

Never Alone: Practicing the Presence of God

Leaders Guide

A Few Introductory Thoughts...

The study you are about to embark on has the power to change the lives of the people in your group. In this work, Brother Lawrence offers a glimpse of what he learned about God, himself, and what it meant to be in a deep, abiding connection with his Creator. Brother Lawrence shared his passions, his struggles, his desires and dreams. Yet throughout his journey his gaze was constant. His passion was to be in such a deep connection with God that he literally lived in a constant awareness of the presence of God in his life.

Our hope is that his passion becomes your group's desire as well—to be in such a deep, abiding connection with your Creator that you see the divine in the daily, and mysterious in the mundane. Brother Lawrence's life can attest to the fact that God's presence fills all creation, and there can be no greater goal of life than that of living in that reality.

As you journey with your group through the writings of Brother Lawrence, may you come to a deep awareness of the presence of God in your midst every day. His presence does indeed fill every corner of creation, and He is waiting for you to awaken to it—to see it, to sense it, to take up residence in it.

As your group begins this journey together, it is important to know that the position you take as a leader is essential. The best learning comes when the leader is not the dispenser of all knowledge, but acts as spiritual guide – nurturing and fostering an environment of questioning, searching, and discussion. The questions that follow are suggestions for each portion of the book. Feel free to use them as they are, or use them as a starting point for your dialogue with your group. Good questions are open-ended, leading to further questions and exploration. Good questions may not always have easy answers, but push the group to reflect and wrestle. Answers that are never earned are rarely ever owned.

So enjoy the journey. Take your time. Listen to each other. Admit it when the reality is that we don't have all the answers. Reflect on what the Scriptures have to say. The journey to discovering the presence of God in our lives is a rich one—and the journey is just as important as the destination.

May God richly bless your journey.

Part I: Conversations with Brother Lawrence

First Conversation: The Life and Thoughts of Brother Lawrence

Prior to the first meeting of your group, be sure that everyone reads the first conversation with Brother Lawrence. One option to keep in mind is to read each conversation, letter, or maxim as a group. You could take turns, or have one student read the entire text for the meeting. As you begin your first group meeting, be sure to introduce everyone, as some of the people in your group may not know each other. After a time of introduction, work through the following:

1. What in the first conversation spoke to you? What parts did you connect with?
What parts did you not fully understand?
2. What do you think Brother Lawrence meant by having a “continual conversation with God”? What do you think that might look like? How does this relate to what is written in 1 Thessalonians 5.16-18?
3. Brother Lawrence talks about how important it is to spend time with God everyday. What do you do that makes you feel most connected to God? How do you connect with God?
4. Have you ever had a “season of dryness” in your life? What did it look like?
5. How would you describe what it means to be “one with God”? What might that look like?

Second Conversation: A Genuine Love, An Authentic Walk

1. What did you think about the second conversation? What spoke to you?
2. The writer makes this statement, “His [Brother Lawrence’s] primary focus is not on whether he will end up going to heaven or to hell when he dies; his primary focus is his love for God. He is completely determined that his love for God will be the single purpose behind every act that he does.” [p. 16] What do you think about that statement? What is meant by it? How does this differ from what we often hear about being a Christian?
3. As Christians, are we motivated more by where we will go when we die, or by living in the presence of God in the present? According to Brother Lawrence, which should we be more motivated by? What would our lives look like if that were our motivation?
4. Brother Lawrence notes that it is not good to be preoccupied with the blessings of God [p. 17]. Why is that?
5. In the reading we are encouraged to see prayer as an open and honest conversation with God. Is that difficult for you? Why or why not?
6. Read Jeremiah 20:7-8. What kind of emotion is Jeremiah unleashing on God? What do you think makes him be that honest with God?
7. How might we cultivate that kind of conversation with God?

