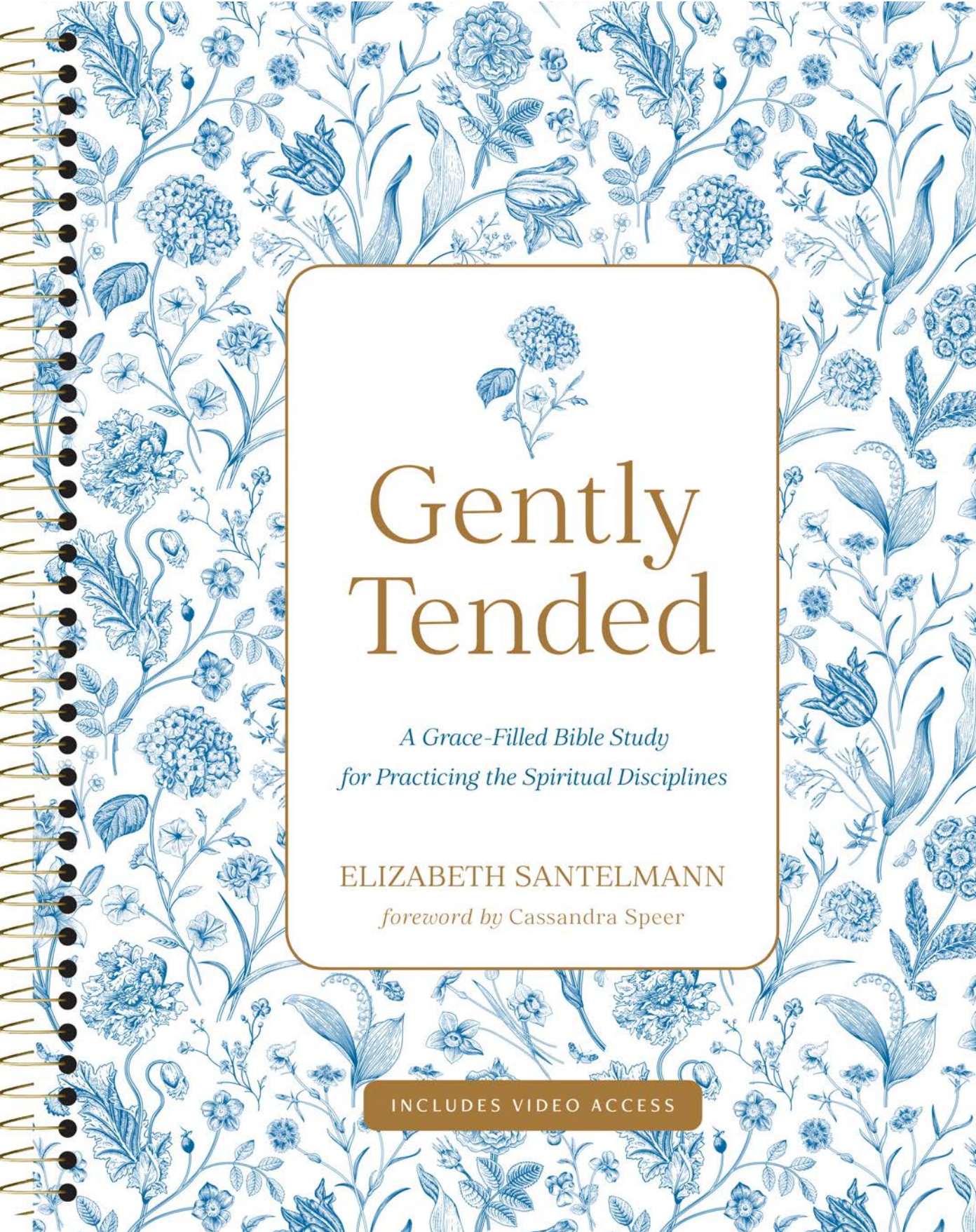




Gently Tended

*A Grace-Filled Bible Study
for Practicing the Spiritual Disciplines*

ELIZABETH SANTELMANN

foreword by Cassandra Speer

INCLUDES VIDEO ACCESS

This Bible study is a warm and gentle welcome into the presence of God through small, daily disciplines which add up to large, lifetime results. Elizabeth invites us not to do more and try harder, but to reframe and rethink our daily habits. Like a big sister in the faith, she shares her own stories and experience, leads us through Scripture, and offers us practical encouragement to live each day in the presence of our kind and gentle Savior, who wants to tend to us. This study encouraged me, and I will be passing it on to the women in my church who want to grow in grace.

Jen Oshman, author, speaker, and women's ministry leader

Gently Tended is the reoriented approach to spiritual disciplines we need. Rather than looking at these disciplines as something more to do to be a “good Christian,” Elizabeth encourages us through these practices to see more of who Christ is and what he has done. Her gentle teaching leads us not to more work, but to rest!

Kristen Hatton, LPC, author of *Parenting Ahead*

The challenge of talking about spiritual disciplines is that most Christians are reminded of things they know they should be doing—but aren't. These conversations lead many people to feelings of shame, and to white-knuckled effort to simply try harder and do better. In *Gently Tended*, Santelmann has offered a gospel-soaked and accessible approach to Christian formation. This book is a great resource for both personal use and group discussion.

Chad Kincer, teaching pastor at Frontline Church in Oklahoma City

During seasons of overwhelm or exhaustion, habits like Bible reading and prayer can feel burdensome. In *Gently Tended*, Elizabeth Santelmann tenderly invites us to set aside the guilt of “not doing enough” and to receive God's love right where we are. She offers practical, accessible guidance for gentle spiritual disciplines that help us draw near to God even in the midst of chaos.

Joanna Kimbrel, MATS, author and coordinator of women's initiatives for The Gospel Coalition

Gently Tended is an accessible and engaging Bible study on both the private and corporate expressions of some of the most overlooked spiritual disciplines that benefit and bless the church. Elizabeth's words are framed with delight rather than duty, with the aim of helping the reader towards living daily their chief end: glorifying and enjoying God forever.

