

EXPERIENCE ONE / *A Source of Spiritual Power*

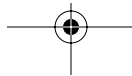
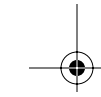
1 PATH FOR GROWTH

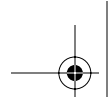


Many of us realize the importance of prayer for building a deeper relationship with God. The study of Scripture, too, is a classic and necessary element of spiritual growth. Times of solitude, along with a host of other valuable spiritual practices, can also be helpful.

All of these have in common the ability to help your soul get quiet and be open to the power and love only available in God. In those times, the human soul “cracks” open, and the Spirit of God moves to shape and heal, woo and nurture, correct and direct the inner being—far below the level of words. God’s Spirit is doing “soul surgery” on a willing patient. Amazing!

Soul restoration—soul transformation—happens. But it requires both our own and God’s involvement. Like a joint project we work on together, there are things God “brings to the table” and there are things we bring. God brings the love, the power, the vision for who we are and who we are becoming (basically God brings most everything), but we must bring our part as well: openness.





SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

- When was the last time you sat down with God? What do you recall being significant about that time?

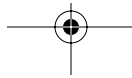
- What kinds of things usually help you be willing to connect with God authentically? For some it might be time in nature, for others worship music and for others silence.

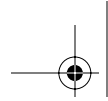


Spiritual practices help us actually sit down with God. They help us get quiet internally, and they help us lean in to better listen and receive from God. When the love and power and radical goodness of God are welcomed deeply into the human soul, things start to happen! We actually become more loving, less self-centered; more sensitive, less calloused; more generous, less greedy. Over time we become effective in whatever role God has for us in extending his love, grace and provision to the hurting world around us.



There are times, however, when the limits of individual spiritual practices become exposed: times of great tragedy, of spiritual or emotional fatigue, or of just remaining stuck spiritually. I've experienced them all. What do you do when you can't stand the thought of praying, when the words of the Bible seem plastic and false? What about when you've been doing everything "right" and the bottom falls out? When





PATH FOR GROWTH

the ministry initiative fails? When a child dies in a freak accident? When a spouse says, “I’m leaving”? When the ropes of addiction still bind you even when you know all the right theology?

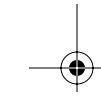
These are the times when spiritual friendship can still connect us to God.

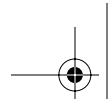
Now, while I am not saying that authentic relationships magically make various troubles disappear, I *am* saying that when we are isolated in the midst of these circumstances, we are closing ourselves off to one of the primary mechanisms by which God will touch our lives.

Human relationships are bumpy. We fail one another regularly. But the fact remains that God has mysteriously endowed each of his followers with the presence of his Spirit so that when we live openly and honestly with at least a few others, we also necessarily open ourselves directly to the power and love of God.

What if we could learn to open ourselves to God in completely new ways? What if he longed to meet with us in the eyes and ears and arms and voices of his flawed and imperfect people who are just like us? What if we could look into the eyes of a friend and see just a glimmer of the love of God? What if we didn’t need to work so very hard to say all the “right” things to friends who seek advice or wisdom? What if?

Of course, the experience of spiritual friendship need not be a last resort. I hope that one day God’s people will naturally view open, healthy relationships as one of the most vital dimensions of spiritual life and health. That will require a revolution of sorts—a long-overdue revolution. I’d like to invite you to your own personal revolution. Learn new ways of relating. Don’t worry about changing your entire family or church, just begin with yourself. Are you willing to take that challenge and begin a revolution of one (that would be you)?

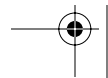
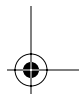
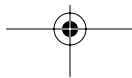
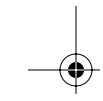
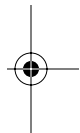
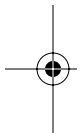


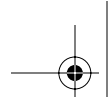


SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

■ As you consider forging or deepening some friendships in the future, what resistance or hesitation do you sense (if any)? What hopes are raised? Take a few minutes to talk with God about that in the space below, being sure to invite his guidance and direction as you pursue this study.

