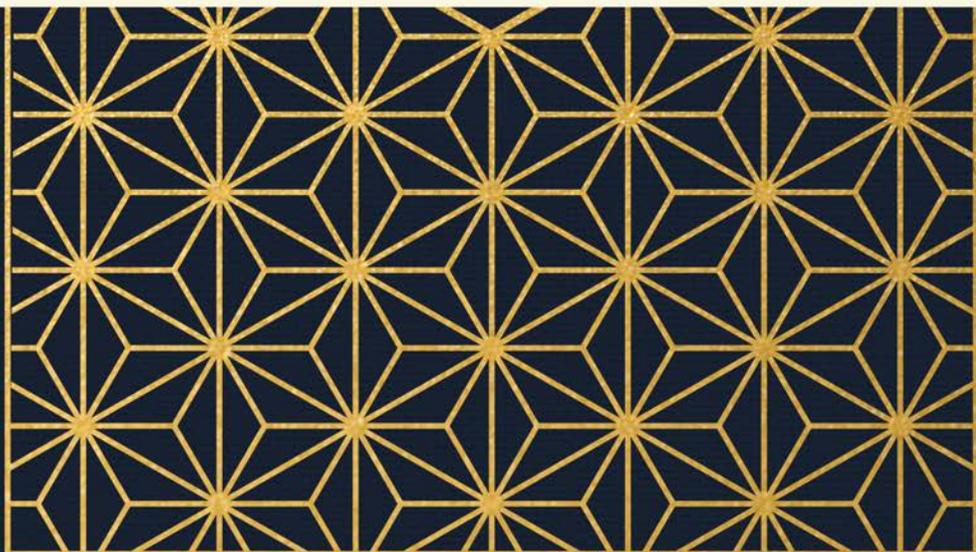


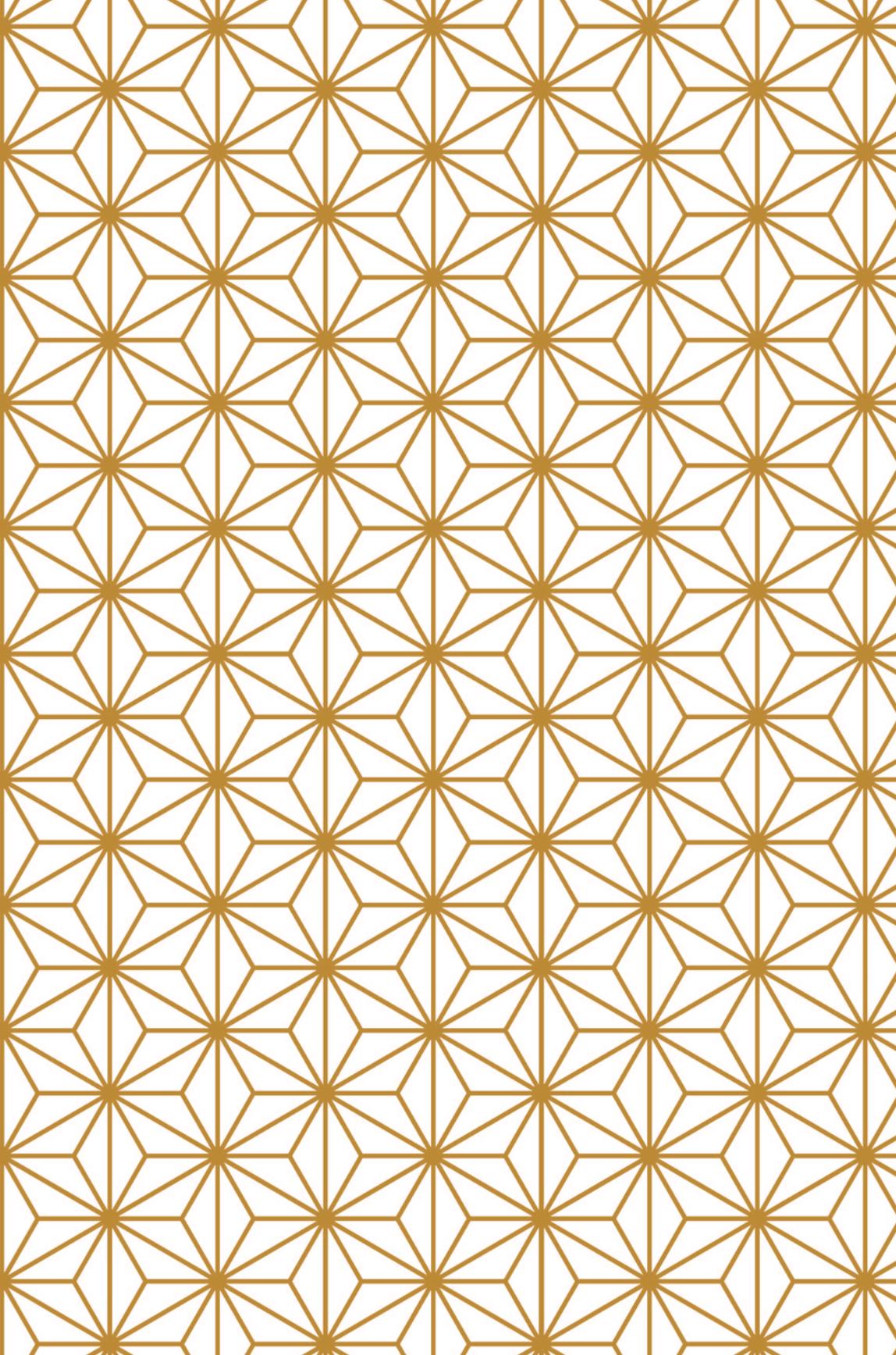
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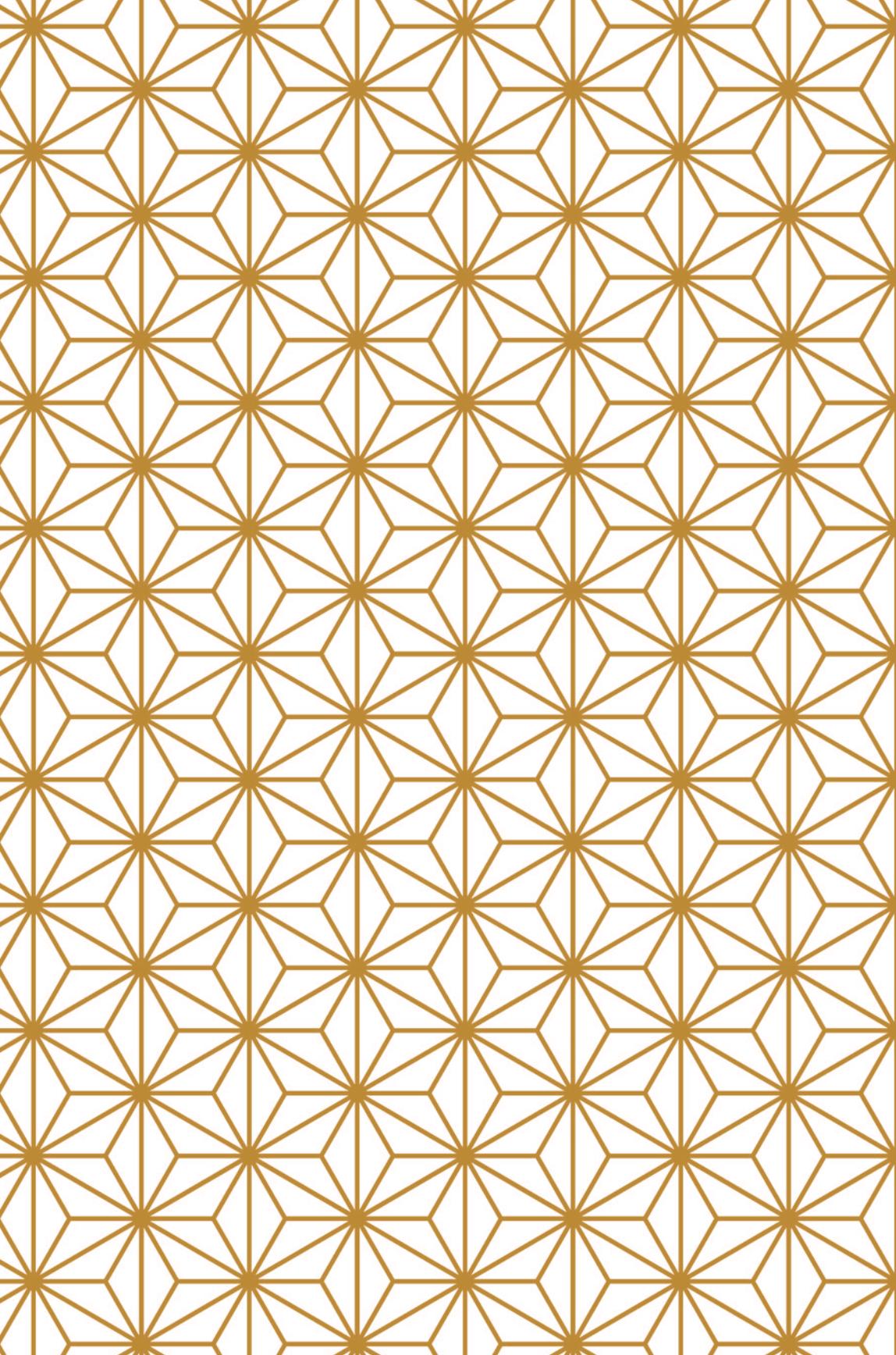
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The One Year Experiencing God's Presence Devotional: 365 Daily Encounters to Bring You Closer to Him