Karen Hodge, coordinator of Women's Ministries for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and author of *Transformed: Life-taker to Life-giver* and *Life-giving Leadership*

Gently Tended is a grace-filled journey through twelve essential spiritual practices—free from guilt or pressure. Elizabeth walks alongside you with the Scripture-saturated teaching, gentle guidance, and steady encouragement of a trusted mentor. Whether you've fallen out of the habit of regular Scripture intake or are longing to grow deeper in your walk with Christ, this book offers a faithful, approachable path forward—one that meets you where you are and helps you tend what truly matters.

Katie Orr, author of the FOCUSed15™ Bible study series and hostess of the Bible Study Hub™

Elizabeth's genuine care for her readers comes through in this astute yet gentle guide through these spiritual practices. With interactive reflections, rewarding opportunities to dig deeper into the Bible, and winsome devotional writing, this study is one I'll recommend to the women around me.

Felicity Carswell, cohost of Two Sisters and a Cup of Tea podcast and Bible teacher

Gently Tended is a warm invitation to explore the spiritual disciplines that God, in his grace, has given us as a means to grow in our love and knowledge of him and to become more like him. This study will exhort the reader to pursue spiritual disciplines not to earn God's love, but because they are greatly loved by him already. This study will help the reader turn ordinary minutes of each day into treasured moments with God.

Courtney Tracy, author of *Putting Jesus First: A 21-day Devotional Journey through Colossians*

As evangelicals, we love to talk about how we are shaped by the Bible. Yet often we neglect to see how formation must be joined to information, and how weekly worship forms us alongside one another. Enter Elizabeth Santelmann's *Gently Tended*, a rich resource for those in seasons of overwhelm. In the book, Santelmann reminds us of the primacy of God's Word, the shaping power of our covenant-keeping God, and practical steps to get biblical truths through our harried souls. How I wish I'd had Elizabeth Santelmann's book as a young mom. May it nourish and shape us toward theologically deep, biblically rich, and practically applicable lives of faith—in our homes and workplaces—for the good of the church.

Ashley Hales, editorial director at *Christianity Today*, cofounder of the Willowbrae Institute, and author of *A Fruitful Life*, *A Spacious Life*, and *Finding Holy in the Suburbs*

In *Gently Tended*, Elizabeth Santelmann holds open the front door to spiritual disciplines and warmly says, "Come on in!" This accessible, helpful study welcomes believers of all seasons to walk more closely with Jesus. Elizabeth's tender guidance offers needed ministry in a chaotic world, and I think it will especially bless the overwhelmed and anxious. (Ask me how I know!)

Caroline Saunders, author of *Come Home: Tracing God's Promise of Home Through Scripture*

Elizabeth writes with the same humility, grace, and Scripture-centered focus that mark her life and ministry. In *Gently Tended*, she invites weary believers to offer God their little and trust him to multiply it, consistently pointing readers to who God is rather than what they must do. Her words offer a gentle reprieve from performance-driven faith and a reminder of Jesus' tender care.

Asheritah Ciuciu, bestselling author of *Delighting in Jesus*



A Tyndale nonfiction imprint





Gently Tended

*A Grace-Filled Bible Study
for Practicing the Spiritual Disciplines*

ELIZABETH SANTELMANN

Visit Tyndale online at tyndale.com.

Visit Elizabeth Santelmann at sunshineinmynest.com.

Visit tyndalechristianresources.com.

Tyndale, Tyndale's quill logo, *Tyndale Momentum*, and the Tyndale Momentum logo are registered and/or common law trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries in the USA and various other jurisdictions around the world. All rights reserved. See tyndale.com for a full list of trademarks owned by Tyndale House Ministries. Tyndale Momentum is a nonfiction imprint of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois.

Gently Tended: A Grace-Filled Bible Study for Practicing the Spiritual Disciplines

Copyright © 2026 by Elizabeth Santelmann. All rights reserved.

Cover and interior illustration of floral pattern copyright © Olga Korneeva/Shutterstock. All rights reserved.

Author photo by Charis Elisabeth Kauffman, copyright © 2025. All Rights Reserved.

Cover design by Julie Chen

Interior design by Laura Cruise

Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Wilson.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Christian Standard Bible,[®] copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible[®] and CSB[®] are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The URLs in this book were verified prior to publication. The publisher is not responsible for content in the links, links that have expired, or websites that have changed ownership after that time.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 979-8-4005-1849-2

Printed in China

32	31	30	29	28	27	26
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Contents

Foreword *xi*

Introduction *xiii*

How to Use This Study *xvii*

PART 1 Gently Tending Your Heart and Mind 1

Bible Study 3

Prayer 19

Gratitude 35

Meditation 51

PART 2 Gently Tending Your Daily Walk 67

Humility 69

Service 85

Silence 101

Simplicity 117

PART 3 Gently Tending Your Life in Community 133

Confession 135

Stewardship 151

Worship 169

Celebration 185

Conclusion 203

Leader's Guide 205

Acknowledgments 209

Notes 211

Books at My Table 214

Scripture Index 215

About the Author 219





Foreword

As Elizabeth's friend, I want you to know something before you begin this study: She wrote it the same way she lives it—with sincerity, compassion, and a deep trust that God isn't intimidated by our limitations. I've watched her walk through seasons when life felt loud and demanding, when capacity was spread thin, and when the spiritual "ideal" felt out of reach. And yet I've also watched her learn how to notice God in ordinary moments, to return to him without shame, and to let simple practices become steady ground. This book isn't asking you to try harder; it's inviting you into a deeper faith. That's what makes *Gently Tended* such a gift.

There's a unique discouragement that can settle in when you love God and want to grow, but you're overwhelmed at the thought of how. You want deeper roots. You want to become someone who lives anchored in the Word, someone who's formed by Jesus in a way that changes your inner world, but your days already feel full, your mind feels crowded, and your energy is limited. Sometimes spiritual growth can feel like it belongs to people with more margin than you've got. Most of the women I know aren't lacking desire . . . they're lacking capacity.

Life is full of school drop-offs and deadlines. An invisible mental load and decision fatigue. Sleep deprivation and chronic stress. Grief that catches you off guard. Trying to keep everyone alive and cared for while quietly wondering where your own peace went in the process. In the busy seasons of life, even good things can start to feel heavy. Even spiritual disciplines can feel like pressure.

