



with God in every breath

A GUIDE TO
DRAWING CLOSER TO JESUS
THROUGH YOUR SENSES

Whitney R. Simpson

With God in Every Breath is a remarkable book—each carefully chosen word woven into a tapestry of wisdom. A gift, really. *Charis* in the truest sense of the word and Spirit. One of my favorite moments is when the author, a soul-care practitioner, invites her readers to craft a thank-you letter to Jesus for our bodies and how they help us on the journey of following him. How original! And so needed for followers of Jesus around the globe. We are not disembodied souls but rather humans, designed to sense our Creator, our deepest needs, those of our neighbors, and every astonishing bit of the world. Here's a book artfully designed to help you in this good work and play. Seize the gift.

Charlie Peacock, Grammy Award–winning music producer, author of *Roots & Rhythm*, and coauthor of *Why Everything That Doesn't Matter, Matters So Much*

Our culture can carve us up into pieces: body, mind, heart, spirit. And sadly, the church often asks us to make choices between these parts of ourselves in how we pursue God. But Scripture sees the human as a whole being and invites us to pursue God with all that we are. Whitney Simpson's work will heal those divides, giving us permission to find God with our whole selves again.

Mandy Smith, pastor and author of *Confessions of an Amateur Saint*

Whitney Simpson is a spiritual director, a yoga instructor, and a podcast host—but what qualifies her to write this beautiful book is that she has experienced deep pain in her own life. The book is not theoretical. It grows out of the author's personal encounters with God and with finding transformational peace through breath prayer and guided meditation. She invites us to join her on the journey through reflections on Scripture from *The Message Bible*. The book will be a treasure for me to cherish for years to come.

Alice Fryling, spiritual director and author of *Aging Faithfully*

After years of practice, Whitney Simpson is a faithful guide, introducing and leading readers in life-giving embodied practices that calm the mind, still the body, and comfort the soul. Through simple breathing, prayer exercises, and thoughtful reflections on Scripture, Simpson invites us on a personal journey to receive the peace of God that surpasses all understanding.

Sam Gutierrez, associate director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination

In Whitney's signature voice, you are invited to take a much-needed deep breath with a cherished friend. The best part? Whitney reminds us that we already have everything we need to meet God . . . wherever we are. With tools for everyone, she's inviting us to claim what's already ours: spiritual practices that heal our bodies and minds, making a clear path forward and inward.

J. Dana Trent, author of *Between Two Trailers*

I love *everything* about this book! *With God in Every Breath* engages many aspects of our humanness—the body, the senses, and the imagination—that are traditionally neglected in many contemporary Christian books. Each meditation is spacious and yet simple; holistic and specific; multisensory and deeply thoughtful. Having known Whitney Simpson for many years, I can hear her voice on each page welcoming you, the reader, into this “with-God” life of grounded presence. You will find her book a pleasure to read and a gift to practice!

Beth A. Booram, spiritual director, cofounder of Fall Creek Abbey, and author and coauthor of several books, including *Starting Something New*, *Awaken Your Senses*, and *When Faith Becomes Sight*



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NavPress 

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With God in Every Breath: A Guide to Drawing Closer to Jesus through Your Senses

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introduction

God is the still point at my centre.

JULIAN OF NORWICH (CA. 1342–CA. 1416)

Life is filled with storms. It's true. I have had my share, and you have too.

Pause and think of a time when you were physically in a thunderstorm. You know what it feels like to have the house shake or a lightning bolt hit nearby. Consider how the bolts and the bangs feel in your body, how they awaken your senses and shake you to the core.

Lying in an MRI machine on my thirty-first birthday, I felt the storms of life raging around me. Amid the booms and bangs coming from the machine in which I lay, I pondered, *How did I end up here? And how do I find my center?*

Upon awakening early in the predawn of the day with a severe headache, I felt paralyzed on my left side. My left arm and leg were not working as usual. I was very confused. With a toddler in the room next door, I hesitated to wake my dear husband. I fell back asleep, dreaming that this storm had disappeared, but it had not. Amid the confusion I was experiencing, I did finally awaken my family, and we headed to the hospital. That is how I ended up at the emergency room in an MRI machine on my thirty-first birthday.

It took hours to get results, but that MRI showed a mass at the base of my brain, which had caused my paralysis. We were prepared for the fact that doctors thought it was a tumor, and those physicians prepared my spouse and me for the worst outcome. After seizures and many scans, a craniotomy two days later revealed that the mass was a clot from a stroke. There were never clear answers and were many more questions as to how this all happened, but we continued moving forward.

Even without clarity about the cause of my health crisis—amid my confusion and fear—I sensed the presence of God near me. And it was the sweet name of Jesus that I found in prayer that day to calm the storm I was in and center me with my Creator.

The prayer that came to me in the MRI machine was like a whisper during the loudest and most chaotic day of my life: *Jesus, give me peace.*

I prayed that quiet prayer, inhaling *Jesus* and exhaling *give me peace* for hours on end that day and have prayed it many, many more hours since that day two decades ago. Believe it or not, that simple breath prayer calmed my spirit even while I was in the loudest storm of my life thus far. It indeed gave me peace and grounded me when life felt like it was spinning around me.