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INTRODUCTION

All of us long for God's Presence, and we sense it—occasionally. But for most of us, our faith tends to slip easily into a religion of theological beliefs about God and His Word, biblically derived precepts, step-by-step principles, and common “best practices.” There are times when what we call a “relationship with God” feels like nothing more than a relationship with these beliefs and behaviors. We relate to printed words on a page, to people at church, to devotional practices, to ministry activities, and to our own sense of obligation to do what's right—and then we call *that* a relationship with God. What's missing? Real encounters with Him. Certainty that we have heard His voice. A sense of His palpable Presence.

This sense of God's Presence is what all of us truly crave. Most of us get glimpses of it from time to time, and we know it won't be full and complete this side of eternity. Still, we want more. We need to feel His touch. And we can. There are things we can do to become more aware of Him and to posture ourselves to experience Him more—if we understand where He is and how He shows Himself.

God is everywhere. We couldn't get away from Him if we wanted to—which, of course, we don't. So if He's always with us, why discuss His Presence as though it fluctuates? Because there's a difference between His Presence and our experience of it. We aren't as aware of Him as we'd like to be. We don't just want Him to be present; we want to actually encounter Him.

Our awareness is half of what we need in order to experience God's Presence; the other half is up to Him. He comes to us. Though He is in every place at all times, He isn't *manifestly* present in every place at all times. Scripture is clear in this distinction: sometimes He is “present,” and sometimes He isn't (see, for example, Exodus 33:3, 14–15). Scripture must be referring not to His omnipresence but to some aspect of His Presence that is more intense, more evident, more tangible and real in some moments than in others. Sometimes He shows up in remarkable ways.

This devotional is about both sides of the issue: becoming more aware of God's Presence and experiencing Him when He comes closer. The first is what is often referred to as “practicing the Presence of God”—that is, tuning in to the knowledge of His nearness. The second is positioning ourselves to encounter His Presence when He shows up—having the attitudes and

expectations that prepare us to encounter Him. We'll explore what it means when He says that His Presence will go with us, or that He is near to the humble and the brokenhearted but far from the proud, or that He draws near to us when we draw near to Him. Without compromising that He is always present, we'll consider the various levels and degrees of His Presence and how to experience "more" of Him. If Scripture can speak in these terms, so can we.

