

THE NEARNESS

An 8-Week Study Guide

for the book of letters on the treasure of God's company in an ordinary life

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How to Use This Guide

This study guide is designed for an 8-week journey through *The Nearness*. Each week covers two letters, following the book's natural structure. The guide works for:

- Small groups (6–12 people)
- Sunday school classes
- Church-wide studies
- Personal reflection (adapted for individual use)

One suggestion before anything else: if you can, meet around a kitchen table rather than in a classroom. The book was written at one. A living room works; a fellowship hall works; but these letters are kitchen-table letters, and something in the study settles into place when there is a table, ordinary chairs, and a cup of something hot.

WHO MAY BE AT THE TABLE

This guide speaks first to believers — to those who have been brought near by the blood of Christ, through the Son, in one Spirit, to the Father. That is the book's own grammar, and the guide keeps it: the practices here cultivate communion; they do not create union. Attention, silence, desire, and eight faithful weeks of attendance reconcile no one to God — Christ does, received through faith. So do not assume everyone at your table is already in Christ because they came, or because they thirst; some of the thirstiest people in the room may still be at the threshold. Welcome their questions without pressure, and when the study speaks of adoption, union, security, or friendship with God, say plainly that these are gifts given in Christ. Be ready to explain the gospel simply and privately to anyone who asks — and remember the book's own word for the one still considering: the door is the same width tonight that it has been for seven centuries.

SUGGESTED SESSION FORMAT (60–75 MINUTES)

- Opening Prayer & Kitchen Sightings (5–10 minutes) — instead of a standard check-in, begin each week with this question: *Where did the Nearness show up in an ordinary place this week?* Keep answers small and concrete — the car line, the stove, the commute. Ninety seconds each. This little exercise trains the very noticing the book teaches, and by week three it may be your group's favorite part. One quiet guardrail: a Kitchen Sighting is not a claim of private revelation — most are simply ordinary moments when someone remembered God, noticed a kindness, or turned. No one needs a dramatic report, and anything offered as guidance gets tested the way everything in this life does: against Scripture, in wise company.
- Review of Key Concepts (5–10 minutes)

- A Quiet Minute (2–3 minutes) — in weeks 1–3, a short silence holding the week’s key line. From week 4 onward, once the book has taught the Godward Turn, this becomes the Turn practiced together. One rule, kept gently: no debrief afterward. Nobody reports what they felt. The silence is for Him, not for the group. (And silence is an invitation, never a test: eyes may stay open, a printed verse may anchor a wandering attention, and anyone who finds unstructured quiet difficult may simply hold one line of Scripture instead.)
- Discussion Questions (30–40 minutes)
- Weekly Practice (5 minutes)
- Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

TIPS FOR LEADERS

- Read the two assigned letters before leading each session — they are short, one sitting each.
- You don’t need to cover every question. Choose the ones that fit your group.
- Create space for silence. Some questions need a moment before anyone speaks.
- Let people read the letters’ words aloud when a quote comes up. These are letters; they were written to be heard.
- End each session with the Weekly Practice clearly named — it is how the book moves from the table into the week.
- If time is short — and it will be — start with question 1 (each week’s easiest on-ramp), take two more that fit your group, and always end with question 7, each week’s homeward question. Going Deeper belongs to extended sessions and personal study. Three questions well walked beat seven survived.
- For the person who didn’t finish the reading: the Key Quotes are the two-minute pathway. Read them aloud and ask, “Which sentence stays with you?” Full participation, no embarrassment.
- One secret this guide keeps with the book: several of the book’s witnesses go unnamed until Letter Fourteen. The guide honors that unfolding — resist the urge to look them up and announce them early. The final session pays for the patience.

A WORD ABOUT TONE

This book dismantles the performed spiritual life, and a study guide can accidentally rebuild it — turning the practices into assignments and the assignments into a scoreboard. Guard against this from the first session. There is no ledger in this study. A missed practice accrues nothing. Attendance is not graded, sharing is not required, and no one has fallen behind, because the returning is the practice. Say this out loud, more than once, across the eight weeks. Some

permissions worth granting your group in week one: you are allowed to miss a week; you are allowed to say nothing; you are allowed to fall asleep praying — He was enjoying the company.

THE LEADER’S COVENANT (ONE PAGE, WORTH KEEPING)

1. What is shared at the table stays at the table — except when law or immediate safety requires action, including a credible risk of harm to self or others, or suspected abuse of a child or vulnerable adult. Never promise absolute confidentiality.
2. Anyone may pass, on any question, always.
3. No one is ever asked to confess private sin or private pain to the group. “Out loud” in this study means before God; confession to another person, where Scripture counsels it, means one mature, trustworthy believer — chosen, not assigned.
4. No fixing. No unrequested advice. No interpreting another person’s suffering.
5. Emotional intensity is not the measure of spiritual depth — in either direction.
6. Never promise that a practice will produce a felt experience. He decides, in His own liberty, which hours carry the treasure.
7. Know your limits: abuse, addiction, self-harm, and acute crisis require appropriate pastoral, medical, counseling, emergency, or civil-authority involvement. The group’s part is love, immediate safety, responsible reporting where required, and wise referral — not investigation or treatment.
8. This guide teaches the security of those genuinely united to Christ, grounded in His keeping rather than their grip. Teach that section in step with your church’s convictions while keeping the letter’s pastoral point whole: fluctuations of feeling are not fluctuations of His faithfulness.
9. End on time. The chair at home is the study’s real classroom.