My birthday health crisis was a near-death experience that awakened my senses as a gift. It was not easy, since that gift also came with many months of chronic pain, medical tests, lifestyle changes, home health nurses, and physical therapy, followed by years of learning new ways to care for my body. And yet, the gift of facing death—and a new way of living—made me more centered, aware, and attentive to the world around me. There are many stories of people coming out of experiences like mine with a new appreciation for life and a new awareness of all that takes place around them. At first, I felt I was overly sensitive from spending so many weeks hospitalized after my stroke. Today, I sense that God gifted me the opportunity to be more connected to the world, the people around me, and the one who created me.

Now, twenty years after my stroke, that breath prayer has become one I turn to often. It became transformational not only for my life but also for my calling and vocation. Now this is my work. I lead others to sense God's presence and to listen with their ears and bodies through ancient practices like *lectio divina*, breath prayer, and meditation and through mindful movement, like yoga. God has allowed me to work with individuals of various backgrounds, ages, shapes, and sizes and to help them connect their bodies and spirits purposefully—to find their quiet center with God.

This soul care is a type of embodied spirituality for everyone! After all, we all have bodies. Our stories and bodies offer varying degrees of flexibility (literally and figuratively). One factor that causes individuals to hesitate when exploring the body-spirit relationship is how they perceive their physical abilities or bodies. Fortunately, life with Christ is not up to us, our abilities, our bodies, or how we view them.

As people of God, we believe that Jesus is the revelation and the answer for our hurting world. We believe that a Creator bigger than ourselves has a divine plan. We believe that the gift of Jesus does not erase all our troubles but does accompany us in all the storms of life. (I, for one, am glad I do not go through trials alone.) Sometimes, we believe in our heads that God is with us—but do we believe it in our hearts, too? Do we sense that God is truly, really with us now?

For over a decade after my stroke, I was plagued with challenging and chronic health conditions. During an appointment one day, a practitioner asked me a profound (and what I honestly thought at the time to be rude) question. She asked, “Whitney, do you believe you can be well?”

My response was silence (which is rare for this wordsmith). She shocked me, and I couldn't believe she would ask me such a blunt and obvious question. Of course, I wanted to be well; I had taken the time to make an appointment to prioritize my health!

My efforts proved I was working hard at it by investing time, energy, and plenty of financial resources. But did I truly believe that I *could be well*?

Guess what? After my initial shock wore off, I realized I *wanted* to be well but did not *believe* I could be. It did not seem possible that I could live a life free from the pain and anxiety that plagued me after my stroke. And suddenly, as that truth sank in, I began to believe I could be well in a much broader sense than she could have understood. It took some time—months and years—but her words slowly and steadily seeped into my soul. They still do.

Since that question, I have changed my thinking. I do not believe I will always be physically well on this earth (I am human, after all), but I will always be whole in Christ. Yes, we seek guidance for health and wellness from trusted and wise practitioners (I highly recommend it), yet we can only find true healing and wholeness within ourselves from God. (For more reflection on what it means to be whole, see pages 66–67.)

when life is loud, get quiet

It is not uncommon to feel like everything slows down in a crisis, which can make it easier to draw close to your Creator through prayer and petition. I have found that when life returns to full speed, it is easy to lose this connection or longing. Sometimes, we are simply too busy to listen, too busy to look, too busy to sense. We need to slow down long enough to sense the sacred on purpose and get quiet enough to hear what may be only a whisper. But hear me say this: Please do not wait for a crisis to make you pause.

I invite you to pause with me now. Let us draw close to God together.

What if the opportunity to meet God was as close to you as the breath you take every day? What if meeting God engaged all your senses and was a holistic experience for your mind, body, and

spirit? What if your experience with God was unique and compared to no one else's? What if sensing the presence of Christ led you toward a more embodied and present life today?

All this is possible.

My breath prayer—*Jesus, give me peace*—is what inspired me to continue exploring the gift of God's peace. Many years later, after much discernment and a shift in career, I began facilitating space for others to connect with God in this way. It was difficult to find resources that invited the imagination and the senses to connect with my Creator that were also grounded in my Christian faith tradition, so I created them. This book you are holding was inspired by my years of experience in leading, facilitating, and enjoying Christ-centered soul care and includes written prayers and guided meditations that you can turn to whenever you need them, for yourself or others. I am honored that you are allowing me to accompany you as we explore guided meditations and prayers in this devotional.

The gift of embodied living invites us to engage our whole selves to connect with our Creator. God came to us in human form, fully human and divine, in the person of Jesus. Using the gifts of our senses and imagination and the experiences of Jesus in the Gospels, we will meet God using Scripture from *The Message Bible* and ask Jesus to guide us in receiving God's healing touch today. This book offers encouraging imagery that will bring clarity and wisdom in your daily life and journey with God.

