ABIDE

Everyday practices for staying close to Jesus

by slowing down



Book 3

Why slow down?

There are a handful of practices God's people have used for centuries that in Soma we've begun to refer to as the "slow-down" disciplines. These include practices like silence, solitude, fasting, and Sabbath rest. These are counter-cultural practices in our noisy, busy, and hurried world. Yet they have always been counter-cultural because they are spiritual practices that challenge the desires of our flesh.

We are often tempted to disregard these practices as a waste of time. Why be still and silent before God when there's so much to do? Why spend prayer time in silence when there's so much to ask for? The slow-down disciplines are to our souls what sleep is to our bodies. God could have designed us to not need sleep, but we spend a quarter to a third of our lives asleep—just laying there, seemingly doing nothing. We don't yet know all the details, but we know sleep is essential for physical and mental health—we can't skip much before we feel the effects. Similarly, God designed us to need things like Sabbath rest and silence (and even sleep itself) for our spiritual health. Though we might be numb to the effects of not having what our souls need, these slow-down disciplines are critically important. They are not a waste of time. They are not "doing nothing." Just like sleep, they make us better prepared for life and you can't be healthy without them. The Lord says to his people in Isaiah 30:15, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength."

That's why this series is called Abide. These guides are about the foundational, everyday practices that keep us close to Jesus—prayer, Scripture, and slowing down. They are how branches stay connected to the vine. Slowing

down is the quietest of the three, and maybe the most counter-cultural. Whether you are brand new to following Jesus or have walked with him for decades, these practices never expire; we simply grow deeper into them.

In these next four weeks, we are going to explore and practice some of these slow-down disciplines as a way to experience God more deeply. We'll start light and begin to build our muscles in this as we go.

How to use this guide

This little booklet is your guide for the next four weeks. Keep it with your Bible, write down what you are learning, and bring what you're hearing into your conversations with the church family.

Three practices, two journeys

The Abide series is six small books—three everyday practices for staying close to Jesus, each visited twice:

	Prayer	**Scripture**	**Slow Down**
First Journey Books 1–3	**Book 1** Meditation & the 3Rs of prayer	**Book 2** The Gospel of John—Observe, Interpret, Apply	**Book 3 — *this book*** Silence & fasting
Second Journey Books 4–6	**Book 4** The Circles & Cycles of prayer	**Book 5** John again—the I-am statements	**Book 6** Sabbath & solitude

Read the books in order and you'll walk through all three practices twice. Want to focus on one practice? Follow its column. If you're new, any book in the First Journey row is a good place to start. And remember, these practices never expire—coming back to any of these books, any time, is simply growing deeper.

Every morning

Plan for at least 10 minutes. Even if you are not a "morning person" there is something significant about putting the Father first in the morning just like we see Jesus often doing in the gospels. You'll probably need to set your alarm a tad earlier.

Grab a Bible—a real, physical, paper Bible is ideal. Our phones and computers come with many distractions that we can avoid by going old-school. Find a quiet spot—especially in these weeks, having a space without distraction is important. Have a pen handy. You may also want a journal or notebook if you prefer writing there.

On your own or together

This book works on its own—just you, a Bible, and a few minutes each morning. But discipleship is a community project, so it's even better with others.

Each week ends with conversation starters for a DNA group and for a Missional Community. If you're going through the book with either one, use those pages when you gather. And if you're on your own, don't skip them—let them prompt your journaling, or borrow one for a conversation with a friend who loves Jesus. These practices are personal, but they were never meant to be private.

However you go through it, bring what you're learning when the church family gathers. Stories of God meeting people in these practices encourage the whole body.

DNA groups

DNA stands for Discover, Nurture, Act—it's a very small group of men or women (usually three or four) who discover Jesus together through the Bible, nurture one another with the gospel, and help each other act in ways that line up with Jesus' teaching. If you'd like to join one, talk to your Missional Community leaders or one of the elders.

Missional Communities

Missional Communities are the primary way we follow Jesus' command to make disciples, living out what it means to be a good family of brothers and sisters, to serve like Jesus served, and be missionaries to our neighborhoods. If you're not yet a part of one, ask an elder or whoever you know best in the church to help get you connected.

We hope you use this guide every day.

Week One

Every so often, life forces us to slow down—an illness, a canceled season, a week snowed in at home. When the calendar suddenly empties, that forced slow-down often reveals things that we overlooked in our regular busyness. Sometimes, it's the stopping-to-smell-the-roses kind of slowing down. But it may also mean confronting things we preferred to ignore—while that process can be painful, it's always more painful in the long run to let harmful things fester. So, even that darker side of slowing down is grace.

But what if slowing down wasn't forced? Cultivating a regular rhythm of quiet amidst the noise of life is something disciples of Jesus have benefited from for centuries. When God instructs us to be silent it's so we notice him more. This week, we are going to look at some biblical reasons to be silent, and experiment with it. (Psst... if you've been through Book 1, you've already done this a bit.)

Day 1

Today, with little introduction, you are invited to simply be silent for three minutes (or more). Afterward, you'll reflect on what that experience was like.

If your MC or the whole church family is going through this guide together, you may get to do this with others. Either way, find a quiet spot, set a timer, close your eyes, and simply be still and silent. Go ahead and do that now.

Don't keep reading... Really, stop here and be silent. ;)

After your time is up

Maybe that felt super weird and difficult or maybe that felt easy and natural or somewhere in between. Jot down your thoughts on these questions:

- How did it feel to be silent for a few minutes straight?
- What came to mind?
- Did God come up in your thoughts? If yes, how so?

You can think about that experience like the control in an experiment. Most of us are not used to simply being silent for that long. Hopefully, every experience of silence and meditation this week will be better than that one as we learn more about it.

