

Online Study Guide

For

Pieces of Heaven: *Recognizing the Presence of God*

By Joseph Bentz

Beacon Hill Press, 2012

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Study Guide

Introduction to the Leader's Guide/Study Guide

This guide is designed to help lead a group through the study of *Pieces of Heaven: Recognizing the Presence of God*. The study guide may be used in several ways:

- Some group leaders may want to use the guide for their own preparation only, while others may choose to print out copies for each group member to use.
- The study guide divides the book into a **six-week study** since that time frame works well for many groups, but some may want to slow it down and spend more time on each chapter.
- This study guide includes more questions and activities than many groups will have time to discuss, depending on the length of your sessions and the level of participation in your group. You may want to be selective about which questions and issues are most relevant to your group.
- The study guide also works well for individual readers who want to deepen their study and reflection of the issues raised in the book.

What is *Pieces of Heaven* About?

Pieces of Heaven: Recognizing the Presence of God seeks to heighten the reader's awareness of those times when the veil between us and eternity—between us and the Holy Spirit—seems thin and permeable and we sense God's presence in a close and supernatural way. The reason for raising this awareness is that the everyday world and its demands and responsibilities take up so much of our attention that it is easy to crowd out the Spirit altogether. This book will invite the reader to become aware of those "thin places" where the Spirit breaks through.

Most Christians don't *intend* to quench the Spirit. They *want* God's presence in their lives, but they end up ignoring Him anyway. Why? In an increasingly secularized and frenzied culture, it's easy to leave God out of our conversations and thoughts—at work, at school, in social settings, and unfortunately sometimes even at church. But our lives can be transformed when we remove Him from that small place on the shelf where we sometimes keep Him and let Him permeate our lives—our work, our play, our music, our relationships, our long walks, our mealtimes, our times of fear, our journeys through suffering.

This book seeks to awaken readers to God's presence in the many places where we have ignored Him. If we open our eyes, we will see Him in our relationships, not only

with those we love, but also in those who cause us problems. His Spirit is powerfully present in music, in nature, in the intellect, in prayer, and in Scripture. He also manifests Himself at rare times in more unusual ways, in powerful revivals, in people's encounters with angels, or in the moments before death. The world we live in tries to snuff out God's presence, but He keeps pushing toward us if only we pay attention.

When people quench the Spirit and shut God out, they don't leave a blank space in their lives where His Spirit should be. Instead, they fill it with something. The world is full of counterfeits that people use as replacements for God. People who serve false gods almost never identify them as such. Some people give themselves over to these gods entirely, while others try to squeeze the false gods into a comfortable spot next to the real God. What can serve as a stand-in for God? Ambition? Wealth? Video games? Sports? The list is endless. In awakening readers to the life-transforming presence of the real God, this book seeks to initiate or renew a joyful relationship with Jesus Christ.

Session 1

This session guides readers through the following chapters of *Pieces of Heaven*:

Chapter 1: The Thin Place in the Veil

Chapter 2: Stamping Out God

Key Themes

How easy is it to ignore the presence of God? How often do Christians “quench the Spirit” even when that is not their intention? The first two chapters of *Pieces of Heaven* consider the many ways in which our culture and our own minds and habits keep the Holy Spirit at a distance. It’s easy to live in denial of the most important realities, but spiritual sleep does not have to become a permanent state.

Discussion Questions

FOCUS: Finding the “Thin Place in the Veil”

1. The opening chapter of this book contrasts a dramatic Hollywood portrayal of God’s presence—smoke and fire and a booming voice—with the more common way that Christians experience Him, as a loving and abiding Presence in their lives. Do you ever wish God would appear in a more dramatic physical form in your daily life? Why do you think He chooses not to do that?
2. Review what the opening chapter says about the “thin place in the veil” between us and eternity. What words would you use to describe that “thin place”? What experiences have you had that fit the description of this kind of spiritual “thin place”?

FOCUS: Quenching the Spirit, Living in Denial of the Big Things

1. Do you agree with the book’s example that a hot, gooey pizza can sound more appealing in a particular moment than the much greater and more significant thrill of seeing the face of God? If so, why is that? Why is it so hard to focus on spiritual realities?
2. The author shows that people in earlier eras, such as the Puritan era in America, had frequent reminders of God and spiritual teachings in their entertainment, education, conversations, and other aspects of daily life. In your own lifetime, what changes have you seen in the ways that God and religion are treated in popular entertainment, education, and elsewhere? Do you think the culture in which you live is more spiritual or less spiritual now than it was earlier in your life?

