

SACRED PATHWAYS

NINE WAYS TO CONNECT WITH GOD

STUDY GUIDE | FIVE SESSIONS

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Sacred Pathways Study Guide

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CONTENTS

Introduction: The Longing of the Soul. v

SESSION 1: The Journey of the Soul

(Introduction to the Pathways) 1

SESSION 2: The Pathways of Wonder

(Naturalist, Sensate, and Traditionalist). 17

SESSION 3: The Pathways of Contemplation

(Intellectual, Ascetic, and Contemplative) 31

SESSION 4: The Pathways of Action

(Caregiver, Activist, and Enthusiast) 49

SESSION 5: Tending the Garden of the Soul

(How the Pathways Apply to Your Life) 63

Sacred Pathways Assessment 79

Leader's Guide 87



INTRODUCTION

THE LONGING OF THE SOUL

We are designed to connect with our God. There is something deep in every human being, even those who don't recognize it, that longs to know their Creator and the lover of their soul.

The One who formed us in our mother's womb and knew us before we breathed the air of this world is eternally relational. God exists in perpetual community as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet he still desires to be close to his children. He delights to be in relationship with us.

We feel this. We sense there is a part of us that hungers and thirsts for intimacy with our Maker. And when we get a taste of God's presence, we hunger for more. When God draws near us, we find ourselves looking for time and space to be with the One who cherishes us.

But here is the dilemma. Religious professionals seek to show us how to relate to our Creator. Faithful pastors, Sunday school teachers, and church leaders design a pathway for discipleship that they believe every Christian can walk. These individuals are well-meaning and kind, but they forget that a one-size-all approach almost never-fits-all. There is not one plan for discipleship. There is not a single pathway that *every* person should walk.

Have you ever met a parent who said, with a baffled look in his or her eyes, “I don’t know what happened . . . I raised all my kids the same, but they turned out so different”? We know that every child is unique. God makes each one delightfully different. Ask the parents of identical twins or triplets if their kids are truly identical. These parents will tell you that, aside from their physical appearance, each one has their own passions, dreams, and approach to life.

When parents or teachers seek to press all children into the same mold, it always fails. Some are compliant by nature, others are adventurous, and some are outspoken. The only way to help children flourish is to unleash who *God* has designed them to be. If they are pressed into the same mold of learning, friendship, and play, there will be battles ahead.

The same is true for us. God has designed us with beautiful and diverse tastes in clothes, foods, interests, learning styles, and so much more. When we recognize this, we quickly realize that our pathway to intimacy with God will also be distinctive. If we ignore this fact and try to follow the path that someone else has set for us, we do a disservice to how God has made us. We will ultimately find ourselves spiritually frustrated, demotivated, or even bitter.

When we come to faith in Jesus, our unique personality, tastes, and outlook on life do not get erased. As a matter of fact, becoming a follower of Jesus should encourage us to pursue our God-given distinctives. Knowing that we are made by God and loved by him should give us peace with the things that make us who he wants us to be.

With this in mind, brace yourself for an amazing journey through *Sacred Pathways*. I think that you will find exciting new ways of connecting with God. You will understand others better and learn to celebrate the beautiful ways they meet with God. And you will encounter your Savior in new ways that will grow your intimacy with the One who loves you most.

Let the journey begin!

OF NOTE

The quotations interspersed throughout this study guide are excerpts from the book *Sacred Pathways: Nine Ways to Connect with God* and the video curriculum of the same name by Gary Thomas. All other resources, including the study introduction, small group questions, session introductions, prayer direction, and between-sessions materials have been written by Kevin and Sherry Harney in collaboration with Gary Thomas.

A black and white photograph of a wooden suspension bridge with metal railings, leading into a misty forest. The bridge is the central focus, receding into the distance. The surrounding forest is dense and shrouded in mist, creating a sense of mystery and adventure.

