

**Please note these  
questions are drawn from  
Stephen Bryan Smith's  
The Good and Beautiful  
God**

## Chapter 1: What Are You Seeking?

### Opening to God [5 minutes]

Begin with five minutes of silence followed by a brief prayer inviting God to guide the conversation. *Why 5 minutes of silence?* We live in a world that is filled with noise and distractions. It is easy to enter one conversation still processing the last conversation. In the midst of all this busyness it is also difficult to hear the whispering voice of God. When we gather with friends to share our spiritual journey, what we want is to hear God's voice in the lives of those around us. With a little silence we will be prepared to listen, so one option is to begin each gathering with some silence.

### Soul Training [10-15 minutes]

If you are in a group of seven or more people, divide into small groups of three or four. Spend ten minutes discussing what you learned from the soul-training experience of sleep. To help everyone get started, share your thoughts on these questions.

1. Were you able to practice the discipline of sleep this week? If so, describe what you did and how you felt about it.
2. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?

### Engaging the Chapter [30-45 minutes]

The primary idea of this chapter is that most people want to change, but fail—not because they're not *trying*, but because they're not *training* properly.

[ *Note:* Each week read through the questions before you begin discussion. Note any questions you especially want to discuss. Depending on your group size and the conversation, you may not have time to discuss all these questions.]

1. Have you ever tried to change something about yourself? What process did you use? How successful were you in changing?
2. The author gives us a diagram for transformation (p. 24). It is made up of personal narratives, soul-training exercises, community and the Holy Spirit. Have any of these been a part of how you have changed in the past? Explain.
3. Our narratives are stories that shape the way we live. To help you understand the concept of narratives better, think of a story from your life that defines success for you. Talk about that with the group.
4. Many people are tempted (and have been taught) to practice spiritual disciplines to please God, when in fact they are a means of transforming the soul. How does that alter your approach to the practices you already do?
5. When has a small group of people spurred you on and encouraged you on your journey?

6. From the section on the work of the Holy Spirit (pp. 28-31), what insights did you gain about the Holy Spirit and how he impacts our narratives, soul training or sense of community?

### **Engaging the word [10-15 minutes]**

[ *Note:* Take the time to have someone read the Scripture text aloud each week. It's good to hear it read even if it's also in front of you in a written format.]

Read John 1:38-39 aloud.

1. Listen to Jesus' words; imagine you are the disciple asking the question. What are you looking for?

2. When Jesus tells you to "come and see," what emotion do you feel?

### **Go in Peace [5 minutes]**

Conclude by having one person in your group read these words from the first chapter aloud. When the Spirit has changed our narratives sufficiently, we begin to think differently. As a result we begin to believe in and trust a good and loving God who is strong and powerful. We begin to see how Jesus lived a perfect life that we cannot live and offered that life to the Father on our behalf, setting us free from having to earn God's love and favor. And as we engage in soul-training exercises—especially in the context of community—our confidence that God is at work in and among us increases. This creates an inward change that manifests itself in outward behavior.

Now, when faced with an airport delay, we can take a deep breath and remember who we are. . . . We can endure these trials with love, joy, peace, patience and kindness. (p. 31)

Go from this place, savoring the good news that God is at work in and among you. Amen.

### **Next Week**

In the next chapter we'll explore God's goodness. The soul-training practice for the week will be five minutes of daily silence and paying attention to the created world.

## Chapter 2: God Is Good

### Opening to God [5 minutes]

Begin with five minutes of silence followed by a brief prayer.

### Soul Training [10-15 minutes]

Divide into small groups of three or four and spend time discussing what you learned from the two soul-training experiences. To help you begin, you might use these three questions:

1. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercises?
2. Was it hard for you to find five minutes for silence each day?
3. What stood out for you as you paid closer attention to the created world around you?

### Engaging the Chapter [20-30 minutes]

The primary focus of this chapter is wrestling with the commonly held narrative that God is an angry God, who punishes us for our sins, but the God Jesus knows and reveals is good—meaning there is nothing bad about God.

