God? Do the desires of your heart make you more or less interested in his will?*” How did you answer this question?

## SUMMARY QUESTION

- ▶ What is the most important observation you have made so far?

## PRAYER

- ▶ Pray for each other. As you do, pray for the realities in each person’s daily life, but be certain to pray for each person in light of the conversation you just had. Pray for God’s guidance as you discover more about him and more about yourselves.

**RUNNING PARTNER GUIDE**

Week 1, Conversations with People, p. 38

## Week Two

# OVERVIEW



DAILY CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD	
INTRODUCTION (page 55)	
READ Day 1: Psalm 139 Day 2: Psalm 142 Day 3: Psalm 63 Day 4: Psalm 146 Day 5: Psalm 127 Day 6: Psalm 20	MEMORIZE <u>Hebrews 11:6</u> “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” <u>Hebrews 4:12</u> “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”
MEDITATE	

WEEKLY EXERCISES						
VIDEO (visit website)	●	READING (page 41)	●	MORPH ME (page 49)	●	CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE (page 57)

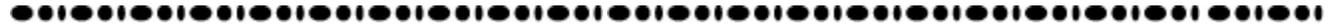
WEB EXTRAS	
Check out RELATED RESOURCES (visit website)	Online <i>Morph</i> community SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS (visit website)

### WEEKLY OVERVIEW

## **WEEKLY OVERVIEW**

Week 2, p. 40

# THE VOICE



## THE SOLITARY WORD

There's something we must read.

We must read it slowly. We must read it carefully. We must listen for a solitary word, an echo—a reverberation of something we've already heard.

The word of God, God's voice, is referred to as...

*...living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).*

Did you hear it?

What is the wellspring of life? What are we to guard?

The heart.

The heart is the wellspring of life. That's where this started. And what did we just hear? We heard an echo of that very word, that very idea, that innermost part of our being—the heart. God's voice, his speaking to us, is sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and get this...

*It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

That wellspring of existence.

That source of desires.

This should pique our interest. And let's be honest.

This should bother us. Judges? We're not sure we like that.

Let's do something else.

Careful though. Not so fast. Let's be open, if just for a moment. Peel back the layers of our hearts and what do we discover? Some things we love; we treasure these things. Other things we disdain; we long to be free of these things. What does it take to be free of things we disdain? If we have cancerous tumors in our body, we disdain them. We travel long distances in search of a cure. We write our last checks. We beg the doctor to *judge* the situation accurately, so the situation can be dealt with properly. Those tumors must be cut out with the double-edged scalpel. We have no problem with this kind of discernment, with that kind of judging.

What would we say to our doctor?

Bring it on, wise doctor, bring it on.

Consider this...

## THE VOICE

What if our spiritual self is much like our physical self?

Our physical self has strengths and weaknesses, good days and bad days, health and sickness. What if our spiritual self reflects a similar reality? What if there are aspects of our spiritual self that must be dealt with? If so, would we not welcome, would we not pursue, would we not seek this living and active voice of God that divides between soul and spirit, joint and marrow, while judging the attitudes and thoughts of our hearts?

What would we say to our God?

Bring it on, wise God, bring it on.

## SCRIPTURE

Common understanding of the double-edged sword is that the sword is Scripture. This interpretation is well-founded. The writer of Hebrews, when speaking of God's voice in this very context, explains that God "spoke through David" and then quotes David's words in Psalm 95 (Hebrews 4:7). So the very words of Scripture are referenced as the very words of God.

With that said, a misapplication of this truth is also common. When Christ walked this earth, he walked amongst a people who greatly revered Scripture. The religious leaders of his day knew Scripture well. Many had great portions of it memorized. They carefully copied and recopied the littlest details and the finest points. And yet, with all of their reverence and all of their caution, many of these leaders missed the very purpose of Scripture.

When addressing these leaders, Christ said,

*You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life (John 5:39-40).*

That's fascinating.

These leaders diligently studied the Scriptures thinking they'd gain life, but the Scriptures were intended to lead them to another end and not be an end in themselves. Rather than letting Scripture inspire and inform their worship of God, they worshipped Scripture as if Scripture itself is god. Scripture testifies not just to something, a collection of beliefs and ideas, but to Someone, the very personhood of God. The purpose of these passages was and is to bring the reader into an encounter with God. Scripture testifies about Christ, and Christ, the Son of God, personifies God and leads us to God.

And the testifying continues to this day.

So engaging Scripture is a movement from the pages to a person, the person of Christ. Scripture, the very word of God, informs a conversation, a relationship, an interacting not just with the sword itself, but with the one who graciously wields the sword for our good.

Why is this important?

It's important because reading Scripture holds tremendous potential. Deep within us is the wellspring of life, this heart of ours, and the voice of God can get down in there and do great good. If that's the case, we're wise to carefully consider how this happens. How does God speak? What is God saying? What has God said to generations before that may apply to my life today? If the voice of God is truly available, then we'd be wise to listen.

## THE VOICE

But let's be honest. As good as all this sounds, common experience is often different. Reading Scripture is sometimes boring.

Maybe we hear it read from the front of a church. The person reading goes on and on, and we're completely lost. We quietly wonder: Is anyone really listening? Or maybe we're inspired to pick it up ourselves. We find a passage that looks promising, and in short order, our eyes cross. If this is supposed to be a meaningful experience, we wonder: How does this happen? How do we position ourselves with Scripture in a manner that truly brings about change by truly bringing an encounter with God? This is a rich and essential question. When Christ returned to the Father's side, he said, "*I am with you always, to the very end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20). If Christ is with us, how do we engage his presence? How do we talk to him? How do we listen to him?

Let's consider a possibility.

Maybe Scripture is boring when it's treated as dry words on a page rather than words from God that invigorate a living and breathing relationship. Maybe Scripture is frustrating when rather than coming to Scripture humbly to hear the voice of God, we come to Scripture arrogantly in search of justifying our own ideas and our own agenda. Or maybe there are aspects of Scripture that are simply an acquired taste. Maybe we're experiencing the normal and understandable reality of reading from pages that are new to us, and we simply need to exercise perseverance. Maybe it's all of these or some of these, but whatever it is, if there is truly the possibility of an encounter with God, there's something in this worthy of our attention.

Consider the possibilities.

What if Scripture not only informed our conversation with God but inspired our conversation with God? What if the stories, the poems, the teachings, and the wisdom gave us insight into this God who walks with us and indwells us so we now know how to recognize his voice and his presence? What if we didn't just read Scripture, but what if we meditated on it, talked with God about it, and opened our hearts up to God in conversational prayer? No, we do not go beyond the bounds of Scripture, but yes, we avoid the error of the Pharisees and let Scripture testify to Christ so we are well informed to authentically walk with Christ through life. What if we did this? What if we truly talked and listened to God?

## CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD

Throughout this *Morph* experience, you are asked to engage in a daily exercise that will feel either risky or right, depending upon your perspective, and to be truthful, it's probably a bit of both. This exercise, if engaged well, will be the exercise you carry with you after you have completed this module and subsequent *Morph* modules. Yes, you'll learn from the *Morph* Readings, but the readings will end. Yes, you'll learn from the *Morph* Me exercises, but these too will end. This exercise is one that could end, but it must not. End this exercise and this entire *Morph* experience will have been for nothing. Engage this exercise, and continue engaging this exercise, and not only will you morph from this experience, but you will continue to be transformed throughout your life.

The exercise?

You are asked to have Conversations with God.

Yes, a daily conversation with your Creator. No, not a quick read of a passage of Scripture to simply get through it. No, not a rote prayer that means and gains nothing. Yes, an ongoing and intentional conversation with the One who knows you best. Yes, a real conversation where you do what you do in all real conversations. You both listen and talk. No doubt you've had friends who talk but never

### THE VOICE

listen or listen but never talk. These are frustrating conversations that lack a healthy give and take. This conversation with God must be both. It must involve thoughtful and reflective listening, and it must involve honest and open talking.

What follows is a suggested path to initiate conversations with God. This suggested path is not intended to impose itself as the only good approach. Like conversing with people, there are countless ways to converse with God. This path is suggested, though, because it is simple while holding potential for profound encounters with God. By walking through three simple phases, both those new to conversing with God and those who have talked with God for years will discover greater depth and resonance in their conversations.

Very simply, the phases are this...

Read  
Memorize  
Meditate

## READ

Each week you will be given five suggested readings from Scripture. Scripture is eclectic. Some sections read like stories while other sections read like teaching. There is poetry and wisdom, parables and prophecy. The five readings for a given week will all come from one particular genre. One week, they will be psalms; another week, the teachings of Christ or proverbial wisdom. How you read these passages is informed by what you're reading. When the readings are stories, for example, the selected passages will be a bit longer and can be read straight through. When the readings are teachings, they will be shorter, and you'll be encouraged to read them multiple times. With each week, the Conversations with God page will give a brief introduction with guidance on how to make the most of that week's selections. With that said, there is an error we must guard against, irrespective of the nature of the passages.

There are two ways to read Scripture. The first is quite common, and the second all too rare: We can read to get through the passage, or we can read to get the passage through us. If we read to get through the passage, to get a little star on our chart, the reading will carry little benefit. If, instead, we read to get the passage through us, there is strong potential for genuine life change. This kind of reading pursues the God behind the words. We want to hear from him. We want to understand him. We want to experience him. In your reading, don't just read. Listen. Listen for the voice of God. If it's a story, what can you discover about God and about yourself through that story? If it is teaching, what aspect of the teaching is God impressing upon you? If it is wisdom, how might we confront our own foolishness? This is not just reading. This is listening and connecting to our Creator.

## MEMORIZE

This second phase complements the first phase and then leads naturally to the third phase. Each week, as part of the five suggested readings, you're asked to memorize (yes, memorize) two short passages. The passages will either come from the readings or be closely related in thought or topic. In this *Morph* module, and in each of the subsequent *Morph* modules, you are given twenty-five passages to memorize. By simply memorizing two passages per week, a doable amount, through this *Morph* experience you will have a hundred passages committed to memory. Yes, with each *Morph* module being eight weeks long, and by memorizing two passages per week, this practice will continue after each module ends. This is by design. Conversing with God must not end when *Morph* ends.

## THE VOICE

Why memorize?

For starters, let's consider what the purpose is not. The purpose is not so we can lob verses of Scripture at any passerby. It's not so we can become quote-a-holics who have a verse to complement any situation and circumstance. Yes, there will be times you're in conversation with friends and a passage of Scripture will come to mind that will enhance the conversation. That's a welcomed benefit. The more central benefit goes much deeper and is much more personal.

Scripture calls us to "*prepare your minds for action*" (1 Peter 1:13). The original language is a call to "gird up the loins of your mind." Odd? To our ears, very odd, but not to the ears of the original recipients. A "loin" is what they wore. Picture a robe. If they needed to move quickly, they would grab hold of the robe, or gird it up, to keep from tripping over themselves. Spiritually and emotionally, tripping over ourselves is common practice. For this reason, we are called to "gird up the loins of our minds." In our language a closer parallel might be to "roll up the shirt sleeves of your minds." Memorizing Scripture is one way we do this. We posture our thought-life with strength. Rather than letting our thoughts come against us leading to a downward spiral of negativity, we fill our minds with thoughts that inspire greater and deeper conversations with God.

A second reason for memorizing Scripture is how this practice leads naturally to the third and richest phase of conversing with God. It's in this third phase where the conversation gets personal and comes to life.

## MEDITATE

The word *meditation* conjures up a host of images. For some, these images feel very natural. For others, they're foreign. In truth, whether we realize it or not, we all meditate. As we drive down the road, for example, our minds turn to something. Maybe we mull over a frustrating conversation with a co-worker. Maybe we recall a wound we experienced years ago. Or maybe the mind goes in the gutter as we drift toward thoughts of vanity, greed, anger, or lust. We rehearse these thoughts, over and over, and whether we like it or not, these thoughts shape us. Scripture says as much...

*Blessed are those who...meditate on God's law day and night. They are like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers (Psalm 1:1-3).*

The imagery is powerful. If a tree is planted by water that is good and pure, that tree is meditating on that water, and it will thrive. If, though, that water is toxic and poisonous, the tree will wither and fade. Those who mediate on God's thoughts, the psalmist tells us, are like a tree planted by streams of water. By meditation, by thinking God's thoughts and conversing with him about these thoughts, we experience the kind of growth we were created to experience. Trees were not created to shrivel and die. Trees were created to grow and thrive.

So very simply, meditating, as encouraged here, is simply talking and listening to God. The conversation is inspired and informed by the reading and memorizing, but the conversation is now personalized. We carefully consider the passage, but we don't *just* consider the passage. We talk, and we listen. If, for example, we read a story of great faith and great courage, maybe we talk to God about our fears and concerns. Or maybe we've been reading and memorizing a teaching on grace, and we now talk to God about an area of our lives where we feel especially susceptible to guilt and shame. It's in these conversations where we don't just read and memorize, but we listen and we talk. We pour out our thoughts, concerns, frustrations, and joys.

Or maybe not.

## THE VOICE

Maybe we sit in silence. Maybe we simply let ourselves rest before God by resting in the voice we've just heard. Meditation, conversing with God, can be as diverse as spending time with a close friend. There are times the conversation abounds with words and ideas, and there are times where the two are simply together and enjoying each other's presence. Meditation, conversing with God, is a lot like that.

With that in mind, this experience will encourage a highly personalized expression of meditation. Conversing with God is not reserved for those whose bent fits the contemplative stereotype. Examples abound, and the following is not meant to be comprehensive, but consider a few ways we may connect best with God.

*The athlete*—For some, their conversation with God will be worked out as they exercise or run. Their early morning hours are spent in motion, and it's while in motion that they have their clearest thoughts and most authentic encounters with God. Try to get athletes to sit down and meditate, and their thoughts will consistently wander to other things. For these, there's something about physical engagement that opens them up and enhances their conversations with God.

*The artist*—The artist converses with God, but the conversation reaches greatest depth not in the lengthy back and forth dialogue, but when they seemingly partner with God in a creative endeavor. Artists take a thought, an idea, a passion, or a concern, and in bringing it before God, they are inspired to express this thought artistically. The Psalms themselves are a rich example of this as many are written poetically and with great thought to choice of words and structure. Down through the ages, artists have expressed their thoughts with God in countless ways—songs, paintings, sculpture, poetry, dance—these are all examples of deep communion with God expressed in ways where mere dialogue falls short.

*The writer*—The writer is the person who converses with God most naturally with pen and paper. Writers write and they listen, they listen and they write. There's something about the exercise of writing their thoughts to God that takes them to depths they would not gain by limiting themselves to thought or even audible words. In the choosing of their words and the expression on the page, their thoughts gain clarity and focus. Not only do they talk to God, but in their writing they hear from God as thoughts are untangled and clarity is gained.

The list could go on. There are those who encounter God in nature, those who talk with God as they walk their dog, those who do best when they engage in a project like gardening or cooking. In truth, no one is exclusively one type or another. We all have a bit of each with an emphasis on a few. Even more, the realities of life will limit the availability of certain expressions. We may connect with God best on long walks in nature, but the accessibility of a mountain trail is yearly at best. This isn't to say we then limit our conversations, but the heart of this phase is to not only personalize the conversation with God but to personalize how the conversation happens. If we limit ourselves to a particular method, that method may miss us, and we may then miss what is most important. If the athlete, for example, thinks connection with God only happens by acting like those who are naturally contemplative, an attempt won't even be made. If, though, this person recognizes the uniqueness of his or her design, rich conversation with God awaits that person and possibilities abound.

## **LET'S GET PRACTICAL**

A few practical suggestions will enhance this experience.

### *Follow Your Wandering Thoughts*

Many complain of wandering thoughts while attempting a conversation with God. The frustration is understandable. When talking to a person, the person is in front of you, or on the phone, so the

## **THE VOICE**

conversation has a tangible quality. Although talking with God is no less real, it is by nature, a spiritual conversation and therefore lacks material presence. Wandering thoughts can be a frustration, but when carefully considered, they can also be a tremendous help to our conversation with God.

Consider that the mind may wander with intention. If, let's say, while talking with God, the mind wanders to a project at work, maybe it's the project at work that is creating undue stress in your life, and it needs to be brought before God. Or if the mind wanders to thoughts of anger, greed, lust, or addictive cravings, maybe these are the issues to address with God. Rather than push the thoughts away, bring those thoughts to God. Talk to him about those desires, those frustrations, those worries, and those concerns. A wandering mind can be a tremendous ally toward honest conversation with God.

In addition, a wandering mind may also be helped by a second suggestion: journaling. There's something very powerful about moving our prayers from our minds to the page.

### *Journaling*

Throughout the *Morph* experience, you're encouraged to keep a journal. How this journal is done will vary from person to person. As mentioned, some are writers who will take to this naturally while others are not the writing type. With that said, though, there are lessons to be learned from all types, and there are aspects of writing that will enhance most anyone's ongoing conversation with God. For those not the writing type, journaling can be done in a variety of ways, many of which fit other persuasions. Consider a few.

*A single page*—Journaling need not be lengthy. When Christ taught on prayer he challenged lengthy prayers when he said, “*When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him*” (Matthew 6:7-8). There is no need for flowery language or lengthy prose. God knows what's on our minds, and it can be said in as few or as many words as are needed. Journaling, then, is often most helpful when we limit rather than lengthen our words. For those new to the exercise, consider limiting yourself to a single page or a single paragraph. As is the case in so many things, less will often mean more.

*Bullet points*—Another thought some will find helpful is to use the journal to chronicle your thoughts rather than transcribe them. In other words, rather than write the prayer out in its entirety, simply write a bullet point or a short sentence of what you will talk with God about. If you're of the athletic bent, this can be done before the run and again after the run is complete. By marking the thought before stepping into the conversation, we gain focus we may otherwise miss.

*One word*—A third thought for journaling is to consider the finding and refining of a single thought, a single phrase, or even a single word. Much of the Psalms are written as poetry. This can be done for many reasons, but even the many of us who lack poetic skill can learn something from the practice. There is power in one very refined thought. God may not be interested in lengthy dialogue but may rather be impressing upon us a single thought. This single thought can be communicated in countless ways, but one way may be in the crafting of a simple but memorable phrase we carry with us. The thought or phrase may not have the artistic quality of words from a trained poet, but if this phrase is birthed from authentic conversation with God, it will be worthy of the work it takes to get to it. The phrase may come in a single sitting, or it may take weeks or months. Either way, if we allow our journal to be a place where we not only pour ourselves out to God, but also refine a few chosen words, we will discover those thoughts from God that carry great significance and are not forgotten with the turn of a page.

### *Carry the Conversation*

This third and final suggestion is simply an acknowledgment that a conversation with God need not end. We err when we divide our spiritual life from the rest of our lives. These Conversations with God exercises are meant to inspire our conversations with God and not encapsulate them. Yes, set aside focused time to converse with God; this is critical, but view these as the beginning of the conversation. This is not to say we must keep the conversation going as if we're with a friend with whom silence is awkward, but it is to say that God is not interested in being compartmentalized. When we cut off our prayer life from the rest of our lives, we may miss out on the more profound moments with God as he speaks into the daily realities of our lives. In an effort to inspire this, consider making the Scripture memory note cards highly accessible throughout your days. As helpful as it is to review these thoughts in set aside times, its greatest power will be when we remind ourselves of God's voice while riding the ups and downs of any given day.

## **MORPH ME**

What follows is a brief Morph Me exercise to create a personalized plan for your conversations with God. This plan is important. There is no gain in reading about a conversation with God if we then fail to actually do it. Of all the things you could gain from this *Morph* experience, the current module and the modules that follow, the deepening of your passion for God's presence transcends all else. Yes, you could cruise through these readings and exercises and learn a few things, but if you miss God's presence, the time and energy invested will be wasted. If we are to morph, we must be active, and this must not be another kick. Scripture tells us "*it is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings*" (Proverbs 25:2). God has purpose in the process. His voice is stunning, but it must be sought. It is ours to search out, to discover, to embrace, and to experience. It is when we do this that we discover the strength of this sword, in the hands of the Spirit, as the Spirit reveals the "*thoughts and attitudes of the heart*" (Hebrews 4:12).

# THE PLAN



## INTRODUCTION

Consider relationships. What makes a relationship strong? What makes a relationship weak? Much could be said, but without question, strong relationships spell love *T-I-M-E*. Ask the elderly couple holding hands in the park, ask the friends who have known each other for decades, ask the co-workers who truly work as a team, and common to each is a relationship forged by participants investing time in the others.

Press a little further, and more will be learned.

In short, the investment of time does not just happen. Relationships built on a passive approach are relationships that are not built. Strong relationships build through the investment of time in the other person's life because the time has been planned. The elderly couple converses at dinner—every night—exceptions are rare. The friendship spanning decades changed when college was over, but they continue to meet—every August—exceptions are rare. The co-workers who work as a team have consistent off-site meetings—every quarter—exceptions are rare. Time is never available unless time is made. The investment of time takes planning.

What's true of our relationships with people is true of our relationship with God.

If we are going to cultivate ongoing and authentic relationships with God, then we must invest time. If this investment of time is going to happen, we must be thoughtful. The exercise that follows is designed to help plan intentional time with God. Planning does not mean you won't periodically break your plan or that you are confined by your plan. It's your plan, and you'll change it as circumstances change. But without a plan, there will always be something else you can do.

For purposes of this exercise, we will consider two forms of time.

### **Daily Time**

This is the time invested in the normal rhythms of life. At the person-to-person level, this is family dinner, lunch every Tuesday with a friend, or a couple's date night. Planning daily time with God will ensure an increase in this time truly happening.

### **Breakout Time**

This is a periodic time when you're given the freedom to do and enjoy what you most want to do. At the person-to-person level, this is the yearly vacation or the quarterly retreat with the team. Considering what you could do to cultivate your relationship with God on an open afternoon or during a time when the pressure is off will enrich your relationship greatly.

## WHO ARE YOU?

Before creating your plan, consider your uniqueness. Do two things:

- 1) Check the descriptions that resemble you.
- 2) Of those you check, as best you can, rank them.

\_\_\_\_\_ **ARTIST:** Artists most naturally think in pictures and metaphors and often connect with God best through sensory stimulation. The sounds of instruments, the smells of incense, and the sights of the cathedral all draw the heart of an artist upward. Artists are strongly influenced by environment, their physical setting, and are wise to be mindful of this when entering into conversations with God. Artists also discover God through the work of their hands. Through painting or photography or other artistic endeavors, they both celebrate God's creative power and uncover new spiritual depths through their work.

\_\_\_\_\_ **ATHLETE:** Athletes prefer movement and often connect with God best during physical activity. A brisk run or a vigorous workout at the gym serve to release energy and clear the mind in ways that allow them to hear God's voice more clearly. Oppositely, attempting to connect with God through quiet prayer or still meditation may feel initially odd to athletes but may also be something they benefit from, so long as it is done in smaller doses, especially at first. Too much, and the athlete will punt.

