

CLOSER THAN YOUR SKIN

The Complete Study Guide

Chapter One - Following Alice

Something to Talk About

-Can you relate to the idea of sensing a moment with God in the way you perceive an impending sneeze? Some call this a “quickenings” of the Holy Spirit. Recall and share incidences like this with your group. You may be amazed.

-Have you ever felt God’s protection? Has he ever saved your life? Many people have had close calls, but never attributed this to God. Discuss this with your group.

Something to Do

-**Start a Book of Remembrance** to log your spiritual “sneeze” moments with God. Like the Jews of old, this will be your pile of rocks as you read and remember what God has done in your life.

Chapter Two - Basic Trust

Something to Talk About

-Someone once said if Shakespeare came in the room, we'd all rise up to meet him. If God entered, we'd all be on the floor. What do you think about this? Would you feel terror and awe or does God seem safe and approachable?

Picture yourself in a large room with specifically, God the Father. (Not God the Son or God the Holy Spirit) Where is God in the room? What is he doing? Where are you in the room, and what are you doing? Is his size comparable to your size or different? What would he say to you? What would you say to him? Who would speak first? How far or close is your proximity to God? Would he place a gentle hand on your head? Would you wince? Would you want to embrace him or hightail it out of the room? Don't think about what you *should* say. Identify how you really feel. (Stop reading here and tell someone or write it down).

Now, examine it. Is your view of God parallel to your experience of your earthly father, or whoever raised you?

Something to Do

A person's concept of God is often profoundly parallel to their earthly father. It's essential to recognize any collateral damage here.

-Recommended reading:

To Own a Dragon, by Don Miller

Sons of the Father, by Gordon Dalbey

Healing the Masculine Soul, by Gordon Dalbey

Healing Women's Emotions, by Paula Sandford

Champions for Life, by Bill Glass with Terry Pluto

The Transformation of the Inner Man, by John and Paul Sandford

-Make every effort to honor your parents. God said in Deuteronomy 5:16 "Honor your father and your mother...that it may go well with you..." This commandment is a basic spiritual law about how life works. This means the opposite is also true: if you don't honor your father and mother, it will not go well for you. If your parents failed as parents, you can still say, like Jesus, "Father, forgive them for they didn't know what they were doing." Your decision to forgive them and retract judgments made against them is a form of honoring them. When possible, reconcile face-to-face with your parents. If they are deceased, do the same actions before God. Chapter 15 and corresponding Study Guide section cover this in more detail.

-Find kingdom parents. If your relationship with your parents or whoever raised you is far too damaged for reconciliation, find a "kingdom" father and mother in the church or your sphere of life. Others can bless, encourage, and guide, giving the unconditional love you deserved. Don Miller has started a program along these lines as a result of his book, *To Own a Dragon*. Check out www.belmontfoundation.org for details.

Chapter 3 - Points of Contact

Something to Talk About

-What kinds of things bring you into God's presence? For many, contact with God comes through song, or worship music in particular. For others, it may be a walk in the woods, times of deep prayer, or going on a retreat. Maybe your heart is stirred by a planetarium show. Every person is unique. What works for you? Discuss this question in your group, and then pursue these times with God. He will meet you there.

Something to Do

-Read stories of well-known people who loved God and discover their points of contact with God. Did you know, for example, that Johnny Cash was so hopeless he tried to commit suicide by walking deep inside a giant cave? He decided he would keep going until his flashlight died, because then, he'd never find his way out. But God spoke to him in the cave and told him it wasn't his time. In faith, he crawled spider-like for hours in pitch black, hoping to avoid the treacherous ravines. Eventually he felt a light breeze and finally saw a faint perception of light. God helped him out of an impossible situation. Did you also know that God comforted Johnny through his dreams? There's much more to explore in his story alone, but here are a few additional suggested readings...

Surprised By Joy, by C.S. Lewis

Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc, by Mark Twain

Memoirs of Childhood and Youth, by Albert Schweitzer

Practicing the Presence of God, by Brother Lawrence

Oswald Chambers: Abandoned To God, by David McCasland

Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham, by Billy Graham

Mother Teresa: A Complete Authorized Biography, by Katheryn Spink

The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Is That Really You, God? by Loren Cunningham, with Janice Rogers

Spiritual Moments with the Great Hymns, by Evelyn Bence

The Man Comes Around: The Spiritual Journey of Johnny Cash, by Dave Urbanski

Chapter Four - Love Came Down

Something to Talk About

-Take time—even a whole evening—to hear how each person in your group came into a place of faith. If someone isn't a Christian, have them share what they know about God at this point. How far will God go to find each person? Clearly, to the ends of the earth. Sharing these stories can be one of the most uplifting experiences. Discover how deep and tall, far and wide is the expansive love of God.

