

14 DAY DEVOTIONAL

Margaret Feinberg



# Pursuing God

Drawing into a Deeper  
Understanding  
of God



# Pursuing God

A 14-Day Devotional  
to Reigniting Your Spiritual Life



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## Beckoning

One of my greatest passions in life is seeing people grow in their relationship with God. While our spiritual journeys look different—and the peaks and valleys of our experiences differ greatly—all of us are entrusted with the opportunity to pursue God each day. What amazes me about God is no matter how much we pursue him, God is always pursuing us more. God beckons us into a deeper relationship with himself each and every day.

But sometimes we need a jumpstart in our spiritual life. We need to be once again awakened to God's love in our life and the personal ways in which he speaks and reveals himself. In this 14-day devotional, you'll find entries that are designed to reignite your desire for God, grow in your prayer life, and reflect on the work God has been doing in your life.

My hope and prayer is that during the next two weeks, you'll discover God meeting you in unexpected ways and beckoning you into a deeper relationship.

Blessings,  
Margaret

## Day One: The Mystery of Prayer



**B**ats fascinate scientists because of their ability to see in the dark using the echoes of their ultrasonic calls. They send out a frequency that illuminates the environment so they can travel safely in the dark. While most bats emit their ultrasonic calls from their mouths, about three hundred species fire it out of their noses. The process is called echolocation.

Like most snappy words, echolocation percolates in my mind because of how precisely it describes a scientifically inexplicable process. In fact, scientists are still grappling to understand a lot about bats. For example, if a bat is feeding in the dark and you throw a pebble in its trajectory, the creature will dodge the rocky bullet. But if a large insect crosses the same bat's trajectory, the bat will fly toward the savory snack. In less than a second, a bat is able to determine whether he's encountering food or foe. Even with modern technology and gizmos, scientists can't create a device that emulates what a bat does naturally.

Sandwiched safely in my file drawer, the story piques my spiritual imagination. When it comes to prayer, all too often I feel like a bat with broken sonar. I'll be going through life and something unidentifiable—a decision, an opportunity, a possibility—will enter my trajectory. I won't know how to respond. At the last possible moment, I'll finally remember to cry out, "God, is this a trap or a treat?"

Thwack!

It's as if I'm flying in the dark with regard to my relationship with God. Though I have a hunch he's there somewhere, I can't detect him, so I do what comes naturally. I let out a sound, a solo prayer, and wait to see what, if anything, comes back.

Like echolocation, prayer is a mystery we can describe but not explain.

I wish prayer were simple, clean, and clear instead of complex, messy, and mysterious. I wish hearing from God was as easy as clipping magazine articles and slipping them into a drawer. Then I could simply open a file anytime and find the exact answer, direction, and encouragement I needed in the moment.



Instead, I find myself calling out to God, hoping he's listening, wondering how and if I'll receive a response. Some people call that faith. For me, it's desperation. The very act of prayer demands vulnerability—an acknowledgment that I don't have all (if any) of the answers, I can't do things on my own, and I am in need. Intimate prayer is disrobing.

Sometimes after I've poured my head and heart out to God, I'll take a breath and ask, "God, what is on your heart?"

On more occasions than I can remember, I have experienced a single word response to this question as an echo in my soul:

You.

Like a feather gently resting on a silky blanket, the word lies soft and tender on my soul. In my heart and mind, it's as if God is saying, I love you. Such moments give me the courage to keep calling out to God even when the life is uncertain I feel like I'm flying in the dark. Though prayer may remain a mystery, it's one I want to spend the rest of my life pursuing, because we never know how God will answer.

Go ahead and ask God what's on his heart. The answer just might surprise you.

Further Reflection:

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In what ways do you feel like you're "flying in the dark" when it comes to life? Prayer?

How has God revealed his love to you?

Read Ephesians 3:17-19.

Why do you think Paul prayed this prayer? What does it mean to you to be "filled up to all the fullness of God"?

## Day Two: Hungering to Know God



All too often I find myself tempted to live a distracted life. You know the kind—the one where within the busyness of life you still manage to perform the stand-up, sit-down, clap, clap, clap of regular church attendance, hope for a new nugget of knowledge or insight from the weekly sermon, and check off a random, albeit short, list of acts of kindness.

That's when the hunger appears in my belly and overtakes my soul, grumbling that there must be more. More of God not only to understand but to discover.

Deep down inside, I still hunger for a true, pure relationship with the Organic God—the One True God.

While organic is usually associated with food grown without chemical-based fertilizers or pesticides, organic is also used to describe a lifestyle: simple, healthful, and close to nature. Those are all things I desire in my relationship with God. I hunger for simplicity. I want to approach God in childlike faith, wonder, and awe. I long for more than just spiritual life but spiritual health—whereby my soul is not just renewed and restored but becomes a source of refreshment for others.

I want to discover God again, anew, in a fresh way. I want my love for him to come alive so that my heart dances at the very thought of him. I want a real relationship with him—a relationship that isn't altered by perfumes, additives, chemicals, or artificial flavors that promise to make it sweeter, sourer, or tastier than it really is. I want to know a God who in all his fullness would allow me to know him. I want a relationship that is real, authentic, and life-giving even when it hurts. I want to know God stripped of as many false perceptions as possible. Such a journey risks exposure, honesty, and even pain, but I'm hungry and desperate enough to go there.



In some ways, the journey to know God isn't too different from a first encounter with someone you've never met. I want to know what God looks like and what his interests are. I want to know God's likes and dislikes. I want to know what makes God tick and what ticks God off. I want to fall in love all over again. I want to know God.

I want to know the Organic God.

Further Reflection:

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On a scale from 1 to 10, how spiritually satisfied are you? In what areas would you describe yourself as hungry for more?