\_\_\_\_\_ **CONTEMPLATIVE:** Contemplatives are happiest when deep in thought and often connect with God best through reflective meditation. They are often discerning and keenly aware of their surroundings. In contrast to the athlete, the contemplative experiences the greatest clarity in a place of stillness and quiet. This tranquility affords them the freedom to openly explore the nuances and trace the contours of any spiritual truth or thought that comes to mind.

\_\_\_\_\_ **MUSIC LOVER:** Music lovers are often musicians but not always. They are those who know the difference between music that is cliché and music that is captivating. No doubt they have favorite genres, but more than the genre, they appreciate good music. They do not love music just for the sake of distracting noise; they love music because it touches something deep within them. Thoughtful music lovers will intentionally select particular songs for their time with God that inspire the kind of connection for which their hearts are most hungry. Even more, for those with skills of their own, time with God will often include writing and creating musical expressions of their own.

\_\_\_\_\_ **OUTDOOR ENTHUSIAST:** The outdoor enthusiast is most at home in the great outdoors and often connects with God best through experiences of nature. As with any description, they come in different stripes. There are those who prefer arduous hikes up a mountain, and there are those who prefer quiet walks in a garden. Either way, the heart of the outdoor enthusiast swells at the sights and sounds associated with breaking out of confinement and into fresh air. The wide open view from a lake, the tree-lined trail, the intricate detail of a tiny rose bud, experiencing and recognizing these majestic moments inspire the outdoor enthusiast toward thoughts of God.

\_\_\_\_\_ **STUDENT:** Students are characterized by an insatiable hunger for knowledge and are driven to understand truth at deeper and deeper levels. Accordingly, they often connect with God best through study of Scripture. Students are rarely satisfied with simply being told *that* some spiritual reality is true. Rather, they have a great need to understand *why* it is true and

## THE PLAN

how it fits with other spiritual truths. Students enjoy deep theological reflection and understanding Scripture in its full and original context.

\_\_\_\_\_ **WRITER:** Writers may or may not write page after page, but they revel in refining their thoughts through words. For them, it is not just the unloading of words on a page but the ping of a finely tuned phrase or the arc of a well-crafted paragraph. They love the stringing together of words, and when they converse with God, they will search for the exact phrase that captures not just the content but the tone of the thought. Like woodworkers shaping a form by sanding away the roughness, writers sand phrases to smooth out their thoughts. Through the process, they not only express their own voice, but increasingly, they hear the voice of God.

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**THE PLAN**

## BRAINSTORM

With your uniqueness in mind...

- 1) Brainstorm ways you could cultivate your relationship with God. Resist analyzing the ideas. This is just brainstorming. Planning comes next.
- 2) Based on the nature of the idea, place it in either the Daily Plan or Breakout Plan column. (Definitions of *daily* and *breakout* are on the cover page of this exercise.)

### DAILY PLAN

Examples for an athlete / outdoor enthusiast:

- Work on Scripture memory as I ride the exercise bike at the gym.
- Talk to God about the daily Scripture readings as I go for my nightly run.

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### BREAKOUT PLAN

Examples for an athlete / outdoor enthusiast:

- Go hiking alone one weekend and use this time to talk to God.
- Plan a camping trip with my Running Partners. Bring my guitar for worship together.

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## THE PLAN

## DAILY PLAN

With your brainstorming in mind, create a Daily Plan. A good plan will reflect the realities of your life and the realities of your uniqueness. A few things to know...

- ▶ Each week you will be given a Conversations with God guide.
- ▶ The Scripture Cards, included with your notebook, offer a simple way to track your daily Scripture readings and Scripture memory. This information is also found on the website.
- ▶ Make your plan realistic rather than idealistic. A little bit over a long time will bring great depth.

### WEEKLY:

#### 1. CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD INTRODUCTION:

Choose a day of the week to read the Conversations with God guide and begin each new week: \_\_\_\_\_

### DAILY:

#### 2. READ:

Choose a time of day you will read the daily Scripture reading:

\_\_\_\_\_

Choose a location conducive to the realities of your daily life and the uniqueness of your spiritual personality:

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#### 3. MEMORIZE:

Choose a time of day you will review the Scripture memory cards (while running, before bed, first thing in the morning, at lunch, while doing dishes, while driving, etc.):

\_\_\_\_\_

#### 4. MEDITATE:

Choose a time of day you will meditate on what you've been reading and move into an authentic conversation with God. It may or may not be the same times as one of the above. Balance the uniqueness of you with the realities of life:

\_\_\_\_\_

## THE PLAN

## **BREAKOUT PLAN**

With your uniqueness in mind...

- ▶ Plan at least one breakout time.
- ▶ Consider a monthly, quarterly, or yearly tradition you may want to implement.

Note: If planning your breakout times feels burdensome, then reconsider either your ideas or your timing. Breakout time should be highly reflective of your uniqueness and something you look forward to doing.

### **ONE PLANNED BREAKOUT TIME**

### **A MONTHLY, QUARTERLY, OR YEARLY TRADITION**

## **THE PLAN**

Week Two  
Conversations with God

# THE PSALMS



## INTRODUCTION

Each week the daily Scripture readings will come from different areas of Scripture. This Conversations with God page will give a brief introduction to the readings along with insights for cultivating authentic conversations with God.

## READ

Central in Scripture is a deeply passionate collection of writings: the Psalms. The Psalms were in large part written by David, and David is not shy with his heart. These writings are often poetic, but they are not purified. Many refer to them as David's journal. We read of struggle and hardship, victory and joy.

We begin with the Psalms because they offer a rich example of conversing with God from our hearts. As you read them, listen for your own heart, your own struggle, and your own joys. See if you can join into the particular psalm you're reading and make it a starting place for your own conversation with God. It's not uncommon for a psalm to chronicle the working out of the writer's own struggle. The psalm may begin with the writer's frustration and move slowly toward worship.

As you read each psalm, consider not just the content but the artistic expression. There's power in a carefully chosen word or a well-crafted phrase. You'll read this differently than you would read a biography, a news article, or even a novel. With poetry, you experience rich metaphors, figurative language, and poignant emotional expression. In short, you read for inspiration more than you do for information.

## MEMORIZE

It's not uncommon for a book or spiritual exercise to suggest a few passages of Scripture to memorize at the end of a chapter. Commonly, though, the suggestion is disregarded. We turn the page convinced the verses are a mere suggestion and not important to our reason for reading the book or doing the exercise, and oftentimes, this is true. Such is not the case with *Morph*. Scripture memory is critical to this experience. This may or may not make sense now, but as you move through this experience, if you truly engage this discipline, you will see the great returns on your investment of time and energy to truly memorize these brief passages.

The Scripture cards included with *Morph* make this exercise simple. Take note of the review system on the back of each card. If it's not helpful to you, feel free to ignore it, but as you have more passages committed to memory, this simple review system will keep previous passages from falling off your radar.

This week's memory verses:

### THE PSALMS

*And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him (Hebrews 11:6).*

*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).*

## **MEDITATE**

Among other things, the Psalms model two important suggestions for cultivating authentic conversations with God: 1) Pour out your heart, 2) Consider journaling.

### *Your heart*

In Scripture, we are told to “*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you*” (1 Peter 5:7). What are you worried about? What has you fearful? What did you discover about your desires in the Heartstorming exercise that might inform your conversation with God? Mechanical prayers lack heart and passion. Follow the psalmist’s lead and pour out your heart to God.

### *Journaling*

You may not be the writing type, but the writing type is not needed for journaling. Journaling need not be the writing of lengthy entries in a leather-bound notebook. Rather, pick up an inexpensive journal and begin by limiting yourself to a single page. What’s on your heart? What’s on your mind? What do you hear God saying to you through the passage you read or memorized, and how are you wrestling with that? There is no magic formula. God simply wants to hear from you. If, after journaling for a while, you find it doesn’t work for you, then scrap it. But many will find this a powerful exercise.

Most important, you are encouraged to make your meditations with God highly personalized. Talk to God. Listen to God. What is on your heart and mind? What is on God’s heart and mind? Resist the urge to simply check the box and move on. Rather, carry the conversation with God through your day, and listen for his voice as you go.

## **THE PSALMS**

## Week Two

### Conversations with People

# SMALL GROUP GUIDE



## OPENING QUESTIONS

As a group, read the following scenarios. Pause no more than fifteen seconds between scenarios for participants to write their instinctive response on a scrap piece of paper. After completing, have participants share and explain their answers.

### FIRST SCENARIO—THE COMPETITION

You work for a successful technology company. The company holds a competition to inspire greater performance in your department. You compete against the seventy-five other people across the country who hold a similar position to yourself.

#### *First Option*

The competition continues for three months, and at the end of the competition it is announced that you won. You are awarded \$6,000 and have gained the attention and respect of the entire company.

#### *Second Option*

The competition continues for three months, and at the end of the competition the results are posted and you came in fifteenth place. You are awarded \$12,000, but beyond the money, there is very little recognition for your work.

### SECOND SCENARIO—THE SWITCH

You must switch places with a historical figure. You will be this person for the best three months of his or her life. Who would you prefer to be: Elvis Presley, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, or your very own grandmother. Why?

### THIRD SCENARIO—THE SWITCH REVISED

You must switch places with a historical figure. You will be this person for his or her entire life. Who would you prefer to be: Elvis Presley, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, or your very own grandmother. Why?

### FOURTH SCENARIO—THE VACATION

You are given an unlimited budget for either of the following two vacations. Which would you choose and why?

### *The First Vacation*

You will spend one month on a quiet but well-resourced island with close friends you enjoy. The water is blue and the beach is pristine. It is a beachfront cottage with a hammock, boat, and books.

### *The Second Vacation*

You will spend one month traveling the world by private jet with close friends you enjoy. You can go to the most exotic and interesting places on the globe, but you cannot stay in any single place more than three days.

## **DEBRIEF QUESTION FOR SCENARIO RESPONSES**

Week one's reading referenced Proverbs 4:23: "*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.*" What do your responses to the scenarios just discussed reveal about your heart? What is it that you *truly* want? Why?

## **WEEK TWO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

### ▶ Morph Me

Which personalities did you identify with most (artist, athlete, music lover, etc.)?

How did your identified personality types influence your plan?

Spend time sharing your plans with each other.

### ▶ Conversations with God

How have your Conversations with God gone so far?

Have you engaged the Scripture memory yet? If yes, how has it been? If no, what's keeping you back?

As a group, open to Psalm 127 and read it aloud no less than three times. After reading it, discuss what you hear? How might God be speaking to you through this psalm?

## **BIG PICTURE QUESTION**

- ▶ What has been most significant for you so far from this entire experience?

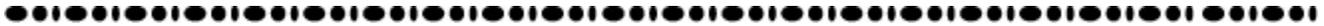
## **PRAYER**

- ▶ As a Small Group, or in Running Partners, discuss the latest in your lives and pray for each other.

## **SMALL GROUP GUIDE**

## Week Three

# OVERVIEW



DAILY CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD	
INTRODUCTION (page 71)	
READ Day 1: Matthew 5 Day 2: Matthew 6 Day 3: Matthew 7 Day 4: Luke 6:20-49 Day 5: Luke 11:1-13 Day 6: Luke 12:13-34	MEMORIZE <u>Matthew 6:24</u> "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." <u>Matthew 6:33-34</u> "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." MEDITATE

WEEKLY EXERCISES						
VIDEO (visit website)	●	READING (page 61)	●	MORPH ME (page 69)	●	CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE (page 73)

WEB EXTRAS	
Check out RELATED RESOURCES (visit website)	Online <i>Morph</i> community SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS (visit website)

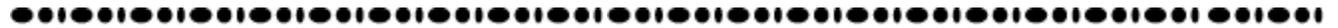
## WEEKLY OVERVIEW

## **WEEKLY OVERVIEW**

Week 3, p. 60

Week Three

# THE SEARCH FOR [SECURITY]



## HEARTS SET FREE

*Command.*

What goes through your mind and heart when you read the word *command*?

It's a sturdy word.

We can't honestly say we like it.

We don't like to be commanded.

We don't treasure commands. We don't enjoy commands. We don't seek commands. We avoid commands. We skirt commands. We look for ways around commands.

*Freedom.*

What goes through your mind and heart when you read the word *freedom*?

It's a liberating word.

We can honestly admit we love it.

We love freedom.

We treasure freedom. We enjoy freedom. We seek freedom. We don't avoid freedom. We don't skirt freedom. We don't look for ways around freedom.

Commands and freedom. Freedom and commands.

The two words seem in opposition. They don't look like friends. We wouldn't expect them to hang out together. But Scripture has an odd way of pairing unlikely companions.

Consider the following...

*I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free (Psalm 119:32).*

That's odd.

A heart set *free*. We like that. Running in the path of God's *commands*. We're not sure we like that.

Freedom? Yes.

Commands? No.

THE SEARCH FOR [SECURITY]

But the two are paired. Oddly coupled, some might think. And take note, it's that word again: *heart*. The psalmist runs to God's commands, "For you have set my heart free."

Where did we begin?

*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).*

We're to take care of our hearts. Our hearts drive our lives. Now we hear the heart experiences liberation by running to God's commands.

There's something in this we must understand.

## **THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT**

We don't like rules. Commandments don't exactly turn our cranks. They often come in thick books with dreaded detail: covenants for the neighborhood, regulations for the football league, codes of conduct for the university. Yuck. They don't inspire us. They don't speak to our souls. They don't beckon us to read and reread.

Christ took a different approach. Profundity is often found in the simple. Christ made it simple.

All God's commands hang on two hooks.

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).*

Love God. Love People.

That's profound. There's something in that. What is it? Let's get after *Love God*.

Why love God? Take a step back for a moment. As profound as it sounds, it's also odd. Why would God command us to love him? Is he some sort of insecure God wishing the world would just give him some attention? Why look to the people you've created and demand their love?

## **GOD'S COMPETITION**

To get after these questions, consider another odd thought. For a moment, consider God's competition.

Competition?

Yes. Competition.

There are obvious contenders for God's greatest competition. What might we love rather than love God? Christ said we're to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. What else might capture the attention of our heart, soul, and mind?

How about money?

There's no question, money captures the imagination of hearts and dreams. Money gains the full and undivided attention of souls and minds.

## **THE SEARCH FOR [SECURITY]**

What will it be?

*Love Almighty God or Love the almighty dollar.*

Christ paired the two...

*No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money (Matthew 6:24).*

Notice the word *love*?

Why do people *love* money?

A list of reasons could be considered. Somewhere near the top of the list would be something about *security, personal well-being*. Money is loved because it offers a degree of security.

Let's evaluate this competition of God's.

Scripture is not so naive as to belittle money. Contrary to popular opinion, Scripture reveals a great deal of street wisdom regarding money. Much more is addressed than just giving money away. We're told how to make it, spend it, save it, use it, and yes, give it. We're told that money will be involved in everything we do (Ecclesiastes 10:19). The most noble of causes involves a budget. Money is neither good nor bad. Like all tools it's a matter of how it's used. Money is often used for great good in the world.

But what happens when financial security is our ultimate security? What happens when it's the foundation of our lives? What happens when we love money in a manner that only God must be loved?

When we do this, money is effectively our god.

The result?

Something deep within us knows we're vulnerable.

Why?

Because there's never enough money to bring impenetrable security. There's always something, someone, somehow that could cause us to lose it all. There are countless needs money can't meet. Money is loved for the security it brings, but there are holes in that security that breed a great deal of insecurity.

## **FRIENDS**

*"Certainly not me; I'd never be so greedy as to make money my god. I saw previous generations do that. I'm not buying into it."*

How about friends?

Friends?

Yes. Friends.

But friends are real. Friends are important. Friends give life meaning and purpose. Even more, the second greatest command is to love people.

True. Right. Good.

Dangerous.

What happens when ultimate security is wrapped up in finding the ideal spouse? Is our well-being resting in the hands of a strong relational world? Is life finally secure when we have friends down the street, a spouse in bed next to us, and kids in the back seat?

It's clear how money can effectively become our god; relationships hold the same potential. We've all experienced friends who cling to us in a way that doesn't feel healthy. We've witnessed parents whose identity is wrapped up in their children. Maybe we've been that friend or parent. Maybe we've looked to others for something they just weren't capable of giving. We hoped they'd satisfy something in us they just were not capable of satisfying.

What's that about?

Make a friend into a god and the friendship will be terribly disappointing. Turn a spouse into a god and the marriage will suffer, if it makes it at all. Squeeze prospective spouses too tight and they run for the hills.

Why?

We instinctively know we're not qualified to do the god-thing.

Yes, we were made to be in relationship with others, but others were not made to be god.

A friend? Yes.

A god? No.

Why love God? Many reasons. Here's one...

We love those things we trust.

Our ultimate trust is our god.

## THE HOOK

Christ said this command to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, is a hook upon which other commands hang. Consider another command. Consider the first command of the Ten Commandments.

*You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:3).*

Fascinating. Do you see it? It's virtually the same command as "*Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind.*" When we love something else with all our heart, soul, and mind, what have we done? Put simply, we've placed another god before God.

So is God's command for us to love him an indication of his insecurity? That seems unlikely. Might it be that God has our best interests in mind? Could it be God longs to see us build our lives upon a foundation that is worthy of being a foundation? Could it be that one expression of loving God as our God is letting God be our ultimate security, and God knows other forms of security leave us vulnerable?

It's yours to answer.

## THE SEARCH FOR [SECURITY]

Let's go deeper.

Let's consider a scenario. It's just one example. Thousands could be listed. The circumstances may differ. The result is quite common.

Call it *The Snap*.

## THE SNAP

Dad opens the door. He's greeted by a couple of kids he loves more than he dreamed possible. They're bouncing. They're filled with life. They're thrilled by his presence. He laughs.

It takes mere minutes. Seemingly nothing prompted it, but it happens.

Snap!

The kids weren't exactly behaving, but the response is way out of proportion.

Mom cringes. Dad retreats. Something's off.

As he changes out of work clothes he whispers a quiet prayer, "God, why did I do that? What's wrong with me? I love those kids? Why did I snap?" The thoughts continue as he reenters reality. His mind goes back to work.

It wasn't a bad day. It wasn't a good day. It was just a day.

And therein lies the problem. It was just a day. Any old day. Now he's home. Now they're dancing and screaming and tugging and wanting. But it was just a day. A nothing-lost-nothing-gained-kind-of-day.

But he longs for gain.

He's nervous.

No, he's scared.

Is his work ever going to deliver the life he really wants? Is his job ever going to do what he really wants it to do? Is he ever going to be at a place where the money is real money, the respect is real respect, the rewards are real rewards?

It was just another day.

It takes time. Eventually he identifies a nagging question: Is his work trustworthy? Can his work be trusted to deliver what he wants it to deliver?

We can't answer this question for him, but we can make a couple of observations.

First, maybe the frustration is legitimate. Maybe he's undervalued, underutilized, and underpaid. It happens all the time. It happens to most everyone.

Second, maybe the frustration is *not* legitimate. Maybe he's looking to his job to deliver something this job, or the next job, or any other job will never deliver. Maybe he's looking to it to bring ultimate security, ultimate satisfaction, ultimate meaning. If so, the job's not the problem. The job's doing precisely what a job should do. And more importantly, it's not doing what a job will never do.

It's not being God.

Snap.

## GOD OF OUR SECURITY

Let's come full circle. Let's pull this one together by listening closely to Scripture's counsel.

Three key passages:

First... *"Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life"* (Proverbs 4:23). Our lives are driven by our desires. We must protect and be aware of our desires.

Second... *"I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free"* (Psalm 119:32). Guarding our hearts involves listening to the commands of the Creator of our hearts. These commands are designed to liberate.

Third... *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment."* (Matthew 22:37-40). The command to love God, among other things, is a command to let God be God of our security, the center of our trust. Our hearts, our lives, our beings, we are designed to love something, to put something at the center of our trust. Whatever is at that center, that job, that bank account, that relationship, it is effectively our god. They are not wrong things, they are often good things, but they are misplaced. Rival gods, God's competition, are insufficient to truly be God.

## DISSONANCE AND RESONANCE

Remember dissonance? Remember resonance? Dissonance is the result of clashing sounds. Resonance is the result of sounds working together.

We noted previously...

Resonance is when our stated desires are a healthy expression of our deepest desires. They work together. They resonate. Dissonance is when our stated desires are an insufficient expression of our deepest desires. They clash. They create dissonance.

Dissonance is also found when we instinctively know something about our stated trust. We're trusting in something to deliver true security. We look to this thing, this opportunity, this being to bring us the kind of security we were designed to want. The desire is good and legitimate. But dissonance comes when we instinctively know the limitations of the object of our trust. We entrust ourselves, our well-being, but we instinctively know there's legitimate vulnerability. The search for security, the place where we put our trust, is one of several places where dissonance and resonance are clearly seen.

## HEARTSTORMING FOR SECURITY

In our previous Morph Me section we identified desires and sought to trace those desires down to more deeply rooted desires. We grouped these desires and then used the "Why?" question to go from a simple desire to the deep desire driving the surface desire. No two people's pages will look exactly alike, but it's not unusual to have at least one grouping of desires have something to do with security. To be human is to have a deeply rooted desire for security. Even those with a strong bent toward extreme risk or radical adventure have their own form of security; there is a certain kind of life they desire and protect. When the high risk and high adventure person sees his or her passion at risk of expression, their desire to secure their life is clearly seen.

This desire for security, in its varying forms, is healthy and to be expected. Problems arise not from the presence of this desire, but from how the desire is expressed. What do we grab hold of for

security? What do we make our ultimate trust? Is it truly qualified to give the security for which we long? Or is it a partial fit at best?

Partial fits create dissonance.

*“I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free” (Psalm 119:32). Might we safely paraphrase this verse that initially seemed like such an odd coupling of the words *commands* and *freedom*? Hear it with a broader perspective: *I run in the path of your commands, the command to love God with all my heart, and soul, and mind because I want a heart that resonates; I want a heart fulfilled in a trustworthy God.**

So now it's time to go deep.

It's time to get personal.

It's time to carefully and prayerfully do that thing we are to do *above all else*.

The pages that follow facilitate an honest consideration of our hearts. You will be encouraged to consider your heart's desire for security. You'll then be encouraged to talk with God and each other about your discoveries.

Revel in these exercises.

Linger and listen.

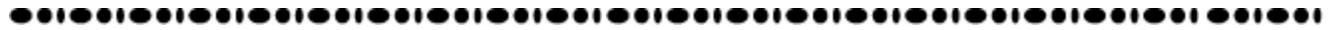
Let God's Spirit speak to you and guide you as you consider your person, your God, and your heart.