End by reading Psalm 46 and using it as a springboard to prayer.

If you'd like, use the 3Rs pattern from Book 1. What in this psalm makes you **Rejoice** about God? What prompts you to **Repent**? What **Requests** do you have for your Father who loves you?

Day 2

For the next few days, we'll look at five biblical reasons to be silent. These come from an article by William Ross for the Gospel Coalition: www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-reasons-to-be-silent

Biblical reasons to be silent No. 1: Obedience

"Simply put, you can't obey if you are not silent to listen. This is true on a physical level, but also a spiritual one. Scripture symbolically links our hearts with what comes out of our mouths (['out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.'] Mt. 12:34; Lk. 6:45). To extend the metaphor, only when we silence our heart are we in a place to hear—to receive God's instruction—and obey.

"Moses highlights this idea in one of his final speeches as he underscores Israel's call to obey all of the Lord's commandments (Deut. 27:1–10). That requirement is rooted in their identity as God's people: no longer slaves, but God's own inheritance (32:9). Moses puts an exclamation point on his speech with the sharp exhortation: 'Be silent and hear, O Israel!' (27:9).

"So God's commandments and our obedience are hinged together by spiritual silence before the King. Conversely, disobedience is the uproar of indwelling sin as our heart denies who we are in Christ. This principle holds in a general way not just for God's people, but all of his creation, including demons (['Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"'] Mk. 1:25/Lk. 4:35)."

Jesus often went to solitary places to be alone with the Father in prayer. And he said that he only says what he hears the Father saying. So, in prayer, Jesus must have spent time listening to the Father and not only speaking to

the Father. The only one who was perfectly obedient to the Father carved out time to be silent before him.

Try it

Later, we'll spend more time unpacking what it means to listen to God in prayer, but for now, give it a try like this:

- Begin by remembering the depth of love the Father has for you that you experienced through meditation and prayer in Books 1 and 2. Remember "Win the Morning" from Book 1?
- Then meditate on the verse from Psalm 46 we read yesterday, "Be still, and know that I am God." Roll that around in your mind as you are silent and listen to the Father for several minutes—try three minutes or more.

Remember, the Lord who loves you is near, so you don't have to be anxious about "getting it right." The goal is to slow down and just be in his presence.

After being silent before God, feel free to speak to him, thank him, worship him, confess, ask that he meet your needs.

Tips on making space for silence

Depending on your situation and stage of life, it may not be easy to find a regular time and place where you can be silent. Here are a few ideas which may help:

- Be an early bird. You might need to wake up before others in your household. That might also require setting an alarm and giving up something the night before to ensure you go to sleep earlier.
- A room or even a closet can be used for prayer where you are undisturbed. In Matthew 6:6, Jesus recommends praying in a private room with the door shut. In context, that is as opposed to praying in public to be noticed by people, but there is wisdom in the privacy and quiet, too. If needed, get creative—this might be your best hide-and-go-seek spot, the laundry room, utility closet, guest bedroom, shed, bathroom, etc.
- Using some white noise (unlike music or other audio) like a fan or even a recording, can help drown out the noise around you without giving your mind words or rhythms to focus on. If you have them, noise-canceling headphones can also help muffle sounds around you to help you focus.
- Try your car. By parking in a safe spot that's not busy (might even be the driveway), use it as your "room" to pray and have some silence.
- Coordinate with others in your household. If you have young kids and more than one adult in the home, ask for some help to carve out a few minutes when you are not disturbed. Even if you live with all

adults, you might need to set up a way for them to know you are taking a few minutes to yourself.

- Remove digital distractions. You may need to put your phone and computer far away from you or use the "Do Not Disturb" feature on your phone to silence all notifications except your timer.
- Close your eyes. It's a simple way to remove visual distractions and focus on what we can't see—that's why many people choose to close their eyes in prayer and worship.
- Ask the Father for help. The Father wants to be with you and help you meditate on his Word. Ask him for help as a way to prepare your heart and mind and handle internal distractions.
- Focus on meditating on his Word in the silence. We are not being silent for its own sake—it's a habit of grace to experience God himself. The Scriptures uniquely reveal Jesus. So, begin with meditating on his Word, and when your thoughts inevitably go somewhere distracting, come back to that same Scripture.

Day 3

Biblical reasons to be silent No. 2: Self-control

"The silence linked with obedience also manifests self-control, a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). Obedience and self-control are inseparable, but distinct. On the one hand, lack of silence betrays a lack of self-control that otherwise governs faithfulness (Eccl. 5:2–3). Scripture warns that the wordy fool only gets into trouble and displays his or her ignorance (Eccl. 10:12–14; Prov. 12:23). The pragmatic but biblical solution for someone acting like a fool is self-inflicted silence: 'Put your hand on your mouth' (Prov. 30:32).

"On the other hand, being silent demonstrates our willingness to wait upon and serve others in love (Gen. 24:21; Job 29:21; Eph. 4:29). Silence is also the catalyst for godly self-reflection amid anger (Ps. 4:4). It attests to our resolve to endure difficulties with hope fixed firmly in the Lord (Lam 3:26–29). Silence also governs our ability to evaluate spiritual instruction carefully (1 Cor. 14:29–30), and interact shrewdly with the world without succumbing to its temptations (Ps. 39:1; Prov. 21:23)."

Try it

Remembering self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, ask God for help as you exercise that self-control to be silent. Add a minute to whatever amount of time you were silent yesterday. Make it a minimum of four minutes. And don't worry, we won't add minutes every day.

Ponder these two verses and how silence and self-control might be connected and why. When you realize your mind has inevitably wandered, that's normal. Don't be ashamed, and simply restart by reading these verses again.

Proverbs 21:23

Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble.

