



A Heart Aflame for God

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STUDY GUIDE

For Group or Personal Use



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How to Use This Guide:

Welcome to the beginner's discipleship guide for *A Heart Aflame for God*. This resource is designed to be used one-on-one or in a small group setting to help you build foundational, life-giving spiritual habits. The goal of this guide is not simply to finish a workbook, but to help you grow in your love for God and your communion with Him.

This curriculum is highly flexible. While reading Matthew Bingham's book alongside this guide is highly recommended, *reading the book is not strictly required to participate in the discussion*. Here is how to approach your time together:

The Dual-Track Approach While you will benefit vastly from having read the chapter, our plan is not to create a discipleship curriculum that is only for those who are big readers. Because we know that weeks get busy and reading capacities differ, this guide is built to serve you whether you finished the reading or not:

- **If you DID read the chapter:** Use the short paragraphs in each lesson as a quick recap. You will be able to bring the deeper insights, historical examples, and theological richness of the book into your conversation. Fill in your partner if they did not complete the reading.
- **If you DID NOT read the chapter:** Don't worry! Every lesson includes short summary paragraphs that define some core concepts, along with the primary Scripture passages you need. Simply read these paragraphs aloud together during your meeting to get up to speed. You will still be able to have a deep, meaningful conversation to help you grow in your spiritual formation.

The Meeting Format To get the most out of this guide, follow this simple pattern:

1. **Before You Meet (Preparation):** Take a few minutes during the week to read the designated Scripture passages. Fill out the sections labeled "**Personal Reflection**" on your own. This gives you time to honestly examine your own heart before sharing with someone else.
2. **When You Meet (Discussion):** *Start Here:* Begin your meeting by asking, "Did you get a chance to read the chapter this week? If so, what was your biggest takeaway?" *Review the Material:* Read the short summary paragraphs and the Scripture passages aloud together.
 - *Talk it Out:* Work through the questions labeled "Discuss" and share your Personal Reflection answers with one another.

Spiritual formation is a lifelong journey. The goal of your meetings is not to have perfect answers, but to point one another toward the grace and perfection of Jesus Christ.

Lesson 1: The Call to Formation – Keeping the Heart

Spiritual growth is an active, conscious pursuit.

Recommended: Read Chapter 1 of *A Heart Aflame for God* by Matthew Bingham

Part 1: The Expectation of Growth

The Christian life is not supposed to be static. When we are "born again," we are expected to grow and mature. While this growth is ultimately God's work in us, the Bible also calls us to put in active, intentional effort. We shouldn't just passively wait for God to change us, nor should we rely only on our own willpower to fix ourselves.

Read: 1 Peter 2:2 and 2 Corinthians 7:1

Discuss: The balance of passive and active growth.

Personal Reflection: Do you tend to lean toward passively waiting for God to fix your habits, or do you exhaust yourself trying to change through sheer willpower? How does seeing growth as a partnership change your approach?

Part 2: Guarding the Heart

The Bible commands us to "keep" or guard our hearts with all vigilance. In the Bible, the heart isn't just about emotions; it is the control center of our thoughts, desires, and choices. Guarding your heart doesn't just mean saying "no" to bad things. It means actively saying "yes" to God and maintaining a healthy spiritual appetite that prepares you for communion with Him.

Read: Proverbs 4:23 and Matthew 15:18-19

Discuss: The heart as the control center of a person.

Personal Reflection: What specific daily distractions, comforts, or worries tend to capture your attention and pull your focus away from God?

Part 3: What is Spiritual Formation?

"Spiritual formation" is the conscious, deliberate process of growing our thirst for God. It is not about finding our "true inner self" or achieving self-actualization, which the modern world often promotes. Instead, the goal of Christian spiritual formation is to look outside ourselves so we can become more like Jesus.

Read: Psalm 42:1-2 and Colossians 1:28

Discuss: The goal of conformity to Christ versus modern "self-discovery."

Personal Reflection: When you think about growing spiritually, what is your primary goal? Are you mostly looking for personal peace and self-improvement, or are you genuinely seeking to become more like Jesus?

Part 4: The Tools God Gave Us

God doesn't leave us to guess how to grow. He has given us specific tools—often called "means of grace"—like reading the Bible and praying. We don't need to invent new, complicated spiritual techniques or rely on physical objects to feel close to God. True growth happens slowly and steadily when we use the straightforward habits God has clearly outlined in Scripture.

Read: Psalm 1:2-3

Discuss: Relying on divinely appointed tools rather than inventing our own spiritual fads.

Personal Reflection: Have you ever felt pressure to try a new, complicated spiritual trend to feel close to God? What is one simple, basic habit (like reading a few verses or praying) you can focus on this week instead?

Part 5: The Cost of Growth

It is helpful to understand the difference between two concepts: *Sanctification* is God's broad work of changing us using everything in our lives—even tragedies, illnesses, and passive suffering. *Spiritual formation* is the specific, active effort we make to seek God daily. This active effort is hard work. It costs us the ease of endless entertainment and requires us to say no to our selfish impulses, but it is the path to a deeply satisfying life.

Read: Romans 8:28-29 and Philippians 2:12-13

Discuss: The difference between God using a hard circumstance to change you (sanctification) and your daily effort to seek Him (formation).

Personal Reflection: Look at your typical week. What is one specific area of "ease" or entertainment you might need to limit so that you have more time and energy to actively seek God?

Lesson 2: Spiritual Formation in a Reformation Key – Grace and the Gospel

Confronting our need for grace, understanding justification by faith, and finding our security in our union with Christ.

Recommended: Read Chapter 2 of *A Heart Aflame for God* by Matthew Bingham

Part 1: The Danger of "Build-Your-Own" Religion

We live in a culture that treats everything like a customizable playlist. It is tempting to do the same with faith, picking and choosing only the practices that make us feel good while ignoring the rest. However, true spiritual growth must be grounded in the reality of what God has actually said, starting with an honest look at our own brokenness. We cannot fix our own sinful nature through moral self-improvement.

