

Hearing *God* in Conversation

18 WEEK PERSONAL OR SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

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Instructions

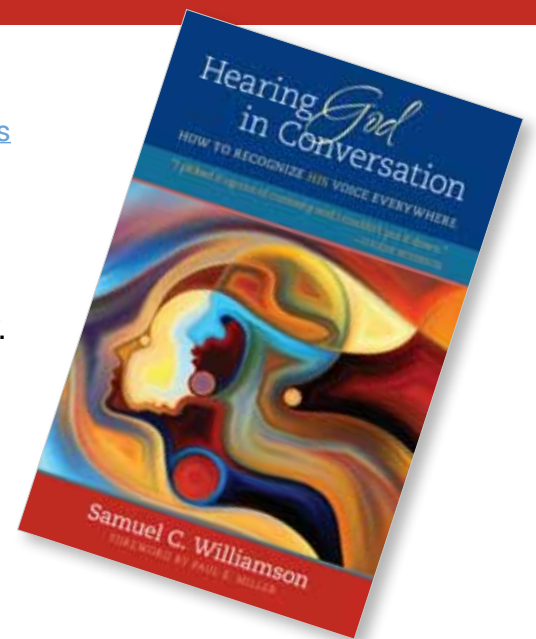
This guide is designed for both personal and group study. (If you are studying personally, some obvious “group” questions will not apply. If so, feel free to go at your own pace, faster or slower, not necessarily a chapter a week.)

Each chapter of *Hearing God in Conversation* has a corresponding section in this guide. Prayerfully consider the questions posed for each chapter. Ask God to speak to you as you pray and think about your answers.

These questions are intended to be a guide to provoke valuable heart-to-heart conversations. Other questions may arise; that’s good. Feel free to choose a subset of these questions or to add additional questions.

When possible, answer these questions in advance in your own prayer time. Write down your answers in a notebook or journal, and bring those notes to the small group meeting.

May God be with you and speak to you.



Week 1: The First Time I Heard God's Voice

PREPARATION:

- Read the foreword, preface, and chapter 1 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. How do you get stuck in prayer? How can a conversational approach to prayer affect the way you pray?
2. What do you think of the idea of hearing God? Have you heard God in the past? What happened? If you haven't heard him, why do you think that is?
3. Sam writes about a man who advised him against telling the story of the first time he heard God at the age of ten. Have you ever been told not to share about the times you have heard God? How did that affect you?
4. As Christians, what things are we saved *from*? What do you think we are saved *for*? How does that answer change your conversations with God? How does it change your Christian walk?
5. "Prayer is not a one-way street with us shouting petitions to God, and Scripture is not a one-way street of God broadcasting his commands to us" (p.18). How does this quote square with your experience of walking with God?
6. Like Sam on the playground hearing his girlfriend cuss, describe a time you had your ideas about God shaken.
7. Describe a time in your life when you sought God more for answers than for God himself.
8. Sam writes, "God always gives us what we most need, but he doesn't always give us what we think we most need" (pp.24–25). How are those different? What hope can you draw from this truth?

9. What happens to a relationship when communication breaks down?
10. Why does it sound humble to say that God doesn't speak to "normal" people like you? What does Sam mean when he writes, "God never speaks to us (or others) because of our (or *their*) greatness. He speaks because of his greatness" (p.27)?

EXERCISE:

- Summarize the eight methods described on pages 30–32.
- Take five minutes to write down examples of the methods you have experienced. Which would you like to experience more?
- Share.

PRAYER:

- Share personal prayer requests and pray for them.
- Ask God that each person this week receive a responsive resonance, spontaneous nudging, direct word, unbidden memory, or a recalled passage (see pp.30–31).

Week 2: Conversation *IS* the Point

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 2 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. Describe one relationship in your life that has the quality of conversation that Sam had with his dad? Why do we think conversation with God is different?
2. Do you ever just talk to God during the day, outside of a prayer time? Why or why not?
3. Do you feel the need to speak the “proper” words in prayer? Why or why not?
4. Do you believe your heavenly Father is more interested in your everyday life than people are? Why or why not?
5. Read Matthew 6:25-33. What everyday things does this passage talk about God caring for?
6. “Letting our nature or nurture restrict God’s voice also limits our capacity for friendship” (pp.41–42). In what ways does your nature or nurture limit God’s voice? What kinds of things do you not expect him to speak to you about?
7. Spend a few minutes in prayer (with simple, conversational language), asking God to provide insight, revelation, eyes to see his daily guidance, and a better understanding of his love (see pp.42–44).