3. The second chapter examines some ways modern culture denies “Big Things,” such as Death. Review the examples in the book. Can you think of other Death-denying practices in addition to those? Why do people try so hard to live in denial of something that is so unavoidable? What would happen if they faced it?

4. For many, heaven and eternity are vague abstractions that don’t have much meaning for living their everyday lives. How would life be different if people lived in greater awareness of eternity?

FOCUS: How God Gets Shut Out of Polite Conversation

The second chapter makes the point that social etiquette calls for leaving God out of many conversations.

1. Make a list of all the places in your own life where it is considered awkward or rude to discuss spiritual issues. Work? School? Your child’s soccer game? The hair salon? Others?

2. Do you think discussion of God *should* be left out of conversations in any or all of these places? Why or why not?

3. Have you found good ways to discuss issues of faith in places where some people have considered such discussions uncomfortable? How have you done it?

4. Are spiritual discussions even in the church itself sometimes too awkward for people to engage in? Discuss your response to this quote from the book:

“In an era in which denominational lines are breaking down, and community churches attract members of ever-widening arrays of beliefs, people are more careful not to raise sensitive theological issues that may cause offense. This diversity of theological assumptions, rather than becoming an opportunity for vigorous conversations about the disputed issues, instead becomes a reason for avoiding those controversies altogether. Better to have a vague or dumbed-down theology that the congregation can agree on than to risk alienating people by challenging their beliefs or asking them to carefully examine them. Because people in the church become so used to downplaying spiritual discussions in other settings—work, social occasions, school—that reticence spills over into church relationships.”

Does that description fit your experience? Do some Christians you know go out of their way not to express beliefs that other Christians might disagree with?

Focus: Removing God from the Cultural Conversation in Science and Beyond

The “Stamping Out God” chapter makes the argument that for many, a narrow conception of science has become the god of modern thought. Review that section of the chapter with your group.

Then consider this:

Like the scientist Francis Collins and others quoted in this chapter, John Wilkinson, in his book *No Argument for God: Going Beyond Reason in Conversations About Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011), makes the point that it is a mistake to assume that one pathway of human knowledge, such as science or reason, is the only way to understand reality. God is simply beyond these narrow ways of knowing, even though science and reason are good tools for the areas of knowledge in their own domains.

As a group, discuss these two quotes from Wilkinson's book:

"Simply put, sense and reason are only one slim pathway of what can be known. Just because faith doesn't reside completely in this pathway doesn't make it a fairy tale. It's crazy to think that all that can be known, can be known by humans. Yes, the scope of human knowledge is vast, but we quickly forget that it belongs to a small subset of total knowledge. There are paths that stretch far beyond the human ability to understand." (Wilkinson, p. 16)

"If we believe the ultimate truth about reality lies outside of our grasp, how can someone as limitless as God (if we really believe this) make sense to us? This is a hard transition for many Christians to make. Perhaps we have been under the influence of the age of reason for too long. Many Christians feel impelled to justify what they believe. Many Christian conversations are really intellectual discussions about the credibility of the gospel or the historical support for faith. We attempt to persuade people to believe. Many believers have exchanged their privileged role of disciple for apologist, as if Jesus needs a lawyer in the courtroom." (Wilkinson, p. 42-43).

Action Steps

1. In the coming week, initiate one conversation with someone about spiritual issues. This could be with a co-worker, a neighbor, a family member, a church member, or a stranger.

Afterward, at the beginning of your next session, discuss this with your group:

- Describe the conversation you had. How awkward or difficult was it to steer the conversation in a spiritual direction?
- How did the person respond to the turn of the conversation toward spiritual issues?
- Once the conversation got going, were you glad to be discussing issues of faith? Did the conversation strengthen your own faith? Would you do it again? Would you do it differently?

2. Spend time as a group *imagining* what Heaven will be like. Review Randy Alcorn's book *Heaven* if that is helpful. What do you look forward to most? How does your anticipation of Heaven change the way you live now?

Session 2

This session guides readers through the following chapters of *Pieces of Heaven*:

Chapter 3: Waking Up to God's Presence

Chapter 4: God in the Ordinary: Encountering Him in the World He Created

Key Themes

Being spiritually awake does not come naturally. Our “default” position is drift, and spiritual sleep, and a gradual eroding of faith. How can we stay awake to God's presence? From Chapter 3, this session considers some ways we can prevent our faith from growing cold. This session also covers Chapter 4, the first of several chapters that celebrate God's presence in the ordinary aspects of life, in this case Nature, His creation.

Discussion Questions

FOCUS: Report on Class Activities from Session 1

If members of your group conducted the Action Steps suggested in Session 1, particularly the conversations with others about spiritual issues, give them a chance to tell about those conversations and to discuss their responses.