Who in your life inspires you to be a closer follower of Jesus? What characteristics make this person so inspiring?

Read John 20:10-18 and Luke 24:13-35. How well do you think Mary and the two on the road to Emmaus each knew Jesus? How much time do you think they spent with him? What do these two passages reveal about our own ability to recognize Jesus?

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**K**indness contains an unmistakable transforming power. It's disarming, especially when it comes in unexpected moments. Kindness has the ability to shape our attitudes and responses, changing the way we interact with others and the world. Even hardened hearts melt in the presence of kindness. Something about kindness pierces the soul, accentuating our own humanity and reminding us that we, too, can be kind.

In my search to know God through the Scriptures, I have been surprised to discover that God is abundantly kind. Sure, I was familiar with God's love and grace, but God's kindness caught me unaware. Now it's hard for me to read more than a portion of Scripture without encountering it.

God's kindness reached down from heaven in the person of Jesus Christ. God saw humanity beyond redemption and sent a Redeemer. It wasn't deserved or the fulfillment of an IOU, but rather an act of love that manifested itself in kindness. It was an expression of covenantal love—a willingness to honor the commitment to love, even when treated badly. Titus 3:4-5 acknowledges, "When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (niv).

If I am to know God as he really is, then I must not just accept that God is kind; I must embrace God's kindness as my own. I need that kindness to saturate my being and transform me.

Like the redemption scene from one of my all-time favorite holiday cartoons, *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, kindness makes our hearts grow larger. When we pour our energy into someone else—whether it's saving a sleigh full of gifts or simply extending kindness to a stranger—we discover new reserves of strength. Like the Grinch's heart, our hearts can grow two sizes in a single day.

Kindness doesn't usually make such grand displays except in holiday cartoons. Instead, kindness makes itself real in the smallest of actions. A gentle smile. A listening ear. A warm reply. A door held open for a stranger. Kindness means doing someone else's chores, filling a stranger's gas tank, or



running an errand for a neighbor. Such simple, everyday activities put kindness on display for the world to see, and they reveal hidden strength.

That's why it should be no wonder that kindness is attractive. It has a magnetic quality. Jeremiah 31:3 says, "The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness'" (niv). God's kindness is part of a committed promise—his covenantal love—to us. This love serves as an invitation to come into a closer relationship with him.

#### Further Reflection:

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In what ways has God revealed his kindness to you? Who have you gone out of your way to be kind to recently? How did it change you?

Why do you think God is so concerned with the way we treat one another?

Read Colossians 3:12-17 and 2 Peter 1:5-7. What personal attributes do these passages encourage? What can you do to clothe yourself in kindness today?

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## Day Four: Deeply Mysterious



Recently, I found myself enjoying a thrilling afternoon with friends in a water park. We raced down Splashdown, swam in Commotion Ocean, and floated down Castaway Creek. My husband, Leif, decided he wanted to try the Acapulco Cliff Dive, a sixty-five-foot-tall high-speed free-fall slide. Knowing what the ride would inadvertently do to my swimsuit, I decided to hang out at the bottom of the slide and watch.

That's when I saw him.

He was only five years old. A purplish-blue birthmark stained the right side of his face, his neck, his arm—all the way down to his fingers. I couldn't take my eyes off the unruly discoloration or the boy who was smiling wildly, sparkling with glee. He was ready for another round in the wave pool.

I stared at that dark blemish, knowing the social pain that it would cause the boy, and a single question sprang from my heart, "Why, God?"

I solemnly offered up those two words in what sounded more like a pang than a prayer. The question I was asking God was about so much more than the boy. Why, God, do we live in a fallen world? Why, God, do we live with so much suffering? Why, God, do we live with so much imperfection?

One soul-piercing sentence flooded my mind: You don't know the plans I have for him. I breathed deeply, releasing the tension I felt in my soul. I recognized my pride in assuming that I knew what was best for this young boy, my pride in assuming that that blemish had escaped God's notice, my pride in assuming that somehow God couldn't handle it.

I asked for God's forgiveness. I asked for his grace. I asked for a special blessing on the child.

God re-landscapes my attitudes and knowledge of him. In unexpected places, God continues the transformation and purification process.

I sense God's presence, like that of a familiar old friend, and I take one step closer to the mystery that is the Organic God. As much as I have



learned and discovered, there is still so far to go. If there's an ocean to travel, I'm still sanding on the shore. In contemplation, I stare into the darkness, and to my amazement I see a flicker of light as something stirs in the depth of my soul. Slowly the light begins to multiply, and I recognize that mysterious wonder of luminescence yet again.

And the hunger for God lives on.

Further Reflection:

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What do you think is mysterious about God?

Do you have a why question that lingers in your heart? What is it? How has God responded to that question? How have you responded to it?

Read 1 Corinthians 2:9 and John 15:15-17. Why do you think God wants to reveal mysteries to us? If you could ask God any single question and know he was going to answer, what would you ask?

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## Day Five: When God Speaks



**G**od's voice always contains an invitation to know him more. The act of listening for God beckons us to grow in our knowledge of both the temporal and the transcendent.

Such is the lesson in 1 Kings 18–19 when Elijah is just coming off the crowning achievement of his career: God was faithful to honor Elijah's every request as he defeated the false prophets at Carmel. But Queen Jezebel decides to rain on his party. She places a price on his head and promises to have him killed.

Emotionally drained, the depressed prophet shuffles into a cave on the side of a mountain. In the midst of the wilderness of silence, God calls Elijah by name, asking, "What are you doing here?"

The prophet rips into God, alleging that his fervent dedication and willingness to risk everything have been in vain. The Israelites have rejected God, destroyed the holy places, and killed the true prophets anyway. With a bounty on his head, Elijah has nowhere to go.