1. The author shares a story of being confronted by a friend who says that either his sin or his wife's sin had caused his daughter Madeline's illness. What was your reaction to that story?
2. Have you ever had times when you felt that God was punishing you for a sin, or perhaps had a friend tell you that was happening to you? If so, talk about that experience.
3. The author points out that many live by the narrative that says: "God is an angry judge. If you sin you will be punished." Has this narrative ever affected you? If so, where did that narrative come from?
4. Look back at the section called "The Good Only the Good Know" ([pp. 46-47](#)). St. Augustine had a brilliant insight when he shifted the discussion away from the "cause and effect" notion of sin and suffering, and taught instead about the "peculiar good" belonging to those who do good, and the evil that results from evil. For example, a person who goes about doing good will experience blessings unknown to those who do evil, such as inner contentment, the good feeling of having helped another, trust and so on. If time allows, tell stories of people you have known who have received the "good" because of their goodness.

### Engaging the Word [15-30 minutes]

Read John 9 aloud.

1. As an onlooker, what do you see, hear and feel?

2. Watching Jesus in action in John 9, what do you learn about him?
3. What do you learn about human nature through the Pharisees, the disciples and the man who was born blind?
4. Are there any areas of your life where you feel God has punished you? If so, imagine yourself in the place of the man born blind. Allow yourself to hear Jesus' words, as if they are spoken to you.

Go in Peace [5-10 minutes]

Have a volunteer from the group read the quote below from the chapter. Then sit in silence and soak in these words to close your time together.

Jesus said his Father was good. Jesus also refused to affirm the idea that external rewards and punishments are given by God on the basis of our good or bad works. Rain falls on the good and the bad. Sometimes we pray for rain (for our crops), and sometimes we pray that it will not rain (for our picnics). Both good and bad people get rained on, whether they want it or not. Jesus faced suffering, rejection and alienation, and the people jeered at him as he hung on the cross, questioning whether God was really with him. And Jesus believed. And he believes for me. ([p. 49](#))

If you're comfortable doing so, offer prayers of praise and thanksgiving for the God who is good.

Next Week

In the next chapter we'll explore God's trustworthiness. The soul-training practice for the week will be counting your blessings.

## Chapter 3: God Is Trustworthy

[ *Note:* In this week's session the soul-training segment takes place following the chapter discussion.]

### Opening to God [5 minutes]

Begin with five minutes of silence followed by a brief prayer.

### Engaging the Chapter [25-45 minutes]

The primary focus of this chapter is that we can trust God because Jesus trusted God—even as he entered into his suffering.

1. Have you ever done a team-building exercise? If so, describe your experience to the group. Did the exercise build trust? If so, what did it feel like to “trust your team”?
2. The author believes God is trustworthy because the God Jesus reveals would never do anything to harm us. God has no malice or evil intentions. How does this compare to your own definition of trustworthiness?
3. In the Lord's Prayer we encounter a God who is present, pure, powerful, who provides, pardons and protects ([pp. 60-61](#)). Which of these aspects of God is most comforting for you? Which one is the most difficult to grasp?
4. If you are in a group of six or more, divide into groups of three or four to discuss the following questions. [Allow about 10-15 minutes for this conversation and prayer.]

A “cup” (see [pp. 64-65](#)) is that aspect of our life that makes it difficult for us to trust God.

- Can you name a “cup” from your own life? What have you learned about God or yourself through that experience?
- The author tells us, “Jesus trusted his Abba, and I will also trust in the God I know to be good.” How does it feel to know that you don't have to “force” yourself to say “all is well”?
- Whether you are in the midst of tragedy or not, it is amazing to see our story joined with God's story ([pp. 65-67](#)). How does this good news change your perspective and the way you spend your time and energy?
- If you're comfortable, spend time in prayer for one another, inviting God to join his story with yours.

### Soul Training [10-15 minutes]

Near the end of the chapter the focus turns to the blessings we have received. If the group is large enough, divide into *new* groups of three to four and discuss what you learned from the soul-training practice of counting your blessings. It isn't necessary to share your list. Use these questions to help you begin:

1. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?
2. What were some of the things that made your list that surprised you? Why?
3. What similarities do you notice between everyone's lists?

### **Engaging the Word [10-15 minutes]**

Read Matthew 26:36-44 aloud.

1. Picture the events in this text. What emotions does this scene stir within you?
2. How does this moment from Jesus' life impact your ability to trust God?

