Nicole Unice

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A Word to Participants

If you’ve picked up this guide, some part of you resonates with the idea that the struggle is real.

At least we’re starting with honesty!

I don’t know what struggle is at the forefront of your mind and heart right now. It might be the struggle between you and someone you love. It might be an unexpected and unwelcome challenge involving your health, job, or finances. It might simply be the struggle to get up every morning, pay the bills, feed the kids, walk the dog, and try to find time to exercise while still making room in your day to do your devotions, love your spouse, and pray with your kids at night. Probably it’s a deep-down angst—the struggle between your ideal life and your reality. But hey, here’s the good news: The struggle most certainly is real, and the struggle can be good.

This participant’s guide is a companion to the six-session video curriculum *The Struggle Is Real DVD Experience*. My hope is that you’ll use both this guide and the video series
either on your own for self-study or in a small group, with a book club, or with another circle of friends who want to make sense of their lives in the bigger story of God’s freedom and grace.

Over the next six sessions, we’ll explore how our struggles are part of the bigger story that goes all the way back to Adam and Eve—and how we can find God’s wisdom so that we can rewrite that story into a wholehearted life. The study is meant to complement the book *The Struggle Is Real*. I think you’ll enjoy these sessions most if you read the book as well, but you can also complete the study using just the participant’s guide and the video.

My prayer for you over the coming weeks is that you experience the freedom that comes from self-awareness and God-awareness and from recognizing the beautiful way that God meets you in the struggle with His grace, truth, and mercy.

Here are some answers to FAQs to help get you started:

**What do I need to complete this study?**
You’ll need the *Participant’s Guide* and a Bible along with the video sessions. We also recommend *The Struggle Is Real* book, but it is not required for the study.

The book *The Struggle Is Real* is like a personal conversation in which I draw from my own life and the lives of others who’ve shared their stories of coming into wholehearted connection with Christ. This participant’s guide takes those truths and makes them personal and interactive as we open the Bible together and walk through some life-changing
principles. The videos center around a few stories from friends of mine who’ve experienced what it means to walk in God’s freedom, along with my teaching straight from the Bible, in order to help you understand and apply God’s wisdom and promises to your daily life.

You may choose to read *The Struggle Is Real* first and then reinforce your learning with the study, or you can read the book as a companion to the study. (At the start of each session’s On Your Own section, I recommend which chapters from the book to read that week.) You can also do the study without reading the book. It is best, however, to use the participant’s guide with the video, as those two are designed to work together.

**Should I complete this study on my own or with a group?**
The curriculum may be completed on your own or with a group. You may need or want to work through this material independently, and you can certainly do that. In that case, “being together” will be a conversation between the two of us, as we do the work of inviting God into your story and seeing Him change your perspective as you spend time in His Word.

If you have the opportunity to study this material with others—whether one friend or a crowd of one hundred—I recommend that approach. I’ve found that one of God’s greatest gifts is the chance to experience fellowship through the encouragement of being together.

Scripture is clear that we are called to share each other’s burdens, and that in doing so, we fulfill the law of Christ
(Galatians 6:2). God designed us to grow in community. When we circle up, whether in a group of two or twelve, we are acknowledging that we need one another for faith, for encouragement, and for the accountability needed to live with love and intentionality—not just for ourselves, but for others.

The book of Hebrews says that we should run the race of life with perseverance because we have such a great cloud of witnesses around us testifying to the love of Christ (see 12:1). Those witnesses include the generations of faithful men and women who have gone before us and the generation we are part of now. That means that your life—the way God has rescued you from your own sin, the way God can restore and redeem your hardest struggles—is a part of His great and glorious story.

Studying God’s Word with others is a reminder that your connection to Christ is also a connection to other people. It’s okay if you feel unsure in your faith. God has given you His Word, a sure and steady anchor. And He’s given you others—people you can link arms with to gain the strength and support you need to live boldly into your new story.

I’m considering leading a group; how can you help?
Whether you’re a veteran small group leader or are ready to jump in with some friends and lead a group for the first time, I want to help! Turn to page 141 to access the leader’s guide and helpful hints, as well as individual session outlines for each week.
How long should each session take to complete?
Each session is structured so that it can be completed in ninety minutes. You can take longer if needed, but I’ve found that most people’s attention begins to wane at this point. If you have less time, you can edit the questions and move more of the group work to participants’ personal study time.

If you are studying on your own, it will take less time to work through the videos (about fifteen to twenty minutes) and the Bible study (about thirty minutes).

In addition, working through this guide involves about fifteen minutes of daily work (five days a week) to help you get into the habit of reading God’s Word on a regular basis. If you haven’t yet developed the habit of spending time with God, I encourage you to remove one distraction from your day and replace that time with this book’s daily work for the duration of the study. You’ll need a Bible and something to write with—there’s room to record your reflections right in the participant’s guide.