And that's why Elizabeth refuses to let tending to your spiritual life become one more task to check off the list. *Gently Tended* doesn't turn formation into performance. It doesn't

make you feel behind. It doesn't offer another standard you can't keep and call it holiness. Instead, it offers something quieter and far more powerful: a gentle invitation back to the heart of God, the one who understands human limitation and meets it with compassion.

Throughout this study, Elizabeth reminds us that spiritual disciplines aren't a way to earn God's love. They're practices of presence. They're ordinary acts of obedience, faithful rhythms that help us become more aware of God's nearness in the middle of everyday life. They're not about proving ourselves. They're about being formed, slowly and honestly, by a God who's already close.

I truly love how practical this study is in showing how to start small. Not because small is trendy or cute, but because small is honest and applicable. A verse on a sticky note. A breath prayer in the carpool line. Gratitude on a hard day. A moment of silence before you pick up your phone. Small choices to return to God, even if yesterday you had nothing left to give.

One of the most meaningful aspects of this study is Elizabeth's invitation to keep a record of God's gentle tending. That practice alone can change the way you see your life and God's presence within it. So often we interpret our exhaustion as God's absence, but when we slow down, we start catching glimpses of the goodness that's been holding us all along. That's what you'll find in these pages.

You'll find disciplines taught with warmth, wisdom, and biblical clarity. You'll find room to breathe. You'll find permission to start where you are, with what you have, and you'll find a steady reminder that God isn't disappointed in your humanity. Your limitations don't limit God's capacity at work within and through you.

You're not behind. You're being gently tended.

So take your time. Receive what nourishes you, leave what you can't carry yet, and trust that God's Word never returns empty. You don't have to try harder. Today is a great day to try gentler.

Cassandra Speer
bestselling author, pediatric chaplain, podcast host,
and vice president of Her True Worth

Introduction

I spent my teens and early twenties working in children's ministry. As director of an after-school program, I poured my time and energy into caring for and discipling young kids in underserved communities. I read the Bible daily and was committed to memorizing Scripture and rigorously practicing spiritual disciplines like prayer and service.

Then I had my first baby.

Brain fog rested on me like a weight, making conversation with my family difficult and understanding what I read even harder.

Tears dripped down my chin as I stared at a passage in my Bible. I tried to read the words, but by the time I finished the second verse I had to go back and reread the first one because I couldn't remember what it was about. *What was wrong with me?* Three verses in I heard the baby crying.

I slammed the Bible shut and scurried off.

One thing after another popped up until I fell into bed exhausted. I was terrified the baby would be awake all night. "You pray," I begged my husband. "God will listen to you. I don't know what to say." Then I cried all over again.

I was so ashamed that I didn't breathe a word of my experience to anyone. But a few months later a friend slipped a book of index cards into my hand and said, "I write my favorite verses on index cards; then when I'm too overwhelmed for quiet time, I read one."

I looked down at my hand feeling like I had just experienced the church equivalent of a drug deal. *Could it be that easy? Did that count? Would God bless reading just one verse a day?*

Though I had lingering doubts, I decided to follow my friend's advice. At first I struggled to think of verses, but over

the next few years they came to me more easily, and I jotted them down in my little book. By the time our next baby was born, the notebook was full. Sometimes I pulled it out and read as I nursed. Other times I copied verses onto separate cards and taped them up around the house.

I knew these small acts of fixing my eyes on Christ were growing my awareness of his presence, but deep down there was a nagging doubt. *Was this enough, or was I just placating myself into thinking I was doing enough because I wanted it to be true?*

Not long after, I was reading a passage from *Life Together* by theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who recommended reflecting on small portions of Scripture during personal Bible study. He described how focusing on one verse for a week was potentially more transformative than scattered attention to many passages.¹ Joy swelled in my heart as I realized that what had been spiritually nourishing me was an acknowledged practice by someone I really respected.

That week, each time I settled into my nursing chair, I felt a renewed sense of purpose and energy as I looked at my little verse card and was reminded of God's truth and promises for my life.

By focusing my attention on one verse, I started noticing God's truth in other places. More verses came to my mind throughout the day, and particular lines from worship songs stood out to me. I was so transformed by this practice that, years later, I started making little note-card books of verses for friends who were going through seasons of life that felt impossible.

I began seeing God's promise in Isaiah 55:11 come to life: "So my word that comes from my mouth will not return to me empty, but it will accomplish what I please and will prosper in what I send it to do."

Slowly, I came to realize that our spiritual life isn't something we grow separate from our ordinary tasks. Instead, it's the simple things we do to integrate spiritual disciplines into our everyday life, so that every moment is lived in his presence with an awareness that "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Little Moments Count

Perhaps you, too, long for something more in your spiritual life. You want to be a person of deep faith, the one with the marked-up Bible and an intentional

prayer list. Your problem isn't a lack of desire to grow a deeper spiritual connection to God but rather overwhelm at when and how to do it in the middle of all the chaos that life brings.

When you come to faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit lives inside you and constantly pulls you to know and love God more deeply. As the psalmist wrote, "God, you are my God; I eagerly seek you. I thirst for you; my body faints for you in a land that is dry, desolate, and without water" (Psalm 63:1).

But the call to move beyond the surface can feel impossible when you already feel like you're drowning in everyday tasks. Do you want to do it? Of course! But where is the energy going to come from to make it happen? Jesus predicted with compassion that this would be the human experience when he said in Matthew 26:41, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

In the best of times, you can scrape together all your good habits to live your "ideal spiritual life." But eventually you find yourself juggling demanding coursework at school; you face an overwhelming deadline at work; chronic illness descends; you give birth and are awake six out of eight hours in the night; or you are called to care for an aging parent or spouse. What then? How do you grow closer to Jesus when the bone-tired exhaustion of sleepless nights piles up?

God understands your frailties, and he has provided a way for you to know him deeply without leaving your everyday life. You may not have space right now to study an entire book of the Bible, commit to a prayer hour, or volunteer to lead a women's retreat, but you can start small. Every day has space for a short reflection on God's Word. The simple faith habits that invite God's presence into your every moment are known as spiritual disciplines. As you fold these into your everyday life, they will leave you feeling refreshed and transformed.