Read: Jeremiah 17:9 and Ephesians 2:1-3

Discuss: The consumer mindset applied to faith.

Personal Reflection: In what ways do you catch yourself treating faith like a buffet—taking the parts of Christianity that are comforting while ignoring the parts that require sacrifice or obedience?

Part 2: The Perfect Rescue (Justification)

The good news of the gospel is that God doesn't wait for us to clean ourselves up. When we put our faith in Jesus, God takes Jesus's perfect, sinless record and credits it to our account. The theological word for this is *Justification*. It is a finished, perfect legal verdict where God declares us fully accepted and righteous—not because we are good, but because Jesus is good.

Read: Romans 3:21-24 and 2 Corinthians 5:21

Discuss: Justification by faith alone. We naturally want to earn our acceptance, but grace is a free gift.

Personal Reflection: How do you functionally try to "earn" your acceptance before God or others? (For example, pointing to how hard you work, your moral record, or how you compare to someone else).

Part 3: The Call to Change (Sanctification)

If God already accepts us completely, why should we try to obey Him? This brings us to a second word: *Sanctification*. Sanctification is God's ongoing, lifelong work *inside* of us to help us overcome sin and become more like Jesus. We obey God to be *sanctified* (to grow), not to be *justified* (to earn God's love). Mixing these up leads to either crushing guilt when we fail, or lazy entitlement when we succeed.

Read: Philippians 3:8-14

Discuss: The difference between our permanent status (justification) and our ongoing growth (sanctification).

Personal Reflection: Which trap do you fall into more often: feeling like God is mad at you when you don't read your Bible (legalism), or feeling like your daily behavior doesn't matter since you are already forgiven (license)?

Part 4: The Anchor: Union with Christ

How do we get both this perfect acceptance and the power to change? They both come from one amazing reality: *Union with Christ*. When you put your faith in Jesus, you are permanently joined to Him. Because you are connected, you receive a "double grace": His perfect record (which makes you accepted) and His spiritual power (which helps you grow). We work hard to grow *because* we are already secure in Him, not to *become* secure.

Read: Romans 6:3-11 and Galatians 2:20

Discuss: The "double grace" of union with Christ.

Personal Reflection: There will be weeks where you succeed in your spiritual habits and weeks where you fail. How does knowing your relationship with God is 100% secure in Christ change how you handle failure?

Part 5: Engaging the Heart Through the Mind

Because our growth is built on this secure foundation, the Reformed approach to growing focuses on studying God's Word rather than relying on complicated physical rituals. It pushes back against the idea that deep thinking or studying makes faith "dry". Instead, it insists that the way to the heart is *through* the mind. Learning deeply about who God is and what He has done is the fuel meant to set our affections on fire.

Read: Psalm 119:97-104 and Romans 12:2

Discuss: The connection between head and heart. As the Puritans said, "As the head acts, the heart glows."

Personal Reflection: Do you ever buy into the idea that studying the Bible or thinking deeply about God makes faith feel "academic"? What is one thing you have learned about God recently that actually made you love Him more?

Lesson 3: The First Point of the Triangle – Hearing from God

Scripture intake is the foundational source from which all other spiritual formation flows.

Recommended: Read Chapter 3 of *A Heart Aflame for God* by Matthew Bingham

Part 1: Moving Past "Quiet Time" Guilt

Many Christians feel guilty about their "quiet time"—either because they find it boring, or because they constantly fail to keep up with a daily routine. While we shouldn't be crushed by legalistic guilt over missing a day, the Bible is clear that engaging with God's Word is not just one optional spiritual discipline among many. It is the foundation of our entire spiritual life. As the Puritans noted, we cannot successfully "keep the heart" unless we first let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly. We lose our hearts to the world when we first lose the powerful impression of the Word.

Read: Psalm 1:1-3 and Proverbs 4:20-23

Discuss: The connection between "keeping the heart" (Proverbs 4:23) and keeping God's words (Proverbs 4:20-22). The Bible is not just a tool in the spiritual formation toolkit; it is the source from which all real communion with God flows.

Personal Reflection: What has been your past experience with a daily "quiet time"? Do you tend to view daily Bible reading as a burdensome chore you feel guilty about, or as a life-giving necessity?

Part 2: The Religion of the Book

During the Reformation, there was a massive shift away from a religion centered on physical rituals, images, and sacraments, toward a religion centered on the Bible. Some modern critics argue that focusing so heavily on reading and doctrine makes faith "cold" or overly intellectual, suggesting we need more images or sensory experiences to truly feel close to God. But the Reformers understood that the Holy Spirit uses the truth of Scripture to set our hearts on fire. We don't bypass the brain to get to the heart; instead, the mind serves to know the truth that fuels the fires of the heart.

Read: James 1:21 and Jeremiah 15:16

Discuss: The idea that Protestantism is a "religion of the book." The biblical pattern is that God shapes His people primarily by speaking to them. Deep theology and careful reading are not meant to freeze us, but to give our affections the proper fuel to burn brightly.

Personal Reflection: Have you ever felt that focusing on the Bible's words felt too dry, "academic," or intellectual? How does realizing that the mind is the gateway to the heart change your approach to studying the Bible?

Part 3: Read Frequently

To read the Bible in step with historic Christian practice, we must read it frequently. The classic advice is to begin the day with God, opening our spiritual eyes as soon as we open our physical eyes. While modern life feels incredibly busy, stressful, and exhausting, Christians in the past felt those same pressures. They simply recognized that the eternal state of their soul was more important than the "humdrum maintenance of everyday life," and intentionally carved out time—even if it meant waking up a little earlier or reading right before going to sleep.

Read: Colossians 3:16

Discuss: The reality of modern busyness and "burnout." Instead of using busyness as an excuse, older generations of believers viewed daily Bible reading as the necessary daily manna needed to survive the stress of life.

Personal Reflection: What are the primary distractions or "busy" tasks that currently crowd out your time to read the Bible? What is one practical adjustment you can make to your daily schedule to prioritize hearing from God?

