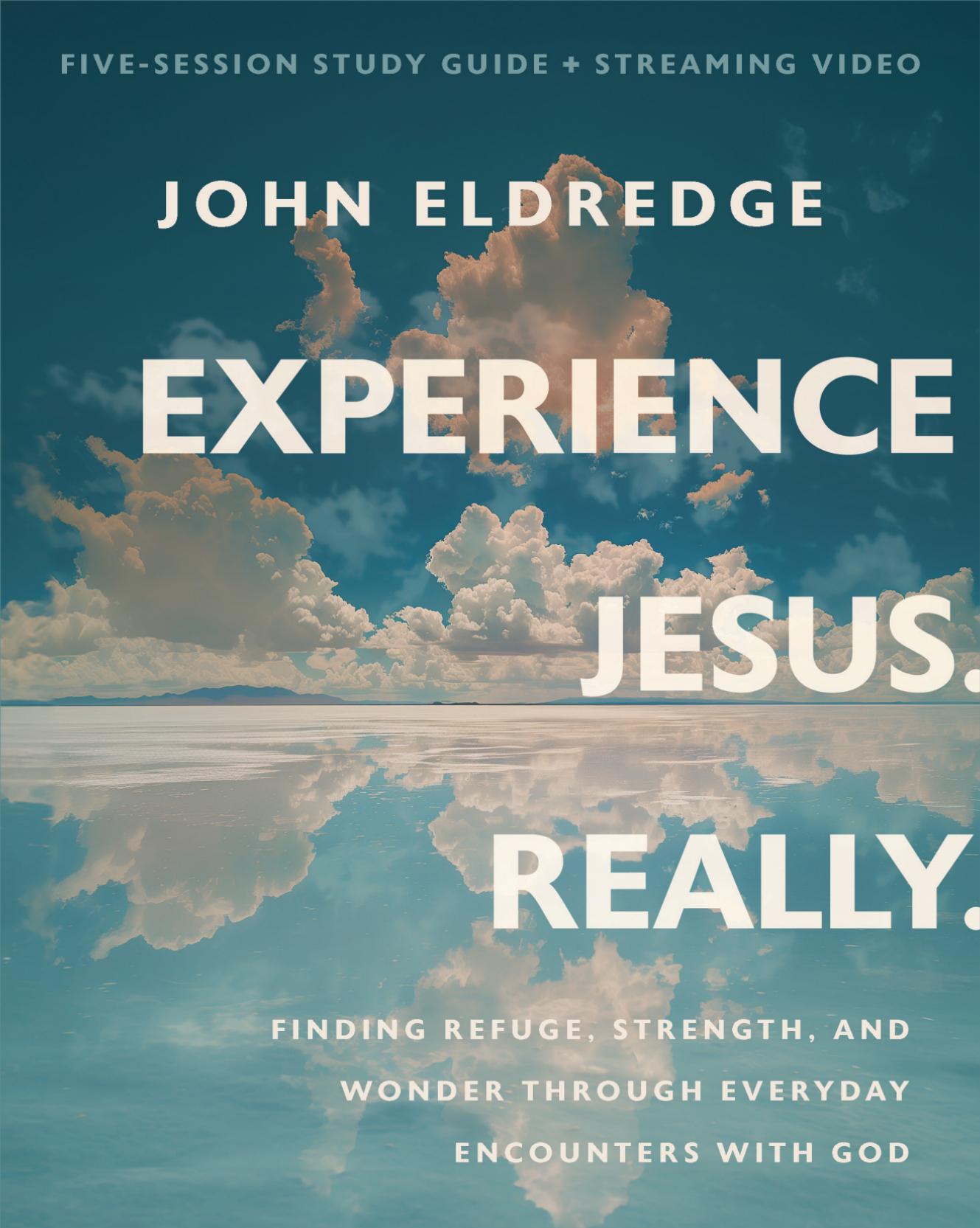


FIVE-SESSION STUDY GUIDE + STREAMING VIDEO



JOHN ELDREDGE
EXPERIENCE
JESUS.
REALLY.

FINDING REFUGE, STRENGTH, AND
WONDER THROUGH EVERYDAY
ENCOUNTERS WITH GOD

Experience Jesus. Really. Study Guide

© 2025 by John Eldredge

Published in Grand Rapids, Michigan, by HarperChristian Resources. HarperChristian Resources is a registered trademark of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Requests for information should be sent to customercare@harpercollins.com.