Toward those two ends—our awareness and His nearness—each day's reading concludes with a prayer to be drawn closer to God's Presence or for His Presence to become more real to us. These prayers are an invitation to enter into the truth of the devotional and to engage God about that truth. If you feel led to another response or another prayer, pray accordingly. Sometimes prayers like this seem contrived because, though they may be the heartfelt request of the writer, they aren't necessarily the heartfelt request of the reader. But some people need ideas or encouragement in taking the next step after they have read or received a spiritual truth. These prayers are offered as that next step. If you actually pray them—even if that feels awkward at first—and own them in some profound way, they can radically change your life. Over time, you will become constantly aware of His nearness, hear Him more clearly, and experience His touch more easily.

Some might consider this idea of experiencing God's Presence to be somewhat mystical, and it is. That's because the Christian faith is by nature somewhat mystical. Jesus spoke to His disciples about His oneness with them and about the Holy Spirit coming to speak to them (see John 14:16-20; 17:22-23); Paul wrote about encountering Jesus on a road to Damascus and of receiving inexpressible revelations in the third heaven (see 2 Corinthians 12:1-4); and Scripture in general is filled with many who encountered God and heard His voice. Clearly, the Bible describes a mystical relationship between Jesus and those who believe in Him. These readings are daily steps toward experiencing that relationship in deeper, more powerful ways.



January 1

Apart from me you can do nothing.

JOHN 15:5

The Presence is everything in the Christian life. Maybe that seems like an overstatement. Surely obedience is important, along with bearing fruit, being loving and compassionate, praying, growing in faith, overcoming obstacles, dealing with relationship issues, and so much more. That's why so many books are published and so many sermons preached about these things. Christian living is a vast array of disciplines, attitudes, and activities, and we have to know how to approach them. Right?

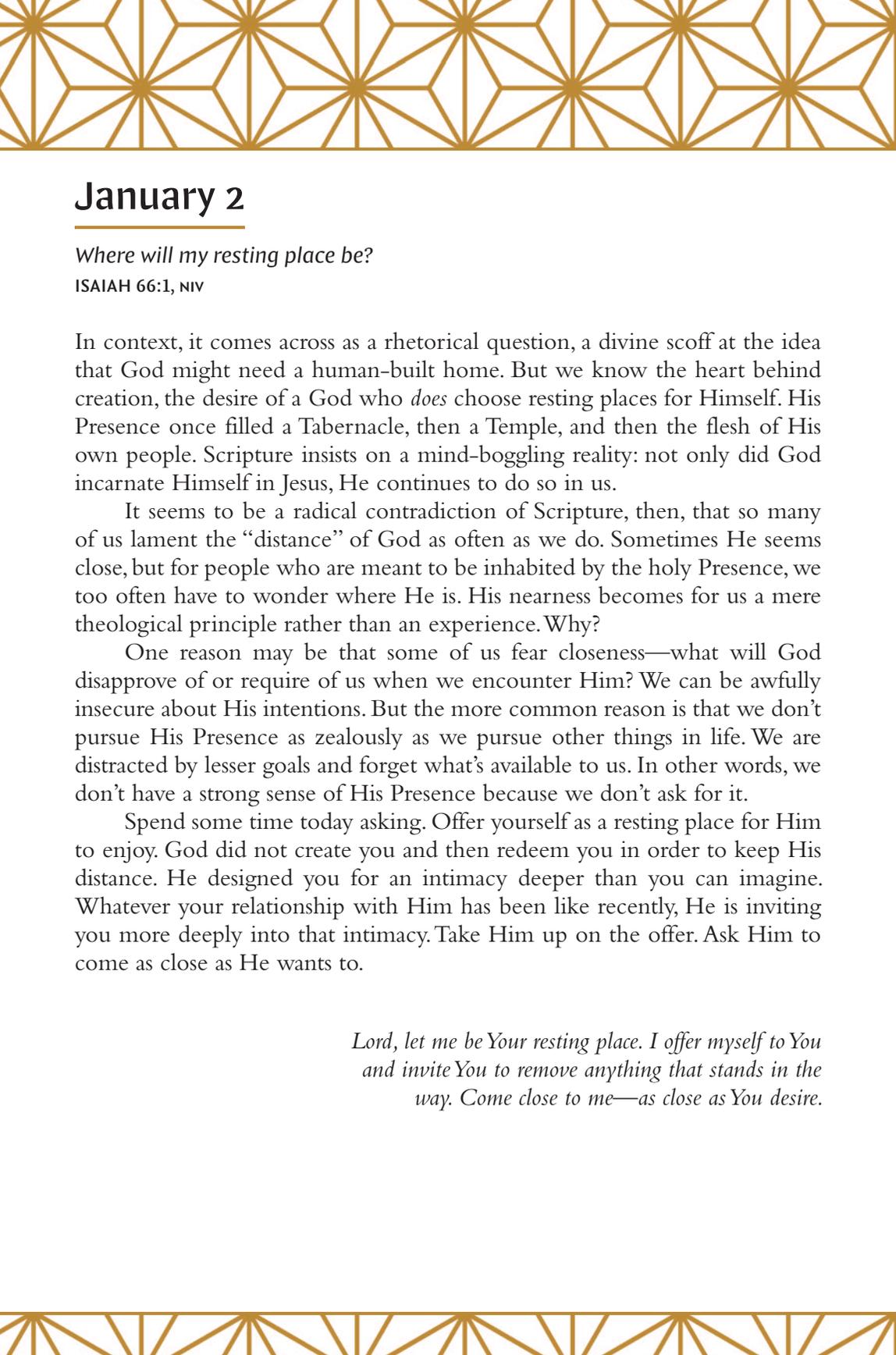
But think about it. What happens to your attitude when you have a palpable sense of God's Presence around you? How fruitful does your prayer life become? How strong does your faith grow? What obstacle seems large when you're aware that God is in the room? How hard is it to obey when He is present to empower you? How hard do you have to try to bear fruit if He is spilling out from within you? What relationship issues remain unyielding when His power overwhelms? The truth is that His Presence working within us is the key to everything, and without Him we can do nothing.