Part 4: Read Actively

Quality is often better than quantity. Early Christians found that reading one chapter thoughtfully is far better than rushing through five chapters just to check a box. They read actively, which meant having a specific reading plan so they knew where to go, and often reading with a pen in hand. They would collect verses that comforted them, convicted them, or directed them, writing them down in notebooks so they could return to them in times of trouble or spiritual dryness.

Read: Psalm 119:11 and 1 Timothy 4:13

Discuss: Active vs. passive reading. The Bible is not meant to be skimmed like a social media feed. It requires focus, order, and intentionality to "suck the sweetness from the flowers as the bees do."

Personal Reflection: Think about your current Bible reading habits. Are you a passive reader or an active reader? What is one specific way you could start reading more actively (like using a pen, keeping a journal, or following a set plan) this week?

Part 5: Read Expectantly (The Reformation Triangle)

Perhaps the biggest reason Bible reading feels lifeless is that we approach it with too low an expectation. Reading Scripture is not just pronouncing words aloud; it is a "holy conference" or conversation with the living God. This is the first point of what we can call the "Reformation Triangle": Scripture (hearing from God), Meditation (reflecting on God), and Prayer (responding to God). When we open the Bible, we should expect God to speak, and we should pray for the Holy Spirit to awaken our hearts to hear Him.

Read: John 17:17 and Psalm 19:7

Discuss: The concept of a "holy conference." We often read the Bible like an ordinary textbook rather than a living encounter. How does treating the text as God's direct voice to us radically change our posture and reverence?

Personal Reflection: If you truly believed God was going to speak directly to you every time you opened the Bible, how would that change the way you approach your reading time? Write down a short, one-sentence prayer you can commit to praying right before you open your Bible each day.

Lesson 4: The Second Point of the Triangle – Reflecting on God

The lost art of Christian meditation—moving the truth of Scripture from the intellect to the affections.

Recommended: Read Chapter 4 of *A Heart Aflame for God* by Matthew Bingham

Part 1: The Meaning of Christian Meditation

In our modern world, meditation is incredibly popular. Apps like Headspace have pushed mindfulness into the mainstream, teaching people to focus on their breathing or posture to manage anxiety and clear their minds. However, biblical meditation is entirely different. While secular meditation often focuses on emptying the mind or manipulating a physical state, Reformed meditation is about filling the mind. It involves slowing down and deliberately directing our attention toward God and His promises in Scripture. We are not trying to empty ourselves; we are trying to think deeply about divine truth so that it stirs up God-honoring affections.

Read: Colossians 3:2 and Philippians 4:8

Discuss: The difference between emptying the mind (secular mindfulness) and "bending the mind" upon a spiritual object (Christian meditation). What we give our sustained attention to ultimately shapes our reality and reveals what we love.

Personal Reflection: When you hear the word "meditation," what normally comes to mind? How does redefining it as "serious thinking upon God" change your perspective on whether you can successfully do it?

Part 2: Guarding Against "Brains-on-a-Stick"

There is a danger in Protestant churches of treating discipleship purely as an intellectual project—what some have called a "brains-on-a-stick" Christianity. We can easily become narrowly focused on filling our heads with biblical knowledge, assuming that merely acquiring information will automatically

sanctify us. But the Puritans understood that bare knowledge is not enough; it has to travel to the heart. This is why they distinguished between *study* and *meditation*. Study is a work of the brain to find out a truth; meditation is a work of the heart for the spiritual improvement of that truth. Study brings the meat, but meditation digests it.

Read: James 2:19 and 1 Corinthians 8:1

Concept to Discuss: The vital difference between knowing facts about God and having those facts transform your affections. Meditation is the "middle duty" between reading the Word and praying—it is the bridge that moves truth from the head to the heart.

Personal Reflection: Think about your own spiritual life. Do you tend to read the Bible just to acquire new information or check off a box? How might your daily devotions change if you spent less time reading and more time digesting a single truth?

Part 3: Slowing Down in an Age of Speed

We live in the "Great Acceleration." The pace of our digital world is relentless, whether we are quickly clearing notifications on an iPad, skimming infinite social media feeds, or binge-watching a fast-paced show like *Stranger Things*. Because we are so accustomed to speed and efficiency, it can feel agonizingly difficult to slow down. But godly meditation cannot be rushed. It requires us to block out the urgent and the new so that we can give our full attention to what is ancient and eternally significant.

Read: Psalm 119:103

Discuss: How the hyper-paced digital world rewires our brains for distraction. We are increasingly "speed-reading life" and absorbing less. Meditation forces us to hit the brakes and savor God's promises like honey.

Personal Reflection: In what specific ways does the fast pace of modern life—or your digital habits—hinder your ability to sit quietly with God's Word? What is one boundary you can set this week to create a slower, quieter space for reflection?

Part 4: The Bellows of the Soul

The Puritans frequently used fireplace imagery to describe meditation. Anyone who has built a campfire on the Oregon coast knows that when the flames die down to gray ash, the heat and life are still there in the coals. You just need to stir the embers and blow oxygen on them to get the fire roaring again. In the same way, the "sparkles of grace" are always present in the heart of a believer, but our affections often grow cold. Meditation acts as the bellows of the soul. By intentionally thinking about God's promises, we blow oxygen onto the dying embers of our hearts until the flame of love is rekindled.

Read: Psalm 119:35-36

Concept to Discuss: The reality of spiritual coldness. It is normal for our affections to cool, which is why we must actively stir them up. We don't wait passively for a feeling to arrive; we apply the bellows of meditation until the heart grows warm.

Personal Reflection: Looking at the verses you've read so far (or something you've recently learned about God), what specific truth acts like 'oxygen' for your soul when you feel spiritually cold?