### **Go in Peace [5 minutes]**

Have two or three volunteers read the list of six descriptors of God (God is present, God is pure, God is powerful, God provides, God pardons and God protects) slowly, once each, then have a few minutes of silence. End the silence with these words: Go in the assurance of a God who can be trusted.

### **Next Week**

In the next chapter we'll explore God's generosity. The soul-training practice for the week will be living and breathing Psalm 23—enjoy!

## Chapter 4: God Is Generous

### Opening to God [5 minutes]

Have someone in the group read through the list of characteristics of God from chapter three (God is present, God is pure, God is powerful, God provides, God pardons and God protects), and then allow five minutes for silence. Conclude the silence with a brief prayer.

### Soul Training [10-15 minutes]

In groups of three or four discuss the soul-shaping practice of living and breathing Psalm 23. Use these reflection questions to help your conversation:

1. Were you able to practice the exercise this week? If so, describe what you did and how you felt about it.
2. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?
3. What was the most meaningful verse or phrase of Psalm 23 for you?

### Engaging the Chapter [25-45 minutes]

The primary focus of this chapter is that we do not earn God's love, favor, forgiveness or acceptance. God is generous and gives them to us freely.

1. The false narrative explored in this chapter is, "Love and forgiveness are commodities that are exchanged for performance. God's love, acceptance and forgiveness must be merited by right living. What God most wants is for us not to sin and instead to do good" ([p. 77](#)). What effect does this narrative have on your relationship with God?
2. The author points out, "To say that sin has consequences is different than saying that because of our sin God entirely rejects us" ([p. 78](#)). How would you put into your own words this idea that sin has consequences, but our sin does *not* lead God to reject us?
3. The overarching story of the Bible reveals a God of grace. Certain minor narratives may seem to  
  
3. contradict this major narrative, but the minor narratives must be interpreted only in terms of undeserved and unearned love (see [p. 79](#)). How does this way of reading Scripture resonate with you? In what ways does it help your reading of the Bible? In what ways does it make you uncomfortable?
4. We are assured that God's love is not earned, and that what God wants from us is simply for us to know his love, which will naturally lead us to love in return. If it's true that God's love is not earned, what would you do differently tomorrow? Why?

5. A. W. Tozer writes, “What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us” ([p. 88](#)). If you are in a group of six or more, split into groups of three or four. Describe to your small group the first thing that comes into your mind when you think about God. In what ways does this thought shape your daily life?

### **Engaging the Word [15-20 minutes]**

Read Matthew 20:1-15 aloud.

1. If this was the only story you knew about God what would you conclude?
2. Silently consider how you have experienced God’s generosity. As events and blessings come to mind, do you notice anything that changes inside of you?

### **Go in Peace [5 minutes]**

Have a volunteer from your group read the following story out loud. Try to imagine this scene as the story is read:

One morning this past spring I noticed a young couple with an infant at an airport departure gate. The baby was staring intently at other people, and as soon as he recognized a human face, no matter whose it was, no matter if it was young or old, pretty or ugly, bored or happy or worried-looking he would respond with absolute delight. It was beautiful to see. Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven. And as I watched that baby play with any adult who would allow it, I felt as awe-struck as Jacob, because I realized that this is how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted, to see the creature he made and called good, along with the rest of creation. . . . I suspect that only God, and well-loved infants, can see this way. ([p. 87](#)).

Go in peace, and live gladly in the knowledge of God’s generosity toward you.

### **Next Week**

In the next chapter we’ll explore God’s radical love. The soul-training practice for the week will be *lectio divina*, which is explained at the end of the chapter. You may want to practice *lectio divina* several times during the coming week.

## Chapter 5: God Is Love

Opening to God [5 minutes]

Begin with five minutes of silence. At the conclusion of the five minutes, offer a brief prayer.

### Soul Training [10-15 minutes]

Divide into small groups of three or four and discuss what you learned from the soul-training practice of *lectio divina*. Use these reflection questions to help your conversation.

1. Were you able to do the *lectio divina* exercise? If so, describe what you did and how you felt about it.
2. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?

### Engaging the Chapter [25-45 minutes]

The primary focus of this chapter is that most people believe that love is conditional, that it's based on one's behavior. Thus, most people believe that God loves us only when we're good. Jesus told of a God who loves without condition—a God who even loves sinners.

