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# Return to Your First Love

Moving beyond boredom  
and guilt into greater  
intimacy with God



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Introduction

# When Boredom Becomes a Blessing

Spiritual dissatisfaction can lead  
to fresh faith and vitality

*By Kelli B. Trujillo*

**W**hen I was in college, my spiritual life was characterized most by fellowship and Bible study. I was a campus ministry leader so I spent lots of time interacting with other Christians. I read the entire Bible in a year, taking elaborate notes that spilled out of a four-inch binder and spending long stretches of time in the Word every day. It was an awesome, spiritually invigorating season.

Fast-forward about five years post-college: When I had my





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first baby, my spiritual life looked quite different. (Understatement!) I hardly "studied" the Bible at all, and was lucky to stay awake during a sermon. But my spiritual life wasn't over—it was just a different season. It was characterized by contemplating God's parental love during long windows of nighttime nursing and by praying *lots* of short, earnest "Help me!" prayers as I tried to adapt to the mothering trade.

Fast-forward ten more years to the present: Now my spiritual life looks different again. Not the same as an on-fire college student's. Not the same as a desperate, hormonal, sleep deprived young mom's. As a part-time working mom of three who's now closer to 40 than 30, today my spiritual life is characterized more by disciplines like **practicing God's presence**, habits of **Examen**, and Scripture meditation (which, for me, is quite different than study).

Fast-forward again . . . and who knows? Maybe in upcoming seasons of life I'll be drawn again toward long stretches of study. Maybe I'll be on a worship kick, dancing up a storm to my favorite gospel music in the living room. Or maybe I'll have grown stronger in the spiritual discipline I most often struggle with: prayer.

The Christian life, thank God, is not a fixed point in space that never moves from its static x-y coordinates. It's *dynamic* journey. It involves change.

Sometimes that change happens naturally without us even realizing how our faith-habits may be shifting or growing. Other times that change happens because we're excited and passionate about something. We enthusiastically sense the Spirit calling us in a new direction.

But other times change happens because we've realized it *needs* to happen. We may feel stuck in a rut. Our enthusiasm for God may be waning. Rather than being dynamic, our faith seems



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stale. We may feel distant from God or consumed by doubts. We may feel guilty that we aren't \_\_\_\_\_-ing enough. You fill in the blank: Not praying enough, not studying the Bible enough, not evangelizing enough, not serving enough, and so on. That guilt—rather than a passionate love for Jesus—has come to characterize our gut-reaction-feelings about our faith.

The good news: Things can change! You aren't stuck! As you grow and change as a person, your faith and spiritual habits can change too. Your needs may shift, your desires might alter, you may feel drawn to Christian spiritual practices that didn't interest you in the past. Sometimes these changes are motivated by passion while other times the catalyst is *dissatisfaction*. In other words, feeling bored and dissatisfied can actually prod you forward into a new phase of spiritual growth.

So where was your faith a few years ago? And how is it different now? How might your relationship with God need to be refreshed, renewed, or reinvigorated? Going through spiritually "blah" times is a normal experience. But at TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, our aim is to help you move through spiritual staleness into faith and vitality. As you read the articles in this download, explore Scripture, and think through the Reflect questions, our hope is that you'll sense the Holy Spirit giving you insight for how *you* can connect with him in fresh, new, and vibrant ways.

Grace and peace,

*Kelli B. Trujillo*

Managing editor, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN downloadable resources

Leader's Guide

## How to use “Return to Your First Love” for a group study



**R**eturn to Your First Love” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

- 1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have their own guide.**
- 2. Consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
- 3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
- 4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
- 5. When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
- 6. End the session in prayer.**



# Bored with God

Has your relationship with the Almighty grown stale?

*By Ginger Kolbaba*

**W**hen I first met my future husband, I couldn't see him or talk to him enough. I was enthralled by him and talked to others about him incessantly ("Scott would love that shirt. . . . Scott thinks . . . Scott says . . . Scott . . . Scott . . . Scott . . ."). Almost every minute was crowded by thoughts of him. And when we'd leave each other's presence, I'd count the moments until we could be reunited.

Those feelings remind me of when I first became a Christian. I faithfully read my Bible. I prayed often. My mind was crowded with thoughts of God and I talked to others about him incessantly.

But then, as so often happens in relationships, I grew distant. To be honest, I got used to God. I knew all the Bible



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stories and could recite them in my sleep. The sermons I heard felt like restatements of things I'd heard a million times before. My prayers stalled at asking for and discussing the same things over and over. And while I still loved God and followed him, the thrill was gone. I felt old in my faith; dusty, in a rut.

At one point as I sat on a beach overlooking Lake Michigan, the reality of my situation overwhelmed me and I cried, "I miss you, God. I miss the joy and excitement of knowing and serving the living God. Why am I so . . . *bored*?"

### Acknowledging the Elephant in the Room

How many people do you know who will say, "Frankly, I'm bored with God"? Most probably won't because they think lightning will strike them! But I've talked with and watched enough Christians to know many of them feel that way, even if they won't admit it.

Acknowledging my own spiritual boredom that day on the beach became a significant turning point in my relationship with God. I think it was so powerful because I was finally honest with myself, and with my Creator. It's funny that I hid that truth deep inside for so long, thinking that if I didn't acknowledge it then no one—including God!—would know. But it was only when I finally got to the end of myself and spoke the truth that God said, "Finally! *Now* I have something to work with. Let's get started!"