Part 5: How to Meditate (Don't Overthink It)

If you are looking for a highly complex, mystical set of rules for meditation, you won't find one in the Bible. The Puritans avoided strict step-by-step methods because they knew meditation is simply slowing down to think about how God's truth applies to your own life. You take a passage of Scripture, grab hold of a thought, and refuse to let it go. You look at it from different angles, compare it to other verses, and ask how it challenges your sins or secures your hopes.

Read: Psalm 1:1-3

Discuss: The danger of overthinking meditation or assuming it is only for the "spiritual elite." The goal is application. John Ball said, "Application is the life of meditation." You are just asking: "What does this truth mean for me today?"

Personal Reflection: Take a single verse that stood out to you recently. Write it down, and then write out three different ways that specific verse applies directly to your current fears, hopes, or struggles.

Lesson 5: The Third Point of the Triangle – Responding to God

Prayer as an earnest, thoughtful, and heartfelt conversation with God that is shaped directly by Scripture.

Recommended: Read Chapter 5 of *A Heart Aflame for God* by Matthew Bingham

Part 1: The Breathing of the Soul (What is Prayer?)

Prayer is simply talking to God. For a Christian, prayer should be as natural and essential as breathing. It is not just a religious ritual or a performance; it is a real, intimate conversation with a God who is actually there, who listens, and who promises to answer. Because God has adopted us as His children, we don't have to hide our true feelings from Him. We can bring Him our praises, our thanks, our frustrations, and our needs, trusting that He delights to give good gifts to those who ask.

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 and Psalm 34:15-17

Discuss: Prayer as the "breathing of the soul." If we truly believe God is personal and actively involved in our lives, talking to Him should become our natural reflex in all circumstances. If you take away a person's breath, they die; if a Christian stops praying, their spiritual vitality withers.

Personal Reflection: How do you currently view prayer? Does it feel more like a religious chore, a last resort in emergencies, or a natural, ongoing conversation with a Father?

Part 2: Two Kinds of Prayer

Because prayer is a conversation, it takes different forms depending on the moment. Older generations of Christians often talked about two kinds of prayer. First, there is "solemn" or settled prayer—the focused times you intentionally set aside to talk to God without distraction (like during your morning reading). Second, there is "occasional" or spontaneous prayer—the short, quick prayers you pray throughout the day while driving, working, or facing a sudden challenge. Both are necessary.

Spontaneous prayers keep us connected to God all day, but they are fueled by our deeper, focused times of quiet prayer.

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:17 and Nehemiah 2:4

Concept to Discuss: "Praying without ceasing." You don't have to be in a quiet room with your eyes closed to pray. God wants us to secretly lift our hearts to Him in the middle of our ordinary, busy lives.

Personal Reflection: Which type of prayer comes more naturally to you right now: setting aside focused time, or praying quick prayers throughout the day? How can you grow in the area that is currently weaker?

Part 3: Thoughtful and Heartfelt

When we pray, God wants both our minds and our hearts engaged. We must be *thoughtful*—using our minds to speak intelligible words, rather than trying to empty our minds to reach a mystical "wordless" state. God is a God who speaks, and He made us to communicate with words. We must also be *heartfelt*. Jesus warned against mechanically repeating empty phrases just to sound spiritual. Our prayers must be sincere. It is far better to pray a short, honest prayer from the heart than a long, eloquent prayer that you don't actually mean.

Read: Matthew 6:7-8 and 1 Corinthians 14:15

Discuss: The danger of "going through the motions." The Reformers warned that merely saying words is not the same thing as praying. True prayer requires the Holy Spirit to align our sincere inner desires with the words we are speaking outwardly.

Personal Reflection: Do you ever find yourself repeating the same phrases in prayer without actually thinking about what they mean? What is one way you can stay more mentally and emotionally engaged when you talk to God?

Part 4: Tethered to Scripture

How do we know what to pray for? We don't just guess; we let the Bible set the agenda. Because God spoke to us first in His Word, our prayers should be a direct response to what He has said. This means we pray His promises back to Him. The ultimate template for this is the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus gave us to show us exactly what kinds of requests God loves to answer. When our prayers are tightly tethered to Scripture, we can be confident that we are praying according to God's will rather than just asking for our own selfish desires.

Read: Matthew 6:9-13 and 1 John 5:14-15

Concept to Discuss: Praying the Bible. If you ever run out of things to say to God, simply open the Bible, read a verse, and turn that verse into a prayer. This ensures we are subjecting our will to God's, rather than trying to bend God's will to ours.

Personal Reflection: Pick one of the specific requests in the Lord's Prayer (for example, "give us this day our daily bread" or "forgive us our debts"). How can you turn that specific request into a personal, detailed prayer for your life today?

Part 5: Completing the Triangle

We have now completed the "Reformation Triangle," which is the engine of our spiritual growth. God speaks to us (Scripture), we digest and think deeply about what He said (Meditation), and we respond back to Him (Prayer). It is a continuous, living dialogue. Reading brings the wood, meditation sparks the flame, and prayer is the heat rising back up to God. If you remove any one of these three sides, the triangle collapses, and our communion with God grows cold.

Read: Psalm 27:8 and Romans 10:17

Discuss: The interconnectedness of the disciplines. If your prayer life feels dry or you don't know what to say, the solution is usually to go back to reading and meditating on Scripture to provide fresh fuel for the fire.

Personal Reflection: Looking at the complete "Reformation Triangle," which of the three areas (Scripture, Meditation, Prayer) do you feel is currently the weakest in your own life? What is one practical step you can take this week to strengthen it?

Lesson 6: Looking Inward – The Practice of Self-Examination

Autobiographical excavation and catching "creeping sin" while reading the story of our lives through God's providence.

Recommended: Read Chapter 6 of *A Heart Aflame for God* by Matthew Bingham

Part 1: The Iceberg of the Heart

There is a lot going on under the surface of our lives. When we think about our own sin, we usually focus on our visible actions or the mistakes that other people can see. However, the human heart is deep and often deceitful. Theologian Francis Schaeffer compared the human heart to an iceberg—one-tenth is visible above the water, but nine-tenths of our motivations, fears, and creeping idolatries are hidden below the surface. Before we can genuinely grow, the Holy Spirit has to help us look inward and see what is driving us. Self-examination is the biblical tool we use to bravely explore those depths.