I love this quote by Henri Nouwen, whose writing has had a profound impact on my journey: "The mystery of one human being is too immense and too profound to be explained by another."¹ This quote reminds us that my journey and yours are not the same and while my story begins this book, your story carries you into these pages. Be reminded that your spiritual-formation journey is unique to you. Try not to compare yourself to anyone else, and instead open yourself up to God in the pages ahead.

open your mind and your heart

*God is always trying to give good things to us,
but our hands are too full to receive them.*

ATTRIBUTED TO AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (354–430)

As we prepare to fully embody God's invitations, I invite you to truly open your mind and release any preconceived notions about meditation that may hold you back. Chances are, if you picked up this book and read this far, you are intrigued by meditation or have experienced the benefits yourself. Study after study shows that meditation offers whole-body benefits.²

I did not enter my healing journey as a contemplative, and I did not think yoga and meditation would work for me. I was a skeptic. Two decades later, I cannot fathom my life without these practices. After my stroke, God led me to train as a spiritual director and then as a yoga teacher. And in my work, I have sometimes faced pushback from Christians about embracing embodied spiritual practices like yoga and meditation. People are either too busy to embrace a pause or they do not think the pause will help them find wholeness with God. Some are even skeptical because they believe practices that stemmed from the East, like yoga and meditation, are religions that go against their Christian beliefs. This is not true. Yoga and meditation are indeed spiritual disciplines, but they are not religions themselves. These spiritual practices are accessible to us as Christians, too, and we can embrace them with our intention set on our Creator, God.

I believe that these practices long to meet us in the quiet, no matter what they are called. I am grateful for the profound impact they have made on my body and my spirit. And while I am not a master, I practice because they shape me by quieting my mind and drawing me closer to the one who made me.

Spending time with Jesus helps transform us into being more

like Jesus. Jesus modeled getting quiet for us. He went away to quiet places and listened for and talked with God. We are called to do the same, and Jesus is our perfect companion. I invite you to open your mind and heart as we begin this journey with Jesus together.

Remember, your journey is not mine, nor is it anyone else's. Allow yourself to go slowly through this devotional book and abandon expectations or preconceived ideas.

Thankfully, most Christians today are unafraid to discuss diverse ways of meeting with God. Some of us meet God on a yoga mat, knitting a prayer shawl, walking in nature, or praying over paper with a box of crayons. There is no one-size-fits-all approach! And during various seasons of our lives, our approaches might change. There is no definition for what time apart with our Creator must look like; God invites us to “come away” to a secluded place and rest in his presence (Mark 6:31, NRSV).


What is restful for you on your journey? What times, places, and opportunities have helped you come away and get quiet with God?

I use the word *journey* often in this devotional because that is what we are embarking on together. And as therapist and author Aundi Kolber pens, “Personal growth is a journey, not an event. It’s a becoming.”³ So let us enter the becoming as we grow and journey with God through these pages and this experience. We are invited to find rest and “come away” together as we meet God using our whole selves with the companionship of Jesus.

As you open your heart and mind to what is ahead, be reminded that this book is not a replacement for an in-person guide. Your season of life may call for support from a trained spiritual director, counselor, therapist, yoga teacher, somatic coach, retreat leader, or other guide to also accompany you. It is designed to be an introduction to embodied spirituality, a companion to help you meet God in the quiet using your whole self.

The next section of the book, “Embodied Living,” will

introduce you to the concepts of imaginative prayer and guided meditation, practices I discovered after my stroke, as well as provide practical tips for your devotional journey. Spend some time absorbing the content, because it will prepare you to engage fully with the meditations that follow. I have also included a few sections throughout the book that will deepen your knowledge and experience of embodied living. Visit these sections at any time and in



THIS BOOK IS NOT A
STUDY OF GOD'S WORD
BUT AN EXPLORATION
OF IT.

any order, or return to them when you need encouragement on your embodied journey.

This book is not a study of God's Word but an exploration of it. It is a whole-body experience designed to be safe and accessible wherever you are on your faith journey. You may have found this book by accident or received it as a gift; we may have journeyed together on a retreat, in a book, or through the *Exploring Peace Meditations* podcast. No matter how you arrived, trust that God has brought you here.

Are you ready?

embodied living

*Humanity, take a good look at yourself. Inside,
you've got heaven and earth, and all of creation.
You're a world—everything is hidden in you.*

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN (1098–1179)

Oh, the body. We talk about the body a lot in our culture. We are told what it should eat and drink, how it should look, move, and so on. And while the body does get much attention in our Western culture, it is sadly an emphasis on external focus rather than internal. Celeste Snowber Schroeder writes in *Embodied Prayer*, “The focus is on outer appearance, denying the relationship between the body and heart, mind and soul.”¹

It is true: Your mind and body are extraordinary! God created you with an imagination and senses. God created you to feel, to sense, to be present. God created you to live life fully *with him*. God created you for a “with-God” life! One part of us that is often left behind in Christian churches today seems to be the most obvious—the body. I am passionate about embodied spirituality because God has met me in intimate and healing ways in my very own body. Whether this sentence makes you feel seen or you are

confused by what I could mean by “embodied spirituality,” this book is for you.