Ecclesiastes 5:2

Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

Day 4

Biblical reasons to be silent No. 3: Wonder

"It is possible to worship God in complete silence. One of Scripture's most beautiful paradoxes is that wordlessness can speak clearly about God's glory. We honor God when we are in awe of him. We are made in his image and therefore bring him glory in our humble silence, while every other creature is simply mute. Scripture is full of instances of silent awe prompted by wonder before God.

"This kind of silence works two ways, both of which can bless God's people. On the one hand, when Christians come to terms with the depth of sinful grievances committed against a holy God, Paul says that their mouths should rightly 'be stopped' (Rom. 3:19). Silence is [a proper] response in the face of God's holiness and the coming judgment (Zeph. 1:7; Zech. 2:12; Mic. 7:16). On the other hand, we ought to be struck silent in light of God's incredible redemption, worked out in his promised deliverance for his people (Isa. 41:1; cf. Lk. 1:20) and the reconciling work of Jesus Christ (Acts 11:18; 15:12). Silence even in corporate worship, where the church gathers to meet with God, facilitates the reverence that he is rightly due (Hab. 2:20)."

> **Acts 15:12**
>
> *And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.*

At the Jerusalem Council, Paul and Barnabas told stories of their experiences in Antioch and their missionary journey through Galatia. One of those stories must have included Acts 14:19 where Paul is executed! He was stoned and

dragged outside the city, supposedly dead. Luke is sparse on the details here and tells us only that afterward he rose up, went into the city, and left the next day. It's still jaw-dropping! Paul and Barnabas likely told that and many other stories of God at work among the Gentiles. The response of the other church leaders was silent astonishment.

Try it

Pick a favorite story about Jesus and read it. (If you want a suggestion, try Mark 4:35–41.) Meditate on that story for several minutes. Be speechless in wonder...

Day 5

Biblical reasons to be silent No. 4: Rest

"As a parallel to wonder in light of God's salvation, silence is a blessed product of the rest that we have in him. Knowing that God is our God prompts us to 'be still' (Ps. 46:10). Even in the face of uncertainty and suffering, the psalmist can say, 'For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation…for my hope is from him' (Ps. 62:1, 5). Even creation knows its Maker and comes to rest at his command, as when Jesus silences the storm (Mk. 4:39). When Israel faced the Red Sea on one side and Egypt's army on the other, Moses inconceivably commands Israel to be silent. 'The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent!' (Ex. 14:13–14). So firm is our hope in God and his salvation that fear may be laid aside, and our silence can demonstrate and encourage rest in him."

> **Psalm 62:1–2, 5**
>
> *For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken… For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him.*

Try it

After reading this verse, ponder the truth that God is great, so we don't have to be in control. And just close your eyes and rest in his presence. Try to stay awake though. ;)

Day 6

Biblical reasons to be silent No. 5: Wisdom

"Often when we think of wisdom we think of speaking, usually to give counsel. But many times wisdom should prompt just the opposite. Especially in the book of Job, we see the tension between the desire to give counsel and the need to be silent. The multiplication of words by Job's friends does little to help (6:24; 13:13, 19; 33:31, 33). The high point of wisdom in their counsel comes in 2:13: 'And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great' (cf. 13:5).

"Silence as a form of wisdom is frequently encouraged in Proverbs too. It can help wisely avoid transgression (10:19) and manifest respect and understanding (11:12; 17:27). It is part of wise and even-handed interactions (29:11; cf. Amos 5:13). Silence is so powerful that it can even make the fool at least appear wise and intelligent (17:28)."

The best thing his friends do is sit with him in silence as a way of showing support and mourning with him. Things go downhill when they open their mouths. And when Job challenges God, he asks for instruction and promises to be silent.

> **Job 6:24**
>
> *"Teach me, and I will be silent; make me understand how I have gone astray."*

At the end of the book, God himself answers Job out of the whirlwind:

> **Job 38:2–3**
>
> *"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me."*

Job responds the way wisdom finally does—in silence before the Almighty:

> **Job 40:4–5**
>
> *"Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further."*

Try it

Reflect on the wisdom you are forming about the practice of silence as a habit of grace. Ask the Father to show you one take-away that you can share with someone else. Think deeply and listen to him through his Word.

Day 7

Which of the biblical reasons for silence did you find the most compelling? Which of them makes you most appreciate the value of it and makes you most want to do it? If you missed any this week, take a moment to go back and review those before answering that question for yourself.

Pick a verse mentioned earlier this week in the text about one of the reasons for silence that stands out to you. Meditate on that verse—think deeply about it—in silence for as long as you'd like today.

Try it

Try not setting a timer today. Stay silent, pondering the wonderful things the Scripture you chose reveals about God and just be in his presence for as long as you'd like.

When you are done, speak to the Father openly about whatever is on your mind.

What from this week will you share with the church family when you gather?

For your DNA group

Going through this book with your DNA group? When you gather, don't wait—within the first five minutes, get talking about your experience with these practices this week.

Find the passages from this week that stood out to you most, and simply read them to each other.

What intrigues you about what you read? What questions do you have?

For your Missional Community

If your MC is in this book together, bring these to your gathering:

In your time together, have someone pick a story about Jesus from one of the Gospels. Pick a longish story rather than a very short one. And read it out loud together in a translation that is different from what the group is most used to. You might try:

- New Living Translation (a very readable thought-for-thought translation)
- The Message (a translation striving to capture the rhythm, idioms, and flavor of the original)
- Living Bible (a classic, easy-reading paraphrase)
- King James Version (a landmark English translation —from Shakespeare's era)

If you want a suggestion for a passage, try John 4:1–42. It's the story of the woman at the well.

Simply read the story out loud together and chat about what stands out to you and what questions it raises.