That's why cultivating both an awareness and an ongoing experience of His Presence is vital. When God shows up, miracles happen. Life comes out of death, beauty comes out of ashes, dancing takes the place of mourning, futility gives way to fruitfulness, confusion is replaced by order, and obstacles bow to His will. Even the hard side of His Presence—the convicting and correcting truth we don't want to hear—eventually gives life. When God is at work in and around us, everything changes.

Zealously, relentlessly, passionately pursue God's Presence. Every endeavor in the Christian life is futile without that. But with it, everything is possible.

Jesus, I need You—Your Spirit, Your life—in me and around me. I'm not content just to know about You or to believe the right things. I want to experience Your Presence. I know You want that too. Please, Lord, let me sense You always.





January 2

Where will my resting place be?

ISAIAH 66:1, NIV

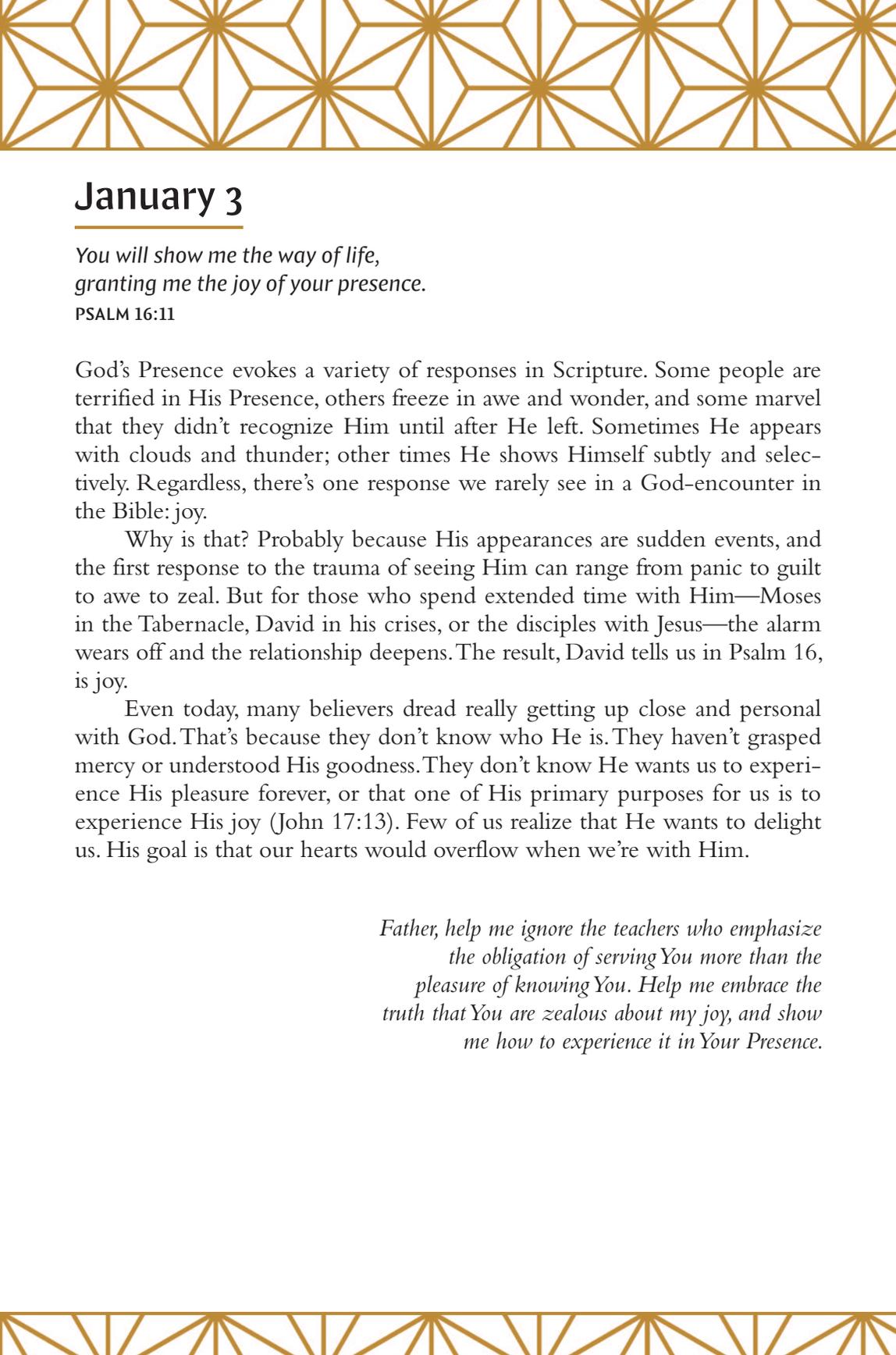
In context, it comes across as a rhetorical question, a divine scoff at the idea that God might need a human-built home. But we know the heart behind creation, the desire of a God who *does* choose resting places for Himself. His Presence once filled a Tabernacle, then a Temple, and then the flesh of His own people. Scripture insists on a mind-boggling reality: not only did God incarnate Himself in Jesus, He continues to do so in us.

It seems to be a radical contradiction of Scripture, then, that so many of us lament the “distance” of God as often as we do. Sometimes He seems close, but for people who are meant to be inhabited by the holy Presence, we too often have to wonder where He is. His nearness becomes for us a mere theological principle rather than an experience. Why?