There's great power in acknowledging aloud what we're feeling about God—even when those feelings are less than enthusiastic. In the movie *The Apostle*, Eulis "Sonny" Dewey, played by Robert Duvall, is a preacher who discovers his wife is having an affair. In one of the most emotional scenes in the movie, Sonny goes into a room, shuts the door, and has a loud argument with God, expressing every feeling, thought, and attitude toward his Creator. He lays everything out, bares it all, holds nothing back. It's honest and vulnerable and oh-so-raw.



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And it's beautiful—because it's real.

To move forward out of spiritual boredom, the first thing I had to do is be real. I realized I had to acknowledge when I just wasn't "not in the mood" to connect with God. It's not a surprise to him, after all! But that honest confession becomes the starting place for true change to occur.

#### Showing Up

After my confession time on that beach, I realized three obvious truths: (1) I wasn't bored because *God* changed; (2) I wasn't unfulfilled because *he'd* stopped working or being involved in my life; and (3) *I* needed to start "showing up" in the relationship. I needed to stop relying on the spiritual excitement of the past and renew my energies into growing the future.

If I wanted to infuse my faith with excitement, I realized I would have to make a move toward Christ—to figuratively step out of the boat, **as Peter literally did** on the Sea of Galilee. Nothing much would happen if I stayed in the boat. So while acknowledging the truth of my feelings and situation is important, it's only a first step. Next I'd have to commit to doing something about it. After all, as John Ortberg so rightly declared: "If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat."

This is where a lot of folks will stop because they think making a change means doing something major—like building the boat before you can step out of it! But I found that major change actually starts with minor changes, one step at a time. And in that one step, true to his character, Jesus is there to catch us.

So my first baby step was to pray a simple, but heartfelt, request. I asked God to make me more aware of him in every moment. Everywhere I turned, I wanted to see his fingerprints. The subtler I could see them, the better. When I prayed that prayer, it was as though God had been standing next to me



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rubbing his hands back and forth, eagerly anticipating my request. And did he ever answer!

I started to see and notice so many things I'd missed before. My world began to explode with God's presence! I was overwhelmed and in awe of his workings, his graciousness, his love, his character. I was overwhelmed by *him*. He became my suitor, my pursuer. And in turn, I couldn't get enough of him. In 1 Timothy 6:11, the apostle Paul encourages us to "pursue a righteous life—a *life of wonder*, faith, love, steadiness, courtesy. Run hard and fast in the faith. *Seize* the eternal life, the life you were called to, the life you so fervently embraced in the presence of so many witnesses" (The Message, italics added).

There is never boredom in seizing a life of wonder. And when I forget what it looks like to pursue wonder, I look at my three-year-old granddaughter. Eyes wide at everything, quick to laugh unabashedly, and free to run full-steam ahead into anything and everything that holds the *slightest* possibility of joy and love.

### Twisting Routines like a Kaleidoscope

When I was a little girl I was fascinated with kaleidoscopes—cylindrical toys with mirrors and colored shapes inside that would shift into all different sorts of patterns when you'd rotate it. The kaleidoscope was the same, but *twisting it just a bit* would create a whole new view inside.

My faith-life had begun to feel like an unused kaleidoscope. I participated in church, Bible study, and acts of service, but I never twisted the kaleidoscope to see a different, new, unique view. So after I set about to change my life of boredom with God into a life of freshness, I decided that I needed to change the routines of my faith.

I started to attend church on Saturday nights, at the beginning of Sabbath (which I also started to observe). I began to



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look forward to attending church again because I wasn't so rushed in the mornings to wake up early and speed around trying to get ready. And practicing Sabbath allowed me to recalibrate my entire life. I began to look forward to that day when I could do none of the have-tos and all of the want-tos. I was reading good books and napping and cooking and playing games. I was having fun—and it focused my mind more on the God of joy and play—such a different aspect of the Almighty that I had too often overlooked or neglected.

Another exciting change in my relationship came when I picked up an audio Bible and began to listen to it during my daily commute to and from work. I was still "reading" my Bible, but in a fresh way. I was turning that kaleidoscope.

That different way of taking in Scripture breathed new life into the stories I'd grown up hearing. God began to use them to show me a truer portrait of himself. For instance, one day I was listening to the passage in Exodus when Moses is on the mountain receiving God's instructions for his people. God gave the Ten Commandments (which I was *very* familiar with), but God also went into precise detail about things that we tend to skip over in our reading, such as the clothing Aaron would need to wear as a holy priest. The instructions about the priests, specifically naming Aaron, went on for three chapters (28–30). Since I was listening instead of reading just a chapter at a time, I heard that entire lengthy section in context. Then, right after that section, came the story of Aaron creating the golden calf idol.

All of a sudden the timing of that story overwhelmed me. God was going into *great* detail about the plans he had for Aaron *at the same time* Aaron was sinning! It wasn't as though God didn't know what Aaron was up to. But God was, in the midst of his instructions, showing that he had plans for Aaron and that Aaron was still part of the kingdom—even in the midst of his downfall. Putting all those chapters together gave me a bigger—and truer—



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picture of God's character. That's something I hadn't received completely when I would simply read a chapter a day and go on my way. Just another fresh twist of the kaleidoscope.

#### One Thing at a Time

The biggest realization about my boredom with God was the most difficult: I can't multi-task and put God in the mix. Our society has become great at multi-tasking: texting, checking emails, iPads, iPhones, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TV . . . Rarely do we focus on just one thing at a time anymore—including our relationships. It all becomes white noise, and the white noise covers over the quiet, gentle voice of our Creator.