ISBN 978-0-310-09706-8 (softcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-09730-3 (ebook)

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.* Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked KJV taken from the authorized King James Version. Public domain.

Scripture quotations marked NASB taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NLT taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked PHILLIPS taken from The New Testament in Modern English by J.B. Phillips copyright © 1960, 1972 J. B. Phillips. Administered by The Archbishops' Council of the Church of England. Used by permission.

Any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this study guide are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by HarperChristian Resources, nor does HarperChristian Resources vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this study guide.

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

HarperChristian Resources titles may be purchased in bulk for church, business, fundraising, or ministry use. For information, please e-mail ResourceSpecialist@ChurchSource.com.

Published in association with the literary agency of Yates & Yates, www.yates2.com.

First Printing February 2025 / Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

A Note from John Eldredge v

How to Use This Guide vii

SESSION 1: WHAT CHILDREN AND MYSTICS KNOW

Group Study 1

Personal Study 9

 Study 1: Programmed for Immediate Answers 10

 Study 2: Ordinary Mystics 13

 Study 3: Become Like a Child 16

 Catch Up and Read Ahead 19

SESSION 2: THE REFUGE OF GOD

Group Study 21

Personal Study 29

 Study 1: A Story, Not a Painting 30

 Study 2: If 33

 Study 3: A Fully Consecrated Life 36

 Catch Up and Read Ahead 39

SESSION 3: LOVE AND TRUTH AS REFUGE

Group Study 41

Personal Study 49

 Study 1: Your Story of Love 50

 Study 2: Spiritual Warfare? Shut It Down 53

 Study 3: Our Created Destiny 56

 Catch Up and Read Ahead 59

SESSION 4: JESUS: THE INTEGRATING CENTER OF ALL THINGS

Group Study 61

Personal Study 69

 Study 1: The *Shalom* Only God Provides..... 70

 Study 2: Re-Create Me 73

 Study 3: Awareness and Integration Aren’t the Same 76

 Catch Up and Read Ahead 79

SESSION 5: THE WONDERS OF GOD’S KINGDOM

Group Study 81

Personal Study 89

 Study 1: The True Stuff of Reality..... 90

 Study 2: God’s Breath of Life 93

 Study 3: The Only Safe Place..... 96

 Wrap It Up..... 99

Leader’s Guide 101

Notes..... 107

About the Author..... 109

A NOTE FROM JOHN ELDREDGE

Friends,

We're about to begin a most remarkable journey. It's not one based on more knowledge and data. And that's a good thing. We are drowning in information. What we need is to experience more of Jesus and discover how God is our refuge. Nothing is more essential. And nothing has been more opposed.

In the dawn of our childhood, we lived with God in a garden paradise. We walked with our Abba Father in the cool of the day, in conversational intimacy. We were ordinary mystics, drinking in the rich company of God and the fullness of his Kingdom. Eden was our home; we flourished in the shelter of a paradise where heaven and earth met.

But we lost that home, and we have been seeking refuge ever since. The stakes couldn't be higher, especially in the intensity of this hour. We live in times just as dangerous as those of our ancient forebears. Let us not be lulled into a false security by the material comforts around us.

We must—we *must*—learn the practice of Jesus as our refuge. And here is where it will prove helpful to allow yourself to become a mystic. If you can suspend your disappointment, skepticism, and fear for even a moment and allow your heart to turn toward Jesus—to *run* toward him—you can experience refuge in him.

For every beautiful being that God has created, he has provided a habitat for it in which to flourish. Brook trout thrive happily in cold mountain streams. If you were to put them in the warm waters of the Caribbean, they would die. Stingrays, however, love that warm salt water; transfer them to a mountain stream, and they will not survive a day.

Cloud forests cannot abide desert conditions. Coral reefs cannot tolerate freezing temperatures. The examples are nearly infinite—each beautiful creation has its perfect habitat.

We do too.

Human beings are meant to live within the safety of God, drawing our nourishment from our union with him. Not only believing in God but also living *within* him.

We are also made to flourish in the fullness of God's Kingdom, part of which is this world we see—coffee with friends, bike rides, a good book. The other part we cannot see but is equally necessary—the refuge of the Almighty and the vast wonders of God's Kingdom.

Not only is the world we live in constantly pulling you out of the habitat for which you are made, but it is also conditioning your soul against finding your way home.