Gently Tended Through the Spiritual Disciplines

I've put together this study to equip you with spiritual practices for growing closer to Christ, but in a way that takes little sit-down-and-focus time. The following sessions offer brief Scripture reflections—just a verse or two—on twelve spiritual disciplines. The spiritual disciplines are intentional, habitual practices that are explicitly taught in the Bible as ways believers can grow into

mature faith. They are not ways to make God love you more, but rather ways you can cultivate an awareness of his love and be formed to be more like him.

Often when the spiritual disciplines are taught, they are presented in their most exaggerated forms, leading us to believe that God can only be reached through exhaustive efforts and long hours dedicated to quiet time and Scripture reading. I would like to use this study to show you the gentle love of your Father, who says he is so close that we live in his shadow (Psalm 91:1). You don't need to work hard to access his presence; he is already with you. Together, we will discover how to turn everyday moments into meaningful time with God.

Maybe these disciplines are something you work on a little every day or a little every week. Even if you pause or fall out of the habit for a few days (or weeks), he is always there, ready and waiting for you to pick it up again. You don't have to practice perfectly in order to see growth and experience transformation. Every moment given to God will bear spiritual fruit.

As you flip through these pages or scan the table of contents, you may see practices your pastor or tradition teaches, or you may see some that are less familiar. You may notice that some disciplines you've been taught are missing. I've included these twelve because they seem like the gentlest way to start, and they are the twelve I have the most experience with in my own walk with God. I believe I can only teach from what God has already taught me, and these are the ones he's used to draw me closer to him.

As you read and study, some of these disciplines may feel gentle to you—pick those up! If others feel overwhelming, make a little mental note and save those for when you have more margin. You will be shocked at what can happen in your heart by simply exposing yourself to an idea.

If you're studying alone and see a discipline that you've always wanted to know more about, feel free to jump to the one that you're curious about or that you most need. Chasing interest is a great way to build excitement and grow your love for learning!

No matter where you begin, remember that this is enough for this season. Focusing on one Scripture verse and discipline at a time doesn't mean you'll never read through the Bible in a year. It doesn't mean you're shallow. God's Word always accomplishes its purpose, so you can trust that any time you spend focusing on his Word and promises will be formative for you!



A decorative floral border runs vertically along the left edge of the page. It features various types of flowers, including carnations and hydrangeas, with detailed leaves and stems in a light brown or tan color.

How to Use This Study

Before you get started, I've included some guidelines that will help you get the most out of this Bible study.

Individual and Group Study

This study can be completed individually or with a group. Maybe you're the kind of person who gets excited about something and then wants someone to share it with. If that's you, invite a friend or two to work through this study alongside you so you can encourage each other and be excited together as you learn. You might consider meeting at a home or coffee shop, or even gathering virtually through voice or video chat.

Maybe you're feeling shy about doing a Bible study with others and you want the freedom to go at your own pace. This study was written for you too! I will guide you through each session as we learn about the spiritual disciplines together.

If you're doing this study with a group, you'll want to watch the video teaching and complete the discussion questions during your group's scheduled meeting time. All other sections of the session are designed to be completed individually prior to your meeting so that you can focus your group time on discussion. (Though please feel free to adapt this structure to best meet the needs of your group.) Each group should have a leader who starts the video, keeps track of time, leads the group through the questions, and helps create a safe environment for participants to share their thoughts. For more guidance, see the Leader's Guide on page 205.

What You'll Need

You'll want to make sure you have a Bible on hand. The verses in this study are taken from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) translation, but you are invited to bring your favorite Bible translation to this study. I find that using another translation can be fun because it provides fresh phrasing and perspective to reflect on the same truths of Scripture.

You'll also need a pen, maybe some markers, and a stack of index cards or Post-its to write the focus verse from each session. Feel free to make this as simple or creative as you like.

Lastly, you'll need access to a streaming device to watch the short video teachings that accompany each session.

What to Expect in Each Session

Video Teaching: At the front of your Bible study book, you'll find instructions on how to access the video teachings. I have recorded twelve videos introducing you to each discipline. Take some time to watch these with your group or listen on your own while you fold laundry, load the dishwasher, or put on your makeup. *My hope is that by hearing my voice you will feel the gentleness of these practices even more deeply.* Feel free to jot down notes in the "Session Notes" space provided if you find that helpful.

Discussion and Reflection Questions: If you're doing this study with a group, here is where you can connect and share your thoughts with other group members. If you're working through this study on your own, take a few moments for personal reflection as you read through each question.

A Record of God's Gentle Tending: It may feel like God is far away at times, but he is always present and at work in our lives—we just have to pause and notice. Take a little time with each discipline to keep a record of how God is gently tending you. Even if you never look at this study again, the act of writing down God's goodness to you will allow you to better see and remember the work he is doing.

Finding the Spiritual Disciplines in the Word: Each study focuses on a short verse or passage of Scripture that teaches you about a spiritual discipline. Write out these focus verses on index cards or Post-its, then hang them somewhere you'll see regularly. You can either read your verses as you see them or attempt to memorize them. The simple act of writing each verse will help solidify the Word of God in your memory. (If you want something cuter and more creative, you can visit sunshineinmynest.com/product/gently-tended and download free copies of hand-painted verse cards to print and write your verses on.)

After writing down your verse, you'll answer some tried-and-true study questions about that verse. In this Bible study, I draw from the inductive Bible study method, which aims to answer the following three questions of Scripture: What does it say? What does it mean? What does it mean for my life? In this section, we will focus on answering the first two questions.

Let's Dig In: It can be hard, even impossible, to dig into commentaries or source texts while living in seasons of overwhelm. Here, I've dug in a bit for you, providing easy-to-digest, "stuff you should know" sections, as well as personal stories, which will give you an even deeper appreciation of each session's focus verse and the work God has done both on the cross and in your own life.

In Context: If you're feeling spunky, I've included some additional Scripture verses that will help you see how the focus verse and teaching fit into the whole of Scripture and provide a fuller understanding of God's character and the calling he's given you. Don't feel pressured to get this done before your group meets. If your season changes and you feel up for it later, you can circle back. Or, if time allows, as a group, you can take turns looking up, reading, and reflecting on these verses together.