I've been in situations in which the people I was visiting never gave me their undivided attention. They'd glance at their phones or just pick them up and start surfing the Internet or texting. They'd interrupt me to say something to someone else. Their eyes would wander. Those times certainly didn't make me feel respected or honored. I didn't leave them thinking, *That was a great time of connecting. We should do that again.*

But that's what I'd so often done to God. I would do quiet times on the fly, or check my Bible app for the daily verse and then get to the *important* stuff of my day. It hurts to admit that! But that's what my actions were showing my Father.

When I get so used to multi-tasking, I can feel bored or impatient when only one thing is going on at a time. To have a singular focus can sometimes make me feel jittery and annoyed. But God wants my undivided attention. He wants to connect at a deep level—something that takes times, focus, and quiet.

We often become bored with God because he asks for our undivided attention and we have forgotten how to give it. It's difficult to see God's fingerprints on everything, as I'd prayed about, if I'm scattered and busy all the time.



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So I decided to set some boundaries. Technology is great—but I only check it at certain times in the day, and *no more*. When I'm with other people, I try to focus completely on them, actively listening and honoring who they are as God's created and loved children. The more I've stuck to my boundaries, the more I see God's amazing work and creativity. I slow down to take it in and I am in wonder all over again.

#### When Boredom Creeps In Again

I look back on my beach confession and thank God that I finally got honest with him. It made me more aware of my part in that boredom and how I could change to make the most of my faith, energies, and creativity. Now when boredom begins to creep in, I acknowledge it again and ask God to show me where I've moved away from him.

The truth is that God never grows weary in pursuing us as his loved ones; he never stops being our suitor; he never takes a break in creating pleasure for us. **He lavishes his love on us.** And when I put all that in perspective, that I should become bored with God is a sheer impossibility! What a mighty God we truly serve.

**Ginger Kolbaba** served as editor of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. She is the author of numerous books including **Desperate Pastors' Wives** and **The Old Fashioned Way**. This article was published by **Today's Christian Woman** in 2013.



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### Reflect

- *When has your spiritual life felt vibrant and exciting? When has it felt boring and stale? Describe both experiences.*
- *Ginger realized that she needed to "show up" in her relationship with God and take steps toward Christ. Read **Matthew 14:22-23**. How do you feel convicted by the inaction of the other disciples in the boat? How do Peter's literal steps toward Christ serve as a figurative inspiration for you in your own relationship with Jesus?*
- *Key to Ginger's spiritual rejuvenation was to "turn the kaleidoscope." Can you relate to Ginger's need to try new or fresh ways of connecting with God? What ideas came to mind for you as you read that section of Ginger's article?*



# Prone to Wander

Why is going back to my first love so difficult sometimes?

*By Ashley Moore*

**M**y church is a monstrous thing. It's probably considered a mega-church, even though that term sits in my mouth about as easily as vinegar. There are more than 50 campuses worldwide; we have a well-known, well-traveled, well-studied, and well-published pastor; and we have worship leaders who win Dove awards in their spare time (when they're not flying to India to care for orphans). It's a wonderful place. But sometimes, I get a little too caught up in it.

In a thriving church, it's easy to allow responsibility



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for my personal holiness to dwindle, to have others "do it for me." I can feel filled up as I let the pastor's words soak in, or as I allow the worship to move me. During the service, I drift aimlessly in the direction of holiness, carried and pushed by the waves of worshipers who surround me. And I'm intentional and focused on worshiping my Savior. But then when I leave church I feel more of a contact-high than anything else.

*Wasn't that great?* I pray as I pull out of the church parking lot. *I love my church. God, thank you for my church. I'm so thankful for my pastor. He's the best. And the worship leaders are so great, so focused on you. Lord, make me like them.*

I hear myself say these words . . . and I know I'm missing something. I can sense that these are partial, surface prayers.

By the time I'm pulling into my driveway, I feel empty again. And I think that maybe this emptiness is coming from being in love with the wrong thing.

In **Revelation 2:1-7**, Jesus Christ reveals himself to John, addressing the church of Ephesus. Jesus commends them for all the wonderful things they're doing. He says that they're hard workers, they persevere, and they protect what is right. (I bet they had great church services too!)

But then verse four punches its reader in the gut.

"Yet I hold this against you: *You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.* If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place" (italics added).

This is not good.

This church had gotten good at being "good." They were great at "doing" church. They were so nice. They wanted the best for everyone. They probably did a lot of kind things.

The problem was, they'd forgotten that you go to church



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*to meet with God.* And I had forgotten too! Like the church in Ephesus, my "first love" for Christ alone has become elusive. Some days it appears that my heart has given up on chasing it down and bringing it back into the light. I'm filled with a sense of distance and unworthiness, but instead of returning to the throne, I busy myself with more good deeds.

I think we all feel this way sometimes—Like we're standing outside a crowd, watching them partake in the beauty of Christianity while we self-consciously itch our arms and look around, hoping no one will notice us. We close our eyes and raise our hands and hope to catch some of that Holy Spirit that everyone around us seems to be experiencing, but often, we're left empty and frustrated.

Fortunately for those of us, like me, who have been feeling lost in the masses lately, we have a Savior who loves drifters. He understands our natural, human desires toward sin and apathy. He knows that at times, we get too caught up in the blessings he has given us to spend time sitting at his feet. He understands it, but he doesn't leave us alone. He comes back for us. Jesus is the shepherd for the lost, *and* for the lost *again*. Under the grace of Christ, we're never really lost.