What do all the icons within the sessions mean?
Throughout the sessions, you’ll see helpful icons to guide your journey and help you get oriented, whether you are studying on your own or with a group.
Icon Legend

**Focus Point**
This introduces the key phrase from each session.

**Video**
This tells you when to tune in to the video component.

**Reflection/Application**
The Reflection and Application questions allow you to take stock of what you are learning that week.

**In the Word**
This indicates when you’ll spend time in Scripture alongside the video material, whether individually or in your group.

**Daily**
Each week includes five sections for fifteen-minute engagement in the material, to keep you growing throughout the week.

**Group**
If you are a group leader, look for this icon in the Leader’s Guide (which begins on page 141) for ideas on how to facilitate each session.
Okay, new friend, one more thing—I’d love to hear from you! If you’d like to share how *The Struggle Is Real* has impacted your life or group, let me know. You can reach me through social media or at nicoleunice.com.

I am excited for you as you begin this exploration of God’s wisdom for your everyday struggles in life. I think you’ll find that though your struggle is very real—God’s love for you is very deep, His freedom for you is vast, and His wisdom for you can change your perspective on the past and future chapters in your story.

The struggle is the start of the story. But it’s certainly not the end. Let’s jump in!

*Much love,*

*Nicole*
The story line that we’ve bought about life—the one that says if it’s not easy, it’s not good—is a lie.

*The Struggle Is Real, chapter 2, page 35*

**Struggles are not fun.** They are not glamorous. They are not easy. But that doesn’t make them bad. From cover to cover, the Bible is open about our raw reality in the struggle. Scripture is filled with stories about the beautiful results created from the struggle; the intangible and eternal things learned in the struggle; and the people we can become through the struggle. Let’s look together at what our struggles teach us about life, about choices, and about the surprising role of wisdom in all of it.

*Life is a choice—choose wisely!*
Tune in to video session 1: “The Struggle.”

Video Notes

Wisdom provides clarity in a confusing world.

Fearing God is not about punishment; it’s about love.

We have a choice to make about the story we believe.

Liz’s Story

“I had to surrender all of my fears and all of my worries to God’s best for me. And it wasn’t until I did . . . that things really changed for me. The more I leaned into God and trusted Him for every aspect of my life, the more joy I felt.”
Reflection

1. On your own or with your group, reflect on one thing from Liz’s story or Nicole’s teaching that you needed to hear today.

2. What choices did Liz make in difficult times that changed her perspective? As you consider difficult situations or relationships in your life, where would you most like to adopt a new outlook or attitude?

3. Think of the challenges you faced today. Using the graph below, mark how likely you are to invite God into those struggles.
4. I believe there are times when any of us might answer “not at all likely” to the idea of inviting God into our struggles. Circle which of the following factors might keep you from inviting God in:

- My struggles feel too petty to pray about.
- I’m too preoccupied or busy to stop and ask God into them.
- I don’t know how to pray about these things.
- I used to pray about these things but didn’t feel like I got any answers from God.
- Other:

In the Word

Let’s look closely at three Bible passages that provide the foundation for understanding why God’s wisdom is so important for our lives.

1. Turn to Proverbs 3:13-18. This section uses vivid imagery to describe the role of wisdom in our lives. Record one or two phrases from the passage that stand out to you:

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**THE STRUGGLE IS REAL PARTICIPANT’S GUIDE**
2. Now turn to Proverbs 4:5-7 and 20-23. Notice the urgent tone in this chapter. What does the author say are the results of having wisdom? What might that look like in today’s world?

3. The New Testament book of James was written by the brother of Jesus. In this letter, James gives instruction for living with wisdom—by understanding the truth of our lives in Christ and then acting on it. Faith is not meant to be an abstract concept in our minds. It’s a true, living reality that should play out in our daily lives.

Read James 3:13-18. Write a list of the characteristics of wisdom:

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Application

How would you explain what you’ve learned about wisdom and how to apply it to your own life? Here’s a prompt to get you started:

Wisdom is ______________, and it matters for my life because ______________.

During this week’s Daily Study, we’ll continue to lay the foundation for understanding the power and relevancy of wisdom for our lives. We’ll then spend the next few weeks understanding how wisdom works to redefine our relationship with God and with others, which enables us to live out our days with confidence and joy.

Remember, James tells us, “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault” (James 1:5).

A prayer for you:

Father, as we begin to look more closely at how Your wisdom directs our struggles, help us to trust in Your promises and believe that they are for each of us—in the life we are living right now. Amen!
On Your Own Daily Study

THIS WEEK’S RECOMMENDED READING:
*Chapters 1 and 2 in The Struggle Is Real*

As we turn to God’s Word together each day, we have the opportunity to reorient our perspective of ourselves, others, and God. My prayer for you is that you discover how eminently practical and completely essential time in the Word is for redefining the struggles of everyday life. This week, we’ll turn our minds toward a vision of what the “good life” can look like when we live in Christ.