One reason may be that some of us fear closeness—what will God disapprove of or require of us when we encounter Him? We can be awfully insecure about His intentions. But the more common reason is that we don’t pursue His Presence as zealously as we pursue other things in life. We are distracted by lesser goals and forget what’s available to us. In other words, we don’t have a strong sense of His Presence because we don’t ask for it.

Spend some time today asking. Offer yourself as a resting place for Him to enjoy. God did not create you and then redeem you in order to keep His distance. He designed you for an intimacy deeper than you can imagine. Whatever your relationship with Him has been like recently, He is inviting you more deeply into that intimacy. Take Him up on the offer. Ask Him to come as close as He wants to.

*Lord, let me be Your resting place. I offer myself to You
and invite You to remove anything that stands in the
way. Come close to me—as close as You desire.*



January 3

*You will show me the way of life,
granting me the joy of your presence.*

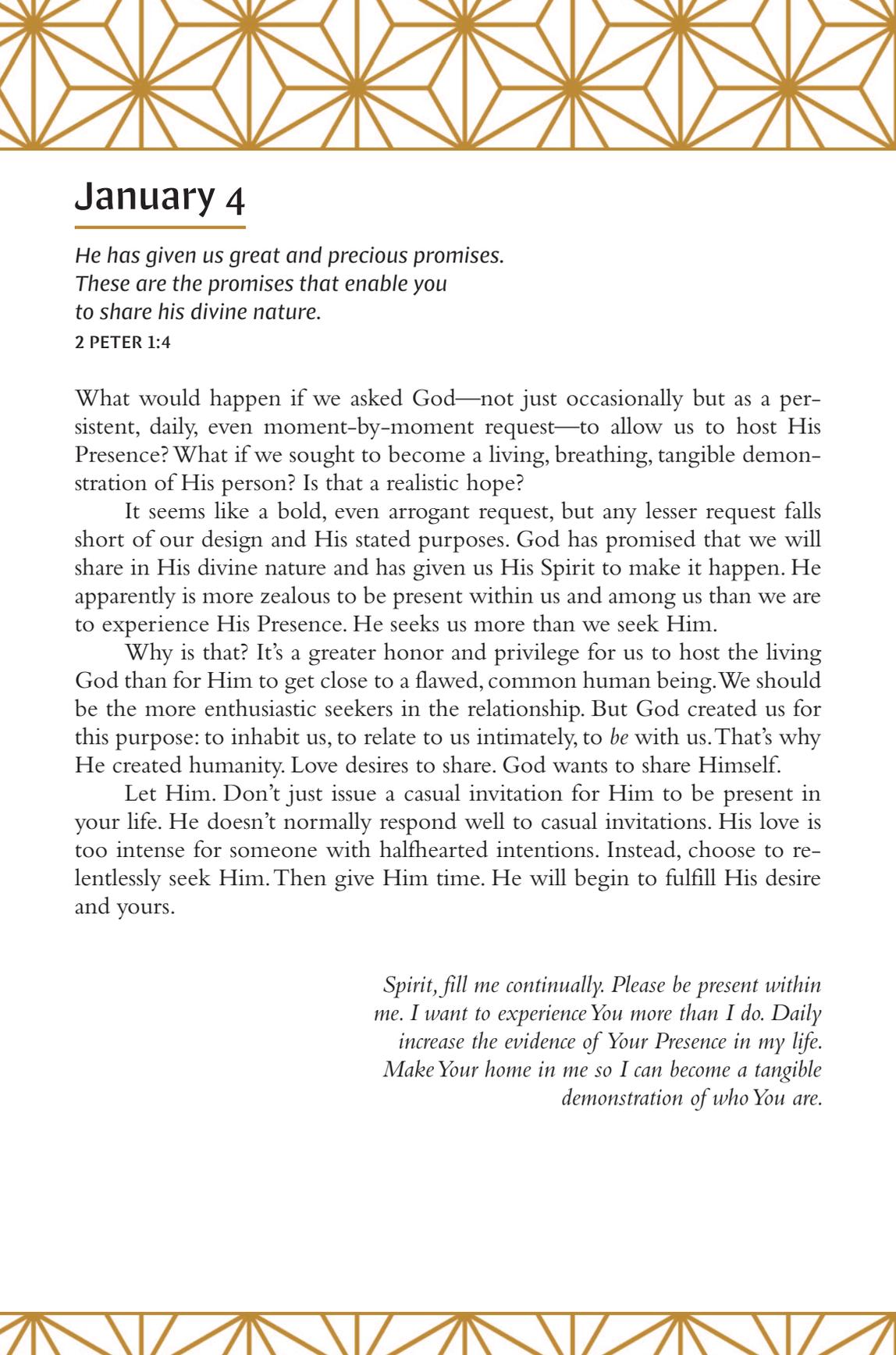
PSALM 16:11

God's Presence evokes a variety of responses in Scripture. Some people are terrified in His Presence, others freeze in awe and wonder, and some marvel that they didn't recognize Him until after He left. Sometimes He appears with clouds and thunder; other times He shows Himself subtly and selectively. Regardless, there's one response we rarely see in a God-encounter in the Bible: joy.

Why is that? Probably because His appearances are sudden events, and the first response to the trauma of seeing Him can range from panic to guilt to awe to zeal. But for those who spend extended time with Him—Moses in the Tabernacle, David in his crises, or the disciples with Jesus—the alarm wears off and the relationship deepens. The result, David tells us in Psalm 16, is joy.

Even today, many believers dread really getting up close and personal with God. That's because they don't know who He is. They haven't grasped mercy or understood His goodness. They don't know He wants us to experience His pleasure forever, or that one of His primary purposes for us is to experience His joy (John 17:13). Few of us realize that He wants to delight us. His goal is that our hearts would overflow when we're with Him.