God doesn't address a single one of Elijah's allegations. Instead he instructs Elijah to stand on the side of the mountain and wait for God's passing.

Elijah obeys.

A thunderous wind shatters the mountainside, scattering rocks in all directions. Despite its power and ferocity, God is not in that wind. Hesitant to step outside the cave, Elijah falls to the ground as the earth convulses. Still regaining his composure, he squints when a shaft of fire descends from the sky and a wave of heat blasts across his face. Smoke fills his nostrils. Finally Elijah hears a thin silence like a gentle whisper.

Approaching the opening of the cave, God calls Elijah by name and asks the prophet a second time, "What are you doing here?" Elijah offers God the same answer as before, as if God hadn't heard him the first time. Only now does God answer Elijah's concerns with specific directives, reminding



him that he is not the last prophet—seven thousand others refuse to bow their knees to Baal.

The image of a whisper speaks to the posture of our relationship with God. Whispering is ineffective if the person we're trying to communicate with is on the other side of the room. God doesn't desire a long-distance relationship but an intimate one. Though the clamor of the wind, earthquake, and fire garner Elijah's attention, the stillness of the whisper grabs his heart and brings him to a place where he is able to receive God's answer.

Elijah's story demonstrates God's ability to speak into any situation. No matter the darkness I might be in, God has a way of bringing me to a place where I can encounter him. Like Elijah's, my pilgrimage is often difficult, riddled with silence and self-doubt. Like Elijah, I don't always get the answer I want. But I get the one I need.

#### Further Reflection:

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What do you think is mysterious about God?

Do you have a why question that lingers in your heart? What is it? How has God responded to that question? How have you responded to it?

Read 1 Corinthians 2:9 and John 15:15-17. Why do you think God wants to reveal mysteries to us? If you could ask God any single question and know he was going to answer, what would you ask?

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## Day Six: Giving Your Best



Some of the hardest teachings for me to wrap my mind around are the details in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) regarding sheep and sacrificial offerings. God makes it clear in Exodus 34:19 that the first offspring “from every womb” belong to him (nasb). In Leviticus 22:27, the instructions become more specific: “When an ox or a sheep or a goat is born, it shall remain seven days with its mother, and from the eighth day on it shall be accepted as a sacrifice of an offering by fire to the Lord” (nasb).

I asked Lynne, a shepherdess, why she thought God wanted the first offspring.

“I don’t want to even guess about all of God’s intentions, but every spring those of us within the shepherding community get excited about our lambs,” Lynne replied. “We can hardly wait for the first lamb to be born, especially those of our new moms. All the shepherds talk about it. When the first one comes, it’s extra special. It means spring is here, and it’s a symbol of new life and hope and joy for us. I think that in the action of giving over the first, you’re saying to God that he is first in your life.”

Lynne explained that if shepherds are careful with their breeding plan, it will produce lambs with the finest fleece. The best fleece is consistent from head to tail. It features rich, lustrous colors without scattered patches of coarse wool or unwanted spots. This is the wool that is most desired for fine garments.

“When God is asking for a sheep without blemish or deformity, he’s again asking for our best,” Lynne said.

“But what’s the best?” I asked.

“Like fine art, that’s always subjective. Yet in every community, including the sheep community, we have standards. When you list God’s standards for a sacrificial sheep, you’re describing the best of the flock—the one with the finest fleece that will produce the strongest offspring—and that takes years to produce.”



Up until that moment, I had never recognized the rich symbolism behind this sacrifice. I knew that the spotless sheep was representative of the flawless sacrifice—the Son of God—who was to come. But when God asked for sheep without blemish, spot, or defect, he was asking the people, not just to hand over their best, but also to sacrifice something they had worked years to develop.

I imagined shepherds struggling, season after season and year after year, to create what was, in essence, the perfect sheep. Then they sacrificed the animal. For me, it would be like spending months working on the perfect prose, then lighting a match and burning it. The act places me in a posture of depending on God to create through me again. For the shepherd, sacrifice meant trusting that another strong, perfect sheep would come along and contribute to the flock's long-term survival. I now understood why the temptation to offer a less-than-perfect sheep at the altar was so great.

All too often, when I think about giving my best to God, I think about giving big. But in asking for the first fleece, God isn't asking for the biggest. He wants the smallest and softest.

He doesn't want more—he wants the best.

#### Further Reflection:

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On a scale from 1 to 10, how difficult is it for you to give your best to God? Why?

When has someone given you their absolute best? What was your response?

Read Genesis 4. Why do you think God looked down upon Cain's sacrifice? Think of a time when you did not give the Lord your best. What was the result?

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## Day Seven: *Chronos* Versus *Kairos*



**T**he ancient Greeks both measured and celebrated time. Maybe that's one reason the New Testament (originally written in Greek) uses two different Greek words for time. The first, *chronos*, expresses time in measurable units: seasons, dates, calendars, and clocks. *Chronos* points to the before and the after; this kind of time is counted, marked off, measured with precision.

Modern-day Westerners like to talk in *chronos* terms. Our standards of minutes, hours, days, and weeks keep score of the chronological passing of time.

But the Greeks regarded time as more than a measurement; it's also a gift to be savored and experienced. Perhaps that's why they had their second word for time, *kairos*, which looks beyond the measurement of time and into its potential. While *chronos* is concerned with quantity, *kairos* asks us to consider quality. *Kairos* invites us to recognize and seize the divine, opportune moments before us.

When God speaks into our lives, the *kairos* interrupts the *chronos*. I call these experiences *Kairos Moments*, and they carry the potential to reorient our lives. They challenge our attitudes and invite repentance. They steady our steps when the footing of life seems unstable, shine a light when the path grows dim, and remind us that we are not alone, even when no other soul seems to understand.