EXERCISE:

- Take five minutes and just talk with God as you'd talk with a friend. This might include sharing what happened during your day, or describing your current fears and joys, or anything else that come to mind. Just pray to God alone in your heart in the same manner you would converse with a friend.
- Share your experience: was it hard, fun, weird, normal, natural? Did you like it?

PRAYER:

- Share personal prayer requests and pray for them.
- Ask God to give us a conversational relationship with him during the “normal” parts of our day, such as driving to work, standing in line at the supermarket, or watching a movie.

Week 3: How to Recognize the Voice of God

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 3 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. “Our naïve expectations lead us to miss richer realities. . . . In a similar fashion, false expectations about hearing God cause us to overlook the many ways he actually does speak to us” (p.46). What expectations have you had about hearing God in the past?
2. How do you get distracted in life “by the spectacular” so that you may not hear God’s whisper? Ask your Father right now to help you quiet your heart to hear him in everyday life.
3. Reflect on stories of Jesus from the New Testament. How is Jesus different from “the self-appointed spokesmen for God” who “are inclined to shout” (p.49)?
4. Have you ever had nudges from the Spirit that you stifled? What happened?
5. What little changes can you make in your day-to-day life to help lessen the tumultuous clamor of noise that buries your Father’s voice?
6. Why is “obedience . . . a major stepping-stone in learning to hear God” (p.52)?
7. Some may say that Sam meeting the suicidal student in the stairwell was a coincidence (pp.52–53). Do you think life is a series of coincidences? Even if you don’t believe life to be coincidences, how do you live as though it is?
8. What in chapter 5 was a new thought for you? What was a reminder of something you have known but forgotten?
9. Are you more cerebral or emotive in your Scripture reading? What are the dangers of being one or the other? How is it better to have a healthy balance of both?

EXERCISE:

Sam's rule of thumb is simple: "If the obedience required is simple and moral—like going to a stairwell or praying for a brother—just do it. If the action is more involved . . . then ask friends for help with discernment, because it isn't always God's voice and we need help learning to distinguish the true from the false" (p.53).

- Take five minutes to write down (a) a few nudges from God that you can obey right now, (b) an area or two for which you have some sense from God but which also requires discernment from friends, and (c) a few people you can go to for this kind of wisdom.
- Share with the group the few nudges from God that you can obey now, and share an area in which you need group discernment.

[Privately, perhaps later this week, ask your list of friends for help in discerning those senses you have for your major areas.]

PRAYER:

- Ask the group for personal pray requests. Pray for them.
- Ask God to increase our sensitivity this week to his still, small voice.
- Ask God to help each person practice prayer as conversation with God; not just asking for things but simply talking with God.

Week 4: What Are the Scriptures For?

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 4 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. List two or three ways you (perhaps accidentally) make Scripture about you instead of about God?
2. In what ways do you live like the Bible is a maintenance manual for personal upkeep instead of a personal letter from God (p.56)?
3. Sam writes, "A right understanding of Scripture makes all the difference in the world for hearing God. It means we meditate on Scripture to hear his voice. It is in meeting him there, in his self-revealed word, that we will hear him" (p.57). Describe a time you met God in Scripture. What can you do to make this a regular part of life?
4. "Knowing wisdom doesn't change us. . . Only when we know the *Person* of wisdom incarnate will we finally live the life we were designed for" (p.57). How do you seek to know God, or how do you seek him mostly for wisdom alone? How would your life look differently if you sought him for *him* instead of wisdom or answers?
5. In what small ways can you add Scripture meditation to your day?
6. What is a danger in pursuing Scripture for truth (p.59)? How does that answer surprise you?
7. This chapter discusses approaches to Scripture that are based on personal tendencies. Which is your natural tendency? (We all have them!) What are some remedies?

EXERCISE:

- Choose one of the following verses below and take ten minutes to write a paraphrase: (a) repeat the verse a couple of times in your usual translation, saying it aloud; (b) meditate on its meaning (what does it say about God and what does it say about you?); (c) look at two or three other translations of the passage; and (d) write your own paraphrase here or in a journal.
 - The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. (Zeph. 3:17)
 - We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:18)
 - If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)
 - I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)
- Share your paraphrase with the group.

