

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Highrock Small Groups

Topic guidance

Doing soul examining work can become frustrating of we have a posture of fixing or perfecting ourselves through a new routine. Spiritual practices are not able to make you any more valuable or loved or accepted by God. You are accepted as you are, full stop. Spiritual practices are not something to perfect, but as the name suggest, they are to be practiced. Be patient. Allow yourself to be a learner. Be curious and grace-filled towards yourself in this process. Here are some things to keep in mind as you study this book.

SOLITUDE

As you practice solitude, remember to start where you are. A half day away might be a long way down the road. But, consider where you can start. Notice moments you can *choose* solitude instead of filling the time with other tasks, "shoulds", and to dos. Choosing to put something aside will be and act of faith and trust in God that whatever it is can wait, that it can get done later or that it will get less of your attention.

As you enter into your time of stillness and solitude, begin with noticing. Barton also has more prompts and questions for you to consider in your time of solitude, but noticing and becoming aware in a way where you are not judging yourself, is a great place to begin becoming familiar with this practice. Then you can consider some of Barton's other questions she brings before you. "Sit with what comes into your awareness, becoming conscious of God's presence with you in that awareness. Don't try to do anything with what you are knowing except be with it. (In other words, don't scare it away.) Feel the difference between trying to fix it and just being with it. Feel the difference between trying to fight it and letting God fight for you."

Finally, time in solitude will ask you to give up control. You can be intentional with your time, set a timer, have questions to consider, but we do not get to manufacture what the time will be. Can you let go of feeling like the time needs to be productive or a "mountain top" experience? We can always expect God to meet us. That is sometimes a simple knowing that God is there, it sometimes springs up with emotion, it is sometimes uncomfortable and challenging, it might be surprising, it is sometimes just quiet. In your time, know that God sees you, God knows you, God loves you. There is no wrong way to sit with God in that truth. Playing a favorite worship song, lighting a candle, darkening the room, connecting with our bodies with movement, these are all ways we can signal a shift in the space we desire to enter into- even if you are sitting between mountains of laundry, paperwork, or next to a sink of dishes.

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Reading Scripture can be a powerful tool in our journey of faith. However, it can be helpful to pause and examine your relationship with the Bible and Scripture. How was it taught to you? How were those principles modeled by those who taught you? Were those two things consistent or inconsistent? Was scripture used as a means of control? How we relate to the Bible, as a place of encouragement/peace or confusion/fear can be shaped by how we were introduced to it. Those formative experiences can impact our relationship with Scripture as adults.

Why does this matter? Because reading scripture shouldn't be a place of shame, but rather hold non-judgmental curiosity for yourself and your feelings about the Bible. Bringing the weight of shoulds and oughts will simply reinforce shame of feeling 'not good enough'. Breathe and know that being in God's word isn't an act of having to prove yourself to anyone or to God. It is not a place of having to be productive. Let yourself come into the scriptures as you are and see what happens. It might not be earth shattering, but it might bring peace.

WEEKS 1 & 2 DESIRE- Longing for More

Reading: Introduction, & Ch. 1: Longing for more (Pages 9-28), for week 1 discussion

Suggested Practice: Examen (Instructions on pg. 4 of this guide)

NOTABLE QUOTE

"When was the last time you felt it—your own longing, that is? Your longing for love, your longing for God, your longing to live your life as it is meant to be lived in God? When was the last time you felt a longing for healing and fundamental change groaning within you? Do not rush past this question; it may be the most important question you ever ask. But this is hard, I know. In religious circles we are much more accustomed to silencing our desire, distancing ourselves from it, because we are suspicious and afraid of its power. Isn't there something better I should be doing with my time? we ask ourselves. Something a little less dangerous and unpredictable? Something more selfless and spiritual? And besides, desire is such a volatile thing." (p. 22)

WEEK 1: Facilitator Notes

- Setting group norms, culture, safety, and sharing conversation time
- Note on Practices- Not a place for shame. Make a plan, make the space but if you are not able to follow though then
 reflect on why? Ex. Were you avoiding it? Why? Ask questions and try to uncover what might be hindering you rather
 than letting shame or "should's" dominate your inner dialogue. Be gentle with yourself as God is gentle with you.
- Go through Appendix C overview
- Review handout of group commitments (Appendix B) and include things about being on time etc.
- Why are we only doing 4 Chapters? In the spirit of the book, we are slowing down to ingest and process each chapter with time to read, discuss and then taking a week to practice and process.