SESSION ONE

THE JOURNEY OF THE SOUL

Introduction to the Pathways

*A journey with no direction, map, or
pathway is a recipe for getting lost.
That same journey—with pathways that
fit our unique personality, style,
and passions—is an exciting adventure!*

INTRODUCTION

Daniel is fourteen. He grew up in the church and made the decision to receive God's grace through faith in Jesus. He loves sports, is outgoing, and gets excited by almost any challenge that comes his way. He loves fun and adventure and looks for ways to engage with people any time he can. *How would you guide Daniel in this critical season of his spiritual development?*

Tanya is twenty-three. She was raised in an atheistic home and never went to church. But now, due to the love and care of a college friend, she has placed her faith in Jesus. She is quiet, spends a lot of her time alone, and feels energized through solitude and silence. *What would you recommend Tanya do to take steps forward in knowing and loving Jesus?*

Manuel is thirty-five. He grew up in a Catholic home and always enjoyed going to Mass. He always felt connected to God through the rhythm and familiar words, songs, and smells that he experienced there. In his youth he walked away from the church, but now he finds himself wanting to connect with God again. He wonders how he can turn his heart back to God and recapture that sense of intimacy he felt as a young man. *What direction would you give him?*

Barbara is seventy-four. She has walked with Jesus for as long as she can remember. She still serves people in her community and church on a regular basis. She is part of a number of community groups for social connection, but she also has a passion to make the world a better place and help people in need. Her faith is real, but it seems to have gone flat and become routine. Barbara feels her passion is waning. *What might help*

ignite Barbara's faith in this season of life and give her fresh new vistas of engagement with God?

It is unlikely that Daniel's pathway will look like Barbara's. Tanya's needs and temperament will certainly guide her to a different journey of faith than Manuel's. All these individuals are all seeking to move toward the same God, led by the same Holy Spirit, as they walk with the one Savior. Each is following a longing to be closer to God. But each one needs a unique and custom-made pathway that fits how God has made them.

Praise God that he has not limited his followers to only one pathway of spiritual growth and connection! The creative God who made each of us has offered many pathways to us that are clearly modeled in the Bible. We get the joy of discovering which pathways resonate for us and which pathways most naturally draw us closer to our Savior.

We were created to find our highest and truest and most intense delight in God.

TAKE THE ASSESSMENT

If you or any of your group members are just getting to know one another, take a few minutes to introduce yourselves. Then, to kick things off, take the personal assessment found in the back of this study guide. This assessment will give you a general idea of the particular pathway (or pathways) to which you gravitate. As you and your group members go through this study, you will learn more about each of these particular pathways to encountering God.

TALK ABOUT IT

Once everyone has completed the assessment, discuss one of the following questions:

- How were you taught to meet with Jesus? What methods, practices, and attitudes were taught to you as a young or new Christian?

— or —

- Choose one of the people in the session introduction. How might you encourage that person to move forward on his or her journey with God?

When someone really matters to us, we will count the cost and do anything to make sure we connect with that person!

TEACHING NOTES

As you watch the video for this session, use the following outline to record any thoughts or concepts that stand out to you.

Quincy . . . the newest member of the family

Hungering and thirsting for God

A wrong view of our time with God

What would you sacrifice to be with someone you truly love?

The danger of a one-size-fits-all approach to God

God made each one of us beautifully unique

Biblical examples of various spiritual pathways

The importance of desire

The best invitation you will ever receive

*If you are in a spiritual malaise, it may be
that you need a change in your spiritual diet.*

GROUP DISCUSSION

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched and explore these concepts in Scripture.

1. Describe a time in your journey of faith when you hungered for God more than anything else—even your own desires and dreams.
2. **Read Psalm 63:1–5.** Describe the heart and longing of David in this psalm. What do you think caused this level of hunger for God?
3. Why do you think Christians often refer to making time to be near God as a “discipline”? Why do we need effort to do something that should be a natural longing of our soul?

4. Tell about a time you changed your schedule, counted the cost, or shifted your plans to meet with someone who mattered to you. Why were you so willing to do this? How should this kind of thinking impact your desire to be with God?

5. What are some dangers of a “one-size-fits-all” approach to spending time with Jesus? Why is it so important to find ways to connect with your Savior that fit the way in which he has uniquely made you?

6. Tell about a person you know who meets with God in ways that are different from you. What have you learned from the example of this person?

7. When you think about the **pathways of wonder** (*naturalists*, *sensates*, and *traditionalists*), how can you see one of these fitting the way in which God has made you? What causes you to be in awe and wonder of God?

8. When you think about the **pathways of contemplation** (*enthusiasts, contemplatives, and intellectuals*), how might one of these help you draw near to God? How have you encountered God through your heart and mind?