Read: Jeremiah 17:9 and Galatians 6:4

Discuss: The "iceberg" analogy. Much of what drives our behavior is hidden below the surface. We are often separated from ourselves and unaware of our own hidden depths and motivations.

Personal Reflection: Think about a recent overreaction or moment of frustration. What was "under the surface" of that reaction? What hidden fear, pride, or desire for control was actually driving it?

Part 2: The Battle Against Indwelling Sin

Even after we become Christians and are perfectly justified by faith, the pull of sin remains a reality in our lives. We are no longer ruled by sin, but we still have to fight it daily. Older generations of Christians called this "mortification," which simply means putting sin to death. You cannot fight an enemy you refuse to look at. Self-examination helps us identify our specific, personal vulnerabilities so we can guard against them. We all have different weaknesses; what tempts one person to anger might tempt another to shrink back in fear.

Read: Romans 8:13 and Romans 7:21-25

Concept to Discuss: Indwelling sin. We shouldn't be surprised that we still struggle. The goal of self-examination is to know our unique weaknesses so we can fight them effectively and avoid the specific byways where our own hearts are most prone to wander.

Personal Reflection: We all have different vulnerabilities. If you had to identify the specific areas your heart is most prone to wander toward when you are stressed or tired (e.g., escaping into video games, seeking comfort in food, growing irritable), what would they be?

Part 3: Catching "Creeping Sins" Early

Self-examination acts as a special preservative against sin. It functions like an early warning system. Small, seemingly harmless compromises can quickly grow into destructive habits. A ship with a small leak is much easier to empty at the very beginning than it is after it has taken on massive amounts of water. Examining our hearts regularly helps us catch these "creeping sins" before they take deep root. Major moral failures rarely happen overnight; they almost always begin with small, secret shifts in our affections and boundaries that we failed to examine.

Read: James 1:14-15 and Psalm 19:12

Discuss: The "slippery slope" of sin. Catching a sinful impulse early on—when it is just a passing thought or a minor compromise—saves us from the devastating consequences of letting it fully grow.

Personal Reflection: Is there a specific area of your life where a small, seemingly "harmless" compromise has slowly started to creep in? How can addressing it honestly today prevent a much larger struggle later?

Part 4: Reading the Story of Your Life

Self-examination isn't just about finding sin; it is also about finding God's grace. It means looking back at the story of your life and tracing God's "providence"—His sovereign, loving care over every detail. When we develop a "sanctified memory," we realize that our lives are not random. God is the author of our stories. Remembering how He has provided for us in the past—like orchestrating the exact circumstances for us to meet our spouse, or keeping us safe during a sudden storm while camping on the coast—gives us profound hope for the future.

Read: Psalm 59:16 and Psalm 143:5

Discuss: God's providence. Our lives are a cohesive story written by God, not a random series of chaotic events. Examining our past helps us see His faithful hand, turning our anxieties into gratitude.

Personal Reflection: Look back at a difficult or confusing season in your past. With the benefit of hindsight, how can you see God's "providence" or hidden hand caring for you or growing you during that specific time?

Part 5: Keeping It Gospel-Centered

We must be careful that self-examination does not turn into morbid self-absorption. We live in a highly individualized culture that loves to obsess over self-discovery. But biblical self-examination is totally different. The goal is not to stare endlessly at our own belly buttons or sink into despair over our failures. Instead, we use God's Word (like the Ten Commandments) as a mirror to show us our need, and then that need immediately drives us to look at Jesus. Robert Murray M'Cheyne famously advised that for every one look at yourself, you should take ten looks at Christ.

Read: Psalm 119:59-60 and Hebrews 12:1-2

Discuss: The balance between looking inward and looking upward. Self-examination should always lead to confession, which then leads to the joyful assurance of our total forgiveness in Christ. It ends in peace, not panic.

Personal Reflection: When you examine your own heart and notice your failures, do you tend to get stuck in guilt and self-condemnation? How does remembering that you are perfectly united to Christ free you to look honestly at your sin without falling into despair?

Lesson 7: Looking Outward – Encountering God in Creation

Encountering God in creation by reading the "book of nature" through the "spectacles of Scripture."

Recommended: Read Chapter 7 of *A Heart Aflame for God* by Matthew Bingham

Part 1: Nature as a Pointer, Not a God

In our modern, secular age, many people still feel a deep spiritual connection to the natural world. It has become increasingly popular to treat nature itself as a kind of religion—worshipping the environment, finding "healing" in the forest, or viewing the universe as a mystical web of life. But while the modern world worships nature as a god, the Christian views nature as a *pointer* to God. The creation is not divine; it is the masterpiece of the Divine Artist. When we look at a towering mountain or a quiet stream, we are not meant to stop and worship the water or the rock. We are meant to let that beauty draw our thoughts and affections upward to the One who spoke it into existence.

Read: Romans 1:20 and Psalm 19:1

Discuss: The difference between pantheism (believing God *is* the universe) and biblical Christianity (believing God *created* the universe). When we view creation correctly, it becomes a massive theater that displays God's eternal power and divine nature.

Personal Reflection: Have you ever experienced a moment outdoors where you felt a deep sense of awe or peace? How does knowing that a personal Creator designed that specific moment change the way you experience it?

Part 2: Reflecting God's Glory

The Reformer John Calvin used several metaphors to describe how creation reveals God. He called it a mirror, a painting, and a beautiful garment. When you look in a mirror, you are not actually looking at yourself directly; you are seeing a reflection. In the same way, because God is invisible, He has clothed Himself in the fabric of the physical world so that we can see sparks of His glory. A vibrant sunset or

the vastness of the ocean are ways God makes His invisible majesty visible to our human eyes. We enjoy the beauty of the earth because it gives us an indirect, mediated taste of the ultimate beauty we will one day see face-to-face in heaven.