**THE SEARCH FOR SECURITY**

Week 3, Reading, p. 68

# HEARTSTORMING

## Part II



### HONEST ASSESSMENT

The exercise that follows is designed to give an honest assessment of what a fulfilled desire will or will not deliver. Specifically, you are encouraged to consider desires related to trust and security. This exercise is very simple, but when considered prayerfully and carefully, it is profound and important.

As you'll discover, the purpose is not to find desires that are *right* or *wrong*. In this category, the desires will often prove highly legitimate. The purpose is to give consideration to the potential for misplaced trust. Jesus himself speaks to both the legitimacy of certain desires while also underscoring their potential to be misplaced. In one place we hear him pray, "Give us today our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). In another place we hear him teach, "Man does not live on bread alone" (Matthew 4:4). He doesn't say, "Forget bread...who needs bread?" Rather, through these multiple statements, he guides us to consider the desires of our hearts. What's central? What's peripheral? What's primary? What's secondary? Carry these thoughts with you.

And here again, color outside the lines.

## FIRST STEP—IDENTIFY A SECURITY GROUPING

- Flip back to the previous Morph Me section found in Week One.
- Look at the third step, *Theming*, and identify any themes of *Security*.
- If there isn't a group dealing with *Security*, give honest consideration to whether or not the lack of this category is a true reflection of your heart or just an area you've yet to identify. Consider other groupings and see if any of them were taken deep enough or if you have desires not yet identified.
- Once identified, keep a finger on that page and come back here.

## SECOND STEP—IDENTIFY WAYS YOU'RE SEEKING SECURITY

Glance at the page where you unloaded your desires and consider those desires grouped into a security grouping. Consider those desires, and then consider other ways this desire may be seen in your life. List these after "by."

I am searching for security by...

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## THIRD STEP—TWO QUESTIONS

If everything is gained after the "by," what will these desires truly deliver?

If everything is gained after the "by," what won't these desires truly deliver?

## FOURTH STEP—DISSONANCE OR RESONANCE

Is this group likely to experience dissonance or resonance (satisfaction or frustration)? Why?

# SERMON ON THE MOUNT

**READ**

Picture the scene...

Christ and his closest followers are gathered on a hillside with a crowd of people from the surrounding area. These are not the elite of society. These are farmers and fishermen, normal people looking to live out their lives on the shores of a beautiful blue lake known as the Sea of Galilee. Jesus notes the crowd and finds a spot on the hillside to sit down and engage the people around him. What happens next changed the world.

This hillside teaching is commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. It's referenced, even by those who do not follow Christ, as both profound and insightful. Profound teaching is often found not in the complex, not in lengthy explanations, not in confusing language, but in the simple. Jesus used simple and memorable statements, and oftentimes stories and metaphors, to communicate depth of insight to common people who were ignored by the celebrated teachers of his day. Interesting that those celebrated and complex teachers are now long forgotten, but the teachings of Christ continue to inspire and challenge us over two thousand years later.

As you read the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in both Matthew and Luke, you'll notice many things. For starters, you'll notice the teachings are written as a series of distinct nuggets of wisdom covering a variety of topics. As you read and later meditate on these topics, listen for themes that unite these statements of Christ. What was his passion? What motivated him? What did he care about? Yes, themes will not always be readily apparent, especially on the first read. The more you read the teachings of Christ, though, the more his heart, passion, and mission will emerge. Understand this passion, embrace this passion, enjoy this passion, and you too will be changed by this teaching that has changed so many before you.

You'll also notice differences between Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount and Luke's abbreviated account, so much so that scholars differ in their opinion on whether Matthew and Luke are recording the same event. Whether the two accounts record a single event or two events is inconsequential, but it does point to an important insight for reading the teachings of Christ. Christ's disciples did not sit with pen in hand and transcribe his every word. Rather, they followed him from town to town for several years hearing him teach again and again. By the end of this time they would know his teachings well, as Christ repeated his core teachings and themes. Later, under guidance of the Holy Spirit, they collected the teachings of Christ and transcribed them for our benefit. This perspective is reinforced by this week's final two readings, sections of Christ's teaching not considered part of the Sermon on the Mount but sounding strikingly similar. Clearly, Christ had consistent themes he'd repeat in varying settings and gatherings. Hearing how he addressed similar teachings in these various settings not only offers interesting nuances to his teachings, but it also underscores the importance of these repeated themes. We'd be wise to carefully consider teachings offered by Christ not just once but on multiple occasions.

Finally, remember that this is not just reading but is intended to inspire ongoing conversations with God. People in Jesus' day would travel from miles around to hear the great Teacher speak. Likely, few had the awesome privilege of dialoguing with him one on one about their own personal questions or troubles. And yet today, we have this astounding opportunity always before us. The same Jesus who climbed the hillside beside the Sea of Galilee is available to us on a moment-by-moment basis in prayer. Are you puzzled by what you read? Ask Christ to explain as you dig in and study. Do you wonder how a teaching might apply to your own

**SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

situation? Ask Christ for counsel. Do not let this great opportunity to talk one on one with the great Teacher pass you by as you read.

## MEMORIZE

This week's memory passages come from the Sermon on the Mount and address the pressing realities of life. Consider them in their entire context (Matthew 6:19-34). Without question, this section of the Sermon on the Mount gives great cause for pause as it deals with aspects of life that commonly wear us down.

This week's memory verses:

*No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money (Matthew 6:24).*

*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own (Matthew 6:33-34).*

## MEDITATE

As mentioned, Jesus often taught spiritual truths through physical metaphor. Through stories and comparisons to daily life, he made the intangible spiritual realm understandable and accessible. In much the same way, bringing physical metaphors from daily life into our prayer language can greatly enhance our communication with God, making our own complex thoughts and emotions tangible and easier to express.

For instance, suppose you have a particularly hard day at work and you feel as though life is closing in on you. Perhaps this emotional feeling reminds you of the physical feeling you once felt in the middle of a crowded concert. You might start a conversation with God like this: "Today at work, I felt like I did at the concert when strangers were pressing in all around me and jostling me in every direction. I felt suffocated and threatened. I felt out of control today just like I did in the middle of the crowd. Why did my day go that way? What can I hear from you and from your Scripture that would bring feelings of freedom and liberation?"

Or on days when you have extended time to talk with God, consider the following options:

- If you are artistically inclined, express the metaphor through your art. You might first draw how you feel now (e.g., tightly bound) and then how you want to feel (e.g., open and free). Invite God to collaborate with you in this artistic process.
- If you are athletically inclined, consider if there are songs or passages of Scripture that remind you of your present circumstances, and take these with you on a run or to the gym. Or consider using the metaphor of physical exercise to talk with God about how you feel spiritually and the endurance you may need to push through life right now.
- If you enjoy a change of scenery, go to a place that is itself metaphorical for your current situation. For example, if you long to feel open and free, you might go to a place with a wide open view of nature and talk to God about what you feel in this environment.

As always, remember that your conversations with God should be highly personalized to your own situation. What is most important is that you continue to cultivate an authentic relationship with God through daily connection. Talk to God about what is truly on your heart and do so in a way that is most natural for you. If you find it helpful to incorporate metaphor into your prayer language, use it; if not, leave it and blaze your own trail.

## SERMON ON THE MOUNT

## Week Three

### Conversations with People

# RUNNING PARTNERS' GUIDE



## INITIATE MEETING

- ▶ Designate someone to pray. Before praying...
  - Read the Running Partner Values (page 15) aloud.
  - Sit silently for thirty seconds to individually pray and to slow yourselves down.

## READING AND MORPH ME

- ▶ Who or what is God's greatest competition for ultimate trust in your own life?
- ▶ Read aloud the section of the reading titled *The Snap*. How would love for God help this dad? What area of your life holds the greatest potential for *snapping* in a similar manner?
- ▶ The Morph Me exercise asked you to consider areas of your life you look to for security. What did you learn about yourself from this exercise?
- ▶ Did this exercise make you more or less inspired to pursue God in your life? Why?

## CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD

- ▶ What most has your attention from any of the following...
  - Psalms
  - Sermon on the Mount
  - Scripture memory passages
- ▶ **Foreshadowing:** In two weeks, the Conversations with People guide will have a brief game to review Scripture memory cards together. Make an effort to be ready for that time.

## SUMMARY QUESTION

- ▶ Scan Weeks 1 through 3. Have each person briefly state their most important insight so far.

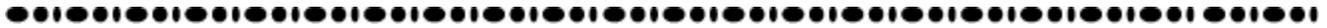
## PRAYER

- ▶ Pray for each other. As you do, pray for the realities in each person's daily life, but be certain to pray for each person in light of the conversation you just had. Pray for God's guidance as you discover more about him and more about yourselves.

**RUNNING PARTNER GUIDE**

Week 3, Conversation with People, p. 74

# OVERVIEW



DAILY CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD	
INTRODUCTION (page 95)	
READ Day 1: Ecclesiastes 1 Day 2: Ecclesiastes 2 Day 3: Ecclesiastes 3 Day 4: Ecclesiastes 4 Day 5: Ecclesiastes 5 Day 6: Ecclesiastes 6	MEMORIZE <u>Exodus 20:3</u> "You shall have no other gods before me." <u>Psalm 27:4</u> "One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple."  MEDITATE

WEEKLY EXERCISES						
VIDEO (visit website)	●	READING (page 77)	●	MORPH ME (page 87)	●	CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE (page 97)

WEB EXTRAS	
Check out RELATED RESOURCES (visit website)	Online <i>Morph</i> community SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS (visit website)

## **WEEKLY OVERVIEW**

Week 4, p. 76



More time?

Yes...no.

More adventure?

Yes...no.

More acceptance?

Yes...no.

More food?

Yes...no.

More drink?

Yes...no.

More admiration?

Yes...no.

So you want more money, sex, time, adventure, acceptance, food, drink, admiration? You want more of all that?

I want more *than* all that.

More *than* all that?

Oh yeah.

You're hard to please.

Silence. No response. Mental wheels spinning. An honest thought is finally given...

I'm impossible to please.

Impossible to please?

Feels that way.

Feels that way?

Yes. Feels unsatisfiable.

Unsatisfiable?

Yes.

Is that a word?

Silence. No response. Mental wheels spinning. An honest thought is finally given...

I don't know.

## **DEEP DOWN**

So this is it?

Twenty-five years of education.

Kindergarten through graduate school.

And this is it.

**THE SEARCH FOR [\_\_\_\_\_]**

I sit in a windowless cube wanting something more.

So this is it?

Twenty-five years of climbing the ladder.

Entry-level clerk to CEO.

And this is it.

I sit in a window-filled office wanting something more.

So this is it?

Twenty-five years of raising children.

Diapers to diplomas.

And this is it.

I sit in a quiet house wanting something more.

So this is it?

Twenty-five years upon twenty-five years upon twenty-five years.

Cradle to the edge of the grave.

And this is it.

I sit in my rocking chair wanting something more.

More?

Yes, more.

More of what?

Honest answer. Uncensored answer. Deep-down-reveal-the-soul-kind-of-answer.

We don't know. We just know we want more.

What's with that? What's with the insatiable hunger for more? If we're to address issues of our heart, if we're to guard our heart as the wellspring of life, we must go toe to toe with this drive, this passion.

## ONE THING

Ever read a statement so shocking you're not sure it's true? Maybe it's a statistic. Maybe it's another person's conviction. Maybe it's a perspective on life. Scripture contains a few shocking statements. Some readers embrace them without thinking, but we're a thinking people, and there's an appropriate place for healthy wrestling.

David made a shocking statement. It's one with which we must wrestle.

He was a warrior. He was a poet. He was a leader. He was a musician.

Much of the book we call *Psalms* flowed from David's pen. One such psalm contains a statement that simply must not be missed. We'll take it slowly, in two parts.

David writes this...

*One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek... (Psalm 27:4).*

One thing. Just one thing.

THE SEARCH FOR [\_\_\_\_\_]

With one hand on this statement and the other on our insatiable hunger for more, how can we understand this man's desire for just one thing? As we consider our own list of desires, is it possible to say we really just want one thing? Truly, if his pen were in your hand, would you be able to authentically complete the statement? Might you scratch it out and write *Three things I ask of the Lord*? What could be your one thing? God grants you a wish. What do you wish for? How do you complete the sentence?

One of two things must be true of David. Either he has very low expectations for life. Or if he genuinely just wants one thing, then this one thing he desires is deeper and grander and greater than anything we could ever imagine.

One other thought to consider before we discover David's completion of this phrase: How might "One thing..." relate to "Above all else..."?

It's just a question. No need for an answer. Consider it for a moment, maybe a couple of moments, and file it away. If David was a man who guarded his heart, and if David's heart was one that truly longed for one thing, this one thing must be something he treasured and guarded. If it's his one thing, it's the one thing that truly drives his life; it is his wellspring of life.

One thing...

Just one thing...

How might we complete that phrase...

Let's put the pen back in David's hand and discover his one thing.

*One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple (Psalm 27:4).*

Low expectations, or is he on to something?

This is one of those places it would be unwise and simplistic to just accept what he says. To accept it without thinking would be to miss something terribly important. Why would David want just one thing, and why is that one thing God himself? To answer these questions we must keep one hand on that insatiable hunger for more, and we must carry an incredibly important question with us. Hold this question close...

Why do we have an insatiable hunger for more?

What's it about? Will we ever be fully satisfied? Will we always long for more? Again, why do we have an insatiable hunger for more? We'll address this slowly and with depth. We'll address it this week and next. For now, let's consider the journey of another one of Scripture's scribes. Let's listen to David's son.

## **SOLOMON'S QUEST**

David had a son. His name was Solomon. Solomon, too, was king. Maybe his heart was more restless than his father's. Maybe he needed to see things for himself. Whatever the reason, Solomon went on a quest. He was determined, absolutely determined, to understand this thing we call life. His quest is recorded in a portion of Scripture we call Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is a must read.

It's a slow read.

It's a read and reread.

If there ever was a person who understood the insatiable hunger for more that person was Solomon, and the place he records his thoughts and discoveries about this hunger is Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes opens with an identified purpose:

**THE SEARCH FOR [\_\_\_\_\_]**

*I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven (Ecclesiastes 1:12-13).*

The quest is begun. The king wishes to understand *all that is done under heaven*. What will he try?

He tried pleasure...

*I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. "Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives (Ecclesiastes 2:1-3).*

Pleasure left him wanting.

The insatiable hunger for more proved to be greater than pleasure and folly could deliver. Did he have fun? Sure, he had fun, but did it satisfy the longings of his heart? The answer is proved not just by his words but by his actions. He left this way of living in search of something more.

He tried achievement...

*I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees... I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6, 8, 11).*

Achievement left him wanting.

As with pleasure, the insatiable hunger for more proved to be greater than the greatest achievements he could attain. Did he achieve much? It is said he was greater than anyone who had ever lived in Jerusalem (Ecclesiastes 2:9). Was this greatness great enough to satisfy the insatiable hunger for more? Here again, the answer is proved not just by his words but by his actions. He moved on to other things.

He tried education...

*Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done? I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both. Then I thought in my heart, "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?" I said in my heart, "This too is meaningless." For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die! (Ecclesiastes 2:12-16).*

Pleasure didn't do it.

Accomplishment didn't do it.

Now education doesn't do it either. Wisdom leaves him wanting.

The result?

*So I hated life... (Ecclesiastes 2:17).*

Hated life? That's strong.

Why?

*...because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun (Ecclesiastes 2:17-18).*

Extreme? Maybe.

Honest? Very.

Let's reflect on this. We'll catch up with Solomon on his quest in due course. For now, let's consider what he's discovered so far.

## THE PURSUIT

What do we feel toward that thing that didn't deliver what we hoped it would deliver?

We dreamed it.

We sought it.

We worked for it.

We realized it.

We expected it to deliver *Level Ten* satisfaction. It came in at *Level Four*. We're disappointed. Very disappointed. It failed us.

We hate it.

We went to the next thing.

We hoped this one would improve upon the last. We're a bit more weathered. We didn't expect *Level Ten*. We'd settle for *Level Eight*.

The results came in.

We opened them slowly. We feared more disappointment.

*Level Three*. Not even close.

Maybe the next thing. This next thing would be the real thing. The next thing would give us what we really and truly wanted.

It came. It went.

We didn't even read the results. We knew they were not what we hoped they would be.

## WHY MORE?

A moment ago we picked up a question to carry with us. We asked, why do we have an insatiable hunger for more? It's a critical question we'll ponder this week and next. For now, consider a thought. It's an important thought. Let it simmer a bit. Consider this thought through the lens of a series of questions.

This insatiable hunger for more, could it have something to do with the relationship between deep desires and surface desires? Could it be that our deep desires are not fully satisfied by the surface desires because our hearts are designed for something greater and grander than these surface desires are capable of being? Could it be that deep down we hope for something, long for something, search for something, and the surface desire we look to in an attempt to satisfy that deep desire proves inadequate?

And consider this...

Might this have something to do with David's one thing? Might the surprising brevity of his wish list, his one desire for God himself, have something to do with the realization that any other thing he would or could put on that list would ultimately prove inadequate, so he effectively scratched those things from the list and zeroed in on the one *being* who could satisfy the deepest longings of his heart?

Previously we considered God's competition. This was done by considering what we look to for ultimate security. What do we trust to be the security of our lives?

That's critical, but it's also incomplete.

There's more to *our hearts, our desires, our love* than finding security. The list could be quite long. There are many legitimate deep desires that are simply part of who we are.

What about purpose? We want lives that matter.

What about pleasure? We want to enjoy life.

What about the desire to be loved? We want to be embraced.

Yes, we look to something or someone for ultimate security. That's part of who we are. And yes, that thing or person to whom we look to for ultimate security is effectively our god. We get that.

But we also get this...

We don't just want a secure life. We want to live. We want to thrive. We want to experience. Peel back the layers of our hearts, and what do we discover?

Desire. Passion. Longing.

God-given desire, passion, and longing.

It's the way we're made. Our hearts are made to be "*the wellspring of life*" (Proverbs 4:23). This is not a wrong thing but a real thing. Desire is not meant to be suppressed but satisfied. When David penned his psalm he did not write, "*I ask God for nothing. I don't want a thing. It's wrong to have desire.*" To the contrary, he rifled through the long list of prospective objects of his desire, and he zeroed in on the one thing he was convinced would bring ultimate satisfaction.

He zeroed in on God himself.

And take note of something.

Take note that the first reason David gives for his one thing is not the desire for security but the desire for beauty. He wants to "*gaze upon the beauty of the LORD.*" Yes, he addresses his desire for security in the verses that follow, but first and foremost he mentions his deep longing for beauty, for pleasure. It's a deep desire, so deep it's given as explanation for the one thing David sought: God himself.

Is this odd?

Consider the common pursuit of beholding beauty in creation. We travel long distances, climb tall mountains, walk long trails, and seek secluded meadows. Why? Numerous reasons could be given, but no doubt one of them is this: We long for beauty and for pleasure. The rugged mountain climber and the delicate gardener have this in common: the pursuit of beauty and pleasure. One pursues pleasure by gazing upon the vastness of the mountain range from the vantage point of the highest peaks; the other pursues pleasure in the delicacy of a tiny petaled flower from the vantage point of a quiet corner garden. It is not a man-thing or a woman-thing; beauty and pleasure touch something deep within all of us. David longed for pleasure. We all, in one way or another, long for pleasure as well.

Which raises a question.

Why want God?

Why not write, "*One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek, to gaze upon the beauty of a vast mountain range...*"? If it's beauty he's after, this would make sense. Why not ask for countless sunsets, bountiful gardens, or star-filled nights?

Only David can speak for David, but common experience and complementary Scripture give a few clues. The beauty that surrounded David, as profound as it was and still is today, not only satisfied a hunger of his heart,

**THE SEARCH FOR [\_\_\_\_\_]**

but no doubt it also created a hunger in his heart. The experience is quite common. What happens when we taste food we love? We want more. A hunger for that food is simultaneously satisfied and created. What happens when we take in the beauty of a lakeside mountain? We want more. A hunger for the beauty of creation is simultaneously satisfied and created.

More?

Yes, more.

Why?

Bring back that question we're carrying with us. Why the insatiable hunger for more? David gives a clue in another place. In speaking of creation he writes something profound and intriguing: "*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge*" (Psalm 19:1-2).

David looks upon the stars, the *heavens*, and he says they declare the glory, or we might say here, *beauty*, of God. When he looks to the heavens, when he considers the vastness of the skies, they do not just proclaim their beauty within themselves, but they point to a Creator, and they pour forth speech about that Creator. They say something about God. They declare not just the beauty of creation, but the implied beauty of the Creator. David sees the vastness of the skies and the heavens, and he shakes his head in wonder, "*God must be marvelous! God must be wondrous! God must be astounding!*" The beauty he beholds simultaneously satisfies a hunger and creates a hunger, and David instinctively knows something.

He knows the deep hunger for beauty will not be fully satisfied by seas or sunsets.

He knows the deep hunger for beauty will only be fully satisfied by God himself.

Or put another way...

David *loves God with all his heart, soul, and strength* because to satisfy his passion for beauty in any lesser thing, to love a lesser thing with all his heart, soul, and strength, will just leave him wanting. God must be ultimate in his love, ultimate in his pursuit of pleasure. All else will only partially satisfy because that is what all else is designed to do. The creation is designed to point to the Creator, not be the Creator. The beauty that surrounds us is designed to simultaneously satisfy hunger and create hunger. Only God, and God alone, will bring complete fulfillment. Seek to fully satisfy that deep hunger for beauty through the many beautiful things that surround us, and we will be frustrated by the *tastes* of beauty rather than allowing them to point us to the ultimate satisfier of our heart's desires. David longed for one thing, and that one thing was God because he was convinced God and God alone would finally and fully deliver the complete satisfaction for which his heart longed.

What was god of David's longing for beauty and pleasure?

God was God of David's longing for beauty and pleasure.

## THE SEARCH FOR (\_\_\_\_\_)

The search for ultimate security and the search for ultimate beauty are two examples of deep desires. The intent here is not to create a comprehensive list of our heart's desires. The intent is to carefully and prayerfully consider the one thing that will satisfy our heart's desires, and to gain insight into the many ways we seek to replace that one thing. With this in mind, hear a later contribution to Scripture. When Paul wrote to the church in Rome, central to humanity's problem, he described, is our propensity to "*worship and serve created things rather than the Creator*" (Romans 1:25). Translation? Among other things, we take our God-given desires, desires meant to be fully satisfied in God himself, and we zero in on lesser things. We get mesmerized with created things rather than allowing them to point us to the Creator of created things. The beauty of creation is wondrous and good, and it is meant to point us to the Creator. What happens when we treat the creation as if it were the Creator? We're left wanting.