PRAYER:

- Ask the group if anyone has a decision or question for which they wish to hear God. Pray for that person.
- Pray that each person receives “God-shaped thoughts” (p.32) this week as they meditate on Scripture in their prayer time.

Week 5: Hearing God in Meditation

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 5 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. When you hear the word meditation, what is your instinctive reaction? How do you imagine a person in mediation looks like? How did this chapter challenge your thinking?
2. What is meant by “furious thinking” (p.63)?
3. What in this chapter was a new thought for you?
4. What in this chapter was a reminder of something you have known but forgotten?
5. How was Sam’s list of questions helpful for your meditation?
6. Are you more cerebral or emotive in your Scripture reading? What are the dangers of being one or the other? How is it better to have a healthy balance of both?

EXERCISE:

- Choose one of the following verses. Using Sam's meditation questions (page 65 and on the bookmark at the end of this guide), take six or seven minutes to meditate on the chosen passage.
 - For we are God's masterpiece, created in the Messiah Jesus to perform good actions that God prepared long ago to be our way of life. (Eph. 2:10 isv)
 - The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. (Ps. 23:1)
 - And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:16–17)
 - For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. (2 Cor. 7:10)
- Share with the group what you heard from God in Scripture.

PRAYER:

- Ask for personal prayer concerns.
- Pray that each member begin to regularly hear his voice in biblical meditation.

[See the meditation plan bookmark at the end of this study guide. It summarizes Sam's daily meditation questions.]

Week 6: Speaking to Listen

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 6 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below..

QUESTIONS:

1. Describe a time you rephrased someone else's direction to ensure you understood it yourself. How can paraphrasing help you meditate on a verse?
2. What does Sam mean in his paraphrase of an Einstein quote, "Part of scriptural meditation is learning to explain the words of the Bible to the 'grandmother' in all of us" (p.72)?
3. While paraphrasing Scripture helps make it real to our hearts, what cautions should we exercise?
4. In Matthew 12:34 Jesus says, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." How does that relate to meditation?
5. We often obsess about the things nearest to our hearts. What kinds of things do you meditate on? How are they biblical or unbiblical?

EXERCISE:

- Choose one of the following verses below and take ten minutes to write a paraphrase: (a) repeat the verse a couple of times in your usual translation, saying it aloud; (b) meditate on its meaning (what does it say about God and what does it say about you?); (c) look at two or three other translations of the passage; and (d) write your own paraphrase here or in a journal.
 - The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. (Zeph. 3:17)
 - We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:18)
 - If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)
 - I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)
- Share your paraphrase with the group.

PRAYER:

- Ask the group if anyone has a decision or question for which they wish to hear God. Pray for that person.
- Pray that each person receives “God-shaped thoughts” (p.32) this week as they meditate on Scripture in their prayer time.

Week 7: Brainstorming with God

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 7 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. Describe a brainstorming time you've experienced (in work, school, home, ministry, etc.). How did that change your relationship with the people involved?
2. Have you ever tried to brainstorm with God? Why or why not?
3. If you do brainstorm with God, what does it look like?
4. Typical brainstorming, like meditation, requires slowing down and taking time. But might it be possible to have mini brainstorms with God throughout the day when faced with the hundreds of mini decisions we make? If so, how would your life look differently?
5. Sam reminds us of one "*absolutely essential* rule: to the best of my ability, *I reject ideas from voices that aren't invited to the brainstorming party*" (p.82). What does he mean?
6. What is so important about recognizing God's voice in Scripture?
7. Have you ever seen a counterfeit (fake money, worldly idea, false solution, etc.)? What is the greatest danger of a "good" counterfeit? How can we recognize it?
8. Write down two or three ideas embraced by secular or Christian culture (i.e. making one's spouse the absolute love of your life, or grasping for self-esteem). How are they just good counterfeits?

EXERCISE:

- Take a few minutes to pick a topic to brainstorm with God. It might be a small decision you need to make, an idea you've been mulling over, a difficulty with work or your children, or a confusion you are experiencing.
- Brainstorm with God; converse with him, list pros and cons in your prayer, look for the nudge or resonance of the Spirit; go deeper.
- Share your experience with the group, your topic, what you said to God, and if you sensed anything from him.