Something to Do

-Write your faith journey. Though you might not think you're a writer, try getting your story down on paper. The Bible says we should be ready to give an answer to others who want to know. Writing is a way of practicing, but can also be a gift to your family both present and future. Wouldn't you like to read such a story written by your parents, grandparents or ancestors? Telling your own story is a non-threatening way to share your faith in a world that's hostile to Christianity. If you don't know much about God, write down any spiritual experiences you've had thus far.

Chapter 5 - Got Religion?

Something to Talk About

-Religiosity is the counterfeit of relationship with God. Here are some warning signs.

Discuss these questions in your group:

- Are your prayers ritualistic in a meaningless way?
- Are you going through the motions at church?
- Is regular church attendance your basis for feeling good about God?
- Do you keep a tally on your spiritual life? Do you feel better about God when you serve others incessantly, or read the Bible?
- Do you do things to be noticed by others at church?
- Do you see yourself as more spiritual or less spiritual than others?
- Do you have a critical spirit? Do you tend to seeing what's wrong with other people or the church, instead of what is right?
- Is it hard to relax or have fun? Do you always have to worry about something or feel responsible for everything?
- Do you see it as your job to straighten other people out?
- Are you legalistic in your interpretation of the Bible?
- Are you a different person in church compared to your regular life?

Something to Do

-Profile the New Testament Pharisee. Jesus was a friend to sinners, but reserved his harshest words for the religious people of the day. Study the passages in Scripture where Jesus encountered the Pharisees and Scribes and write a profile of what a “religious” person is like, listing ten characteristics. Then write a profile showing the opposite of these ten characteristics and see if this doesn't describe Jesus, himself.

-Set aside time to be alone with God. Find a quiet place where you won't be distracted or disturbed. Invite God to spend time with you. Put on some worship music, if you like. Engage your heart. Talk to him, but also take time to listen. He may bring something to your remembrance. He may point you to a scripture. Take a journal so you can write something down if you need to. The point is—you don't have to do anything. Just show up and ask God to come.

Chapter 6 - Never Good Enough

Something to Talk About

-Condemnation does not manifest the same for everyone though it functions under the same lie. Answer the following questions to expose any condemnation themes in your life:

1. Have you experienced God in a personal way, where you knew He was communicating and connecting with you? No _____ Yes _____
2. Are your prayers formal or do you speak from your heart to God in a real person-to-person exchange? Formal _____ Real _____
3. Do you struggle with a particular, ongoing sin in your life—something, no matter how hard you try, you just can't change? Yes _____ No _____
4. Have you experienced specific answers to your prayers, or does prayer feel like a monologue? Monologue _____ Received Answers _____
5. Are you likely to give up something for Lent or make a New Year's resolution? Yes _____ No _____
6. Have you made "deals" with God to secure His favor in some area of concern? Yes _____ No _____
7. Did you experience unconditional love from your father as a child? No _____ Yes _____
8. Did you experience unconditional love from your mother as a child? No _____ Yes _____
9. Have you experienced unconditional love on a consistent basis from others besides your parents? No _____ Yes _____
10. What do you do with sin in your life? Hide it and pretend like everything's okay? Or do you tell someone, apologize or ask for help?
Hide/Fake _____ Tell/Get Help _____
11. Are you hard on yourself or others when something is not done to your standards? Yes _____ No _____
12. Do you accept blame that belongs to another? Do you apologize even when it is not necessary or appropriate? Yes _____ No _____
13. Are you in the small group of people at church who do all the work? Yes _____ No _____

14. Did you grow up in a family with high standards and expectations, and parents who seemed like perfect people? Or did you grow up with parents who showed you their process of growth including their failures?

Parents/Perfect _____ Parents/Showed Process _____

15. How does Scripture affect your understanding of God's character? Does it build a view of God's amazing love, or do you cringe under a God of judgment?

God of Love _____ God of Judgment _____

16. Do you live an exhausting lifestyle of over-commitment? Do you try to be all things to all people?

Yes _____ No _____

17. If you and Jesus were in the same room would you want to embrace him or fall on the floor?

Fall down _____ Embrace _____

Summary: If you have checks on the left side, you may be living under the lie of condemnation.

Something to Do

Here are some actions steps to get free from a life of condemnation:

-Ask: Ask God to break the lie of condemnation over your life. (James 4:4, 2 Corinthians 10:5)

-Biblical Truth: For many, knowing the truth about condemnation will set you free. Meditate on key New Testament verses: Romans 8:1,15,16,31, 33-39, John 1:12-13, Ephesians 1:3-14, Philippians 1:6, 2:13, 1 John 3:1, 4:18, 5:13. Cross-reference for other verses. Using a concordance, study the word "beloved"—a title of endearment applied to all believers. Look for verses that show God's father-like heart: Isaiah 49:14-16a, Psalm 103:8-14.

-Honest Prayers: Be real as you talk to God. Many of God's "friends," spoke candidly with him. Check out Moses in Exodus 33, David in Psalm 51, and Job in chapter 10.

-Start a Prayer Journal: A prayer journal is a faith-building document, chronicling a two-way connection with the living God. Pray specific instead of general prayers. Write down and date your requests. Expect answers and record them as they come.