Third Conversation: A Faithful Awe, A Real Trust

1. If you were to underline one part of the third conversation, what would it be?
2. What words or phrases are used to describe God in this reading? What kind of portrait is being painted of God?
3. Brother Lawrence notes that he was more at home and at one with God in the every day things of life, than even when he was doing “religious things”. Have you ever felt that way? When was a time that you felt more “at one” with God?
4. If what Brother Lawrence said was true, then what is the role of “religious things” in our lives?
5. Why is it often easier to see God in the “religious things” rather than in the everyday things?
6. Read Micah 6.8 as a group. What kinds of things please the heart of God? What might a life look like that is lived in harmony with this verse?
7. How might we begin to change our understanding and perspective?
8. What does it mean to “live authentically and wholeheartedly as God’s, handing over our own plans and desires and picking up His plans and desires”? [p. 26]

Fourth Conversation: Coming Before God with an Undivided Heart

1. Brother Lawrence notes that God is “intimately present with us”. What do you think that means?
2. Read Psalm 139:7-12 together. What does this verse tell us about God? Is there any phrase in this passage that sticks out to you?
3. What does God being “intimately present with us” mean for us?
4. In our reading, prayer is described as “being totally aware of God’s presence with us.” [p. 28] How does this change your perspective on prayer?
5. Why is it tough to see God’s presence as always being with us?
6. What kind of hope comes from seeing God as always being present with us?
7. What might it look like to have “an undivided heart”?

Part II: Letters from Brother Lawrence to Those Who Are Serious About Their Journey with God

First Letter: Coming to Our Senses—Living in God’s Presence

1. What did you read in the first letter that spoke to you? What did you struggle with?
2. According to this first letter, how would you describe what it means to “live in the presence of God”?
3. Read Genesis 28:10-18, focusing on verses 16-18. How would you paraphrase verses 16-18 in your own words? What kind of implications does Jacob’s discovery have for us today?
4. Brother Lawrence quotes a friend who says that “God’s got an endless bank account of grace, and we settle for pocket-change...” What do you think his friend meant by that statement?
5. What are some ways in which we “settle for pocket-change” in our walk with God today, “limiting God”?
6. What would it mean to “open our eyes to God’s grace”?
7. What can we do to open our eyes this week to the bigness of God’s grace?

Second Letter: Practicing the Presence—The Ongoing Conversation

1. How did the second letter speak to you? What did you read that connected with you?
2. Brother Lawrence makes the statement that only when we fully open up every area of our lives for God to take up residence do we see him doing what He wants there. Do you agree?
3. Read Psalm 86:11 as a group. David prays that God would give him “an undivided heart,” what do you think he meant by that? What do you think David was asking for?
4. In our reading it states that God will not share room with other things that we trust and love. Have you ever experienced this truth? What are some things that you have “trusted and loved” that have pushed God out of your life?
5. It says on page 36 that the most gratifying life we can ever have is one that is dominated by an “uninterrupted, ongoing conversation with God.” We’ve talked about this before, have any of you tried it? What has been the result? How can we practice this kind of living this week? [NOTE – spend a good amount of time discussing ways in which your group can experiment with this. This idea is central to the book and to Brother Lawrence’s journey.]

Third Letter: The Role of Self Denial

1. Before we get into our reading, let's talk about what it was like to explore having an ongoing conversation with God this last week. How did it go? What did you learn? Was it tough? Why or why not?
2. What stood out to you from our reading in the third letter?
3. Read the entire chapter of Deuteronomy 8. Why might the Israelites forget God and what He has done for them? What is the consequence of forgetting? How do you think this relates to the festivals that Israel was commanded to celebrate?
4. The reading talked about the power of remembering God, not forgetting Him. How is it that we forget God in our every day lives? Why is it easy to forget Him? How might we be able to remember God more frequently throughout our day?
5. "The very air we breathe in our journey with God is not one of slavery and bondage but one of freedom and liberation." [p. 38] What do you think Brother Lawrence meant by this statement?
6. Often times when we think of freedom and liberation, we automatically think of what we are freed *from*. But there's another side—what we are freed *to*. In Christ, what are we freed from? What are we freed to?
7. The letter makes a fascinating statement in regards to our devotional life, saying "be careful not to do your devotions for the wrong reasons." What might be a wrong reason for doing devotions? What is the right posture to take towards our devotions?
8. Given what we've read and talked about, what changes can we make this week to incorporate what we've talked about?