We fall back into *chronos* thinking when we watch the clock, wondering when God will speak to us. *Kairos* thinking reminds us that God is speaking right now. Our role is to ask how he wants to talk to us. *Kairos* moments are like a dinner bell for the spiritually starved. Recognizing these moments gets us to stop and listen, knowing God is about to rock our world.

*Kairos* moments are those instances where in a personal way we're reminded of God's love, exposed to another facet of God's character, or awakened to an eternal truth that stirs our hearts back toward God. These moments can come in ten thousand different ways. A passage of Scripture



comes alive and changes the lighting in which we see a situation. A child says something offhanded that echoes a truth God has been speaking into our lives. A friend sends a handwritten note with the words that you've been praying to hear.

We may live in the *chronos*, but live with the expectation for the *Kairos* moments—looking for the moments God may want to speak and sometimes in a single word change everything.

#### Further Reflection:

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Do you tend to honor the *chronos* or the *kairos* moments in life? Explain.

When have you experienced a *kairos* moment? What impact did it have on your faith?

Read Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-17; and 15:1-21. How did God speak to Abraham? Why do you think God didn't say everything he had to say to Abraham when first speaking to him in Genesis 12?

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**M**ost days Rhonda's name rolls through my prayers unnoticed, but today I can almost smell the rage hanging in the air as I pray for her. When you're truly mad at God, the anger taints everything—your attitude, relationships, even your breath. Rhonda's anger traces back to her marriage to a verbally and physically abusive husband. When she prayed to God, the abuse didn't stop. Rhonda grew angry with God over the abuse and began blaming him. Eventually, she broke free from the abusive relationship, but heartache followed. One of her two children profits from the drug trade, the other has been destroyed by it. Left unchecked, the poisonous anger has simmered into venom that is unleashed whenever God's name is mentioned.

Despite the disparity in our lifestyles and beliefs, we still maintain a long-distance friendship. Rhonda has no idea that I'm praying for this day. As much as I know about her story, a thousand unanswered questions stir as I think about my friend. Most of our conversations are reduced to a singular point of conflict. She believes everything that has happened is God's fault. I'm still not quite sure when the original seed of disappointment and hurt planted itself, but my prayer this day is that God will uproot that dried up thorny bush replace it with sweet lavender instead—changing the sight, even the scent of her experience. An agrarian prayer, I know, but it's my personal plea for God to usher new life and beauty into a dark and desperate situation.

Praying for Rhonda reminds me of the importance of nurturing the soil of my own heart so it does not grow dry and hard, so prickly weeds don't grow. In a world filled with so much struggle, pain, and loss, I, too, find myself asking God "why?" If left unchecked, I can begin to blame God, then slip into dissatisfaction and slide into anger. I wish anger was just Rhonda's issue, but too often it's my own. I've experienced moments when I wonder, Why God did you allow that to happen? I've prayed prayers on behalf of others what have left me asking, Why God would you not answer? I've faced situations that have left me questioning, Where were you God?

And while the questions are fair to ask, they all niggle at the same core issue: Do I really believe God is good? Because if God is good, then even in



those moments that I can't wrap my head around a situation or comprehend what's just happened, then I can rest in the grace of God's goodness.

Reflecting on Rhonda's journey, I cry out to God not only for her healing and restoration but also my own. I pray that God will till the soil of my heart, remove the stones and stubborn thistles. Give me the faith to trust when I don't understand. Give me the strength to hold on when I want to let go. And give me the courage to continue pursuing you even when I don't understand. In humility, I find myself clinging to the truth that God is good and wait for the day my friend, Rhonda, rediscovers this beautiful truth as well.

Further Reflection:

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What are some of the "Why God?" questions that you find yourself wrestling with regularly?

What recent situation has tempted you to believe that God is not good?

Read Psalm 16:2, 31:19, 34:8-10, 84:11, and 107:1. What do these passages reveal about the goodness of God?

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## Day Nine: The Aaronic Blessing



One of the most potent prayers in all the Scripture comes from the book of Numbers. Known as the Aaronic blessing (after Aaron, Moses's brother), it says:

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
The Lord make His face shine upon you,  
And be gracious to you;  
The Lord lift up His countenance upon you,  
And give you peace. (Numbers 6:24-26, nkjv)

The prayer is powerful because it's a rich blessing. When I pray these words, I'm calling on God to protect, show favor, demonstrate kindness, and dispense peace on behalf of someone else.

Why is that so important?

Because in my own life, I've discovered that blessing someone is often crucial to truly forgiving them. If I feel like someone has wronged me in some way, I can make the choice to forgive—to erase the record of wrong—but sometimes it's still hard to fully let go and move on. I may say that I forgive the person and even tell God that I forgive the person, but something amiss still lingers in my heart. How do I move past the hurt or disappointment in the relationship?

That's why the Aaronic blessing is an indispensable part of my life. In the process of forgiveness, I've found it helpful to pray this blessing over the person. When I pray for the person in this way, asking God to pour out blessing and faithfulness, something shifts in my heart. I move from not being against the person to actually being for the person. This prayer helps align my heart with God's heart, my perspective with God's perspective.

I've even found this prayer helpful in my relationship with my best friend, Leif. We try to pray this prayer together every day. Some days we say it together, and other days I pray it back over him. The prayer often helps us to identify with any issues that have been left on the back burner. It's hard to sincerely pray for someone—even a memorized prayer—when you're



angry with the person. Thus, the prayer has become a check in our lives to make sure that we don't let the sun set on our anger. Sometimes we'll find ourselves talking about issues before we can pray, and occasionally, we'll have to deal with them afterward. But the prayer exposes our hearts toward God and each other.

