

How To Experience God

encountering God in worship

7 DEVOTIONALS FOR INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS

vineyard usa



“MY SOUL THIRSTS FOR GOD, FOR THE LIVING GOD.
WHEN CAN I GO AND MEET WITH MY GOD?”

-PSALM 42:2

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content
introduction

1. Encounter
Page 6-7

2. Expect
Page 8-9

3. Enter
Page 10-11

4. Exalt
Page 12-13

5. Express
Page 14-15

6. Engage
Page 16-17

7. Experience
Page 18-19

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Quote on the following page is from the *Core Beliefs* booklet of Vineyard USA. A sample copy can be downloaded online at **www.vineyardusa.org**.

Written by Dan Wilt, M.Min.

A People of the Presence of God

For the Vineyard family of churches, experiencing God in the midst of personal or corporate worship has always been one of our core values. We are, at our very foundation, a people who find their greatest identity, strength, and joy in the presence of God.

A great legacy we have been privileged to contribute to the Body of Christ is a collection of songs, born out of real encounters with Christ in local churches, that have literally impacted millions around the world.

Yet, anyone who has been in a time of worship, and has connected deeply with God in the midst of a song, will know that the music, the lyrics, and the leader, all working beautifully together, cannot create an experience for us. We have a part to play as well.

Each of us must choose to enter in to an encounter with Christ. The Spirit draws us to a place where we desire to experience God, and reveals Jesus to the hungry heart – touching us in some of the most deep and powerful ways imaginable in the process.

This devotional series is intended to open a few doorways that may help you to experience God's presence.

Choose to take a step through each passage provided, and expect with us that He will meet you in the process.

Phil Strout
National Director, Vineyard USA

you can experience God.

What does it mean to "experience" the presence of God? This devotional is designed to take you through 7 "big ideas" about the God/us encounter, and particularly how we can experience God through the gifts of corporate and personal worship. Vineyard USA's *Core Values* booklet says the following about experiencing God:

"When one enters the kingdom she/he experiences the dynamic reality which exists within the triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This means that the experience of the kingdom of God (and thus, the experience of God's presence) is central to our faith and Christian life.

God is eager to be known and experienced by all. We believe that God is searching for lost humanity in order to draw us into intimate relationship with Himself. In response to God's initiative, we value the life-changing power of the experience of His presence. ***The primary place where that relationship is nurtured and developed is in the act of worship – both private and corporate.***



So, experience-based worship is the central activity of all that we do in the Vineyard. It is worship that causes all else that we do to become an act of worship. We experience God's presence as a palpable reality when we worship. As we worship we become increasingly sensitive and responsive to the Spirit's presence so that we can do as Jesus did: "See what the Father is doing," (John 5:19) and support His work with our lives.

The experience of God flowing out of a life of worship affects all aspects of our life so that all division between the secular and the sacred vanish. We believe that the Spirit distributes His gifts to us resulting in prophecy, prayer languages, healing, miracles and many other gifts as we joyfully experience His presence.

We value an approach to God's presence that is respectful both of God and of those we are with. We eschew hype and other efforts to manipulate either God's presence or the response of others to His presence. We distinguish between the Holy Spirit and the human response which shares in all the beauty and brokenness of our humanity. We also believe that as we experience His presence through Christ by the Spirit we will be made more fully human and better reflections of the God-image that we were created to be."

This study gives 7 approaches to worship that can help you to increasingly experience God's presence. Read one each day (or each week), and ask God to reveal Himself to you.


"Every heart longs to meet with God, hear His voice, and encounter His Presence. It is in worship we can say 'Yes,' to this deepest of desires, and find that God has been anticipating the moment as much as we have."
encounter.

1. Worship is face to face.

A MOMENT MATTERS

Prepare your heart for meeting.

"My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" Psa. 42:2

Experiencing the presence of God is, in many ways, like experiencing the presence of a person. According to the Scriptures, there is no "force," no math equation, no non-descript "nature" sitting at the center of the cosmos. At the center of everything, right now, is a *Person* – a Person that can be *known*.

How do we get to know a person? First, we need to do things that connect us to that person's heart, motivations, and desires. We study who that person is, and arrange to meet face-to-face for an *encounter*. When we have an encounter with a person, everything we studied begins to make sense as they share their life with us.