Fourth Letter: Our Inner Being—A Cathedral

1. What happened this week as you put into practice what we talked about last week?
2. From the reading, what stood out to you? Why?
3. Brother Lawrence makes this statement. “Our inner being can become a cathedral or a small prayer chapel in which we share fellowship with Him. There we’ll experience wholeness and love; there we’ll see God for who He is, and we’ll see ourselves for who we are. Every person can have these intimate conversations with God.” When you hear this quote, what comes to your mind and heart?
4. How does this discussion relate to 1 Corinthians 6:18-20?
5. What is threatening about what Brother Lawrence describes? What is hopeful?
6. How do you think one becomes “a cathedral”?
7. According to Brother Lawrence, what is one way in which we worship God? How is this different from what we often think about worship? What other doors does this open for how we worship God?

Fifth Letter: Daily Practicing His Presence

1. When you read this particular letter, did you see yourself in it? Where were the places that you could see your journey with God reflected in Brother Lawrence's words about his own journey?
2. What are some ways in which this letter describes what it looks like to practice God's presence in your life?
3. As you read the letter, were there any verses that came to mind? If so, what were they? How did you see them relating to the issues Brother Lawrence talked about?
4. "I walk with God out of His love for me and my love for Him. I realize that I don't have to be something other than what I am." How would you describe this in your own words? Have you ever experienced this kind of life before? If so, describe it. If not, what do you think keeps you from experiencing this kind of freedom with God?
5. Again Brother Lawrence talks about devotions in this letter. What does he say about them? What do you think about what he has to say about them?
6. What can we do this week to live the kind of life that we find in this letter?

Sixth Letter: Perseverance in Suffering

1. When you read this letter, where there are ideas that jumped out to you?
2. Brother Lawrence asks the following question, “Wouldn’t we be overjoyed if we could discover the treasure that the gospel talks about?” What treasure do you think he has in mind? Is he talking about something bigger than knowing where you will go when you die?
3. How does John 10:10 relate to “the treasure that the gospel talks about”?
4. “Because there’s no limit to the Good News of God’s Kingdom, the more we explore, the more fortune we find. We’ve got to keep searching until we discover it; don’t stop short.” What do you think Brother Lawrence is describing? What is God’s Kingdom?
5. This letter talks much about finding hope in the midst of suffering. What thoughts does Brother Lawrence offer? How do they relate to Romans 5:1-5? Often we think about suffering as being for our own perseverance, could how we endure suffering also be for the perseverance of others?

Seventh Letter: In the Midst of Struggle

1. Did anything connect with you in this letter?
2. Brother Lawrence makes the following observation. “No doubt, God will permit painful difficulties, but whenever he wants to step in and change the situation He can and will—many times at the very moment we least expect it.” Have you ever experienced deep pain? Does what Brother Lawrence said bring hope or frustration to you?
3. Why do you think God allows suffering? In other words, how does the suffering and pain God allows fit with his love and compassion for us?
4. The Scriptures are filled with stories of suffering. Often we get this image that if we choose to follow God, then somehow everything will get better. The reality is that there are times where it does not. One of the classic examples of suffering in the Scriptures is Job. Read Job 2 and 42:1-5 as a group and wrestle with what you find there. We may never know why something has happened, but we can see the change that is brought by God because of it. According to Job 42:1-5, how has suffering changed Job? Why is that significant?
5. How does Joseph come to terms with what has happened to him in Genesis 50:15-21?
6. How does this letter describe the kind of prayer life God loves? How could this be put into practice? [NOTE – It might be a good idea to actually try praying this way as a group, to model what the letter is describing. Take a few minutes to pray, acknowledging God’s presence and praising him, without making requests to him.]

7. Brother Lawrence speaks of rushing into life's difficult situations with boldness and courage, where does that boldness and courage come from?
8. Is there a struggle that you are in the midst of right now? What would it look like for you to enter that situation with boldness and courage?