Read: Psalm 104:1-2 and Revelation 22:4

Concept to Discuss: Creation as God's "garment." God meets us in the fabric of the physical world. This means that enjoying a beautiful day outside is not a distraction from spiritual things; it is a profound opportunity for worship.

Personal Reflection: When you look at the natural world, do you usually just see the physical object (a tree, a bird, a cloud), or do you consciously see it as a reflection of God's creativity? What is one way you can train your mind to look "through" the creation to the Creator this week?

Part 3: The School of Nature

Nature doesn't just display God's beauty; it also teaches God's truth. The Bible constantly uses the natural world as a school to instruct us. Proverbs tells the lazy person to go watch how hard the ant works. Jesus tells us to look at the birds of the air to learn about trusting God for our daily needs. The Puritans took this very seriously, looking for spiritual lessons in everyday things. When John Flavel looked at a massive oak tree, he didn't just see wood and leaves. He remembered that this giant tree started as a tiny acorn, which reminded him never to despise the days of small beginnings in his own spiritual growth.

Read: Proverbs 6:6-8 and Matthew 6:26-30

Discuss: The idea that every creature can be a preacher to us. God designed the world with order and intention. We don't need to invent new doctrines, but we can use the physical world to vividly illustrate the truths we already know from Scripture.

Personal Reflection: Think about a common element of nature you see every day (a houseplant, a rainstorm, a pet, the sunrise). What is one simple spiritual lesson or biblical truth that object could illustrate for you?

Part 4: A Groaning Creation

While it is easy to see God's glory in a perfect summer day, we must also remember that we live in a fallen world. The creation is cursed by sin; it contains decay, violence, thorns, and destructive storms. If we only look for God in the "sentimentally sweet" parts of nature, we are not reading the book of nature truthfully. Even the harsh realities of the physical world teach us theology. The rot of a fallen log or the terrifying power of a thunderstorm remind us of God's judgment, our own frailty, and the reality that this broken world is groaning for the day when Jesus returns to make all things new.

Read: Genesis 3:17-19 and Romans 8:19-22

Concept to Discuss: The "bittersweet" reality of nature. Death and decay in the natural world should strip us of our illusions that this present earth is our final home, stirring up a deep longing for the New Creation.

Personal Reflection: How does observing the darker, harsher, or decaying parts of nature actually help strengthen your Christian hope for the future?

Part 5: Getting Outside

If we want to pursue spiritual formation through encountering God's creation, we cannot even begin until we make ourselves go outside. It is easy to stay inside our climate-controlled homes, absorbed in our screens, but we must intentionally step into the natural world. Whether pitching a tent at Nehalem Bay or walking the trails around Fort Stevens, these environments become the arena for our meditation. Just as Christians in the past retreated to the woods for prayer, we can designate specific times to leave the digital noise behind, observe the Creator's handiwork firsthand, and read the book of nature using the spectacles of Scripture.

Read: Psalm 8:3-4 and Psalm 147:8

Discuss: "Nature-deficit disorder." We live in a society that is largely disconnected from the rhythms of the natural world. Carving out time to simply be outside and observe God's creation is a deliberate, necessary spiritual discipline.

Personal Reflection: Look at your schedule for the upcoming week. When can you carve out 20 minutes to unplug, step outside, and intentionally meditate on the Creator through His creation?

Lesson 8: Looking to One Another – Christian Relationships

Corporate formation and the absolute necessity of Christian community and intentional spiritual friendship.

Recommended: Read Chapter 8 of *A Heart Aflame for God* by Matthew Bingham

Part 1: The Danger of "Bowling Alone"

In the year 2000, a sociologist wrote a famous book called *Bowling Alone*, which documented how modern society is pulling apart. People are far less likely to join clubs, host dinners, or even bowl in leagues than they used to. Today, we are in the middle of a "friendship recession" where many people feel profoundly lonely and isolated. For the Christian, this cultural trend is not just sad; it is spiritually dangerous. From the very beginning of the Bible, God declared that "it is not good that the man should be alone." We were created for connection. A healthy Christian spirituality cannot be practiced in isolation; it must be cultivated in community with others.

Read: Genesis 2:18 and Hebrews 10:24-25

Discuss: The decline of community in modern life. It is very easy to slip into "solo Christianity," treating our faith as a purely private, individual matter. But the Bible commands us to actively stir one another up to love and good works.

Personal Reflection: Looking at your own life, do you feel the effects of the modern "friendship recession"? How often do you actively pursue community with other believers versus simply focusing on your own private walk with God?

Part 2: Formation in the Home

For most people, the very first place where spiritual formation happens is inside the home. The relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and siblings are meant to be a primary engine for our growth. The Puritans believed that the home should be a "garden of God." Marriage is not just for companionship; it is meant to unite two people in duty and help them bear each other's burdens. Likewise, parents have a God-given responsibility to guide their children toward godliness by opening the Bible together and modeling a life of faith.

Read: Ephesians 5:25-27 and Deuteronomy 6:6-7

Concept to Discuss: The home as a site of formation. The home is not just a place where we sleep and watch TV; it is where our character is most deeply tested and shaped.

Personal Reflection: Think about the environment in your home right now. Is it a place that naturally encourages spiritual growth, or do you treat it as a "neutral zone" where faith is rarely discussed?

Part 3: The Church Family

While the biological family is incredibly important, the Bible teaches that our most significant spiritual family is the local church. When you become a Christian, you are adopted into a worldwide family of brothers and sisters. The Apostle Paul compares the church to a human body: just as an eye or a hand makes no sense on its own, an individual Christian only functions properly when connected to the rest of the body. Furthermore, Christian character is often *caught* as much as it is *taught*. We need to be around mature believers so we can see what a holy, self-denying, heavenly-minded life actually looks like in practice.

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and Romans 12:4-5

Discuss: The balance between the individual and the collective. We live in a culture that prizes radical individualism, but the New Testament assumes that every believer is deeply embedded in the life of a local congregation.