Experiencing God's presence happens in a similar way. We get to know Him through His Word, the Bible. Then, we begin to get beyond the reading, looking for God's personality, perspectives, motives, and attitudes to shine through each page and verse. We are getting to know what God is like. With that fresh awareness in our head and heart, we then look for an opportunity to "meet" with God. We turn our attention to noticing God's invisible, loving presence. Psalm 42:2 suggests that our heart is longing for this – has always been longing for this. The Holy Spirit makes this possible.

Corporate worship is one place we can encounter God's presence, satisfying that longing. As you enter into your next time of worship, ask God to meet you there, and listen with your heart for Him to personally reveal who He is to your inner thoughts and feelings.

PRAYER

I want to know You, my God.

My Lord and my God, to think that You would desire to meet, face to face with me, is beyond my imagination. I yield myself to the encounters with you that you have planned. In Jesus' name I come to encounter You. Amen.

MOVING FORWARD

Learning To Experience God

Am I ready for the next moment God has designed for us to meet? When I enter into a time of personal or corporate worship, am I going through the "church motions," or am I really prepared for an encounter with God?

Try preparing your heart, as a worship gathering starts, by quieting your heart and mind, and specifically focusing in on God's approach toward you. Expect an encounter.


"We have a part to play in experiencing God – raising our expectation. If we don't anticipate God's meeting with us, we can miss Him even though He is present. If we raise our expectation, we will find Him (Jer. 29:13) – that's His promise."
expect.

2. Worship is a posture.

EXPECT HIS PRESENCE

Anticipate Him drawing near.

"Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy…." 1 Pet. 1:8

Many people talk about having a very personal, intimate encounter with Jesus in the midst of a time of corporate worship. They have lost their inner inhibitions, their inner self-protection and resistance, and have yielded to the Holy Spirit "showing up" and touching their souls in a very profound way. In some cases, they may feel a sense of inner joy, experience a revelatory thought, or weep as God kindly begins to touch an area of pain in their life. When God is near, and we welcome His gracious presence, anything can begin to happen if we're willing. Are you willing and expectant?

In 1 Peter 1:8, the apostle is describing the strangely beautiful idea that while God is unseen physically, He reveals Himself to our needy hearts. At times, we are overwhelmed with an unexplainable sense of His love and affection for us. This is God's presence.

God seems to draw near to the heart that has faith and expects to engage with Him. We can choose to "show up," and begin to pray "Lord, I welcome a strong inner connection with you, no matter how I respond emotionally. I expect You to reveal Yourself to me, and I'll listen to my heart and mind for thoughts and feelings that line up with Your personality as revealed in Your Word. By faith, I'll believe that is Your presence revealed to me.

PRAYER

I want to touch You, my God.

Spirit of God, I want to be a "first responder" when it comes to meeting with You in worship. Though I can't see You, I want to touch Your heart with my own. Teach me how to respond to Your approach. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

MOVING FORWARD

Learning To Experience God.

Am I expectant when I come to worship? Do I believe that God wants to meet with me, and if I will listen, will speak and interact with my heart?

Experiencing God is like noticing a quiet voice in a loud room. He is always speaking, but it takes being attentive to hear Him.

If what you're hearing in your heart (impressions, thoughts, images, Scriptures) lines up with the love of God expressed in Jesus in the Gospels, you're probably hearing God. Worship can open us to God's presence, and responding with love.

"Songs are a place we go to meet with God. The gift of songs is that they can help us get beyond our interior noise, in mind and heart, and can take us somewhere else. We can either sing a song – or enter it. God is often waiting in the music."



3. Worship is a place.

ENTER THE MOMENT

Songs can lead us to God.

"Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name." Psa. 100:4

Now that our hearts have said "Yes" to Jesus' approach to us, we now take hold of opportunities to cultivate the attitudes that seem to draw us nearer and nearer to God's heart. A thankful, grateful heart, we all know, can open us up to experiencing God's renewing touch. How can we express our thankfulness more fully?

Here is where songs, among all the forms of worship we could choose, are especially powerful. Songs can help us to give thanks, offer praise, and pray.

Have you ever listened to a song, and been "transported" to another place, an internal atmosphere, a unique vision inside your mind? Songs are powerful. They can create an emotional and spiritual place just by wrapping us up in their beauty and meaning.