FOCUS: Is it Possible to Fill Every Minute with God's Presence?

1. Discuss Frank Laubach's experiment of trying to turn his attention toward God at least once every minute of his waking hours.

- Are there ways in which you think this is a spiritually helpful idea?
- Are there ways in which it bothers you?
- What difference do you think it would make in your own Christian life if you tried it?

2. Do you agree with the point made in Chapter 3 that it is harder than it used to be to concentrate on *anything*?

- If so, discuss what examples of this thinking come to mind. What forces have led to this increasing difficulty in focusing on one thing for an extended period of time?
- What impact does this scattered thinking have on your daily life as a Christian?

FOCUS: Hearing God

Chapter 3 describes some of the ways God relates to us. Some ways are powerful, emotional and direct. Other ways are more indirect, such as when we sense God's presence in His creation or in our relationships with other people.

1. If you were asked to describe the ways God's presence fills your life, what would you say? Often this is hard to put into words, but try it. It may be encouraging to other group members to hear the testimonies of how God makes His presence known in the lives of fellow believers.
2. Christians sense God's direction as His presence fills their lives day by day. But it's easy to mistake our own ideas or desires for His leading. What are ways that these impressions from God should be tested? What part does Scripture play in this process? What part do other Christians play?

FOCUS: "Flinging Yourself" at Prayer

When discussing an example in Scripture in which Jesus went off alone to pray, the author writes:

"When I see Jesus praying in this scene and others, including in His agonizing night at Gethsemane, He teaches me the most important lesson I've ever learned about prayer: you have to fling yourself at it. No matter what else is vying for your energy and attention, you have to set it all aside, push yourself into the darkness if you have to, and go to the place of prayer. You and the Father, staying in close connection. That's what Jesus did. That's what I want to do."

1. Do you agree with this attitude toward prayer? Jesus had to *sneak away* to find time to pray. Do you?
 - What strategies have you found for setting aside a portion of your day for prayer, Scripture reading, and worship? What would you like to do differently?
 - How important are these practices in maintaining your relationship with God?
2. Why do you think the Gospel writers included stories not only of Jesus' sermons and miracles, but also of His times of leaving everyone behind to go off alone to pray?

FOCUS: Why Do People Keep God at a Distance?

1. Since a relationship with God seems like such an obviously good and fulfilling thing, why are people so often reluctant to enter into it? Make a list of the impediments that keep people apart from God. How can those barriers be swept away?
2. Consider this excerpt from Chapter 3:

"Let's face it. The spiritual life can seem a little dull, especially if we buy into the stereotypes about it. Instead of picturing it as being embodied by someone enjoying a soul-shaking, joyful, life-embracing relationship with God, people instead might picture the cliché of a too-pious, overly religious, life-denying

person spouting rote prayers in a sterile room. Many get stuck in that cliché and never taste the joy of God's presence. They don't even think they would want to." Is that stereotype of the Christian life prevalent among people you know? How would you respond to someone who said he or she didn't want to be a Christian because such a life would be boring?

FOCUS: Experiencing God's Presence in Nature

1. Take some time to think about the most inspiring time you have ever spent in nature. If time permits, write about the experience, reflecting on the details of what made it so powerful.

- Share your story with other members of the group, and listen to their experiences. What do these stories have in common?
- In what ways do you sense God's presence in nature?
- How is that way of experiencing God's presence different from how you sense Him in other settings, such as in a worship service or a time of prayer?

2. The author begins Chapter 4 by mentioning his father's lovingly restored 1951 Chevy. Whenever the author sees that car or any car like it, he immediately thinks of his father. In a similar way, whenever the author spends time in nature, he immediately thinks of his Heavenly Father, the Creator of all that beauty. For you, does nature reveal the "fingerprints of God"? If so, make a list of all the things that nature tells us about what God is like.

FOCUS: How Nature Adjusts Our Perspective

1. As Chapter 4 discusses, the sun is so huge that a million earths could fit inside it. It takes hundreds of thousands of years for a photon to move from the solar core to the sun's surface. A new star that was recently discovered is 10 million times brighter than our own sun.

- How does contemplating the vastness of the universe affect your perspective on your own place in it? Does it have any implications for your faith?

2. The author shows how hiking in the foothills above his home and looking down at his house from this different perspective helps him think differently about what really matters. Does nature serve a similar perspective-changing role for you?

Action Steps

1. Plan one experience in nature this week—hiking in the woods, enjoying a sunset, walking the beach, or something similar. Use this time to deliberately turn your thoughts toward God and His presence in His creation. Pray, sing, read Scripture, or simply contemplate His Spirit during this time. Report back to your group next week. How

helpful and meaningful was this experience? Do you want to do it again? What is one thing you would like your group to know about it?