Week Two

This past week or before, you may have found it difficult, even frightening, to be alone with your thoughts for too long. We can be troubled by our inadequacies, hurts of the past, problems of the present, worries about the future, etc. There are countless ways we can feel uncomfortable in silence. That's why we often avoid it.

This week, we'll continue learning about and practicing meditative silence. The gospel addresses all the things that make us shy away from silence, and the more we know our Father and his Word, the more comfortable we are in the quiet and the more joy we find in his presence. Remember our key passage for this whole Abide series, John 15:1–17. In it, Jesus says that all he said about abiding in him as the vine is so that "my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

Day 1

Blaise Pascal was a brilliant mathematician, physicist, theologian, and inventor from France in the 1600s. Peter Kreeft wrote a book explaining one of Pascal's masterpieces to modern audiences. In it he says:

> *"Your great-grandmother scrubbed clothes on a scrubbing board and cooked on a coal stove. You push buttons on washing machines and microwave ovens full of prepared food. Yet your great-grandmother had more time to talk to her daughter than you do. Why?...*
>
> *"Since you are probably impatient like most people today, I will tell you Pascal's answer immediately. We want to complexify our lives. We don't have to, we want to. We want to be harried and hassled and busy. Unconsciously, we want the very thing we complain about. For if we had leisure, we would look at ourselves and listen to our hearts and see the great gaping hole in our hearts and be terrified, because that hole is so big that nothing but God can fill it... We think we want peace and silence and freedom and leisure, but deep down we know that this would be unendurable to us..."*

Does this ring true for you in some way? Did you experience something like this in your times of silence last week?

Silence is a habit of grace that sometimes reveals brokenness in our hearts for which the gospel is the cure. And another way that disciples of Jesus experience grace is through his Body—the community of faith. When you gather with the church family, come ready to share something you experienced in silence this week—you may

need someone else to speak the truth of the gospel to you or someone else may need to be inspired by what you share. All our individual practices of nourishing our souls in Jesus lead to connection with others in community, for their benefit and ours. If you can't make a gathering, talk with someone who loves Jesus about your experience this past week. Encourage one another and pray together.

Day 2

The ESV Study Bible uses this verse to summarize the entire message of Isaiah chapters 1–39:

> **Isaiah 30:15**
>
> *"For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.' But you were unwilling"*

And a couple chapters later, in a passage foreseeing the eventual triumph of the Messiah, Isaiah says,

> **Isaiah 32:17**
>
> *"And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever."*

These verses emphasize the importance of silence for the people of God.

Try it

Meditate on these verses, think deeply about what it means that returning and repentance lead to salvation. Ask the Father to bring to mind anything you need to repent of while you are silent before him. Jot down what came to mind.

Then confess and let your heart be warmed by the grace of God in Jesus who has already paid for every one of your thoughts and actions that put someone or something above God in your life.

Day 3

You may have heard of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot, part of a missionary team who went to Ecuador in the 50s. Jim was killed by an indigenous tribe and his wife continued the work, bringing the gospel to those who had killed her husband. In her book, Shadow of the Almighty, Elisabeth quotes from one of Jim's letters where he mentions the verses we meditated on yesterday.

> *"""And the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever." "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength." I think the devil has made it his business to monopolize on three elements: noise, hurry, crowds. If he can keep us hearing radios, gossip, conversation or even sermons, he is happy. But he will not allow quietness. For he believes Isaiah where we do not. Satan is quite aware of the power of silence. The voice of God, though persistent, is soft. ...I am finding your counsel to get enough sleep most practical, Mother. Not only to be fit for the day and able to relax, but for spiritual awareness and reception one must simply be rested if he is to be blessed. Let us resist the devil in this by avoiding noise as much as we can, purposefully seeking to spend time alone, facing ourselves in the Word. ...Satan is aware of where we find our strength. May he not rob us!"" (emphasis and ellipses from the original)*

Try it

Ask the Father to speak to you through his Word and meditate again on these verses:

> **Isaiah 30:15**
>
> *"in quietness and in trust shall be your strength."*

Isaiah 32:17

"And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever."

Roll these around in your mind as you are silent. Consider what has been getting in the way of the practice of silence for you. How can you resist and fight for the quietness that brings true strength?

Day 4

One goal of this entire Abide series is that you would be equipped to pursue these spiritual practices on your own, finding nourishment directly from Jesus, the true vine. So, as we build our muscles with this discipline of silence, it's important that we try it with less leading.

Try it

You got this. Here are a couple verses. Incorporate what you've learned so far about silent meditation on Scripture and go for it:

> **Psalm 62:1–2, 5**
>
> *For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken... For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him.*

Day 5

Consider these verses. The Romans passage we meditated on before reminds us of how near God is—his love and Holy Spirit in our hearts. And the Ecclesiastes verse reminds us of God's transcendence—that he is high above us in so many ways. Both are true. Both can lead us to speechless wonder.

> **Romans 5:5–8**
>
> *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us... God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*
>
> **Ecclesiastes 5:2**
>
> *Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.*

Try it

As you meditate in silence, ponder these truths until you are in awe of our God.

Day 6

In the story of Elijah, after several spectacular wonders by God, like fire from heaven in response to Elijah's prayer in a showdown with false prophets, the Lord speaks to Elijah while he is running for his life.

> **1 Kings 19:11–12**
>
> *And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.*

That low whisper, that "still, small voice," was how God spoke to Elijah. God used the miraculous spectacle, and he can also use a whisper. God told Elijah that the final step in this epic battle against false worship in Israel would be through the ordinary process of new kings and prophets being appointed—a whisper compared to fire from heaven and Elijah's prayer bringing rain to end a drought.