In worship, songs are played not just because they are nice to sing or hold grand pieces of truth. Worship songs are actually designed to be "entered" – just as a doorway is meant to be entered and the world inside experienced. We sing to God, instead of just singing about God, and allow the songs to give wings to our praise and our prayers. The next time you are in a corporate worship setting, try setting aside the idea that you will just sing, and actually choose to make each song your *place of meeting with God*. Ask God to meet you within each song, as you get beyond the music, and enter that special place. Songs are a place you can go to meet with God often.

PRAYER

I want to meet with You, my God.

Lord, I want to thank You for the gifts of music and other tools of worship that can draw me so near to You. Guide me to the songs that most capture my heart of love for You, and that help me yield to Your disarming grace. In Jesus' name, I come with thanks. Amen.

MOVING FORWARD

Learning To Experience God.

Am I learning to be vulnerable with God, to let down my guard and to enter a place where I might be healed and restored to wholeness?

Find a recording of a worship song that deeply moves you, and get some alone time. Sing with the recording loud and long, in your car or home, until you "break through" and sense the presence of God. Sometimes it just takes time to get past ourselves to enter God's presence. A song can help us do that.

"The Scriptures reveal a God who is *pursuing* us. We get the worship story backward if we think we are the ones pursuing God at every turn. God is the subject of the worship sentence, pursuing us as the object of His love. Ours is to respond."



4. Worship is a response.

MAKE GOD FAMOUS

Tell God He is worth it all.

"We love because he first loved us." 1 John 4:19

Why do we worship God? Why do we come together to sing, to share in communion, to pray, and to listen to God's word?

We do it because of the little verse above. God is loving us, all of the time. He starts the worship dance. He creates the opportunity for us to experience His love. Right now, He is caring about you and those you love, wanting you to know He is near you, and telling you that all you need is found in Him.

In light of God's already, all-consuming love for us, we begin to realize that worship is simply a *response* to His approach. God is not interested in our religious performance, our sitting in services listening to talks and singing songs. He is interested in us responding to His majesty, His beauty, His creativity – His love for you and I.

How do we respond, according to the Scriptures? We "ascribe glory to God." We recognize that God is loving, and good, and kind, and sovereign, and we tell Him that with our songs, words, and actions. To exalt God means that we get past our own emotions, and do what the Scriptures say is good and right, and even command us to do – to *give thanks* to the Lord (Psa. 107:1).

When we give thanks, when we respond and praise God because of who He is and what He has done, we line up our emotions and thoughts with what is true. In doing so, our senses become more aware of God's nearness, and we experience that He is present in our praise.

PRAYER

I want to honor You, my God.