2. Ask the members of your group (or maybe only particular volunteers) to try Frank Laubach's experiment of turning their thoughts toward God at least once each minute. They can set whatever time frame they like for this—one hour, one day, one week.

Some may be willing to journal about this. Ask everyone who does it to report on their experience during the next meeting. Were they able to sustain that discipline? Was it helpful? Would they do it again? Would they recommend it?

Session 3

This session guides readers through the following chapter of *Pieces of Heaven*:

Chapter 5: God in the Ordinary: He Disguises Himself in People

Key Themes

Many people find it easy to love Jesus but hard to love the people all around them. Scripture teaches that when we serve those sometimes difficult people, we are serving Jesus Himself. How can we learn to recognize God's presence in other people? This session centers on encountering God in relationships with others.

Discussion Questions

FOCUS: Report on Class Activities from Session 2

If members of your group conducted the Action Steps suggested in Session 2, including their experience in Nature and their attempt at following Frank Laubach's experiment of turning to God at some point in every minute, give them a chance to tell about those experiences and to discuss their responses.

FOCUS: Connecting to God Through Service to Others

1. Chapter 5 tells of a man who has stopped participating in his church except for occasional attendance because he has a hard time relating to the new music and other aspects of worship and feels the church no longer cares much about him or his accumulated years of wisdom.

The author suggests the best way for the man to reconnect is through service in his church—helping with one of the ministries to the poor or to children, teaching a Sunday school class, or serving in some other way.

- Do you agree with that advice?
- What would you tell the man if he were in your church?
- Do you see the man's alienation as his fault alone, or should more be done to reach out to him?

2. In Matthew 25:35-40, when Jesus is describing the final judgment, He says to His true followers:

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”

- Read this Scripture together as a group. Discuss the many implications this has for how we live our Christian lives. How literally do you take Jesus’ phrase, “you did it for me”? What does that mean?

- Jesus mentions those who are hungry, those who are thirsty, those who are strangers, those who need clothes, those who are sick, and those who are in prison. Examine your own life as well as the ministries of your church. In what ways do you and your church serve Jesus by serving people who fit those descriptions? In what ways could you do more?

- The author discusses the difficulty not only of serving *needy* people, but also the difficulty of loving those who cause us problems. He writes:

“It’s easy to see Jesus in the face of a child, maybe, or even in the face of a hungry homeless person, but how about the clerk at the drive-thru window who screws up your order? Do you feel reverence for that person?

“How about the colleague who sends you a scathing email? How about the family member who demands and demands but never gives? Jesus in those people?...Love them, Jesus says, and you have loved me.”

Do you agree that those are valid examples of people we are required to love as if they are Jesus? If so, how can you do it?

- Chapter 5 includes the story of a church member who becomes friends with a woman in the grocery store whose cart is blocking the aisle. Review that story, and then make a list of all the ways in which we sometimes perceive the people in our lives as *impediments* or objects to be dealt with rather than as *human beings* made in the image of God. What can we do to make ourselves *see* people better?

FOCUS: Even With Its Problems, the Church Still *Works* as the Body of Christ

1. This chapter ends with the story of the author’s daughter, who somehow learned the Gospel message in Vacation Bible School (and was able to teach it to her dolls) even though the week had seemed like a chaotic mess. The author, who had spent the week in frustration chasing around unruly kids, realized the Holy Spirit had been there the whole time, loving and teaching those children.

- Can you think of examples from your own life in which you realized only *after the fact* that God had been at work in a situation that had looked only like chaos or failure at the time?

2. The author mentions that he became a Christian in Vacation Bible School at age 8. He asks this about the workers at that VBS:

“Were those volunteering church members aware they were leading someone to Christ when they agreed to help? Did they see it as a spiritual practice when they set out the crackers and juice and prepared the crafts and taught the songs?

“Or did one of their friends, say, ‘Please help us. We really need you.,’ and they reluctantly agreed? Were they aware of me particularly, or was I just another one of the squirmy kids they had to keep in line until that day’s activities ended?... Whatever their feelings about their service, the Holy Spirit was working in their midst. The life of at least one child was changed forever.”

- What areas of service have you been part of in which you may have had an impact beyond anything you realized at the time? Has anyone ever come to you a long time later to say that you influenced them in ways you could not have known?

3. Chapter 5 points out that some people are more naturally drawn to the more “devotional” aspects of the church (such as prayer, study of the Bible) but have a harder time with the “relational” aspects (such as serving others, participating in Sunday school classes, etc.). Other people are just the opposite. Which side do you veer toward? What can you do to keep the two in balance?