PRAYER:

- Ask the group if anyone has a decision or question for which they wish to hear God. Pray for that person.
- Pray that each person practice brainstorming with God each day this week, and pray that God speaks in the midst of their prayerful brainstorming.

Week 8: Hearing God's Voice for Others

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 8 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever sensed the Lord leading you to say something to someone only to find out it wasn't from God? What happened? How did you feel afterward?
2. Have you ever had someone else give you a "word from God" that you think wasn't from God? What did you do? How did you react?
3. When have you had a sense from the Lord for someone else and not said anything? Spend a few minutes talking to God about it; ask for boldness and courage.
4. Think of a time you wanted to chicken out on talking to someone but instead you stepped out in faith. How did God use you or grow you in the situation?
5. Describe a time someone spoke a good word of encouragement or conviction to you.
6. In Colossians 3:16, Paul urges us, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." How would you describe Paul's list of ways the word of Christ should "dwell in you richly"?
7. Does the idea of a time of listening for a word from God in a group intimidate you? Why or why not?

EXERCISE:

[If you are studying this personally and not in a group, see second bullet below:]

- Take five minutes to pray, each person praying for the person on their right. Ask God to give you a word for them, either a passage, a sense, a nudging, or a direct word (pp.88–89). Put away your biases (we’re not looking for what you think God should say to them!). Ask for words of encouragement or insight, not words of direction (move to Timbuktu) or correction (quit spending so much money on mocha lattes).

[If you are not in a group, use the exercise above, but instead of “the person on your right,” think of a family member or friend and pray for him or her. And then, consider writing a letter or email with what you hear. You could begin it, “I was praying for you today, and I sensed God might be saying....”]

- Go around the group and share what you heard for the person you were praying for. Remember to share with humility and gentleness—we might be wrong or not fully right (90)! We wish to bring encouragement and joy in this time, not our opinions or heaviness.

PRAYER:

- Pray that God’s encouragement from this prayer time takes root and grows this coming week. Pray that miscommunication and misunderstanding take no root.
- Pray that each member be attentive in the coming week to nudges and senses of God’s encouragement for people around them, and pray for a gentle boldness to share.

Week 9: Hijacking the Conversation

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 9 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. Tell of a time in your life when you pleaded for an answer for something and God spoke to you about another topic altogether. What was your response?
2. How can our own agendas, sin, or impatience taint our listening to God?
3. Is there an area of your life in which you are begging God for an answer and he seems to be silent? What else might he be talking to you about? Ask him for eyes to see how he is working, especially if it's different than you might expect.
4. "We control our conversation with God by filtering out whatever doesn't conform to our notions of spiritual reality" (p.98). Give an example of a word that might seem "unspiritual" and yet might be the spiritual reality God is working in.
5. In the gospel of John, Jesus says, "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:13–14). But in Isaiah God says, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isa. 55:9). How do we hold these two passages in balance? How can that tension shape our prayer and listening?
6. "Our limitations mean that we not only need God to hear him but also to *understand* him" (p.99). What does that mean to you?

7. Ask God for wisdom to see the various ways you hijack the conversation. Write them down. How can you recognize this hijacking in the future? What can you do about it?
8. How can humility help your ability to hear God?

EXERCISE:

- Think of a time you were in a conversation with friend, but you couldn't get a word in edgewise. How did that make you feel?
- Think of a time you dominated a conversation with someone else. Were you aware of it? If so, what was going on inside you? If you weren't aware at the time, but you recognize it now (after the fact), how can you begin to recognize that conversation-domination now?
- Describe to the group:
 - What it felt like when someone else dominated the conversation (don't mention that person's name or the circumstances; they might be in the group!).
 - And what symptoms you can recognize in yourself when you are hijacking a conversation.

PRAYER:

- Pray that you can come to God with an openness to hear what he wants to say without ignoring him.
- And pray that you can also share your desires, fears, and concerns with God honestly without obsessing. (He might have another great word for you!).