*Father, help me ignore the teachers who emphasize
the obligation of serving You more than the
pleasure of knowing You. Help me embrace the
truth that You are zealous about my joy, and show
me how to experience it in Your Presence.*



January 4

*He has given us great and precious promises.
These are the promises that enable you
to share his divine nature.*

2 PETER 1:4

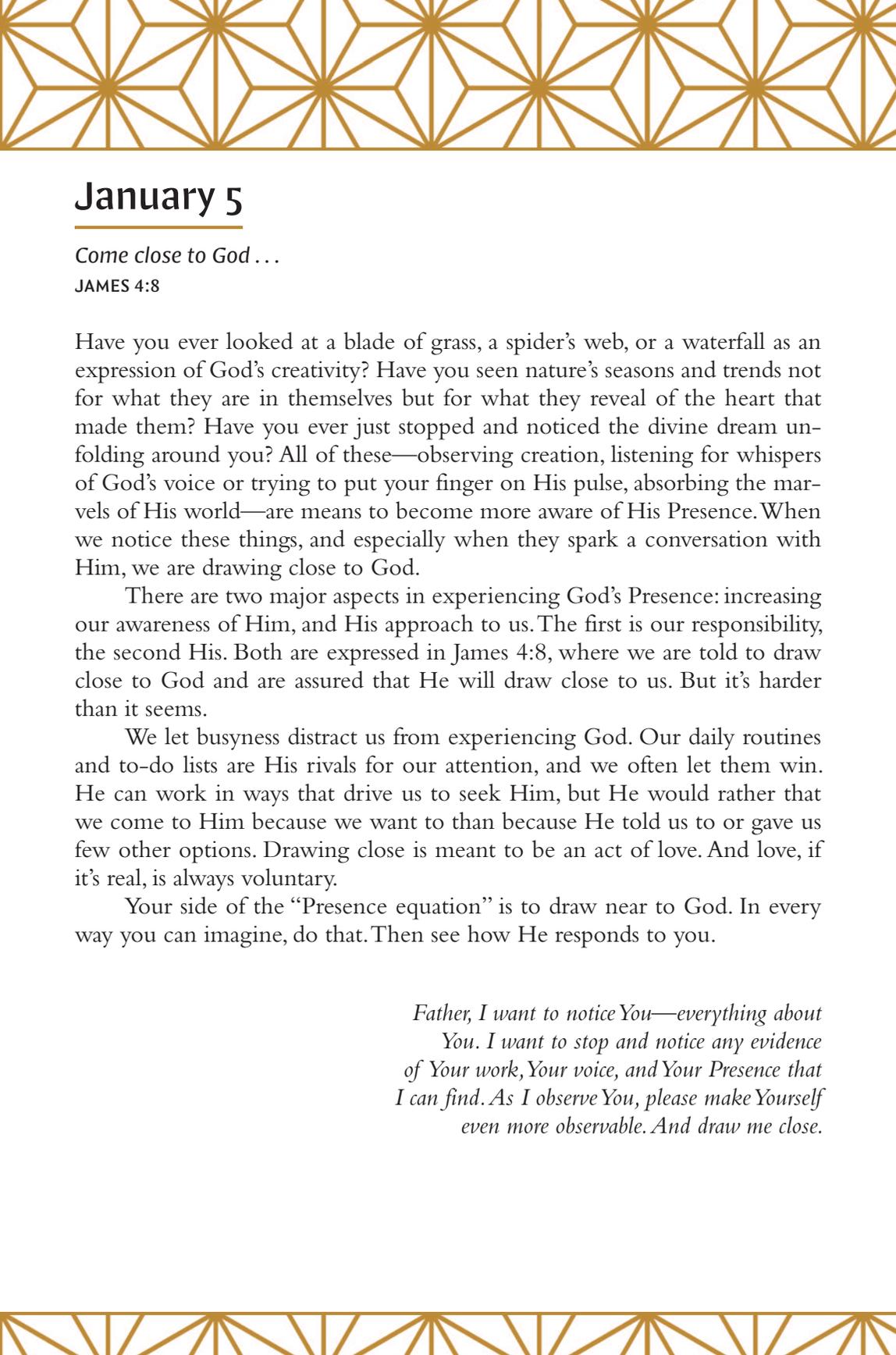
What would happen if we asked God—not just occasionally but as a persistent, daily, even moment-by-moment request—to allow us to host His Presence? What if we sought to become a living, breathing, tangible demonstration of His person? Is that a realistic hope?

It seems like a bold, even arrogant request, but any lesser request falls short of our design and His stated purposes. God has promised that we will share in His divine nature and has given us His Spirit to make it happen. He apparently is more zealous to be present within us and among us than we are to experience His Presence. He seeks us more than we seek Him.

Why is that? It's a greater honor and privilege for us to host the living God than for Him to get close to a flawed, common human being. We should be the more enthusiastic seekers in the relationship. But God created us for this purpose: to inhabit us, to relate to us intimately, to *be* with us. That's why He created humanity. Love desires to share. God wants to share Himself.

Let Him. Don't just issue a casual invitation for Him to be present in your life. He doesn't normally respond well to casual invitations. His love is too intense for someone with halfhearted intentions. Instead, choose to relentlessly seek Him. Then give Him time. He will begin to fulfill His desire and yours.

Spirit, fill me continually. Please be present within me. I want to experience You more than I do. Daily increase the evidence of Your Presence in my life. Make Your home in me so I can become a tangible demonstration of who You are.



January 5

Come close to God . . .