Try it

Ponder how God might be at work in the "ordinary" things in your life—a low whisper you must be silent to notice.

Day 7

It's a great opportunity to catch up if you missed any days this week, or to revisit a Scripture that is meaningful to you.

Try it

Spend an extended time in silence today. If you've been doing 3–5 minutes, try 6–10. That's still less time than the average YouTube video.

Afterward, spend time thanking the Father for what you noticed about him in his Word this week.

For your DNA group

Going through this book with your DNA group? When you gather, don't wait—within the first five minutes, get talking about your experience with these practices this week.

What got in the way of being silent this week? Where was the battle?

How can you help one another resist the noise and build the kind of strength that comes from silence?

For your Missional Community

If your MC is in this book together, bring these to your gathering:

Sometimes, engaging in these slow-down disciplines can feel like a battle. Take a few minutes to talk about that, encourage one another, and pray for each other.

Then, spend the rest of your time together doing something fun you all enjoy as a break from the seriousness. Play some games, include the kids, make music, laugh, etc. Enjoy one another like the best kind of family—brothers and sisters who have God as their perfect Father.

Week Three

Silence and meditation, like prayer and Bible study, are regular, frequent practices in the life of a healthy disciple. But there are other habits of grace that are best practiced in different rhythms.

For the next two weeks, we'll be learning about fasting, but we won't be fasting every day. Fasting is important, arguably even essential, but like giving a gift to a loved one, it's a special thing and not something you typically do every single day.

Unfortunately, just mentioning fasting might scare you a bit—it's one of the most misunderstood, most feared, and least talked about spiritual practices. But the Bible mentions fasting even more often than baptism.

Did you know the Bible never commands Christians to fast? We'll find out why the church has employed this practice from the earliest days in the book of Acts until now. We'll learn what the Bible has to say about it through many examples from both the Old and New Testaments and what Jesus himself says about fasting. We'll see that we often receive more from it than we give up.

Day 1

In his classic book, Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life, Don Whitney defines fasting as "a believer's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes." It's a disciple of Jesus choosing to go without food for a spiritual reason. This is different from fasting in a diet plan or before getting your blood drawn because of that spiritual purpose.

The Bible only uses the word fasting about abstaining from food. However, it is also possible to "fast" from any good thing for spiritual purposes. For a time, we might deny ourselves the enjoyment of media, a hobby, a sport, or something else for a spiritual purpose as well. Our focus here will be on the biblical definition. Even if you should not skip meals for medical reasons, it is often possible to do a partial fast by eating smaller or more simple meals than usual. Of course, consult your doctor first.

At its core, fasting amplifies our spiritual longings in prayer by pairing them with our physical longing for food. Fasting is a helpful tool to train our souls to want Jesus as much as our stomachs want food. Every time your stomach rumbles while fasting, it's a reminder to your heart to look to Jesus for the true, spiritual nourishment you need.

Matthew Henry says fasting serves to "put an edge upon devout affections." Fasting sharpens our love for God and our understanding of our need for him. John Piper calls fasting a "physical exclamation point at the end of our pleas to God." Fasting demonstrates our earnestness and passion in prayer in a manner God chose. And David Mathis says, "It is a desperate measure, for desperate times, among those who know themselves desperate for God."

With all that in mind, read John 6:25–59. Jesus speaks of physical food, spiritual food, and desire. What verses stood out to you?

Jot those down or highlight them in your Bible.

Day 2

Two of the most important Bible passages about fasting are in Matthew. In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer—one of the most famous passages from the entire Bible. Much less known is that immediately following the Lord's Prayer, Jesus discusses fasting. In context, it's right in the middle of teaching on giving to the needy, prayer, treasuring God over money, and not being anxious for tomorrow. These are all basics in the life of a disciple. But we don't treat fasting with anywhere near the same importance.

Read Matthew 6:16–18.

The key is that though Jesus doesn't command it, he assumes his followers will fast. He does not say, "if you fast" but rather "when you fast."

Read Matthew 9:14–15.

Richard Foster, another author who wrote a classic book about spiritual practices, Celebration of Discipline, says this may be "the most important statement in the New Testament on whether or not Christians should fast today."

Jesus makes the promise about his disciples that "they will fast." He says it's inappropriate to fast when he is physically present with his disciples—it's a time for celebration, like when the groom is with the wedding guests. And there is a time coming when a great wedding feast will mark the final restoration when Jesus physically returns to make all things new—there will be no fasting then either. Between these times, while the groom is not here with us physically, we long for him and that is the time for fasting.

What strikes you about these passages?

Heads up

On Day 4, you are invited to fast during breakfast—along with anyone else going through this guide with you. Set yourself a reminder now, to help you remember.

Day 3

Remember, we defined fasting as "a believer's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes." Over the next couple weeks we'll look at some biblical examples of what those spiritual purposes can be.

A purpose of fasting: expressing devotion to God

Read Luke 2:36–38.

Everything we know about Anna comes from these few verses, but she is remarkable. She loved God and never left the temple. She spent decades worshiping night and day with prayer and fasting. Her actions showed the depth of her love and devotion to God.

By fasting, Anna was saying that she loved God more than food. When we fast, we are making a statement to ourselves, reinforcing our belief that Jesus—the Bread of Life—is more satisfying than even our favorite foods. By fasting, we train our hearts to believe that our god is not our bellies (like Paul says in Philippians 3:19) but that Jesus reigns over everything, even the strong desires of our bodies for food.

Every other purpose of fasting is simply a more specific expression of this general one—all fasting expresses our devotion to God. David Mathis sums this up by saying, "Christian fasting is not mainly about what we go without, but who we want more of."

Pray, asking the Father to help you fast tomorrow.

- Ask him to help you focus on him every time you feel hungry.