1. The false narrative explored in this chapter is that God only loves us when we're good. The author gives us the image of a God sitting on a swivel chair, turning toward us when we're "good," and turning away when we're "bad" ([p. 94](#)). What image would you use to describe God's reaction to your sin?
2. By looking at various Scripture passages, this chapter unpacks the reality that God loves sinners. How does it make you feel to know that God loves you—just as you are?
3. John 3:16 tells us that God loves the world, meaning that God loves everyone—including our enemies, those who have wounded us and those who just irritate us. How does it make you feel to know that God loves people you don't love? You might silently consider naming those you struggle to love (including yourself).

If you're in a group of six or more, split into groups of three or four to share your thoughts on questions four and five below. If necessary, review "The Prodigal Father" ([pp. 99-101](#)) and "The Elder Brother and Me" ([pp. 101-2](#)).

1. From the parable of the prodigal son, which of the sons can you relate to more? Can you relate to the father? If so, in what way(s)?
2. The author writes, "Our self-righteousness does not turn God from us, but us from God. It is not my sin that moves me away from God, it is my refusal of grace, both for myself and for others" ([p. 102](#)). What is your reaction to this statement? In what ways does your own self-righteousness hold you back from God? How can we recognize self-righteousness in our lives?

3. If you have split into groups of three or four, regroup and have someone in the group slowly read aloud the poem “Love (III)” ([pp. 103-4](#)), allowing everyone else to picture the encounter with Love.

### **Engaging the Word [15-20 minutes]**

*Lectio divina* can be done as a group. Use the Scripture printed below as your text (Matthew 9:12-13). Before you start, decide who will read the Scripture each time.

- The first time the Scripture is read, let the Word soak into your mind. Allow a few minutes of silence.
- The second time the Scripture is read, note any word that God seems to be emphasizing. After the second reading, anyone in the group can share the word or phrase that spoke to them, but they should not elaborate.
- Read the passage a third time. This time allow God to reveal to you the significance of this word. Spend three to five minutes in silence, conversing with God. After the silence, anyone who is willing can share what they felt God spoke to them through the passage.

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners. (Matthew 9:12-13)

### **Go in Peace**

Go in peace, and live gladly in the knowledge of God’s love for you.

### **Next Week**

In the next chapter we’ll study God’s holiness. The soul-shaping practice is margin, which will be explained in depth at the end of the chapter. Margin is something you’ll want a full week to practice before you gather again to discuss, so plan on reading the chapter and soul-training section early.

## Chapter 6: God Is Holy

### Opening to God [5 minutes]

Begin with five minutes of silence. At the conclusion of the five minutes, offer a brief prayer.

### Soul Training [10-15 minutes]

Divide into small groups of three or four and discuss what you learned from the soul-training practice of margin. Use these reflection questions to start your conversation:

1. Were you able to develop margin in any way this week? If so, describe what you did and how you felt about it.
2. As you tried to develop margin in your life, what was most difficult? What was most rewarding?
3. How do you plan to practice the discipline of margin in the future?
4. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?

### Engaging the Chapter [25-35 minutes]

The primary focus of this chapter is that God is love and God is also holy. God's wrath toward sin is an action that reflects that love and holiness.

1. Chapter six addresses two false narratives. The first is that God is always angry and wrathful toward us. The second false narrative is that God doesn't care about sin at all and is more of a "teddy bear." Which of these two narratives do you identify with more? Why?
2. To love is "to will the good of another," according to Dallas Willard ([p. 119](#)). When this understanding of love comes in contact with our sin, the result is God's wrath, because "God is fiercely and forcefully opposed to the things that destroy his precious people" ([p. 121](#)). What would you say to a friend who wanted to understand how a loving God could be wrathful?
3. On [pages 121-22](#) the author gives the example of MADD as a rare instance when human wrath could be compared to God's wrath. Can you think of any other human examples?
4. We are given this wonderful quote from George MacDonald: "love loves unto purity" ([p. 123](#)). What thoughts and feelings do you have when you consider that God longs to remove everything from your life that would destroy you?
5. "God will not violate the choices we make. People may choose to bar God from their life. Thus the doors of hell are locked from the inside" ([p. 125](#)). How is this vision of hell similar to or different from your own understanding?