JAMES 4:8

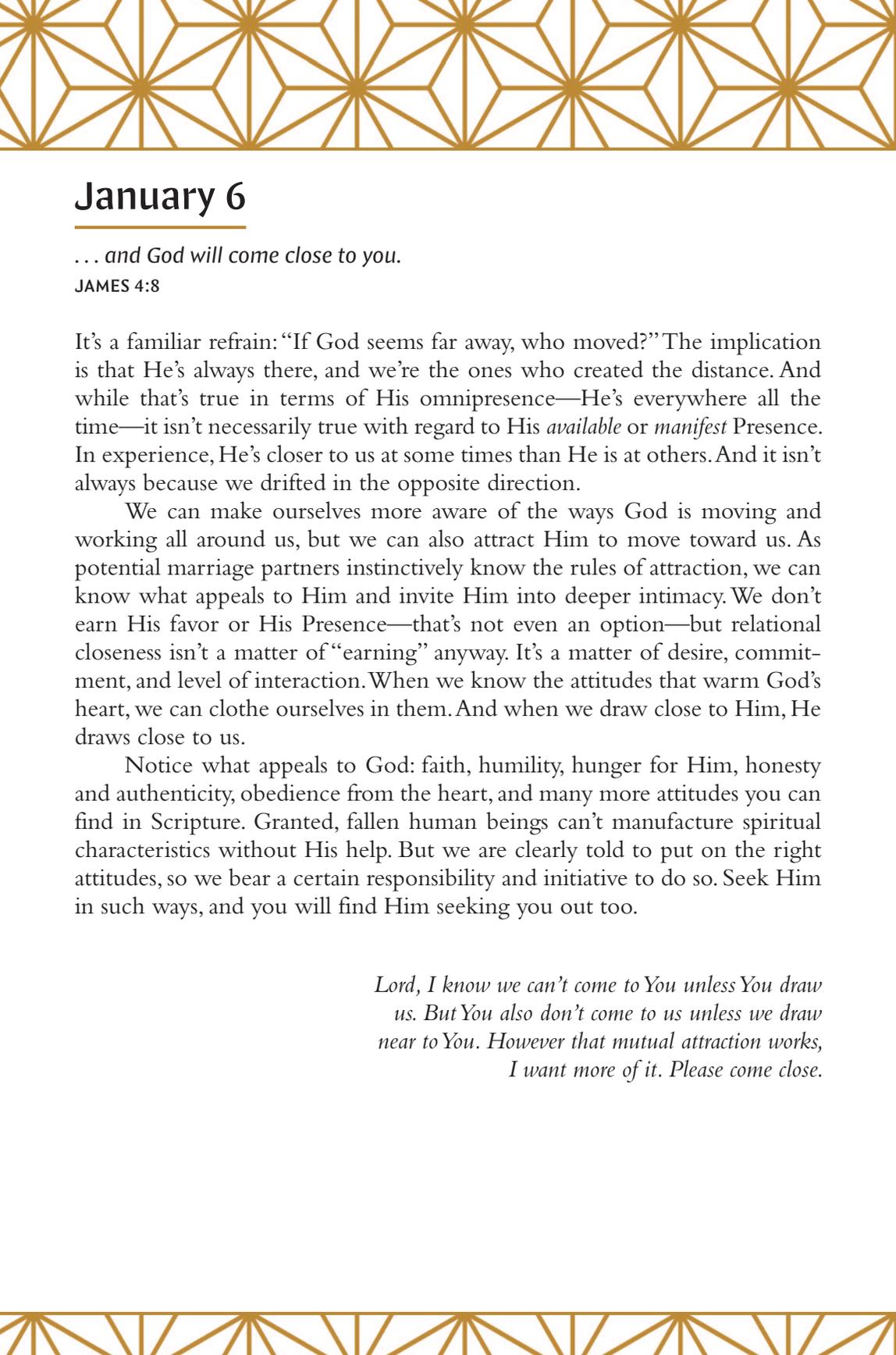
Have you ever looked at a blade of grass, a spider's web, or a waterfall as an expression of God's creativity? Have you seen nature's seasons and trends not for what they are in themselves but for what they reveal of the heart that made them? Have you ever just stopped and noticed the divine dream unfolding around you? All of these—observing creation, listening for whispers of God's voice or trying to put your finger on His pulse, absorbing the marvels of His world—are means to become more aware of His Presence. When we notice these things, and especially when they spark a conversation with Him, we are drawing close to God.

There are two major aspects in experiencing God's Presence: increasing our awareness of Him, and His approach to us. The first is our responsibility, the second His. Both are expressed in James 4:8, where we are told to draw close to God and are assured that He will draw close to us. But it's harder than it seems.

We let busyness distract us from experiencing God. Our daily routines and to-do lists are His rivals for our attention, and we often let them win. He can work in ways that drive us to seek Him, but He would rather that we come to Him because we want to than because He told us to or gave us few other options. Drawing close is meant to be an act of love. And love, if it's real, is always voluntary.

Your side of the "Presence equation" is to draw near to God. In every way you can imagine, do that. Then see how He responds to you.

Father, I want to notice You—everything about You. I want to stop and notice any evidence of Your work, Your voice, and Your Presence that I can find. As I observe You, please make Yourself even more observable. And draw me close.



January 6

... and God will come close to you.