Day One
Searching for the Good Life

RECOMMENDED BIBLE READING:
*Proverbs 3:1-18*

The first chapter in *The Struggle Is Real* contains a baseline questionnaire called the Good Life Inventory, which allows us to assess how fully we are living into the wholehearted life God offers. Each of the descriptions on page 8 captures how the Bible describes the “good life”—living in God’s way rather than our own.

We’ll look at how each of these attributes is connected to wisdom throughout our daily exercises.
The Good Life Inventory

Think about the last two weeks. Put a check by the statements that currently describe you. Answer honestly—this is for your growth! The only way we grow is with honesty, and the only person you would be lying to is yourself. Be courageously honest.

1. I am totally committed to knowing the truth about myself. I am not afraid to ask others around me to help me see blind spots or trouble areas in my life.

2. I have a peaceful and nonanxious presence, both inside and out.

3. Generally I feel that my soul is untroubled and undisturbed. I have nothing to hide.

4. I regularly and sincerely ask for forgiveness from my family, friends, and coworkers.

5. I respect my own heart, body, and soul as something to be cherished.

6. I treat conflicting patterns of thinking and behaving in myself with gentleness.

7. I have a clear sense of purpose in my life.

8. I have experienced deep compassion for someone who has hurt me.

9. I feel total freedom from my past hurts and regrets.

10. I experience joy on a daily basis.
Each of these ten statements represents some aspect of what it means to be fully whole in every relationship—with God, with ourselves, with others, and with the world. In session 2, we’ll talk about why those relationships fractured in the first place and how Christ works to redeem them in our lives. But before we seek to restore what has been broken, let’s consider what it means to live as God intended for us—fully whole and fully free in our everyday living.

This week, we’ll focus on the first three statements in the inventory:

+ **I am totally committed to knowing the truth about myself. I am not afraid to ask others around me to help me see blind spots or trouble areas in my life.**

+ **I have a peaceful and nonanxious presence, both inside and out.**

+ **Generally I feel that my soul is untroubled and undisturbed. I have nothing to hide.**

Each of these statements reflects a soul that is rigorously honest and refreshingly transparent—yet at the same time peaceful and secure. This is the outward expression of inward wisdom. Let’s see what the Bible has to say about this kind of life:

Below is James 3:17-18 from three Bible translations. Read through each and circle or highlight all the attributes of a person living in God’s wisdom (“the wisdom that comes from heaven”):
New International Version

The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

New Living Translation

The wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.

Amplified Bible

The wisdom from above is first pure [morally and spiritually undefiled], then peace-loving [courteous, considerate], gentle, reasonable [and willing to listen], full of compassion and good fruits. It is unwavering, without [self-righteous] hypocrisy [and self-serving guile]. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness (spiritual maturity) is sown in peace by those who make peace [by actively encouraging goodwill between individuals].
1. How does this passage relate to the “Good Life” statements above?

2. As you go through your day, think about how “wisdom from heaven” shows up in your life—or doesn’t! Here’s a challenge for you (if you choose to accept it!): Lean into one or more of the attributes listed above as your goal for today.

3. Pay attention to your thoughts, feelings, and actions this week. Take note of whether you are committed to knowing the truth about yourself; whether you are generally peaceful and nonanxious; and whether you go about your days relatively untroubled with nothing to hide. We’ll come back to this on Day 5.
Day Two

Inviting God into Your Struggle

RECOMMENDED BIBLE READING:

Proverbs 3:18-35

Most of us are aware that we live in the gap between our ideal (the good life) and our reality (the Struggle). In chapter 1, I identify this struggle as “the frustrating place between who I want to be and who I actually am.” This might manifest itself in interrupting your “quiet time” by yelling at your kids, tackling a hard project and giving up in frustration twenty minutes later, or giving marriage advice to a friend and getting in a fight with your spouse that evening.

1. Name some of the relationships, circumstances, or thought patterns where this is true for you.

On page 3, we considered the prompt “Think of the challenges you faced today” and asked you to evaluate how likely you are to invite God into those struggles. Then we considered which of the following keep us from allowing God into those places:
My struggles feel too petty to pray about.
I’m too preoccupied/busy to stop and ask God into them.
I don’t know how to pray about these things.
I used to pray about these things but didn’t feel like I got any answers from God.
Other:

As you think about the reason(s) you are reluctant to turn to God, consider what the Bible tells us about the struggle. Begin by reading Psalm 139:23-24.