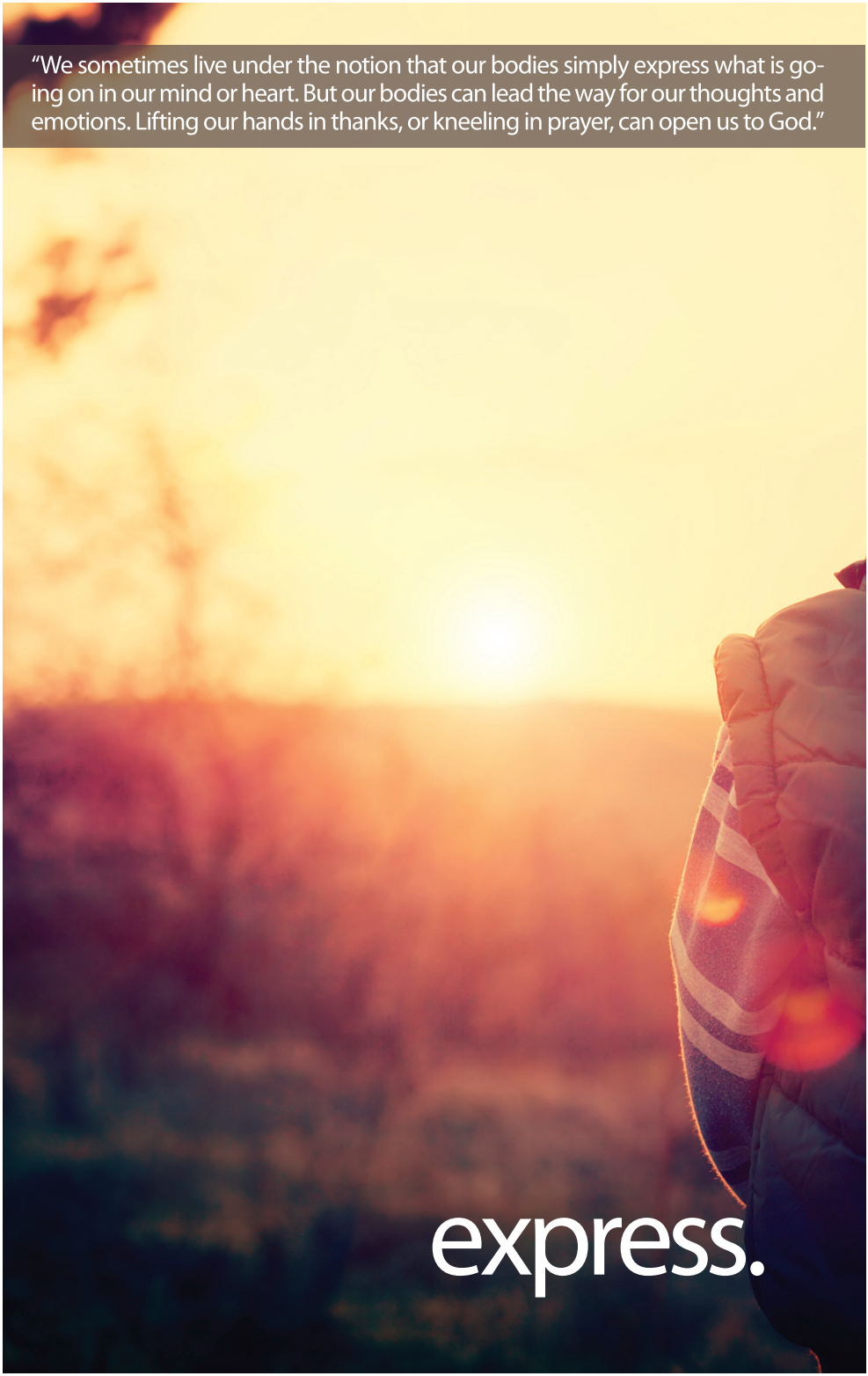
Father, I live in a time when feelings are elevated above truth. Who You are never changes. How I feel changes all the time. Help me rise above my emotions to praise You, thank You, and exalt Your name. In Jesus' name, I offer myself to praise You. Amen.

MOVING FORWARD

Learning To Experience God.

Do my emotions lead me, or have I learned how to make them serve my choice to express gratitude to God because He deserves it?

Try telling your negative emotions to take a back seat while you give God glory. Declaring praise to God can actually break the hold that a dark mood can have on us, setting us free to see our life as God does – as one in which He is in control.


"We sometimes live under the notion that our bodies simply express what is going on in our mind or heart. But our bodies can lead the way for our thoughts and emotions. Lifting our hands in thanks, or kneeling in prayer, can open us to God."
express.

5. Worship is embodied.

COME WITH A GIFT

God has brought one for you.

"Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord." Psa. 134:2

Have you ever wondered why people lift their voice to sing melodies, raise their hands, bow down, or clap during corporate worship?

The Scriptures show us, over and over again in the Psalms, that we can physically express our worship as well as internally express it. In fact, worship is so marked by physical actions and postures throughout the Bible, that one might think they are even more important than silent expressions!

Of course they are not more important, but we should take notice. Try an experiment right now. Open your hands in front of you. Now, as you lift them in the air, say to God, "I am so grateful for all You've done; I offer my life to You again and give You everything – knowing that You will take care of me as You always have."

Did holding your hands open help, or hinder, your sense of connection with God as you prayed? For many people, they would say it actually helps them sense God near when they engage in a physical demonstration of the state of their heart.

The Psalms (the Bible's "worship songbook") talk about lifting our hands in worship (Psa. 134:2), bowing down and kneeling (Psa. 95:6), clapping (Psa. 47:1), singing (Psa. 68:4), and expressing our hearts to God in many different ways.

Our experience of God can be influenced by trying some of these physical expressions, and embodying our worship in both private and corporate settings.

PRAYER

I want to praise You, my God.