■ Imagine yourself sitting down at a table with God to talk about soul friendships with him. What would you like to say? What, if anything, do you sense God would like to say to you?





2 TAPPING INTO THE TRANSCENDENT

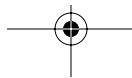
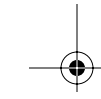


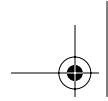
Ordinary friendships are generally characterized by intimacy, trust and mutual enjoyment of one another. Spiritual friends share those qualities, of course, but are also characterized by another element: spiritual friends actively help us pay attention to God. Similar to the way other spiritual practices connect us to God, our soul friends help us sit with him. They have the capacity to help restore life to the soul.

- How is this kind of friendship similar to or different from what you have experienced with friendships in the past?

What is it about these friendships that makes them so powerful? Beyond the human element, something of a spiritual nature is going on in this kind of friendship. It's invisible but it's absolutely real.

Ephesians 4:16 says, "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." The writer of this passage uses the metaphor of a human body, whose parts are intimately connected to one another (joined by ligaments—connected), to describe how spiritual growth occurs among Jesus' followers.





SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

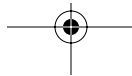
- How do the interconnections in our physical bodies facilitate growth (for example, the connection between the wrist and the arm, or the skin and the blood)?

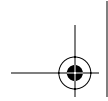
- What exactly causes the growth once these connections are in place? That is, what is the source of power?



Our connections with God and each other make the whole process of growth possible. Only the power of God can change a human soul. When members of the body are meaningfully connected to each other, they feel each other's pain, and they sense each other's joy. And when they are open to it, in a mystical way that is deeply embedded in ordinary human conversation and circumstances, the Spirit of God has unchecked exposure to the soul of each.

The Spirit of God moves freely between those in the body of Christ who are thus connected, and without any direct effort to cause these changes, growth, transformation and healing naturally occur. The direct effort comes in forging that kind of relationship in the first place. Then, because of our intimacy with God and each other, our ordinary, flawed selves can be part of a transformative work that happens deep within our hearts and souls—and those of others.





TAPPING INTO THE TRANSCENDENT

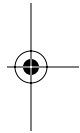
Larry Crabb writes in his book *Connecting*:

*Releasing the power of God through our lives into the hearts and souls of others requires that we both understand and enter into a kind of relating that only the gospel makes possible. . . . This kind of relating depends entirely on deep fellowship with Christ and then spills over on to other people with the power to change their lives, not always on our timetable or in the ways we expect but as the sovereign Spirit moves.**

■ How do you respond to this quote?

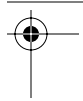
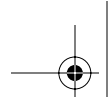


■ What about the gospel makes this kind of relationship possible?



*Larry Crabb, *Connecting* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1997), p. 5 (emphasis mine).





3 GOD WITH US

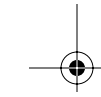
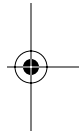


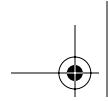
We can expect to experience God's power at work in soul friendship because of God's indwelling presence in the lives of his people. How does this work?

When a person enters into a relationship with God through Jesus, Scripture teaches that a radical spiritual phenomenon takes place in the life of the new believer. The interior world of a Christ-follower is invaded—a willing invasion, but an invasion nonetheless. The new Christian has become an “outpost” of God's presence here on earth as the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the human soul.

- Consider the words and actions of Jesus in the Gospels, the ways that he interacted with people and the message Jesus brought. What was Jesus known for? What characterized his life?

- Who stands out in your mind as someone who has embodied at least some of these characteristics of Jesus—a friend, mentor, parent or even a figure from history?





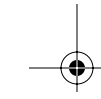
GOD WITH US

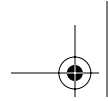
- What words or phrases describe what *you* are known for?

A curious word describes the presence of God among his people: his *kingdom* dwells among us (Luke 17:21). What might that mean? Well, by the presence of his Spirit, his kingdom now dwells individually inside his people, but his presence is also active between us. There is a supernatural dynamic to the relationships between all people—especially between those who share a faith in Christ. Among followers of Christ, the Holy Spirit is flowing, energizing, healing, convicting and transforming.