Eighth Letter: The Battle for Wandering Minds

1. What part of the letter spoke the most to you?
2. What encouragement does Brother Lawrence offer when it comes to having your mind wander when trying to focus on God?
3. When Brother Lawrence talks about being honest with God and yourself about your struggles, how does that relate to the term “confession”?
4. Read 1 John 1:5-10 as a group. What is the relationship between light, darkness, and this thought of confession?
5. What do you think causes our minds to wander? Do you think God understands?
6. Sometimes a wandering mind is due to a lack of connection with God. What are some ways in which you connect with God most deeply? [NOTE – Some of the things that are going to be mentioned are not necessarily “religious” in nature. That’s okay. If God’s presence truly fills all creation, then he is bigger than just things labeled “religious”.] Does your mind wander when you are involved in those things? What can be learned from this?
7. What can each one of do this week to explore more deeply how we can connect with God?

Ninth Letter: One Desire

1. As you read letter number nine, what resonated with you?
2. “Our lives should unmistakably show the rest of the world that our only desire is to bring joy to God.” What kind of life brings joy to God? What kind of life brings grief to God?
3. What kind of life do the following verses portray? [Micah 6:8; Matthew 5:3-12; 22:34-40]
4. How can we orient our lives around those kinds of things, living the kind of life that brings God joy?
5. What do you think is the result of living a life that brings God joy?
6. What kind of impact do you think that kind of life would have on this world?

Tenth Letter: On Friendship

1. What parts of letter number ten stood out to you as you read it?
2. Why is it easy to just see God as attached to “religious” things? Is God only in “religious” things? Is he in every aspect of life?
3. How would you define the words “sacred” and “secular”?
4. Brother Lawrence is challenging our definitions of “sacred” and “secular”, seeing much that we would label as “ordinary” or “secular” life as in actuality truly sacred. Read Colossians 1:15-23 as a group. The text notes that “in him [Jesus] all things hold together” as well as “and through him [Jesus] to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or in heaven”. What does this passage have to say about dividing things into “sacred” and “secular”?
5. How does this change how you see the “ordinary” in life? [NOTE – Brother Lawrence would say that even the “ordinary” things of life are infused with the profoundly spiritual. This is the reason he could acknowledge that God’s presence was in the entirety of life, as well as something that could be practiced and celebrated.]

Eleventh Letter: On Suffering

1. In the reading for this week, what connected with you?
2. What do you think it means to “share in the sufferings of Christ”?
3. Read Philippians 3:10-11. What does Paul desire here? What does he see as the result of “sharing in the sufferings of Christ”?
4. What are some of the positive implications of suffering?
5. Brother Lawrence makes this statement, “Life’s most difficult and painful situations are like heaven to me if I experience them with God beside me. On the other hand, life’s most pleasurable and enjoyable situations are like hell to me if I have to experience them without God beside me.” [p. 54]. What do you think led him to feel this way? What attitudes need to change for one to be able to echo Brother Lawrence’s statement?
6. Is there any suffering in your life right now? How is God using it in your life? What attitudes need to change in order for you to see suffering as Brother Lawrence did?

Twelfth Letter: The Habit of Practicing the Presence of God

1. What parts of the twelfth letter spoke to you?
2. Read the following passages. What is a common theme in all of them? After reading them, how would you describe God's desire?

Exodus 25:8; 29:45-46

Numbers 35:34

Deuteronomy 12:5, 11

Zechariah 8:3

Ephesians 3:17

Colossians 1:19

Revelation 21:1-5

3. How might knowing that God is present with you in the here and now impact your life? What are some of the implications of God being very present in your life?
4. What hints does Brother Lawrence give about practicing the presence of God on a daily basis?
5. Have you ever experienced what Brother Lawrence is talking about? What happened?
6. To this point in the book, we've been exposed to this idea of "practicing the presence of God" quite a bit. What do you think it means? What might it look like in your life to do just that?