More?

## THE SEARCH FOR [\_\_\_\_\_]

Yes. More.

## **GOING DEEPER**

It's time to peel back the layers of our hearts. It's time to not just talk about God, but talk with God. As you do so, consider the genuine desires of your heart and where those desires are ultimately directed.

**THE SEARCH FOR [\_\_\_\_\_]**

Week 4, Reading, p. 86

**Week Four**  
**Morph Me**

# HEARTSTORMING

## Part III



### HONEST ASSESSMENT

The exercise that follows is similar to the previous Morph Me section with a critical distinction. Previously, we gave honest assessment of what a fulfilled desire will or will not deliver, but we limited this to groupings related to the deep desire for *security*. This exercise walks through similar steps, but with a much broader perspective. Essentially, you're asking yourself, *What is my quest? What am I searching for? What is that deep desire or collection of desires that is truly driving my life?* Multiple pages will be given for the likelihood of multiple quests. If more are needed, either make copies or write on the back of a page.

As you go through this Heartstorming exercise, keep in mind the thoughts of this week's The Search for [ ] reading. In the second half of this exercise, you will be asked to contemplate what you expect to come out of your current pursuits. As you consider this question, continue to ask yourself whether you are chasing after "IT" or merely "it." Consider the genuine desires of your heart and where those desires are ultimately directed.

### FIRST STEP—IDENTIFY THE QUESTS

- Flip back to Week One—Morph Me.
- As you read your notes, ask yourself, *What am I searching for?*

### SECOND STEP—IDENTIFY WAYS YOU'RE FULFILLING THE QUEST

Use notes and additional insight you've gained to do the following...

I am searching for A relationship with full acceptance by...

Building a family different than my family of origin

Proving to my co-workers I'm an essential part of the team

Dieting and exercising to make myself more attractive

I am searching for Rest by...  
Trying to save money  
Looking for a less demanding job  
Cycling

### **THIRD STEP—TWO QUESTIONS**

The third step is to simply ask two questions about these desires.

- *If everything is gained after the “by,” what will these desires truly deliver?*
- *If everything is gained after the “by,” what won’t these desires truly deliver?*

### **FOURTH STEP—DISSONANCE OR RESONANCE**

The fourth and final step is to consider if this search holds the potential to promote dissonance or resonance in your life. Will the search resonate? Why yes or why no? As with the previous discussion regarding *security*, the purpose is not to find desires that are right or wrong. In this category, the desires will often prove highly legitimate (such as having a healthy family or having a healthy body). The purpose is to give consideration to whether or not the stated search will truly fulfill the deep desire. Are we setting healthy expectations on the activities and desires in our lives? Are the desires pointing to something greater and grander than the immediate things we’re doing to fulfill that desire?

As always, use either more or less than the space provided. Color outside the lines...

**FIRST STEP—IDENTIFY THE QUESTS**

Flip back to Week One—Morph Me and ask yourself, “What am I searching for?”

**SECOND STEP—IDENTIFY WAYS YOU’RE FULFILLING THE QUEST**

I am searching for \_\_\_\_\_ by...

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**THIRD STEP—TWO QUESTIONS**

If everything is gained after the “by,” what will these desires truly deliver?

If everything is gained after the “by,” what won’t these desires truly deliver?

**FOURTH STEP—DISSONANCE OR RESONANCE**

Is this group likely to experience dissonance or resonance (frustration or satisfaction)? Why? How can God be God of these desires? What needs to be moved from godlike status to giftlike status?

### **FIRST STEP—IDENTIFY THE QUESTS**

Flip back to Week One—Morph Me and ask yourself, “*What am I searching for?*”

### **SECOND STEP—IDENTIFY WAYS YOU’RE FULFILLING THE QUEST**

I am searching for \_\_\_\_\_ by...

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### **THIRD STEP—TWO QUESTIONS**

If everything is gained after the “by,” what will these desires truly deliver?

If everything is gained after the “by,” what won’t these desires truly deliver?

### **FOURTH STEP—DISSONANCE OR RESONANCE**

Is this group likely to experience dissonance or resonance (satisfaction or frustration)? Why? How can God be God of these desires? What needs to be moved from godlike status to giftlike status?

### FIRST STEP—IDENTIFY THE QUESTS

Flip back to Week One—Morph Me and ask yourself, “*What am I searching for?*”

### SECOND STEP—IDENTIFY WAYS YOU’RE FULFILLING THE QUEST

I am searching for \_\_\_\_\_ by...

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### THIRD STEP—TWO QUESTIONS

If everything is gained after the “by,” what will these desires truly deliver?

If everything is gained after the “by,” what won’t these desires truly deliver?

### FOURTH STEP—DISSONANCE OR RESONANCE

Is this group likely to experience dissonance or resonance (satisfaction or frustration)? Why? How can God be God of these desires? What needs to be moved from godlike status to giftlike status?

### **FIRST STEP—IDENTIFY THE QUESTS**

Flip back to Week One—Morph Me and ask yourself, “*What am I searching for?*”

### **SECOND STEP—IDENTIFY WAYS YOU’RE FULFILLING THE QUEST**

I am searching for \_\_\_\_\_ by...

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### **THIRD STEP—TWO QUESTIONS**

If everything is gained after the “by,” what will these desires truly deliver?

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### SECOND STEP—IDENTIFY WAYS YOU’RE FULFILLING THE QUEST

I am searching for \_\_\_\_\_ by...

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### THIRD STEP—TWO QUESTIONS

If everything is gained after the “by,” what will these desires truly deliver?

If everything is gained after the “by,” what won’t these desires truly deliver?

### FOURTH STEP—DISSONANCE OR RESONANCE

Is this group likely to experience dissonance or resonance (satisfaction or frustration)? Why? How can God be God of these desires? What needs to be moved from godlike status to giftlike status?

## **HEARTSTORMING, PART III**

Week 4, Morph Me, p. 94

*Week Four*  
*Conversations with God*

# ECCLESIASTES, PART I



## READ

Depth of insight, along with wisdom, often comes through experience. We experience life and gain insight into life. Interestingly, though, this depth of insight and wisdom not only comes as we experience our own lives, but it also comes as we listen to the lives of others. Wise is the person who asks questions, who listens, who observes the lives of others, not to judge, but to gain wisdom and insight. Even wiser is the one who takes time to sit with those who have experienced more of life and simply ask, “What have you learned?” or “What would you do differently?”

Our daily Scripture readings this week provide this opportunity.

Ecclesiastes reads much like a personal memoir. It’s our opportunity to sit down with King Solomon and ask, “What have you learned?” and “What would you do differently?” The vantage point of a king provides a unique perspective. As king of Israel, Solomon was able to do and experience what most only dream of doing and experiencing. His life abounds with the kind of successes many spend their entire lives attempting to achieve but often miss. Reading Ecclesiastes is a bit like planning a journey to a distant country and talking to someone who has not just dreamed of going there, but who has gone there and come back. We are able to ask, “Would you go again?” and “Should I go too?”

This week, you’ll read the first six chapters of Solomon’s memoir. As you read, listen for the overarching story of Solomon’s quest for the meaning of life, but also listen for wise proverbs and words of insight along the way. As you incorporate your Scripture reading into your conversations with God, reflect on your own personal quest for purpose and meaning in life. Consider the parts of Solomon’s story that remind you of your own story and talk to God about wisdom you’ve gained along the way.

## MEMORIZE

Scripture memory is a bit like doing spiritual push-ups. Some will take to it naturally. Others will struggle. If you’re in the struggle category, you’re not alone, but don’t miss this opportunity. Engaging this exercise is well worth the effort. This week’s passages are both profound and succinct. As you memorize them, consider how Solomon’s life might have read differently had he fully embraced these truths from a young age. No doubt Solomon was familiar with both. One comes from the Ten Commandments, and the other was penned by Solomon’s father, King David.

This week’s memory verses:

*You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:3).*

*One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple (Psalm 27:4).*

## **MEDITATE**

As you read Solomon's story, consider reflecting on your own unique story in your daily conversations with God. What part of Solomon's journey could you map over a portion of your own journey? Did you reach similar conclusions? Or what paths might Solomon have completed that you are currently partially down? Is there wisdom you can gain from this person who has been to the end of that path and come back? Just as Solomon was able to better understand his past experiences with the benefit of hindsight, we too can gain fresh insight into our own story by revisiting past events and circumstances from our current vantage point in life.

On days when you have extended time to talk with God, consider using one of the following suggestions to guide your reflection:

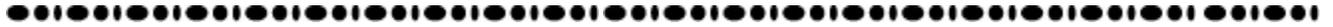
- ▶ Grab a journal and write a summary of the major seasons of your life (e.g., childhood before parents' divorce, childhood after parents' divorce, adolescence, college years, etc.). Reflecting on each season in turn, ask God to give you new insight into significant events, salient emotions, or relational dynamics of that time. Journal these insights as God reveals them to you.
  
- ▶ Pull out some old pictures or bring other nostalgic or symbolic items into your time with God. Use these as tangible reminders of a previous season of life. Invite God into this space with you as if talking with a good friend. Talk to God about the memories, the lessons learned, the good experiences, and the hard experiences. Ask God, "What have I learned?" or "What can I learn from these now?"

As always, remember that your conversations with God should be highly personalized to your own situation, while listening to God's voice through Scripture and by his Spirit. What is most important is that you continue to cultivate an authentic relationship with God through daily connection. Talk to God about what is truly on your heart and do so in a way that is most natural for you. If you find it helpful to reflect on your own story with God, do so; if not, as always, blaze your own trail.

## Week Four

### Conversations with People

# SMALL GROUP GUIDE



### OPENING QUESTIONS

As a group, read the following questions. Have each person pick one to answer.

- ▶ What is the worst job you've ever had?
- ▶ Describe a time in childhood when your expectations were high and then not met.
- ▶ What bores you that other people love?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

#### READING AND MORPH ME

- ▶ This week's reading discussed Solomon's quest. Time and again, he experienced disappointment with different roads he traveled. What quests have you been on? How have your expectations been met or unmet?
- ▶ From the Morph Me exercise, describe how you responded to the Third Step in each of the identified quests.

#### CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD

- ▶ You've been encouraged to cultivate authentic conversations with God (Read, Memorize, Meditate). How is this going?
- ▶ **Foreshadowing:** Next week the Conversations with People guide will have a brief game to review Scripture memory cards together. Make an effort to be ready for that time.

### BIG PICTURE QUESTION

- ▶ Do you have a sense of how God is leading you or speaking to you through this experience? If so, what are you hearing?

### PRAYER

- ▶ As a Small Group, or in Running Partners, discuss the latest in your lives and pray for each other.

### SMALL GROUP GUIDE

**SMALL GROUP GUIDE**

Week 4, Conversation with People, p. 98

## Week Five

# OVERVIEW



DAILY CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD	
INTRODUCTION (page 119)	
READ Day 1: Ecclesiastes 7:1–8:1 Day 2: Ecclesiastes 8:2-17 Day 3: Ecclesiastes 9:1-12 Day 4: Ecclesiastes 9:13–10:20 Day 5: Ecclesiastes 11:1–12:8 Day 6: Ecclesiastes 12:9-14	MEMORIZE <u>Philippians 4:12-13</u> “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” <u>Psalms 119:32</u> “I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.”
MEDITATE	

WEEKLY EXERCISES						
VIDEO (visit website)	●	READING (page 101)	●	MORPH ME (page 111)	●	CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE (page 121)

WEB EXTRAS	
Check out RELATED RESOURCES (visit website)	Online <i>Morph</i> community SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS (visit website)

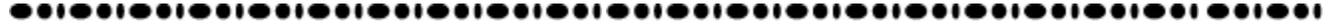
## WEEKLY OVERVIEW

**WEEKLY OVERVIEW**

Week 5, p. 100

*Week Five*

# GOD AND GIFTS



## **ICE CREAM, COLORS, AND SUNSETS**

Ice cream.

Ice cream?

Yes. Ice cream.

What about it?

I like it.

You like it?

Yes. I like ice cream.

Good.

Blue.

Blue? Like the color?

Yes. Blue...like the color.

What about it?

I like it.

You like blue.

Yes.

Good.

Sunsets.

Sunsets?

Yes. Sunsets.

What about them?

I like them.

You like sunsets?

Yes. I like sunsets.

Good. You like ice cream, blue, and sunsets.

Yes.

So here's a moment...You're eating ice cream while watching the sunset over a blue ocean. Perfect?  
Silence...No response...Mental wheels spinning...An honest thought is finally given.

Almost.

Almost?

Almost.

What else?

Very Berry Strawberry.

Very Berry Strawberry?

Yes. Very Berry Strawberry.

Now you've lost me.

Very Berry Strawberry. The ice cream flavor. It must be Very Berry Strawberry.

So you're eating Very Berry Strawberry while watching the sunset over a blue ocean. Perfect?

Perfectly Peachy.

Perfectly Peachy?

Yes. Perfectly Peachy. My other favorite ice cream.

So it's either Very Berry Strawberry or Perfectly Peachy?

That's right.

Good.

## **LIFE**

The stuff of life. The good stuff anyway...

The cool of the evening. Fresh mountain snow. Long walks with an old friend. Oak trees. Waves crashing on the shore. Candlelit dinners. Little league. Chocolate pie. Sweet corn in August. Watermelon. Swimming pools. The cry of a newborn baby. Jumping frogs. Singing birds. Paychecks. Springtime in the country. City lights. Friday nights. Fresh-cut grass. Championship teams. Holding hands. Touchdowns. Blue sky. Star-filled nights. Freshly brewed coffee. Red wine. Autumn leaves. Sleeping in. Hot dogs at the ball park. Adventure. Wooded trails. Sleepy ponds. Holidays. Quiet moments. Roaring crowds. Early mornings. Late evenings. Faithful friends. Old yellowed letters in the attic. Laughter. Singing. Courage. Little tiny bugs. Splashing fish. Tall glasses of iced tea.

*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good (Genesis 1:31).*

Let's linger here. Yes, there's another list, an ugly list, a disturbing list. Save that for another day. Let's revel a bit in the good stuff of life.

Can we frolic? Some don't think we can. Life is serious; God is serious.

## **GOD AND GIFTS**

Yes. God is serious. But can't we frolic? Wouldn't God want us to frolic? Wouldn't God want us to enjoy the good stuff? Wouldn't God want us to laugh and sing and jump and embrace and eat Very Berry Strawberry while watching his sun set over his blue ocean?

Let's be honest.

Let's be uncensored.

Let's be vulnerable.

Ready? Here we go...

We like stuff.

We like chocolate pie. We like ice cream. We like laughing and dancing and singing and strolling. We like to be with friends. We like to be alone. We like to listen to music. We like to make music. We like to make love. We like to cheer our favorite team to victory. We like to run and bike and swim and walk. We like lots of things.

We like stuff. But can we? Can we like these things? We are to *love God with all our heart, soul, and mind*. We are to *have no other gods before God*. We've talked of God's competition. Stuff can become gods. Is stuff wrong? Is stuff evil?

Clearly a distinction must be made. We sense that. We know that.

What must we do?

We must slowly and carefully draw our double-edged sword that "*judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*" (Hebrews 4:12). We must discover what's helpful and healthy, and ghastly and gross about the stuff of life. Something must be divided, distinguished, and displayed. But what? What's the distinction? Let's rejoin Solomon on his quest.

## SOLOMON QUEST CONTINUED

Solomon determined to "*explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven*" (Ecclesiastes 1:13). We listened to what he *didn't* find. Let's consider what he *did* find.

You'll recall he tried pleasure...

*"Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?"* (Ecclesiastes 2:2).

We then read of his frustration with the pursuit of achievement...

*My heart took delight in all my work... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun* (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11).

He then turned to education...

*"What then do I gain by being wise?" I said in my heart, "This too is meaningless."... Like the fool, the wise man too must die!* (Ecclesiastes 2:15-16).

So pleasure didn't do it.

Accomplishment didn't do it.

Education didn't do it.

## GOD AND GIFTS

Remember the result?

*So I hated life... (Ecclesiastes 2:17).*

But what then? Does he just leave it at that? Does he just fold his arms, shake his head, wallow in cynicism, and declare life meaningless?

Not exactly.

Not at all.

Solomon makes a distinction. Some will find him frustrating. The wise will be inspired. He writes:

*I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13, TNIV).*

This is maddening! In one breath he states his frustration with life. In the next breath he beckons us to be *happy and find satisfaction in our work*. This, he says, is *the gift of God*.

You can't have it both ways Solomon.

Do you hate it? Do you enjoy it? Which is it?

*Everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind (Ecclesiastes 2:11).*

And yet we must...

*Eat and drink and find satisfaction in our work. This too, is from the hand of God. (Ecclesiastes 2:24).*

This man is speaking from both sides of his mouth.

Or is he? Might he be on to something? Might we discover profound wisdom at the intersection of his commentary on life?

## **IT OR IT**

Carefully consider another insightful observation by Solomon...

*God has set eternity in the human heart (Ecclesiastes 3:11).*

It's that word again: *heart*. God has set eternity in our hearts.

We are designed, our hearts are designed, with a hunger for something big—no, not just big—something infinite, something eternal. Again, “*God has set eternity in the human heart*” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

That's our condition.

That's our design.

That's our longing.

That's our hunger.

That's our wishing, wanting, and seeking.

## **GOD AND GIFTS**

That's our pursuit.

The pursuit of *The Eternal*.

We wish for IT.

We hunger for IT.

We seek IT.

We crave IT.

We go for IT.

But...

*God has set eternity in the human heart (Ecclesiastes 3:11).*

There's something in our wiring, our makeup, our design that longs for *The Infinite, The Grand, The Eternal*.

We look for IT in work.

What do we discover?

Not IT. Just it.

We look for IT in pleasure.

What do we discover?

Not IT. Just it.

We look for IT in accomplishment.

What do we discover?

Not IT. Just it.

But God has set eternity in the human heart. It's our design. It's our makeup. It's our crafting.

We don't just want it. We want IT.

So what happens? Life can get quite ugly.

She was crafted with eternity in her heart. She claws and climbs higher and higher on that corporate ladder...the next rung...the next box above...the next win...that will be IT. An addiction is born because she is never quite satisfied. She struggles and strives to get higher and higher because it is never quite IT.

But it was never meant to be IT...just it.

He is crafted with eternity in his heart. He gropes and gripes from one high to another...the next drink...the next fling...the next one will be IT. An addiction is born because he is never quite satisfied. He takes good things and puts them on steroids. He struggles and strives as his life is buried by buzzes that are never quite IT.

But they were never meant to be IT...just it.

## **GOD AND GIFTS**

She is crafted with eternity in her heart. She squeezes and squirms from one relationship to another...the next one...the next relationship...the next encounter...that one will be IT. An addiction is born because she is never quite satisfied. She cries and craves to get the one that will finally be IT.

But he is never meant to be IT...just it.

## **GIFTS OR GODS**

Solomon offers a profound observation that must not be missed. What does he say concerning the stuff of life? These are...

...*the gift of God.* (Ecclesiastes 3:13).

The “gift” of God. Gifts not gods.

The human design is one that longs for *The Eternal*. Solomon is making a distinction. It’s critical. Might it go something like this...

Let gifts be gifts and God be God.

When we expect a gift to be God, we will hate those gifts as they fail to satisfy the eternal hunger of our hearts. When we let gifts be gifts, we can enjoy these gifts for what they are rather than despise them for what they are not.

God gives gifts, but he never intended them to deliver what only he can deliver.

He is *The Eternal*.

Work is not *The Eternal*.

Human relationships are not *The Eternal*.

Brownie fudge pie is not *The Eternal*.

Money is not *The Eternal*.

Sex is not *The Eternal*.

Baseball is not *The Eternal*.

Spouses are not *The Eternal*.

Children are not *The Eternal*.

God and God alone is *The Eternal*.

Let’s put it all together...

*Love The Eternal with all your heart, soul, and mind because God has set eternity in the human heart. Our hearts were designed for something infinite, something grand, something eternal. All else will prove frustrating when vainly attempting to be The Eternal.*

## **SOLOMON’S DISCOVERY**

Is this what Solomon discovered? We’ve yet to hear how it all turned out. What was the end of his quest? Where did it lead him? What did he ultimately discover? Was he ever satisfied?

### **GOD AND GIFTS**

Solomon reveals his discovery in his final comments in the final chapter of Ecclesiastes.

*Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of humanity. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).*

What's he saying?

Solomon gives us as much as had been revealed by God at the time he lived. He points to a time, a day, an event. He looks to the future and instinctively knows one day he will stand before *The Eternal*.

So what does Solomon say?

Live for that day.

Live for that reality.

Live for God.

Don't waste your life expecting gifts to be God.

Let gifts be gifts and God be God.

Live for God.

Or put another way, a way that sounds familiar by now: Love God.

It's profound. It's simple. It reverberates from every page of Scripture.

Remember David's one thing? David longed to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. Do you see it? David and Solomon had the same *one thing*. Both of their hearts beat for *The Eternal*.

Did David want financial security? Of course he did.

Did David want friends? Of course he did.

Did David want family? Of course he did.

Would David have liked *Very Berry Strawberry*? Most definitely.

But David recognized the deep desire also recognized by his son, Solomon. *God has set eternity in the human heart and only God himself can satisfy that longing. "One thing I ask of the Lord...I ask for The Eternal."*

## **EVERYBODY WORSHIPS**

Consider this. It's a bold thought: *Everybody worships*.

Everybody?

Yes. Everybody.

We don't think of it like worship, but consider this carefully. It's not a matter of worshipping or not worshipping; it's a matter of what we worship. We worship that thing, that person, that opportunity that is at the center of our passion, our desire, our heart. Most worship does not feel stereotypically religious. Most worship feels highly secular. Worship is pervasive; it's just not always worship of God.

And consider the flip side.

## **GOD AND GIFTS**

All too often, what we *do* think of when we think of religion or worship is not worship. God spoke of this ages ago through Isaiah: “*These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men*” (Isaiah 29:13). What was near God? Their lips. What was far from God? It’s that word again: their *hearts*. Their lips said one thing, but their hearts were centered upon something else. They did not worship God authentically. They had something else at the center of their hearts, the center of their desires, the center of their passions. It could have been many things. It could have been relational, financial, vocational, or political. It could have been the next buzz, the next adventure, the next big thing. Whatever it was, whatever was their god, it was not God.

Is it any wonder religious circles can, at times, feel plastic?

And positively speaking...

Is it any wonder religious circles can, at times, feel passionate?

Plastic religion comes when the lips say one thing but the heart is somewhere else. There’s something repulsive about this. Passionate religion comes when the heart and lips resonate with a unified desire. There’s something radiant about this.