Week 1: The Thirst and the Diagnosis

Reading: The Opening Letter + Letter One — Something Nearer Than This

Theme: You are not tired of God. You have never yet been near enough to Him to be tired of Him.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **The Nearness:** Not a place you travel to and not a state you achieve — Him, near, in the middle of your unfinished, distracted, thoroughly ordinary life. The whole Christian life is learning to live there.
- **The Performed Life:** Three quiet sentences organize more of our lives than we would like to admit — *I am what I do. I am what I have. I am what other people think of me.* And when the ordinary versions stop working, we baptize them: *I am what I do for God* — a life spent entirely *for* Him that was somehow never spent *with* Him.
- **The Diagnosis as a Door:** The exhaustion is not evidence that something is wrong with you. It is evidence that something in you refuses to be fooled — you were made for a nearness no performance can counterfeit.
- **Asaph's Slip:** The worship leader's feet did not slip because his doctrine failed. They slipped because his eyes moved. And the way out was not a better argument. It was a Presence.

KEY QUOTES

"There is a nearness of God. Real, present, unadvertised. Closer than the room you are sitting in, open at this hour, in the middle of your unfinished, distracted, thoroughly ordinary life."

"Nothing here will hand you a ladder. There is no ladder."

"The god you are exhausted by is not God."

"You are tired, in a sentence, from living for Him without living with Him."

"The way out was not a better argument. It was a Presence."

AT THE TABLE: THE COOK

The opening letter seats four witnesses in a single sentence, and the first is a seventeenth-century monastery cook who never held office, never published a book in his lifetime, and found the treasure of God's company among his pots and pans. History knows his name — but the book is saving it for Letter Fourteen, and this guide will keep the secret. For now, hold his one sentence, which contains the whole world of this study: "He is nearer to

us than we are aware of.” And know that the kitchen you may be sitting in is preceded ground.

OPENING REFLECTION

Before the discussion, sit with this in silence for one minute: Underneath the believing, the serving, and the sincere trying, is there a question in you that sounds like *“Is this it?”* — and how long has it been there?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Letter One opens by welcoming two kinds of readers: the one who turned at the opening letter’s invitation, and the one who “turned the page instead, because turning pages is what you know how to do.” Which one are you — and did the welcome (“Either way, you are welcome here”) land, or slide off?
2. The letter names four ways we feed the ache — doing, having, the eyes of others, and motion — and says even our sincere spiritual habits can quietly become meters (the app “still sends its small reminders, hopeful as a dog at the door”). Which feeding is yours, and what is your app-streak equivalent?
3. “I am what I do for God” is called the counterfeit’s cruelest edition, “because it wears the uniform of devotion... and gets thanked in the lobby.” Where have you seen this — in the church broadly, or closer to home?
4. The letter insists there’s a difference between the sting of being accused and the sting of being found. Have you felt that difference reading these two letters? Which sentence found you?
5. “Every treadmill is powered by a picture of God.” Without looking back at the page, describe the god your own performance assumes on a tired Tuesday. Then compare him to the letter’s description. How close is the match?
6. Asaph’s feet slipped while his theology stayed in perfect order — not because his doctrine failed, but because his eyes moved. What does this distinction change about how you read your own tired seasons?
7. The opening letter promises: “Nearer than you dared believe, and gladder to have you than you dared hope.” Which half is harder for you to believe — the nearness, or the gladness? Why?

GOING DEEPER

1. Read Psalm 73 in one sitting — the whole psalm, not the famous verses. Trace the turn at verse 17 (“until I went into the sanctuary of God”). What actually changed — his circumstances, his arguments, or something else?

2. Read Ephesians 2:13. The opening letter leans its whole weight on one grammatical fact about this verse: the verb is passive — you “have been brought near.” What does the passive voice mean for everything the performed life was trying to accomplish?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Two small things this week, neither of which can be failed:

First, the inventory. Once, on paper, name your feeding of choice — doing, having, the eyes of others, or motion — and the place it shows up most (the office, the app, the mirror, the calendar). No fixing this week. Just the flashlight, held by a kind hand.

Second, the turn you were already given. The opening letter closed by asking you to turn — not your body, your attention — toward the God who is already in the room. Once a day this week, anywhere, for ten seconds, do that. No words required. If you forget five days out of seven, the two count and the five accuse you of nothing.

Bring one Kitchen Sighting to next week’s table: one place the Nearness showed up in your ordinary week.

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, we have been tired for a long time, and we have called the tiredness by the wrong names. Tonight we heard the right one: we have lived for You without living with You. We do not ask You to come near — Your Son already carried us near, and You were in the room before we thought to look. Only open our eyes this week, in the car line and at the stove, to the Nearness that was never far. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Week 2: The Eyes That Moved First

Reading: Letter Two — The Searching Eyes + Letter Three — The Father You Didn't Know You Had

Theme: You were sought before you ever sought Him — and the eyes are a Father's.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **The Two Pictures of the Same Eyes:** Scripture's audit finds no seekers on earth — "no one seeks for God" — yet the same eyes "run to and fro throughout the whole earth" searching. The resolution is the gospel under the gospel: He makes seekers. He plants the very thirst He then finds.
- **The Whole Heart:** What the running eyes search for is not the impressive heart but the whole one — undivided, not unblemished. "Leaning is the one thing exhaustion does well."
- **The Half-Turn at the Bush:** The eyes that range the earth caught a herdsman's few steps of curiosity and answered by name, twice. God's attention is not caught by spectacle; it is already given.
- **The Face Behind the Eyes:** The Son is the Father's heart made visible — "no other Father hiding behind Jesus." The running father of the parable, the robe, the adoption, the *teknon*: the searching eyes belong to a gladness you have not dared assume.

KEY QUOTES

"Children, the thirst is first in Him. He thirsteth for the souls that are athirst for Him."

"You were sought before you ever sought Him. Your seeking was never your application. It is His fingerprint."

"You're the one I've been looking for."

"You only see someone a long way off if you have been watching the road."

"The door is the Son, the breath behind the word is the Spirit, and the house has been hoping for you longer than you have been avoiding it."