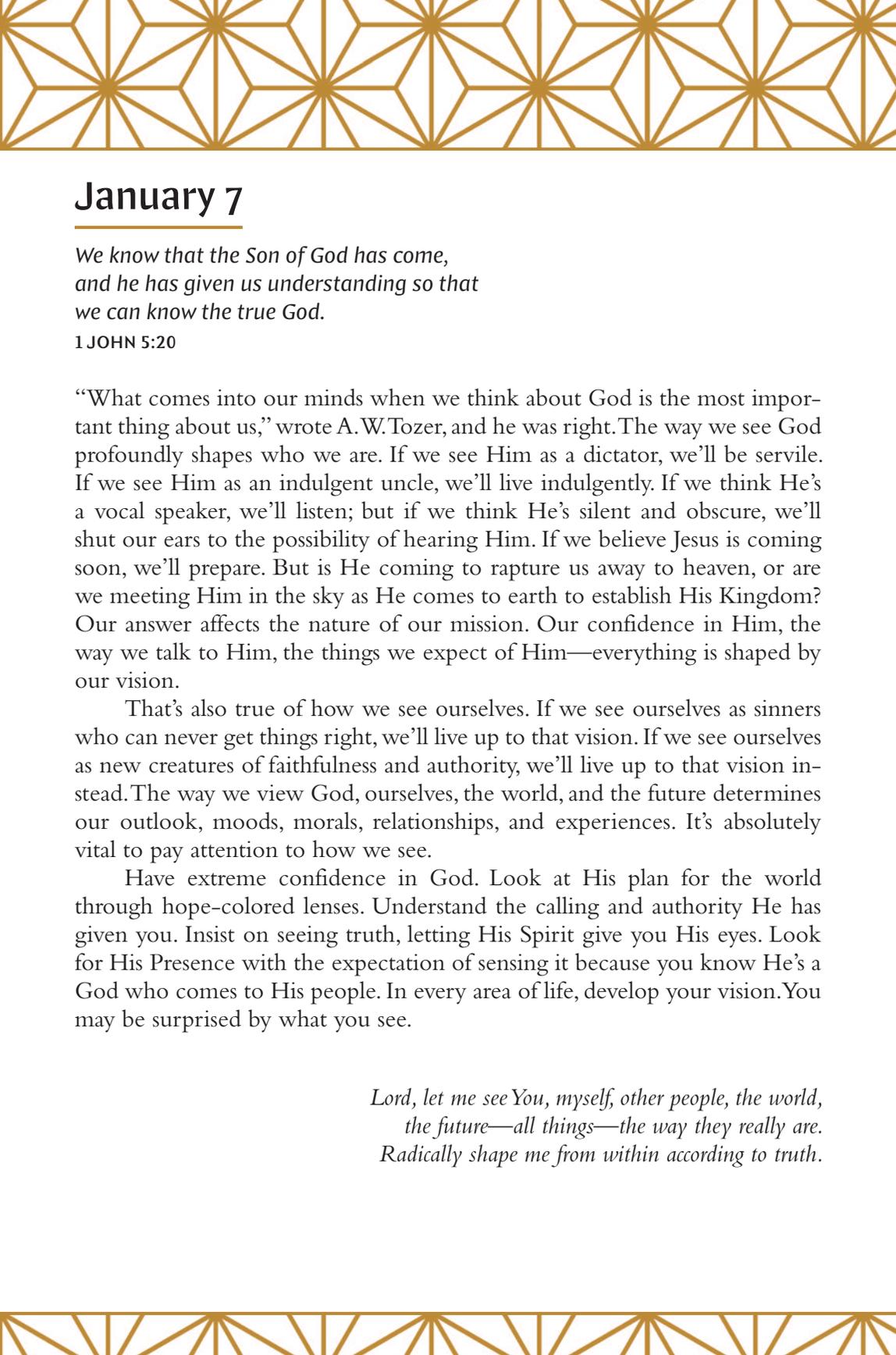
JAMES 4:8

It's a familiar refrain: "If God seems far away, who moved?" The implication is that He's always there, and we're the ones who created the distance. And while that's true in terms of His omnipresence—He's everywhere all the time—it isn't necessarily true with regard to His *available* or *manifest* Presence. In experience, He's closer to us at some times than He is at others. And it isn't always because we drifted in the opposite direction.

We can make ourselves more aware of the ways God is moving and working all around us, but we can also attract Him to move toward us. As potential marriage partners instinctively know the rules of attraction, we can know what appeals to Him and invite Him into deeper intimacy. We don't earn His favor or His Presence—that's not even an option—but relational closeness isn't a matter of "earning" anyway. It's a matter of desire, commitment, and level of interaction. When we know the attitudes that warm God's heart, we can clothe ourselves in them. And when we draw close to Him, He draws close to us.

Notice what appeals to God: faith, humility, hunger for Him, honesty and authenticity, obedience from the heart, and many more attitudes you can find in Scripture. Granted, fallen human beings can't manufacture spiritual characteristics without His help. But we are clearly told to put on the right attitudes, so we bear a certain responsibility and initiative to do so. Seek Him in such ways, and you will find Him seeking you out too.

Lord, I know we can't come to You unless You draw us. But You also don't come to us unless we draw near to You. However that mutual attraction works, I want more of it. Please come close.



January 7

*We know that the Son of God has come,
and he has given us understanding so that
we can know the true God.*

1 JOHN 5:20

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us,” wrote A.W. Tozer, and he was right. The way we see God profoundly shapes who we are. If we see Him as a dictator, we’ll be servile. If we see Him as an indulgent uncle, we’ll live indulgently. If we think He’s a vocal speaker, we’ll listen; but if we think He’s silent and obscure, we’ll shut our ears to the possibility of hearing Him. If we believe Jesus is coming soon, we’ll prepare. But is He coming to rapture us away to heaven, or are we meeting Him in the sky as He comes to earth to establish His Kingdom? Our answer affects the nature of our mission. Our confidence in Him, the way we talk to Him, the things we expect of Him—everything is shaped by our vision.

That’s also true of how we see ourselves. If we see ourselves as sinners who can never get things right, we’ll live up to that vision. If we see ourselves as new creatures of faithfulness and authority, we’ll live up to that vision instead. The way we view God, ourselves, the world, and the future determines our outlook, moods, morals, relationships, and experiences. It’s absolutely vital to pay attention to how we see.

Have extreme confidence in God. Look at His plan for the world through hope-colored lenses. Understand the calling and authority He has given you. Insist on seeing truth, letting His Spirit give you His eyes. Look for His Presence with the expectation of sensing it because you know He’s a God who comes to His people. In every area of life, develop your vision. You may be surprised by what you see.

*Lord, let me see You, myself, other people, the world,
the future—all things—the way they really are.
Radically shape me from within according to truth.*