Although our culture often invites us to think about the negative traits of our bodies, I believe our bodies are good and created in the image of our Creator. As W. David O. Taylor reminds us in *A Body of Praise*, “Our physical bodies are not separate or secondary to the divine image that we bear as human beings. They are fundamental to the *imago Dei*.”² *Imago Dei* means that we are made in the image of God, and that is indeed good news.

Practicing embodiment with God means using the body’s sensations to become more aware, remain present, feel whole, love ourselves better, and even get to know our Creator better, the one whose image we are made in. Embodiment practices can help each of us more fully discover the person God created and become more connected to the one who created us—God!

As Christians, this matters because the more connected we are to ourselves and our Creator, the more we can express our God-given longings, needs, gifts, and desires. The body of Christ needs us each to live into our best selves. Can you imagine a world where everyone is connected, grounded, centered, and whole because of their relationship with their Creator? What a gift!

In *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice*, Stephanie Paulsell writes that “the practice of honoring the body is a vital aspect of Christian spirituality. But spirituality is often understood as being made up solely of what individuals do alone, like solitary prayer, meditation, and spiritual reading. And because what is ‘spiritual’ is often opposed to what is ‘bodily,’ these activities are often understood as somehow disembodied, as if they engaged the mind and spirit alone.”³ We must not separate what is spiritual from what is bodily. We must bring them together if we long to meet God with our whole selves—body, mind, and spirit.

Hillary McBride reminds us in *The Wisdom of Your Body*, “Embodiment is the conscious knowing of and living as a body, not as a thing distinct from the self or the mind. It is the how,

what, why, where, and who of existence—the ground zero of consciousness, of present-moment living. It is to be present to yourself and your experience from the inside out.”⁴

Along the way, my journey with embodiment has included gaining a better appreciation and respect for the parts of me that have experienced trauma, negative self-talk, and outright disrespect for the body God gave me. Thank goodness, body positivity is being talked about more and more regarding weight, size, shape, and ability. You may or may not have a positive relationship with the body God gave you at this season of your life. However, you *can* still practice embodied spirituality. You may even find that becoming more embodied gives you more compassion and care for the body God has given you. I am living into this practice each day. I would love for you to come along with me.

On this devotional journey, we practice embodied spirituality and engage the whole self through somatic prompts, imagination, and the mind-body connection. Embodied spirituality is a very personal way to engage with God, yet it is also quite powerful when shared or experienced communally. We are all unique, so my response to an image or passage differs from my neighbor’s. Exploring embodied spirituality with others allows us to see and hear things we may not have noticed otherwise and can enrich our spiritual-formation experience. If you long to enrich your experience, consider journeying through the book and these exercises alongside others (perhaps by asking an accountability partner, spiritual friend, or small group to journey with you).

This devotional is an invitation to connect or reconnect with Jesus. And do not be surprised if not all your interactions leave you with peace initially. Some may offer you curiosity, frustration, or even discouragement. After all, Jesus invites our whole selves on this journey.

If your senses or imagination bring up feelings you are not expecting, ask this question often used in spiritual direction: *Where is God in this?* See what arises for you. I will say this again with

new words: *Try not to avoid the curious or unexpected when you journey through this book.* Remember, Jesus' life had many highs and lows, and we have opportunities to engage with them all and see what they offer us on our own journeys, which are also filled with highs and lows. Be reminded that if you find yourself accessing unpleasant memories or trauma when you engage your senses and imagination, seek professional companionship from a trained counselor or therapist. Allowing what you are feeling to be processed in your mind and body is a powerful healing opportunity, and it is helpful to have a trusted companion or guide as you learn to listen to the gift of your body.

I have not always considered myself an embodied person. Before my health crisis, I had no concept of what a whole-body experience might look or feel like. Becoming an embodied person is indeed a spiritual practice. Yet if we are mindful and aware, there are plenty of opportunities to be present within our bodies. Additionally, living in a present and embodied way helps us reduce stress, balance the nervous system, decrease experiences of anxiety and depression, and provide a sense of overall well-being.⁵

In ministry, at the intersection of spiritual direction and yoga, I have worked with many people to help them practice embodied living and discover a connection to God through embodied spirituality, from survivors of trafficking to burned-out clergy to college students to kids and senior adults. One thing we have in common is that we all have bodies. And those bodies sense all that is happening around us. If we can learn to live in a more embodied and present way, using our whole selves, we can connect with God no matter our situations, surroundings, or circumstances.

Now, you may wonder how one could have a whole-body experience while reading a book. Connecting with your whole self as you connect with God is a form of embodied spirituality. We go beyond reading for head knowledge. I invite you to read this book as a full-body experience. If that feels outside your comfort zone, that is okay. I hope you will trust me as your companion as we

lean into this sensory experience and embrace embodiment as a spiritual practice together.

Using our senses is where we start on this embodied journey of connecting with Jesus as we reach for his healing touch.

the senses

Engaging the senses keeps us present, and *presence is what Jesus is all about*. Just look to the Gospels. *Note:* If some of your senses have diminished or failed, use the senses you have access to as a guide on this journey with Jesus.