AT THE TABLE: THE OLD PREACHER

This week you hear a voice from nearly seven centuries ago — the book calls him only "an old preacher," and the guide will keep that secret too. What he told his people, in one of the hardest centuries Europe ever lived through, was not "try harder." It was: the thirst is first in Him. Whoever he is, he learned the searching eyes in a dark time — and he is proof the doctrine holds in the dark.

OPENING REFLECTION

One minute of silence with this: the letter says the lonelier fear is not that God doesn't exist, but "that He exists, and is looking, and has never particularly looked at us." Has that fear ever had a voice in you?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Letter Two describes the seeking career most of us have run: "the books, the ones with 'hearing God' and 'getting closer' in their subtitles, read with a highlighter and a hope." What has your audition for God's attention looked like — the books, the retreats, the praying harder? What did it cost you to keep it up?
2. Hold the two pictures together: heaven's audit finds *no one* seeking, yet you have sought. The letter says something "has entered the arithmetic from outside it." What does it change to learn your own thirst was planted — His workmanship, not your initiative?
3. The eyes search for a *whole* heart — undivided, not unblemished — and the letter adds: "the small are not disqualified, nor the ordinary, nor the exhausted." Why do we find it so hard to believe that leaning counts?
4. The old preacher's sheep ends up on shoulders: "The sheep no longer walks... God carries us." Where in your life right now do you most need to hear that found people are carried people?
5. In Letter Three, the father runs — and the letter notes what running cost a man of his standing. Then it turns to the elder brother, "standing in a field, refusing a party," itemizing years of service "like an invoice." Which son's habits do you recognize in yourself this season — and what does the father do about each?
6. "There is no other Father hiding behind Jesus. Not a sterner one, not a colder one, not one whose mood the Son manages." What picture of the Father did you inherit — and what would change if the face behind the searching eyes really is the face of the one who ran?
7. The kindest sentence in these two letters may be the smallest: "You were not overlooked. You were never overlooked." Say where that lands for you — or where it still meets resistance.

GOING DEEPER

1. Read Psalm 14:2–3 alongside 2 Chronicles 16:9 — the two pictures of the eyes. Then read John 6:44 and 1 John 4:19. How do these four texts together produce the letter's sentence, "The desire came down before it ever rose up"?
2. Read Exodus 3:1–6 slowly. Notice the sequence the letter calls the tenderest in the Old Testament: "When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him." What does this scene teach about the scale of attention God answers?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Live one week as someone being looked *for* rather than looked *at*. Carry 2 Chronicles 16:9 with you — write it where you will meet it daily. Each time you catch the old impulse to perform for watching eyes (a boss's, a feed's, even God's, as you used to picture Him), recall whose eyes are actually on you and what they are ranging the earth to find: not impressiveness — a lean.

And once this week, let the résumé fall. On paper, name one thing you have been quietly keeping as evidence for God — the discipline, the serving, the emotional Sunday. Then read the letter's verdict over it: the eyes "were never judges' eyes, and they did not need convincing."

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, we spent years auditioning for eyes that were never auditioning us. Tonight we heard the truth: the thirst was Yours before it was ours, the seeking was Yours before we took a step, and the road has been watched the whole time. Teach us this week to lean instead of perform — to be found instead of impressive. And when we forget, catch our half-turns the way You caught the shepherd's, and call us by name. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Week 3: The Room and the Treasure

Reading: Letter Four — The Nearness + Letter Five — The Treasure in the Field

Theme: Being with Him is the life itself — and joy, not duty, is what funds everything.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **The Room Described Once:** “The door is not effort but childlikeness; the furniture is not technique but attention; and the treasure inside is not an experience of Christ but Christ Himself.”
- **Bethel Got Up and Walked:** Jacob’s ladder stands up in Christ — “I am the door.” The address of heaven’s traffic is no longer a *where* but a *Who*.
- **The Strangest Accounting:** The man in the field sold everything and felt no loss, because “the joy did the selling.” Renunciation demanded ahead of treasure “is only the treadmill wearing robes.” The finding funds the selling — the order is everything.
- **The Double Reading:** You are the finder and Christ is the treasure — and Christ is the finder and *you* are the treasure, bought at the price of everything He had. “The readings are not rivals; they are the two ends of one embrace, and His end moved first.”

KEY QUOTES

“Hear the plainest sentence in these pages. Being with Him is the life itself. Not the accessory. Not the fuel. The life.”

“...it is enough to have seen the door, and to know that it was never locked, and the handle is on your side only in this small sense, that attention can turn.”

“You do not turn to make Him near. You turn because He is.”

“The joy did the selling.”

“The field changed hands for money. The man had already been changed for free.”

“You were never foolish for wanting so much. You were made for the Treasure. And the Treasure, all along, had come seeking you.”

AT THE TABLE: THE BISHOP

In this week’s reading you brush past “a bishop” — brilliant, restless, a man who ran from God for thirty years before he was found. The book will hand you his name in Letter Fourteen, and when it does, you may laugh at how famous the man is whom you met without his robes. For now, only the sentence this week’s letter gives you, the one he is most loved for: the heart “is restless, until it repose in Thee.” He spent thirty years proving the first half and the rest of his life enjoying the second.