Action Steps

1. Decide who is the most difficult or bothersome person in your life (you may not want to name the person out loud!). Come up with a strategy to see Jesus in that person this week. How can you find ways to treat that person as if he or she were Jesus?

At the end of the week, reflect on these questions:

- How did this experiment change your *actions* toward this person?
- How did it change your *attitude* toward the person?
- What effect did it have on the person’s actions and attitudes toward you?
- What do you think would happen if you continued this experiment for another month?

2. This chapter points out that people are often more likely to point out the church’s flaws than to talk about what it does right. Yet for millions of people every day all over the globe, the church is functioning as it should. With that in mind, try this:

- Make a list of the significant moments when the church has really been there for you and acted as the Body of Christ, such as when people welcomed you, taught you, inspired you, comforted you, or helped you. Write down as many specific examples as you can think of. How does this list affect your attitude toward the church?

Session 4

This session guides readers through the following chapters of *Pieces of Heaven*:

Chapter 6: God in the Ordinary: He Dances in the Music

Chapter 7: God in the Ordinary: He Astonishes the Intellect

Key Themes

This session probes and celebrates two ordinary areas of life in which God makes His Spirit known: Music and the Intellect. Words alone are not enough to convey God's majesty, but soaring music points toward it. Music has the power to usher people into God's presence, but unfortunately, it has also been used to divide Christians. The Intellect is another force that can lead people closer to God, but Christians often neglect it. How can Christ's followers learn to follow His command to love God with all their mind?

Discussion Questions

FOCUS: Report on Class Activities from Session 3

If members of your group conducted the Action Steps suggested in Session 3, including their work on seeing Jesus in a difficult person and their reflections on times when the church served its purpose in their lives, give them a chance to tell about those experiences and to discuss their responses.

FOCUS: How the Holy Spirit Inhabits Music

1. If you had the chance to hear only one Christian song out of all you have ever heard, what would it be? Ask each group member to tell about their song and why it means so much to them. If time permits, and if your group feels comfortable doing so, sing one or two of these songs as a way of moving into the discussion about God's presence in music.
2. Describe your most memorable experience when music brought you into God's presence.

FOCUS: The Power of Music

1. Chapter 6 tells about a novel in which people can not only *hear* the music but can also *see* it in the form of strands of light, which they can also *ride* at the speed of the sound. As one character describes this experience:

“At what must have been millions of miles per hour, I pierced through a melody that was faster and more complicated and glorious than any sound my ears had ever been able to hear. As I sliced through the music, it pierced through me like bolts of energy. Every cell in my body tingled with power, with the very Spirit of God. I never wanted to leave the music. I wrapped myself in it, flung myself thousands of miles through it, sang in it, danced in it.”

If you had the power to make music whatever you wanted it to be, would you add these elements of light and motion, or would you imagine it in some other way? Does the power of music make you think it *should* have those other dimensions?

3. One reason music is part of worship, according to Chapter 6, is that words alone are inadequate to capture and celebrate the glory and magnificence of God. Do you agree? If so, what songs come to mind in which the music particularly brings out the power and meaning of the lyrics, or in which the music goes *beyond* anything any lyrics could do?

4. This chapter suggests that the music we enjoy now is only a hint of what music in heaven will be like. What do you imagine about the music of eternity? How big a part of life do you believe it will be there?

FOCUS: Music Can Unite Christians—It Can Also Divide Them

1. Churches often have trouble pleasing everyone with their choices of music styles. What do you think are some good ways to handle that dilemma?

2. Discuss this chapter’s point about how our culture reveres old books and classic works of art, but it is quick to label music irrelevant or outdated after a relatively short period of time. Why is music treated differently than other art forms?

FOCUS: Loving God With Your Intellect

1. The author writes this about the hesitancy of some churches to fully embrace the intellect as a way of worshiping God:

“The intellect, in churches like this, is suspect because it is too often associated with things people don’t like—pedantic know-it-alls who use their knowledge as a weapon against others, nerdy misfits who take refuge in mental minutiae, dull practitioners of a dried-out faith of stale words. These churches find it much safer to keep things friendly and light. A *certain* amount of intellect is necessary for the church members to understand enough Scripture and doctrine to get them saved, but appeals to belief and emotion are what really propel the congregation. Tone down the intellectual stuff, they think, or it will turn people off.”

He later says some Christians are “suspicious of a quieter, more cerebral Christian who seeks God in reflection or in scholarly research or in wrestling with an intellectual conundrum of the faith. The zeal of these more thought-oriented Christians is powerful, but less *visible*, which may make some of their more extroverted fellow believers assume it isn’t *real*.”

