

Read Me First

Whether you were raised in the church and accepted Christ as your personal savior at age five, or whether you have only recently given your life to Christ, spiritual growth is not optional. God expects his children to *grow up!*

We define *spiritual formation* as the process of allowing God to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ. The Bible clearly teaches that God wants his children to grow to maturity. As you read the sampling of verses below, especially notice the italicized words.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be *conformed to the likeness of his Son*, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Rom. 8:29)

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but *be transformed* by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Rom. 12:1–2)

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are *being transformed into his likeness* with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18)

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly *we are being renewed* day by day. (2 Cor. 4:16)

My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth *until Christ is formed in you* . . . (Gal. 4:19)

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to *be made new* in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, *created to be like God* in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph. 4:22–24)

... being confident of this, that *he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion* until the day of Christ Jesus. (Phil. 1:6)

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to *work out your salvation* with fear and trembling, *for it is God who works in you* to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Phil. 2:12–13)

Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, *train yourself to be godly*. (1 Tim. 4:7)

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it *you may grow up in your salvation*, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. (1 Peter 2:2–3)

Each aspect of our definition of *spiritual formation* is significant. Spiritual formation is a *process*. We don't experience growth as a neat, clean, upward slope toward heaven. In reality it looks and feels more like a roller-coaster ride, twisting and turning and looping and climbing and dropping. Only as you stand back and see the big picture can you tell that the "exit" to the ride is higher than the "entrance." Spiritual formation is a messy process. Because we don't always cooperate with the Lord, it takes time for him to accomplish his purpose in our lives. Philippians 1:6 offers a great deal of encouragement here (see above). God never stops working.

Spiritual formation is the process of *allowing* God to work in our lives. God is sovereign but he has also created us to make important decisions and to bear the responsibility for those decisions. We have no power in and of ourselves to cause our own growth, nor will God force us to obey him. We must allow God to work in our lives and to bring about change. God deeply desires to work, but we must give him the necessary time and space. We don't cause our own growth, but we do cooperate with God as he works. Check out Philippians 2:12–13 above.

Spiritual formation is a process of allowing *God* to work in our lives. We are told that the Holy Spirit continues the earthly ministry that Jesus began (Acts 1:1–2). God's Spirit lives within each genuine believer (1 Cor. 6:19). Our growth is not the result of special circumstances or good luck. We don't grow by our own willpower or by striving to obey the Law. We grow when we follow the Holy Spirit, who alone can produce spiritual fruit in our lives (see Gal. 5:16–23). For us to be loving, joyful, peaceful, and so on, the Holy Spirit must be allowed to do his work.

Spiritual formation is the process of allowing God *to conform* us to the image of Jesus. As much as I hate to admit it, growth means change. Like clay in the potter's hand, we are shaped and molded and conformed to a particular pattern. Change at the hand of God is sometimes painful, but it is always good. We don't always like it, but deep down we always desire it

because we know it is necessary. James tells us to “consider it pure joy . . . whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance” and “perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2–4). God loves us too much to let us stay as we are.

Finally, spiritual formation is the process of allowing God to conform us *to the image of Jesus Christ*. In Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18; and Galatians 4:19 (see page 9), we are told that God is making us more and more like his Son. Jesus is the perfect pattern or model. He represents the goal of spiritual formation. We are not being shaped into merely religious people or ethical people or church-going people. We are being conformed to the very character of Christ himself.

Everyone, without exception, experiences some kind of “spiritual formation.” Dallas Willard puts it this way:

All people undergo a process of spiritual formation. Their spirit is formed, and with it their whole being. . . . Spiritual formation is not something just for especially religious people. No one escapes. The most hardened criminal as well as the most devout of human beings have had a spiritual formation. They have become a certain kind of person. You have had a spiritual formation and I have had one, and it is still ongoing. It is like education: everyone gets one—a good one or a bad one. (*Renovation of the Heart*, 45)

Everyone is being formed by certain powers after a particular pattern or model. We are blessed beyond words to be able to participate in God’s design for spiritual formation.