Each of the Gospel passages chosen for these reflections makes note of some form of sensory experience. As you read, you will notice an opportunity to connect with Jesus through your body:

- 👁️ What is there to see?
- 👂 What is there to hear?
- 👄 What is there to taste?
- 👃 What is there to breathe in?
- 👋 What is there to touch?

Most of us are familiar with our five main senses: *sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch*. Some lesser-known senses are harder to explain than these more obvious ones. For example, one class of sensation is known as *exteroception*, which is how we take in information from our surroundings.⁶ We also have *interoception* and *proprioception*.

As experiential learning specialist Amanda Blake explains in her book *Your Body Is Your Brain*, “Interoception is essentially the inverse of exteroception”⁷ and helps you feel what is happening inside you. Examples of interoception include: Do you

ENGAGING THE SENSES
KEEPS US PRESENT,
AND PRESENCE IS WHAT
JESUS IS ALL ABOUT.



feel hot, cold, hungry, thirsty, happy, sad, or tired? Interoception helps you notice the emotions that stir in you after you reflect on a passage or a meditation.

Proprioception lets you notice where your body is in space and helps coordinate your movements and sense of balance.⁸ For instance, with your eyes closed, you can feel your hands in your lap or arms beside your body without looking to see them there. Proprioception helps you ride a bike or hold this book in your hands as you read.

Using mindfulness, we can engage each of our main senses, as well as exteroception, interoception, and proprioception and live in a more embodied way. After my stroke, I struggled with interoception and proprioception. Embodied living, mindfulness, and much patience have helped me engage these senses again.

Some of us are better at sensing all that is around us than others, and that is okay. I invite you to pause now and notice your body as you read. What do you sense around you in this moment? What sense can you most connect with externally (sight, sound, taste, smell, or touch)? Now allow yourself to connect to what you are sensing on the inside. Ask God to help you notice any internal sensations that arise as you begin this book. Ask God to help you be more present in your devotional time and in your daily life.

The encouraging part is that these reflections go beyond our external senses and bring us inward on our journey with Jesus. They help us practice presence in our lives and with our Creator. You are invited to use all your senses and your whole self along the way.

I invite others to engage the whole self and be in the present moment often. It is a practice I have not mastered for myself; none of us have. Meditation and prayer are called practices for a reason: We return to them again and again and again. And so, with that mindset, we come to these meditations to be present and practice using our senses and imaginations to meet God. If that feels intimidating or overwhelming, take a deep breath, and continue reading when you're ready.

imaginative prayer

There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God. Those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it.

BROTHER LAWRENCE (CA. 1614–1691)

In addition to engaging your senses, you will use your imagination and draw closer to God. Why the imagination? Imagination is a gift from our Creator! We were made to use our imaginations, and this is a resource that is often overlooked or ignored, especially regarding spirituality in the Christian tradition.

Theologian and pastor Gregory Boyd writes, “We might say imagination, when guided by the Holy Spirit and submitted to the authority of Scripture, is our main receptor to the spiritual world. Sadly, the modern Western world has been largely dismissive of this receptor.”⁹

What if, rather than dismissing this receptor, we used our imaginations as a tool to connect with God? Might it change the way we pray? Might we find God more accessible to us? This book offers a unique invitation: to meet God, through Jesus, in the Scriptures through prayer, reflection, and imagination. It will help serve as a guide to give you the confidence and companionship you need to meet your Creator with your whole self and allow Scripture to come to life for you in a new and creative way.

Imaginative prayer is not a new concept for Christians. In fact, Saint Ignatius of Loyola (who lived from 1491 to 1556) had a remarkable imagination and was “convinced that God can speak to us as surely through our imagination as through our thoughts and memories.”¹⁰ Ignatius taught and led Christ’s followers through exercises that engaged their imaginations and often used the Gospels to meet Jesus in his teachings through what he called the Spiritual Exercises.

Praying with our whole selves (imagination, senses, breath,

movement, feelings) is an embodied form of contemplation. Our bodies and brains were designed by God and meant to be accessed. In his book *Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics*, Dan Harris writes, “In recent years, there has been an explosion of research into meditation, which has been shown to reduce blood pressure, boost recovery after the release of the stress hormone cortisol, improve immune system functioning and response, slow age-related atrophy of the brain, [and] mitigate the symptoms of depression and anxiety.”¹¹ While I share this data to show the science, it may be worth noting that Harris was not simply a skeptic of meditation prior to a life-changing experience but is also a self-proclaimed skeptic of God’s existence. As with many of the practices of embodied living we will explore in this devotional, some resources do have roots outside Christianity and can also be helpful in our journey to grow closer to Jesus. When we thoughtfully incorporate these into a Scripture-based worldview and lifestyle, we can be less skeptical. If you are a skeptic, lean into the brain science and consider this devotional one that is not only good for your spirit but also good for your whole self. Be present with yourself and your imagination in your quiet time, and you will likely come away feeling refreshed and more connected with your Creator.

guided meditation

Whether or not you have actively practiced any type of formal meditation, you have paused and experienced the benefits. Think about a time you gazed on a beautiful sunset, held a loved one’s hand in the quiet, or savored a cup of your favorite warm beverage and genuinely tasted and smelled the experience. Each of these examples is a meditative experience. Our journey will tap into the practice of savoring time apart with God and allowing Jesus to be our guide each step of the way.