A Gentle Invitation into the Spiritual Disciplines: The final step of an inductive study is answering the question, What does this mean for my life? As we learn about Jesus, his work on the cross, and his calling on our lives, it inspires us to be transformed. This isn't a spot for you to beat yourself up but rather to gently consider the hope his work brings to your life today.

Prayer: At the end of each session, I've included a prayer for you to take into your week. I know there are times when I'm overwhelmed about what to pray. I wish I were there to take your hands and pray with you if you're feeling that way too. These prayers are the closest I can get to doing that, and I hope they are an encouragement to you.

If you got really into the session's topic and have bonus time, I've included a few extra sections for further study:

Digging Deeper into the Spiritual Disciplines

A Second Look

Additional Context

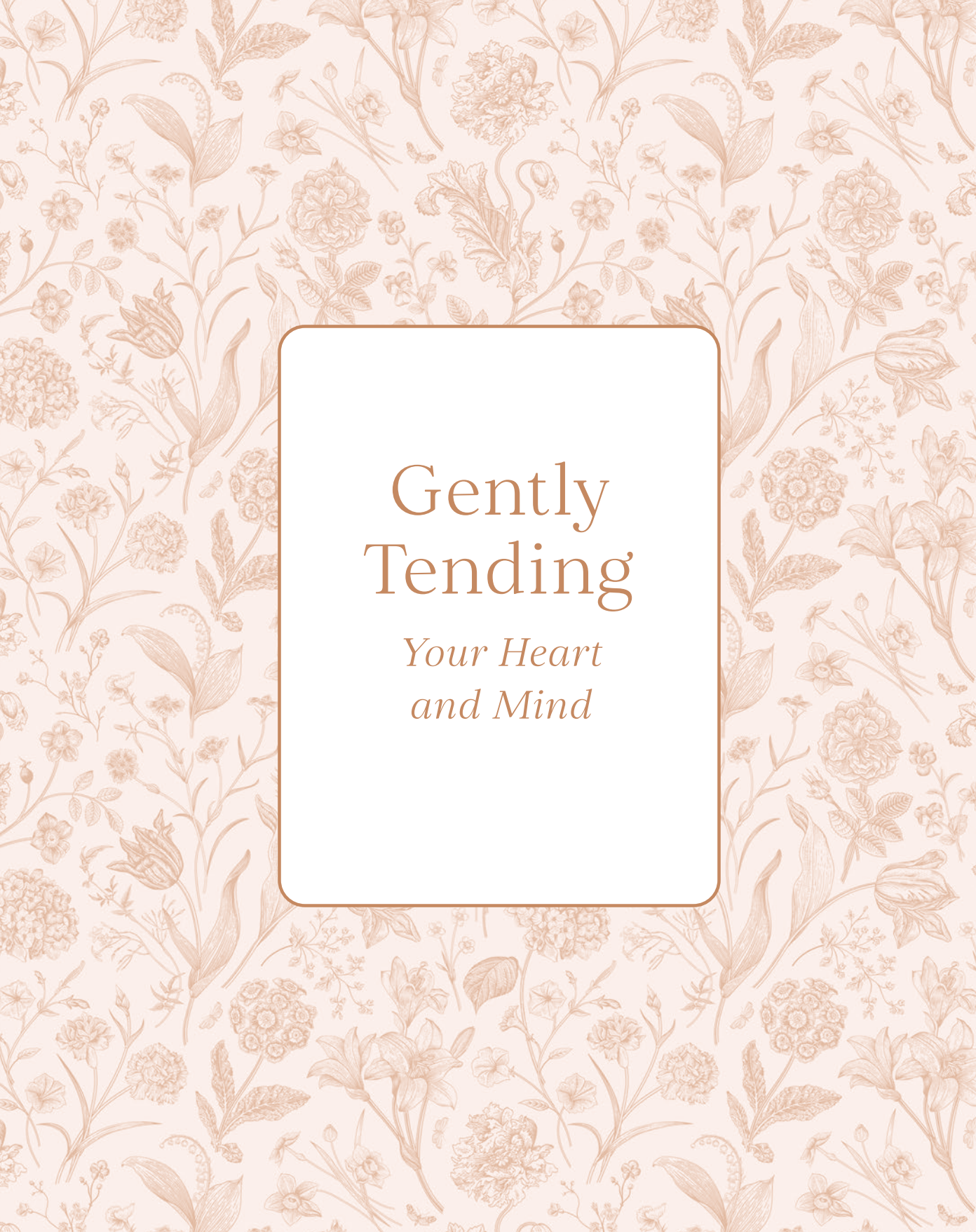
A Second Invitation into the Spiritual Disciplines

In these sections, you'll find an additional focus verse, commentary, and context section, as well as another opportunity to apply the session's discipline to your life. *Important note:* If you leave these final sections blank, or complete them for some lessons but not others, *you have not failed this study!* You may find that a week, month, or year later you want to come back and dig into an idea a little more. It will be here waiting for you!

Please be gentle with yourself. Take what is encouraging to you and trust that God's Word doesn't return empty. He will nourish you with as much or as little as you have capacity for today and lead you back to it when you're ready.

A Final Note

I'm so honored that you are allowing me to walk with you to our heavenly Father who gently tends us. Someday when I see you face-to-face, I can't wait to tell you about how he did that for me while I wrote this book, and I hope you can tell me about how he met you in these pages as well.



Gently Tending

*Your Heart
and Mind*



You have immediate adoption into God's family at the moment of salvation. Now you can live free and in relationship with God as your Father. You get to know him on a more personal basis by listening to the stories he tells about himself, having conversations with him, and seeing the way he is faithful to meet your needs when you trust him. The spiritual disciplines in this section will invite you to know God personally. This knowledge isn't just information that stays in your head, but rather truth that equips you to be more like him and transforms your heart, mind, and life.