While I've never been a fan of rote prayers, I have found that the commitment to this simple pray has brought healing and health to my life and relationships. So go ahead, and try it! I'd love to know what you think.

Further Reflection:

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What types of situation are the most natural for you to respond with prayer?  
What types of situations make it difficult for you to respond with prayer? What makes the difference?

Read Matthew 6:5-15. What new instructions on how to pray do you take away from this passage?

How do you and your spouse or significant other grow in your faith as a couple?  
What advice would you give another couple?

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## Day Ten: Where You've Been Planted



**M**y book *Scouting the Divine* focuses on my time with a vintner in Napa Valley, but I also spent time while researching for the project with a vintner in Fresno, California. These two vintners' techniques and purposes couldn't be more different.

The grape grower in Fresno cultivated thousands of acres of grapes. His vineyard stretched across the landscape in all directions. Each vine stood thick and sturdy, boasting huge, vibrant canopies of dark-emerald leaves. Bunches of grapes abounded underneath in what seemed like biblical proportions—often weighing ten pounds or more.

Many of these grapes were dried in the hot California sun in order to become raisins for Sun-Maid. Others were squished into grape juice for companies like Welch's. Still others were cultivated for large-scale wineries like Gallo.

As the vintner and I walked and drove around the farmland, we took time to examine the large, expensive machinery and irrigation systems used to prune the vines and water and fertilize the soil. Though the harvest still depended on manual labor, much of the care of the vines had been automated.

As we explored the vineyards, my guide encouraged to taste the various grapes—Thompson, ruby red, and globe. Right off the vine, these grapes burst with a candylike sweetness, the kind of sugary wonderment you taste when licking a lollipop. I had never had grapes as fresh, delicious, or addictive. I found myself nibbling the fruit of countless vines.

I also noticed cuts forming a circular scarring pattern at the base of each vine. My host vintner explained that this process is called girdling. In Fresno, the goal for the grape grower is maximum production on every vine. Each year, a worker will go out with a knife and cut a ring around the bottom of the vine. The process tricks the vine into thinking it's going to die, so the vine overproduces and yields a bountiful harvest.

My experience in Napa Valley was much different from my time in Fresno. In Napa, the vintner I spent time with only worked with boutique



vineyards. Rather than being responsible for ten thousand acres, he was caring for a mere half to three quarters of an acre per vineyard. He didn't girdle the vines. He wasn't interested in maximum productivity. He was interested in the character and the flavor of each grape.

In his vineyard, almost everything except irrigation was done by hand. The vintner touched every cluster of grapes two or three times during the growing season. He pruned each vine by hand to ensure that each bunch of grapes received just the right amount of sunlight.

Both men were passionate about growing grapes. Both were great at growing grapes. Yet their focus and their techniques couldn't be more different.

Why do I share this experience with you? Like viticulture, caring for God's people and shaping culture in a meaningful way is a labor of love. And each leader's labor of love will be very different, but no less important to God's work.

#### Further Reflection:

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What kind of vineyard has God called you to cultivate? Are you in an area like Fresno, where you will cultivate thousands and thousands of acres and the fruitfulness will be overwhelming at times? Or have you been placed in an area like Napa Valley, where your acreage is limited but the character and distinctiveness of your work are unmistakable?

Describe an experience you have had with a leader who cultivated like the vintner in Fresno. Describe an experience you have had with a leader who cultivated like the vintner in Napa Valley.

Read 1 Peter 4:8-11. What gifts has God given you to use in your own leadership positions?

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## Day Eleven: Tag, You're It



I recently attended a large convention where everyone wore badges that identified the person's name, company, and location of their company. Without the badge, you weren't allowed inside the convention. It was your pass, your permit to be there. For the first few days, I found myself skimming past the names of the people I encountered and focusing on their company. From this little piece of information, I could pigeonhole them into their purpose for being at the convention and even make some assumptions about their theology and background.

All from a name tag.

Over the course of the week, I met with many of these tag wearers, and what I discovered over a cup of coffee or a meal was so far beyond what those little tags could tell. I met one woman who had been battling the pain and exhaustion of fibromyalgia for more than two years. A man longed to quit his job but had nowhere else to go. One was still working on finishing a degree. Another had never gotten one. Many were experiencing personal breakthroughs in their spiritual life.

But none of that was on the name tag.

Finding out such meaningful things required going beyond a person's name and into the heart of the person wearing the little tag.

I sometimes wonder what name tag we'll be wearing in the banquet halls of heaven—at the marriage supper of the lamb. How will we be identified? What will our tag say?

In the Gospel of John in *The Message*, we read of Christ: "Whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, he made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves" (John 1:9, tm).



In my mind's eye, I can see God removing the plastic convention tag from my neck so he can allow my true identity—the one he has placed inside me and is fashioning after himself—to shine through. In God's identity, I am no longer limited by a name that is attached to failure or a history that is linked to heartache. In the true self, the child-of-God self, I am empowered to becoming something greater than myself, namely like Christ.

And that is the greatest tag I will ever wear.

Further Reflection:

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What three words describe you best?

Think of someone who reflects the character of Christ well. What characteristics does he or she embody?

Read Ephesians 4. How does Paul urge followers of Christ to act? How can you better imitate Christ in the next week?

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## Day Twelve: You Follow Me



**J**ohn 21 describes a memorable breakfast on the beach that the resurrected Jesus shared with his followers. It starts off like this...

Simon Peter and his friends are fishing—unsuccessfully—offshore when a familiar voice yells out to them to place their nets on the other side of their boat. Against their better judgment, they follow the advice of the landlocked man and find their nets groaning under the weighty catch. In the midst of the excitement, Simon Peter realizes that the stranger is Jesus. Throwing on a shirt, he belly flops into the water and swims to shore as fast as he can.