People think that because I often (not always) seem (or sound) calm or peaceful, that is my natural inclination. But that is not

true. Finding peace takes much practice, and I am grateful I discovered these tools to help me. I need the practices of prayer and meditation in my life.

I began exploring Christian meditation after my health crisis, when I was in my early thirties—twenty years ago. It took me years to settle into my own meditation practice because it was challenging and uncomfortable at first. Oftentimes, it still is!

Many people find meditation intimidating, but it does not need to be intimidating or scary. If prayer is talking to God, meditation is simply quieting our minds and listening to God. And I long to listen to God whenever possible! Here are a few things I've learned over the years:

- *The practice of listening to God through meditation helps us find inner stillness.* We are not striving for anything at all; we are simply resting in God's presence and giving ourselves a break from thinking. Christian meditation does not require an emptying of our minds. Instead, it quiets our minds and helps us rest in God's presence. It is a great way to cultivate peace, self-esteem, clarity, presence, and better relationships.
- *Meditation is beneficial at any time of day.* I find that a morning meditation (silent or guided) sets the tone for my entire day and an afternoon meditation gives me the pick-me-up I need when my energy fades. No matter the time of day, I get to be with God.
- *Meditation can be practiced anywhere.* My meditation practice today does not typically look like sitting on a pillow in the corner of a candlelit room (although that is fun too). I often meditate in my bed, in my car, on my couch, on my yoga mat, while walking, or outside under a tree.

On a recent retreat, after holding space for retreatants and facilitating a time of guided meditation, I asked them to share

what it was like to invite Jesus into their quiet meditation time on purpose. Here are some reflections that arose from their sharing:

- “It’s like fog on the lake clearing away with the sunrise.”
- “It’s like a snow globe going from heavily shaken and stirring to calm and settled.”
- “It’s like Jesus has taken a broom and is helping me clean the cobwebs and dust out of each room of my house (or the corners of my mind).”

What a gift it is to slow down and offer our minds and hearts to God. What a delight it is to have Jesus clear the cobwebs of our minds! Whether new or experienced, you are not alone in your Christian meditation journey: God is our guide, and I am honored to be your companion along the way.

The guided meditations in this book are based on the many meditations I have experienced and led myself. Ideas spark ideas. If there is anything that does not resonate or does not feel comfortable, release it or modify it to meet your needs; this is your journey. Consider making these meditations your own if inspiration arises for you while reading. These words are simply guidance to help you engage your whole self and interact with God, as inspired by the themes in the passages.

We have all experienced different life circumstances. If you find a past trauma or crisis triggered by a passage, invitation, question, or cue, recognize that everything in this book is discretionary. In my training as a trauma-informed yoga instructor, I was taught the importance of options. All prompts, cues, and questions are your option to engage with or not. If something does not resonate, let it go.

It is important to feel your feelings, however. If you feel stirred by something you read or that arises in your imagination, consider exploring that further with a companion. When you recognize a trigger, try not to flee from that sensation; instead, seek support

from a trained and trusted counselor, therapist, spiritual director, or pastor.

The sensory cues are designed to be user friendly. If one is not accessible to your body, modify it to meet your needs.

Why is guided meditation good for more than our spirits? Sadly, it is true that today most of us are disembodied and overwhelmed by life. Even those who teach or offer embodied work fall into patterns of disconnecting from our bodies. It is also true that many of us live with some type of trauma, making embodied living even more important in the healing process. Psychologist Dr. Bessel van der Kolk writes in his authoritative and essential book for anyone interested in trauma and the body, *The Body Keeps the Score*, “Trauma victims cannot recover until they become familiar with and befriend the sensations in their bodies.”¹² We need to befriend our bodies, becoming more embodied and connected people. Guided meditation can help us, especially when we feel disconnected.

Trauma (big or small) lives in our bodies because it happens all around us.¹³ We can choose to disconnect from ourselves or connect with our bodies and engage our spirits, as we invite God into this healing work. It is possible. But it takes practice. This is *your* journey with God; welcome your whole self to it, and see what you learn along the way.

Whether you find it easy or challenging to connect with God, I hope Jesus will come alive to you through these guided meditations and meet you in these pages. Over the years, I have found Jesus to be a practical companion for Christian-guided meditation because we can relate to him as a person. He walked, talked, and lived as a human on this earth. Allowing Jesus to be your companion can help you enter these passages, prayers, and meditations with a friend and embrace guided meditation, especially if it is new or unfamiliar.

These devotions can be done individually or with others. You can use them as your daily quiet time, process them with a spiritual director or therapist, savor them on a retreat, experience them with

a small group, or even offer them from the pulpit during worship. *There is no right or wrong way to engage if you enter with an open mind and heart and genuinely long to meet God in your present experience.* Go at your pace, one a day or one a week. The important thing is for you to be consistent and open to meet Christ on your embodied journey, involving your whole self. If you choose one per day, you will notice that there are five days of meditations (one targeted for each sense) and then an “Interlude” section you may choose to read at your pace. If you follow this pattern, this book is a six-week guide.

tips for your devotional journey

Some of my favorite tips for establishing a regular quiet time or meditation practice are as follows.