- In your own experience, what evidence have you seen of this kind of anti-intellectualism in the church?
- What evidence have you seen to the contrary?

2. “Do we *have* to know this?”

The author uses this common—and discouraging—question from students to professors to show one example of the ways people limit the knowledge that is so freely available to them. Why do people do that? What keeps people from pursuing the joy and fascination the intellect can open up?

FOCUS: Loving God with Your Mind by Immersing Yourself in Scripture

1. Chapter 7 describes the way you come to “know” your favorite author through *immersion* in the works of that writer. The chapter compares that to the way we can “know” God through delving into His Word on a consistent and ongoing basis.

- If you have a favorite author, talk about how well you feel you know that person through the writing.
- Do you agree that this is similar to how God reveals Himself through Scripture?
- In what ways is it different?
- What difference does it make if you only dabble in an author’s work rather than immerse yourself in it?

2. The Bible combines poetry, history, parables, prophecy, biography, and several other genres. Its books were written by numerous authors over hundreds of years. Why do you think God uses such a strange combination of authors and genres to embody His Word? Why not a more straightforward book written all at once?

3. List some specific examples of ways in which the Bible has changed you or others you know. How has it worked differently than any other book?

Action Steps

1. During the week ahead, listen to worship music outside the usual style you prefer. Can you find the beauty and value in it? Can you see why others might prefer it?
2. If you have not been in the habit of including music in your personal devotional time, try it a few times this week. What does this add to your experience? Do you think it

makes you more aware of God's presence? Do you think you want to regularly include music from now on?

3. Chapter 7 gives some examples of ways churches have engaged the intellect through seminars and workshops and other activities. Brainstorm some specific ways you think the church could do a better job of helping Christians love God with their mind. Bring your ideas to your group to discuss at the next meeting.

Session 5

This session guides readers through the following chapters of *Pieces of Heaven*:

Chapter 8: God Concealing, God Revealing

Chapter 9: The Lure of Counterfeits

Key Themes

On Mount Sinai and in the Tabernacle of the Old Testament, God revealed Himself to His people, but not as fully as they might have wished. He also concealed Himself from them to a great extent as He led them to the Promised Land. In our own lives, God both reveals and conceals. This session considers that aspect of God's presence, and it also looks at our own fluctuations of faith and feelings as we follow Him. When people feel far from God, the temptation is to fill that void with a counterfeit god. This session probes what makes those counterfeits so alluring and what we can do to keep from being trapped by them.

Discussion Questions

FOCUS: Report on Class Activities from Session 4

If members of your group conducted the Action Steps suggested in Session 4, such as listening to worship music that differs from the style they usually prefer, or adding music to their times of daily devotions, give them a chance to discuss those experiences. Also take some time to review any brainstorming they did about ways the church could do a better job of helping its members love God with their intellect.

FOCUS: Probing Fluctuations in Faith and Feelings

1. Discuss the Mount of Transfiguration episode and its aftermath that are examined in Chapter 8.

- Contrast the different responses of Jesus and Peter to what they witness. What can we learn from their reactions?
- The chapter makes the point that Jesus often downplayed the miraculous aspects of His ministry in order to put the focus back on spiritual issues. Can you find examples of that in the Gospels?

2. Both Peter and John the Baptist had periods of either denial or doubt about Jesus. Review their stories, which are summarized in Chapter 8.

- How could these men who had seen such amazing and miraculous things from Jesus ever deny or doubt Him? Wouldn't it seem that such a close personal connection with Jesus would prevent such a faltering of faith?

- Can you relate to their struggles? What do their stories teach us about faith?

3. In Chapter 8 the author discusses a sense of guilt that would sometimes come upon him as a young Christian when the emotional high of an intense spiritual experience such as a teen camp would fade. If only his faith were strong enough, he thought, he could hold onto that intense awareness of God all the time. He later learned not to rely on such emotions as an accurate measure of his faith.

- How common is it for people to equate their emotions connected to their faith with the faith itself?

- Can you think of examples in which that way of thinking led to trouble for you or someone you know?

- How do you keep your faith strong—or at least alive—during spiritually dry times?

FOCUS: When People Saw God in Physical Form

In the Old Testament stories discussed in Chapter 8, God's presence is *physical*. Review how God revealed (and concealed) Himself on Mount Sinai and in the Tabernacle.

- For a Christian, what advantages would there be if God now chose to make His presence known in this physical way? What would the disadvantages be?

- Have you ever wished God would appear in a pillar of fire or smoke or in some other dramatic way? Why do you think He chooses not to do that now?