6. The chapter concludes with the important point that we must first trust in God's love and forgiveness before we can begin to understand God's holiness. The first five chapters of this book unpack God's love and goodness. What impact have the previous five chapters had in preparing you to understand God's holiness?

### **Engaging the Word [15-20 minutes]**

Read Hebrews 12:18-29 aloud.

1. This passage begins by contrasting the covenant made on Mount Sinai with the covenant made by Jesus' blood. What images of God's holiness do you see throughout the passage?
2. One way of interpreting this passage is to view pieces in our lives that can be "shaken" and removed as those pieces that are opposed to God. On the other hand, the kingdom we are receiving is the unshakable kingdom of God—the "with-God life." Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt shaken and eventually purified? Did you see God's hand at work through that situation, and if so, in what way?
3. How does it feel to know that while purification can be painful, it ultimately leads to deeper intimacy with God?

### **Go in Peace [5 minutes]**

Have a volunteer from the group read the quote below from the chapter. Then sit in silence and soak in these words to close your time together.

God is against my sin because he is for me. And if I am for sin, God stands against those desires, MacDonald is saying, because they cause my destruction. I would not have it any other way. To be sure, I am prone to excusing my sin or rationalizing my weaknesses, but God is not in that business. Though we are now reconciled through Christ, God is not indifferent to my sin. It hurts me, and therefore it hurts God—because God loves me.

God does not make me feel bad or shame me into better behavior. Nor does he use fear or guilt. God's method of change is the highest of all. God's holy love burns the dross of sin out of our lives. It is God's kindness that leads to genuine repentance (Romans 2:4). As MacDonald said, "love loves unto purity." ([pp. 123-24](#))

God's love is loving you "unto purity." Go in the assurance of God's deep desire for your good.

### **Next Week**

In the next chapter we'll explore God's self-sacrificial nature. The soul-training practice for the week will be reading the entire Gospel of John. You'll need to allow ample time for this exercise (one to three hours). Some groups have done their reading together out loud; you may wish to consider this option as well.

## Chapter 7: God is Self-Sacrificing

### Opening to God [5 minutes]

Begin with five minutes of silence. At the conclusion of the five minutes, offer a brief prayer.

### Soul Training [10-15 minutes]

Divide into small groups of three or four and discuss your experience of reading the Gospel of John. To help you begin, you might use these questions:

1. What did you notice that you hadn't noticed before in previous readings of the Gospel of John?
2. How would you describe the effect this week's reading had on you?
3. If time allows, spend a few minutes looking over past soul-training exercises. What exercises are you still doing? What impact are they continuing to have on your life?

### Engaging the Chapter [25-35 minutes]

The primary focus of this chapter is that self-sacrifice is an essential part of the character of God.

1. This chapter begins with a story of the author's sister being uncertain of the necessity of the cross. Before reading this chapter, how would you have explained Jesus' need to die on the cross?
2. On [pages 135-38](#) the author gives us an imaginary conversation with Athanasius, based on the book *On the Incarnation*. Look back over this section and share parts that you really enjoyed and parts that raised questions for you.
3. The author introduces the idea that God feels both joy and pain. How do you feel about a God who feels pain? Why?
4. "Maybe vulnerability is true strength" ([p. 140](#)). This idea runs against cultural narratives that many of us hold. Who in your own life have you seen demonstrate strength through vulnerability?
5. "At the heart of the universe is this one principle: *self-sacrifice is the highest act*. The grain of wheat must die in order to give life. The cosmos reflects the nature of the God who created it" ([p. 141](#)). Can you name other examples of creation revealing this principle? Have you ever considered it a characteristic of God to be self-sacrificing? What impact does this statement have on your own feelings toward God?
6. What was your reaction to the Brennan Manning story ([pp. 142-43](#)), specifically the understanding that Jesus could not have done any more for us?

### Engaging the Word [15-25 minutes]

The following Scripture study follows a *lectio divina* format. Use the Scripture on the next page as your text (Philippians 2:6-11). Before you begin, decide who will read the Scripture each time.

- The first time the Scripture is read, allow the Word to soak into your mind. Allow a few minutes of silence.
- The second time the Scripture is read, note any word that God seems to be emphasizing. After the second reading, anyone in the group can share the word or phrase that spoke to them, but they should not elaborate.
- Read the passage a third time. This time allow God to reveal to you the significance of this word. Spend three to five minutes in silence, conversing with God. After the silence, anyone who is willing can share what they felt God spoke to them through the passage.