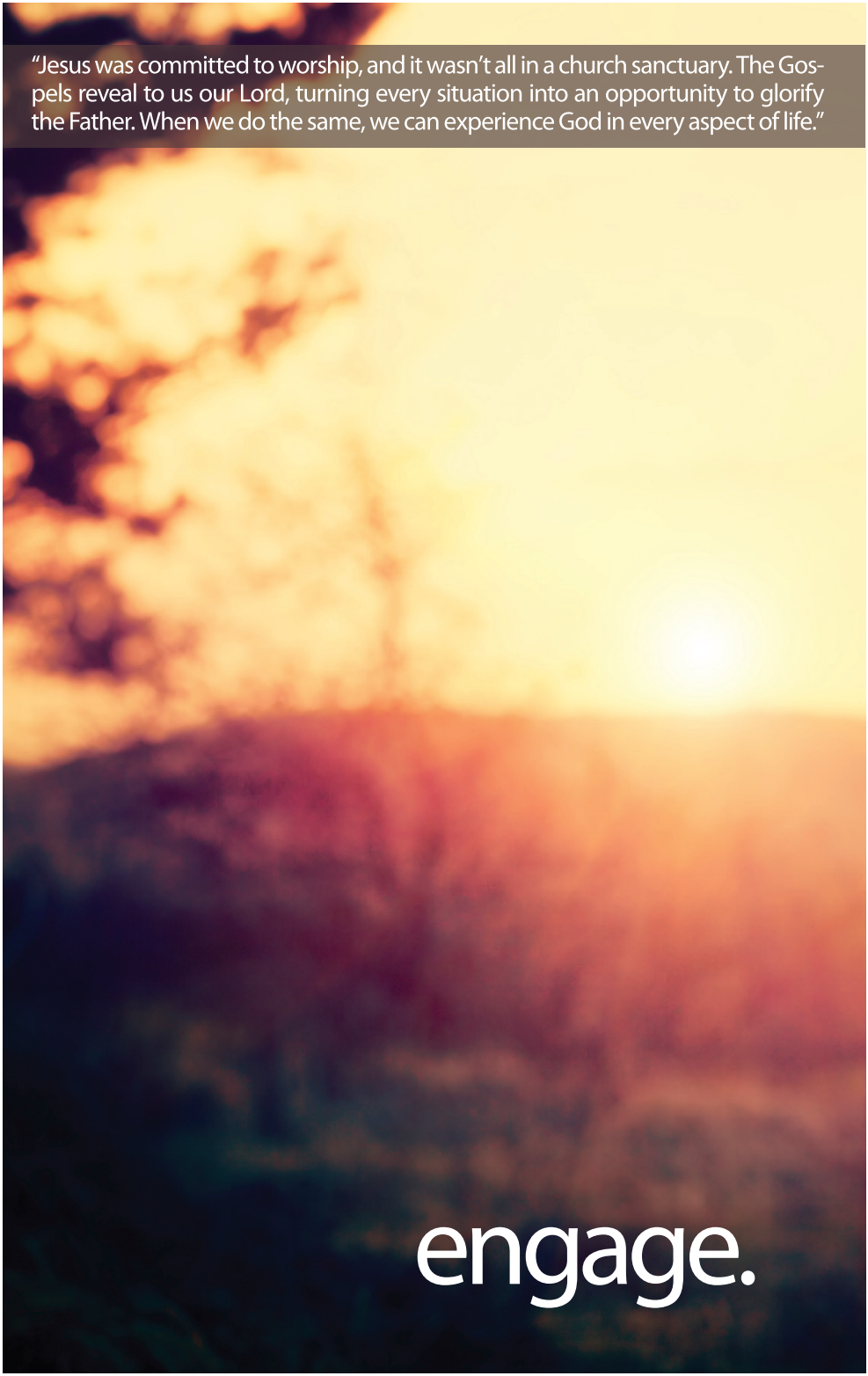
Lord, I know that I have been given this body for a good reason, and that sometimes what I do with it affects the state of my heart. Show me ways I can begin to express my love for You, with physical postures that will influence my spiritual posture. In Jesus' name, I come to worship You. Amen.

MOVING FORWARD

Learning To Experience God.

Have I ever tried, in private or in public, lifting my hands in worship, or kneeling down in prayer? What small physical action would capture what I feel toward God right now?