WEEK 1: DISCUSSION

- Review Appendix C (Page 186) then, on paper, write group norms together- what are 5-10 things that are important to being a part of this group?
- When you think about spiritual practices, what pictures come to mind for you? Do they feel approachable?
- With lives which are busy and filled with the unexpected or day-to-day routine, what might it look like to find stillness and silence in the mess/ noise of life?
- Discussion Questions from Appendix A: (as relevant)
- Review Spiritual Practice for Week 2: DESIRE (page 27)

- Have each person write their brief plan on a note card as well as a sentence of two about their hope for the week and a note to themselves about how they want to approach it or the posture they want to have towards it. Have each person share their plan to incorporate it in the following week.

DURING THE WEEK

- This week, read Mark 10:46-52. Then, on page 27, Follow her guided reflection.
- In a journal (drawing or writing) Return to the prompt she gives 4-5 times this week: "God, what I most need/want from you right now is..." Make it a morning/ mid-day/ evening habit.
- You can also practice this in prayer throughout your day.
- Use the Examen prayer during your day

WEEK 2: DISCUSSION

Use the questions below as prompts for reflecting. If there is a thread that is coming up within your group, stay there and discuss. There is no need to answer all the questions provided. You may also return to the discussion questions in the book or what stood out to people from the reading.

- Did you find it easy or difficult to make new space to be with God in stillness?
- What did you notice when you went to write down your thoughts/ feelings to the prompt about what you need/ want from God? Was it hard to name these things? Did you write more than you expected?
- How did you experience God during that time of reflecting?
- During your day/ week do you feel very aware of your own needs/wants? What was it like to become more aware of them?
- Have you had an impression that God cares about your needs/ desires/ wants/ longings?
- What are your desires/ longings for God? (This question will be repeated at week 8)

WEEKS 1 & 2 DESIRE: PRACTICE

PRAYER OF EXAMEN

A suggested option to practice this week alongside the practice portion in the Chapter From Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, by Adele Calhoun

4 different ways to practice the Examen

- 1. Gather together the threads of your daily encounters and activities. Attending to them one at a time, ask yourself some of the examen questions: Where did I give or receive love in this activity or interaction? How did I withhold love in this activity or interaction? What activity gave me the greatest high? Which one made me feel low? Reflect on where God was in the highs and lows of the day. How is God inviting you to pray about these things before you nestle into his arms and fall asleep?
- Make a list of feeling words. For example: accepted, anxious, apathetic, confused, defeated, disgusted, ecstatic, enraged, paranoid, weepy, undecided. Then begin to ask yourself the examen questions. Let these words help you articulate what drains or saps you and what gives you life. Let this knowing inform your choices.
- Light a candle and become still in the presence of Christ. Place your hand on your heart and ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind the moment of the day you are most grateful for. When were you most able to give and receive love?
 Talk to God about what it was like for you to be in that moment. What made it important to you? Breathe in your gratitude to God. Journal your gratitude to God. What have you learned about yourself in this?
- 4. Find a quiet moment to reflect on your day or week. Open your palms and ask the Holy Spirit to show you the moment for which you are least grateful. What made that moment difficult? Be with your feelings; don't try to change them or make them acceptable. Offer them up to God. Talk to him about them. Where was God in this moment? You may want to thank God that he is always ready to be with you and talk to you.

WEEKS 3 & 4 SOLITUDE- A Place for Desire

Read: Ch. 2, Solitude (Pages 29-43) for week 3 Discussion

Suggested Practice: Welcoming prayer (Instructions on page 7)

NOTABLE QUOTES:

"This is the way it is for most of us. Most of us are more tired than we know at the soul level. We are teetering on the brink of dangerous exhaustion, and we really cannot do anything else until we have gotten some rest. The other disciplines described in this book and elsewhere are a wonderful smorgasbord of spiritual sustenance, but we really can't engage any of them until solitude becomes a place of rest for us rather than another place for human striving and hard work." (p. 37)

"The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still" (Exodus 14:13-14).