-Get Real About Sin: If you have an area of continual sin in your life, it's likely you're under condemnation. Bring sin into the light by confessing it to another. (1 John 1:7) Asking for help and accountability often brings the beginning of a breakthrough. Apart from blaspheming the Holy Spirit, Jesus says God will forgive *all* our sins. (Mark 3:28-29)

-Identify Forms of Penance: Give up making "deals" with God, such as "New Year's resolutions," sacrifices at Lent and even fasting if it's motivated by guilt, shame or fear. Acts of religious duty are often a form of penance.

-Seek Unconditional Love: Ask your pastor to recommend a small Bible study or home group where you can experience safe and loving relationships. If you were a victim of parental emotional abuse ("You won't amount to anything!" "You're stupid!"), you may need professional help.

-Expose Perfectionism: Perfectionist tendencies can be a manifestation of condemnation. If you were raised in a family with high performance standards or expectations, and parents who seemed perfect, you're at risk. Accept that your life is a process. Spiritual maturity and character development take time. God loves you from the beginning to the end. Be kinder to yourself, but also give others grace and mercy in their failures. With the help of others, identify overbearing actions or obsessive/compulsive behaviors. Ask friends to pray for you to find a new freedom from the trap of perfectionism.

-Stop Being a Scapegoat: Do you accept blame that is not yours? Do you say, "I'm sorry," every few sentences? Ask God for discernment: what is your fault, and what isn't? Let your apologies be *specific* instead of general. No more—"It's all my fault." Set a boundary with guilt. When appropriate, learn to say, "This is not my responsibility."

Chapter Seven - Exposing Martha

Something to Talk About

-Have you ever considered the idea of an inner vow? Vows often happen when someone's pain reaches critical mass. All inner vows, even good ones, are still harmful because they set a person's life on a course of action that's essentially binding. It's much better to live in step with the Holy Spirit. For example, a bad vow, "I'll never forgive myself," grieves a God who is all about forgiveness. A good vow, "I will always be a vigilant mother so nothing bad will ever happen," may cause me to be overprotective. The Holy Spirit may want me to let go and trust what God is doing in my child's life. Discuss these ideas with your group.

-Has your life become marginless? Do you have moments to rest, read, exercise and spend time with God? Physician and author, Richard Swenson, wrote "Chronic overloading is not a spiritual prerequisite for authentic Christianity. Quite the contrary, overloading is often what we do when we forget who God is." Somehow overdoing gets mixed up with our idea of being a real Christian. Not only that, but our American culture is driven in nature, making a Martha-like lifestyle the norm. Is this problem worse for women as opposed to men, or just different? If so, why? Discuss in your group whether or not these misconceptions are themes in your life.

Something to Do

-Read the Martha and Mary story in Luke 10:38-42 even if you've read it a million times. What one phrase in this passage stands out to you?

-Ask God to show you any vows in your own life that drive you to Martha-like behaviors. Pray with someone you trust and break these vows in Jesus' name.

-Become a "Recovering Martha": Do you always volunteer at church, feel over-extended in commitments, and have endless "To Do" lists? Do you stay up late, wake up early, hit the floor running and always arrive late? You may be a practicing Martha. Sometimes the driving force behind a Martha-like lifestyle is condemnation—striving for approval from God. Make a daily priority of spending time with God. He wants your company, not your works. Take a sabbatical from all unnecessary commitments. Let life slow down. Pray, ask, and wait on God before saying, "yes" to new commitments.

-Recommended Books:

The Overload Syndrome: Learning to Live Within Your Limits, by Richard Swenson

Having a Mary's Heart in a Martha World, by Joanna Weaver

Having a Mary Spirit, by Joanna Weaver

-Study of the word "rest" in Scripture, using a concordance. There are over 250 references. If you search it out, you'll find some real gems.

-Buy a hammock. See www.hammocks.com

Chapter Eight - Ambushed by Life

Something to Talk About

-“Why do bad things happen to good people?” is an ageless question that keeps many people from trusting in a loving God. Have you put God’s heart on trial in your own life because of the conundrum of pain?

-A crisis or a tragedy is often an opening for God to speak, or rather, for us to hear. Sometimes, when life is shattered and you come to the end of yourself, you are actually in a posture to receive something. The Bible says, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” (Psalms 34:18) Can you share an experience where you sensed the comfort of God in a time of crisis?

Something to Do

-“**Forgive**” **God**. After the tragedy on September 11, 2001, many people filled the churches, searching for a connection with God. Others ranted their feelings publicly, saying they would never again believe in a loving and sovereign God. Anger towards God creates a serious block to intimacy with him. Many don’t realize that an accumulation of life’s hurts can lead to resentment against God. Ask him to bring to remembrance any hurtful situation from your past that subsequently caused you to question him. See what comes to mind. Write it down. Share it with another person confidentially. Confess your resentment before God if you are mad at him and ask him to help you overcome this anger.