OPENING REFLECTION

A minute of silence with the letter's plainest sentence: *Being with Him is the life itself*. Not the recharge for the life. Not the reward after it. The life. What in you agrees — and what in you quietly files that under “unrealistic”?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Letter Four says the nearness “is not the recharge that makes the real life possible, not the reward waiting after the real life is done.” How have you actually been filing your time with God — fuel, reward, accessory, or life? Be honest about the folder.
2. The room's door “is not effort but childlikeness.” Why childlikeness — and why do you suppose effort keeps trying to apply for the job?
3. The letter says the kept places of the saints — a chair, a furnace-room corner, a kitchen — were “not magic... memory, a piece of wood that had learned what happened there.” Have you ever had a place like that? What happened to it?
4. In the parable, nobody lectured the man about his possessions: “He struck something in the dirt, and from that hour his possessions were not renounced; they were repurposed — demoted, in a single afternoon, from treasures to currency.” What's the difference between a faith that demands selling and a joy that makes selling easy? Which have you been living under?
5. The wry audit: Letter Five describes the things we chase — “each one loud with promise in the cart and mute on the shelf.” Name your most recent cart-loud, shelf-mute purchase — object, achievement, or experience. What was it actually promising you?
6. Now the second reading: He is the man, you are the treasure, “buried under its ordinary dirt,” bought with everything He had. The letter says Scripture has used this vocabulary for God's people since Sinai — “my treasured possession.” What resists you receiving that valuation — and what would living from it change?
7. “You were never foolish for wanting so much.” How does that sentence sit with a lifetime of being told your desires were the problem?

GOING DEEPER

1. Read Genesis 28:10–17 and John 1:51 — Bethel and Jesus' promise to Nathanael. Trace the letter's claim: “The commerce between heaven and earth now moves through a Person.” What does it mean that the gate of heaven has a heartbeat?
2. Read Matthew 13:44 for its plain meaning first: the kingdom is the treasure, and its surpassing worth makes joy do the selling. Then follow the hint the letter follows — Jesus' own words a few verses earlier, “the field is the world” (Matthew 13:38) — and read 2 Corinthians 8:9 and Titus 2:14 beside it: the gospel echo the old readers heard, of a Buyer

who gave everything for a people He calls His treasured possession. Held together — not as two interpretations of one parable, but as two truths of one gospel — what do the finding and the being-found reveal about each other? Which did you need today?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

The treasure audit. One evening this week, take a page and let the heart's ledger speak: where does your attention actually go, unforced — the checks, the scrolls, the daydreams? The letter's diagnostic is kind but exact: "The heart follows the treasure; attention flows toward whatever the soul has priced highest." No fixing, no shame — the parable's whole mechanism is that nobody argued the man out of anything. Then read Matthew 13:44 once over your list and ask for one thing only: a strike of the spade. One glimpse of the Treasure worth more.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, we have chased so much, and everything went mute on the shelf. Tonight we heard why: we were made for the Treasure, and the wanting itself was never the problem. Show us the field where You are hidden — our own kitchen, our own ordinary days — and let joy do in us what duty never could. And thank You for the second reading: that before we ever found anything, You found us, and paid gladly. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Week 4: The Deed and the Door

Reading: Letter Six — What Cannot Be Lost + Letter Seven — The Godward Turn

Theme: Union with Christ cannot be lost, and the door He opened was never locked — so the practice can finally begin.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **Union and Communion:** Union with Christ is the fixed thing — “His doing, His act, His grip,” a deed that has no weather. Communion is the enjoyed thing — the fellowship inside the union, and it breathes. “Everything you have been reading as a verdict on the union was only ever the weather of communion.”
- **The Rule of the Ifs:** “Entry is free. Depth is responsive. Neither is earned.” The conditional invitations this letter examines — *draw near, abide* — govern the fellowship, not the deed. Scripture’s sober warnings still do their own work in their own contexts, and each asks its own reading; but the letter’s pastoral point stands whole: felt fluctuation is communion’s weather, never the union’s failure.
- **The Godward Turn:** “The smallest complete act of communion. The deliberate return of the heart’s attention to the God who is already here.” It summons nothing; it greets. It manufactures nothing; it notices.
- **The Lengths:** Glance, look, gaze, long sit — “One direction, many lengths.” The performing heart will want to rank them. Refuse it. The anchored turns fund the free ones: “The long sits sink the well; the glances draw from it.”

KEY QUOTES

“Union says that in Christ the house is yours and cannot be un-bought. Communion asks whether anyone is sitting in the rooms this evening.”

“Nearness is not earned, but it can be neglected; communion is not purchased, but it can be cultivated.”

“He prayed. Mid-sentence, mid-terror, at work, in front of the most dangerous audience of his life, with no warning, no altar, no closed eyes, no time.”

“The Turn does not summon Him; it greets Him. It manufactures nothing; it notices what was already true.”

“You do not turn to make Him near. You turn because He is.”

THE ONE-BREATH (LEARN IT THIS WEEK — THE WHOLE PRACTICE, WHOLE):

He is already near; you do not have to get His attention. So through the day, turn — not your body, your attention — toward Him. Some turns last two seconds at a red light; some are a long

sit before the house wakes. Carry a word of His in your pocket to turn with. Anchor a few turnings by design — a time, a chair — and let the rest fly free. You will drift; everyone drifts. Come back without accusation or self-contempt, because the returning is the practice. And when you rise, go with Him into the next thing.

AT THE TABLE: THE OLD PURITAN

The tenderest doctrines in these two letters — the love that cannot be heightened or lessened, the union that has no weather, the Comforter who abides — come from a man the book calls only “the old Puritan.” Here is the one clue the guide will give: he was, by common consent, the sturdiest theologian his country ever produced, and the hardest mind in this book carries its gentlest freight. File that away. Letter Fourteen explains why it is not a coincidence.