Bible Study

The term *Bible study* may conjure up images of Instagram posts with coffee, candles, highlighters, and an open Bible—the perfect setup for long, quiet hours of reading chapter after chapter. But this is vastly different from the way the early church studied God’s Word. For the first one thousand years after Christ, most people didn’t have personal copies of the Bible. They would read it together corporately, discuss it, and mull over what they had heard throughout their week.

Bible study is the practice of exposing ourselves to what the Bible says and applying those truths to our lives. So read or listen to what you can retain, and seek to deepen your understanding of the meaning. The goal is for his Word to be a major forming influence in your life.

- Can you remember a time in your life when you studied your Bible often? What made it meaningful, and how did you grow through it?
- What resources do you use to help you study the Bible? Have you used them recently?
- What is a Bible verse that is particularly meaningful to you, and why is it important? If you're working in a group, write your favorite verse on an index card and exchange cards with one another.

To access the video session, use the instructions in the front of your Bible study book.

A Record of God's Gentle Tending

Sometimes we think God doesn't meet with us, when really we just don't pause long enough to notice what he's already doing. Take a moment to record how God is tending you.

Look back over your life. What are some ways God has used the Bible to show himself to you? Is there a passage from Scripture he's recently used to transform one part of your life? Describe that experience.

Finding Bible Study in the Word

Write out Romans 12:2 on an index card or Post-it so you can refer to it throughout your week.

Now let's take some time to look deeply at Romans 12:2. We want to see this verse in its context, understand the words used, and discover its meaning.

What do you think are the key words in this verse?

Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

ROMANS 12:2

Look up the words *conformed* and *transformed* in the dictionary, then write this verse in your own words.

What is the result of having our minds transformed by truth?

A decorative floral border runs vertically along the left edge of the page. It features a variety of flowers, including carnations and smaller blossoms, with detailed leaves and stems in a light brown or tan color.

LET'S DIG INTO

Bible Study

The other day I was telling a friend that one of the most formative influences in my life has been who I married. My husband and I have been married thirteen years. We've talked so much that we know nearly all each other's stories from childhood, teen years, and young adulthood. Though occasionally he will tell a story that, much to my delight, surprises me.

I've found that the more I know about my husband, the dearer he becomes to me. I understand his motivations and the choices he makes. Our conversations have helped shape who I am, what my interests are, and the way I talk to people. His tenderness has helped me become less self-critical and more confident about trying new things.

Reading God's Word does something similar to us. Bible teacher Jen Wilkin often says, "The heart cannot love what the mind does not know."² Without spending time with God, it's possible to be vaguely spiritual. But to really love God, we must get to know him. He's made that possible by giving us hundreds of pages of stories and teachings about who he is. In his Word, we also learn how much he loves us and that he has intimately known us since before we were even born (Psalm 139:13-14).

When we read his Word and ask the deep, hard questions of our faith, we grow to know God more intimately and develop deep trust in him that cannot be shaken no matter how many years pass or what trials come.

In today's verse, Romans 12:2, Paul calls believers in Rome to stand firm in God's truth amid a pagan society. It's hard to imagine what the world was like before the widespread influence of Christian ethics, but let's try for a moment. In Roman culture, you married mainly for status and to have

children who would help advance your business ventures. Though Romans rejoiced when a child was born to them, they did not consider children fully human until adulthood. Sometimes families left unwanted babies in the wilderness to die of exposure. Other times these abandoned infants were adopted or taken to be raised as slaves or prostitutes. If you were in a financially tight place, you could sell your children for profit. Women were legally required to follow the demands of their husbands. And while some forms of Roman entertainment were peaceful—like poetry readings and theater performances—many others were brutal and violent. In the Colosseum, human life was only as valuable as the enjoyment it created. Crowds would watch as slaves or prisoners fought to the death. The gods they worshiped were unstable and manipulative.³

Into this world, Christians came to teach about a God who loves people so much that he sent his Son to die for them. While on earth, Jesus healed people, ate with them, and gathered children to himself. In Romans 12:2, Paul urges the early church not to be shaped by the city they lived in, but rather by the beautiful new truth they had found in Jesus.

We are all daily being formed by the things that we are continually exposed to—whether it's the speech patterns of our friends, jokes from the TV shows we watch, or the theology of our church family.

Less innocent types of formation come as we scroll social media and are told that our aging faces are a problem. We read novels that suggest we'd be happier with a husband who has a better personality. Advertisements try to convince us that anxiety can be masked with substances, and our fear of missing out can be cured by spending more money on experiences.

It can be tempting to listen to all these voices. But the goal of a Christian is to spend time studying the Word of God so that it is the major forming influence in our lives and gives us discernment to recognize the lies culture is selling.

When we think of "doing Bible study," we often picture quiet, personal time spent reading our Bibles. But this is much different from the way the early Christians studied God's Word. In the historical period when the New Testament was written, most people didn't even have personal copies of Scripture. Instead, they would gather to read it together, then discuss and reflect on it in the days that followed. God's Word was integrated into their daily rhythms.

We are transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). But our minds can only be transformed if we are exposing them to things that are

true, lovely, and commendable (Philippians 4:8). When we follow the pattern of calling on the Lord, believing in him, and discussing and sharing his Word (Romans 10:14-15), it causes us to be transformed.