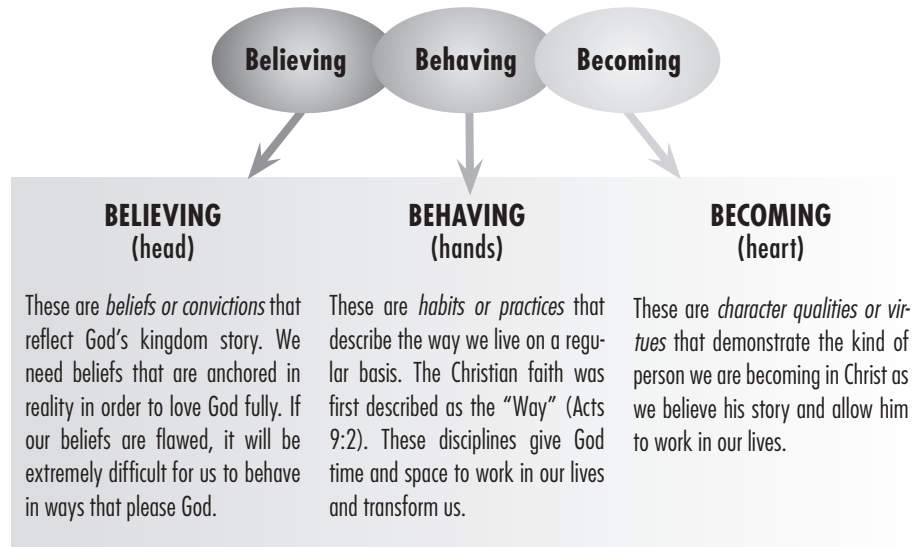
God often uses resources to shape or mold us into conformity with Christ’s character. Of course, the primary resource is God’s Word, the Bible. But there are also many good and helpful supplementary resources. We certainly know that no ministry resource of any kind can ever substitute for a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, but God does seem to use spiritual-growth resources to help our love for him grow deeper and stronger. The *Experiencing God’s Story* series is one particularly effective resource that God can use to help us understand and participate consistently in true, godly spiritual formation.

Believing-Behaving-Becoming

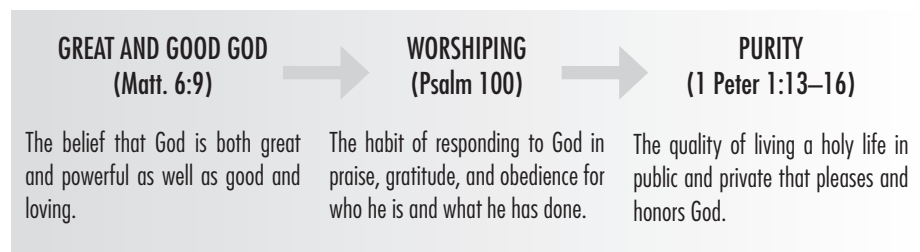
Most resources focus on just one aspect of the spiritual formation process. Some tools emphasize our *beliefs* by explaining the core teachings of the Christian faith. Knowing what to believe is crucial, but there is more. Many spiritual formation resources highlight how we should *behave*. They stress the importance of spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, solitude, worship, and so on. Without a doubt God uses such disciplines to transform our lives, but the disciplines are means to an end, not the end themselves.

The disciplines are like workout routines pointing toward the game itself. The game is our life with God. Finally, there are a handful of resources that pay attention to what people are *becoming* in the entire process of spiritual formation (i.e., godly character). Most of these center on the fruit of the Spirit as the true test of spirituality, and rightly so.

The Experiencing God’s Story series connects all three aspects of spiritual formation: what we believe, how we behave, and who we are becoming. All three are essential to our growth:



As a teaching tool, each workbook in this series connects a “Believing” area with a “Behaving” area and a “Becoming” area. Look at the overview on pages 16–17 to see the whole plan. For example, in the third row of the overview you will notice a belief in a great and good God. That belief is connected to the habit of worship and to the quality of purity or holiness. In other words, each row of the overview is connected and integrated; each belief is tied to a behavior or habit and then to a character quality.



This Believing-Behaving-Becoming arrangement is merely a teaching tool and is not intended as a rigid religious system. Sometimes beliefs lead to behavior, while at other times behavior influences beliefs. I’m not suggesting a 1-2-3, neat, clean, foolproof, linear progression that will solve all of life’s problems. We all know that life is messy, dynamic, unpredictable, confusing, spontaneous, mystical, and so on. But I still think there are

important connections to be made using this teaching arrangement. For instance, what we believe about Satan and sin will affect how we fight spiritual battles and how we understand and experience true freedom. While recognizing this somewhat artificial organization, I hope the Believing-Behaving-Becoming setup encourages you to allow the Lord to work in your entire life rather than just one area of your life.

The four study guides in this series include a total of thirty-six boxes of beliefs, behaviors, and character qualities.

Why these particular topics? Were they chosen simply because they are the most popular topics when it comes to spiritual growth? Are we looking at a random bunch of beliefs and habits and virtues all loosely connected? Actually, the topics were not chosen at random or through some popularity contest. These topics reflect God's story and in our context today we definitely need to stay anchored to God's story.