9. When you think about the **pathways of action** (*ascetics, activists, and caregivers*), how can you see these helping you draw near your Creator? When was a time you engaged in an action that really connected you to the heart of God?

10. What are some of the dangers of not finding rich and meaningful ways to connect with God? What are some potential exciting new things that could happen if you engage in fresh new ways of drawing near to God and growing your relationship with him?

Delight is as powerful as discipline!

CLOSING PRAYER

Spend time as your group comes to a close to pray in some of the following directions:

- Thank God for the unique and beautiful way he has made each person in your small group.
- Give God praise for his amazing plan to create a wonderful array of pathways so that you can find joyful and fruitful ways to draw near to him.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you over the coming sessions as you seek to discover new and dynamic ways to connect with the God who loves you.
- If you have taken the assessment and have a sense of your particular pathway, thank God for his leading and invite him to take you to even deeper places of intimacy with him.

The focus on spiritual temperaments is an attempt to help us understand how we best relate to God so we can develop new ways of drawing near to him.

BETWEEN-SESSIONS PERSONAL STUDY

Reflect on the content you've covered this week in *Sacred Pathways* by engaging in any or all of the following between-sessions activities. (This week, before you begin, you may want to review chapters 1–2 in the book.) The time you invest will be well spent, so let God use it to draw you closer to him. At your next meeting, share with your group any key points or insights that stood out to you as you spent this time with the Lord.

WHAT DO I LOVE TO DO?

What are three things you really enjoy doing?

Think about how you feel when you do these things. What expressions are on your face when you engage in them? How do you order your schedule so you can engage in them?

Take time to pray that you will grow to feel this same excitement, anticipation, and joy when you spend time with God.

A TIME OF REFLECTION

When do you tend to feel God's presence most powerfully?

What actions or experiences connect you closely to God?

What kind of places help you to notice and better tune into God's presence?

THE QUINCY CHALLENGE

Think back to the story of Quincy, the cavalier King Charles puppy, that you heard in this week's teaching. Take time today to watch a puppy or recall a past experience with a puppy or grown dog (since all dogs, at any age, still have a bit of a puppy in them). Take note of their loyalty, their devotion, and their focus on the approval of their owner.

What are three or four things that you learn about love and devotion from a puppy?

As you reflect on these lessons, what are a few ways that you can grow in devotion to and passion for the God who made you and loves to be with you?

LEARNING FROM THE MASTER

If you look closely at the life of Jesus, you can find him engaging with the Father by walking in each of the nine pathways that we will discuss in this study. Choose one of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) and review it in the coming week while looking for various ways Jesus drew near to his Father. Keep a record of examples in the space provided below:

Gospel I am reading: _____

| Pathways: | Example (and passage): |
|----------------|------------------------|
| Naturalist | |
| Sensate | |
| Traditionalist | |

| Pathways: | Example (and passage): |
|---------------|------------------------|
| Ascetic | |
| Activist | |
| Caregiver | |
| Enthusiast | |
| Contemplative | |
| Intellectual | |

JOURNAL

Write down your thoughts and reflections on the following topics:

- How have I seen Christians I respect draw near to God in ways that fit them naturally? Which of the pathways do they seem to walk? How does this bind their heart to the heart of God?
- What encounters, experiences, and events have most connected my heart with God's heart? How can I walk this pathway more often?
- Have there been times when I've felt pressured to spend time with God that simply have not worked for me? What are those ways? How can I be freed from feeling the need to walk that particular pathway?

FOR NEXT WEEK

In preparation for next week, read chapters 3, 4, and 5 of *Sacred Pathways* by Gary Thomas.

A long wooden suspension bridge stretches into a misty forest. The bridge has a wooden plank deck and metal railings with a mesh-like pattern. The background is a dense forest with trees and foliage, partially obscured by a light mist or fog. The overall tone is serene and contemplative.

SESSION TWO

THE PATHWAYS OF WONDER

Naturalist, Sensate, and Traditionalist

There are followers of Jesus who draw near to God and grow to love him more when they are in awe and amazed by who God is, what he does, and all God has made.

Naturalists say, “Let me be outdoors.”

Sensates declare, “Let me experience.”

Traditionalists cry out, “Let me remember.”