WEEK 1: DISCUSSION

- What is your visceral reaction to the word: solitude?
- What pictures come to mind when you think of being in solitude?
- How would you distinguish solitude from isolation/ loneliness?
- Share about time of solitude you experienced. How long was it... how did you feel during that time... what did you notice...was it structured or unstructured... did you ever feel like you settled into it?
- What does it look like to experience solitude amidst noise and mess (of a space, on a commute, of your mind/heart)
- How does technology impact our relationship or ability to be in solitude? How does being inundated with a constant stream of information, opinions, alerts, and ways to engage make it hard to be aware of our own inner voice?
- How could minimizing or being more discerning about the input from your devices, podcasts, social media make a shift in your ability to engage with solitude?
- In preparation for the week of practice consider Parker Palmer's vivid description of the soul in the opening of this chapter. Read through the quote thoughtfully. How does this make you think about how you care for your own soul? Have you been in a season of crashing about? What does it look like to make space to be patient so your souls could emerge- what would that look or feel like: your soul emerging?

"The soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, self-sufficient. It knows how to survive in hard places. But it is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently by the base of the tree, and fade into our surroundings, the wild animal we seek might put in an appearance." Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness

- Review Spiritual Practice for Week 2: SOLITUDE

- Have each person share their plan to incorporate it in the following week. Have each person write their brief plan on a note card as well as a sentence of two about their hope for the week and a note to themselves about how they want to approach it or the posture they want to have towards it.

DURING THE WEEK

- Looking for moments of solitude: where is there already space? Where do you need to let go of some habits/ distractions/ entertainment to allow space for solitude- it zoning out or distracting, but turning inward to make space for your soul? What does it look like when you are "crashing around"?
- Welcoming prayer
- Go through the "practice" section for solitude a few times.

WEEK 2: DISCUSSION

Use the questions below as prompts for reflecting. If there is a thread that is coming up within your group, stay there and discuss. There is no need to answer all the questions provided. You may also return to the discussion questions in the book or what stood out to people from the reading.

- Discussion Questions from Appendix A: (as relevant)
- How resistant to this practice did you feel? Did you notice yourself making any excuses or looking for other things to do instead? Why might that be do you think?
- When you went into this week, how skeptical or excited were you that you would be able to find time for silence/ solitude?
- Where did you find moments for silence and/or solitude? Did they come naturally or did you have to fight hard to make or find the space?
- When you were in stillness, what did you notice about your heart/mind/soul?
- Did you notice anything about your posture towards God or ways you related to God differently?
- Was there anything that helped you let go of your expectations for the time in stillness? Is it hard to let go of wanting to perform or "do it right"?
- Did you notice impatience, desire to be productive with the time, or peacefulness, or anxiety...

WEEKS 3 & 4 SOLITUDE: PRACTICE

WELCOMING PRAYER

A suggested option to practice this week alongside the practice portion in the Chapter From Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, by Adele Calhoun

Welcoming prayer invites God into the ordinary events and relationships of life with all their busyness, triggers, muscle tension and heartache. It is a way of becoming attentive to God in what is happening now—while I fix dinner, sit in a traffic jam or talk to a colleague. Welcoming prayer addresses three fundamental needs hardwired into our psyches. The need for affection and love security and safety a sense of agency or power

- 1. This week make a point to notice when you are triggered by a person or event. Invite Jesus into the event with the words "Welcome, Jesus, welcome."
- 2. Do a body scan from your toes to the top of your head. Feel any tension, tightness, ache or pain? As you name that place say, "Welcome, Jesus, welcome," and let the tightness go. Breathe deeply. Release.
- 3. In the morning scan through your day. Anticipate the events and what will be good or hard. Welcome Jesus into these events before you enter your day and in the midst of the day.