FOCUS: Fending Off Those Alluring Counterfeits

1. In Chapter 9 the author mentions that even though he *knows* money, fame and good looks don't buy happiness, his automatic response to news of the attempted suicide of a wealthy, famous and handsome young actor was to think, "Why him? He has it all!"

- List all the times you can think of when you have fallen under the allure of those kinds of "counterfeit gods" even though you *logically* know they are false.

- Which counterfeits are the most seductive? Do you envy people with great wealth? With beauty? With power and influence? Are you tempted to think that if you had those things, they would be enough to fulfill you?

2. Review that chapter's point that one reason counterfeits fool us is that *to some extent* they are real. In other words, they sneakily combine the real *and* the false.

- Choose a false god that is a big temptation for you. What parts of that counterfeit are real, in the sense of being truly worthwhile, admirable and legitimate?

- What parts of it are destructive and wrong?

- How does the counterfeit manage to cover up the bad in order to make itself appealing?

- What can you do to guard yourself against the false allure of this and other counterfeit gods?

3. Can you relate to the stories about the dream houses the author was sure would not only be nice places to live, but would actually make him a better man? Have you ever been tempted with such a lie?

- If your dream possession was not the perfect house, was it something else? A car? An accomplishment? A relationship? When did you realize that thing would not really be your ultimate answer?

FOCUS: Video Games, Celebrities, and Sports

1. Review the story in Chapter 9 of the man with an addiction to video games. Despite the pain and destruction they brought to his life, he still maintains they have also enriched his life.

- Does that response surprise you, or do you think it is common for people to cling to counterfeits even when the falsity of them has been exposed?

2. The chapter analyzes sports and celebrities as two of the false gods of our culture. Do you agree that they fit the definition? Why or why not? What other possible false gods of our age might you add to the list?

FOCUS: Enjoying Life's Pleasures Without Turning Them Into Counterfeit Gods

Pieces of Heaven celebrates music, nature, the intellect and other gifts that God has placed in human life. To enjoy the world God created is not to turn it into a counterfeit god. In fact, Scripture indicates we will enjoy these pleasures throughout eternity. With that in mind consider these questions:

1. How can you tell when something moves from being a legitimate interest or pleasure to becoming a false god? What are possible signs that things are moving in that direction?

2. Do people usually *admit* that they are following counterfeit gods? If not, what excuses do they usually give for their devotion to the counterfeit?

FOCUS: Spiritual But Not Religious

1. Why do you think the category of people who identify themselves as “Spiritual but Not Religious” is growing so fast? What is the appeal of that stance toward religion?

2. What are the drawbacks to the “Spiritual but Not Religious” approach toward faith?

Action Steps

1. The last portion of Chapter 8 talks about what one believer has called a “gravitational pull” toward God even in the midst of life’s most painful circumstances.

During the coming week, look back on your own spiritual journey and write about a time when your relationship with God was most strained or distant. How did you work through that? Did you feel that “gravitational pull”? How did God bring you back to Him?

2. Make a list of any interests or obsessions or other forces in your life that are so powerful that they have the potential to push God to the side and become a counterfeit god. Once you have compiled the list, ask yourself:

- Have any of these items crossed over into the status of “nearby god” in your life?
- If so, what can you do to remove it from that status?

Session 6

This session guides readers through the following chapters of *Pieces of Heaven*:

Chapter 10: God in the Extraordinary: The Invisible God at Work

Chapter 11: God in the Extraordinary: Shaken by Revival, Touched by Angels, Approaching the Eternal

Key Themes

Earlier chapters emphasized God's presence in the ordinary aspects of life, but this session considers more unusual movements of God's Spirit. He sometimes shakes a nation or region or church with revival. He works miraculously through circumstances that only He could have arranged. He sends angels to rescue and warn. Some of these examples are so rare that many Christians never experience them, and some raise understandable skepticism, but seeing some of extraordinary ways God works can inspire and strengthen our faith.

Discussion Questions

FOCUS: Report on Class Activities from Session 5

If members of your group conducted the Action Steps suggested in Session 5, such as writing about their “gravitational pull” toward God in the midst of life's most difficult circumstances, or making a list of possible counterfeit gods, give them a chance to discuss those ideas and get feedback from other members of the group.

FOCUS: Where Does the Supernatural Fit in the Christian Life?

1. Review the first sentence of Chapter 10, which says, “One of the Spirit-quenching tendencies of Christians in our age is to try to tame our faith in order to make it look more acceptable and less eccentric to skeptical outsiders.”

- Do you agree that this is a trend among Christians today? If so, what examples come to mind?