Thirteenth Letter: Trust Brings Intimacy with God

1. What connected with you in the thirteenth letter?
2. Brother Lawrence states, “Many times God allows suffering in our lives because in suffering much of the clutter that we have accumulated in our lives is cleaned up.” [p. 57]. Give an example of what you think he meant by this statement.
3. How does suffering change our perspective on what is important?
4. Go back and re-read Job 42:1-5 together as a group. How do you see this passage relating with what Brother Lawrence said in this letter?
5. Re-read as a group the last full paragraph on page 58. What truths jump out at you from this section? How have you seen these things to be true in your own life?

Fourteenth Letter: God the Faithful Healer

1. As you read the fourteenth letter, what connected with you?
2. Brother Lawrence offers the thoughts in this letter as an encouragement to a friend in pain. What specific encouragements does he offer in this letter?
3. How do you think this letter is a living example of 2 Corinthians 1:3-7?
4. Take a moment to write a similar letter to someone you know who is in the midst of pain right now. What would you want to say to him or her? [NOTE – after allowing the students in your group to write their letters, have each person read theirs and explain why they wrote what they wrote.

Fifteenth Letter: The Journey to His Presence

1. As you read the letter, what connected with you? Did you disagree with anything?
2. What do you think Brother Lawrence meant by the statement, “Don’t do anything, say anything, or think anything that might offend God.” [p. 61]? What are some examples of what he is talking about?
3. How does Brother Lawrence’s statement apply to expressing to God our doubts and anger towards him? Do these offend God? What does offend God?
4. Read Genesis 18:16-33 together as a group. This is a much-debated passage of Scripture. Does Abraham change the mind of God? Does Abraham’s request express doubt or faith? What is the difference between boldness with God and offending God?
5. The subtitle of this letter is “The Journey to His Presence”. How do you see the experience of God’s presence as a journey? What is the destination? [NOTE – Be sure to discuss all the facets of the journey metaphor with your students as a way of understanding our relationship with God more as a journey than a destination.]

Sixteenth Letter: Intimacy with God

1. What did you think about what you read in letter sixteen?
2. How does God's love keep us "level-headed"? [p. 61]
3. How does one come to know God intimately?
4. What does John 8:31-32 have to add to the discussion about knowing truth and being intimate with God? What is the relationship between living the teachings of Jesus and knowing truth? What is the result of living the teachings of Jesus according to this passage?
5. Brother Lawrence states, "We go around with overloaded schedules every day doing a million things that really don't matter in the long run." How do you see this being true?
6. Near the end of the letter Brother Lawrence makes an astounding claim. He encourages the reader to verbalize [and ultimately to realize] the statement, "I belong to God". What does this phrase mean to you? How might living in this reality change the way one lives?

Part III: Spiritual Maxims—Life Sayings

The closing section of *Practicing the Presence of God* is perhaps the most practical section of the book. In it Brother Lawrence offers practical helps in embracing and living a life that is in tune with the Spirit of God. Each section includes several numerical points. As a part of your gathering with your group, do each of the following with every section.

1. Read the section together out loud.
2. Assign each numerical section to a student, asking them to lead a discussion on the following:
 - What was the main idea of the section? What point was Brother Lawrence trying to make?
 - How does Brother Lawrence see this truth as connecting one deeper in communion with God?
 - Are there any passages of Scripture that speak to or bring a deeper understanding of this truth?
 - How might this kind of thinking and living take shape in everyday life?
3. After you have covered the numerical points in each section, have your students offer additional ideas they think could be added to Brother Lawrence's list. One way of asking this question would be, "Now that we've explored Brother Lawrence's thoughts on _____, what would you add to the list?"

The goal of this approach is to have your students guide their own discussion, as well as be able to interact and process the thoughts and points made in each of the maxims. These kinds of critical thinking skills are what a new generation of followers of Jesus must be able to do.

As a way of wrapping up the book as a group, have each member of the group describe their journey of reading and interacting with the book. What spoke to them? What challenged them? What resonated with them? What frustrated them? What did they disagree with? How have or will their lives be altered because of coming into contact with these writings?