A life of everyday encounters with Jesus will help you get back.

That's what we are after here.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, sweeping initial "J" and a small dot above the "i".

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Welcome to the *Experience Jesus. Really. Study Guide*. Before you begin, you should know that there are a few ways you can go through this material. You can experience this study with others in a group (such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or any other small-group gathering), or you may choose to go through the content on your own. Either way, the videos for each session are available for you to view at any time via streaming (see the instructions provided for how to access).

GROUP STUDY

Each of the sessions in this study is divided into two parts: (1) a group study section, and (2) a personal study section. The group study section provides a basic framework on how to open your time together, get the most out of the video content, and discuss the key ideas that were presented in the teaching. Each session includes the following:

- **Welcome:** A short opening note about the topic of the session for you to read on your own before you meet as a group.
- **Connect:** A few icebreaker questions to get you and your group members thinking about the topic and interacting with each other.
- **Watch:** An outline of the key points covered in each video teaching along with space for you to take notes as you watch each session.
- **Discuss:** Questions to help you and your group reflect on the teaching material presented and apply it to your lives.

- **Respond:** A short personal exercise to help reinforce the key ideas.
- **Practice:** A personal spiritual practice for you to do on your own at the end of the session to help you experience more of Jesus.

If you are doing this study in a group, make sure you have your own copy of the study guide so you can write down your thoughts, responses, and reflections—and so you have access to the videos via streaming. You will also want to have a copy of the book *Experience Jesus. Really.*, as reading it alongside this guide will provide you with deeper insights. (See the notes at the beginning of each group session and personal study section on which chapters of the book you should read before the next group session.)

- **Facilitation:** If you are doing this study in a group, you will want to appoint someone to serve as a facilitator. This person will be responsible for starting the video and keeping track of time during discussions and activities. If *you* have been chosen for this role, there are some resources in the back of this guide that can help you lead your group through the study.
- **Faithfulness:** Your group is a place where tremendous growth can happen as you reflect on the Bible, ask questions, and learn what God is doing in other people's lives. For this reason, be fully committed and attend each session so you can build trust and rapport with the other members.
- **Friendship:** The goal of any small group is to serve as a place where people can share, learn about God, and build friendships. So seek to make your group a "safe place." Be honest about your thoughts and feelings, but also listen carefully to everyone else's thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Keep anything personal that your group members share in confidence so that you can create a community where people can heal, be challenged, and grow spiritually.

If you are going through this study on your own, read the opening Welcome section and reflect on the questions in the Connect section. Watch the video and use the prompts provided to take notes. Finally, personalize the questions and exercises in the Discuss and Respond sections. Close by following the instructions provided in the Practice section.

PERSONAL STUDY

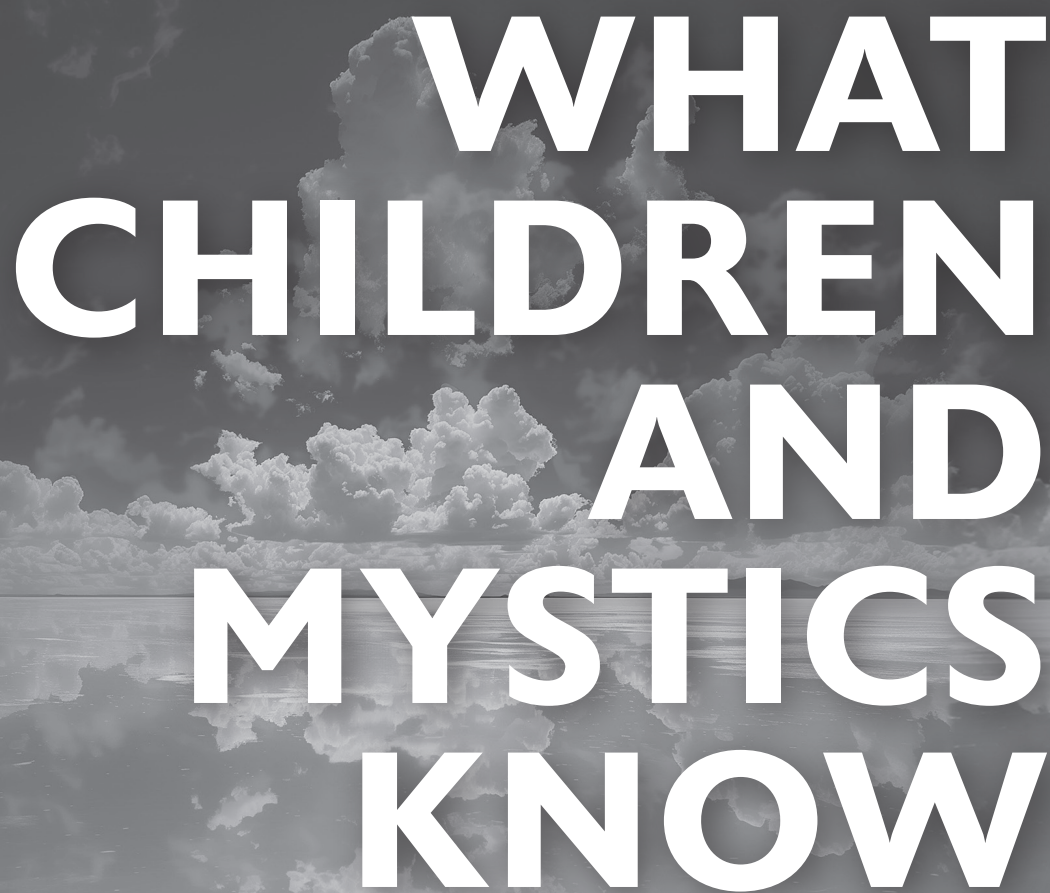
The personal study is for you to work through on your own during the week. Each exercise is designed to help you explore the key ideas you uncovered during your group time and delve into passages of Scripture that will help you apply those principles to your life. Go at your own pace, doing a little each day—or tackle the material all at once. Remember to spend a few moments in silence to listen to whatever God might be saying to you.