What does that mean for our daily lives of faith and relationships? First, it invites us to engage in deeply spiritual living as individuals, to fan into flame the personal relationship we enjoy with the God of the universe. When we have that intimacy established with God, it changes who we are and how we operate in every way. Thus, it cannot *not* pour out of us into others. John 15:5 (NASB) explains this dynamic well: we “abide” with God. We have an intimate, dependent relationship with God as our source of life, and we cannot thwart or stop what it is God intends to do through us. We are completely available to allow his Spirit to flow through us into the lives of others.

Second, the spiritual realities of indwelling call us toward each other with greater expectancy and willingness to experience God working among us—working precisely because we’ve ventured into the kinds of relationships through which his Spirit can powerfully move.





SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

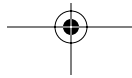
- How would you describe your current level of expectation that God's Spirit would interact with you through a friend and vice versa?

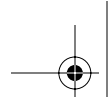
- Write about a few experiences that might have influenced that level of expectation.



Not only are these relationships possible, but within them lies the hope for an outpouring of the Spirit of God in our day—transforming the souls of individuals and accomplishing the purposes of God in our own lives and in our world.

- If this is relatively new for you, or even if you already enjoy this kind of relationship, how do you imagine your life might be different through deeper connections to a few soul friends? What would be the same?





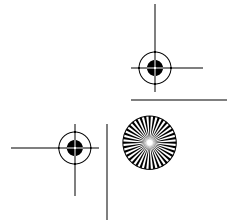
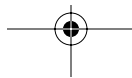
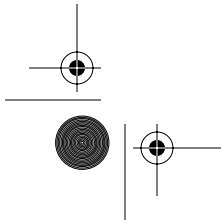
4 GOD AMONG US

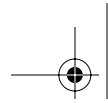


Soul friendships, while receiving their extraordinary power from God, possess some clear and consistent human characteristics. What marks the kind of relationship through which God can freely move among us? Many factors contribute, such as honesty, self-awareness, genuine love and acceptance, but soul friends are also characterized by being open (or undefended), authentic and “unagendaed.” Under these circumstances, your soul is literally opened up to another person in a mutual way, and this is what makes transformation by God’s Spirit possible.

Open or undefended relationships transcend the invisible system of calluses and emotional armor that generally keeps the self protected from other people. That invisible system of protection is our defenses, which are elaborate and strong, and very important in many settings. But in an open relationship, the defenses gradually come down, and we allow our true self to be known.

“Unagendaed” relationships occur when we drop our agendas for what we want from other people and just connect with them as they are. Often we have unspoken agendas for other people. We may not even be aware of them until we find ourselves angry or disappointed in someone—and realize they just weren’t meeting our expectations. When I am tempted to move toward friendship with someone I enjoy but from whom I also want something, that’s when an agenda creeps in.





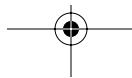
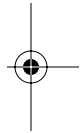
GOD AMONG US

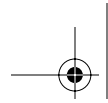
The potential power of the Holy Spirit being poured into another person's heart and soul depends on your own deep fellowship with Christ. What words would you use to describe your current experience of intimacy with Christ?

When we remain deeply connected with God, one of the realities of the spiritual life is this: We cannot *not* bring his person and presence into every circumstance we find ourselves in. He's there because we're there. That's the miracle of indwelling. Furthermore, we don't have to work so hard at being like Jesus, and we don't have to think so very much about what Jesus would do; because of our intimacy and yield- edness, over time we simply act and behave as he would because that's what makes sense to us. Things that characterize the person of Jesus will eventually begin to characterize us. Our minds are being renewed; this is the miracle of transformation taking place. And when we bring that very-much-in-process-but-open-to-God self into relationship with others, all heaven breaks loose!

But it all hinges on our own intimacy and surrender to God.

- In what ways do you suspect that your own character is being shaped in a way that is more like Jesus? Have you found yourself more compassionate lately? less anxious?





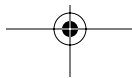
SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

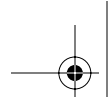
- What tends to keep you close to the heart of God during ordinary days? Are there certain practices or places that remind you of God's presence and love? What are they?