WEEKS 5 & 6 SCRIPTURE- Reading for Relationship

Read: Ch. 3, Scripture (Pages 45-59)

Suggested Practice: Lectio Divina (instructions in book and pg. 11 of this guide)

NOTABLE QUOTE

"When we engage the Scriptures for spiritual transformation, we make it our top priority to listen to God relationally rather than seeking only to learn more about God cognitively. Our approach is driven by the longing of a lover. We read slowly so that we can savor each word and let its meaning sink in. Rather than rushing on to the next chapter so that we can complete a reading or study assignment, we stay in the place where God is speaking to us, contemplating its meaning for our life and for our relationship." (p. 50)

"Like the little boy Samuel, we approach the Scripture with utter openness and availability to God: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:9)." (p. 50)

WEEK 1: Facilitator Notes

- The women in your group, (as well as you) will all come to scripture with different history and way of approaching/ understanding the Word of God. For some it may have been used to encourage, uplift, direct in a healthy way. For others, Scripture could have been misused as a way to control, manipulate, or over simplify etc. And then, perhaps for together in your group, exploring scripture is brand new to them! Be sure to make space for everyone's story and offering guidance as needed.
- Ask if there is anyone in your group who does not have a Bible. I will try to find one they can borrow.

WEEK 1: DISCUSSION

Begin your time together getting a feel for how those in your group relate to scripture. You could use some of the questions below.

- How do you feel about reading the Bible? (Intimidated, joyful, bored...)
- What are some of your early experiences with Scripture that have been positive? Are there any which have been negative?
- Does the Bible feel accessible to you? Why or why not.
- When you read scripture, what do you notice are some of your goals or expectations of that time? When you read Scripture do you tend to take it in primarily for your head (gaining knowledge) or with your heart (inspiration/feeling)?

- What have been the ways you have learned to read, understand, engage with scripture? What have you found helpful?
- Share about what Scripture has meant to you in your relationship with God. How has it been a part of your growth as a follower of Jesus? How have you seen/ experienced God/ Holy Spirit/ Jesus through the scriptures? What does it look like to read Scripture for relationship?
- What do you think some of God's purposes are in giving us the Scriptures? Feel welcome to think about what the Bible has to say about itself and discuss.
- What stands out to you about the practice of Lectio Divina? What intrigues you or interest you about this way of being in the word?
- Discussion Questions from Appendix A: (as relevant)
- Review Spiritual Practice for Week 2: SCRIPTURE, page 59-61
 - Have each person share their plan to incorporate Lectio Divina in the following week. Have each person write their brief plan on a note card as well as a sentence of two about their hope for the week and a note to themselves about how they want to approach it or the posture they want to have towards it.

DURING THE WEEK

Review and practice Lectio Divina. If this is new to you, remember it is not about doing it "right" or mastering the method. Give yourself freedom to be learning and time to get to know this way of interacting with scripture.

WEEK 2: DISCUSSION

Use the questions below as prompts for reflecting. If there is a thread that is coming up within your group, stay there and discuss. There is no need to answer all the questions provided. You may also return to the discussion questions in the book or what stood out to people from the reading.

- How has it been allowing yourself to be a learner of these new practices? Are you experiencing frustration, where or how do you see it coming up?
- Where have you been finding joy, freedom, or invitation as you work through these practices? Are you noticing any themes as you are sitting with God?
- What did you notice about relating to Scripture for relationship, rather than just for head knowledge? Did it feel unusual or hard to quantify how your time with God went by not having a specific goal of what you were trying to learn?

- Ruth Haley Barton talks about the practice of Lectio Divina as a way to slow down as we read the Scriptures. Do you find yourself wanting to rush through the practice? Do you think you are trying to rush to the next thing you have to do OR are you rushing away from the slowness and work of settling into the practice?
- What was one passage you read this week using Lectio Divina? Share about what stood out to you during your time of reflection from the passage?
- What else would you like to share from the reading or the time practicing Lectio Divina? What was it like relating to scripture and God this way?