Week 10: Questions: Connecting with God

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 10 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever had an encounter with a good listener, someone who draws out the very deepest parts of you in love? Describe it. How do you feel when someone asks questions to help you articulate what you've never said aloud?
2. God's first encounter with Adam and Eve after their disobedience is filled with questions: "But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, '*Where are you?*' . . . '*Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?*' . . . '*What is this that you have done?*'" (Gen. 3:8–13, emphasis added). Why might God ask Adam and Eve questions when he already knows the answers?
3. What does Sam mean when he writes, "questions from God are pruning tools for our hearts" (p.107)?
4. How can asking questions of God deepen your relationship with him? How can questioning God harm that relationship? What is the difference?
5. Read the passages below and list a few questions of God that stir in your heart as you meditate on these verses.
6. So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. (Phil. 2:1–3)

EXERCISE:

- Below are five questions (out of hundreds) that God asks in Scripture. Pick one and answer it back to God. Take at least five minutes. As you answer, let God dig deeper by asking you more questions. Be alert in your spirit to the quiet whisperings of God's follow-up questions.
 - “What is the matter?” (Gen. 21:17 swp)
 - “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.” (Job 38:4)
 - “Can any of you add a single moment to your life by worrying?” (Matt 6:27 swp)
 - “Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye and yet fail to see the log in your own eye?” (Matt. 7:3 swp)
 - “Do you believe I can do this?” (Matt. 9:28 swp)
- Share with the group the question you chose, how you answered it, and what you heard from God.

PRAYER:

- Ask God to ask you questions this week—in Scripture study, conversations, or even billboards—and answer them back to God.
- Pray that each person's heart be protected this week from doubts, assaults, and questioning *of* God instead of questions *to* God.

Week 11: Cultivating a Holy Curiosity

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 11 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. What might a “holy curiosity” mean?
2. How can curiosity disrupt (in the best way possible) our routines?
3. What areas in your life do you accept as normal but could start to look at through the eyes of curiosity?
4. What emotions are you feeling lately? What is bugging you? Think and pray through those things, asking God *what, where, when, why, and how*.
5. Read Psalm 34. Turn some of the verses into questions of curiosity, e.g. “How can my soul make its boast in you, Lord, instead of other things? What are other things I boast in?” Pray them.
6. Sam writes, “If emotions are responses to beliefs (hopes, desires, and loves), then they leave a breadcrumb trail to our inner life. They offer an opportunity for curiosity, a chance to explore with God. We can’t do it without him. We are all blind to the deep things of our own hearts; we need him to open the eyes of our heart—not just to our own beliefs and hopes, but also to our deepest, unknown longings” (p.114). What does this mean? How do you see that in your own life?

EXERCISE:

- Think of a movie, play, or book that moved you. What did it stir in you? (Sadness, joy, hope, or longing)
- Ask God, "What might you be revealing to me in that stirring? What belief, hidden or open, is triggering this in me?"
- Brainstorm with God about the question.
- Share with the group the story that moved you and what you heard from God.

PRAYER:

- Ask God to help you connect with him this week as you are aware of the stirrings in your heart; let them lead you to him in prayer.
- Pray that each person this week grow in their ability to recognize God's voice.

Week 12: How Can I Know It's God's Voice?

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 12 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

Questions:

1. What signs have you been told that indicate whether a message is a word from God or not? Have you ever heard, "You will always recognize God's voice by the great peace you feel"? How has this sense of peace been true or untrue in your life?
2. Describe a direction (or word or wisdom) that didn't bring immediate peace but that eventually proved to be from God. If not peace, what did you feel?
3. Compare Hebrews 5:14 ("but solid food is for mature people, whose minds are trained by practice to distinguish good from evil," swp) and Proverbs 11:14 ("a nation falls through a lack of guidance, but victory comes through the counsel of many," swp). How do these verses relate to discernment?
4. Describe one time you experienced conviction of sin when seeking to hear from God?
5. How can you reorient your thinking about expecting inner tranquility the retreat speaker promised versus the peace "which surpasses all understanding" (Phil. 4:7)? How are they different?

EXERCISE:

- On pages 121 through 126, Sam lists five tools for discerning God's voice (beginning with, "Find discernment in community"). Summarize those five.
- Pick the two you are least comfortable with and write down why you think they make you uncomfortable.
- Pick the two you experience most often. Give an example of each.
- Share with the group you two least favorite, and why, and you two most common, giving the examples.