-**Read, *The Sacred Romance***, by Brent Curtis and John Eldredge. They discuss “The Message of the Arrows” or how pain in life causes people to question whether or not God’s heart is good. Together, they resolved this dilemma.

-Other resources:

Disappointment with God, by Philip Yancey

Where is God When it Hurts? by Philip Yancey

When God Doesn’t Make Sense, by James Dobson

Chapter Nine - Inklings

Something to Talk About

-Have you felt annoyed or even indignant when someone says “God told me...”?

-Does it feel inappropriate or presumptuous to say you can know God intimately?
Discuss your answers in a group setting.

Something to Do

-Spend time in Scripture for awhile if you feel blocked from God’s voice. In this way, you will build your vocabulary with God. When a verse is “highlighted” or stirs you-- stop and linger. Listen for the Lord’s still small voice and wait for him to expound on the scripture. Often he’s saying something personal.

-Keep a bible dictionary handy to look up the meaning of names, places, historical context and symbols. This will enhance your understanding of a particular verse. (For example, see *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, by Merrill F. Unger, published by Moody Press).

-Find a bible commentary or two and read what someone else thinks about a particular verse. (For example, try *Matthew Henry, Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible*, from Moody Press).

-Start journaling. Keep a log of special verses, dreams, coincidences, impressions, and the like. Notice things. Take a second look. If you have a record, you can often see a pattern. God will speak through two or more things, confirming his message.

Chapter Ten - Puzzles

Something to Talk About

-Discuss one parable in the Bible that's significant to you. Give an interpretation and an application of the parable as it relates to your life.

-Discuss a metaphor of life that is meaningful to you. For example, gardening (planting, pulling weeds, watering, pruning) can be a metaphor for spiritual growth.

Something to Do

- **Build your metaphor awareness.** Explore the rich symbolism in books and movies such as:

The Lord of the Rings, by J.R.R. Tolkien

The Chronicles of Narnia, by C.S. Lewis

Gifts from the Sea, by Anne Morrow Lindbergh

The Matrix, directed and written by the Wachowski Brothers, produced by Joel Silver, distributed by Warner Brothers, 1999

Les Miserables, by Victor Hugo (book, movie and musical)

The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories, edited, with commentary by William J Bennett

-**Invest in a biblically based book to help understand the symbolic and metaphorical language of the Bible.** This will aid you in interpreting dreams as well.

Interpreting the Symbols and Types, (revised and expanded 1992), by Kevin J. Conner

Chapter Eleven - Thanksgiving.com

Something to Talk About

-Are you an optimist or pessimist? Would people say you complain a lot? Have you struggled with a critical spirit? Discuss with your group.

-Does life feel like an adventure or an unending trial? Has this shaped your view of God?

Something to Do

-**Make a list of everything you are thankful for**--people, animals, places and events. Add to your list every few days. You can write down little things like “a baby’s first laugh,” or “dishwashers” or “elk jerky.” Keep adding to your list for awhile and read it out loud on Thanksgiving. Read it from time to time. Tell God about it too.

-**Write a note of thanks** to people who have profoundly affected your life: teachers, parents, grandparents, friends, mentors, or even someone famous.

-**Instead of grumbling and complaining, start a new spiritual discipline**--turn every negative, critical thought into a compassionate prayer for the person or situation involved.

Chapter Twelve - Unwinding

Something to Talk About

-Identify if you have a “religious agenda.” Is there something in your life that you’re doing for God? Did God ask you to do it? Does your agenda show results, or are you fishing all night without any catch?

-Do you understand what C.S. Lewis meant when he talked about a spiritual kind of bankruptcy? How does this bankruptcy change one’s faith?

Something to Do

-**“God, what are you doing today?”** Every day for a whole week, start your day with this question. See what happens. Maybe God will bring someone to you who needs prayer. A year ago I visited Imago Dei (In His Image), a Portland-area church. During the service I went to the ladies room and encountered a woman on Crack or Meth. She had sores all over her arms and was using Purell to disinfect her wounds. I listened to her story and finally asked her if I could pray for her. She agreed. All her frantic behavior settled down. I told her there were a lot of cool people at Imago Dei who could help her. Meeting her was not my agenda for the day, but life is more adventurous if you ask God what he’s doing. Try it and after a week, report to your group what happened.

Chapter Thirteen - Thoughts on Destiny

Something to Talk About

-It's natural for us to want to help others in need as we try to fix a broken world. But if God's not in it, we labor in vain. Discuss what you think is meant by "the hidden arrogance of a fix-it-all mindset."

-Are you open to a God who is bigger than you can explain? Does the supernatural, mysterious side of God make you uncomfortable?

Something to Do

-In the context of your group, ask these questions:

-Do you believe God created you for a specific purpose, over and above everyday-living-and-walking-with-Jesus?

-Laying aside monetary concerns, if you could relinquish all extraneous obligations other than your family, where is God telling you to throw your net for the Kingdom of God?

-Is this purpose something current or future?