- Ask him to use the experience to train your heart to hunger for Jesus even more than your stomach hungers for food.

If you haven't done it yet, set yourself a reminder to not eat your normal first meal tomorrow.

Day 4

You are invited to fast this morning. If you can, skip at least your first meal of the day—and if others are going through this guide with you, you're all in this together.

We spent significant time in John 15 in Books 1 and 2—the vine and branches is our foundational metaphor for finding nourishment in Jesus. In the middle of the passage, Jesus says:

> **John 15:7**
>
> *"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."*

You may have read this so many times by now that it feels familiar, but don't miss how radical it is. "Ask whatever you wish"? This morning as you fast, meditate on this surprising verse. Of course Jesus is not a genie granting wishes, but as you abide in him, you become more like him and your once sinful desires begin to align with his perfect desires. As that happens, you ask and he responds according to his perfect wisdom and timing.

John 15:7 begs the question, what do you want? Maybe it's deep down or maybe it's at the tip of your tongue, but if you are to strip away the trivial things we often spend so much time thinking about, what really matters to you? Where's your God-given passion? What do you want more than anything and has eternal significance?

- Maybe you love someone deeply who has rejected Jesus—pray Jesus would draw them to the Father as you fast.
- Maybe you know someone who is deeply sick—pray Jesus would heal them and get all the glory.

- Maybe you are struggling with a particular pattern of sin in your life—as you fast, pray Jesus would strengthen your dependence on him and that you would be blown away by his grace.
- Maybe you are realizing your deep need for Jesus and you want to want him more—pray Jesus would set ablaze the affections of your heart for him above all else.
- Maybe there's another deep longing of your heart—ask for that as you long for food.

Try it

While you fast, use the time you would have eaten to meditate on John 15:7 and pray for your deep desire. May fasting intensify the earnestness of your request.

Day 5

The day after a fast is a great day to look at Isaiah 58 and respond in a spirit of thanksgiving.

Read Isaiah 58:3–8. (If you have a few extra minutes, read all 14 verses of the chapter.)

The Lord takes Israel to task for making a show of fasting while oppressing others. He's even sarcastic in calling them out for practicing a ritual rather than doing right. The type of fast he desires and blesses is one where his people show grace to the marginalized, not one where they do the marginalizing.

The Lord says, "Is not this the fast that I choose: ...to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house."

Yesterday, you chose to be hungry for a time. Consider how you might demonstrate God's grace to those who are hungry though they didn't choose it.

As a small but practical application of this passage, when they fast, some Christians choose to donate the money they would have spent on food to those who desperately need food. Others choose to share food in a more personal way, making and then giving away meals.

Dope Church is our family's work to extend the love of God to those on the streets and in some of the toughest circumstances imaginable. Helping provide food, serving a meal, giving funds, or serving in other practical ways through Dope Church are all very tangible ways to live out Isaiah 58. One guest at a meal we served told us it had been 14 years since he sat at a table for a meal that was served to him by someone else. If you are interested, talk

to your MC leaders or one of the elders to find out how you can help.

How will you make yesterday's fast and today's meals a moment that shows the grace of Jesus to others?

Day 6

In several biblical examples, the spiritual purpose behind fasting is to seek God's guidance.

A purpose of fasting: seeking guidance from God

Read Acts 13:1–3 and Acts 14:21–23.

In Acts 13, the leaders of the church are worshiping and fasting, presumably simply out of devotion for God like Anna in the temple who we read about on Day 3. In the midst of that, the Holy Spirit says to them to set apart Paul and Barnabas for a special job he has for them. And then they fast and pray, again. Why fast again?

Paul and Barnabas were top-notch leaders in the church where disciples of Jesus were first called "Christians." Paul went on to write most of the books in the New Testament. You can imagine the leaders at Antioch might not have wanted to lose him. We don't know for sure, but maybe their fasting the second time was to confirm what they heard was really from the Spirit. Maybe they asked for wisdom to shepherd the church without these two key leaders. Maybe it was also a way of dedicating Paul and Barnabas for the mission and asking the Spirit to wisely guide them in their new work. It seems reasonable to think fasting a second time might have had to do with seeking God's guidance.

They left Antioch on Paul's first missionary journey and planted many churches in the region of Galatia in modern-day Turkey. And then they back-tracked through those same towns to appoint elders. They fasted and prayed for wisdom to choose these leaders.

In what area of life do you need God's wisdom? Maybe this will be a focus the next time you fast.

Day 7

As we learn what the Bible teaches about fasting, it's also important to note what fasting is not. Fasting is not a way to make up for sin—to think we need to work off sin is to say Jesus' death wasn't enough. Fasting is not a magic ritual or a spiritual hunger strike or anything else that somehow compels God to do what we ask. We exert no power over God through fasting—the Lord of the Universe cannot be coerced.

Don Whitney says, "Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying." Like we said before, fasting amplifies our spiritual longings in prayer by pairing them with our physical longing for food. It sharpens, concentrates, and intensifies our prayers.

Take the rest of your time today to catch up on anything you missed this week or to review what you've learned and turn it back to God in prayers of thanksgiving.

For your DNA group

Going through this book with your DNA group? When you gather, don't wait—within the first five minutes, get talking about your experience with these practices this week.

Here are some conversation starters:

- Have you ever fasted before? If so, what was that experience like?
- What do you think is the main purpose of fasting? Have your thoughts about fasting changed?
- What do you think will be the barriers to fasting for you personally? How can you help each other overcome these?

For your Missional Community

If your MC is in this book together, bring these to your gathering:

Read Matthew 6:16–18.