Every once in a while, take a new step of involving your body, in some way, in personal or corporate worship. Over time, evaluate if you are sensing God's presence in new ways.


"Jesus was committed to worship, and it wasn't all in a church sanctuary. The Gospels reveal to us our Lord, turning every situation into an opportunity to glorify the Father. When we do the same, we can experience God in every aspect of life."
engage.

6. Worship is interactive.

GOD'S WORLD WAITS

Your life is your response of love.

"Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship." Rom. 12:1b

When Paul wrote the passage above to the followers of Jesus in Rome, he was using a metaphor about worship that would have made very good sense to those of his day.

The people of that day understood the idea of "sacrifice." If there was one thing that was true about an animal sacrifice offered in worship, it was that the sacrifice was completely *dead*. Here, however, Paul was saying that as *dead* as a dead sacrifice is – that is how *living* our offering of worship to God is to be!

Engaging with God in His great love for the world (Jn 3:16) is one of the ways that we offer ourselves to Him in worship. It is risky to allow worship to spill over into our work relationships, or our checkbooks – but experiencing God in everyday life is worth it.

Living a devoted life, praying, ascribing worth to God, caring for the poor, walking in personal purity, honoring our family members, serving others who don't believe in Jesus, saying "Yes" to God in difficult moments, studying to be the best at our profession, stewarding our finances, time, and energies well, praying for a co-worker – all of these expressions are vital ways we respond to God in worship and experience His touch. Praying for healing for others can open up encounters with God that last a lifetime.

Begin to see all of life as a sacred space where you walk with God, and interact with Him as you look for what He is already doing. Then, join Him in His work.

PRAYER

I want to glorify You, my God.

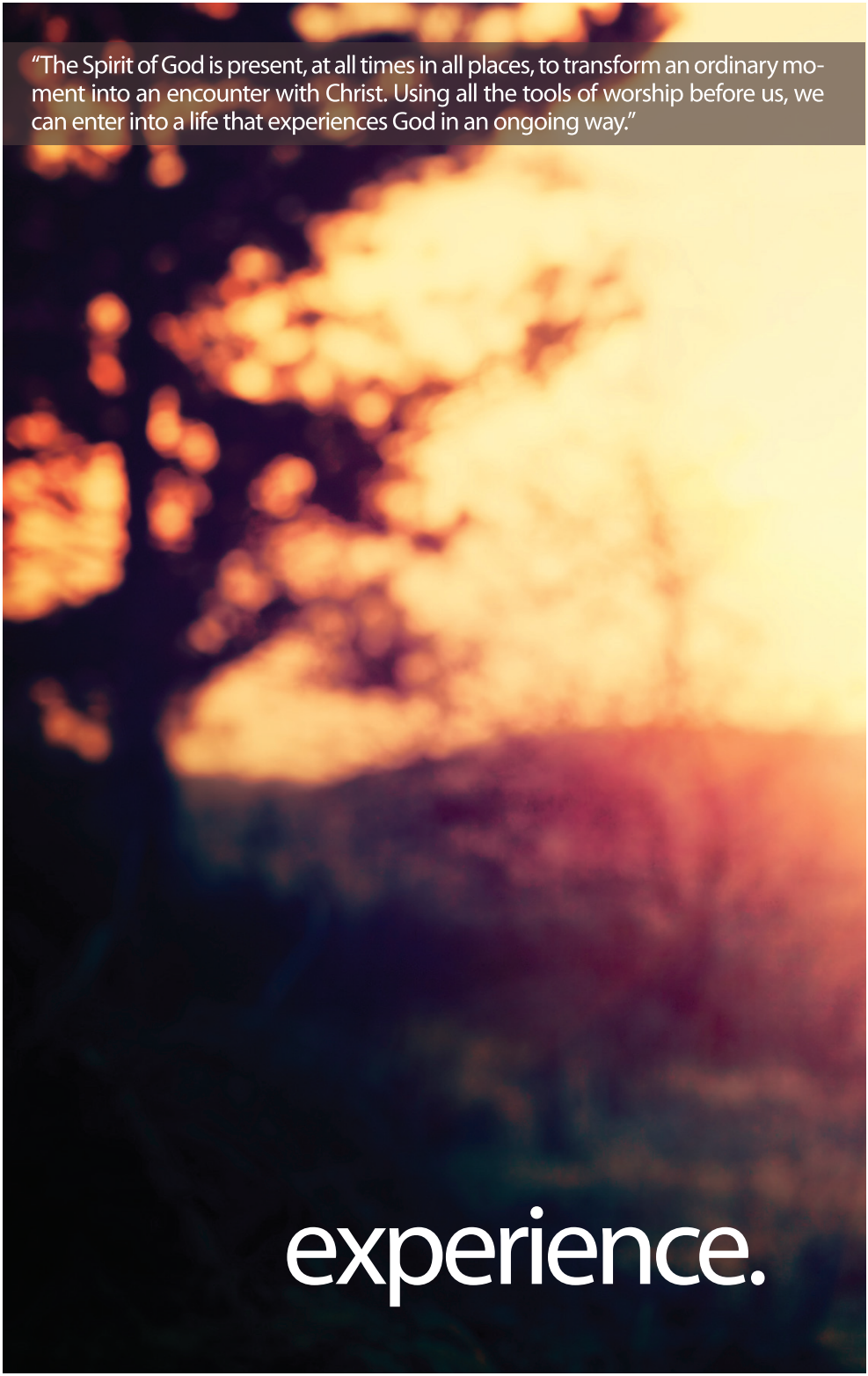
God, You so loved the world that You called me into it, filled with Your Spirit, to make every act of giving, friendship, work, and love an act of worship. I choose to see my life through the lens of worship. In Jesus' name, I come to engage with Your world. Amen.