OPENING REFLECTION

(From this week forward, the Quiet Minute becomes the Turn, practiced together.) Before it, one silent question: when your feelings of God’s presence drop, what verdict does your heart automatically pass — and on what?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Letter Six describes the barometer life: reading every drop in feeling as a drop in standing, the restarts, “the promise made in the car with your eyes stinging,” the white-knuckle grip. Which detail was most specifically yours?
2. “That is not a relationship. That is a grip-strength test, and no one passes it forever.” What finally answers the grip-strength fear — and why is it good news that “you are not the one holding”?
3. The needle you watch “is real. It measures something. It has never once measured the deed.” What does it change to learn that your dry mornings were data about communion’s weather — never about the union?
4. Letter Seven opens with Nehemiah’s two-second prayer between a king’s question and a king’s answer — and insists heaven received it whole. What does the cupbearer’s gap do to your definition of prayer?
5. The Turn “manufactures nothing; it notices what was already true.” How is this different from every technique you have tried and abandoned? What would it mean for the practice to be un-failable?
6. The lengths: glance, look, gaze, long sit — and the letter says the glance “is not the junior version.” Where did you learn to rank them? What would this week look like if you refused the ranking?

7. The letter's last three sentences: "You do not turn to make Him near. You turn because He is. And He is." Read them aloud together, slowly. Which of the three lands hardest tonight?

GOING DEEPER

1. Read Ephesians 2:13 and 2:18, then John 10:27–29. Trace the letter's architecture: brought near by blood, access through the Son in one Spirit to the Father, held by a hand inside a hand. Where does your grip appear in these verses?
2. Read James 4:8 in its setting. The letter says this verse was written to believers — that the nearness which responds to approach is the fellowship, not the deed. How does this reading guard both against presumption and against fear?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Memorize the one-breath — it is printed above, whole. Say it once each morning until it says itself.

Then begin, with glances only: through the day, turn — not your body, your attention — toward Him. Two seconds at a red light. No quotas, no streaks, no record kept. The letter's own instruction covers every outcome in advance: you will drift; everyone drifts; the returning is the practice.

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, the deed was purchased in blood and is held in a hand inside a hand, and we spent years checking a barometer that never once measured it. Thank You that the house is ours and cannot be un-bought. This week, teach us the smallest act of fellowship — the glance, the two-second turn at a red light — and when we drift, remind us that the coming back is the practice, and that You were near the whole time. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Week 5: The Kept Fire

Reading: Letter Eight — A Time and a Chair + Letter Nine — Come Away

Theme: Lasting loves are kept on purpose — and you are not the one who wants this friendship most.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **Love on an Ordinary Calendar:** “No one drifts into a long friendship; the loves that survive the fourth week are the ones somebody meant.” The standing coffee, the anniversary, the saved voicemail — design is what wanting someone looks like.
- **Daniel’s Kit:** A word carried, a time kept, a place that knew him — “the whole equipment of a life with God fits in a coat pocket.” The pieces “were not a ladder he climbed toward God. They were the shape of a love that intended to last.”
- **The Kept Fire:** David’s “always” is the temple’s word for the altar fire never allowed to go out. “Not appointments. A kept fire.” And grace-shaped: “anchors are invitations, not invoices. A missed morning accrues nothing.”
- **He Initiates:** The whisper at Horeb, the knock at the door, the 2:30 appointments, the tug mid-inbox — “Many of the turns you have been making were never yours to begin with.” Even the desire to come back after a drift “is not you working up the nerve to face Him. It is Him, come to fetch you.”

KEY QUOTES

“It is what wanting someone looks like on an ordinary calendar.”

“That is the whole kit, dear friend. A word you love, a time you keep, a chair that remembers.”

“Not appointments. A kept fire.”

“A whisper is the volume of intimacy. You only whisper to someone beside you.”

“My share is as keen as yours.”

“You are not the only one keeping this friendship. And you are not the one who wants it most.”

AT THE TABLE: THE TEACHER WITH THE CHAIR

Letter Nine finally tells the story the opening letter promised: the Bible teacher, the cottage in Pennsylvania, the knock at half past two — and the tenderness of the math. “By then you have had enough rest to stay up with Me a while without falling asleep, and when we are finished, there is time enough to sleep again before the day’s work.” Someone worked out the sleep of one aging schoolteacher and set their meetings at the hour that would cost

him the least. The book will give you his name in Letter Fourteen. The math, you can keep now.

OPENING REFLECTION

(The Turn, together — two minutes, no debrief.) Then, silently: name the loves in your life that have lasted. Were any of them accidental?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. “Every love in your life that has lasted, lasted on purpose... And you have never once called that legalism.” Why do we call design *devotion* everywhere in life except with God? Where did that suspicion come from?
2. Daniel’s enemies “could set their trap by him the way you set a clock.” His habits were legible enough to be weaponized — and strong enough to hold. What would it take for your walk with God to have that kind of shape? What resists it?
3. The wry calendar audit: the letter lists the standing coffee, the drive-home call, the anniversary nobody reminds you of. Look at your actual calendar and your actual call log. What do they say you love on purpose?
4. The morning gets the first candidacy “before the phone gets its hands on you” — and the letter grounds it in Jesus’ own habit, “rising very early... while it was still dark.” What would have to move for you to give Him a kept time — and what, honestly, is currently occupying it?
5. Letter Nine’s discovery: “Many of the turns you have been making were never yours to begin with.” Have you felt the tug it describes — mid-inbox, mid-errand, “quiet, specific, unmistakably toward Him”? What did you do with it?
6. The interruption mercy: “the Friend you are attending to is allowed to change the subject.” How does “If God is in it, pray it. If it needs remembering, write it. If it is nothing, release it” change your picture of a devotional time that keeps getting invaded?
7. The kindest arithmetic in these letters: Laubach heard the Lord say of the friendship, “My share is as keen as yours.” Do you believe God enjoys your company — not tolerates, enjoys? What in these two letters helps?