PRAYER:

- Ask people in the group for prayer requests, and pray for them.
- Ask God to drive you to him, even in (maybe *especially in*) the moments of uncertainty in our lives.

Week 13: Friendship with the Real God

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 13 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. List several elements of what a good friendship looks like. How does your relationship with God look like that, and how does it differ?
2. Explain what Sam means when he writes that problems in the world are often caused by false beliefs about God (p.129).
3. When you think of God, what is your mind's picture of him? What false pictures of God have you encountered in our culture?
4. At the bottom of page 130, Sam says, "Real knowledge is not something one owns like a set of fine china, and spiritual insight is more than a mere assemblage of facts that one collects like baseball cards. Relational knowledge of God—true spiritual wisdom—is a living, breathing, personal power, a voice and a conscience, a movement in the heart, a new pair of eyes and a new way of thinking. It's always an experience." What do you think of his statement? Do you agree? Why or why not?
5. List two or three ways that you know about God and then list another two or three ways that you've come to know God himself.
6. Read Philippians 3:8 ("Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ"). How can you tell that the apostle Paul had his perceptions, desires, hopes, and ambitions changed by knowing God?
7. Spend some time with the suggestions on pages 133–35. Find a passage in Scripture to study, pray through the questions, and jot down your insights here or in your journal.

EXERCISE:

- Read this story from the gospel of Mark:
 - On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:35-41)
- Practice on this passage the suggestions Sam has for helping Scripture come alive (pp.133-135). Take 8–10 minutes to apply these to the passage.
 - Ask God to bring this passage alive.
 - Ask God to reveal himself through mysteries you find in the passage.
 - Ask yourself, “How would I have acted” (either as a disciple or as Jesus)?
 - Ask, “What would I have thought?”
 - Picture the scene in your mind, from beginning to end.
 - Look for seeming inconsistencies with other passages or with what you know of God. How does the true God transcend them?
 - Ask how your life would be different if you saw God and the world this way always.
 - Pray, “Let me know you and be known by you.”
 - Share the most meaningful insights you had.

PRAYER:

- Hudson Taylor, a missionary to China, prayed these words each day: “Lord Jesus make Thyself to me, a living, bright Reality.” Pray this prayer in your heart and as a group.

Week 14: Emotions and Experiences of God

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 14 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever had a time in your life when you inadvertently sought an emotional experience of God instead of God himself? What happened?
2. Describe a time you had a belief-altering experience of God that resonated with the faith inside your heart more than with your emotion.
3. On pages 138–39, Sam explains the almost inseparable connection between feelings and beliefs. Summarize the five examples of “feeling” describe on those pages. Use a personal example for each.
4. How is “aiming for euphoria” more like the world around us than followers of Jesus should be?
5. Spend a couple of minutes praying through or about experiences with God that you’ve had, asking him to focus your desires on him.

EXERCISE:

- Take ten minutes to write down one area of your life in which feelings are driven by bad beliefs. Jot down two more. Then list false beliefs about God or yourself that you recognize. Examples might be:
 - *Judging God*: what I've done could never be forgiven, even by God.
 - *Doubting God*: even God can't get me out of this mess.
 - *Overgeneralization*: if you failed somewhere, you think, "My life is a total failure.
 - *Mind Reading*: everyone thinks I'm incompetent.
 - *Fortune Telling*: no one will ever love me or trust me again.
 - *Filtered Thinking*: you dwell exclusively on bad traits and ignore the good (love of God, love of friends or family, food on your plate, etc.).
 - *And many other beliefs*: unlovable, God is harsh, no good can come out of this, I don't deserve this, this will never end, etc.
- How can an examination of our feelings uncover unhelpful beliefs?
- Share the most meaningful insights you had.

PRAYER:

- Pray Hudson Taylor's prayer again: "Lord Jesus make Thyself to me, a living, bright Reality."
- Pray that God reveal a bit of himself this week to everyone in the group; pray that this self-revelation of God address our false beliefs.

