

### Welcome

When I was in elementary school, we did a unit on trees. We had a hands-on component that included some live saplings we got to plant in little pots - I remember them being huge, which probably means they were a couple of feet tall at the time.

I'm not sure whose idea this was, but we all got to take our saplings home at the end of the unit. For some reason, I took home two (maybe it was because another kid's parents didn't want to plant an ash tree in their yard). We chose a spot along our fence in our backyard and spent a Saturday morning planting those two trees.

I don't remember exactly how old I was, but that would have been around 1990 or so, and my mom didn't move out of that house until 2000, so I got to watch those two trees grow for a decade. And even though they grew right next to each other (maybe 20 feet apart), in the same soil, with the same water and sunlight, one grew strong and healthy and the other was stunted and sickly. My parents and I came up with all kinds of theories as to why they might grow so differently, but none of us were arborists and my elementary school tree training didn't cut it for this sort of diagnosis.

We often feel a similar mystification when it comes to our faith. How many of us gather for worship and see people around us who just seem to *get it* while we don't? We look at others' faith and see a tall, healthy faith, but we look at ours and it seems... less. We wrestle with doubts and questions. We struggle in the face of adversity. We just don't feel that spark.

I want to talk today about our spiritual health. I still don't know anything about trees, but I know something about what it means to be rooted in life with God. So we're going to explore the spiritual practices that help us maintain a vibrant, healthy faith.

Spiritual practices are pathways to a relationship with God. When we cultivate healthy spiritual habits, we are doing more than just learning about God, or choosing better habits. We're rooting ourselves in the very source of our life, the one who created us and calls us and sustains us. Spiritual practices are the key to a vibrant, beautiful faith.

Let's begin by celebrating the God who created us for life and invites us to live!

### Message

[Series Master Slide] During the Summer, we're asking one basic question: How do we know God? We began last week with the conviction that, if God is our creator, then God is knowable. God is knowable because God *wants* to be known and, by becoming human in the person of Jesus, made himself knowable.

We have four major sources of knowing God: Scripture, the record of God's interactions with us throughout history; Reason, our ability to think and learn and discover; Tradition, how others on the journey of faith have known God; and Experience, what we learn about God from our own lives.

[Experience Slide] Throughout the summer, we're going to dive into each of those four sources of knowing God, and ask how we can know God better. We're going to begin with experience.

What are our personal experiences of God? In many ways, this is the most profound of the four. Experience insists that there is a knowledge of God that comes not from a book or from a gathering like this or anything else except from your direct experience of and encounter with God.

So a question: have you experienced God's love at a deep, personal level? And a more important question: is that experience of God's love for you something that's deep, abiding and continual? In other words, do you have a relationship with God, or is God someone who lives at arm's length from you?

Do you experience God as a boss? A good idea? An inspiring historical figure? An acquaintance? Or a friend who knows you deeply and intimately?

When we talk about experiencing God, we're getting at that deep friendship with God. And for thousands of years, the pathway to that friendship with God is spiritual practices like meditating on Scripture, prayer, fasting and more.

Spiritual practices are the pathway to friendship with God.

That's an important distinction to keep in mind. At least it is for me. Maybe it's because I grew up in the Church, and there's not a time I don't remember following Jesus, but spiritual practices like reading scripture and prayer always felt like things I had to do *because* I knew God. They felt like obligations that I had to do to be part of the club.

If there's a common area where a lot of Christians struggle, it's with developing consistent spiritual habits. Yet these are the very things that lead us to know God personally.

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me over to Galatians 3. This is a letter Paul wrote to a church he planted. Paul shared the good news - that because God had raised Jesus from the dead, all these people living in Galatia could now have a relationship with God - and the church in Galatia was formed. After Paul left, though, some other missionaries showed up, insisting that in order for the Galatians to have a relationship with God, they had to follow the Jewish Torah.

For Paul, this amounted to going backwards, as you'll see in a moment. Paul himself is Jewish, and has a great love for the Torah, the law. But he knows that just following the Law was never the end goal. So he explains himself using a metaphor that these Galatians would've understood. In the Roman culture of Galatia, wealthy parents often hired guardians or tutors for their children. The idea was that, until the kids came of age, the guardian would teach them what it meant to be an adult. But once the kid came of age, they didn't keep the guardian on - the guardian was always meant to be a temporary position.

Listen to what Paul says about guardians and the Torah:

Let me put it another way. The law was our guardian until Christ came; it protected us until we could be made right with God through faith.-- Galatians 3:24

Paul says the whole point of the Torah, the Law, was to bring us into relationship with God. To the Galatians, he says, If you're *already* in a relationship with Jesus, then you don't need the Law to help you do that! The point of the path is to get you to the destination. If you're already there, you don't need the path.