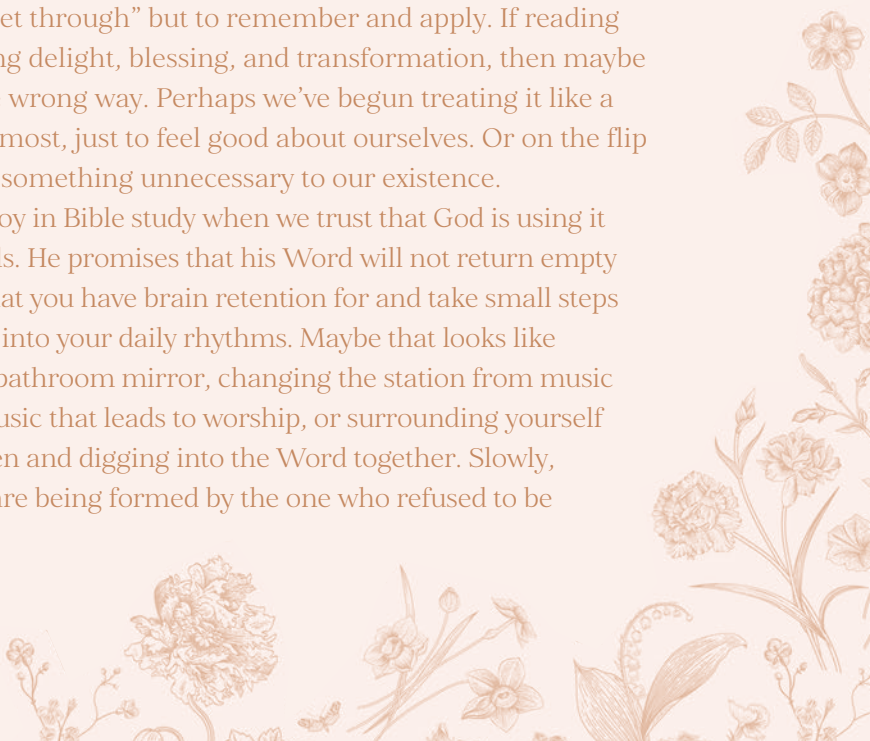
If you're like me, you grab your phone off your nightstand first thing in the morning. You settle down in the evening with another quick scroll. You burn through page after page in your novel while the Bible study lies dusty on the desk. Or you hop from social event to social event without pausing to think about how it went and how the experience impacted you.

We know we can't form ourselves. We've tried, and we've come up lacking. Jesus is the perfect Son of God who sacrificed himself to save us from our own shortcomings, and because of him we can have an intimate relationship with God and be blessed as we are formed by his Word.

We can rest in the truths laid out in his Word, knowing that even if we don't immediately understand everything, he is good, and his ways are good. We don't have to see aging as a problem, but can find peace in the truth that aging brings wisdom acquired from years of being formed by the gospel and ushers us into God's presence when this life passes. God's Word shows us how marriage and family life give us the space to humble ourselves and serve. His truth enables us to remove ourselves from the center of the universe and practice the disciplines of our faith in daily life.

But how can we do this if we don't know what the Word says? The goal of our reading isn't to "get through" but to remember and apply. If reading God's Word isn't bringing delight, blessing, and transformation, then maybe we're approaching it the wrong way. Perhaps we've begun treating it like a competition to read the most, just to feel good about ourselves. Or on the flip side, maybe it's become something unnecessary to our existence.

We can reclaim our joy in Bible study when we trust that God is using it to gently tend to our souls. He promises that his Word will not return empty (Isaiah 55:11). So read what you have brain retention for and take small steps to incorporate his truths into your daily rhythms. Maybe that looks like sticking a verse on your bathroom mirror, changing the station from music that glamorizes sin to music that leads to worship, or surrounding yourself with other faithful women and digging into the Word together. Slowly, you will notice that you are being formed by the one who refused to be conformed by the world.



In Context

I've listed some of my favorite passages on Bible study below. After reading each passage in your Bible, use the space provided to respond to one (or both) of these questions:

What does this teach you about how and why to study the Bible?

What does this reveal to you about who God is?

You can also choose to simply write out the passage. Writing the Word of God helps solidify it in our hearts.

Psalm 119:11

Psalm 119:105

Hebrews 4:12

2 Timothy 3:16-17

A Gentle Invitation into Bible Study

What do you need most in life to start reading God's Word more regularly—to lock in on really hearing what the Bible is saying and applying its truths to your life?

What have you learned today that shows you who God is?

Prayer

Father, thank you for wanting a relationship with your people so much that you created a way for us to know you intimately.

Help me not to use your Word as a weapon to beat myself up when I fail, but to understand your grace and your love for me! Teach me to know you better this week.

Digging Deeper into Bible Study

If you have bonus time, I invite you to explore an additional verse on Bible study. Write out Isaiah 55:11 on an index card or Post-it so you can refer to it throughout your week.

Now let’s take some time to look deeply at Isaiah 55:11. We want to see this verse in its context, understand the words used, and discover its meaning.

What is the promise of this verse?

So my word that comes from my mouth will not return to me empty, but it will accomplish what I please and will prosper in what I send it to do.

ISAIAH 55:11

When we look at Isaiah 55, what clues show that verse 11 is a promise, not a threat?

Isaiah was prophesying to God’s covenant people who had become corrupt and rejected him. In the book, we see the narrative arc of coming judgment, a promised Messiah, and the compassion of God. How might that context make the promise of this verse even more meaningful and tangible?



A SECOND LOOK AT

Bible Study

The smell of grass floated in through the open window of our farmhouse. The pulse of the buzzing cicadas made it seem as if the air was breathing. I lay sprawled out across my twin bed, so engrossed in my book that I hardly noticed the sticky July heat. A tear slowly slid down my face as I turned a page.

Every paragraph of the missionary testimony I was reading was laced with Scripture. Miracle after miracle unfolded as the chapters slipped by. Newlywed Darlene Deibler Rose went to a mission field in New Guinea to serve alongside several elderly missionaries right before the start of World War II.

When news of the war reached them, their whole group prayed to see if they should leave or stay. Unanimously they decided to stay, and a short time later they received word that the ship they would have left on was torpedoed three days after it set sail. There were no survivors.

Eventually, the Japanese military took control of the region where Darlene and her husband were serving, and they were imprisoned in different camps. Accused of being a spy, Darlene was put in a maximum-security prison where, upon arrival, the commander took her Bible. She said in her testimony, “He didn’t know that as a little girl I went to bed every night with this book [my Bible] in front of me. And I began to memorize it, and I started in with Genesis. There was much of this book that was there on the grooves of my mind for the Holy Spirit just to drop the needle down on it and play it back to me. So I didn’t mind him taking my Bible.”⁴

Day after day, year after year, God sustained her through the verses she had memorized. Time and time again he answered her prayers, and she was comforted in her grief.

The words of God that Darlene had memorized as a child didn't just sit in her mind or run through her thoughts as a mantra. They transformed who she was and the way she reacted to the pain and struggle that life brought her way.