Experiencing God's Story of Life and Hope

Since the late 1960s we have been experiencing a cultural shift from modernism to postmodernism. (See Jimmy Long's excellent book *Emerging Hope* for more on this cultural change and how Christians can respond.) The modern era emphasized the individual, objective truth, words, and some kind of grand story to explain the meaning of life. By contrast, the postmodern era emphasizes community, subjective "truth," images, and the absence of any grand story to explain life. Christians can embrace some aspects of postmodernism and probably need to resist others. For instance, we can certainly celebrate the greater emphasis on community. But if we give up on a big story that explains reality, then we might as well give up on our faith.

The Christian faith is founded upon God's grand story revealed in the Bible. Postmodernism does away with all big stories that claim to explain reality, opting instead for local or small-group stories. What is true for me and my friends is what is true—period! But Christians can't abandon God's grand story or there is nothing left to believe and all hope is lost. Instead, we need to understand God's story even more and see how it connects to life and how it does us good. We would say that what is real and true is not just what my local group prefers, but what God has revealed. God's story explains life.

Spiritual formation needs to be connected to God's story or it can be manipulated to mean almost anything. In other words, we need a biblical story approach to spiritual formation. But we obviously need to do more than just "believe" the story. We need to act upon the story and allow God's story to shape our whole being. Perhaps now the title makes more sense. We need to experience (beliefs, habits, character qualities) God's story (as revealed in the Bible) of life and hope (a story that does what is best for us).

How is this story approach built into these workbooks? It's simple. If you look again at the overview you will notice that the "Believing" column is actually God's grand story.

BELIEVING	(meaning in the story)
Authority of the Bible	A trustworthy script for the story
Triune God who is Great and Good	Begins with God who is community
Humanity	God wants to share his community
Satan and Sin	Evil powers try to ruin the plan
Jesus Christ	The hero of the story
Salvation	The rescue begins
Holy Spirit	God with us until the end
The Church	The community being rescued
Transformation	God works among his children
Mission	God works through his children
The End	The end—we are with God in the new creation

The very first item in the column is the *Bible* or the script of the story. The story proper begins with *God*—who he is and what he has done. God creates *human beings* to relate to him in perfect community, but *Satan and sin* spoil God's good creation and interfere with his story. God must now attempt a rescue to save his creation. Because of his great love for us, God sent his Son *Jesus Christ* to rescue us from Satan and sin and restore us to a relationship with him. *Salvation* means that God has come to rescue us from the dark side. Through Christ, God offers us a way home. As we respond to his gracious offer by trusting him, we are adopted by God into his family. He puts his very own *Spirit* within us and incorporates us into his community. God desires to use this *new community* (called *church*) to provide us with identity, stability, and wholeness. As we eat, pray, worship, and listen to God's Word together, we begin to feel safe. We open up, revealing our joys and struggles. We discover that we can really be known and loved at the same time, rather than just one or the other. Perhaps for the first time we experience life and hope through Christ and his community. We are *transformed* into the kind of person we were created to be. Naturally, we want other people to experience this life and hope. We have a *mission*—to live out God's story in biblical community so that others can join God's community. Since it is a story of hope, God's story *ends* happily (read Rev. 21:1–4).

To summarize, the “Believing” column is God’s grand story. Spiritual formation is anchored in God’s story. As we move through the story (from top to bottom), each Belief area extends out (from left to right) to a Behaving and a Becoming area. In this way our whole life is being shaped by the Lord and the entire process is firmly secured to God’s story.

Workbook Format

Most of the studies in these workbooks consist of the following elements:

- An introduction that explores the biblical context
- “A Closer Look,” to dig deeper into a particular text
- “Crossing the Bridge,” to move from the ancient world to our world
- “So What?” to apply what we have discovered in the context of biblical community
- “The Power of Words,” to help you understand the meaning of words in the text
- Insightful quotes that inspire reflection and action
- Application questions for your small group
- Cross-references for more Bible exploration
- A “For Deeper Study” recommended reading list

In terms of assumptions, characteristics, and benefits, the Experiencing God’s Story series is:

- theologically grounded in the evangelical Christian tradition
- spiritually integrated by connecting believing, behaving, and becoming
- academically reliable through the use of solid biblical scholarship
- pedagogically interactive without being insulting (i.e., you won’t find rhetorical fill-in-the-blank questions)
- creatively designed to be used by individuals within the context of biblical community
- practically and realistically arranged into four books, each with 3 three-part chapters

Another subtle characteristic worth mentioning is that the workbooks teach by example how to do responsible Bible study. The move from context to observation to theological principle to application follows the journey model detailed in *Grasping God’s Word* by Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays.

May the Lord bless you richly as you allow him to conform you to the image of Jesus Christ. I pray that the Experiencing God’s Story series will serve you well on your journey.