WEEKS 5 & 6 SCRIPTURE: PRACTICE

LECTIO DIVINA

From Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, by Adele Calhoun

In lectio one listens to the word as it is read aloud, or you read the text aloud for yourself. Devotional reading of Scripture is rooted in the assurance that every part of the biblical story—letters, parables, Gospels, Prophets, history—is inspired and can give voice to God's particular word to us. Devotional reading was traditionally made up five movements:

- Silencio—quiet preparation of the heart. Come into God's presence, slow down, relax, and intentionally release the chaos and noise in your mind to him.
- Lectio—read the word. Read a Scripture passage slowly and out loud, lingering over the words so that they resonate in your heart. When a word or phrase catches your attention, don't keep reading. Stop and attend to what God is saying to you. Be open to the word. Don't analyze it or judge it. Listen and wait.
- Meditatio—meditate. Read the Scripture a second time out loud. Savor the words. Listen for any invitation that God is extending to you in this word. Reflect on the importance of the words that light up to you. Like Mary, who pondered the word in her heart, gently explore the ramifications of God's invitation.
- Oratio—respond, pray. Read the Scripture a third time. Now is the moment to enter into a personal dialogue with God. There is no right or wrong way to do this. The important thing is to respond truthfully and authentically. What feelings has the text aroused in you? Name where you are resistant or want to push back. Become aware of where you feel invited into a deeper way of being with God. Talk to God about these feelings.
- Contemplatio—contemplate, rest and wait in the presence of God. Allow some time for the word to sink deeply into your soul. Yield and surrender yourself to God. Before you leave, you might consider a reminder that can help you dwell on or incarnate this word throughout the day.

WEEKS 7 & 8 PRAYER- Beginning Again

Read: Ch. 4, Prayer (Pages 62-76)

Suggested Practice: Breath Prayer (Instructions in book and pg. 15 of this guide)

NOTABLE QUOTE

"When we read God's story in the Old and New Testaments we are confronted with a God who is always after us, looking for us, and who cries out each time he finds us with a divine despair. . . . He wants us here, now, totally, unconditionally. As long as we continue to reduce prayer to occasional piety we keep running away from the mystery of God's jealous love. . . . Looking at prayer as a generous response to a jealous God helps explain why we may have serious reservations about prayer. . . . Prayer means letting God's creative love touch the most hidden places of our being and prayer means listening with attentive, undivided hearts to the inner movement of the Spirit of Jesus, even when that Spirit leads us to places we would rather not go." (p. 66)

WEEK 1: Facilitator Notes

As with scripture, take some time to allow people to share how they relate to or understand prayer. What does prayer mean to them?

WEEK 1: DISCUSSION

- Allow people to share how they were taught to pray.
- What do their prayers look like these days? Are they feeling content and connected in their prayer life or longing for something different/ feeling stale or distant (these two things do not have to be mutually exclusive).
- After reading for this week, have they identified where they might be in their prayer journey relating to God? Beginning, transitioning to another deeper place... etc?
- Barton talks about the different ways we pray in different stages of our faith. Was there a stage which resonated with you? On page 65 are there parts of the transition stage that resonates with you?
- Have you been in a season where prayers feel like they are not what you want or don't *feel* the way they used to or you feel disconnected? What is that like for you.
- What are some ways in which barton expands the idea of what prayer is?
- Consider this longer description of what prayer is (below). Have you experienced that feeling of risk, fear, hesitancy when you go before God in prayer? What is unique about the intimacy we have before God?
 - What could it look like to take steps of trust and vulnerability when you go before God in prayer?

- Are there possible areas where you might not trust God and so feel more walled off to letting God into certain areas when you go to pray?
- "As long as we continue to reduce prayer to occasional piety we keep running away from the mystery of God's jealous love. . . . Looking at prayer as a generous response to a jealous God helps explain why we may have serious reservations about prayer. . . . Prayer means letting God's creative love touch the most hidden places of our being and prayer means listening with attentive, undivided hearts to the inner movement of the Spirit of Jesus, even when that Spirit leads us to places we would rather not go. Intimacy also requires risk—the risk of allowing someone to see me." (page 65-66)
- Week 7 Discussion Questions from Appendix A: (As relevant)
- Review Spiritual Practice for PRAYER, pgs. 67-70
 - Have each person share their plan to incorporate Breath Prayer in the following week. Have each person write their brief plan on a note card as well as a sentence of two about their hope for the week and a note to themselves about how they want to approach it or the posture they want to have towards it.