MOVING FORWARD

Learning To Experience God.

Have you seen your work life, your time, your energy, your talents, and your resources as means through which you can exchange love and affection with God?

The next time you plan out your schedule for the day, try asking God this question: "Lord, is there anything You want to do today, through me, in someone else's life?" Plan to obey God, ahead of time. Risk.


"The Spirit of God is present, at all times in all places, to transform an ordinary moment into an encounter with Christ. Using all the tools of worship before us, we can enter into a life that experiences God in an ongoing way."
experience.

7. Worship is an opportunity.

NOW IS THE TIME

Lean into the next opportunity.

"Come near to God, and he will come near to you…." James 4:8a

Every time we come to worship, we are coming to a moment that is pregnant with the possibility of a rich, transforming encounter with God.

Instead of seeing personal or corporate worship experiences as "something you do," see them as ripe opportunities to experience God in all of His love, splendor, and goodness. Practice being attentive to what God might be whispering to your heart for yourself, or for another person. Yield to what you hear, and welcome God to heal your inner and outer wounds as you sing your thanks and praise to Him.

Outside of the walls of a church service, begin to expect that God is already active in your life and the lives of those around you. Look for, listen for, what He is already doing – and then join Him in His work.

Each moment can become a place of meeting with God, learning to understand His heart as He conveys it to you in the inner thoughts and emotions that rise inside. Immerse yourself in the Scriptures, so that you can filter your experiences through the lens of who the Scriptures reveal God to be. Welcome God to use you in healing prayer for others, and more experiences with God will await you. Welcome others to pray for you. Listen for those moments of meeting, and respond.

PRAYER

I want to experience You, my God.

Lord of my worship, focus of my love, center of my affection, I am fully prepared to say that experiencing You in my daily life is my greatest desire. Make me like You, as I learn to respond to Your great love for me. In Jesus' name, I come to experience You. Amen.

MOVING FORWARD

Learning To Experience God.

In what ways am I currently learning to experience God? Through this series, have I begun to hear God's voice, to sense God's love, to experience God's kingdom all around me?

Reflect on each one of the words that are on the left side of each page in this devotional. Consider posting them at key places in your home or car, reminding you that God is near and is wanting you to experience His presence at every turn. Practice being attentive to experiencing God by leaning into personal and corporate worship, using songs and other tools to focus your thoughts and affections on Christ, and being active in your faith.



The Vineyard Movement, since birth, has valued seeing individual Christians experience God in their daily lives. Through spiritual practices such as worship, fellowship, mission, the reading and application of Scripture, soul care, family care, healing of the broken, cultural influence, the compassionate ministry of the Holy Spirit, and neighbor-love, the Vineyard community of churches seeks to be intentional about nurturing the lives of those who call us their family. To find out more about the Vineyard, visit www.vineyardusa.org.

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