Personal Reflection: If someone looked at your involvement with other Christians, would they say you treat church more like a movie theater (where you go to consume a service) or a family (where you contribute and share burdens)? What is one way you can contribute to the body this month?

Part 4: The Art of "Conference" (Holy Conversation)

One of the primary ways we grow is through honest, serious, God-honoring conversations with other believers. The Puritans called this the practice of "conference." Too often, our conversations with other Christians never go deeper than the weather, sports, or work. While small talk is fine, we miss out on massive spiritual blessings when we fail to talk about our faith. "Conference" means intentionally sharing our struggles, encouraging each other with Scripture, and asking real questions about the state of our souls. Like sticks in a firepit, we lose our heat when we are scattered, but we burst into a great flame when we are gathered together.

Read: Ephesians 4:15 and Proverbs 27:17

Discuss: Moving past small talk. It takes intentionality to transition a conversation from everyday topics to spiritual realities. "Holy conference" is how we apply the Bible's wisdom to the complex, messy situations in our lives.

Personal Reflection: Who is someone in your life that you can have a "holy conference" with? What is one specific, spiritually focused question you could ask them the next time you meet?

Part 5: Winter Friends vs. Summer Friends

Not every relationship will have the same level of depth, and that is okay. But we all need a few close, intentional Christian friends. Older writers warned against "summer friends"—people who are happy to be around you when life is easy but vanish when things get hard. What we desperately need are "winter friends"—people who stand by us in adversity, hold us accountable, pray with us, and push us toward Jesus. The ultimate example of this is the friendship between David and Jonathan in the Old Testament. In our busy, fast-paced world, building this kind of friendship requires intentional action, like setting up a recurring monthly breakfast to check in on each other's spiritual health.

Read: 1 Samuel 18:1-3 and Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Discuss: The necessity of intentional friendship. Good friendships don't happen by accident; they require time, vulnerability, and effort to overcome the natural drift of our busy lives.

Personal Reflection: Do you have any "winter friends" in your life right now? If not, what is one intentional step you can take this month to begin cultivating a deeper friendship with another believer?

Lesson 9: What about the Body? – Connecting the Spiritual and the Physical

Understanding the relationship between our physical bodies, our minds, and our spiritual growth without falling into empty rituals or "brains-on-a-stick" Christianity.

Recommended: Read Chapter 9 of *A Heart Aflame for God* by Matthew Bingham

Part 1: Brains on a Stick?

Because the Reformed tradition places such a heavy emphasis on reading the Bible, listening to sermons, and studying theology, it faces a unique danger: treating humans as if they were just "brains on a stick." It is easy to accidentally assume that discipleship is just a matter of downloading the right facts into a person's head. But human beings are not fleshy computers; we are fundamentally driven by what we *love*. If our spiritual formation only targets the intellect and fails to capture our desires, our imagination, and our affections, it will result in a dry, lifeless faith.

Read: Matthew 22:37 and Psalm 37:4

Discuss: Humans as "lovers" versus "thinkers." True Christianity is not just about getting your doctrinal facts straight; it is about your heart being reoriented to love what God loves.

Personal Reflection: Have you ever experienced a season where you knew a lot of facts about God in your head, but felt completely cold toward Him in your heart? What does that disconnect feel like?

Part 2: The Danger of Empty Rituals

To fix this "head-only" problem, some modern writers argue that the way to the heart is through the *body*. They suggest we need more physical rituals—like kneeling, lighting candles, or smelling incense—to truly feel close to God. However, history gives us a strong warning here. Before the Reformation, the church relied heavily on physical rituals. The Mass was performed in Latin (which most people didn't understand), and the focus was entirely on standing in the right place, looking at

the right object, and repeating the right motions. The Reformers pushed back, realizing that physical movement without mental understanding does not change the heart.

Read: Matthew 15:8-9 and Romans 10:17

Concept to Discuss: Physical actions do not automatically create spiritual growth. You can go through a highly physical, sensory worship service and still have a heart that is far from God. Faith comes from hearing and understanding the Word of Christ.

Personal Reflection: Do you ever catch yourself relying on a specific physical environment (like a dimly lit room or emotional music) to "feel" spiritual, rather than relying on the truth of God's Word?

Part 3: The Real Way to the Heart

While physical rituals like learning to swing a golf bat or type on a keyboard train our physical muscle memory, they don't train our spiritual affections. You do not have to move your body to be deeply moved in your soul. Think about sitting perfectly still in a movie theater—your body isn't moving, yet a powerful story can move you to tears, shape your imagination, and change the way you view the world. The real cure for a dry, "brains-on-a-stick" faith is not inventing new physical rituals. The cure is using the discipline of *meditation* to let the incredible story of the Gospel actually sink in and set our imaginations on fire.

Read: Colossians 3:1-2

Discuss: How words shape the heart. A powerful story or a deep truth can profoundly change our desires without us ever moving a muscle. The Holy Spirit uses the Word to transform our inner affections.

Personal Reflection: What is one specific thing you have learned about Jesus recently that captures your imagination and makes you genuinely love Him more when you think deeply about it?

Part 4: Honoring the Body God Gave Us

Even though we reject the idea that physical rituals are the "magic key" to spiritual growth, we must still remember that God created us with physical bodies, and our bodies matter. We don't need to invent *new* rituals, but we should deeply value the physical signs God actually gave us: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, taking care of our physical bodies profoundly impacts our spiritual lives. If you are chronically sleep-deprived, eating poorly, and never exercising, your spiritual life will suffer because your physical body is exhausted.

Read: 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 and Psalm 103:13-14

Concept to Discuss: We are embodied creatures. God knows our frame and remembers that we are dust. Sometimes the most spiritual thing a person can do is go to sleep, knowing that God is awake and ruling the universe.

Personal Reflection: How does your current physical health (sleep habits, diet, exercise) impact your ability to focus on God, resist temptation, or show patience to others?