CHOOSE A TIME: You likely know that consistency is a key factor in creating any routine and sustaining habits. You may have ten minutes in the morning or twenty minutes in the evening to commit to this embodied journey. Start with what works for you, and be consistent. If you recognize that the current time no longer works, pick a new one and stick with it. A daily quiet time best benefits my body and spirit (even if it’s brief—consistency is key for me). The time I spend with Jesus varies, but it also adds up. If your schedule varies greatly, consider beginning with a couple of days per week. This is not about legalism; it is about claiming time for yourself and your Creator.

FIND A QUIET PLACE: Choose a quiet place where you will not be interrupted. Finding a quiet place without distractions is not always easy. I have been known to practice meditations like these in my closet, my car, my bed, and my bathroom. You can sit on the floor or in a chair or even lie down and rest in a

posture that is calming to you. If you need background sounds to stay present, you can use a meditation app with calming sounds or an instrumental playlist. Remember, you can also put on headphones to block out the world and listen to these meditations by simply scanning the QR code on each page to be taken to that day's guided meditation.

SILENCE YOUR SURROUNDINGS: This feels obvious to say, but sadly it is not: Please turn off the television and silence your phone when journeying with Jesus and your senses through this book. With constant communication, this may be the most challenging tip to embrace. Consider placing your phone on Do Not Disturb mode for the short time you spend with Jesus. Out of habit, I place my phone on Do Not Disturb whenever I open my guided meditations or meditation timer. I am fairly certain that if Jesus sat down in my living room with me today, I would drop my phone immediately to sense his nearness. You may feel that presence and want to snap a selfie with God before your time is up; I understand capturing moments (and if you do, please tag them later with #withGodineverybreath so we can connect)—but for now, just savor God's nearness and release your distractions.

USE AN ANCHOR: An anchor item is something tangible that you can hold or touch while you read or pray. It may be a cross, prayer beads, a stone, your Bible, an icon, your journal, a cup of tea, a hand over your heart, or this very book in your hands! Being purposeful with your anchor item reminds you that you are here to be fully present *with God*, and having an anchor helps remind you when you may be tempted to reach for your phone or task list. Allow your anchor to help you sit with Jesus.

BREATHE: Once you have found a space and released distractions, take a few purposeful deep breaths before reading. Inhale

through your nose, expanding your belly as you breathe in. Pause. Then exhale slowly, through your nose or mouth, completely and fully until every ounce of air feels as if it has left your lungs and your belly deflates. Pause again before your next inhale. Focus on your breath for a few rounds and notice how it feels as the breath moves in and out of your body. God created you and gave you breath. Your breath also serves as an anchor and is a foundational starting point for this quiet time of reflecting with Jesus. As noted eloquently by one of my spiritual teachers, Christine Valters Paintner, in *The Wisdom of the Body*, “the breath can also be a tremendous gift in learning how to access and pay attention to body sensations. . . . The breath becomes a tool of awareness and focus for tending to the sensations that arise in the body.”¹⁴ I invite you to use the gift of your breath often and let it be a guide into the present.

GO SLOW AND LET GO: Based on the tips I have shared above, this also seems obvious, but it is not easy. Go slow, refrain from multitasking, let go, and be patient. Jesus longs to meet you where you are, and your most important task has already been accomplished: You have chosen to be present with God. Take your time to see what bubbles up during your guided meditation, and if there is nothing beyond the time and space you have made, then that is enough. When your mind wanders (not *if*, because it will wander), acknowledge your thoughts and let them go, then return to your breath, your anchor, and your meditation.

OFFER GRATITUDE: When your guided meditation is complete, take a moment to express gratitude for your time apart with your Creator. Thank God for this moment of stillness and connection for your body, mind, and spirit. Consider a big stretch or give yourself a hug. Dance in gratitude, journal what you have heard, or simply thank God out loud!

We are so close to experiencing these sensations together with God! Are you ready?

Before we dive in, here is an overview of the format of the guided meditations in this devotional book.

SCRIPTURE: Each devotion begins with a passage from *The Message* Gospels. (For more on why I use *The Message* version, see pages 44–45.) As you read, notice the sensory invitations that Jesus and others may have experienced. When you read the passage for each meditation, you may wish to read it more than once in the style of *lectio divina* (see pages 88–89) or have it audibly read to you using a Bible app. However you read the passage, try to be present with your senses. Rather than reading these words for information, read them formationally and allow them to be the grounding point of your time in meditation.

PONDER THIS: This prompt offers a very simple overview and is not meant to be an all-encompassing theological overview of the Scripture passage. There are entire commentaries written on single passages in this book. The “Ponder” section invites you to wonder about the passage and be curious about what may have been happening for Jesus or others and to consider how this Scripture relates to you today.

GUIDED MEDITATION: Use the meditation tips on the previous few pages for settling into your space, and always begin with a deep breath, then take your time. Pause and place the book down, or simply close your eyes between sections. If you read these meditations for yourself, you will need your eyes to see as you read. Consider pausing and closing your eyes at line breaks to savor what you’ve read before moving on.