DURING THE WEEK

Review and practice Breath Prayer. If this is new to you, remember it is not about doing it "right" or mastering the method. Give yourself freedom to be learning and time to get to know this way of interacting with scripture.

WEEK 2: DISCUSSION

Use the questions below as prompts for reflecting. If there is a thread that is coming up within your group, stay there and discuss. There is no need to answer all the questions provided. You may also return to the discussion questions in the book or what stood out to people from the reading.

- Reflect on your time practicing breath prayer. What stood out to people? Did this practice come naturally or was it hard to navigate?
- Do you think about your breath often? Do you spend most of your day tense and taking quick breaths? What did this reveal about how our breath can be a reflection of the tension or relaxation in our body/mind/gut?
- Have you related the body and breath with your prayers before? How did connecting to your breath affect how you
 experienced this type of prayer? Did you notice it helpful in slowing and being present, why or why not?
- Over the course of the week, do you feel a sense of what your breath prayer might be for this season? Share about why this prayer is resonating with you. What does it remind you about who God is and God's love for you.

Reflecting on the 8 Weeks

- Which chapter or practice has stood out to you the most?
- Have you noticed a theme rising up as you have spent time with God these past 8 weeks? What might that theme be? How do you want to respond to God's invitation to you?
- Which practices were hardest for you to engage with? Why do you think that was? Is there an invitation amidst that difficulty to learn or grow?
- What is something that you would like to take hold of or let go of that you would be able to make regular rhythms of spiritual practices a part of your hours, day, week, month...etc?
- Take some time before leaving to make note of any themes, invitations, or next steps you would like to embrace after concluding these 8 weeks.
- Make note also of any ways in which you have come to understand God differently, God's love for you, and/or your posture toward God.
- What do your desires or longings for God look like now? Have they shifted over the last 8 weeks? How?

WEEKS 7 & 8 PRAYER: PRACTICE

BREATH PRAYER

From Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, by Adele Calhoun

Breath prayer reminds us that each breath we are given is God's gift and that God's Spirit is nearer to us than our own breath. Breath prayer or "prayer of the heart" has been practiced in the church for millennia. The Eastern Orthodox Church in particular has seen breath prayer as a way of living out Paul's instruction to "pray without ceasing."

- Become comfortable. Breathe deeply. Intentionally place yourself before God. In rhythm with your breathing, gratefully inhale the breath of life. Exhale remembering that Jesus gave his last breath for love of you. Gently and thankfully repeat, "Breath of life, breathe on me."
- Decide to pray the Jesus Prayer or some other scriptural breath prayer as often as you are able during one day. If you worry about forgetting, set a clock at every hour to remind you, or put the prayer on your car mirror. Reminders should be gentle and not forced. In the evening spend time telling the Lord what it means to you to be able to return to him again and again during the day with one particular prayer.
- Is there someone for whom you wish to pray ceaselessly? Listen deeply to what Jesus' desire for this person might be. Form a breath prayer naming God's adequacy and your desire for the person. Throughout the day as they come to mind, offer up your prayer. Don't allow yourself to be drawn into long prayer dialogues about what you want God to do in this person's life. Let the breath prayer carry all your desire to God.
- Begin and end each day with your breath prayer. Let it be the word that comes to mind as you wake and as you fall asleep.
- Tell someone what breath prayer means to you.
- Help a child form a breath prayer to say while at school or at play.

RESOURCES

Barton, Ruth Haley. Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation (Transforming Resources) (p. 43). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

RETREATS & MORE

Boston Area Retreats

PAX Center for Spiritual Formation (Essex, MA)

Bethany House (Arlington, MA)

Society St. John the Evangelist (Cambridge, MA and Newbury, MA) Link goes to Newbury location

Rolling Ridge (Andover, MA)

Glastonbury Abbey (Hingham, MA)

Places in Nature

Crane's Beach and Plum Island (Newburyport, MA)

Halibut Point (Annisquam, MA)

MEDIA

Pray As You Go (Should also be available on Android)

Sermon by Pastor Eugene Kim on the Contemplative tradition

Websites

Soul Shepherding: Lectio Divina & Ignatian Meditation

Gospel Contemplation