[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.  
Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11)

### **Go in Peace [5 minutes]**

Have a volunteer from the group read the quote below. Then sit in silence for a few minutes soaking in these words to close your time together.

Here is a key principle of the kingdom of God: What we let go of will never be lost but becomes a thing of beauty. No wonder the manger and the cross are two of the most beautiful images this world has ever seen. In the incarnation God, who created millions of spinning galaxies, chose to become vulnerable, and in so doing, heaven came down and kissed the earth. In the crucifixion God, who could not die, subjected himself to death, and in so doing lifted the whole world to himself. ([p. 145](#))

God loves you so much he became vulnerable for you. Go with that amazing good news.

### **Next Week**

In the next chapter we'll explore how God transforms us. The soul-training practice for the week is solitude. You'll need to schedule time for this practice and let others in your life who may be affected by it know when you'll be doing it.

## Chapter 8: God Transforms

### Opening to God [5 minutes]

Begin with five minutes of silence. At the conclusion of the five minutes, offer a brief prayer.

### Soul Training [10-15 minutes]

Divide into small groups of three or four and spend ten to fifteen minutes discussing your experience of solitude. Use these reflection questions to get your conversation started:

1. Begin by sharing how your time of solitude went. Remember that for some people this discipline can be very difficult and even frustrating, while for others this exercise is very energizing.
2. One of the aims of the time of solitude is to give you the ability to “take off your masks” and simply be who you truly are in the presence of God. This is a powerful and complex idea, so it may be helpful to refer to [page 167](#). Would that describe your experience with this exercise? Explain.
3. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?

### Engaging the Chapter [25-45 minutes]

The primary focus of this chapter is that the resurrection of Jesus transforms us into new beings (in whom Christ dwells), which empowers and guides how we live as Christians.

1. The author opens the chapter with a story about a friend of his named Carey, who did not want to sin, and yet continued to sin. Can you relate to Carey’s struggle to overcome sin? What have you done in the past to address areas of sin in your life? How effective were those efforts?
2. Read this out loud: “In Christ I am no longer to be defined by sin. I have been reconciled. Sin has been defeated” ([p. 153](#)). What is the implication of this statement in your daily life?
3. “Christians are people Christ dwells in” ([p. 154](#)). As a group, spend a few minutes in silence. During that time, imagine Jesus “dwelling” within you. After the silence, if you’re comfortable, share what this reality means to you.
4. As ones “indwelt by Christ,” we are not under the law; however, not everything is “beneficial” for us. Our choices no longer *define* who we are; instead, our choices are made *in light of* who we are. Reflect on the last twenty-four hours of your life. Call to mind the choices that you made. What choices did you make to “determine who you are”? What choices did you make “in light of who you are”? How would your day have been different if you had made more decisions in light of who you are?

5. The author gives us this amazing paradox: “We minister out of our brokenness. We heal others through our vulnerability because that is where Christ shines most brightly” ([p. 163](#)). In what ways are you broken? How might the light of Christ shine through those wounds?

### **Engaging the Word [15-20 minutes]**

Read John 15:1-5 aloud.

1. The author gives us this definition for “abide”: “To abide means to rest in and rely on Jesus, who is not outside of us, judging us, but is inside of us, empowering us. The more deeply we’re aware of our identity in Christ and his presence and power with us, the more naturally we’ll do this. We must get our narrative right and practice spiritual exercises to deepen our awareness of truth. In the end, Jesus’ way is easy. He said that his yoke was easy and his burden was light (Matthew 11:30). Typically, we try to do what we think Jesus wants us to do . . . by [our] own strength. We can’t do that. But we ‘can do all things through Christ who strengthens’ us (Philippians 4:13)” ([p. 159](#)). Write your own definition for what it means to “abide” in Christ, based on the author’s definition. If you’re comfortable, share your definition with the group.

2. Read John 15:4-5 again. What, if any, practices do you have in your life that help you “abide” in Christ?

### **Go in Peace [5 minutes]**

End your time together by saying to each other in your group these words of good news: You were meant to house the fullness of God!