## **THE SECOND COMMANDMENT**

When considering the god of our trust, we previously noted the first of the Ten Commandments:

*You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:3).*

As we consider our passions, our desires, our worship, consider the second commandment:

*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them (Exodus 20:4).*

Translation?

Don’t worship lesser things. Lesser things will frustrate your heart. The heart is designed for *The Eternal*. Worship God and God alone. Stunning, isn’t it? Scripture comes back, again and again and again, to the same theme.

Let God be God. Trust God. Worship God. Love God.

## **ICE CREAM, COLORS, AND SUNSETS**

So what about ice cream? What about sunsets? What about Very Berry Strawberry while watching the sunset over the blue ocean? What about the stuff of life? What do we do with these things?

Live for them? No.

Enjoy them? Yes.

Let gifts be gifts and God be God.

An interesting thing happens when the stuff of life is weighted appropriately. We can enjoy them for what they are rather than disdain them for what they are not. We no longer obsess over them. We no

longer grip them, gripe about them, or grope for them. They're there. We can enjoy them. We hold them openly in the palm of our hands.

God will give them. God will take them away.

Stuff will come. Stuff will go.

Some will have more. Some will have less.

We will have seasons of abundance. We will have seasons of scarcity.

Both have their place. Both are designed to shape us. Both serve their purpose in making us into the kind of people we truly long to be. We become the kind of people who, with Paul, can say "*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength*" (Philippians 4:11-13, TNIV).

Paul learned a secret.

What was his secret?

Paul could endure all of life's circumstances, times of plenty and times of need, through the strength provided by Christ.

If Christ gave strength, what would he give Paul strength to do?

Wouldn't Christ give him the strength to maintain the greatest of God's commands, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*" Wouldn't Christ give Paul the strength to fulfill the first two commandments, "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" And, "*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters below.*" In the midst of the ebb and flow of life's stuff, Paul learned to love *The Eternal*.

Let gifts be gifts and God be God.

## **WHISPERED WISDOM**

Our journey began with a whisper.

We leaned in.

We listened close.

We let ancient words of wisdom speak to us today.

*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).*

This wisdom inspired reflection.

It inspired us to question, to wonder, to dig. Important discoveries have been made, and much more lies ahead, but at this point we must mark something. It is infinitely important and must not be missed.

Scripture says we are "*fearfully and wonderfully made*" (Psalm 139:14).

Scripture says that in this making, "*God has set eternity in the human heart*" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

So this we know...

## **GOD AND GIFTS**

This heart that we are to guard *above all else* beats with no ordinary passion. When this heart was *fearfully and wonderfully made* it was filled with longing, desire, and drive, and this longing, desire, and drive is a longing for *The Eternal*. This heart, this wellspring of life, was fearfully and wonderfully and carefully and thoughtfully designed to love the greatest and grandest of beings.

It was designed to *love God*.

Here's the discovery.

Mark this.

Hold it close.

Carry it with you, and never let it go.

It speaks to where we started, and where we must go.

It directly addresses that which we are to do *above all else*.

*To guard this heart we must direct this wellspring to that which it is designed to love. It is not ultimately designed for anything less than The Eternal. To direct this pulsating passion to little things is to not guard our hearts but frustrate our hearts. "More!" our hearts rightfully beat. "More! I was designed for more! I was designed for The Eternal! Don't ruin me with little things! Guard me. Protect me. Care for me. Guard me, protect me, and care for me by setting me free and letting me run to the only God grand enough and great enough to bring ultimate satisfaction."*

*"I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free" (Psalm 119:32).*

Love God. Love God. Love God. Love God.

# HEARTSTORMING

## Part IV



### INTRODUCTION

In the previous Heartstorming exercises, we began exploring the deep desires of our hearts by considering our wants. In this week's exercise, we will continue to dig deep into the true desires of our hearts, but now from a new angle. Here, we will focus not on the things we *want* but on the things we *have*. Specifically, we will be taking a hard look at all of the good gifts that God has brought into our lives and assessing the extent to which these things compete with God for our hearts' affection.

As you go through this exercise, keep the thoughts of the just read God and Gifts reading in mind. This exercise is intended to identify objects and pursuits in your life that may have assumed godlike status. As you come into these areas, consider how these things might be enjoyed as gifts rather than idolized as gods.

## **FIRST STEP GIFTS INVENTORY**

First, take inventory of the gifts that God has brought into your life by considering the “*I have*’ s” that you treasure. List things in your life that are valuable to you and that you would really miss if you did not have. Include in your list not only physical possessions such as money or a car, but also intangibles such as a job or a good relationship that you enjoy. The categories below should help you to think broadly.

### **POSSESSIONS**

(e.g., house, car, savings, music, books, etc.)

- I have...

### **PEOPLE**

(e.g., friends, running partner, co-workers, family, etc.)

- I have...

**POSITIONS OF INFLUENCE**

(e.g., career, leadership role, parenthood, volunteerism, etc.)

- I have...

**OTHER**

(e.g., health, intelligence, respect, ability to travel, chocolate, solitude, etc.)

- I have...

## SECOND STEP STATUS CHECK

For each of the gifts that you listed in the First Step, prayerfully consider whether or not you have allowed the gift to assume godlike status in your life. The status may not be immediately obvious, and your assessment may not come quickly, so let your thoughts and prayers linger. Ask God to give you insight along the way.

As you prayerfully consider each of the gifts in the First Step, put a star by any that you feel you may be treating as a god in your life. Journal your thoughts below:

Consider the following questions to get started:

- *Do you maintain this gift in an unhealthy way?*  
Examples of this would be working an unhealthy number of hours to pay the mortgage of a house you cannot afford, or allowing a boyfriend to cross boundaries to keep him from leaving. If this is truly a gift from God in your life, God would not require you to maintain it in unhealthy ways.
- *Would the loss of this gift leave you in despair?*  
In writing to the Corinthians, Paul wrote that he was “*hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair*” (2 Corinthians 4:8). In another place, when addressing ultimate loss, the death of a loved one, he wrote that we do not “*grieve like the rest of humanity who have no hope*” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Yes, loss can and does bring deep and lasting grief, but a heart that holds the gifts of God with an open hand will not feel the hopelessness of despair. Would the sudden loss of your savings, your career, or your health leave you in grief or in despair? The heart that lets God be God and gifts be gifts will grieve and grieve deeply, but this grief will also be coupled with “*a peace that passes understanding*” (Philippians 4:7).

These are only two of many possible indicators that a gift has become an idol and assumed godlike status in your life. These questions are only meant to help you get started in your heartstorming. Ultimately, God must show you if there are idols in your heart. Accordingly, prayer is a crucial part of this exercise.

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## THIRD STEP SURRENDERING IDOLS

Finally, talk to God about any idols you uncovered in the Second Step. Use the following to guide your prayers:

- *Confess the idol.*

The best way to surrender an idol in your life is to confess it before God. The introduction to your Conversations with God exercise for this week offers some basic guidelines on how to incorporate confession into your time with God. As mentioned there, biblical confession is described in two ways: *confessing sins* and *confessing Jesus as Lord*. As you confess to God areas where you have allowed his gifts to assume godlike status in your heart, remember to reaffirm Christ's lordship over these areas.

- *Thank God for the gifts.*

Expressing gratitude, when done genuinely, is a powerful exercise. As we thank God for the gifts he has given us and acknowledge that all that we have comes from him, we increase our ability to see gifts as gifts and God as God.

- *Surrender the gifts.*

The only way to fully receive and enjoy gifts as God gives them is to continually surrender them to God, embracing them in the moment but always allowing God to remove them at any time, if he so chooses. Surrender is a submissive act of the heart. It is a simple act, but not an easy act and it is not always immediate. The only way to truly surrender our gifts to God is to believe that God desires our good and that he alone will ultimately satisfy our deepest desires. If you are not yet able to fully surrender your gifts to God, talk to him about any resistance that you feel and ask him to bring you to this place of surrender.

Journal your thoughts below:

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## **HEARTSTORMING, PART IV**

Week 5, Morph Me, p. 118

# ECCLESIASTES, PART II

## READ

Your Scripture reading this week is the remaining six chapters of Ecclesiastes. As you continue to wade through the by-now-familiar theme of “everything is meaningless” throughout Ecclesiastes—a theme that might even strike you as curious for a work of Scripture—listen closely for Solomon’s great “conclusion of the matter.” After years of searching and struggle, after endless disappointment and much chasing after the wind, after tasting all the good that this world has to offer and still being left wanting more, Solomon finally comes to one thing—one thing he can truly trust for security, one thing that truly satisfies, one thing that imparts meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence.

As you read, continue to let the insights you gain inspire and inform your conversations with God. How does Solomon’s story remind you of your own story? How is it different? What wisdom and insight have you gained along the way? Discuss these matters with God.

## MEMORIZE

By now, there are ten passages from *Morph* to memorize. If you’ve fallen behind, don’t let that discourage you. Just keep plodding.

*I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:12-13).*

*I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free (Psalm 119:32).*

## MEDITATE

One powerful way to have transformative conversations with God is through confession.

Interestingly, Scripture describes confession in a variety of ways. Understanding these descriptions gives depth to confession. The description of confession most commonly understood is *confession of sins*. Scripture tells us that, “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy” (Proverbs 28:13). In another place we read, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). These descriptions of confession call us to lean into God’s grace as we bring our sins before him.

A second description of confession is *confessing Christ as Lord*. We read in Scripture that “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Romans 10:9-10). Yes, this description of confession describes an initial confession of Christ, but it also describes what authentic

confession looks like. Authentic confession, the confessing of our sins, is allowing Christ to be Lord over a troubled area we are confessing. If we confess sexual sin, for example, we're asking Christ to be Lord of how we express ourselves sexually. If we confess addictive behaviors, we're asking Christ to be Lord of those areas and asking him to give us the strength to overcome. If we confess hatred toward others, we're asking Christ to be Lord of our relationships and to give us hearts of love. Authentic confession is not just making a list of things we've done wrong. Authentic confession is bringing these wrongs before God and asking that he be fully God of our lives again. Scripture tells us that *"Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness"* (2 Timothy 2:19). In other words, we must BOTH confess our sins, renouncing the lordship of all that has competed with God for our affections, AND confess Jesus as Lord, surrendering to God's lordship in our lives.

While confession need not be elaborate, some might find it helpful to incorporate one or more of the following suggestions:

- **Prayer posture:** A prayer posture is the position that your body assumes as you pray before God. Each posture communicates a unique heart attitude before God. Hands stretched upward can communicate an attitude of worship and thanksgiving, while a head bowed can communicate reverence and esteem. If you are confessing sins before God, consider posture. What's going on in your heart? How might your posture reflect your heart?
- **Journal:** You may also find it helpful to write your confession in a journal. Putting your confession in black and white can make it feel solid and tangible and can serve as a clear reminder of the commitment you made before God to renounce your sin and follow his direction.

As always, remember that your conversations with God should be highly personalized to your own situation. What is most important is that you continue to cultivate an authentic relationship with God through daily connection. Talk to God about what is truly on your heart and do so in a way that is most natural for you. Confession should not feel forced. If you have nothing to confess, you should not feel pressured to do so. Or if you do need to confess sin in your life, but you are not yet ready to sincerely surrender to Christ's lordship in this area, then begin your conversation with God here. Tell him about this area of your life, your reluctance to let it go, and ask him for a change of heart.

## Week Five

### Conversations with People

# RUNNING PARTNERS' GUIDE



## INITIATE MEETING

- ▶ Designate someone to pray. Before praying...
  - Read the Running Partner Values (page 15) aloud.
  - Sit silently for thirty seconds to individually pray and to slow yourselves down.

## SCRIPTURE MEMORY REVIEW GAME

Using one person's Scripture memory cards, place the cards from Weeks 1 through 5 in a pile between you. Going around the circle (or back and forth if just two people), have each person pick up a card until no cards are left. Whoever has the least amount of cards goes first. That person is asked to quote a verse being held by another person in the group. If quoted correctly, the person who quoted it gets the card and gets to go again. If missed, he or she gives a card to the person whose card they attempted to quote and the next person goes. Go around the circle until one person has all the cards.

## READING AND MORPH ME

- ▶ What is one of life's gifts you most enjoy?
- ▶ How has your life been impacted by treating an *it* like an *IT*?
- ▶ In the final step of the Morph Me exercise you were asked to consider any gift that may need to be addressed by confession, thanksgiving, or surrender. What came from this time for you?

## SUMMARY QUESTION

- ▶ What change will you make in your life this week as a result of something you've learned or discovered?

## PRAYER

- ▶ Pray for each other. As you do, pray for the realities in each person's daily lives, but be certain to pray for each person in light of the conversation you just had. Pray for God's guidance as you discover more about him and more about yourselves.

**RUNNING PARTNER GUIDE**

Week 5, Conversations with People, p. 122

# OVERVIEW



DAILY CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD	
INTRODUCTION (page 139)	
<p>READ</p> <p>Day 1: James 1–5</p> <p>Day 2: James 1</p> <p>Day 3: James 2</p> <p>Day 4: James 3</p> <p>Day 5: James 4</p> <p>Day 6: James 5</p>	<p>MEMORIZE</p> <p><u>James 1:22</u> “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”</p> <p><u>1 John 5:3</u> “This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.”</p>
	<p>MEDITATE</p>

WEEKLY EXERCISES			
<p>VIDEO</p> <p>(visit website)</p>	●	<p>READING</p> <p>(page 125)</p>	●
		<p>MORPH ME</p> <p>(page 133)</p>	●
			<p>CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE</p> <p>(page 143)</p>

WEB EXTRAS	
<p>Check out</p> <p>RELATED RESOURCES</p> <p>(visit website)</p>	<p>Online <i>Morph</i> community</p> <p>SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS</p> <p>(visit website)</p>

**WEEKLY OVERVIEW**

Week 6, p. 124

# THE “H” WORD

## THE “H” WORD

Some words sting. We don't like these words, especially when they're leveled at us. They're offensive. They're fighting words. Throw them our way, and we'll throw something back.

A distinction must be made, though. Wisdom loves distinctions. Let's be wise.

*Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you (Proverbs 9:8).*

Strong words are not always fighting words. Strong words are, at times, driven by love. It's an odd form of love, but we get it. Sometimes we need strong words. It's not pleasant, but it is important. The wise see this, welcome the correction, and love the person courageous enough to bring it.

There's a word, a strong word, which must be considered.

It's a word that stings.

It's a word that's offensive.

It's a word we run from, loathe, and avoid. May it not be said of us. May it not be true. May it not be an accurate reflection of our own reality.

As we consider this word, there is a “must not do” and a “must do” to carry with us.

Must not?

We must not race to apply the word to others.

Must?

We must carefully consider if it applies to us.

That's difficult.

And that's wise.

It's wise because everything...yes everything...is on the line.

Be bold.

Be honest.

Be uncensored.

Let the word soak.

Let the word simmer.

Far too much rides on this to brush it off as not applicable to our *own* lives.

Ready?

## THE “H” WORD

Here goes...

*Hypocrite.*

What an ugly word.

Let it not be true of us. Let it not be an accurate description of our own reality. Let us have integrity. Let us be real. Let us be authentic.

Not us.

No way.

We've known hypocrites. We've worked with them; we've watched them on TV; we've read about them in the news; we've even attempted friendship with a few. Us? No way. We will be true.

But remember the "must do"? And remember the "must not do"? We must not race to apply the word to others. We must wisely consider if it applies to us.

## **RIPE FOR ABUSE**

There are a few areas of life ripe for abuse. They are areas often cheated of truthfulness. Something about these areas beckons dishonesty.

Paying taxes.

Selling goods.

Reporting accomplishments.

And one more...

Loving God.

It bothers us deeply that it's true...but it is true...loving God is one of those areas ripe for abuse, ripe for hypocrisy. It's an area of life often cheated of truthfulness.

Why?

Maybe because lip service comes easy. It's easy to check the God box. Some check it boldly. They fill their lives with activities associated with church or a good cause. They feel good about themselves, because they're clearly distinguished from those who check the box lightly. *"Those are the hypocrites," they think to themselves. "They do just enough to get by. They're not like us. We're committed. We're really into it."*

Danger.

Warning.

Red lights are flashing on the dashboard.

The buzzer is demanding our attention.

Why?

Consider Christ's strongest words. Were his strongest words for those blatantly rebelling against God? Not at all. Christ's strongest words were for those who checked the God box with great fanfare and boldness, the religious leaders of his day.

## **THE "H" WORD**

*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are (Matthew 23:15).*

Ouch! Not only does he refer to them as *sons of hell*, but he levels them with the “h” word. “*You hypocrites!*” he says. Lip service and activities are one thing. An authentically devoted heart is another. It’s an old problem. God addressed it early in Scripture’s story.

## TAKE THE NAME

Scripture is often misunderstood. One such misunderstanding involves the third commandment.

*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain (Exodus 20:7, NASB).*

The above is often quoted against using the name “God” as an expression. “*Don’t take God’s name in vain,*” Grandma tells us. Without question, using “God” to curse is against the teaching of Scripture. Nothing said here is meant to advocate speaking the name “God” as an expression of frustration. To do so is careless, offensive, and wrong, and many professing followers of Christ do so without thinking. This needs to stop. With that said, though, inappropriate speaking of the name “God” is not the concern of this commandment. Let’s give it a careful read. What does it mean to “*take the name of the LORD your God in vain*”?

For starters, note that all the letters of LORD are capitalized. This is meant to tip us off. In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, there are two words we translate Lord: *Adonai* and *Yahweh*. *Adonai* is the general term for Lord. It is used of masters, bosses, and leaders. Translators let us know the Hebrew word underneath the English *Lord* is *Adonai* by using lower case letters: Lord.

*Yahweh* carries much more weight. It is a derivative of God’s description of himself to Moses. When asked his name, God said to Moses, “*I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’*” (Exodus 3:14). Moses did as God instructed and referred to God as *Yahweh*, a derivative of the Hebrew verb for *I am*. It is a unique name of God himself. And here’s how English Bibles tip us off. *Yahweh* is translated in capital letters: LORD.

It should be noted that the New Testament is in Greek and doesn’t have this same distinction.

Back to the third commandment. We’re to not take the name *Yahweh* in vain.

That helps. There’s more.

What does it mean to “take” a name?

The Hebrew word here is *Nasa*. *Nasa* is translated as take, carry, lift, lift up, bear, or bear up. Contrast this with another Hebrew word: *Amar*. *Amar* is translated to speak, to say. If this command was just about speaking God’s name, we would expect the Hebrew word *Amar*. We don’t get *Amar*. We get *Nasa*.

Consider this...

What does it mean to “lift” a name?

What does it mean to “carry” a name?

What does it mean to “bear” a name?

When we lift a name, when we carry a name, when we bear a name, we take that name as our own. We identify with that name. When we bear a name, we proclaim to the world that we want to be associated with that name. When a bride chooses to take the name of her groom, the action could be described by *Nasa*. She bears the new name.

## THE “H” WORD

Is it coming into focus?

What would God be after by stating, “Don’t carry the name Yahweh in vain”?

Or what might God’s passion be when he says, “Don’t bear the name Yahweh in vain”?

To take a name, to bear a name, to carry a name is to be associated with that name. God’s concern? “Don’t associate with my name in vain. Don’t claim to carry my name but have it take no effect in your life. Don’t bear my name, carry my name, take my name as your own but in your heart of hearts have no real interest in me.”

God’s concern?

Hypocrisy.

To carry the name Yahweh in vain is to give lip service but lack a truly dedicated heart.

*The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29:13).*

Lips say one thing.

Lives reveal another.

Christ put it like this, “Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). Or he could have said, “Why are you taking my name in vain? You say I’m your Lord, but your actions say otherwise.” It’s no wonder Scripture makes love for God synonymous with obedience. John stated this succinctly:

*This is love for God: to obey his commands (1 John 5:3).*

## **THE MAGIC WAND**

But we hold the magic wand, right? Obedience is good, but it’s not obligatory. We’re saved by grace. The cross covers all that. Wave the magic wand of grace, and we need not worry about hypocrisy. Let’s not get legalistic. Let’s not say obedience is needed. Wouldn’t that contradict the message of the cross? Don’t we say we’re saved by grace and not by works? If we make obedience obligatory, aren’t we compromising grace? Aren’t we saying the cross isn’t really needed?

Not exactly.

Actually, not at all.

The wondrous gift of the cross is the gift of grace and forgiveness for those who want God to be their God. The cross does nothing for those pretending that God is their God while bowing down to another god altogether. Nothing.

The cross is for those wanting to live in God’s presence, but they cannot do so due to the offense of their sin. They see life. Life is found living and walking with God as their God, but they cannot approach this God on their own. On their own, their sin is an offense to this God they genuinely want to know and experience. The cross deals with the offense so they can live and walk and breathe with the God that they love.

But know this...

The cross is useless to those pursuing another god even if they’re pretending God is their God. Their true god, whatever it may be, is accessible through other means. If their god is riches, then riches come through hard work, not the cross. If their god is unbridled sexual expression, then they do not need the cross to get this; they just need to hit the scene.

## **THE “H” WORD**

The person who takes God's name in vain does not need the cross to get to their true god any more than the person on the street needs the door for a building they have no intention of entering. The cross brings awe-inspiring grace and forgiveness for those who want the presence of God in their lives. Scripture puts it like this:

*Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16).*

Why claim grace, why claim the cross, if you don't truly want to approach the God of that grace? Why flaunt the key to the room you never intend to enter? If you want to run from God, if you want to live apart from his desires, the cross is not needed for that, nor is it available for that. The cross makes available the ongoing presence of God for those who want the ongoing presence of God. It is the most stunning gift available, but it does nothing for those who in their heart of hearts are truly just pretenders.

So what do we do with that? How do we discern ourselves? Clearly, self-deception abounds. The recipients of Christ's strong words were quite certain of their faith. How do we recognize the real thing? Even more, how do we recognize the real thing in us?

Passages of Scripture could be referenced at this point, but a clue is given by stepping back and viewing Scripture's landscape. When we do, we notice something: Scripture abounds with stories. Page after page displays life after life. Many reasons could be given for this. Clearly, one of the most important comes from Christ himself. He explained that "each tree is recognized by its own fruit" (Luke 6:44). In other words, we know what's inside a tree by observing the outside fruit of that tree. Stories display fruit. As God inspired Scripture, he didn't just want to tell us what it means to authentically love him; he painted pictures through stories. Through these stories, we see both authentic and inauthentic love for God put on display. The stories display fruit from lives lived before us. Seeing this fruit helps us discern our own lives as well.

One such story is profound.

## **LITTLE MAN, BIG GOD**

Ever face an insurmountable challenge? Ever have so much to do it just can't be done? Ever feel inadequate and unqualified, but called? There's a thought about God, a saying maybe, that goes something like this...