One chapter later in Revelation, Jesus says these words, this time to a different church struggling with lukewarm faith: "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me" (Revelation 3:19–20).

Jesus doesn't give up on his people. In this passage he spoke to an entire congregation of fruitless, passionless Christians. I think it's safe to say that these people had forgotten their first love. Maybe they, like me, had been letting the "church



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experience" carry their spiritual lives. But Jesus loved them, and he told them the same thing he told the church in Ephesus. The same thing he's telling you and me. *Let's get this relationship back to what it used to be.*

I like that idea, so here's what I'm going to do:

I will repent—ask forgiveness of my Savior, and look my sin straight in the face.

I will spend time in prayer—real time, talking to God, and sharing my doubts, fears, thoughts, hopes, and dreams. I will ask for his advice and seek his will. These are the things I did at first. These are the things I need to return to.

I will read his words—not words someone else wrote about God, or an article written about a famous Christian. Those are good things—but I need to stop being afraid that once it's just me and the words of God, his words will fall flat. They don't.

Christianity was never meant to be impersonal. It was never supposed to be done *for* me. Faith requires a one-on-one relationship, not a mega-church's standing ovation. And somewhere along the line, I forgot about that.

I still love my church—the worship, the pastor, and everything else. But I'm done letting them do the heavy lifting for my faith.

So this is where I leave you. It's between me and Jesus now. And I can hear him at the door.

**Ashley Moore** is the editorial coordinator for **Today's Christian Woman**, **GiftedforLeadership.com**, and **ChristianBibleStudies.com**. This article was first published on the **Today's Christian Woman** blog in August 2011.



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### Reflect

- *Ashley is brutally honest when she says, "In a thriving church, it's easy to allow responsibility for my personal holiness to dwindle, to have others 'do it for me.'" Can you relate? When have you relied on your church, a ministry you're involved in, or the faith of others (family, friends) to sustain your faith—while neglecting your own personal commitment to discipleship? Why do you think this so often happens?*
- *Read the words of Christ to the church in Ephesus in **Revelation 2:1-7** and the church in Laodicea in **Revelation 3:14-22**. What most stands out to you about these believers? How do you sense God may be convicting you and leading you to respond to his Word?*
- *The good news is that conviction about spiritual failings and flailings need not lead us to discouragement. Instead, as Ashley reminds us, "we have a Savior who loves drifters. He understands our natural, human desires toward sin and apathy." You can come to Jesus in honesty about your struggles with spiritual lukewarmness and in recognition of ways you've forgotten your first love. What comfort or encouragement do you find in Jesus' understanding and unconditional love for you? How does this love motivate you to change and grow?*



# Cultivating Time Alone with God

God is asking us to come near to him, so what's keeping us from taking time to spiritually recharge?

*By Lisa Chan*

**H**ave you ever been to a place so amazing, you wished that someone you loved was with you? Maybe it was the beauty or the peacefulness or the fun, but you wanted so badly for them to experience what you were experiencing. You just knew how much they would love it, and how happy they'd be if they had come.

This is how I feel about my time with God. Moments spent in his presence, with his Word, and with all of my attention. I have so much to learn from him, there are so



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many things he wants to show me, and I can't help but want this for everyone.

Of course, not every time I'm with him is a glorious event. Sometimes I'm overwhelmed with my sin, sometimes I'm hurting, and sometimes I just feel *blah* about everything. But this is like any good relationship. Our deepest bonds are with people who have walked with us through *life*, with its messiness and highs and lows. God wants to walk with us like this.

So it's definitely not every time I'm alone with God that I feel an amazing rush. But many times I *do*. Many times over the years I've been brought to tears as God has so obviously shown me how he is working in my life. As I read and meditate on his Word, it is amazing how quickly it can snap me back into place, and align my heart with his heart. There are times I'll pray about the smallest things, and he will answer me. Do you know how thrilling it is to realize that the God of the universe is reaching out to you? *This* is what I'm yearning for every woman to experience.

And it won't happen by chance. It won't even happen if you go to church every Sunday. *Every* great relationship takes time, commitment, sacrifice, and effort.

The apostle James reminds us: "Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world" (James 4:8).

I hate to admit it, but at times my loyalty has been divided. It's as though I can't make a decision about who my heart belongs to. I can whine and complain about feeling distant from God, but I have only to look at my time management to figure out how it happened. Running around on empty for so long is exhausting. And then I make that choice to **be still before God**, to submit



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myself to him. I stop the madness of my life for a while and "come close to God." The amazing promise is that when I do this, he *will* come close to me. He isn't hiding from us. When we come humbly before him, he is right there.

Picture that God has personally invited you to a great banquet. He has a seat held for you at his table, which is filled with every good thing you could imagine. He would be sitting across from you, and his table would hold everything your heart needed or desired to live for him. You could have your fill of wisdom, comfort, patience, endurance, peace, love, joy, or forgiveness.

It would make no sense for you not to show up!

It also wouldn't make sense for you to crawl around on the floor picking up crumbs when God has so clearly invited you to come and sit at his table. Crumbs will not leave you satisfied. And crawling around on the floor will leave you feeling unimportant and unloved. Sit down with God. Let him love you and know you and change you and give you what you need.

I think deep inside, we all know this is what we need. Nothing is more important than cultivating that time alone with God. And I'm hoping to motivate you to run to his table right now. You won't be disappointed.