- Talk with God right now about your desire to remain connected. Prayerfully ask, *What is one simple thing I could do today to pursue a deeper connection?* (Be sure to listen!)



God can touch our souls when we are relating with one another. I am with God when I am with my soul friends in open and unagendaed ways. If we could let down our guard and learn to relate this way, what might happen?





5 GROUP DISCUSSION

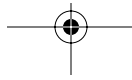
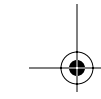


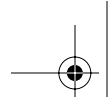
Summary

God created humans in his own image, which includes his very *essence* as community. We are designed to enjoy and to develop mutual relationships of self-giving love, just like the Trinity. But the pain and brokenness and disappointments of life often leave us deeply isolated, unwilling to extend ourselves relationally. Yet intimate relationships remain one of the primary ways God intends to be present with us and among us. We tend to forget this! And our souls suffer for it, our communities suffer for it, our world suffers for it. Developing a few soul friends—intimate, life-giving relationships that help us pay attention to God—can help us experience the new life available in God. The incredible power of soul friends to bring healing and transformation into our lives hinges in the reality of God’s indwelling Spirit in the lives of his people. When, as individuals, we remain deeply connected to God and then develop relationships marked by openness, authenticity and the lack of a hidden agenda, the power of God freely moves in and among us.

Discussion Basics

This discussion guide works best in a context of openness and vulnerability among friends (new or old!). Before answering the opening question, if you don’t know each other already, take plenty of time to exchange names and some basic get-to-know-you information—like





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where you live, what kind of work you do, what your family is like and maybe something silly, like your favorite childhood cartoon or book. At the end of the study, you may also want to exchange basic contact information, such as telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. However, before you begin, a few ground rules are in order.*

First, please feel no pressure to answer any of these questions. I encourage you to be vulnerable, but if at any time, for any reason, you don't feel comfortable, it's okay to pass.

Second, please give one another the gift of listening, not advice. This is not the time to tell about when that same thing happened to you or about the Scripture verse that "solves" that problem. Ask a follow-up question, perhaps, or simply remain quiet—but refrain from interjecting your own advice.

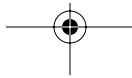
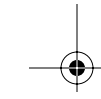
Third, no faking. There is no need to be anything other than who you are. If what's really true feels too uncomfortable to talk about, just take a pass. Trust in the process of authentic, vulnerable communication with God and others.

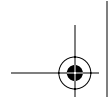
And last, ruthlessly protect and honor one another's confidentiality. When a friend shares an intimate struggle or concern, it represents a gift of their trust. You can even thank them! But it was given to you, not to everyone you know, so guard your words accordingly.

Opening

What brought you to the place of wanting to do this study at this time in your life?

*Adapted from John Ortberg and Ruth Haley Barton, *An Ordinary Day with Jesus Leader's Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 32-33.





GROUP DISCUSSION

Discussion

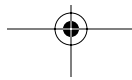
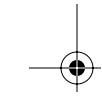
1. What, if anything, did you sense God stirring in you through this first experience?

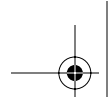
2. Go back over your written responses to parts one through four. What one or two ideas stand out as something you'd like to bring to the group? Why did they stand out to you?

3. Place yourself on a spectrum of how you view relationships: "intimacy is dangerous" versus "intimacy is desirable." Describe something in your life that may have influenced that belief.

4. Read John 16:7 and John 17:26. How do you experience this indwelling reality in ordinary life? Are you largely unaware? often aware?

5. Which of the three characteristics—openness, authenticity or lack of a hidden agenda—comes most naturally for you, and which is most difficult?





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6. Talk about one thing that you anticipate might be a challenge for you personally in the coming days or weeks.

Prayer

If you feel comfortable, have one or several group members close this time in prayer, perhaps using this text from Ephesians 1:17-19 as your guide (interestingly, the language throughout this prayer is plural—"you" is directed to a group of people, not a person):

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

Before the next gathering, everyone should complete "Experience Two: Barriers to Soul Friendship."