-What's blocking you from that purpose?

-Pray over each person, asking God to bring their kingdom purpose into actuality. Make these prayers a regular part of your prayer time for each other.

-Read *The Dream Giver*, by Bruce Wilkinson with David and Heather Kopp. They've also developed a matching workbook: *The Dream Giver Study Workbook* and an application guide called: *The Dream Planner*.

Chapter Fourteen - Anchored

Something to Talk About

-If you're married, has it proven to be more than you bargained for? Have you "lost your way," in marriage? Do you understand the term "silent divorce"? If your group is confidential and safe, share your view on this subject. Remember to be respectful of your husband or wife.

-Currently, what is your source of well-being? Your spouse, your job, your kids, your accomplishments, or a community of friends? Is God factored into your identity equation? If not, why not?

-God showed me that even when marriage was painful, he wanted me to be open and emotionally available to my spouse. Is this difficult in your view? Why is vulnerability of this kind important in relationships? Discuss with your group.

Something to Do

-Ask God to give you a vision or word of hope if you're in a difficult relationship. He can sustain you with a scripture, a dream, or a seeming coincidence. Pray and watch for God's messages.

-If God is going to be your anchor, your source of comfort, you need to spend time with him. Start setting time apart for worship, listening, reading Scripture, telling God the anguish of your heart, thanking him for the good things. Buy a good devotional or a book on the topic:

My Utmost for His Highest, by Oswald Chambers
Streams in the Desert, by L. B. Cowman
God is Closer Than You Think, by John Ortberg
Experiencing God, by Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King

Chapter Fifteen - Repairing Desolations

Something to Talk About

- I've heard people say, "He's living out of his wounds," or "The booze just anesthetizes his deeper pain." Do you believe in the idea of original wounds?

- Can you see how every day situations "trigger" past hurts, causing us to be pain-driven in our current relationships?

-When we're hurt, it's easy to put a judgment on the one who hurt us. God sees these judgments as sin. But worse than that, judging others virtually sets us up to do the very same thing. We need to repent of judging others when "others" have hurt us. Is this hard to understand?

Something to Do

"Intentional Forgiveness" is the key to repairing original wounds. Those who have hurt you may not apologize, might not change, and could hurt you again. But God tells us to forgive, because he has forgiven us.

- **Read Matthew 18: 23-35.** If you want to know God intimately, you must embrace the foundational importance of forgiveness. Mark this passage in Matthew. In the margin, write, "I understand this truth," and put the date. You may mark time by this decision.

-**Work on forgiving your parents first.**

-**Ask the Holy Spirit** to bring to remembrance specific incidences and overall themes of how you were hurt. In some cases, you may be hurt by what you didn't receive, but still needed from your parents (a loving touch, a listening ear, a word of encouragement). The Holy Spirit is the best counselor and knows what is pertinent. Write it all down. This may take awhile.

-**Speak out loud, your willingness to forgive.** First, share your notes with a trusted person. Then say, "This hurt me, but I choose to forgive him or her." You may find yourself in deep grief as you process the past, but this is good, and it leads to freedom.

-**Repent of any judgments** you made against the ones who hurt you (God, I'm sorry that I've condemned my father by calling him a jerk) and pray a blessing over him (God, bless my father with an experience of your love. Give him compassion for others).

-**Identify and break any vows** that were made (God, in the name of Jesus, I ask you to break my vow of hatred towards my mother. Give me your love for her and your eyes to see the ways she was a wounded person too).

-**Expose the lies** you believed as a result of being wounded (God, I don't believe anymore that all men in authority have control issues. Please give me a healthy understanding of authority). Counselors and/or friends can help you discern the lies.

-Do these same steps regarding other people who hurt you—siblings, extended family, friends, employers, teachers etc.

-Finally, ask yourself...are you mad at God? Write down specific grievances, confess it to another and together, ask God to increase your faith.

-Read more about this topic. Most of this teaching in the book comes from, *The Transformation of the Inner Man*, by John Loren Sanford and Paula Sanford, and *Genuine Recovery*, by Edward M. Smith. The Sandfords' book is weighty, but worth the read.

- Practice “safe talk” in strained relationships: One person talks for a full five minutes, and the other has to listen without interrupting. You can say anything as long as you don't intentionally hurt the other person. Then you switch roles with the second person talking for five whole minutes while the other person listens. Repeat this sequence again, making twenty minutes total. In emotionally-charged times, my husband and I had important talks using this simple format.

Chapter Sixteen - No Stones or Snakes

Something to Talk About

- If you're a parent, what do you think about raising your child in today's world?
- It's not enough to send them off to Sunday school, camp or youth group and hope they'll get your values or your faith. Would you agree or disagree?
- Have you ever prayed the "911 prayer," and if so, how did God help you?