*Lisa Chan is a mother of five and co-founder (with her husband, **Francis**) of Cornerstone Community Church in Simi Valley, California. Lisa recently produced a devotional DVD series called **True Beauty**, dedicated to helping women discover and create authentic conversations with God. This article was first published on the **Today's Christian Woman blog** in December 2012.*



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## Reflect

- *Lisa poses a challenge that's absolutely simple but that can be difficult to actually do: Prioritize and spend time in stillness in God's presence. Be courageously honest right now: How tough is it for you to spend regular time being still before God? What challenges, distractions, life circumstances, or other factors prevent you from really doing what Lisa describes?*
- *Read **Psalm 46:10** and **James 4:8**. Consider: Why do you need stillness before God? What good does this do in your life? What are you missing when you neglect times of stillness before God?*
- *How might a more vigorous commitment to times of quiet and stillness with God be a meaningful "twist of the kaleidoscope" for you? Or how has Lisa's article challenged or inspired you in other ways?*



## Coming Alive!

Your service can be an exciting extension of God's work within you.

*By Arloa Sutter*

**M**y grandson loves video games. If given the opportunity, he'll stay up all night and forget to eat, hoping to get to the next level. After all, who isn't perpetually optimistic when it comes to careening a motorcycle between cars on an iPhone or facing down Bowser in the final castle of a Mario game?

In her book *Reality Is Broken*, Jane McGonigal contends that thousands are being drawn to the world of video games by the intoxicating experience of achieving victory against all odds. Bored with real life, they join forces online to triumph over imaginary enemies. They work for hours alongside comrades and allies, not for money, but for



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the joy of solving problems, grasping new concepts, and saving the virtual world from those who seek to destroy it.

Perhaps we could learn from the gaming world when it comes to the way we think of and approach service. We call people to faith in Christ and then ask them to sit docilely through church "services." We recruit them to usher or work in the nursery, but are we really challenging people to use their unique abilities in service? Are we urging them to take up the cross to follow Jesus down the path of self-sacrifice?

Frankly, many Christians are flat-out bored.

Yet when we were woven together in our mother's wombs (**Psalm 139:13**), God prepared good works, in advance, for us to do (**Ephesians 2:10**). We were created to serve. It is our reason for being. Just like you were specially designed with DNA that would result in the color of your skin, eyes, and hair, God has given you a job to do. Your service in the world is a natural outflow of the Creator's good work within you.

Frederick Buechner says, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Your place of service should be a place of gladness. There is no greater thrill than to work hard in the places of the world's deepest hunger—to give of ourselves in a cause that is bigger than us with an effort that stretches us and brings out our best.

I've seen churches come alive when they finally get outside their walls and participate in acts of service. I saw parishioners at a church in Florida join forces to build a mission house for Habitat for Missionaries. They worked hard and then fasted and prayed that the house would sell. The epic pleasure on their faces when the pastor announced the house had sold in the first five minutes was palpable and would rival the face of any virtual game victor!

My daughter, who has been in the church for 27 years,



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claims that her most profound church experience was when she sang and danced in praise with women at a homeless shelter. It was in that place, where battered women praised God in the midst of their pain, that she experienced the presence of God most powerfully.

Recently my friend Adam left his lucrative job on the commodities trading floor to build affordable housing in a metropolitan city. He becomes animated with passion as he talks about the history of housing discrimination in America. His wife told him, "Your heart has been broken for the people living in poverty in Chicago. You think about it all the time, you dream about it, how to fight it, how to solve it." Adam has caught the service bug and will never be the same.

Michael Chitwood, who organizes marathon runners for **World Vision** throughout the U.S. and in Africa told me, "I was afraid God was going to call me to a way of life that I couldn't live up to. If I obeyed I would be miserable. If I didn't obey I'd be miserable. What I didn't understand was that God would indeed break my heart, but I would never want to go back to the way things were."

So what is it for you? What do *you* care about? What breaks *your* heart? What makes your blood boil? What would you stay up all night to do? Your deep gladness will erupt when you choose to obey, to go to the broken places of the world to do the good works created in advance for you to do.

**Arloa Sutter** is the founder and leader of **Breakthrough Urban Ministries** as well as the author of **The Invisible**. This article was published by **Today's Christian Woman** in September 2011.



## Reflect

- *Arloa candidly critiques the less-than-inspiring culture the church can create when we focus inward while neglecting the real excitement of the Christian life: outward ministry! Along with a focus on your own spiritual habits, have you considered that action—serving others—might be a key to revitalizing your spiritual life? What's your reaction to Arloa's premise?*
- *Read **Ephesians 2:8-10**. Often Christians zero in on verses 8 and 9 while neglecting the real thrust of the idea in verse 10. Are you living out this calling? Do you see your life as one crafted by God for his purpose of you doing real good in this world? How does this passage challenge or inspire you?*
- *"So what is it for you?" asks Arloa. "What do you care about? What breaks your heart? What makes your blood boil? What would you stay up all night to do?" Pause now to really consider her questions: What is your real passion? What need in your community or across the globe might God be calling you to address? How could really using your gifts and talents for God's purposes bring new energy and excitement to your life with God?*
- *In the previous article, Lisa Chan challenges us to spend time in stillness with God, while here Arloa challenges us toward action. What do you see as a healthy, life-giving balance between stillness and action? Which of these two different areas of discipleship do you personally most need to focus on now in order to revitalize your spiritual walk?*



# A Deeper Knowing

God is mysterious—but present—in the moments of our lives.