God never gives you more than you can handle.

If that statement is true, let's be honest, it doesn't feel true. Both Scripture and life display God's habit of positioning us where we are in way over our heads. Clearly, it is not God's intent to design easy lives, soft lives, lives that do not stretch us. There's something about challenges that put our hearts on display. What or who will we turn to? In what will we put our trust? Where will we rest our confidence? Will we cut corners? Will we be faithful?

Will we still love God?

Scripture tells of a time where the army of Israel was in one of those moments. Across the battlefield were the Philistines. We're told the Philistines were on one hill, the Israelites were on another, and a valley rested between them. It was a standoff. They were not physically engaged, but one of them, a Philistine, engaged in a little trash talk.

He wasn't just big. He was enormous. His armor alone weighed 125 pounds.

Goliath was ready to fight. Day after day he taunted the Israelites to send out their best by making an offer simultaneously appealing and appalling. Rather than have the two armies fight, he offered to let the contest be between two men: himself and a warrior of their choosing. No doubt the offer appealed to those wishing to

## **THE "H" WORD**

avoid war. One man risking his life was better than an entire army risking their lives. But what man? What fool would square off with this seasoned and enormous warrior.

No doubt the story is familiar to many, but the details are astounding. Consider Scripture's description of the Israelite's response...

*On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified (1 Samuel 17:11).*

At first pass, this sounds understandable. Of course they were scared. They didn't have a man who could take on a warrior like Goliath. Who wouldn't be scared? Who wouldn't be dismayed? But this misses something terribly important.

We're talking about the Israelites.

The Israelites bear the name of Yahweh, the name they must not carry in vain. This Yahweh, their professed God, had displayed his strength again and again in their nation's history by delivering them from enemies far superior to themselves. He parted the sea when the Egyptians had them cornered. He crumbled the walls of Jericho at the blast of their trumpets. He consistently gave them the ability to defeat armies with greater numbers and greater experience. It was as if God allowed and encouraged positions of weakness so they would need to lean into his great strength.

And now one man taunts them, and they're dismayed and terrified. Why?

Maybe the best explanation comes from Yahweh speaking through an Israelite prophet.

*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God (Isaiah 41:10).*

The fruit on the tree was fear and dismay, but this breed of fear and dismay are inconsistent with the kind of tree Israel used to be. At the core of their nation was Yahweh as their God, but fear and dismay displayed love and trust of another god, not love and trust of Yahweh. They may have been carrying the name of Yahweh, but they carried it in vain. Yahweh no longer had their trust. On the outside, they worshipped Yahweh, they carried his name. On the inside, they worshipped their own strength and skills, and their own strength and skills were inferior to Goliath's. Yahweh was not their God.

And then there was David.

Too young to be a warrior himself, he made it to the battlefield only to check on his older brothers. When there, he too heard the taunts of Goliath, and he was stunned. He was stunned not by this man's presence. He was stunned by the offense of Goliath's words.

*David asked the men standing near him,... "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (1 Samuel 17:26)*

David was not offended because Goliath denied the physical strength of Israel's army. David was offended by this man defying "*the armies of the living God.*" This was not an offense to the manliness of any Israelite warrior. This was an offense to his God. David's response, the fruit on his tree, revealed the God of his heart. This was a no brainer to David. On one side, there was Goliath. On the other side, there was Yahweh, the Creator of all things.

David did not carry Yahweh's name in vain.

David's passion and confidence was put on even greater display when he himself squared off with Goliath. Goliath laughed when young David stepped onto the battlefield and only intensified his taunting, "*Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?*" Unmoved, David makes known to Goliath and to all those watching, the true source of his great confidence.

## THE "H" WORD

*You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied (1 Samuel 17:45).*

What a statement! Did you catch his exact words? Do you see the capitalized LORD? He does not carry this name in vain. Rather, he comes against Goliath, “in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel.” It’s as if he’s saying, “My God’s bigger than your god.” Goliath worshipped his sword, spear, and javelin. David worshipped Yahweh. In David’s mind, this was no contest, and the moments that followed would prove him right. Goliath fell and fell hard. Through David, Yahweh displayed his great power and strength once again.

## **LEGALISM AND LICENSE**

It’s time to get practical. It’s time to get focused. With all that we’ve read as backdrop, let’s bring hypocrisy its greatest threat. Hypocrisy is deception. Let’s bring clarity. Hypocrisy loathes clarity.

Broadly speaking, hypocrisy comes in two stripes. Understanding these two categories of hypocrisy will carry us into our exercise.

First, there’s the legalist. The legalists are those of us who know the trappings of faith, but at our core, are still trusting in something other than God. Commonly, we put our trust in ourselves. This is those of us who look to our own strength rather than the strength of God. We may attend church, but church attendance is a point of pride rather than gathering with others to lean into God for strength and guidance. We may know and read the Bible, but as with church attendance, knowing Scripture inflates our ego rather than feeding our souls. We may even support the church financially, at times with large checks; but when considered honestly, these gifts to the church are not expressions of gratitude to the God we need for all things, but expressions of pride as it seems God and his church need us. Yes, we take the name of the Lord, but we do so in vain because it is only external. Internally, we trust in and look to something or someone other than God. Christ challenged the legalist with this:

*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean (Matthew 23:27).*

Second, there’s the licentious, a common form of hypocrisy in our day. The licentious are those of us who view grace as a license to do what we really want to do: disobey God. It’s rarely stated blatantly. More commonly, we state it with an air of humility. Struggle with sin is thought to be a badge of authenticity. To overcome sin would compromise this authenticity, so rather than appear plastic, we revel in our sin. Reveling in sin is viewed as a deeper understanding of grace, and those who challenge this understanding are viewed as legalists. Grace no longer moves us away from sin, as grace is intended, but gives us the ability to sin, even if we pretend we don’t like it. The licentious take the name of the Lord, but they miss the point of grace, and therefore take his name in vain. Grace is no license to run from God. Grace opens the door to be close to God. Jude challenged the licentious with this:

*For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord (Jude 1:4).*

Which leads to a question.

## **THE QUESTION**

It’s our closing question. With it, though, we will not do what hypocrisy loves to do. Hypocrisy notes insights with interest but simply turns the page and leaves the insights behind. With increased clarity on hypocrisy, this

### **THE “H” WORD**

question will carry us into an exercise. Is the exercise hypocrisy proof? Unfortunately, it is not. Hypocrisy can weasel its way through the best of exercises. But the question, when considered carefully, leads us to the only true remedy for hypocrisy, God himself, so not only will the question highlight hypocrisy, but it will provide hope for us as well.

The question is this...

Who is your God?

Do you claim God while trusting in yourself (the legalist)? Do you claim God while *not* trusting his commandments (the licentious)? This question, when carefully and prayerfully considered, not only addresses hypocrisy, but also leads us to our point of hope. It is both ironic and tragic that we attempt to slay our hypocrisy with our own strength. Liberation happens when we come against this Goliath in the strength of our God.

The exercise that follows guides us toward this very end.

**Week Six**  
**Morph Me**

# X THE H



## INTRODUCTION

The exercise that follows is simple. It is so simple, in fact, that it could be faked. The questions are not lengthy. The thoughts are not complex. The time needed to fill in the blanks could be mere minutes.

Or the exercise could take time, be profound, and change your life.

Very simply, you're asked to do two things.

- 1) Talk with God about you.
- 2) Talk with at least one other person about you.

The curious thing about hypocrisy is that while it is almost immediately evident in others, it is terribly difficult to see in ourselves. As hypocrites, we are masters of self-justification. So if you really want to discover if there are areas of hypocrisy in your own life, asking others is a powerful tool.

You will ask God and others two questions leading to the one question we're carrying with us from the reading. The two questions address legalism and licentiousness. The one question is an honest look at your true God.

Given the nature of these questions, consider who you question carefully. This person (or people) could be from your Small Group or Running Partners, or you may want to consider asking somebody outside this *Morph* experience to gain a fresh perspective. Most importantly, consider two factors.

- 1) Do I trust this person?
- 2) Does this person know me well enough to answer the questions effectively?

Finally, a word of caution. Throughout this exercise, guard against condemnation. Yes, the purpose is to surface hypocrisy, but the purpose of surfacing this hypocrisy is not self-loathing but freedom. Conviction brings freedom and is from God; condemnation brings oppression and is from the enemy. While both conviction and condemnation are deeply penetrating and often painful, only conviction is accompanied by a sense of hope and promise for the future. Scripture reminds us that there is "*no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:1). God brings conviction because he wants for us a better tomorrow. The enemy brings condemnation because he wants for us a life of despair. As you engage this exercise listening for God's voice through prayer and through others, be careful to stay open to hopeful conviction while guarding against despairing condemnation.

## **STEP I: WRITE A PRAYER**

Essential to this exercise is an open and humble heart. Use this page to write a prayer to God. Ask God to give you eyes that see what he wants you to see and ears that hear what he wants you to hear. Ask for a humble and open heart. Ask that you hear his voice of conviction and not the accuser's voice of condemnation.

## **STEP 2: ASK GOD**

Ask God the following two questions and record any response you hear in the space provided:

- ▶ Legalism: Do I carry the name of Christ while inwardly still trusting in myself or something other than you?

- ▶ License: Do I use grace as a license to sin?

Ask God the following summary question and record any responses you hear in the space provided:

- ▶ Are you my God?

### STEP 3: ASK OTHERS

Ask one or two trusted friends the same questions and record their responses in the space provided. If the friend(s) are not currently going through *Morph*, have them read the closing paragraphs of the reading with the heading *Legalism and License*.

- ▶ Legalism: Do you sense that I carry the name of Christ outwardly while inwardly still trusting in myself or something other than God?

- ▶ License: Do you see areas of my life where I use grace as a license to sin?

Ask your friend(s) the following summary question and record any responses you hear in the space provided:

- ▶ Is God my God?

#### **STEP 4: FINAL THOUGHTS**

As mentioned at the close of the reading, the great irony and tragedy of hypocrisy is that we discover it and then attempt to beat it in our own strength. Use this space to entrust yourself to God. If you have uncovered hypocrisy, bring this before him, ask him for his grace, and ask him for his power to overcome. The same power that raised Christ from the dead is available to raise us up and out of our sin. *“Just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life”* (Romans 6:4).

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## Week Six

### Conversations with God

# JAMES

#### READ

So here's one of the more unsurprising statements in Scripture:

*For even Jesus' own brothers did not believe in him (John 7:5).*

The statement is unsurprising not just because sibling rivalry is common, but it's unsurprising when considering the claims of Christ. He claimed to be the Son of God—the promised Messiah—divinity. If ever there would be a difficult group to convince of one's divinity, it would be that person's immediate family. This would be a hard sell.

So if the above is one of the more unsurprising statements in Scripture, consider what may be one of the more surprising statements of Scripture:

*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings (James 1:1).*

At first read, the statement is easily forgotten. Clearly, it's the opening of a letter. Some guy named James is writing a letter to a group of people he refers to as the "twelve tribes scattered among the nations." What's so surprising about that? The stunning nature of this letter's opening is that James is one of Jesus' brothers. No, not just a spiritual brother, but biologically speaking, a half-brother, another son from Mary and her then husband, Joseph. James, this brother of Jesus who previously doubted Christ's veracity, now refers to himself as "a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ." That's astounding!

Some of Scripture's most profound insights, particularly in the New Testament, come from letters. Understanding these letters' context moves the reading of these letters from black and white to color. As you read through James this week, you'll be reading a letter considered by many scholars as one of the first, if not the first, New Testament writing to be penned. James writes it, likely from Jerusalem, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. By "twelve tribes" James is referencing the twelve tribes of Israel, the Jewish nation. So not only do we know who the letter is from, but we also know who the letter is to. As expected if we were to read any letter, knowing who the letter is both from and to gives us a context that brings meaning to the letter itself.

Since this is a letter, our approach to James is to approach it as we would a letter of importance. When we read a letter, we don't first read it in little bits. More commonly, we sit down and read the letter in its entirety. Having read it from beginning to end, we may then go back and read it more slowly and thoughtfully. Our approach to James will be similar. You're encouraged to first read the letter in its entirety and to then read it in smaller segments. The letter is short, so it's not hard to do, and we've designed the daily readings to facilitate this. If the time you've allotted on Day One is not long enough to read James in a single sitting, then feel free to read as far as you can and pick it up

#### JAMES

again later in the day. Do make an effort to read it through in a single day, though. Gaining this context will enrich your experience with James.

## MEMORIZE

As you read through James, insights you gain may relate to one or both of this week's memory passages. If so, consider writing these insights on the Scripture cards to be reminded of them again when you review the memory passages later. How is God speaking to you? What are you hearing? Where are you encouraged? Where are you challenged? Write these thoughts down and talk with God about them as you memorize.

This week's memory verses:

*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says (James 1:22).*

*This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome (1 John 5:3).*

## MEDITATE

One of the more important concepts in hearing God's voice through Scripture is the idea that Scripture interprets Scripture. Consider a brief analogy.

A woman goes to a doctor. The doctor tells her she needs to rest. She follows the doctor's orders, and she feels better, but not entirely. She then goes to another doctor. This doctor tells her she needs exercise. As she drives home, she is confused. One doctor says to rest, and the other tells her to exercise. Which doctor is telling her the truth?

Do the doctors contradict each other? On the surface, maybe, but put the two doctors in the same room, and they will likely agree with each other. Healthy living requires both rest and exercise. On the surface, there is contradiction between the two doctors. Under the surface, the two orders don't contradict but complement. Wisdom and truth are found where the two statements intersect.

Scripture interprets Scripture. A statement from one book of the Bible may appear at odds with a statement in another book of the Bible. Are they truly at odds, or are they working together to bring the full weight of wisdom? Meditating on Scripture will at times mean we dig into Scripture and allow Scripture to interpret Scripture by hearing complementary truths from different authors. James provides a great opportunity for this.

Consider this statement of James:

*Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:17).*

Then consider this statement from Paul:

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).*

Do these two statements contradict each other or complement each other? As you meditate, ask God to speak to you, and listen for depth of insight. Listening to the full counsel of Scripture will at times take you away from the passage you started with, but it will profoundly enrich your conversation with God as you move from Scripture to more personalized conversation. When we hear the balance of

## JAMES

Scripture, we gain insight into the heart of God. Knowing this heart informs our ability to recognize his voice in our lives.

## **JAMES**

**JAMES**

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## Week Six

### Conversations with People

# SMALL GROUP GUIDE



## OPENING QUESTIONS

As a group, read the following questions. Have each person pick one to answer.

- ▶ Past: What is a past challenge in your life where you felt in over your head?
- ▶ Present: What is a current challenge in your life where you feel in over your head?
- ▶ Future: What concerns you most about the future?

### *Debrief Question from Opening Questions*

This week's reading discussed David and Goliath. David displayed love for God by entrusting himself to God with a challenge far stronger than himself but far weaker than God. How could you or did you genuinely display love for God with the challenge you expressed from your past, present, or future?

## READING AND MORPH ME

- ▶ What most got your attention in this week's reading?
- ▶ Who do you relate to most, the person who struggles with legalism or the person who struggles with license?
- ▶ What insights did you gain about yourself from the Morph Me exercise?

## CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD

- ▶ As a group, read James 1:19-27 aloud no fewer than three times. What do you hear God saying through this passage?
- ▶ What other insights have you gained from reading James this week?

## SUMMARY QUESTION

- ▶ What changes have you made in your life from the *Morph* experience so far?

## PRAYER

- ▶ As a Small Group, or in Running Partners, discuss the latest in your lives and pray for each other.

## SMALL GROUP GUIDE

**SMALL GROUP GUIDE**

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## Week Seven

# OVERVIEW



DAILY CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD	
INTRODUCTION (page 161)	
READ Day 1: Genesis 22:1-19 Day 2: Genesis 39 Day 3: 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11 Day 4: 1 Kings 17 Day 5: Daniel 3 Day 6: Acts 12:1-19	MEMORIZE <u>Psalm 46:10</u> "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." <u>Isaiah 41:10</u> "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." MEDITATE

WEEKLY EXERCISES						
VIDEO (visit website)	●	READING (page 147)	●	MORPH ME (page 155)	●	CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE (page 163)

WEB EXTRAS	
Check out RELATED RESOURCES (visit website)	Online <i>Morph</i> community SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS (visit website)

### WEEKLY OVERVIEW

**WEEKLY OVERVIEW**

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## Week Seven

# THE LIE

### I LIED

I lied.

You lied?

That's what I said...I lied.

About what?

About loving God.

How'd you lie about loving God?

I said I want to love God. I said I'd do it if I could. I don't want to do it.

You don't want to love God?

I don't want to love God.

That's a little harsh.

At least I'm honest.

You're honest about lying?

I'm honest about lying.

A bit ironic...Why?

Why am I honest about lying?

No, why don't you want to love God?

Silence...No response...Mental wheels spinning...An honest thought is finally given.

Sounds boring.

Sounds boring?

Yeah, it sounds boring to love God. He'll take away my fun. I'll be serious, sappy, and sexless...not exactly the dream life.

Is that right?

Seems that way.

### THE LIE

## AUTHENTICITY

So let's be honest.

Let's protect against the "H" word.

Let's offer a confession.

It's nothing scandalous, just an honest display of reality. If we're to kick the hypocrite out from within, reality must be dealt with directly. To deal with reality directly, we must be honest. To be honest is to guard our heart. To deny reality allows the hypocrite to set up camp, or worse, permanent residency. By putting it all on the table, we deal with it.

Ready? Here goes...

We may **want** to **want** to love God, but we don't always **want** to love God.

It's an odd thought, but give it thoughtful consideration. Yes, we know we should love God. Yes, we know it is best to love God. But it sure seems like those who don't love God have a great deal of fun. They fly through life. They don't take things so seriously. They get rich. They live loose. They laugh a lot. Loving God sounds dreadfully serious.

## LIFE?

Let's take a brief survey. It's not long. Just one question. All you have to do is give your degree of agreement or disagreement with a statement. The backdrop to the survey is Christ's stated purpose. He said, "*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*" (John 10:10).

So here's the survey: Do you *agree* or *disagree* with Christ's assertion that he brings life?

Put another way, if you want to live, truly live, do you run toward Christ, or do you run from Christ? Does following Christ mean you'll miss out on the good stuff? Or does following Christ mean you'll come into the good stuff?

As you might suspect, this is one of those places where *real* trumps *right*. The "right" answer means nothing here. The answer that matters for this discussion is your perception. Pause briefly. Your impulse answer may be the most honest.

Agree or disagree: Following Christ leads to real living.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

So what's that about? If you lean toward 1 or 2, why? If you lean toward 4 or 5, why? Why be compelled or repelled by Christ? What has influenced your perception? We're not asking if Christ's statement is *true* or *false*. The veracity of his statement is another essential question, but it's not the question here. Here we're just considering perception. Perception is an essential question because it's influenced by so many factors, the truth being just one of them. Family, no doubt, is one of the more dramatic factors. The child's perception of God is influenced by parenting, lack of parenting, or overparenting. Other factors weigh heavily on our perception of God as well: culture, entertainment, friends, education, wins, wounds—the list is seemingly endless. Bottom line, we're all influenced by the

## THE LIE

world around us, which is both good and alarming. If the world around us influences our perception, even our perception of God, is our perception in touch or out of touch with reality?

Tragic is the life lived running from a God who may in fact have our best interest in mind.

With that in mind, consider something terribly powerful. This *something* is *something* we do not consider very often. Without question, though, this *something* is *something* we experience every day. It must be considered thoughtfully. It must be considered carefully.

Consider the power of a lie.

## THE LIE

Lies move people to do things they would not ordinarily do. We buy things we wouldn't buy. We sell things we wouldn't sell. We trust people we wouldn't trust. We give things we wouldn't give.

Lies sell products.

Lies get votes.

Lies get us to do things at night that leave us feeling dirty in the morning.

Lies belittle us.

I'm unlovable.

I'm unforgivable.

I'm unable.

Lies seduce us.

Life is found in unbridled sexual passion.

Life is found at the top of the social ladder.

Life is found in vocational status.

As you consider your response to our brief survey, also consider the context in which Christ made his statement. Christ's statement is given in context of another's stated purpose: "*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy*" (also John 10:10).

So Christ is not the only one who came with a purpose. The thief, too, is intentional. The thief comes to steal and kill and destroy. Scripture speaks of a spiritual realm. Much fun is had imagining what this spiritual realm is like. We envision angels with harps floating on the clouds. There's a devil with little pointy ears and a pitchfork. Heaven is dreamy. Hell is cavelike. It's all very safe.

And it's all very misleading.

It's no wonder we have difficulty believing in a spiritual realm. We don't believe in cartoons, and we shouldn't. When it looks cartoonlike we shrug it off with a laugh. But Scripture indicates a different reality. Experience does so, as well. Peruse the realities of experience. Clearly something very dark is at work. Why the destruction? Why the suffering? Why the calamity? Why all of this despite Christ's stated purpose?

Scripture tells us there is a thief. This thief robs us of life by use of a very powerful weapon. How does the thief do this? How does the thief rob us of life? Consider Scripture's comment on the thief...

## THE LIE

*When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).*

It's not the power of a pitchfork. Pitchforks move hay. That's fairly powerless. It's the power of a lie. Lies move people. That's tremendously powerful. If there's a thief out to rob us of life, this thief could be highly effective by messing with our perception of reality. Or, more specifically, messing with our perception of God.

Consider another bold statement...

*We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one (1 John 5:19).*

The whole world is under the control of the evil one? Is it really that bad? That's not how we typically perceive evil. We don't think of evil being all around us. We think of evil just being in the dark corners of life. We don't think of daily realities. To put evil in the midst of daily realities feels far too normal.

Which is precisely the point.

The thief is a liar and the father of lies. Without question, one of the more effective and potent lies bouncing around this world is that our experience of normal is exactly that: normal. It's normal, not evil. What's the message we hear from the daily stuff of life? Is it a message beckoning us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? Do we hear that the way to truly experience life is to get close to the Creator of life?

Not exactly.

Let's go light. Let's consider the messages of laughter. God made us to laugh. Laughter is good. We need more laughter in life. But consider for a moment the screaming message from common halls of laughter. Do the comedians, the sitcoms, the jokes at the water cooler typically send the message that life is found in the Creator of life? Not typically. Do the story lines and punch lines inspire us to gratefulness to God for the good gifts he's given? Rarely. Are we led to believe life, true life, is found by letting God be God while maturing our hearts to obey him? Pretty much never. The screaming message from the lightest side of life belittles God and leads us to believe the best life is lived far from God, not close to God. Get close to God, listen to God, obey God, and you'll miss out on the good stuff of life. That's the more common message, and make no mistake, humor is powerfully persuasive.

But, of course, it's not dark...it's normal.