Something to Do

-The very best thing you can do spiritually for your child is to cultivate a genuine relationship with God yourself. They see you up close and personal, and they know if you're being authentic or just religious. Share with them verses that God has spoken to you personally. Help your kids pay attention to their dreams. Teach your son or daughter when God is moving through a circumstance, a coincidence or a change of events. Show them how to pray by doing it with them. Most of all, demonstrate faith in God in hard times, trusting him no matter what it looks like here on earth.

Chapter Seventeen - Steadfast Love

Something to Talk About

-As parents we have an invasive culture on one hand, and the Christian bubble problem on the other. Discernment to walk in the balance requires help from God. Is this a new thought to you?

-Holiness is a progressive revelation. Kids need to know that their parents are in a process of growth. Does the idea of being transparent with your children make you uneasy?

-Have you felt the “peace that passes understanding” when God is saying “Yes,” to you? Have you felt the “body block” of his “No” or a “gentle hand” on your shoulder when he’s saying “Wait.” How would you describe in concrete terms God’s answers and guidance in your experience?

Something to Do

-Take some hoop-skirt time to be still before the Lord. Wake up early. If you’re not a morning person, drive to a park on your lunch break or maybe take a walk in the moonlight. You know where to find that quiet space. Make it happen. Then, ask God, “Father, is there anything you want to tell me today?” Like King David, stop and inquire of the Lord. In the parenting years, this is all-important.

-Teach discernment: I told my daughters they could come to me with any question, any time. When Sarah was about ten, she asked me what the word *prostitution* meant. I felt God’s nudge. It was a teachable moment. Another time, Katie, Sarah and I watched the movie *Clueless*. While it’s not a movie I recommend, it was a perfect springboard for a discussion on integrity and sexual purity. Questions like “What is a technical virgin?” came up. Or, “If your ultimate goals are good, does it matter if you cheat and lie.” Instead of avoiding these discussions, God taught me to engage with my children. If they didn’t come to me, you can imagine what kind of answers they’d get on the school bus. Tell your kids they can ask you any question, any time, and you will be straight up with them. Then, ask God to prompt you, and give you the words to say for those teachable moments.

-Avoid Christian legalism in your own parenting and watch out for it in others who influence your children. This is a toxic problem in some Christian circles. I’ve seen some kids walk away from their faith as a result. For example, my son was punished at a Christian school for singing a love song on the playground. The lyrics were clean. The problem was he heard the tune on a secular radio station. He was eight.

Another time on a talk radio program, I heard a frantic Christian mother call in for help. Her thirteen-year-old son had feigned illness to stay home from school and scan the internet for porn. His parents were horrified and took away every possible privilege (internet, phone, TV, etc.) and grounded him for life or thereabouts. In addition, they required their son to look up over a hundred verses on sexual sin and sexual purity. (How about James 1:14-15, for instance.) When I heard this, I winced.

The counselor responded saying that the son's curiosity about the female body was normal. This could have been a perfect "Dad" moment, a time to put an arm around your son. A time to say, "Let's go talk about some stuff." The Dad could have been transparent and shared his own curiosity with female anatomy at the same age. He could have built a sense of rapport with his son as a platform for sharing God's ideas regarding sex. Their overbearing response (using the Bible as a club) and hysterical reaction effectively shut down communication with their son. Now, how much energy will this kid spend hiding his sexuality when he really needs guidance?

Our children are going to make mistakes. It's a given. If you're a parent, please sit down with your spouse and have a discussion about Christian legalism.

-Pray at all times and give your children steadfast love. Start praying for the day your child will have to make up his own mind about God. There are no guarantees in parenting. You can keep a tight rein on them in their years at home. Eventually we have to work ourselves out of the job of parenting or we jeopardize achieving a healthy adult relationship with our children. We can do our level best, and still the time will come where our children will have to find their way. Pray for your children in this time of transition. Trust that God loves them just as much as you do. Let God show you when to let go. The Prodigal Son story is in the Bible for a reason. No matter what happens, we must offer our children steadfast love.

Chapter Eighteen - Three Hammers

Something to Talk About

-Do you believe prayer is a two-way conversation with God?

-Have you ever heard someone say, “Well, all I can do is pray”? That’s like saying, “Well, I don’t have a knife, or a slingshot. All I have is this an intercontinental, heat-seeking, atomic missile.” Do you see prayer as a powerful spiritual force?

-Do you think praying specifically is a form of testing God? On the other hand, do you think general prayers are weak and ineffectual?

Something to Do

-**Try “Praying the Day.”** Lay aside ritualistic prayer or long prayers lists for various people and situations. These aren’t wrong, by the way. Just try something new. In a “reflexive” kind of way, spend a day praying about whatever comes up. Let prayer be your automatic response to life. See what God brings to mind as you stir your coffee. See what happens at work (a troubled co-worker, an urgent unresolved problem). Pray right then and there. As you take the kids to the park, or the dog on a walk, or sit in rush hour traffic, pray about the things God brings to your mind. Notice what you’re thinking about in your daydreams. Maybe you’ll remember your uncle’s health problem, or a friend’s infertility issues. Spend the day talking to God in the here and now.