When the water finally grows shallow enough for his feet to touch, Simon Peter sees Jesus standing near a beachside fire. The unmistakable smell of smoke, charred fish, and fresh, baked bread fills the air.

This is not an ordinary breakfast but an encounter that changes one disciple forever and echoes truths into my heart thousands of years later.

At this breakfast, Jesus prophetically warns Simon Peter that “truly, truly” there will come a day “when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go . . . Follow Me!” (John 21:18-19, nasb).

Though the words penetrate Simon Peter’s mind, they do not pierce his heart. He doesn’t want them to. Who would? Peter looks anywhere and everywhere for an escape. He finds one among the impromptu breakfast crowd. “Lord, and what about this man?” Peter asks.

“If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?” Jesus asks pointedly.



Then Jesus echoes the command “You follow Me!” (John 21:20-22)

Through that passage, God anchors me in the truth that above all else the greatest calling on my life is not my marital status or ministry but simply my need to follow him. My calling is to press my face into the shoulder blades of Jesus so that wherever he leads I will go.

You follow me.

Don't be distracted by what others are doing. Don't worry about the speed, productivity, or efficiency of others. Stay the course. The calling of all our lives is to press our noses into the shoulder blades of Jesus so that he is the only one we are seeing and following.

Further Reflection:

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Have you ever had a particular Scripture passage follow you through life events? If so, describe it.

When are you most tempted to fall into the comparison trap or become distracted by others?

What does following Jesus and not being distracted by others look like in your life?

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## Day Thirteen: The Beauty of Conviction



One particularly rough day for me began as a bad hair day and rolled into a bad everything day. At the end of a long, grumpy afternoon, I laced up my tennis shoes and headed out the door for a run. I needed to vent, and God was the only available option. I spent most of the two-mile trail around my home expressing an entire grocery list of complaints. The Bible says we're supposed to offer up our concerns to God, so I super-sized my offering, pouring out my heart in a thirty-minute gripe fest. As I rounded the turn toward the driveway, I emptied my final words and emotions, ending my tirade with a groan that was more of a "So there!" than an "Amen."

As I stared at the pebbles on the paved road so I didn't tumble, one thought flooded my mind: It's not about you.

The words weren't original. I'd heard and read them before. But God was now speaking them at an appointed time, an opportune moment, using them to reshape me as I realized that all of my concerns and complaints centered on one person: me. In my hurt and frustration, I had become self-consumed. Over the next few days, "It's not about you" rolled through my mind and spirit. I felt conviction, the invitation of God's Spirit to change my attitude and behavior. I repented for becoming so self-focused.

That bad day is long gone, but the correction God whispered in my heart often revisits me. It's not about you. Those words still serve as a wake-up call when I find myself frustrated or discouraged.

I used to cringe at the thought of conviction, believing that God's correction was a marker of my spiritual failure, but I've begun recognizing it instead as one of God's greatest blessings and a mark of his love. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, who rouses the conscience of right and wrong (John 16:8). A repentant response not only removes the impurities that separate us from God but also helps us align our heart with God's heart.



The process isn't easy. Discipline always feels more painful than pleasant but often leads to beautiful transformation.

The conviction It's not about you doesn't apply only to my grumpiest days, but to all of them. The words are an invitation to embrace an outward-focused lifestyle, placing others' needs above my own. God longs for our holiness, aches for our freedom, and desires our purity. He wants these things more than we ever will. Like a master potter, God will apply just the right amount of pressure to correct and reprove so that we live centered on him.

Further Reflection:

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When in the last month have you experienced the Lord's conviction? How did you respond?

When in the last month have you felt the Lord's disciplining you? What was the result?

Read Psalm 39:11, Proverbs 3:12, Proverbs 10:17, and Hebrews 12:8.

What do these verses reveal about discipline?

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## Day Fourteen: Abiding in the True Vine



I had been waiting to unpack John 15 with Kristof, a master vintner in Napa Valley, from the moment I met him. As he showed me around his vineyard, I saw gnarled plants with crusty, brittle bark, clinging to life. The tiny buds sprouting underneath the rough exterior of the branches were waiting for an experienced pruner to guide their growth.

When we returned from our tour, we looked at John 15 together. Reading through the passage in which Jesus calls himself the true vine, Kristof noted that it was quite a metaphor. I asked him to look at the passage line by line through the lens of a vintner.

“What’s interesting is that the passage doesn’t identify the full role of his Father,” he observed.

I was confused. The passage clearly said that the Father was the vinedresser. “What do you mean?” I challenged.

“In a vineyard, people often have multiple roles, and the Father probably isn’t just the vinedresser—he plays a role as the owner of the vineyard, the manager of the vineyard, and the vintner too,” Kristof said. “But of all the titles, Jesus gives his Father the title of vinedresser, and that’s the one who prunes or sculpts the vine.”

I wondered why the role of vinedresser was so important. Why didn’t Jesus give the Father the title of owner? Although Scripture doesn’t say, Kristof had an intriguing observation.

“It may surprise you, but whoever is pruning a vine really is the master. Even in our vineyards, the owner may possess the land, and I might be making the wine, but it’s the guy with the pair of shears making twelve dollars an hour who has all the power.”

Kristof continued reading aloud, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:2, *nasb*).



He explained that as a kid, when he had read that passage, he always thought the practice of pruning was easy. “I thought you’d just walk up to a vine, see a branch with fruit, and say, ‘We’ll keep that one.’ You’d see another branch without fruit and cut it off.

“But as a vintner,” Kristof continued, “I know that there’s a lot more decision making and expertise going on in this passage than appears at first glance. It’s the little cuts that are the most important. You can’t come in with a pair of shears and clip like crazy. You don’t just look at what appears to be a dead branch and cut it off, and then look at a branch full of fruit and think it’s fine. Over the course of pruning, you make a series of very precise, strategic cuts that will produce the healthiest, most robust vines.”