This is one of the passages from Day 2, where Jesus discusses fasting. Jesus encourages his disciples to not make a show of their fasting but to keep it secret. Obviously, if your MC is going through this guide together, your fasting is not exactly a secret in the group. But we shouldn't go around complaining to our co-workers or neighbors about how hungry and tired we are when we fast. It's definitely not something to post about on social media. No "humble brags" here, family.

How else might fasting affect people around us? How should we handle situations like the ones below as we are fasting?

- When you have young kids at home...
- When you live with people who don't share your faith...
- When the meal you will skip is one you regularly eat with coworkers...
- When you get hangry easily...

Our heightened focus on God should go hand-in-hand with our love for others. Talk about the nitty-gritty details of how this works out for each of you.

Week Four

This week, we'll learn more about the biblical purposes for fasting, and we'll practice it one more time and extend the fast to two meals.

Day 1

Read Luke 2:22–38.

On the same day Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus meet Anna, who we looked at last week, they also meet Simeon. Luke tells us Simeon was a devout man and led by the Holy Spirit. He lived prayerfully expectant that the promised Messiah would come and rescue Israel. Seeing Jesus, he literally said he could now die in peace. He lived to see the day he had waited for. The Messiah was here and nothing else mattered.

Simeon and Anna capture the people of Israel at their best —expectant and longing for Jesus. The people of God have waited hundreds of years, generation after generation since the last prophets of God painted a glorious picture of the coming Messiah: a suffering servant and victorious king who would rescue his people, usher in a new world order and whose kingdom would never end. Simeon and Anna illustrate the longing of all God's people.

May our fasting this week remind us of the centuries of longing Israel faced until Jesus arrived.

Imagine what it might have been like to be Anna or Simeon that day, to see your deepest hope realized in Jesus. Jot down your thoughts:

Day 2

Saul was the first man ever anointed king of Israel, and Jonathan, his son, was David's dear friend. When David hears of their violent deaths, he tears his clothes, weeps, and fasts—he and all the men with him (2 Samuel 1:11–12). Fasting was an expression of their grief.

Paul talks about the "godly grief" we can experience when confronted with our sin (2 Corinthians 7:10). It's a grief that leads to repentance. This sorrow produces a changed heart and changed behaviors. In the Bible, it's also sometimes accompanied by fasting.

A purpose of fasting: expressing grief and repentance

Read Jonah 3:1–10.

Jonah, the reluctant prophet, barely gets his message out and the entire massive city immediately repents and turns to God, mourning their rebellion against him with godly sorrow. From the king all the way down to the livestock, they all fast as an expression of the people's earnest desire to get right with God, hoping he will show them mercy and withhold the punishment they deserve.

Practice the 3Rs pattern of prayer from Book 1 as you think about this passage. **Rejoice. Repent. Request.** Focus particularly on repentance today. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you where you are not in step with him, where you have believed a lie about God, failed to worship him, or valued a created thing over the Creator. Jot down what you are repenting.

For us, because of Jesus, we know God has already withheld the punishment we deserve for sin. How does that make our repentance different from that of the people of Nineveh?

Day 3

David Mathis categorizes the examples of fasting in the Bible like this:

1. Inward (to express repentance): "Old Testament saints often expressed an 'inward' heart of repentance to God not only in words but with the exclamation point of fasting. Such fasts did not earn his forgiveness but demonstrated the genuineness of their contrition."

2. Outward (to grieve hardship): "Fasting gave voice to the pain and sorrow of sudden and severe 'outward' circumstances and represented a heart of faith toward God in the midst of great tragedies."

3. Forward (to seek God's favor): "Fasting often served as an intensifier alongside 'forward' prayers for God's guidance, traveling mercies, and special favor."

With the common thread being Godward: "We need his help, his favor, his guidance. We need his rescue and comfort in trouble. We need his forgiveness and grace because we have sinned. We need God… Fasting expresses to God our pointedly felt need for God."

As a way of quickly surveying many different examples of fasting, read these verses and determine which of the first three categories the example fits in. Do as many as you have time for.

- Ezra 8:21–23
- 2 Samuel 12:16, 21–23
- 1 Kings 21:25–29

- Judges 20:26–28
- Daniel 6:17–19
- Joel 2:12
- Esther 4:3
- Nehemiah 9:1–2
- Psalm 69:9

To see all the verses in one place, look them up together at biblegateway.com, where you can enter several references at once.

Day 4

A purpose of fasting: strengthening prayer

Read Daniel 9:3–7.

At this point, it almost goes without saying that fasting and prayer go together. Fasting is a prayer intensifier. The majority of the biblical examples of fasting fit this purpose of strengthening prayer. Like Daniel praying on behalf of all the people of Israel in exile, God's people have added the dimension of fasting to their prayers when their requests were especially important or urgent. Fasting is pulling out all the stops in prayer. John Calvin wrote, "Whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter, it would be expedient to appoint fasting along with prayer."

Tomorrow is our second fast. This time, we'll skip two meals instead of one. So, that makes it essentially a 24-hour fast—no food between dinner tonight and dinner tomorrow if you are able.

Prayerfully determine the purpose of your personal fast tomorrow.

It's likely your focus in prayer tomorrow will be the same as when you fasted last week. Or maybe as you've learned about the various spiritual purposes for fasting in the Bible, you've been inspired to pray differently or for something else. Ask the Father to direct you, and briefly jot down what you want to pray for tomorrow.

If you haven't done it yet, set yourself a reminder to not eat your normal first meal tomorrow. It's easy to be on autopilot in the morning.

Day 5

You are invited to fast for two meals today—along with anyone else going through this guide with you. If you can, don't eat until dinner.