GOING DEEPER

1. Read Daniel 6:10 and Daniel 9:1–3. Notice the letter’s observation: the man prayed *out of what he carried* — a word, a time, a place, “worn smooth by one life Babylon could not unsettle.” Which piece of the kit is strongest in your life? Which is missing?
2. Read 1 Kings 19:4–13 whole — the meals, the sleep, the mountain, the low whisper. Why do you think God fed and rested His burned-out prophet *before* asking him a single

question — and what does the whisper's volume say about what He wanted from the meeting?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Assemble the kit — one piece at a time, grace-shaped:

The word: choose one verse you love (the book suggests its own — “The nearness of God is my good”). Read it warm in the morning; carry it; let it surface.

The time: keep one this week — just one to start. Morning is the book's wise default (“before the phone gets its hands on you”), not a spiritually superior hour: the night nurse, the new parent, and the pre-dawn farmer keep other clocks. Choose a time your actual life can keep rather than an ideal hour that belongs to someone else's life. If a second comes, welcome; if not, one was kept, and the fire doesn't audit.

The chair: choose the place. Sit in it once. That is the whole assignment — the leaning-forward comes on its own by the third or fourth morning, and this week only asks for the first.

And if a tug comes mid-week, unplanned and toward Him — answer it. That one was never on the syllabus. It was an invitation.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, You kept a fire on Your altar that was never allowed to go out, and You have kept one for us through every week we forgot to tend anything. Teach us the kit this week — a word, a time, a chair — not as a ladder, but as the shape of wanting You. And tune our ears to the knock, the tug, the whisper, because we have heard the best news in this book: we are not the ones who want this friendship most. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Week 6: The Road and the Jar

Reading: Letter Ten — Stay With Us + Letter Eleven — The Glad Cost

Theme: The meeting does not end when you stand up — and what this life costs, love pays gladly.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **No Secondhand Hours:** We sort the day into fifteen holy minutes and twenty-three hours of commute away from Him — and “the sorting is wrong, and it is wrong in the happiest possible direction. What ends at the chair is the sitting. Not the company.”
- **Emmaus, Stretched Over a Life:** The risen Lord’s first free afternoon was spent walking seven miles beside two discouraged people — and “the burning happened while He was unrecognized. The communion was real before they could name it.”
- **The Economy of Chair and Kitchen:** “The chair funds the kitchen. The kitchen spends what the chair keeps banking.” The cook possessed God amid the pots — because a fire was kept somewhere in the house.
- **The Glad Cost:** The bill arrived and was paid — “for the joy that was set before him.” What it costs you now is not entry; it is “answering love with love’s own currency.” Mary’s broken flask, the verdict *beautiful*, and the measure that “was never the amount.”

KEY QUOTES

“What ends at the chair is the sitting. Not the company.”

“The rest and the work are one, he said. Six words, and most of this letter is in them.”

“The chair funds the kitchen. The kitchen spends what the chair keeps banking.”

“Your Monday is not the price you pay for your Sunday.”

“She has done a beautiful thing to me.”

“Once you get a taste of Him, the cost evaporates.”

“That is all the cost ever was. The sound of full hands.”

AT THE TABLE: THE KITCHEN, AT LAST

Letter Ten is the page the cook’s kitchen was saved for: “in the noise and clutter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees.” His friends recorded something more startling still — that he was *more* united to God in his work than in his chapel hours. Read the letter’s warning label with it: the kitchen never competed with the chair; the kitchen was warm because a fire was kept. Two letters from now, this man gets his name.

OPENING REFLECTION

(The Turn, together.) Then, silently: what percentage of your waking hours have you been quietly filing as “spiritually offstage”?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. “Fifteen holy minutes; twenty-three secondhand hours.” Where did you learn the sorting — and what has it cost you to believe your actual life was the commute away from the meeting?
2. On the Emmaus road, “the burning happened while He was unrecognized.” Look back: name an hour you now suspect He was beside you on the road, warming things, while you felt nothing but the miles.
3. Watch His manners at the village: “He does not invite Himself in... He will walk your whole day beside you, but He does not barge.” Why does the courtesy matter? What does it protect?
4. The wry noise audit: the cook wrote his clause three centuries early — “while several persons are at the same time calling for different things.” Fill in your own version: *in the noise and clutter of my _____*. What would tranquility there even look like?
5. The field-worker asked to quit and go sing in the church, and the Lord said No — “He should earn his bread by the sweat of his brow, and feel it an honor to do so.” Does that answer surprise you? What does it say about where God locates the devoted life?
6. Mary broke the flask — “You cannot un-break a flask... the breaking is the deciding.” The meter called it waste; Jesus called it beautiful, and added, “She has done what she could.” What have your payments been lately — the evening, the opinion, the comfort loosening? And whose voice has been auditing them?
7. The kindness question, from the letter’s own verdict: “He calls it beautiful. He calls you beautiful.” The letter says heaven “recognizes a broken jar at every size, and no fragrance is ever wasted.” Which of your small jars needed that sentence?

GOING DEEPER

1. Read Luke 24:13–35 in one sitting. Mark the sequence: drew near unrecognized, opened the Scriptures, acted as if going farther, was urged to stay, known in the breaking of the bread. Which movement is most like your current season?
2. Read Hebrews 12:2 with Psalm 16:11. The letter argues the “joy set before him” was the joy of the presence — His people home with Him. How does the *why* of the cross change the *why* of your own payments?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Two practices, both roads:

The Emmaus walk. Once this week, walk an actual road — with a spouse or friend from the group if you can, alone with Him if not — and talk through what has actually been happening to you, the way those two did. No agenda beyond honesty, and one open ear for the Third who draws near on roads.