Part 5: Unplugging the Imagination

If we want to connect our minds to our hearts, we have to give our imaginations room to breathe. The modern world is aggressively hostile to deep thought. A constant diet of glowing screens, social media feeds, and binge-watching trains our brains to be distracted and shallow. If we are constantly staring at screens, we will lose the capacity to sit quietly and meditate on the glory of God. To reconnect the spiritual and the physical, we need to physically put our phones away, embrace solitude, and allow the quietness to help our minds focus on eternity.

Read: Psalm 46:10 and Romans 12:2

Discuss: The physical environment of our devices. Screen time disrupts our capacity for serious reflection. We must physically distance ourselves from distractions to spiritually draw near to God.

Personal Reflection: Look at your daily screen time habits. What is one specific, physical boundary you can set with your phone or devices this week to create a quiet space for your imagination to reflect on God?

Lesson 10: When Things Go Wrong – Wrestling With Spiritual Weakness

Navigating seasons of spiritual dryness, physical exhaustion, and discouragement by leaning on Christ and persisting in the ordinary habits of faith.

Recommended: Read Chapter 10 of *A Heart Aflame for God* by Matthew Bingham

Part 1: The Reality of the Struggle

If you follow God, at some point you will hit a wall. You will wake up and not want to read your Bible. Your prayers will feel like they are bouncing off the ceiling. You might even feel a deep, unexplainable sadness or distance from God. Many people assume that if they feel this way, they must be doing something wrong, or worse, that they aren't real Christians. But history shows that spiritual struggle is a normal, expected part of the Christian life. Even giants of the faith, like the great preacher Charles Spurgeon, wrestled with severe depression and spiritual darkness. A lack of feeling does not mean a lack of faith. As the Puritans used to say, sometimes grace in our hearts is like a fire in the embers—the bright flame has gone out, but the heat and life are still there, waiting to be stirred.

Read: Psalm 42:5 and Mark 9:24

Discuss: The normality of spiritual numbness. The Bible never promises a Christian life of uninterrupted emotional highs. God's children often walk through dark valleys where they have to cry out, "I believe; help my unbelief."

Personal Reflection: Have you ever felt guilty or panicked because your faith felt dry, numb, or emotionless? How does it change your perspective to know that this is a normal part of the Christian journey?

Part 2: Diagnosing the Drought (Sin and Worldliness)

When we feel spiritually dry, we should start by doing an honest diagnostic check. Sometimes the cause is straightforward: unrepentant sin. If we are actively living in a known sin, or holding onto bitterness

toward a friend, we are running away from God, so it makes sense that we feel distant from Him. Another common cause is "creeping worldliness." As one older writer put it, "Dead fish swim down the stream, living fish swim against it." If we spend all our time passively absorbing the values, anxieties, and entertainment of modern culture, our spiritual appetite will naturally wither.

Read: 1 John 2:15-16 and Proverbs 6:16-19

Concept to Discuss: *The link between our daily choices and our spiritual appetite.* We cannot gorge ourselves on the world's "junk food" all week and expect to have a healthy appetite for God's Word on Sunday.

Personal Reflection: Take an honest inventory of your life right now. Is there a specific, hidden sin you are tolerating, or a worldly habit (like endless scrolling or prioritizing wealth) that is quietly choking out your desire for God?

Part 3: The Body and the Brain

Not all spiritual dryness is caused by sin. Sometimes, the problem is physical. We are embodied creatures, meaning our physical bodies and our spiritual souls are deeply connected. If you are chronically sleep-deprived, eating poorly, burnt out at work, or dealing with clinical depression, your spiritual life will feel heavy and dark. Older writers called this "melancholy," recognizing that a struggling body makes the soul view everything through dark glasses. As theologian D.A. Carson noted, sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is not to pray all night, but to simply get a good night's sleep.

Read: Psalm 103:13-14

Discuss: God knows our frame. He remembers that we are made of dust. We can't separate our spiritual health from our physical and mental health.

Personal Reflection: Look at your current physical habits—your sleep schedule, your stress levels, your physical activity. How might your physical exhaustion or burnout be masquerading as a "spiritual" crisis right now?

Part 4: Obedience Over Feeling

When you are in a season of spiritual dryness, what should you do? Our modern culture tells us to only do things that feel authentic and emotionally satisfying. If we applied that to the gym, we would never work out! The Christian response to spiritual numbness is simple, but frustrating to hear: *press on*. You must read your Bible even when it feels like a dry textbook. You must pray even when you don't feel like it. You do not wait to pray until you find the feeling; you pray in obedience until the feeling eventually returns.

Read: Psalm 55:22

Discuss: *Doing the duty without the feeling.* We naturally want a quick fix, a secret formula, or an emotional high to cure our dryness. But God usually heals us through the slow, unglamorous persistence of putting one foot in front of the other. When you don't "feel" God's presence, is your natural instinct to withdraw and stop trying, or to press in harder?

Personal Reflection: What is one basic spiritual habit you need to simply push through and do this week, regardless of how you feel?

Part 5: Getting Outside Yourself

When we are struggling, our natural tendency is to look entirely inward. We stare at our failures, our lack of emotion, and our persistent sins until we spiral into total despair. The cure for this spiritual quicksand is to get outside of yourself. Literally, go outside—take a walk in the woods and observe God's creation, or grab coffee with a Christian friend who can encourage you. Figuratively, you must stop staring at your own heart and look at Jesus. Robert Murray M'Cheyne famously advised, "For every one look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ." Our standing with God is based on Christ's perfect record, not our emotional performance.

Read: Hebrews 12:1-2

Discuss: *The danger of morbid introspection.* Self-examination is healthy, but self-obsession is paralyzing. Peace comes not from finding perfection inside yourself, but from resting in the perfection of Jesus. When you evaluate your own spiritual life, do you spend more time looking at your own failures, or looking at Christ's forgiveness?

Personal Reflection: Write down three specific things about Jesus's character or promises that you can choose to "look at" today instead of your own struggles.