Similarly, God encouraged Israel through the prophet Isaiah. Israel had been a wandering people, and they were given the law of God to guide their faith and a place to settle down in the land God had promised Abraham. For a while they had God as their ultimate King, and judges who helped to deliver them. But eventually Israel wanted an earthly king so they could be like the nations around them. While King David and his son Solomon taught Israel to love God more and made a place for them to worship, after a few decades, their earthly kings led them into idol worship and poverty. The Scriptures were lost, and worship of God mostly stopped.

Isaiah was a prophet during this phase of Israel's history. He warned that they would be taken captive and punished unless they repented of their sin and turned to God. He encouraged them to listen to Scripture and obey it. And he told them of God's promise of restoration, even in the face of punishment and exile. In today's verse, Isaiah 55:11, God is speaking through Isaiah to remind Israel that they can trust in his promises.

We, too, can place our trust in God's Word. The purpose of studying the Bible isn't to become stuffed with knowledge but rather to be transformed by his Spirit (Romans 12:2). We are putting off our old ways and putting on the new way of life God has given us (Ephesians 4:22-24). Just like Darlene Deibler Rose and the Israelites, we are invited to lean into God's Word to sustain and guide us each day, no matter what comes our way.

When we read the Word with an open heart, ready to do what it says, God transforms the way we see the world. His attitudes start to become our attitudes. What breaks his heart breaks ours, and what brings him joy brings us joy.

Studying the Word brings joy because it reminds us that God hasn't handed us over to the influence of a broken world. He lays out his heart in a way that we can access and walks beside us as we become more like him. I had a mentor tell me once that someone can show up to therapy for years and make no progress until it finally "clicks" and they see how they need to change. That, for them, is day one. The same thing happens in the life of a believer. We can believe in Jesus and be saved, knowing that grace covers us and we are his

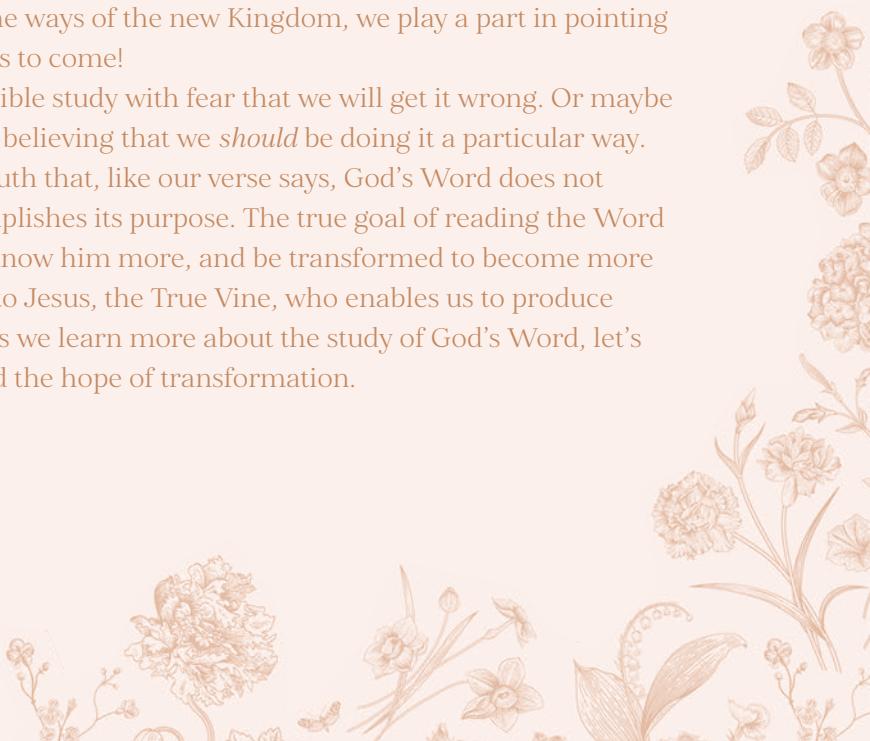
children. However, there is a different kind of transformation that happens when a Christian dedicates themselves to the study of God's Word.

We don't study the Bible to earn our salvation—Jesus already paid that price. Rather, when we open our Bibles, we are accepting Jesus' gentle invitation to walk with him and become more like him: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. . . . For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30). Bible study *does* require effort and intentionality—Jesus describes following him as wearing a "yoke." Yokes for ancient people were always connected to work. But he also promises that his yoke is "easy," meant to lead us into freedom and flourishing.

The Bible is God's path for us to find flourishing in the world he created. Of course, because we live in a broken world, we can never find complete fulfillment here. When the first humans sinned, the ground became cursed and pain and death entered in.

Yet the joy we have as Christians is knowing that when things became broken, God didn't leave us. Jesus came to be perfect for us. He endured a crown of thorns on our behalf. He was publicly mocked. His flesh was torn. Then he died to make things new again. Even though the earth is still groaning under the effects of sin, we are told of a Kingdom to come with no more tears. The peace we experience in Christ now is just a shadow of what is to come. The more we dig into his Word, the more real it becomes to us. And when we live in alignment with the ways of the new Kingdom, we play a part in pointing others to the glory that is to come!

It's easy to come to Bible study with fear that we will get it wrong. Or maybe someone misled us into believing that we *should* be doing it a particular way. But we can rest in the truth that, like our verse says, God's Word does not return empty but accomplishes its purpose. The true goal of reading the Word of God is to love Jesus, know him more, and be transformed to become more like him. It is tapping into Jesus, the True Vine, who enables us to produce good fruit in our lives. As we learn more about the study of God's Word, let's move into it with joy and the hope of transformation.



Additional Context

I've listed some more of my favorite passages on Bible study below. After reading each passage in your Bible, use the space provided to respond to one (or both) of these questions:

What does this teach you about how and why to study the Bible?

What does this reveal to you about who God is?

You can also choose to simply write out the passage. Writing the Word of God helps solidify it in our hearts.

1 Peter 2:2

Proverbs 30:5

Isaiah 40:8

Psalms 119:18

A Second Invitation into Bible Study

Sometimes embracing new spiritual practices can feel hard. What, if anything, about Bible study makes you uncomfortable? Take a moment to pray over your concerns, remembering that Jesus meets each one with gentleness and compassion.

How does what you've read change the way you feel called to live?