-**Spend some prayer times just listening.** Is prayer something you have to accomplish each day? Do you let God get a word in edgewise? Listen, wait, notice and write it down.

-**Pray for the sick.** You don’t have to look very far in Scripture to see that God wants us to pray for the sick. Not just for encouragement or endurance, but healing! Think of Jesus and the disciples. James says the church should do these things (James 5: 14-15). Praying in such a way enlarges your faith and this pleases God. Plus you see more miracles.

Chapter Nineteen - A Bald Man in Plaid

Something to Talk About

-Okay, let's face it. Either you will find this chapter inspiring or dangerous? What is your gut level response to the idea of hearing God for others?

-How much of our attempts to "help" others rest on the wisdom of man instead of a demonstration of God's power? I know this is a testy question, but think about it.

-When God tells you something for someone else that you wouldn't humanly know, this is what Paul called "a word of knowledge." Old Testament prophets got information from God all the time. When the Holy Spirit gives an interpretation or an application of that knowledge, that's usually called "a word of wisdom." It's not earthly wisdom, but wisdom from above (1st Corinthians 12: 4-8, James 3: 13-18, check it out). When you encourage someone through a word of knowledge or wisdom from the Holy Spirit, suddenly the person realizes that God knows them! Is it possible that people need to know God is personal, loving and real, almost more than they need answers to their current problems?

Something to Do

-Search out scriptures on hearing God. Here are a few to get you started: Isaiah 50:4-5, John 10:2-5, 14-15, Job 33:13-17, John 16:12-13, Acts 2:17-18, Joel 2:28-29, Jeremiah 33:3, Isaiah 52:15-16, 1 Corinthians 2: 9-10, Ephesians 1:17-19, 1 Kings 19:12-13.

-Hearing God's voice involves a learning curve. Many people in the Bible went through long seasons of training before God could use them to speak his words to others. Hearing God's voice for ourselves takes practice. Hearing God's voice for others is a gift from God to restore hope in another that God is really real. This is often called prophetic ministry and is the reason that the Apostle Paul said that we should especially seek the gift of prophecy. To enhance your development, here are some resources:

The Beginner's Guide to Hearing God, by Jim Goll

Developing Your Prophetic Gift, by John Paul Jackson

Growing in the Prophetic, by Mike Bickle

The Beginner's Guide to the Gift of Prophecy, by Jack Deere

-Try a listening-prayer exercise. Someone once said Jeremiah 33:3 was God's phone number. God invites us to call him. Below are some thoughts from author, Brad Jersak, on "Listening Prayer."

Listen for yourself: When you ask God a question, if you hear a word, a phrase, or see a mental picture, don't dismiss it. Pay attention in those first few seconds. After that, your mind starts to interfere, argue, rationalize or manipulate a simple word from God.

Listening for others: When you hear God for others, you're his instrument of encouragement. If your motivation is love, your purpose is to build up, and your content

is scriptural, you are on the right track. In a small group setting, put everyone's name in a basket and draw names. Spend the next week asking God the following two questions:

1. Father, when you look at (Kate) what do you see? Ask God for three different things. Write it down.
2. Father, how do you want to encourage (Kate) ? Again, ask and wait for three things and take note of it.

Then write out what you heard in letter form, listing the things after each phrase accordingly:

(Kate), When God looks at you he sees... I believe God want to bless you with...

I've been in an interdenominational women's group for a long time and every year we do this exercise. In the beginning, some of us were just in our human heads, saying nice words. But as we developed, God elevated our simple step of faith to the level of prophetic ministry. Often God's power to touch hearts is embedded in these words of encouragement. Profound things have resulted, and we all go home sensing God is truly closer than our skins.

For more on Listening Prayer, read Brad Jersak's book, *Can You Hear Me?: Tuning in to the God Who Speaks*, and check out his blog: the-god-who-speaks.blogspot.com.

Chapter Twenty - Christian Psychics?

Something to Talk About

-Do you fear the enemy's power to deceive you more than God's ability to speak to you?

-In your group, discuss the safeguards in the chapter. Are there other safeguards you could add?

-Spiritual warfare is a real aspect of knowing Christ. Yet the work of the demonic is not often brought up in many Christian circles. Do you feel you have a biblical grasp of this subject?

Something to Do

-Learn about spiritual warfare so as John Paul Jackson said, you aren't a "needless casualties of war." Deception is a real possibility. Other "voices" besides God's and our own thoughts try to influence us, but you can learn the difference. For example, the enemy's voice will speak in contradiction to Scripture. His voice is often full of condemnation. In contrast, the Holy Spirit will speak in unison with Scripture, bringing hard truths with love. God may put his finger on your gossiping habit, or your substance abuse, saying "This has to go," but you will sense that God is for you, giving you hope. The enemy will just make you feel defeated. Here are some resources:

The Three Battlegrounds, by Francis Frangipane

The Believer's Guide to Spiritual Warfare, by Thomas B. White

Needless Casualties of War, by John Paul Jackson

The Bondage Breaker, by Neil T. Anderson

-Learn about biblical dream interpretation. God seems to communicate with me through dreams more than anything else, except Scripture. I'm not sure why this is so. Maybe he can get my attention when I'm sleeping. Perhaps a picture, a scene or a short story in dream-form is worth a thousand words and is easier to remember. God is not formulaic, however, and may speak in predominantly different ways to you. However, if dreams are one of your God-languages, here are some things to know:

-The Bible gives numerous examples of God speaking through dreams and visions. Beginning with Abraham in Genesis all the way through to John in Revelations, God speaks to both believers and non-believers in the mysterious language of dreams and visions.