If you prefer to listen to the guided meditations, audio recordings are available via the QR codes located near each one.

If you are leading others through these guided meditations, invite them to close their eyes if that feels safe. If not, have them gaze on an object in the room or soften their gaze, gently allowing their eyes to fall down the tip of the nose. Be sure to pause at the line breaks, allowing the words to sink in for you or the listener.

Your eyes are sensory organs and are an often-overworked part of the body; closing them can help you stay present and pause the receptors that receive loads of information for your brain and body throughout the day.

Note: These meditations are a product of creative imagination and spiritual exploration. As with any meditation, feel free to adapt it to suit your needs. Each meditation is an invitation with guidance meant to enhance your connection to God's Spirit.

SOAK IN SILENCE: Allow yourself a moment of silence to soak in what God is inviting you to notice.

American priest and centering prayer proponent Thomas Keating wrote, "Silence is God's first language; everything else is a poor translation."¹⁵ Consider what happens when you get quiet and truly listen to your body, letting the outside voices fade away and instead sensing God's presence in the quiet. Give yourself permission to stay there and be quiet as long as you are able, honoring the needs of your body and spirit. Be patient with silence, for although challenging for many, it may be the most valuable part of your contemplative journey.

FOR REFLECTION: I end each devotional with reflection prompts that are meant to help you listen to and sense more deeply what you have read, sensed, and experienced. As time allows, you may wish to journal your reflections in this book or in your journal. Or, if you prefer, pause and quietly reflect rather than write. While there is a bonus body-mind connection when you

physically write your reflections, there is no right or wrong way to engage with the prompts.

SENSORY CUE: The sensory cues are meant to be gentle and soothing, and most are to be carried into your day, helping you soak in your meditation beyond your quiet time. These prompts invite you into a somatic connection with your guided meditation. *Soma* means “body” in Latin. These sensory cues or somatic invitations are all connected to your physical body and are meant to be accessible to everyone. If you experience any discomfort, pain, or overstimulation in your body at any time, adjust or simply stop the activity. It is important to listen to your body and only engage in sensory activities that feel comfortable for you. If you need to physically modify for your body, take these as suggestions or cues and make the invitations applicable.

CLOSING PRAYER: Offer your own prayer to God or add to the short prayer prompt as you wish. Bring gratitude into each of your reflections, and thank God for anything you may have sensed in the presence of Jesus. Whatever arises, feel it, sense it, or name it before God!

Let us begin as we connect *with God in every breath* through Scripture, meditation, movement, journaling, reflection, and prayer.

1

open your eyes



Read reflectively: Matthew 6:22-23

A Life of God-Worship

[Jesus said,] “Your eyes are windows into your body. If you open your eyes wide in wonder and belief, your body fills up with light. If you live squinty-eyed in greed and distrust, your body is a musty cellar. If you pull the blinds on your windows, what a dark life you will have!”

ponder this

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses the metaphor of the eyes being the body’s windows (or, in other translations, the

eye as a lamp) to illustrate how our spiritual perception affects our entire being. Just as our eyes enable us to see the physical world, our spiritual eyes (our perception, understanding, and priorities) determine how we view life and engage in the world around us.



guided meditation

Center yourself in your space by taking a few deep breaths and welcoming God's presence with you. Now bring your gaze to an ordinary object nearby, something you might not typically pay much attention to. It could be a simple household item, an object in nature, or anything your eyes are drawn to in this moment. Gaze on this object before you as you take three to five deep breaths.

Slowly begin noticing the small details of this object, the intricacies that often go unnoticed. See it with fresh eyes, as if encountering it for the first time. Observe its shape, texture, or color.

Take time to explore every aspect, as if unraveling its ordinary yet hidden beauty. What might you see that you have not noticed before?

Now imagine that you are lending your eyes to God, as if you are gazing through a fresh, clean window of perspective.

God's light can reveal new insights and understanding not only in what you see with your physical eyes but also in your life. Pause and invite God into your thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Ask God for open eyes to see.

Say to yourself:

I am open to seeing things with the eyes of God.

I am willing to notice the beauty and divine presence in even the most minor aspects of life.

I see anew today because I see with the eyes of God.

Embrace this practice of holy gazing and gain a fresh perspective that allows you to appreciate the wonders surrounding you in this moment and in everyday life.

soak in silence

Pause in the quiet and breathe purposefully. What do you sense?

for reflection

1. Does the practice of holy gazing allow you to see in new ways?
2. What small details do you sometimes miss?
3. What can you do today to soak up more of God's light and open the windows of your eyes?

sensory cue

Rub your hands together, feel the warmth that is generated, then close your eyes and place your palms over your eye sockets. There should be no pressure from your hands. Offer a blessing for your eyes, and ask God to help you continue to see anew this day. Rest with your eyes closed and palms over your eyes for anywhere from one to ten minutes. Return to the world with fresh eyes and an open mind.

closing prayer

Lord,

Give me fresh eyes to see you, this day and always.

Amen.