2. What does the psalmist ask God to do?

3. What is the result?

When we invite God to examine the deepest parts of us, He will gently but honestly reveal our misconceptions, blind spots, and sin. Yet notice that when we open ourselves to God, He will also guide us onto the pathway of eternal, abundant life.
4. Next read Philippians 4:6-7. What does Paul (the writer of Philippians) instruct us to do?

5. What is the result?

6. Apparently, nothing is too small for God. He commands us to bring all our concerns—both small and large—to Him. In the process, He provides both defensive (He guards our hearts) and offensive (He leads us forward) help for our lives! Where do you need to trust God to guard and lead you?
Day Three

The Promise of Wisdom

RECOMMENDED BIBLE READING:
*James 1:1-18*

1. Turn to James 1:2-8. What promise is given in verse 5?

2. There is a condition on that promise in verse 6. What is it?

The NIV Key Word Study Bible defines the Greek word for doubt, *diakrino*, as “deciding between.” When used in this verse in James, it denotes “to be divided in one’s mind.”

One of the key distinctions that Scripture makes is between being wholeheartedly with God or “double-minded.” Our God is a loving God, but He is also an exclusive God. He wants our wholeheartedness, the complete attention of our heart, soul, mind, and strength (see Mark 12:30). With our wholehearted devotion comes the ability to examine
ourselves honestly and to invite God into the struggle, no matter where we find it.

What if, whenever you faced a challenging, confusing, or frustrating situation, you asked God for His wisdom? What if you chose to pray *passionately* and *persistently*, believing that God is faithful, and that since He said He would give you wisdom, He will? Oh yes, “the fear of the Lord [believing He can and will do what He says] is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10).

3. Take a few minutes now to consider this passage and the James 3 passage from day 1. Ask God to bring to mind areas of your life that lack wisdom. List them below:

In closing, imagine offering up each of the words on this list to God with the assurance that He will answer.
Author, blogger, and popular speaker Sally Clarkson has always loved gardening, and she expected to enjoy it more than ever when her family moved to their current home: “I was fooled into thinking gardening would be easy when we relocated to Colorado one spring. Myriad wildflowers swayed gracefully in the ballet of springtime breezes, charming me to my tiptoes as we moved into our home.”¹ Before long, however, she made some painful discoveries. Not only was their home built on a mountainside teeming with hungry deer, but also the soil was rocky, which meant she had to carefully select the few plants that could thrive in such conditions.

Jesus used a similar story to explain why God’s Word sometimes doesn’t attach firmly to our hearts.

1. Turn to Matthew 13:3-9 and 18-23. In this parable, what does Jesus teach about why certain people take in God’s Word but remain preoccupied with the cares of the world?
2. What is the result?

Our hearts, it turns out, need to establish deep roots in God’s Word before they can produce a harvest of wisdom, peace, and right living. Here we see a place in our lives where the struggle may definitely be real. How we receive God’s Word varies widely. When we find ourselves so busy, so worried, or so preoccupied that we don’t find time for God, we are in danger of becoming like the seed that dries out or is choked out and never has a chance to grow.

3. When you hear God’s Word, do you ever find that it is crowded out by other thoughts, priorities, or concerns? Explain.

4. What does James 1:21-25 tell us about how to access the power of the Word God has planted in your heart?
Day Five
Choose Wisely

RECOMMENDED BIBLE READING:
Deuteronomy 30:11-20

One of the greatest challenges in life is that of choice. Because God has given us freedom, every day we must decide whether to believe that God is good, whether to trust Him, and whether to surrender our lives to Him. This is not a choice we make once for all time, but one that requires a continued setting (and resetting) of our hearts each day.

1. Turn to Deuteronomy 30:19-20. In this context, it’s obvious that Moses is talking about more than just biological life. What do you think it means to “choose life”? What does it look like for you to “choose life” today?
2. When you think about choosing life according to God’s design, what do you want your life to have more of? What do you want your life to have less of?

3. Deuteronomy 30:20 describes three actions we can take to choose life. What are they? Which do you find most difficult?

4. On day 1 of this week’s study, you were asked to observe yourself this week and consider whether you are committed to knowing the truth about yourself; whether you are generally peaceful and nonanxious; and whether you go about your days relatively untroubled with nothing to hide. What did you learn about yourself through this process?
Next week, we’ll look at how we make sense of our personal story in the greater story God tells about us through the Bible. Buckle up, friends—it’s going to be an incredible ride!

As you finish session 1, this is my prayer for you:

*Father, there are so many areas in our lives where we might want to trust You, but the reality is, we don’t. Treat us gently, as all good fathers would, and lead us into the truth of our doubt. Help us to be children who trust You, who love You, and who persevere in prayer with You, believing that You will provide the wisdom we seek. Amen!*