-Most dreams are for you, or about you. Only a small percentage of dreams are for others or the church at-large.

-Dreams are highly symbolic and not to be taken literally in most cases.

-Dreams do not necessarily predict the future or say "This will happen." Some warning dreams are given for prevention if you will change your course of action, your attitude, your choices.

- Dreams are highly contextual to your life. A bed could represent “marriage” for some and “insomnia” for another.
- Most symbols have a positive and negative interpretation. Red can be the color of love and passion, or the color of war and bloodshed.
- While dream dictionaries exist and provide some general help (e.g. “this” means “that”), I would be cautious if the reference gets down to telling you what “eating a cabbage” means. Nothing is in stone.
- Write dreams down as soon as possible, because much of the details are lost in a matter of minutes. Keep a pen and a notebook by your bed.
- Never make an important life decision based on a dream alone. Dreams should only confirm what God is already telling you in other ways.
- In dreams, a person with Christ-like character often represents the Holy Spirit. He is usually next to you or with you, and you never quite see his face.
- Not all dreams come from God. Some dreams are “pizza” dreams. Others are from the enemy to torment you. Others are just from our carnal minds. God dreams usually have one important message or theme with a purpose.
- Dream Theorists like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler and Frederick Perls have written much on dream interpretation. Their ideas make for interesting reading, but do not square with a scriptural approach.
- When looking for dream interpretation resources, stick with biblically based sources. If you search the internet in general, beware. You’ll find a lot of weird websites. However, I can recommend the following:

-www.streamsministries.com/dreams (this website is the most reliable source I’ve known). Founder, John Paul Jackson is a man of character, grounded in the biblical understanding.

-*Understanding Dreams & Visions*, by John Paul Jackson (tape series)

-*Parables in the Night Seasons: Understanding Your Dreams*, by Joy Parrott

-*Dream Language: The Prophetic Power of Dreams*, by James W. Goll

-Join a Bible study to ground your faith. Surprisingly, many Christian churches today are not teaching a biblical Christianity. If one doesn’t know the Bible, it’s easy to shape God into what we want him to be, instead of who he is. We start to make God in our image. Compare different churches’ “Statement of Faith.” Read the Bible with your own mind and don’t just rely on what the pastor or minister says. I recommend finding a Bible Study Fellowship group in your area. (www.bsfindernational.org) BSF is a highly acclaimed interdenominational ministry that grounds people in Bible knowledge.

-Recommended reading to study false religions so you can recognize the counterfeit:

Fast Facts of False Teachings, by Ron Carlson and Ed Decker

The Kingdom of the Cults, revised, updated and expanded edition,
by Walter Martin, with general editor Ravi Zacharias, 2003

-Be accountable. People are vulnerable to presumption and deception when they aren’t submitted to pastoral authority and out of fellowship with others. The enemy looks for lone rangers. Be connected to people of strong Christian faith for your own protection.

Chapter Twenty-One - Beloved

Something to Talk About

-Can you relate to Stacey? Do you feel you have all the trappings of Christianity, but no real experience of God? Do you feel the mysterious gap in your life?

-Is it hard to trust God, when there's so much suffering in the world? Is this your major road block? Discuss with your group.

-What do you think about the statement from my dream: "It's not about this life"?

-If all our earthly stories are short and sometimes tragic, what does that mean in light of the much larger story God is telling?

-God told me of his love through a passionate embrace--first in a dream, next in a painting and finally in a scripture. Discuss how God weaves together the important messages, saying it now one way, now another.

Something to Do

-Select words describing attributes of God's character. Think of terms like: strong, lovingkindness, faithful, forgive, helper, wise, father, merciful, compassionate. Using a concordance, find at least three verses describing each attribute. Expand your search looking up verses about the "fatherless." How does God feel about the fatherless, the broken, and the bitter ones? Or look for verses where Jesus specifically talked about his Father. Soon you will see a new side to God's heart.

-Keep searching. If this book has helped you, if your heart has been stirred, keep looking for God. Have your spiritual antennas up, for God has promised if we search for him with all our hearts, we will find him.

Gordon Livingston ended his fine book *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart*, with the words of Raymond Carver: "And did you get what you wanted from this life, even so? I did. And what did you want? To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth." To feel this way among family and friends is one thing, but how much better to step into eternity with the One who calls you Beloved forever.