That's just one area of daily life. How about advertisements? How about corporate culture? How about social networks and the scene downtown? How about talk shows and soap operas? How about common influences in life, like the morning show beamed to car radios navigating rush hour traffic? What's the screaming message from the multitude of megaphones? Let gifts be gifts and God be God? Love God and follow him closely? Enjoy the stuff of life, just don't idolize it and obsess over it?

Not quite.

It's not all we hear, but the screaming message is *run from God not toward God. Get away fast and get away far.* You don't need God; you can do it in your own strength with your own drive. It's the message of *more*, it hits us on all sides, and maybe the most difficult aspect of all of it is this: It feels so terribly normal.

Sort of.

## THE LIE

## SORT OF

Why sort of? Because, yes, it feels normal, but we also sense something else. Yes, we have this urge to run from God and are drawn by a perception that to get away from God is to get the most out of life. The expressions vary, but to say we're absent all temptation would be dishonest. Some are intoxicated by the draw of Friday night thrills. Others see vocational status and wonder if they're missing out by not putting their work life on tilt. Others still wonder if they might be happier if they lived with her morals or his money. We get this, but only sort of. Sort of, because there's a check in our spirit. Something inside us tells us this isn't right, this isn't good, this isn't in our best interest despite the screaming message from the world around us.

Or maybe it's not a check. Maybe the reservation is blaring.

Why blaring? Possibilities abound. Maybe we took a big drink of what this world has to offer, and it didn't take long before we coughed it all up. Or maybe we didn't drink it ourselves. Maybe we were raised by parents who drank deeply from this world; we saw what it did to their lives and want nothing of it. Scripture states it clearly:

*Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life (Galatians 6:7-8).*

The meaning of this passage is clear enough. If we sow wheat seeds, we will reap wheat. If we sow apple seeds, we will reap apples. The challenge is not comprehension. The challenge is in those first four words: *Do not be deceived*. When it comes to sowing and reaping, deception abounds.

Why?

Many reasons could be promoted, but one is implicit in the metaphor. We sow in springtime, but we reap in the fall. What is the difference between spring and fall? Many months, and the months between are ripe for deception. Why might deception abound? Might it have something to do with the fact that Friday night excitement commonly provides immediate pleasure while the pain is delayed? And the opposite is often also true. Friday night pain, the pain of missing out, offers a delayed pleasure that far outweighs the pleasure we forgo in the moment. What's true of Friday nights is true in other areas of life as well. Yes, immediate pleasure is gained by cutting ethical corners, but harvest time is coming when that pleasure is replaced by the pain of the scheme being shown to be a scam. And conversely, the pain of doing business honestly and ethically is later rewarded by the satisfaction of a job well done; but let's be honest, that satisfaction is often delayed.

## PERCEPTION OF GOD

So back to our confession...

We may **want** to **want** to love God, but we don't always **want** to love God.

Why? What keeps us from turning the world's volume switch to off, so we can listen for God's voice more clearly? How can we eliminate one of those **want** words and simply **want** to love God? Many things could be said, but consider a question reflective of our brief survey: *What's your perception of God?*

Even more, to what degree do you wonder if your perception of God is warped by influences other than God himself? Opportunities for warped perceptions of God abound. Perception can be warped by

## THE LIE

abusive authority figures, through statements belittling God by those we trust, and of course experience plays strongly, especially hardship.

If we are going to love God, we must address this head on. The liar sends twisted thoughts and twisted perceptions which send us running from the source of all life. The stakes are high, sky high. Undercurrents in our lives may influence our actions more than we realize. Our heads may know an all-out pursuit of God is where authentic life is found, but our hearts may drive us toward other paths. What is it? What dampens our love for God? Friends, family, entertainment, experience – all of these weigh in and influence our perception of God and his worthiness of our pursuit. Clarity of these influences is essential.

So how do we know what's genuinely true about God? Answers to this question abound. Two are considered here.

## KNOW GOD

The simplest answer may be the most profound. Think of that friend who surprised you. You thought he was one thing, and he ended up being something else. Think of the co-worker who was so pretty there was no way she could be kind. Or how about that guy who was so odd there was no way he could be interesting. Then there's that wealthy family; you just knew they were arrogant. Your perception was strong and defined. Time would prove it a misperception. What happened?

Simply put: You got to know them.

What's true of people is true of God. Our perceptions of God can be dangerously warped, even in those who profess to trust him. A more genuine perception of God will come about through similar means to a more genuine perception of people. We get to know God. We hold our perception of God up to what we know about God from Scripture and through our ongoing communion with him. If we are to genuinely trust God, if we are to passionately love God, and if we are to guard our hearts by letting gifts be gifts and God be God, then we must let God speak for himself. No, we won't have our every question answered. No, we won't know God exhaustively. A warped perception of God is different from a limited perception of God. Our knowledge of God will remain limited—such is the nature of knowing a limitless being. But our knowledge of God need not remain dangerously warped. By conversing with God, and walking with God, we may actually get to know God as he truly is.

No doubt, it is for this reason you have engaged *Morph*, and it is for this reason you are challenged throughout *Morph* to engage your Creator with great passion. Invest the time and energy to truly get to know God, and authentic faith will be inspired and strengthened. Miss this opportunity, skip through this experience by only giving what you *must* to get by, and you may gain something, but an opportunity will have been missed.

## KNOW YOUR INFLUENCES

A second way we increase our understanding of God's genuine nature is reflected in this week's *Morph Me* exercise. In short, we gain insight into our perception of God by considering the influences that shape our thinking. How have we been influenced by family? How are we influenced by friends? What has our education or lack of education done for us? How about entertainment and experience? By considering these influences, we gain insight into ourselves and insight into our God.

This week's exercises will address our understanding of God in three ways. First, through the *Morph Me* exercise, we will gain greater awareness of influences in our lives that have influenced our perception of God, positively or negatively. Second, in our Conversations with People, we will discuss

### THE LIE

these influences and the perceptions they have created. And third, through our Conversations with God, we take opportunity to get to know God himself by talking and interacting with him personally. As always, through all of these we will seek depth of insight to cultivate a more genuine perception of God himself.

## **THE LIE**

**THE LIE**

Week 7, Reading, p. 154

# PERCEPTION OF GOD



## THOUGHTFUL QUESTIONS

The pages that follow are an assessment of sorts, but it is not a typical assessment. Assessments are often quantitative. You're asked a series of questions, and the questions produce a score or graphs. Quantitative assessments have an important place, but this isn't one of them. This assessment might be thought of as qualitative. Don't expect numbers or graphs. Simply expect a series of thoughtful questions.

The questions do not have right or wrong answers. Even more, they will often be answered in degrees. To a certain degree, you'll see things from one perspective. To another degree, you'll see things from a different perspective. Some of your answers may even conflict with other answers. Let the conflicts stand. The purpose of this exercise is to gain greater insight into your own perception of God. Your perception of God may be simple, or it may be complex. Either way, engage the questions boldly to carefully consider your perception of God.

As you go through the questions, do so prayerfully and thoughtfully. By prayerfully, it is not meant that you'd pray a quick prayer and move on. Rather, talk to God as you go. Ask for uncommon insight. Ask him to bring influential memories to mind that have influenced your perception of who he is. By thoughtfully, it is not meant that you'd think overly hard about this, as if it is a math problem. Rather, let the questions linger. No doubt, some of the questions won't do much for you. That's expected. Skip those. But it's also expected that you'll come into at least a few questions that give cause for pause. Make the most of these.

The questions are grouped by categories. As always, don't limit yourself to the questions—color outside the lines.

## **FAMILY**

What were your earliest thoughts of God? Did you voice these thoughts? If so, how were your thoughts received?

As best you can tell, what was your family-of-origin's god? Was it God? Was it something else (money, achievement, adventure, escapism, social status)? Was the family god said to be God but was actually something else? If you had multiple family experiences in your early years, through divorce or foster situations, consider each of those families or the most influential of them.

Generally speaking, was your relationship with your parents, or those who raised you, healthy or unhealthy? As best you can tell, to what degree is their representation of authority and leadership in your life now projected on God?

## **PERCEPTION OF GOD**

## **FRIENDSHIPS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

Life has seasons. As best you can, broadly group your life into seasons (young years, young adult, etc...). For each season write the names of significant relationships and friendships.

As you consider the seasons and relationships in those seasons, what relationships positively influenced your perception of God? Why?

As you consider the seasons and relationships in those seasons, what relationships negatively influenced your perception of God? Why?

## **EXPERIENCES**

Life has hardship. Make a list of seasons or events in your life that have had a heightened degree of hardship.

As you consider your list of hardships, did these hardships make you want to pursue God or run from God. Why?

Life has happiness. Make a list of seasons or events in your life that have had a heightened degree of happiness.

As you consider your list of seasons or events of heightened happiness, did these make you want to pursue God or run from God. Why?

## **CULTURE**

Consider your world (not the entire world, but *your* world, the portion you touch). Where are you most at home? Are you most at home at home? Are you most at home with a certain group of friends? Are you most at home at work or at school? Why?

How does this “home” (virtual or literal) influence your perception of God?

Consider entertainment. What do you watch, listen to, or enjoy? Are there shows you watch consistently? Is there a certain genre of movie you consistently go to? If so, how do these influences typically perceive God?

What do you do for fun? Is there a relational scene associated with this fun? If so, how does this group or activity influence your perception of God?

Consider your formal education. Have educational influences been supportive or unsupportive to your pursuit of God? How have you responded to this influence?

## **OTHER**

Who else or what else has influenced your perception of God (positively or negatively)?

## **SUMMARY THOUGHTS**

List insights you have gained from this exercise. Use additional paper if needed. Bring these to your next Running Partner conversation.

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## Week Seven

### Conversations with God

# STORIES

## READ

Whether we watch it on the big screen, read it in a book, or hear it from a friend, everyone likes a good story. Why? What's the attraction? Why will we pay good money to watch a movie or invest hours in the reading of a book? Answers to these questions abound. For some, they like the adrenaline from thrillers. For others, they get swept away by romance. For others still, there's nothing quite like mystery and suspense.

With that said, there's another powerful draw to stories. Very simply it's this: We see ourselves through the lives of others. Sometimes, we see us as we are. We see our strengths and weaknesses, our good times and hard times. Other times, we see ourselves as who we wish to be. We see the romance and want it for ourselves. We see the adventure and want it for ourselves. We see the success and want it for ourselves. Stories speak to our lives.

It should be no surprise that Scripture's largest genre is the telling of stories (not teaching, not prayers, not wisdom, and not prophecy). Stories make up about 45 percent of Scripture. There's a message in this. God speaks through stories. The stories of Scripture have not been sterilized for easy reading, and at times we must wade through differences of culture and time. But the stories are both rich and real, and through them, we hear from God as he speaks to our lives through the lives of others—both well-lived lives and lives that were squandered.

This week's readings are selected stories from different areas of Scripture. You'll read them differently than you might read a psalm with worship or a letter with teaching. When reading a letter, like James, it's likely that individual words and phrases will catch your attention, and it will often matter if a verb is in the past tense or future tense. When reading a story, there are places where the precision of a word matters as well, but in large part, you're reading the broad brush strokes of another person's life. Yes, details still matter, but the story itself carries the weight of the reading.

As you read the stories, do your best to enter into them. How would it feel to be one of the characters? What would it be like to be challenged as they are challenged? Is there a parallel challenge in your own life? The selections are not long, so you may wish to keep reading. The greater context from the surrounding story will no doubt add color and depth of insight. Consider reading both before and after the selection. Who knows how God may wish to speak into your life through the life of someone who lived long ago?

## MEMORIZE

This week's passages address issues of worry and scurry, fear and anxiety. If there's a scene in your life that consistently triggers these emotions, consider reviewing these passages prior to that time. If, for example, a weekly meeting at work consistently rattles you, sneak away for a moment prior to the meeting and prayerfully review the passages.

This week's memory verses:

*Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth*  
(Psalm 46:10).

## STORIES

*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10).*

## **MEDITATE**

It's not uncommon that in the reading of stories we feel either better or worse about our own stories. In truth, either extreme has its pitfalls. There's no benefit in reading stories if they swell our pride or push us toward despondency. There's a simple exercise that protects us from both extremes. It won't sound revolutionary, but by consistently practicing this discipline our self-centeredness is weakened and our God-centeredness gains strength.

Very simply, we practice gratitude. We are intentional about thanking God.

In describing people far from God, Scripture says this, *"Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened"* (Romans 1:21). That's sobering. It says that their thanklessness led to hearts that were darkened. What does life look like when the heart—the wellspring of life—is darkened? Gratitude protects us from this.

But maybe we don't feel grateful. Maybe we read the lives of others, and the only thing it reminds us of is how life has been so terribly stacked against us. Or maybe the opposite. Maybe we've been given a lot, and reading the lives of others reminds us of how we've wasted opportunities others have not had. These thoughts are normal, but they're no place to dwell. Rather than fester in these thoughts, what if we turned around and looked for ways to express gratitude to God? Might this loosen the grip of life's frustrations and liberate us toward freedom and worship? It's worth trying.

This week, as you talk with God, consider talking to him about gifts he has given you. If nothing comes to mind, then tell him this. There's no benefit in faking gratitude. If you don't feel grateful, then pour this out to him, and ask him for help to see blessings in your life. As thoughts come to mind, turn these thoughts into simple prayers of gratitude. Maybe write them down in a journal or meditate on them as you go for a run. If there is a swell of gratitude, let the time turn toward worship. For the artists, the thoughts may inspire a song, a dance, a painting, or a poem. As always, simply be you. Let the value of gratitude not be forced or ignored, but let it be a personalized expression of gratefulness to your God.

## **STORIES**

## Week Seven

### Conversations with People

# RUNNING PARTNERS' GUIDE

**Foreshadowing:** Next week, at the final gathering for this module, the Conversations with People guide will have a brief game to review Scripture memory cards together. Make an effort to be ready for that time.

## NOTE: THIS WEEK IS DIFFERENT

This week's Conversations with People is organized a bit differently than previously. As always, the conversation will influence different people differently, but the topic and the exercise hold potential to be one of the more important conversations in the *Morph* experience. Consider following this guide closely, but most importantly, listen to God's Spirit as you interact with each other.

The guide that follows is designed to...

- ▶ Allow participants to each speak of influences in their life that have influenced their perception of God.
- ▶ Provide opportunity for God's Spirit to speak graciously into each other's lives.
- ▶ Provide concrete next steps to address misperceptions.

## INITIATE MEETING

- ▶ Designate someone to pray. Before praying...
  - Read the Running Partner Values (page 15) aloud.
  - Sit silently for thirty seconds to individually pray and to slow yourselves down.

## EXERCISE

- ▶ Walk through the following page together for each person.

## PERCEPTIONS OF GOD

Based on insights gained from the Morph Me exercise, walk through the following questions person by person, and help each other gain clarity and insight. The pages that follow this page give examples to better inform the meaning of the questions here. It's suggested to read those examples as a group and then come back to this page.

**Misperception of God Titled:** \_\_\_\_\_

- ▶ Share with the group key influences that have shaped this misperception.
- ▶ Ask the group to assist in giving the misperception a title.

**Ways this misperception is seen in my life:**

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**Passages of Scripture or known truths that address this misperception:**

- ▶ Ask the group to assist in offering Scriptures that address the misperception.

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**Action I will take over the next month to get to know God as he truly is:**

- ▶ Ask the group to assist in offering ways the misperception could be addressed in the coming days and weeks.

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## EXAMPLES

The following are not intended to be comprehensive but are given as examples.

**Misperception of God Titled:** The Cosmic Kill-Joy

**Ways this misperception is seen in my life:**

*I see God as a cosmic kill-joy looking to rob my life of fun. This misperception has influenced the way I do my Friday nights. I walk away from God and do my own thing.*

**Passages of Scripture or known truths that address this misperception:**

*John 10:10  
Hebrews 3:13  
Galatians 6:9*

**Action I will take over the next month to get to know God as he truly is:**

*Over the next month, I'll trust God with my Friday nights. I'll look for new ways to enjoy life. I'll also memorize and meditate on Galatians 6:7-10.*

**Misperception of God Titled:** The Naive-to-the-World God

**Ways this misperception is seen in my life:**

*I see God as naive to the ways this world really works. God's not interested in my business or my financial needs. Because of that, I keep my work separate from God. At times, I take ethical shortcuts or knowingly hurt those around me.*

**Passages of Scripture or known truths that address this misperception:**

*Matthew 6:25-34  
Proverbs 13:11  
Much of Proverbs addresses issues of finance and work.*

**ACTION I WILL TAKE OVER THE NEXT MONTH TO GET TO KNOW GOD AS HE TRULY IS:**

*Over the next month, I'll read through Proverbs and note every verse that addresses money. I'll increasingly entrust my work to God by identifying areas of corner cutting and discussing these with my Running Partners at our next meeting.*

**Misperception of God Titled:** The Belittling God

**Ways this misperception is seen in my life:**

*I see God as a nag. He consistently points his finger at every little thing and consistently looks at me with his arms crossed. Consequently, I avoid God. I don't talk to him because I don't want to hear what he has to say.*

**Passages of Scripture or known truths that address this misperception:**

*Romans 5:1  
Romans 8:1  
Ephesians 2:8-9*

**Actions I will take over the next month to address this misperception:**

*I will recognize that this is not about God but about past authority figures in my life.  
I will meditate daily on Romans 8:1.  
I will cultivate a grateful and worshipful spirit by daily thanking God for the good things he is doing in my life. I will write these thoughts down and share them with my Running Partners next time we meet.*

**Misperception of God:** The Distant God

**Ways this misperception is seen in my life:**

*I see God as far away and unaware, or at least disinterested, in the daily realities of my life. Because of this, I don't talk to God about normal stuff. I only talk to him about things I assume he's interested in hearing.*

**Passages of Scripture or known truths that address this misperception:**

*Matthew 10:29-30 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.*

**Actions I will take over the next month to address this misperception:**

*On my drive to work each day, I will talk to God about the details of the day before me. I'll talk to him about both big things and little things, whatever is on my mind.*

## Week Eight

# OVERVIEW



DAILY CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD	
INTRODUCTION (page 187)	
READ Day 1: 2 Chronicles 34–36 Day 2: Habakkuk 1–3 Day 3: Habakkuk 1 Day 4: Habakkuk 2 Day 5: Habakkuk 3 Day 6: Habakkuk 1–3	MEMORIZE <u>Habakkuk 3:17-18</u> “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. “ <u>Proverbs 3:5-6</u> “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.: MEDITATE

WEEKLY EXERCISES						
VIDEO (visit website)	●	READING (page 169)	●	MORPH ME (page 179)	●	CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE (page 189)

WEB EXTRAS	
Check out RELATED RESOURCES (visit website)	Online <i>Morph</i> community SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS (visit website)

### WEEKLY OVERVIEW

## **WEEKLY OVERVIEW**

Week 8, p. 168

## Week Eight

# TWO WORDS



## TWO WORDS

Two words.

Just two words.

Two words, that when put together, change everything.

Absolutely everything.

They are the epicenter. Put these two words at the center of our lives and everything changes. Nothing escapes their reach. Everything feels their presence.

His presence.

Two words. Just two simple, but profound words.

By now, you know them.

This is not new, but don't read them too quickly. Don't think, "Yes...I know that...that's what we've been doing each week."

Let them soak and simmer.

Let them bounce around awhile.

Let the insights gained throughout this experience weigh in.

Yes, the words are known, but now we see their significance, their resonance, their centrality in our lives.

Often, they're given a nod and wink. Now we know this must not be. Now we see their power. The words are good, yes, but they're more than that.

They're dangerous.

Apply these words and the adventure begins.

It takes courage.

It takes faith.

It takes authenticity.

It all comes down to two words.

Just two words.

Ready?

## TWO WORDS

We know them well...

Love God.

Profound simplicity

Would we be more convinced if it came down to a five-hundred-page dissertation rather than two words? Would we be more welcoming? Would we be increasingly ready to embrace the teaching?

There's something profound in the simple. Set the dissertation aside. They have their place. Not here. Just two words.

Love God.

They resonate, do they not? There's something in them. There's something about them. We know there's something infinitely profound in these two words.

They have strength.

They have weight.

They beckon us.

And now they must do more.

Now we must let these two simple but profound words elicit a short but powerful question.

The question also comes in two words. It's a question that inspires vision. This is not a whimsical vision, but a vision only available when we the creation are touched by the Creator.

The question is simple...

What if?

What if we really did it? What if every fiber of our being loved God? What if we genuinely and passionately loved God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? What would life be like? What would life feel like?

That's a powerful question.

We've asked "*What if?*" to other gods. We've dreamed of financial abundance and all it would do for our lives. We've been caught up in thoughts of social or vocational status and the respect we'd have from neighbors and peers. The "*What if?*" question is not new, but have we applied it to the greatest gift of all? Have we wondered and dreamed about our lives set free by love for God? Have we set back in the chair, closed our eyes, and wondered and wished for all that comes from a life with God as our God? When our minds go to neutral, what do we dream about, what do we wonder about, what do we wish would be true of our days? Is God at the center of that vision?

"*What if?*" is a dangerous but appropriate question. Before we apply it to ourselves, let's carry the question to where we've been in Scripture.

## WHAT IF DAVID?

David.

We recently considered David's life. We've even read from his journal. What if David displayed a different set of two words? One of the words would have been the same. He would still love something. But what if the blank that followed that love read differently?

Love \_\_\_\_\_.

What if he loved comfort?

Love for comfort doesn't lead one to square off with a man twice your size.

What if he loved people-pleasing? What if the opinions of his brothers weighed more heavily than the opinion of God?

But his brothers were not pleased. They criticized his desire to take on Goliath, and David pressed on.

Or how about another love, another thing central in David's life? What if David loved his own abilities, his own skills, his own strength?

Love for his own strength would not have inspired him to stand up to a stronger man. Love for his own skills would not have emboldened him to stand up to a seasoned warrior. David loved someone whose strength and skill made Goliath's strength and skill inconsequential.

But what if he didn't? What would have come from David's life?

In truth, we do not know, and we would not know because David would have been forgotten. Along with the nameless warriors who cowered at Goliath's taunts, we'd know nothing of David today. He'd not have shepherded Israel as king. He'd only have shepherded sheep.

All the adventure...gone.

All the influence...gone.

All the inspiration...gone.

Life has challenges. Many of those challenges are simply beyond us. We have limited strength, limited knowledge, limited understanding, limited time. To be human is to be limited.

But tragic is the life lived within those limitations.

Far greater is the life that loves The One Without Limits.

## WHAT IF JOSEPH?

Joseph.

We read recently from a scene in Joseph's life. Sold into slavery and working in another man's household, then something happens. Opportunity knocks. The wife of his boss attempts seduction. What if Joseph displayed a different set of two words? One of the words would have been the same. He would still love something. But what if the blank that followed that love read differently?