2. This chapter argues that many people are skeptical of certain supernatural elements of the Christian faith—angel encounters, seeing Jesus or an angel at the time of death, believing a “coincidence” was really God's intervention, and so on—but they take other supernatural aspects of the faith for granted, such as prayer, heaven, and the stories in the Bible.

- Why is it easier to believe in prayer, which is about speaking to the Creator of the universe, than to believe that God sends an angel to intervene in a particular situation?

FOCUS: Surprised by the Invisible God

1. Chapter 10 shows how often God *surprised* people in Scripture, breaking in to their daily lives when they least expected Him. Review the stories of Moses, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, and Paul. What other stories from the Bible could be added to this list of people surprised by God?

- What do these stories indicate about how God operates?
- In what ways have you been surprised by God? Have you seen Him work in ways you never could have expected?

2. Although Job was frustrated that God was absent from his life, in fact God was intently watching Job the whole time. Job was being tested in ways that had far bigger implications than he could understand.

- Do you think the same might be true for you? Do you agree with this chapter's point that God may be doing His most important work in us even when we sense His presence the least?

3. This chapter suggests we are part of a spiritual battle much larger than our own individual lives and stories.

- How often do you think of your life that way, as part of something with large spiritual consequences that spread far beyond you?
- Do biblical passages such as Hebrews 11 give reasons for thinking of our lives that way? Review that chapter and see how it applies.

4. Find examples of biblical figures in this chapter who didn't really welcome God's intervention in their lives at first.

- Why were they reluctant to welcome His presence? How did they work through that?
- Do you think you would have responded in similar ways?

FOCUS: The Miracle of Revival

1. Chapter 11 presents a hypothetical scenario in which a devastating earthquake literally shakes people out of their spiritual complacency and ushers in revival. Review that story and then discuss:

- Do you think that is a realistic scenario? Are people *more* likely or *less* likely to turn to God during periods of disaster?
- What else do you think might trigger the kind of large-scale revival envisioned in that story?

2. What is a revival? How would you define it? What evidence would you expect to see to indicate that one is happening?
3. What do you see as the key components that led to the Great Awakening?
 - Do you think such widespread revivals can be predicted or prepared for, or are they simply unusual movements of the Holy Spirit beyond our understanding or control?
4. Review the Asbury Revival story. What do you find most significant and inspiring about that story?
 - Why do you think the *story* of the revival was so powerful as students traveled to churches around the country to give their simple accounts of it?
5. Why do you think we don't see more revivals in our day?
 - How much do people today long for revival?
 - When was the last time your church prayed for revival?

FOCUS: The Dangers of Revival

Chapter 11 discusses some dangers of revivals. Consider these:

1. Some people can get caught up in the emotion or even sensationalism of a revival, but then they quickly fall away from faith when the enthusiasm fades.
 - Are the benefits of a revival worth the risk of losing those who are mostly tied to the emotion of the event? Can anything be done to prevent that falling away?
2. When revival breaks out, evil sometimes emerges also, as this chapter shows. Have you experienced that emergence of evil in the church or elsewhere when God is moving in a particularly powerful way?

FOCUS: The Work of Angels

1. Some of the activities attributed to angels in this chapter and elsewhere may really have been the actions of people, not angels. Look through the angel stories in this chapter.
 - Do you suspect any of them were people rather than angels? Why do you think so? If they were people, do you still think they were sent by God as angels are?
 - Why do you think God sometimes sends angels and sometimes sends people?
2. Describe any experiences you may have had with someone near death who has seen an angel or had some other unusual experience that may indicate a glimpse into the afterlife. What do you believe about such experiences?

FOCUS: The Rarity of Extraordinary Encounters

1. The author suggests that perhaps one reason why angel encounters or glimpses of heaven at the point of death are so rare is that God doesn't want us to let such experiences sidetrack us from the core message of the Gospel.

- Do you agree? Do you believe such experiences have the potential to put Christians' minds on the wrong things?

2. Stories like those told in popular books such as *Heaven is for Real* and *90 Minutes in Heaven* are vivid and inspiring. They have also provoked skepticism among Christians and non-Christians. Have you read those books or others like them? What do you believe about them?

Action Steps

1. Review what this chapter says about the concept of the "God Thing." Look back on your own life and make a list of every example of a "God Thing," both large and small, that you can remember. What is it about these circumstances that leads you to believe God must have been involved?

If you have the opportunity, share these with other members of your group and listen to their examples. What impact does thinking about these things have on your faith?

2. Over the next week, ask people you know whether they have ever had what they believe was an encounter with an angel and whether other people they know have had such encounters.

Bring these stories back to share with your group. Are such stories fairly common? If so, does that surprise you?

What elements do these stories have in common? How does hearing these stories affect your attitude toward angels?