“Which highlights just how intimately God is involved in our lives,” I interjected.

“And also how God handles each of us differently,” Kristof added.

He explained that if a vinedresser chooses the wrong cuts, the vine won’t produce fruit. That’s why a vinedresser looks at each vine carefully. Every vine is unique. Even two vines planted next to each other may require significantly different pruning in order to produce fruit.

“One vine may have great soil and be strong enough to handle a significant pruning, but the next vine may be weaker, and the same pruning would leave it fruitless,” he explained.

“Which may be one of the reasons Jesus chose to describe his Father as vinedresser,” I offered. “He’s the only one who can make those judgments.”

Yet the imagery of the vine in John 15 doesn’t just illuminate the idea of pruning but also abiding. In fact, Kristof was convinced that vines are the perfect portrait of abiding.

“The vine is the source of everything for the branch—every nutrient, every life-giving drop of water, every hint of growth,” Kristof explained. “The branch is completely dependent on the vine. But even in those mo-





ments when I grow wild or unbalanced, God is faithful as a vinedresser to perform all the small cuts I need to remain fruitful. So in that place where I am abiding in Christ under the watchful eye of the Father, I can trust that the Father will be pruning those areas and desires in my life that don't line up with where he wants me to go."

#### Further Reflection:

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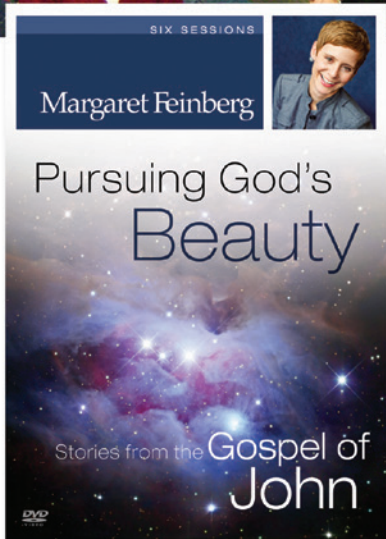
How have you seen God pruning you in the last month? What does the process feel like?

What does fruit bearing look like in your own life?

Read John 15:1-8. How are you abiding in the vine? How in the next week can you more fully rely on Christ for everything?

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Let God's beauty take your breath away.

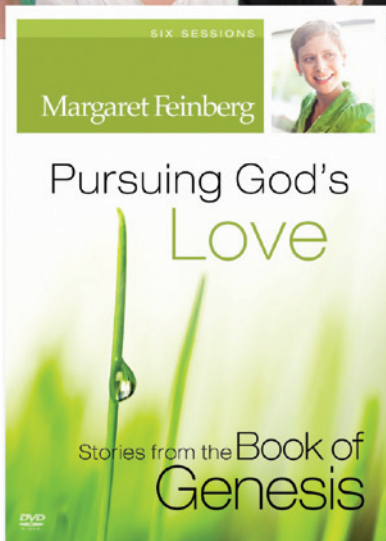


*Pursuing God's Beauty* is a 6-session DVD Bible study that blends art, Scripture and spiritual insight to explore the riches of the Gospel of John. Whether in a group or on your own, you'll discover what it means to celebrate and radiate the beauty of Christ.

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The greatest story you will ever know is  
the story of God's love.

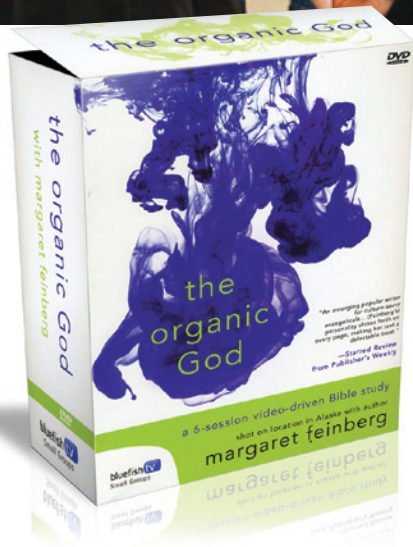


*Pursuing God's Love* is a 6-session DVD Bible study designed to take participants through the book of Genesis. The study reminds us that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, abounding in imagination, creativity, mystery, and wisdom. And even when we question God's love or act in disobedience, God pursues us.

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## The Organic God 6-Session DVD Bible Study

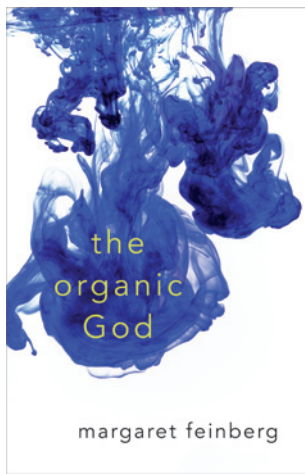


*The Organic God Bible study* is a 6-session DVD study designed to help you catch glimpses of God's character—big-hearted, beautiful, mysterious—that point to an authentic and deep relationship. You'll find yourself falling in love with God all over again.

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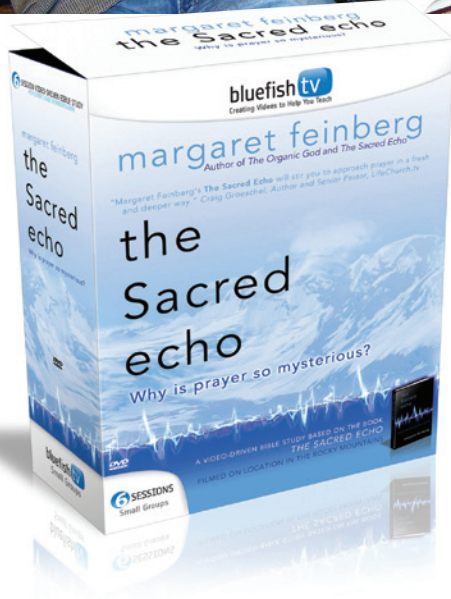
Fall in love with God all over again.