Love \_\_\_\_\_.

What if to Joseph sex was not a gift from God but held godlike status in his life? What if Joseph obeyed his sex drive as one might obey God?

### TWO WORDS

What would Joseph have gained? What would Joseph have lost?

The gain? One night of pleasure.

The loss? Everything.

God entrusted great things to Joseph because God was central in Joseph's life. Yes, his road was difficult, but it ultimately led to him ruling the land of Egypt and saving the nation of Israel. Sure, he could have had a fling with Potiphar's wife, but if this fling resulted from idolatry of sexual expression, the story of Joseph would read very differently, and likely, we'd not read it at all.

And how about a few descendants of the family Joseph saved?

How about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?

## **WHAT IF SHADRACH, MESHACH, AND ABEDNEGO?**

Shadrach. Meshach. Abednego.

We recently read from their lives. What if they loved King Nebuchadnezzar as they loved God? What if they loved the pleasures of palace life as they loved God? What if they loved protecting themselves rather than loving a life under God's protection?

How would their story read?

What would they have experienced?

Would we be discussing them thousands of years later?

What would they have missed? What would we have missed?

Talk about an adventure. These three men loved God, and their love for God took them on the wildest of rides.

They were refugees. That's where it started. They were dragged from their homes, their land, their livelihood, and taken to a land not their own. Life was bad...really bad.

They were discovered.

The king took note of them and took them in. They were given royal treatment. They had pleasure and respect. They were the envy of the masses. Life was good...really good.

They were dismissed.

The king's rage at their rebellion was only to be exceeded by the rage of the fire. Their arms were bound. Their legs were bound. Their bodies were dragged. They were pitched into an earthly hell.

They were rescued.

As they walked in the midst of that fire the unseen became manifest. They were not alone. They were never alone. Nothing could stop their lives. The king could not. The guards could not. The fire could not. They were alive in body and soul.

What a story!

What an adventure!

What a life!

## **TWO WORDS**

What if they had missed it? What if they had acquiesced to the king's idolatrous demands? What if they had bowed to the pressures rather than bow to their God?

They would have felt gain.

They would have experienced loss.

Unknown loss. Loss of opportunity. Opportunity to see God at work in their lives. Opportunity to ride the adventure of a life characterized by two words, two simple but profound words.

Love God.

They loved God.

What if we stayed centered?

What if we loved God?

One more.

How about Habakkuk?

## **WHAT IF HABAKKUK?**

Habakkuk?

Yes, we read from his life this week.

He was tired. He was frustrated. He was disillusioned.

Things were not going the way he had envisioned. He'd read the stories of God's amazing work. They inspired him. They moved him. They convinced him that he, too, wanted to be part of God's story.

But he found himself in a desert of sorts. He found himself wishing and waiting, just like countless others who had gone before him. But unlike the crowds, unlike the common response, Habakkuk did something different. Two words would be put on display.

*Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior (Habakkuk 3:17-18).*

That's bold.

That's love for God in full color.

Why would anyone want that?

Why would anyone want a heart faithful to God in the midst of trying circumstances? Why not take the recommendation of Job's wife after he lost his children, his livelihood, and his health: "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9).

Job refused.

Job and Habakkuk lived centered lives. They were centered on something infinitely capable, strong, and enduring.

They were centered on God himself.

## **TWO WORDS**

Every life has degrees of hardship. Every life has deserts. Every life has loss. Every life has seasons where there are no grapes on the vines, where the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food. Struggle is a reality in life.

The question is not the reality of struggle.

The question is this...

What will be the epicenter of our lives when struggle comes?

What will we do to maintain strength in the midst of struggle?

What will we rest in, stand upon, and cling to?

David wrestled in his journal, but he stayed centered.

Habakkuk struggled, but he stayed centered.

Job grieved, but he stayed centered.

What if we stayed centered?

What if we loved God?

## **WEAKNESS**

It's astounding, but an odd thing happens to those who get this. Consider a stunning statement made by Paul to his friends in Corinth.

*That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:10).*

Delight in weaknesses? Is this man sick?

Not at all. He's alive.

He's made an astounding discovery. It's when he's weak that he gets to see God most clearly. It's when he's in over his head that he discovers a strength that is clearly beyond himself. It's when he most certainly cannot rely on his own competency that he must lean heavily into God. In another place, regarding a time of intense challenge, Paul writes, "*This happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead*" (2 Corinthians 1:9). Paul reveled in his weakness because he reveled in God's strength. Two words characterized his life: Love God. These words were at the epicenter of his being.

## **OURSELVES**

Now we get personal.

Now we get vulnerable.

Now we get uncensored.

It gets a little dangerous at this point.

## **TWO WORDS**

It seems easy and obvious when we turn the pages of the lives of others. We hover over their lives and read of their love or lack of love for God. We watch it all unfold as we turn from page to page in Scripture. The good decisions appear so easy, so clear. The bad decisions seem so foolish, so obvious.

It's one thing to read another person's story.

It's another to be in the midst of writing your own.

Scripture contains life after life, story after story. We read these stories and are both inspired and challenged. We make a mistake, though, if we fail to recognize one incredibly important truth.

The Scriptures are complete, but God's still writing through lives...our lives...your life.

Life after life, story after story, the book of human history continues to be transcribed. Flip to the table of contents. Run your finger down through the names. It will take some time, but you will find it. It's a chapter partially written. It's the story of a person along the way.

It's your story.

How does it read?

What will seem so obvious to readers that may not be obvious to you now?

Wasn't it obvious? Any one of those soldiers could have stood up to Goliath in the strength of God. It took a boy to exercise his love and faith in God. It seems so clear, doesn't it?

Wasn't it obvious? The Israelites had been miraculously brought out of slavery. If God had taken care of them then would he not do so now? It seems so clear, doesn't it?

Again, what will seem so obvious to those who read your story that may not be obvious right now?

What if?

What if you really did it? What if your life was really and truly characterized by two words, two simple but profound words?

What's in the blank?

Love\_\_\_\_\_.

There are so many things we can write in that blank. Some of them even seem noble. Some of them even seem good.

But are they strong?

Are they capable?

Are they wise?

Are they able to touch all of your life and not just part of your life?

Are they able to give your life a foundation that withstands the storms?

Are they qualified to be your god?

Do you see it?

## **LET'S DREAM**

Let's come full circle. We started with whispered wisdom that set us on a journey.

### **TWO WORDS**

*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).*

The heart is the wellspring of life. It is to be carefully considered and guarded at all cost. What's in there? What do we love? What is at the epicenter of our being? What do we treasure? What do we desire? What do we seek? What do we rest upon, stand upon, and cling to?

Which is exactly what we've done.

We have stormed our hearts. We have peeled back the layers to consider this wellspring of life. And we have stormed Scripture. We have peeled back the layers of Scripture to discover Scripture's central theme. It reverberates from one page to the next, and we've discovered it from a multitude of vantage points. It is seen in the lives, the poetry, the prophecies, the teachings, the commands. Page after page, life after life, encounter after encounter, the *Love God* theme resonates and reverberates from this astounding book.

By now we have greater insight into important aspects of these exercises. We are in pursuit of two things:

We are in pursuit of self-awareness: What holds potential to capture the imagination of my heart and distract me from loving God?

We are in pursuit of God-awareness: What would it be like for God to capture the imagination of my heart and truly be central in my life?

And so now it's time to dream.

It's a reality of life. When our minds go to neutral we imagine what life would be like if \_\_\_\_\_ were true. *What if I had financial abundance? What if I had more time? What if I had a relationship with her? What if I dated or was married to him? What if I had that job? What if I was retired? What if...?* The health of this dreaming is determined by circumstances and perspective, but it's hoped that reflections in this experience have inspired and strengthened another *What if?*

Imagination is not reserved for the more natural *dreamers* in life. Imagination happens in the mind of the artist and the engineer, the poet and the accountant. Something captures our attention. Something captures our minds. Something captures our hearts.

We could not have put this exercise at the beginning of our journey. To do so would have been dangerous. It would have been dangerous because we all have preconceived visions of what it would mean to love God. For some, loving God would be boring. To others, loving God would be dangerous. To others still, loving God would make them someone they really don't want to be.

In light of recent reflections on Scripture, on life, on ourselves, how might we envision what it looks like, feels like, and is like to have an authentic and growing passion for our Creator? It's hoped that the context of this journey has created a fresh and alive perspective of life and of God. So as you turn these pages, let the greater context inform your dreaming. Wonder if a more fervent love for God would set your heart free. Consider if a more genuine love for God might empower you to treasure life's gifts (rather than grip them), to enjoy your work for what it is (rather than despise it for what it's not), to walk peacefully through the midst of life's ebb and flow (rather than be tossed and turned by life's circumstances).

Yes, for some, a genuine love for God will involve radical change in day-to-day experiences. But for others, the day to day will not change on the outside, but it may change entirely on the inside. Yes, for some it means vocational change; their vocation is simply incompatible with a love for God. For others, though, it may not mean vocational change, but it may very well mean a change in perspective on the vocation. Similarly, for some it means financial change; previous idolatry of money is simply

## **TWO WORDS**

incompatible with love for God. For others, though, it may not mean financial change, but it may very well mean a change in perspective on their finances. The categories could go on and on.

Proceed thoughtfully.

Proceed carefully.

Proceed prayerfully.

Leave assumptions behind.

Leave the old imagination behind.

Invigorate a new imagination.

It's time to ask...

What if?

**Two Words**

Week 8, Reading, p. 178

# WHAT IF?



## WHAT IF?

It's a reality of life: We dream. Dreams are thought to be flighty and flaky, and to be sure, some dreams are. The exercise that follows is designed to inspire the greatest and grandest of dreaming: dreams flowing from the reality of God.

Each page of this exercise has a thought. These thoughts are designed to stimulate your imagination with truth from Scripture. As you consider these thoughts, let them inspire the *What if?* question. Following the thought is an open section on the page. Before you write, pause prayerfully. Listen. Dream. Talk to God about this area of your life. As you talk, ask for renewed imagination and vision for your life, both now and for all eternity. Let the question linger. Be suspicious of impulses. This is a place where first impulses may be rooted in the old imagination. Prayerfully engage a new imagination by letting the fresh vision for God and the deeper understanding of your heart inspire the greatest and grandest of dreams.

Then put it on the page, below the *What if...*, and as always, color outside the lines.

## WHAT IF?

## Tomorrow

Scripture beckons us to be free from the worry of tomorrow. We are told to “*not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself*” (Matthew 6:34). This freedom from worry is inspired by love for God. Rather than let worry reign in our lives as we attempt to be god, we are set free from worry as we let God be God. We get to live in the moment. We get to see the world around us. This very moment, the moment we are in, passes in an instant. Worry for tomorrow will rob us of this moment. It robs us of the joy of this moment. It robs us of the opportunity in this moment. It robs us of the need in this moment.

What if I really did it?

What if I love God by letting him be God of tomorrow?

Using as many of the points below as needed, how would life be different if God were God of tomorrow?



## **WHAT IF?**

## Appetites

We crave food. We crave drink. We crave brownie fudge pie with ice cream and chocolate sauce. We crave sex. We crave buzzes and adrenaline and rushes and thrills. Cravings can be healthy, normal, and good. Cravings can be destructive, controlling, and dangerous.

Which is it?

Is it a normal desire to satisfy an appetite?

Is it escapist behavior as we seek to anesthetize life's struggles?

Scripture tells us, for some, *"Their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame"* (Philippians 3:19). Do we walk to the refrigerator with normal cravings for food? Or do we escape to the pantry as we bow down to our appetites? Do we enjoy the drink and give thanks to God? Or do we embrace three more drinks and make them our god?

What if love for God set us free? Using as many of the points below as needed, how would life be different if God were God of our appetites?



## **WHAT IF?**

## People

Let's be honest: There are some people we like, and there are some people we don't like.

Let's be honest again: There are some people who like us, and there are some people who don't like us.

Scripture calls us to be in relationship with people.

Fair enough. There's more.

Scripture calls us to love people.

Fair enough. There's more.

Scripture calls us to...

*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44).*

That's asking a lot. But what if? What if I were *free* from the control of difficult relationships? Not free from the relationships; there will always be difficult relationships. But what if my love for God set me free so that the difficult person no longer held godlike sway over my life?

Using as many of the points below as needed, how would life be different, if God were God of your relationships?



## **WHAT IF?**

## Rest

Life is filled with limitations. We have limited time, limited money, limited resources. One more...

Limited energy.

Christ beckons us...

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).*

How do we rest? What or whom do we look to for rest for our souls? Will rest be found through another round of channel surfing. Just one more pass through all the shows. One of them will do it. One of them will give me the rest I want and need.

Maybe. Maybe not.

A quiet night of entertainment may be right and good as we rest our bodies, but it is not equipped to rest our souls. Seek to rest the soul with methods only strong enough to rest our bodies, and rest will forever evade us.

What if love for God gave us rest? Using as many of the points below as needed, how would life be different if God were God of our rest?



## **WHAT IF?**

## Work

It's a reality of life. We work.

Sometimes we like it. We're in the zone. We're doing what we feel created to do.

Other times we loathe it. We're in the ditch. We're moaning and groaning as we do what we have to do.

Scripture call us to...

*Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).*

How does a life centered on God influence your work? Do you work more? Do you work less?

Using as many of the points below as needed, how would life be different if God were God of your work?



## **WHAT IF?**

## Cause

We live in a broken world.

There is hunger and hardship, sorrow and suffering.

Scripture tells us...

*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (James 1:27).*

A life centered on God is a life liberated to serve those around us. Using as many of the points below as needed, how will your life be different with God ever-increasingly at the center of your life?



## **WHAT IF?**

## What Else?

What if...

Using as many of the points below as needed, how would life be different in any area not yet mentioned in these categories?



**WHAT IF?**

## Week Eight

### Conversations with God

# HABAKKUK

## READ

Have you ever established a new friendship with an old acquaintance? This is the person you've known for years, but for one reason or another, you never became friends. Then something happens. You strike up a conversation or you stumble into a shared experience, and the longtime acquaintance becomes a treasured friendship. Oddly, Scripture can be a lot like that.

Every time you thumb through a Bible you pass through a genre of Scripture known as the prophets. For most, they are mere acquaintances. Titles like Jeremiah or Ezekiel are seen as the pages flip by, but a friendship has yet to be established. Those who truly engage the prophets often discover the unexpected. These writings are profound and worthy of lifelong friendship.

The prophets are commonly considered in two categories: major prophets and minor prophets. The distinction has nothing to do with value and is simply a matter of length. Isaiah (sixty-six chapters), Jeremiah (fifty-two chapters), and Ezekiel (forty-eight chapters) are examples of major prophets. Joel (three chapters), Jonah (four chapters), and Micah (seven chapters) are examples of minor prophets. This week, we will read the minor prophet Habakkuk—a mere three chapters. Yes, it is small, so small you may need to turn to the table of contents to find it. But yes, it is rich, so rich you'll likely find a new friend.

Little is known about Habakkuk as a person, but we do know he lived sometime before the nation Israel was overrun by their neighbors, the Babylonians. This may sound like ancient history (as it is), but it is highly relevant to our lives today. The Babylonians sacked Israel for a reason. The Israelites had drifted from God. Rather than letting God be their God, they were carrying God's name in vain, and God then allowed the invasion. To see this drifting from God, and to best get the context of Habakkuk, the first day's reading will not be Habakkuk itself but a few chapters from 2 Chronicles where you'll see Israel stairstepping down and away from God. This context is rich within itself and will enhance your experience with Habakkuk.

Because of both its richness and brevity, you're asked to read Habakkuk fully through three times. On day two, you're encouraged to read all of Habakkuk in its entirety simply to gain the broad context. Don't spend too much time on the details on this day. Just read through with an eye for the big picture of what is on this prophet's heart. On days three through five, you'll have a chance to read each chapter more slowly. If a particular verse or phrase catches your attention, let your thoughts and questions linger. Finally on day six, you're asked to read Habakkuk through in its entirety one final time. As you do, consider how all of the insights that you've gained over the week's reading are brought together into a seamless work of inspiration.

## MEMORIZE

As you finish this *Morph* module, you'll notice there are additional memory verses remaining. The purpose of this is twofold. First, this will assist you in continuing the practice after this *Morph* module ends. And second, if you continue through all four *Morph* modules, you'll have one hundred passages committed to memory—not a magical number but a worthy goal.

## HABAKKUK

If you're starting a second *Morph* module immediately after finishing this one, you'll want to wait on the additional passages here and pick them up later. But if you have a few weeks before starting the next, the additional verses are a great way to bridge the time.

*Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior (Habakkuk 3:17-18).*

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight (Proverbs 3:5-6).*

## **MEDITATE**

One of the more profound aspects of Habakkuk is how he interacts with God. The three chapters record a conversation between Habakkuk and God. Habakkuk's heart is heavy with questions: "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" (Habakkuk 1:2). And later: "Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" (Habakkuk 1:13). Not only do we gain insight by reading the exchange, but it also serves as a model for our own conversations with God.

This week, as you converse with God, consider asking him questions about matters that are heavy on your heart. Your questions may be similar to Habakkuk's, but consider more of what Habakkuk did and not just the particular questions he asked. He asked questions highly relevant to his own life and experience. The questions were not simply theological mind benders. He was seeing and experiencing life, and this experience inspired questions. Habakkuk didn't stuff these questions; he brought them before God and waited.

Asking these penetrating questions of God will feel risky to some. Is it good to question God in this way? On the one hand, we want to be authentic with God, and if we have questions, they should be asked. On the other hand, we recall times in Scripture where people questioned God, and God's response was strong. The Israelites, for example, complained about lack of food in the desert, and they were told by Moses that they were not "grumbling against us, but against the LORD" (Exodus 16:8). No one enjoys listening to whiners and complainers, and God apparently is no exception. But what if that's simply where we are? We're frustrated with God or frustrated with life. Should we not complain?

If we're in a place of frustration or we have a grumbling spirit, God knows this and there's no sense pretending it's not true. The last thing God would want is a plastic prayer. Instead, consider another option. Consider letting your frustration be your initial question, "God, I want to grumble. I want to complain. I want to roll on the ground and whine like a three-year-old. Why shouldn't I? I bring you this desire and ask that you speak to it." A question like this is simultaneously bold and faithful. It brings an honest question with a desire for healing.

## **HABAKKUK**

## Week Eight

### Conversations with People

# SMALL GROUP GUIDE

## SCRIPTURE MEMORY REVIEW GAME

Using one person's Scripture memory cards, place the cards from Weeks One through Five in a pile between you. Going around the circle (or back and forth if just two people), have each person pick up a card until no cards are left. Whoever has the least amount of cards goes first. That person is asked to quote a verse being held by another person in the group. If quoted correctly, the person who quoted it gets the card and gets to go again. If missed, he or she gives a card to the person whose card they attempted to quote and the next person goes. Go around the circle until one person has all the cards.

## READING AND MORPH ME

- ▶ The reading briefly reviewed several Bible stories (Joseph, Shadrach/Meshach/Abednego, and Habakkuk). Which of these do you find most inspiring? Why?
- ▶ In the Morph Me exercise, which "What if?" category most captured your attention? What did you write?

## CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD

- ▶ The Meditate section from Week Seven's Conversations with God guide (last week's) discussed exercising the discipline of gratitude. If you've been doing this, discuss your experience.
- ▶ How has your experience been with reading Habakkuk and the 2 Chronicles chapters that gave background? Are there any standout verses that got your attention?

## SUMMARY QUESTION

- ▶ Why love God?

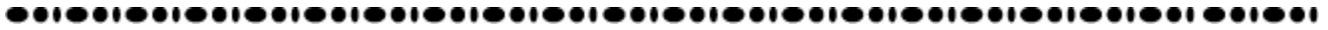
## PRAYER

- ▶ As a Small Group, or in Running Partners, discuss the latest in your lives and pray for each other.

**SMALL GROUP GUIDE**

Week 8, Conversation with People, p. 190

# MORPH MODULES



### **Build Character**

Without a doubt, most of us look at ourselves and desire varying degrees of change. We see anxiety where we want peace. We see fear where we want courage. We see addiction where we want self-control. Various methods are implemented to actualize this change. We set goals, we get organized, or maybe we make rules for what we will and will not do. Some plans work better than others, but all too often our patterns remain the same. How can we break out? How can we establish new ways of living? How can we experience irreversible life change? Central to Christ's teaching is a distinction. It's a distinction he introduced to his earliest followers and then taught and wrote about in depth. The distinction is between empowering people to transform rather than insisting that they conform. Transformation—metamorphosis—is change from the inside that moves to our outside. This transformation happens not by applying the latest self-help fad but by understanding and implementing the full richness of Christ's gospel.

*Build Character* is an eight-week module designed to train participants for a life of transformation by applying and experiencing their passionate love for God.

### **Love People**

There are six billion people in the world. At any given time, we are in relationship with a handful. At times, these relationships bring great joy. At other times, these relationships bring great pain. Truth be told, relationships bring about the best and worst of life. Our greatest joys consistently involve people. Our greatest pains consistently involve people. But what happens when a life is liberated by a love for God? How does love for God impact and influence our love for people? Christ gave two great commandments. First, we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And second, we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Are these commandments related? Might love of God inspire and equip us to authentically love those around us? How rich might life be if we ever-increasingly knew how to truly love people—not put up with people, not walk over people, not use people or avoid people—but truly love people?

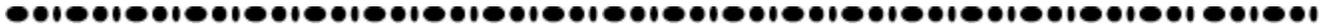
*Love People* is an eight-week module designed to train participants to authentically love the people in their lives.

### **Be Christ's Body**

The world is a beautiful place, but it is also a broken place. Turn on the evening news, and the brokenness comes at us in waves. Sure, we'd like to do something, but how? How can one person truly make a difference? How can we, with our limited time and resources, really matter in a world overflowing with needs? For the better part of 2,000 years, followers of Christ have pooled their time, talents, and resources to make a difference in the world. Liberated by a love for God, set free from enslavement to living for instant gratification or the accumulation of resources, authentic Christ-followers liberally and passionately pour love and grace into the world around them. Astounding things happen when followers of Christ discover their spiritual gifts and mobilize these gifts into action by partnering with the body of Christ around them.

*Be Christ's Body* is an eight-week module designed to train participants in how to be active participants in the body of Christ, to make a sizeable and significant difference in the world around them.

## About Morph



### **Morph Development Team**

Like most worthy endeavors, *Morph: Love God* was developed in community. It was written and developed by Rick Shurtz and Sherilyn Villareal with the support, guidance, and input of numerous others at Gateway Community Church. If you have ideas on how to make this experience better, please let us know.

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## **MORPH MODULES**

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