*By Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, with Kelli B. Trujillo*

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes . . .*

**W**e love the words of this deeply theological hymn. Yet for the most part, this "inaccessibility" of God isn't a trait most of us like to dwell on. We're more often drawn to descriptions of God's knowability—friendship with God, intimacy with God, the aspects of God's Divine Being that we can grasp and understand.

Yet God *is*, in many ways, very much "hid from our



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eyes"—not just from our literal vision, but hidden by the limits of our human comprehension. Though we often speak about "knowing God," in what ways is God simply beyond us and unknowable? And how can we seek to better know and grow in relationship with our amazing—and mysterious—God?

#### **Knowable, Unknowable**

The question of how well we can really "know" God has been woven throughout church history from the beginning. There are two realms of Christian theology that explore this issue: cataphatic theology and apophatic theology.

Cataphatic theology emphasizes how God is knowable; we can know him through the revelation of God in the Word, through his character traits, through what he has made, and through what we see. In this sense, God *is* absolutely a knowable God.

Apophatic theology, on the other hand, emphasizes the more mysterious aspects of seeking to "know" God. From an apophatic standpoint, God is so big, so huge, and so beyond us that in a sense we can never truly know God. We're fooling ourselves if we think we can nail down the flapping corners of the universe and confidently declare, "This is who God is . . ." because God is beyond us.

Both of these theological currents are present in Scripture, and both help us see how we can—and cannot—know and understand God. We live in a society that always wants to level the playing field; for example, we called President Carter just plain "Jimmy" and people often refer to our current president as just "Obama." Similarly, we often have a very friendly and familiar approach to the Holy One. It is a *good thing* to be close to God and on familiar terms! But if that is the only way we view and relate to God, then our perspective is inadequate and



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incomplete. If we neglect the mystery of God, we aren't seeing the whole picture.

God is not an object to be analyzed, a theory to be debated, or an abstract concept to be pondered. We cannot put God on a dissecting table, examine everything, and then proclaim conclusively, "*This* is God." No, God is a *subject*. Subjects are both knowable and mysterious. As we seek to know God, we must recognize that he is both known and unknown to us—both utterly close and familiar, and stunningly mysterious and unfamiliar.

And so we can say with humility, "This is who God is to me. This is the God I find in the Bible; this is the God I've experienced. It's just a little, teeny *piece* of this big, big picture of our awesome, mysterious God—but this is who God is to me."

### Mysterious Encounters

How can we grow in relationship with this amazing and mysterious God? We know the quick answer often offered by the church: "Read your Bible and pray." Of course this is good advice—these practices are certainly important and they help us know God better. But there's more to knowing God than reading about him.

Consider the biblical story itself and the wide variety of ways people experienced God and got to know God: Abram heard God's voice, Jacob dreamed of angels ascending and descending, Moses saw a burning bush, Balaam heard God speak through a donkey, Samson felt God's strength, Elijah heard God in a whisper on a mountain, Isaiah saw God high and lifted up, Daniel had dreams, Mary talked with an angel, and on and on. The Bible itself is a catalogue of people's diverse and unique experiences with God.

Frederick Buechner wrote, "There is no event so



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commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not recognize him." God invites us to listen to our life and to see it for what it is—a mysterious adventure of meeting God. We each may encounter God, who is beyond our comprehension, in different or surprising ways. And so a good place to begin in seeking to know our mysterious God is to reflect on some questions:

- Who is God to you *now*?
- How has God revealed himself so far in your life?
- Where and when in your life do you feel closest to God?

### Pay Attention

The first time I read Isaiah 42:20 it blew me away. The prophet says, "You have seen many things, but you pay no attention; your ears are open, but you do not listen" (NIV)." I read it and immediately took it to heart; *Yes, I've seen many things, but have I paid no attention?* This passage spoke powerfully to me about how I want to approach my life.

We're each given experiences in our lives and I believe we're meant to reflect on them—to milk them for meaning and try to discover what God might have for us in them.

*How is God present in a certain experience? What might God be teaching me? How might God be changing me?*

Yet so often we're so rushed and busy that we simply don't pay attention. For example, a person might go on mission trip, to a fantastic concert, on a cross-country road trip, or have some other really amazing experience. But instead of reflecting and noticing where God was in that experience, she just adds it to her big, accumulating pile of experiences. Imagine for a moment that experiences are like yarn; this person's yarn-ball of experiences just keeps getting bigger and bigger throughout her life.



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But if we choose to pay attention in a spiritual sense, rather than merely accumulating experiences, we can take out our knitting needles and *knit* something out of those experiences. That is what experiences are for: to *make* us into people, to introduce us to God.

#### Learning to Knit

My friend Karen Mains often talks about finding God in a "myriad of transcendencies" every day. What a beautiful image! Finding, knowing, and experiencing God in this way takes a certain mindset: a perspective that is open, reflective, expecting. *How* we each begin to knit—how we move into a place of reflection and noticing—depends on each unique person.

Too often we make the mistake of turning to a generic prescription for spiritual growth. We prescribe things like, "Read your Bible and pray, go to church on Sunday, try a mission trip, memorize Scripture." We prescribe the spiritual disciplines. While I believe spiritual disciplines are important, they are *not generic*. Spiritual disciplines are not an aspirin we can pass out to people and say, "If you do this, you'll feel better and your relationship with God will grow."