Overview of the Experiencing God's Story Series

	BELIEVING	BEHAVING	BECOMING
The Story Begins	Authority of the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16–17) The belief that the Bible is God's inspired Word given to us to help us mature in our faith.	Studying the Bible (2 Tim. 2:15) The habit of reading, interpreting, and applying the Bible as the primary means of listening to God.	Truth (Eph. 4:20–25) The quality of living and speaking truthfully in a world of lies and deception.
	Triune God (Gal. 4:4–6) The belief that the Bible teaches the triune (three-in-one) nature of God.	Fellowshipping (Acts 2:42–47) The habit of living in authentic relationship with and dependence upon other followers of Jesus.	Love (1 John 4:7–8) The quality of choosing to do what God says is best for another person.
	Great and Good God (Matt. 6:9) The belief that God is both great and powerful as well as good and loving.	Worshipping (Psalm 100) The habit of responding to God in praise, gratitude, and obedience for who he is and what he has done.	Purity (1 Peter 1:13–16) The quality of living a holy life in public and private that pleases and honors God.
The Hero Who Restores	Humanity (Gen. 1:26–28) The belief that human beings are uniquely created in the image of God.	Seeking the Kingdom (Matt. 6:33) The habit of acknowledging that God is our Creator and that we are creatures intended to seek him and his purposes.	Rest (Matt. 11:28–30) The quality of living with a deep awareness of and contentment with God's purpose for our lives.
	Satan and Sin (Gen. 3:1–7) The belief that Satan is the leader of the opposition against God and his people, and that all human beings have a willful opposition to God's claim on their lives (sin).	Waging Spiritual War (Matt. 4:1–11) The habit of knowing and using appropriate strategies for fighting against the Devil, the flesh, and the world.	Freedom (Rom. 8:1–4) The quality of experiencing freedom from Satan's power and sin's domination and freedom for new life with God.
	Jesus Christ (John 1:1–3, 14, 18) The belief that Jesus Christ is God the Son, fully divine and fully human.	Following (Mark 8:34–38) The habit of daily choosing to follow Jesus Christ as Lord in every area of life.	New Identity in Christ (John 21:15–23) The quality of single-minded allegiance to Jesus Christ above every other competing loyalty.

BELIEVING	BEHAVING	BECOMING
<p>Salvation (Eph. 2:8–10)</p> <p>The belief that salvation is by grace (source), through faith (means), for good works (result).</p>	<p>Trusting and Acting (Phil. 2:12–13)</p> <p>The habit of allowing God to work in our lives so that our faith results in action (not salvation by works, but true faith that works).</p>	<p>Assurance (Rom. 8:15–16)</p> <p>The quality of knowing (with a healthy confidence) that we belong to God.</p>
<p>Holy Spirit (John 14:16–17)</p> <p>The belief that God the Spirit continues Jesus’ earthly ministry, especially that of transforming believers and empowering them to fulfill their mission.</p>	<p>Walking by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 25)</p> <p>The habit of living in dependence upon the Holy Spirit as the source of strength to resist temptation and imitate Jesus Christ.</p>	<p>Fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–24)</p> <p>The quality of bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Christlike character qualities) in one’s life.</p>
<p>The Church (1 Peter 2:4–10)</p> <p>The belief that God’s people are joined together in Christ into a new community, the church.</p>	<p>Serving (Mark 10:35–45)</p> <p>The habit of being a servant to other members of this new community.</p>	<p>Humility (Luke 18:9–14)</p> <p>The quality of a servant’s attitude grounded in the recognition of our status before God and our relationship to others.</p>
<p>Transformation (Rom. 12:1–2)</p> <p>The belief that we are not to be conformed to this world, but we are to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ.</p>	<p>Praying (Matt. 6:9–13)</p> <p>The habit of continual communion with God that fosters our relationship and allows for genuine transformation in our lives.</p>	<p>Peace (Phil. 4:6–7)</p> <p>The quality of calmness and well being (vs. worry and inner turmoil) that comes as a result of our communion with God.</p>
<p>Mission (Matt. 28:18–20)</p> <p>The belief that Jesus commissioned his church to make disciples of all nations.</p>	<p>Engaging the World (Acts 1:7–8)</p> <p>The habit of engaging the world for the purpose of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.</p>	<p>Compassion (Luke 10:30–37)</p> <p>The quality of extending love and compassion to people in need.</p>
<p>The End (1 Thess. 4:13–18)</p> <p>The belief that Jesus Christ will return to judge evil, restore his creation, and live forever in intimate fellowship with his people.</p>	<p>Persevering (Heb. 12:1–2)</p> <p>The habit of enduring and persisting in spite of the trials and difficulties we face in life.</p>	<p>Hope (Rom. 8:22–25)</p> <p>The quality of a confident expectation that in the end God will be true to his word and keep his promises.</p>

The Rescue

New People Forever