Week 15: God Speaks in Our Detours

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 15 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. Would you say you have a regular, quiet, conversational relationship with God? How would you encourage someone (including yourself) to seek that?
2. List a couple of circumstances in your life that are perplexing or seem at odds with how you think life should go. What might God be up to?
3. What detours have you walked through (or are you walking through now) with God? How did (or might) things go differently than you thought they would?
4. Looking back, how do you see God's hand in past detours? How does that encourage your faith for the future?
5. Describe a time in your life when great growth came in a time of deep trouble? What might God say to you today about that experience?
6. Following God in the detours requires us to be watchful for when he opens new roads. When you come across scientific oddities, theological oddities, hardships, or disillusionment, what is your first response? Ask God to shape you into one who turns quickly to him when a detour bars your path.

EXERCISE:

- Think of a recent detour in your life (being laid off or demoted, not being able to sell your house, difficulty in a friendship [though not a person present in the group], a feeling of insignificance, etc.).
- Jot down possible good God can bring out of this (renewed humility, a better job, deeper honesty or connection with a friend, etc.) Be wildly creative in your possibilities.
- Read the following passage and write down your reactions: “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (Eph. 3:20).
- Share with the group.

PRAYER:

- Read these lines from a poem by John Newton:
*Thou are coming to a King,
Large petitions with thee bring,
For his Grace and Power are such,
None can ever ask too much*
- Lift up prayers for each member of the group; do not be afraid to ask for God to “do far more abundantly than all we can ask or think.”

Week 16: Hearing God in the Ordinary

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 16 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. In one sentence, describe the difference between a formative test and a summative test? Which come from the heart of God? Tell of a time you felt a test was summative only to discover later that God was “teaching you to fly” (p.154).
2. Have you ever prayed, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam. 3:9 NIV)? Try it right now. What might God be saying in this moment?
3. What distractions regularly fill your life that keep you from willfully hearing God?
4. List a few very “ordinary” times or ways you have heard God.
5. What in Scripture teaches us that we can ask God anything (even about where to go for vacation)? What in Scripture would prohibit asking God for the tiniest of directions?
6. It is often easy to read quickly over details like the angel touching Elijah (1 Kings 19:4–8), but God loves us in those quiet ways as well as in meeting our needs. Describe a few quiet details in which you have seen God touch you when you didn’t even notice it at first.

EXERCISE:

- Scripture says, “God speaks time and time again—but nobody notices” (Job 33:14 isv). If so, God is often speaking in very ordinary circumstances and moments we are unaware of.
- Think of a recent ordinary moment—when you accidentally overheard a conversation, or a movie scene moved you, or a passage you read stirred you. Take five minutes to ask God what he might be saying in that twinkling of an eye.
- Throw away agendas (what you want God to say), brainstorm with God, and seek him for what he might be saying to you.
- Share the moment and any word you might have heard.

PRAYER:

- Pray that each member hear God’s voice in the midst of an ordinary moment—a still, small voice amidst the thunder of the world around.
- Pray for friends, family, and neighbors that they too begin to hear God’s voice in their lives.

Week 17: Hearing God in the Ordinary

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 17 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. What does Sam mean when he says there are some things God cannot tell us but must show us? Have you even had one of those times in your life?
2. What does the story of Joseph, summarized on pages 164–65, suggest about God’s purposes when he leads us through detours and suffering?
3. What is it about the human heart that doesn’t always change in response to the loud and quick?
4. At the bottom of page 166, Sam quotes C. S. Lewis: “Can it be that the more perfect the creature is, the further this separation must at some point be pushed? It is saints, not common people, who experience the ‘dark night.’ It is men and angels, not beasts, who rebel. Inanimate matter sleeps in the bosom of the Father. The ‘hiddenness’ of God perhaps presses most painfully on those who are in another way nearest to Him.” What does Lewis mean?
5. When Sam describes the classic “evangelical checklist” (pp.167–68), what is your first reaction? Has anyone ever treated you to this checklist? Have you ever treated anyone else the same way? What do you need to work on?
6. Consider either the story of Joseph (Genesis 37–50) or the book of Esther. Then reflect on what God did . . . *in his silence*. In your journal, write anything that surprises you or strikes you in a new way.

EXERCISE:

- Read Psalm 13 and answer these questions:
 - What does verse 1 tell you about how the psalmist feels?
 - How would you divide this psalm into sections, and what would you title each section?
 - Over the course of the psalm, what happens to David's heart, focus, and request?
 - What does Psalm 13 teach you about God's apparent silence?
 - List one area in which you might be sensing silence (direction, relational confusion, career, kids, etc.)
 - What might God most want for you in your current season of silence?
- Share with the group.