We each have a unique relationship with God. Relationships are dynamic, growing, and changing; what *you're* doing at a certain point in your relationship with God may be different from what I am doing in my relationship with God, and that's okay. My spiritual practices need to be the ones that bring me to God; yours need to be the ones that take *you* to God. And so the way to reflect—to knit, per se—is for each person, in her own heart, to pay attention, to *listen* to God. And to discern, with God, what specific practices or disciplines will best allow her to do so.



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#### Even in Darkness

When we think about reflecting on our experiences and noticing God, often we think first of "mountain top" experiences—times in which we've experienced something amazing or have sensed God's presence in a meaningful way. But what about "valley" times? Periods in which God seems anything but close?

There are experiences of what I call "the presence of the absence of God." In these times we sense God as a God who hides himself; it may be that we cannot "feel" God or it seems God is distant from us. Being aware of that feeling of absence is *also* a way of knowing God.

Martin Luther talked about how our mysterious God, in some ways, is hidden from us—how sometimes we feel a dark side of God's love. And so it is crucial to know that even when a person is in a place of profound spiritual desolation, that too is a *real* place in the spiritual journey with God. God's hiddenness—what Christian mystics called "the cloud of unknowing"—is as real as it would be if you saw God's handwriting on the wall.

#### No Questions Asked

As we move toward living in a way in which we notice God and reflect on our lives, we can begin to know God better and draw closer to him. But at the same time, if someone were to ask me, "What do you know about God?" I'd say that I know *less* about God than I ever thought I knew years ago. A deeper knowing of God inevitably leads us to realize more and more how beyond us, how amazing, how mysterious God really is.

When my son was in college, he and I were having a vigorous discussion about God—about how difficult it is



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sometimes to know God, and about some of the tough issues like human suffering.

I asked my son, "What questions do you have for God? When you get to heaven and you have a chance to talk to God, what kinds of things would you want to ask him?"

He said, "I wouldn't ask God anything."

"What do you *mean* you wouldn't ask God anything?"

My son turned to look at me and said, "Mom, we're talking about *God*—the uncreated, immortal, all-powerful, Creator God. There's nothing to question before this Being. You just fall down on your face and say, 'Thank you for my life. Thank you for my life. Thank you for my life.'"

I think there's something to that. I don't care how smart a person is or how much theology someone has read—we must come to terms with the fact that our finite human minds simply cannot fully comprehend the infinite, immortal, invisible, only-wise God.

All we can do is bow.

**Adele Ahlberg Calhoun** is the author of **Invitations from God** and **The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook**. She is co-pastor with her husband of **Redeemer Community Church** in Boston, Massachusetts. **Kelli B. Trujillo** is managing editor of downloads for **TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN** and is the author of several books, including the **Flourishing Faith series** and **The Busy Mom's Guide to Spiritual Survival**. This article was published on **Today'sChristianWoman.com** in February 2012.



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### Reflect

- *Adele encourages us to find vitality in our relationship with God by heightening our awareness of God's faithful presence in our lives. Read **Psalm 139:1-12** and **Matthew 28:20**. How often are you "tuned in" to God's presence in your everyday life? How could focusing your attention more often on God's faithful presence change your mindset during normal experiences?*
- *Taking time to reflect—to "pay attention" to what God is doing in your life—can be a valuable spiritual practice. What best helps you "pay attention" to God? How might habits like journaling, discussing life circumstances with a friend, or simply pausing intentionally to evaluate your life help you better discern how God is interacting with you?*
- *This download is full of many ideas, insights, and challenges to help you consider how you can refresh and revitalize your relationship with God. In light of all you read, what's one key idea that really stands out to you? What's one step you plan to take in order to grow closer to Jesus?*



# Additional Resources

Dive deeper into these topics with the articles, books, and Bible study guides listed below.

## Articles

**Breathing Space**—*Three secrets to creating more room in your life for God*

By Keri Wyatt Kent

**The Gift of Boredom**—*My frantic pace cannot be helping my relationship with God.*

By JoHannah Reardon

**The Gift of Rest**—*How to embrace the blessings of the Sabbath.*

By Lynne M. Baab

**Having Ears, Do You Not Hear?**—*An ancient practice helps us stop merely studying the Bible and start listening to it in a way that transforms us.*

By Eugene Peterson, with Skye Jethani



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### Additional Resources

**I Am Enough**—*Adele Ahlberg Calhoun believes God is inviting us into his presence. Will we notice and accept the Holy One's invitations?*

By Kelli B. Trujillo

**I Have Called You Friend**—*Getting alone with God helps us listen to the rich, soul-making silence that is divine love.*

By Carmen Acevedo Butcher

**Mission: Quiet Suburban Life**—*I had committed to do anything for Christ—but was I willing to be ordinary?*

By Cathy Quock

**Off the Beaten Path**—*Think you don't have the time or ability to get quiet and alone? According to personal retreat director Brenda Jank, your life and faith depend on it.*

Interview by Ann Byle

## Books

**The Busy Mom's Guide to Spiritual Survival** by Kelli B. Trujillo (Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007). Take a fresh look at some classic spiritual practices through the eyes of the busiest people on earth: mothers of small children. You'll find out why these practical disciplines are so important for maintaining a vibrant spiritual life and discover realistic, doable ways to implement them in everyday life—with kids. As a bonus, you'll garner some age-appropriate ideas for fostering spiritual growth in the lives of your children.



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### Additional Resources

**Sacred Pathways: Discover Your Soul's Path to God** by Gary Thomas (Zondervan, 2002; 232 pages). Has your Christian walk become a spiritual rut? Maybe it's because you're trying to follow somebody else's path. Describing nine different temperaments, Thomas helps you more naturally express your relationship with God and follow the route he has designed you to travel.

**Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation** by Ruth Haley Barton (InterVarsity, 2006). Spiritual disciplines are activities that open us to God's transforming love and the changes that only God can bring about in our lives. Picking up on the monastic tradition of creating a "rule of life" that allows for regular space for the practice of the spiritual disciplines, *Sacred Rhythms* takes you more deeply into understanding seven key disciplines along with practical ideas for weaving them into everyday life. Each chapter includes exercises to help you begin the practices—individually and in a group context. The final chapter puts it all together in a way that will help you arrange your life for spiritual transformation.

**Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us** by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun (InterVarsity Press, 2005; 292 pages). Fasting. Solitude. Contemplative prayer. *Lectio divina*. Have you heard about these practices and wanted to try them? Have you wandered from one practice to another not sure quite what to do? Are you overwhelmed by all the to-dos of your spiritual life? In the *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* Adele Calhoun gives us directions for our journey toward intimacy with Christ. While the word *discipline* may make us want to run and hide, Calhoun shows how desires and discipline work together to lead us to the transformation we're longing for—the transformation only Christ can bring.



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### Additional Resources

**Soul Guide: Following Jesus as Spiritual Director** by Bruce Demarest (NavPress, 2002; 204 pages). Just as tour guides lead you to unfamiliar destinations, so spiritual mentors can point the way through life's myriad decisions. With Demarest's practical handbook, you'll gain direction from Jesus, Moses, Luther, and others; learn how to deal with confusion; rekindle your spiritual passion; develop deeper intimacy with God; and more.

## Bible Studies and Online Resources

**How to Grow Spiritually**—a 13-session Bible study course exploring how to pursue and intimate relationship with God, from [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com)

**Pursuing Spiritual Formation**—a 12-session Bible study course that explores a variety of spiritual disciplines, from [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com)

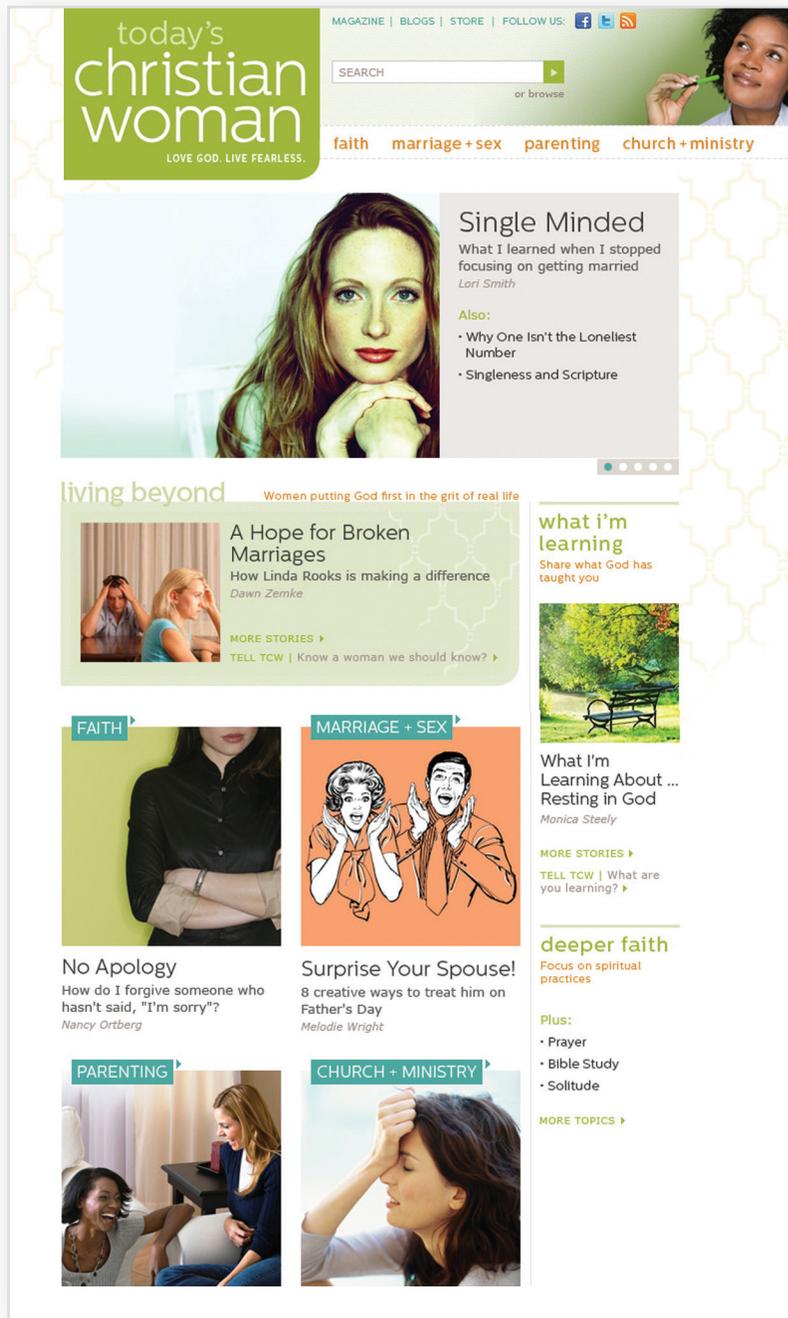
**Spiritual Disciplines**—a seven-session Bible study course that examines the rhythms and practices essential to a growing Christian life, from [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com)

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