Try it

> **Psalm 37:3–7**
>
> *Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.*
>
> *Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*
>
> *Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act.*
>
> *He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.*
>
> *Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him…*

Determine the focus of your prayer and fasting

The line "and he will give you the desires of your heart," just like John 15:7 from last week, begs the question, "what do you want?" What are the desires of your heart? Don't be afraid to pray big and ask God for something only he can possibly accomplish. What will be the spiritual purpose of your fast today? Will it be the same as last week? Are you inspired to fast about something different after all we've learned?

- Maybe you love someone deeply who has rejected Jesus—pray Jesus would draw them to the Father as you fast.
- Maybe you know someone who is deeply sick—pray Jesus would heal them and get all the glory.

- Maybe you are struggling with a particular pattern of sin in your life—as you fast, pray Jesus would strengthen your dependence on him and that you would be blown away by his grace.
- Maybe you are realizing your deep need for Jesus and you want to want him more—pray Jesus would set ablaze the affections of your heart for him above all else.
- Maybe there's another deep longing of your heart—ask for that as you long for food.

Give your request a shorthand name

Chances are you will be busy with tasks and people today needing your attention. But hunger will interrupt you, reminding you to pray even though you may not be able to engage in prayer with full sentences and 100% attention. However, if you can sum up your prayer in one phrase or even one word, you can use that as shorthand for a longer prayer.

For instance, you can use someone's name as shorthand for a prayer to bring them to faith or heal them. At every twinge of hunger, pray using at least this simplified request. It can help you stay in a constant attitude of prayer even though you are busy changing diapers, hammering nails, writing emails, etc.

Pray, asking the Father to help you fast

- Ask him to help you focus on him every time you feel hungry.
- Ask him to use the experience to train your heart to hunger for Jesus even more than your stomach hungers for food.

A few ideas for how to spend your meal times

When your stomach growls, don't fall into the trap of dwelling on what you don't have. But rather, use that as a signal to turn your heart toward Jesus. Remember, fasting is meant to intensify our spiritual desires through this connection to our physical desires. Take advantage of the time you would have had a meal.

- "Be still before the LORD"—Follow what Psalm 37:7 above says, and use the skills you developed a couple weeks ago to practice meditative silence before the King.
- "Delight yourself in the LORD"—Remember how in the 3Rs pattern of prayer, we always spent time rejoicing? Even in a fast, even in the midst of grief, we can wonder at God's mighty deeds and marvel at his love for us. David does this often in the Psalms. Find delight in God. One way to do that is worshipful music. Listen to and/or sing a song that you love which helps draw out your affections for Jesus.
- Read Scripture—either the passage for today, Psalm 37:3–7, or another portion of the Bible somehow connected to your purpose for fasting today.
- Pray individually—Worship God, confess your sins, and don't hold back in requesting the deep desires of your heart.
- Join others in prayer—Coordinate ahead of time with your DNA group or MC to pray together during a meal time, in person or by phone or video call. Hearing others pray through a fast can help motivate and inspire your prayers.

Day 6

> *"Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God." — Don Whitney*

> **Matthew 5:6**
>
> *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."*

Christian fasting is unique because of Christ. As we express our special needs and desires to God in fasting, we do so with the certainty that he has already met our deepest need in the gospel of Jesus. The whole city of Nineveh fasted in desperate hope God would show mercy and withhold the punishment they justly deserved, but we fast with a confident assurance that Jesus drank every drop of the cup of God's wrath. Because of Jesus, we fast on a firm foundation.

God is the source of all righteousness, so our hunger for righteousness is a hunger for God himself. And in Jesus, we get God himself given for us and the Spirit of Christ dwelling in our hearts. Fasting reminds us of the already-not-yet nature of God's kingdom. Through fasting, we experience persistent and insistent hunger for physical food, which amplifies the experience of our spiritual hunger. Paradoxically, we are then at the same time, more grateful for Jesus satisfying that hunger and more hungry for the future feast and the day we will see him face to face and he will set everything right.

We fast in grief or repentance, because of some hardship or to seek God's favor and wisdom. We fast because we lack something. But one day, fasting will cease because there will be no more lack. There will be no more sickness, no more death, no more sorrow. Jesus will remake the

world and everything in every detail will be as it should be and the presence of God will light up the world.

May that vision of our hunger ending one day create a hunger now in our church family to see the glory of Jesus spread so that our neighbors would eat their fill and delight in rich food without price at our Father's table.

Day 7

Isaiah 55:1–3

"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;

and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,

and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,

and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me;

hear, that your soul may live;

and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,

my steadfast, sure love for David."

In light of all we've learned about silence, meditation, prayer, and fasting, simply slow down and enjoy this beautiful picture painted in Isaiah of the feast of God's covenant love.

Review and catch up if needed.

How would you sum up your key take-aways from these past four weeks?

For your DNA group

Going through this book with your DNA group? When you gather, don't wait—within the first five minutes, get talking about your experience with these practices this week.

Talk together about what you wrote about repentance on Day 2. If you were not all able to complete it yet, take some time to do it together right now. Read through it, discuss, and pray.

For your Missional Community

If your MC is in this book together, bring these to your gathering:

Share with one another your experience fasting. Depending on the day you meet, you might be discussing only last week's fast or it may include this week's also.

What was it like? Was it what you expected? Is there anything that got in the way? What's a key take-away about fasting that you've learned so far?

Tying a bow on these four weeks

Soma family, our prayer is that these weeks of silence and fasting have helped you find real nourishment through an abiding connection with Jesus. We pray you better understand these slow-down disciplines and feel empowered to make a habit of quieting your soul before the Father—and that in the quiet you experience "joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" (1 Peter 1:8) as you wait on the Lord. The journey continues in Book 4, where we go deeper into prayer.

May this be the beginning of a new season of maturity for all of us and a big step toward a day when every man, woman, and child in Federal Way has a daily experience of the love of Jesus through the words and deeds of his people.

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