### **Next Week**

The next chapter looks at the slow process of spiritual transformation. The soul-shaping practice for the week is slowing down.

## Chapter 9: How to Make a Pickle

### Opening to God [5 minutes]

Begin with five minutes of silence. At the conclusion of the five minutes, offer a brief prayer.

### Soul Training [15-20 minutes]

Divide into groups of three or four to discuss your experience of slowing down. Use these reflection questions to help your conversation:

1. Slowing down is countercultural in our day. Describe the challenges you encountered. Will you keep trying to slow down in the future?
2. How would you describe the level of hurry in your life? What impact is the hurry in your life having on your relationship with God and others?
3. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercises?

### Engaging the Chapter [25-40 minutes]

The primary focus of this chapter is that to live an authentic and effective Christian life we must slow down the pace of our lives and become aware of the present moment.

1. The first part of the chapter ([pp. 173-79](#)) explores how our view of time evolved into “tyranny of the urgent” and even regarding humanity as a machine designed to produce tasks with efficiency. Discuss your experiences of being in the workplace, and the expectations placed on your performance.
2. The author reminds us that “we cannot love, think, eat, laugh or pray in a hurry” ([p. 180](#)). Looking back over the last week, what did you attempt to do in a hurry that can’t be done in a hurry? When did you slow down and experience some of the blessings that come from slowing down?
3. “Too many of us are trying to serve God without listening to God. There will be time to serve, but listening to Jesus always takes precedence” (p. 181). Why do you think we’re tempted to serve God without listening to God? What impact do your old narratives about God have on your need to be busy with God-work?
4. The author gives us this illustration from A. H. Strong: “A student asked the President of his school whether he could not take a shorter course than the one prescribed. ‘Oh yes,’ replied the President, ‘but then it depends on what you want to be. When God wants to make an oak, He takes a hundred years, but when He wants to make a squash, He takes six months.’ Strong goes on to explain that spiritual growth, in addition to being slow, is also not *uniform*. Some years we may experience tremendous growth, and some we see very little change. An oak tree has only a couple of months of actual growth each year in terms of measurable expansion, says Strong. The rest of the year, the other ten months, are spent solidifying that growth” ([p. 186](#)). Reflecting on your spiritual

journey over the last year, when have you experienced growth and when have you experienced solidifying? How about the last five and/or ten years?

Have someone from the group read this quote out loud to conclude your time of engaging the chapter:

Why is eliminating hurry from our lives so crucial? When we eliminate hurry we become present, or more specifically, present to the present moment in all of its glory. We become aware of our surroundings. We see colors and smell smells; we hear hushed sounds and can actually feel the wind in our faces. In short, we “show up” and experience the fullness of life. And that includes, not least of all, being present to God. If I am to live well as a Christian, I need to be constantly connected to God. Hurry is not part of a well-lived life. (p. 183)

### **Engaging the Word [15-20 minutes]**

Read aloud Luke 10:38-42.

1. We are often tempted to view Martha and Mary as having two personality types: Martha is the active busybody and Mary is the contemplative. But based on the author’s insights we can see that the issue is not their personalities; it’s the choices they made at that particular moment: Martha chose to serve, while Mary chose to listen. What are the ways that you regularly listen to Jesus? What activities tempt you away from those times of listening?
2. Name specific ways you as a group can support and encourage each other to continue listening to Jesus.

### **Go in Peace [15-20 minutes]**

Spend fifteen to twenty minutes sharing with your group what you have gained by sharing this journey with them. Discuss this question: How has this group blessed you during these last several weeks?

### **Looking Forward [15 minutes]**

Your study of *The Good and Beautiful God* has come to an end, but there are many options for your group. One option would be to begin the next book in The Apprentice Series, *The Good and Beautiful Life* (available January 2010). The two books are designed to go together. *The Good and Beautiful Life* explores the narratives of Jesus, and how those who have been “pickling” in his message are being set free from struggles with anger, lust, lying, self-righteousness and so on. The book takes a close look at the Sermon on the Mount.

Another option would be for members of the current group to form new groups and invite their friends to go through *The Good and Beautiful God* together. This second option is a great way to continue “pickling” in these narratives and falling more deeply in love with God. Whatever option you choose, select a date for your group to begin.