So am I saying that, once you have a relationship with Jesus, we don't need spiritual practices anymore? Not at all. But I do want to be clear: reading the bible, praying, fasting, giving, none of the spiritual practices make you a better Christian than the person sitting next to you. You don't earn divine gold stars or cosmic brownie points. You don't earn credit you can exchange for a raise, promotion or healing.

Spiritual practices are the pathway to a relationship with God.

[Scripture slide 2] The book of Joshua tells the story of what happened to Israel after the death of Moses, their great leader who freed them from slavery in Egypt, led them safely through the desert and delivered the Torah to them. You can imagine how big his shoes were, and how intimidating it would be to step into them.

God chose a man named Joshua to step up, and at the opening of the book, we have God's instructions for Joshua:

Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you. Do not deviate from them, turning either to the right or to the left. Then you will be successful in everything you do. Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. -- Joshua 1:7-8

God says, "You want to be the right leader for my people? Then study the Torah day continually. Meditate on it day and night. Obey it. *That's* how you prosper and succeed."

Study of Scripture. Meditation. Prayer. These are the ways, from the beginning, God has given to us. Why? Because that's how we get to know God.

If Scripture is a reflection of God's mind, God's thoughts, God's way of seeing the world, then when we immerse ourselves in Scripture, we learn to think like God, to see the world the way God does.

Ancient teachers and leaders of Israel didn't understand God's promise to Joshua to be a blank check - read your Bible every day and God will make you rich. God's command to Joshua isn't transactional; it's

*relational*. You want to know God? Meditating on Scripture is a pathway to knowing God. So is prayer. So is fasting. So is giving. So is keeping a Sabbath.

You want to be the person God created you to be? You want to be a good leader, a good parent? A faithful friend, a good spouse? Then you need to be in relationship with the one who created you and calls you.

[Scripture Slide 3] Psalm 1 is the opening song in Israel's worship book. And appropriately, it celebrates a person who is deeply rooted in life with God. Listen to how the song celebrates that person:

They delight in the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do. -- Psalm 1:2-3

God's people delight in the Way of God - the spiritual practices that lead us to God. And when we make them such a part of our lives that they're our daily rhythms, we grow deep roots, we bear fruit. We prosper - and again, this isn't talking about health and wealth.

I can't overemphasize this: spiritual practices are not transactions that earn us credit in the First Bank of Heaven. We don't do spiritual practices to *earn* from God. Spiritual practice create pathways to a deeper relationship with God.

Here at Catalyst, we emphasize five spiritual practices that help us make space to know God better.

We've already talked a little about Scripture (and since it's one of our four sources of knowing God, we're going to talk a lot more about it later this summer). What's important for us to remember as a spiritual practice is that we're not reading for information. We're reading to be transformed, to allow God to speak to us through the Scriptures. That's not how we're used to reading, so in our spiritual practices guide, we outline a method called Sacred Reading that helps us meditate on God's words the way the Scriptures encourage us to.

Prayer is how we take time to disconnect from our busy world to be alone with God, to sit in God's unconditional and loving gaze. Too often we think of prayer as though we're giving dictation to God, hoping God's writing fast enough to keep up with all our demands. But true prayer is one of stillness and silence, of listening as much as we're talking. In our guide, we outline a prayer of examen, a guided prayer to help us be attentive to how God is active throughout each day.

Fasting is how we remember that our life comes from God, not from the things we crave. Regular fasting shapes us into a holy rhythm, inviting us to depend wholly and completely on God for our meaning and purpose.

Sabbath is a similar practice, one that humbles us and reminds us that the world keeps on spinning because God is good, not because of how hard we work. Sabbath is another practice we have a lot of misconceptions about - we imagine sitting quietly in a dark room. But Sabbath is about enjoying the life God has given us, with the people God has given us.

Giving is our fifth practice. We give not because God needs our moneys, but because money far too easily becomes an idol in our lives. By giving, we remember that everything we have is from God, that God created us in God's image, and that means we're generous because God is generous toward us.

These practices (and the many others that constitute a life of faith) are not meant to be occasional dalliances. They're not meant to be burdensome obligations. They're certainly not meant to be means of earning cache with God, buying divine favor.

They are ways that shape our lives toward our creator, pathways we create that lead us deeper and deeper into God's love for us.

What does the tree of your relationship with God look like? Do you have deep roots, formed by long years of habits? Or are your roots shallow, your spirituality sickly? Can you imagine that God is inviting you into a deeper, rooted relationship? Can you imagine that these spiritual practices are not an obligation but an invitation to a deeper, more flourishing life?

### **Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] At the table, Jesus called us friends. Every practice, including communion, is meant to invite us deeper into relationship with God.

1. What practices have helped me know God more deeply this past week?
2. When have I ignored or avoided spiritual practices?
3. How might I be tempted to ignore or avoid spiritual practices in the next week?
4. How is God inviting me into a deeper relationship this week?

### **Assignment + Blessing**

What practice are you making time for this week?