Imagine what it would look like to have an organic relationship with God—one that is stripped of all pollutants and additives of this world. *The Organic God* removes the unhealthy fillers and purifies our relationship with the God of the Scriptures. Through personal stories and scriptural insights, Margaret Feinberg shares glimpses of God's character—big-hearted, kind, beautiful, mysterious—that point you to an authentic and naturally spiritual relationship with him, allowing you to truly discover God in a healthy, refreshing new way. You won't be able to help but fall in love all over again.

Also available in e-book and audio download formats.

# The Sacred Echo 6-Session DVD Bible Study

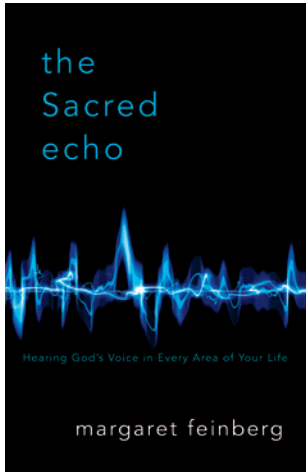


*The Sacred Echo* Bible study is a 6-session DVD study designed to help participants develop a more vibrant prayer life and recognize the repetitive nature of God's voice in their lives.

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Rather than just listen for the whispers of God,  
listen for the echoes.



When God really wants to get your attention, he doesn't just say something once.  
He echoes.

He speaks through a Sunday sermon, a chance conversation with a friend the next day, even a random email. The same theme, idea, impression, or lesson will repeat itself in surprising and unexpected ways until you realize that maybe, just maybe, God is at work.

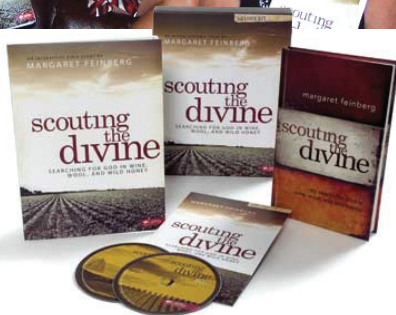
According to author Margaret Feinberg, the repetitive nature of a sacred echo gives us confidence that God really is prompting, guiding, or leading. The sacred echo reminds us to pay close attention—something important may be going on here. The sacred echo challenges us to prayerfully consider how God is at work in our life as well as in the lives of those around us. The sacred echo is an invitation to spiritual awakening.

Margaret writes, *"I want a relationship with God where prayer is as natural as breathing. If God is the one in whom we are to live and move and have our being, then I want my every inhale infused with his presence, my every exhale an extension of his love."*

If that's your desire too, let *The Sacred Echo* be your guide to a deeper, more rewarding relationship with the God of the universe.

Also available in e-book and audio download formats.

# Scouting the Divine 6-Session DVD Bible Study



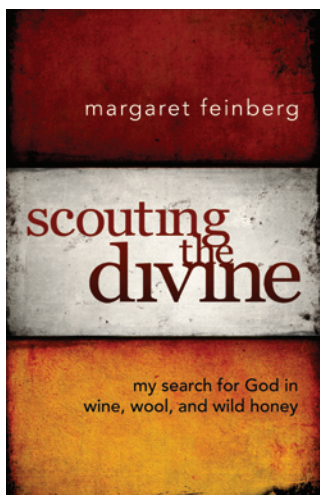
*Scouting the Divine* Bible study is a 6-session DVD study in which Margaret spends time with a shepherd, beekeeper, farmer, and vintner in order to unlock the beauty and wonder of Scripture. Fresh and insightful, you won't read the Bible the same way again.

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Embark on the spiritual adventure of a lifetime.



The Bible is full of clever plots and compelling stories, laced with historic insights and literary beauty. Despite its richness and depth, many of us struggle to close the gap between the ancient world and our own.

What does it mean to know that Jesus is the Good Shepherd when the only place you've encountered sheep is at a petting zoo? How can you understand the promise of a land overflowing with honey when you buy yours in a bear-shaped bottle? Can you grasp the urgency of Jesus' invitation to abide in the vine when you shop for grapes at a local grocery store?

Popular author and speaker Margaret Feinberg invites you to accompany her on the spiritual adventure of a lifetime. Explore how ancient livelihoods illuminate meaningful Christian truths that apply to life today. Spend time with a shepherdess, farmer, beekeeper, and vintner who each bring fresh insights to familiar Scriptures. Scout the divine and move from just reading the Bible to entering stories that can be touched, tasted, heard, seen, smelled, and savored.

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The screenshot shows the website's navigation bar with links for BIO, SCHEDULE, COMMUNITY, BLOG, PRESS, BOOKING, STORE, DOWNLOADS, and SPECIAL OFFERS AND SECRET DEALS. Below the navigation is a large photo of Margaret and a man, with a video download link for 'Scouting the Divine'. The main content area features a 'welcome' message, a featured blog post titled 'Ten Most Beautiful Books I Read During the Last Decade' with a 'read more' button, and a 'latest tweet' section showing a tweet from @mfeinberg. A 'next event' section for 'Renewal by the Lake, Juneau AK' is also visible.

On the site, you'll find:

- Weekly giveaways
- Free e-newsletter sign-up
- Margaret's personal blog
- Interactive discussion board
- Video and audio clips
- Secret sales and promotions
- Travel schedule
- Great prices on Bible studies

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