And take Him into one chore. The letter's own assignment: "take Him into the dishes tonight. Talk to Him over the sink the way those two talked down their road." One sink, one commute, one laundry room — accompanied, on purpose.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord of the road, You spent Your first free afternoon walking beside two discouraged friends, and You have not changed Your idea of a good day. Forgive us the sorting — the secondhand hours, the offstage years. Walk with us this week through the noise and clutter of our own kitchens, and when the time comes to pay some small cost for Your company, give us Mary's hands and the man in the field's face. The house is filling, and You call it beautiful. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Week 7: The Fire on the Beach and the Winter Tree

Reading: Letter Twelve — The Charcoal Fire + Letter Thirteen — The Winter Tree

Theme: For real failure: breakfast is already cooking. For the quiet room: the tree is not dead, and the Gardener has not left.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **The Trees or the Beach:** Adam hid; Peter swam. The whole difference between religion and the gospel is in those two directions — and in Peter's restoration, as under Elijah's broom tree, the meal comes before the questions: the welcome is already cooking at the fire.
- **Two Voices, Told Apart by Direction:** "Conviction runs to Him. Only condemnation runs away." Conviction is specific and pulls toward the fire; condemnation is global — not *you did this* but *you are this* — and pushes toward the trees. (Conviction's first touch may sting or grieve — real healing touches the wound — but its direction is homeward.)
- **Visitation and Residence:** "The felt warmth is a visitation. The Presence is a residence. Winter changes what you feel of Him. It cannot change where He lives."
- **The Winter Counsel:** Believe in the absence of feeling; do not renovate the practice ("Begin again where we left off"); bring the intentions of love and know they are received. "You are not failing this season. You are wintering."

KEY QUOTES

"God feeds the failed before He examines them. The meal comes first. It always has."

"Conviction runs to Him. Only condemnation runs away, and condemnation, you may remember, has nothing left to stand on."

"The smell of charcoal is not your shame anymore. It is breakfast."

"Nevertheless, I am continually with you."

"The felt warmth is a visitation. The Presence is a residence."

"The Gardener has never lost a tree He planted."

AT THE TABLE: THE RIBBON-WEAVER

Letter Thirteen introduces him by name at last: Gerhard Tersteegen, who wove silk for his bread and became, without seeking it, a physician of souls — and who spent five years of his own young manhood unable to feel the favor of the God he would spend forty years commending. His deliverance came mid-errand, on an ordinary road: "the dayspring from on high again visited him." The physician had been the patient. That is why his winter counsel can be trusted: every line of it was tested on himself first.

OPENING REFLECTION

(The Turn, together.) Then, silently — and gently: which letter did you need this week, the beach or the tree? The named night, or the quiet room?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Letter Twelve describes the after-failure instinct exactly: the skipped chair, the general prayers, the plan to “put together some good days” before coming back. The wry version of an old lie: what does your “program” usually consist of — and has it ever once worked?
2. The charcoal fire appears exactly twice in the New Testament — the courtyard where Peter’s courage died, and the beach where breakfast was cooking. “He rebuilt the scene of the failure in order to heal it.” Why does He take Peter back to the smell of charcoal instead of somewhere neutral?
3. Three questions, one for each denial — and all three the same: “Do you love me?” Not *how could you*; not *what have you learned*. Why is that the only question restoration asks?
4. Learn the two voices by their directions: conviction specific and Godward, condemnation global and away. Which voice have you been listening to lately — and toward where has it been steering you?
5. Asaph’s confession — “I was like a beast toward you” — is answered by “Nevertheless, I am continually with you.” The letter says the fire that never went out through his worst season “was God’s keeping of him.” What does the *nevertheless* do to your worst season?
6. Tersteegen’s second counsel: winter “is not the season to renovate” the practice — keep the chair, keep the verse, exactly as built, because the enemy’s strategy is “to talk the tree into pulling up its own roots to go looking for better soil.” Have you seen that temptation? What did it promise?
7. The kindness question: “bring Him the intention of one, and know that it is received as love, because it is love.” For anyone in the quiet room right now — what would it mean to believe the intention lands?

GOING DEEPER

1. Read John 21:1–19 with Luke 22:31–34 and 61–62. Notice what was said *before* the failure: “when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” What does it mean that Peter’s return was prayed for, planned on, and assigned a job in advance?
2. Read Psalm 32:1–5 and then Psalm 88 — the psalm that ends in darkness. Why is it a comfort that Scripture kept Heman’s unresolved winter in the hymnal? What does its presence there permit you?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

First, the amnesty — read aloud by the leader, and meant: if you missed every practice this study has suggested, you have fallen behind in nothing, because there was never a ledger. Anyone who spent this week in the trees is invited to the beach, where the food was cooking before the boat landed.

Then, one practice for each letter: if there is a named thing — tonight, specific, before God, the thing by its name. Out loud if you are alone; on paper if you are not; never as a demand of the group — no one is asked to confess private sin at this table, and where Scripture counsels confession to another person, choose one mature, trustworthy believer. Then no program; the welcome “does not expire, it does not cool... It is cooking.” And for the quiet room — one morning this week, keep the chair with no demand that it blaze. Bring the intention when the feeling will not come, and leave knowing it was received as love. Because it is love.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, You built a fire on the beach for a man who had denied You, and You fed him before You asked him anything. We bring You our named nights and our quiet rooms — the failures and the winters — and we come down the beach instead of into the trees, because we finally know whose face is waiting. Keep our small fires through the seasons we cannot feel You, and let the intention of love be our offering when it is all we have. It is received. We believe You. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Week 8: The Circle and the Chair

Reading: Letter Fourteen — The Circle of the Friends of God + The Closing Page — The Chair Is Still in the Kitchen

Theme: You have not been reading about a circle. In Christ, you have been welcomed into one.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **Friendship, on Jesus' Accounting:** Chosen, loved, laid-down-for, and told things — “No longer do I call you servants... I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.” The disclosure is the letter’s key, and John 15 holds it inside the rest: His initiating choice, His sacrificial love, and the obedience that never purchases the friendship but grows inside it, as love’s response. You have been receiving a Friend’s disclosures for fourteen letters.
- **The Unveilings:** The cook, the old preacher, the bishop, the old Puritan, the teacher with the chair — every unnamed companion gets a name, and the room turns out to be crowded with centuries. “Whatever pew you sit in, half this circle is not from it... The circle was never denominational. It runs on thirst.”
- **The Census That Never Stopped:** Elijah’s “I alone am left” was off by seven thousand, “because the friends of God are almost always hidden from one another.” The circle has living members — two pews behind you, in the pickup line, behind a counter.
- **The Induction:** “Dear friend” was never a manner of speaking. “You have been reading your own induction... You turned. You have been one of them for every letter of this book, and longer.” The induction is Christ’s to give, and He gives it in Himself: the welcome belongs to all who are in Him. And for anyone at the table still considering, the circle is not closed — the letter’s own word stands: the door is the same width tonight, and the Friend Himself is calling.