PRAYER:

- Pray that God speak to each member in any season of silence they might be experiencing; pray that God *show* us as much as speak to us.
- Pray for family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues, that they begin to hear the voice of God.

Week 18: The God Who Guides

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 18 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. When we are in our darkest moments or when we feel utterly lost, we tend to think our greatest need is for direction from God. How might your real need be a conversational relationship with God? What perceived needs are you clinging to instead?
2. Confess to God some of the things you perceived as your real needs instead of him.
3. As Sam asks on page 178, in your personal journey, what are some of the ways you've experienced God's guidance through your circumstances?
4. Proverbs 3:5–6 is such a common passage that it's easy to read it quickly without thought. Sam paraphrases it this way: "Trust in the Lord, not your own ideas; acknowledge him in all your plans, and he will direct your paths" (p.173). If we took those verses seriously, how would our prayer and decision-making look differently? What does it mean to acknowledge God?
5. Summarize the various methods God uses to give us his guidance (pp.177–79). Which of those have you experienced in your life? Which would you love to experience?
6. How is it freeing to think that God uses our desires in his plans for us?
7. How does Scripture encourage you that you can have a conversational relationship with God?

EXERCISE:

- Sam summarizes Proverbs 3:5–6 like this:
After prayer, counsel, and wisdom: *make a plan*.
Then: *commit that plan to God*.
Finally: *let God direct your path*.
- Take six or eight minutes to consider a small decision you need to make and for which you wish for God's guidance. Pray, ask God for help, consider options (try on the dress [or kilt!]), and make a plan.
- Commit that plan completely to God, give it over to him, and ask God to direct your path.
- Share with the group your small need for direction, your considerations, and your plan.

PRAYER:

- As a group, commit all the plans to God and ask God to direct your paths.
- Pray for each member of the group that they grow in a conversational relationship with God.
- Pray for friends, neighbors, and family that they too grow deeply in a divine dialogue with the Lord.

Acknowledgments

Several months before publication, Kregel Publications asked me to create a study guide for *Hearing God in Conversations*. I quickly agreed.

I agreed too quickly.

I spent hours poring over my manuscript, desperately and fruitlessly trying to develop questions that would engage the heart. I pulled out my hair (it grew back) and questioned everything I knew about writing, study, prayer, and the universe. I was just too close.

Shortly after its publication—and a month after the study guide was due—a reader posted a review on Amazon: “I loved this book. While visiting my parents, I stole it from my Dad, and promptly devoured it.”

Anyone who would steal a book from her father was a kindred spirit. That reader was Lydia Leggett. I asked if she would take this confusing burden from my shoulders and write these study questions for me.

She quickly agreed. And just as quickly she sent me a draft that eventually became this study guide.

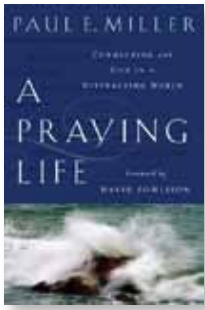
Lydia Leggett, I cannot thank you enough. And Bob Allums (her father), you raised a great daughter. Just let her keep the book!

—Sam

RESOURCES

We offer an 18 week or 10 week study guide. To download copies, visit:
<http://beliefsoftheheart.com/study-guides>

Sam conducts retreats on hearing God based on *Hearing God in Conversation*. For more information, go to:
<http://beliefsoftheheart.com/speaking>.



A Praying Life
by Paul E. Miller



Is Sunday School Destroying Our Kids?
by Samuel C. Williamson

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BELIEFS OF THE HEART SCRIPTURE MEDITATION PLAN

MEDITATIONS

MEDITATION QUESTIONS

What does this reveal about God?
Why would God want to reveal it to me?

What does it reveal about humanity, believers, and me?

Why does this passage intrigue me?
What about it stirs my curiosity?

What would my life look like if I believed it were true?

How does my culture twist, distort, or reject it? How has that affected me?

Why don't I really believe this truth deep down? What stops me from embracing it?

How does this truth make me love God more? How does it reveal his beauty?

What do I need to change in order to realign my heart with this truth?

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MEDITATION BOOKMARK

Cut out and use as a guide you for prayerful reflection on the passages you've read.