KEY QUOTES

“I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”

“The circle was never denominational. It runs on thirst.”

“Thirst can spot thirst across a room.”

“You have been one of them for every letter of this book, and longer, and everyone in this room knew it before you did.”

“And friends tell what they know.”

“The chair is still in the kitchen. It has always been yours.”

AT THE TABLE: EVERYONE

This is the week the guide's kept secrets come home. The cook, the preacher, the bishop, the Puritan, the teacher with the chair — read their unveilings aloud in the session and let the room react. Then do what the letter does: look at the whole company at once. A Carmelite kitchen brother, a Dominican friar, a North African bishop, an Oxford Puritan, two Scottish Presbyterians, a Flemish contemplative, a German mystic, an American missionary, a Pentecostal Bible teacher. The roster illustrates the doctrine: the friendship of God runs wider than any one pew. And wide was never undefined — these witnesses differ on real things, but every one confesses the triune God, the Lord Christ crucified and risen, the authority of His Word, and a nearness that flows from being brought near by blood. Thirst does not replace truth; rightly ordered thirst is thirst for the God who has made Himself known in Christ.

OPENING REFLECTION

(The Turn, together — and tonight, let it run a beat longer.) Then, silently: fifteen times this book has called you *Dear friend*. Did you take it as a manner of speaking?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The unveilings: which name landed hardest — the cook, the bishop, the old preacher, the Puritan, the teacher with the chair? The letter says of the bishop, “you liked him before you could be impressed by him.” What does meeting these voices without their reputations change about how you’ll read them now?
2. Jesus’ definition of friendship is disclosure — “the servant gets instructions; the friend gets explanations.” Looking back over the study, what has He told you? Name one disclosure from these weeks you did not have eight weeks ago.
3. “The hardest mind in the book carried its gentlest freight” — the sturdiest theologian wrote the most mothering doctrines, and the letter insists that is no coincidence: “That is what happens to an intellect that spends a lifetime looking at the right Face.” What does this pairing do to the old divorce between deep theology and warm devotion?
4. The wry census: Elijah said “I alone am left” and was off by seven thousand. Whom have you assumed you were alone in this? And — look around the table — what does the letter say about the room you’re actually sitting in? (“Thirst can spot thirst across a room.”)
5. The roster is the doctrine: half the circle is not from your pew, whatever your pew is. What does a company that “has never once checked a membership card at the door” ask of how you regard Christians shaped differently than you?
6. The closing page says: “I have nothing left to teach you, and that is the best news in this book. There was never much to learn. There was Someone to meet.” After eight weeks — was there ever much to learn? What was there instead?

7. The kindness question, and the last one: the P.S. reveals these letters began as a father's letters to his daughter — "But I will tell you the whole truth... I did not know your name. But I was hoping for you." You were hoped for before you opened the book. What do you want to say back — to the writer, and to the Friend behind the writing?

GOING DEEPER

1. Read John 15:12–17. Trace the letter's claim that friendship with God "is the Bible's own name for what He has with His people" — Abraham (Isaiah 41:8), Moses (Exodus 33:11), and the upper room. What did each friend receive that a servant would not have?
2. Read Hebrews 12:1 and 10:24–25. The cloud of witnesses and the command not to neglect meeting: how do the secret room and the gathered row turn out to be the same nearness in two places?

WEEKLY PRACTICE — THE SENDING

Two assignments, and the second is the study's whole point walking out the door:

Adopt a friend. Consider choosing one member of the circle to read slowly over the coming year — the cook's little book, the ribbon-weaver's letters, the Puritan on communion, the missionary's letters, the bishop's confessions, the young Scottish pastor's letters, the biography of the teacher with the chair. Friends introduce their friends; the book just introduced you to ten. An invitation, not an assignment — the right one will choose you back.

Begin the letter. Somebody you love may someday stand where you stood eight weeks ago — thirsty, tired, half sure nobody else lives this way. Begin a one-page letter to them: what you found, where you found it, and the welcome that was waiting. There is no deadline and no ledger here either — finish it when it finishes, send it if and when love says so. The book's last teaching is five words long — "friends tell what they know" — and letters like that are not assignments; they are what full hands eventually do. If you write it, bring what the writing was like — not necessarily the letter itself — to any reunion your group plans.

And then go home, to the kitchen, to the chair. It was never only a chair, and it was never a solitary one.

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, we came to this table eight weeks ago as readers. Those You have brought near in Your Son leave tonight bearing the name You gave before we knew to claim it — friends. And if anyone at this table is still at the threshold, let them hear the door's own welcome tonight: it was opened from Your side, and it is open still. Thank You for the company: the cook and the weaver, the bishop and the Puritan, the seven thousand we miscounted, and the ones at this table, whom thirst has taught us to recognize. Send those You have brought near home to the chair that was always theirs; and lead anyone still at the threshold to the Son who opened the

way from Your side. We leave with nothing left to earn, and Someone to meet in the morning — and every ordinary morning after that, forever. In His presence is fullness of joy. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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