Note that if you are doing this study as part of a group and are unable to finish (or even start) these personal studies for the week, you should still attend the group time. Be assured that you are still wanted and welcome even if you don't have your "homework" done. The group studies and personal studies are intended to help you hear what God wants you to hear and learn how to apply what he is saying to your life. So . . . as you go through this study, be listening for him to speak to you and open to how he is drawing near to you.

WEEK 1

BEFORE GROUP MEETING	Read chapters 1 and 2 in <i>Experience Jesus. Really.</i> Read the Welcome section (page 2)
GROUP MEETING	Discuss the Connect questions Watch the video teaching for session 1 Discuss the questions that follow as a group Do the closing exercises (pages 2-7)
STUDY 1	Complete the personal study (pages 10-12)
STUDY 2	Complete the personal study (pages 13-15)
STUDY 3	Complete the personal study (pages 16-18)
CATCH UP & READ AHEAD (BEFORE WEEK 2 GROUP MEETING)	Connect with someone in your group Read chapters 4 and 6 in <i>Experience Jesus. Really.</i> Complete any unfinished personal studies (page 19)

SESSION ONE



WHAT CHILDREN AND MYSTICS KNOW

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

MATTHEW 18:3

WELCOME | READ ON YOUR OWN

We have unintentionally become Disciples of the Internet. We have answers to every question at our fingertips, and yet humanity has never been more distracted, anxious, and weary. We've traded curiosity for control. We've become more guarded and cynical. And we've replaced enchantment with a "prove it to me" mindset.

Jesus offers a better way forward . . . and it's beautifully counterintuitive. He invites us to "become like little children" again. Doing so allows us to find refuge, strength, and wonder through everyday encounters with God. The simplicity of such an approach holds great appeal. We long to experience it. Yet we regularly make choices that pull us in the opposite direction. As a result, we lose what children know. Worse, we exchange wonder and mystery with an obsession to know *everything*.

Thankfully, there is a cure: to return to a daily experience of God. This is the life of what we could call an "ordinary mystic." If it helps, substitute *amphibian* for *mystic*—as in someone who lives comfortably in two worlds: the spiritual realm and the physical. In a very "mystical" sort of statement, Paul said that in God "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). God is our habitat. We are surrounded with his presence. We swim in it every day, which fits the "amphibious" idea of human nature and experience. Joy comes when we tune in to it, give our attention to it, and drink deeply from it.

At the epicenter of human existence is an invitation into deep and profound union with God. It alone is the path to experience all the wonder, nourishment, and adventure he created us for. And it is the way to experience Jesus . . . *really*. Our journey begins with discovering what children and mystics know.

CONNECT | 15 MINUTES

If any of your group members don't know each other, take a few minutes to introduce yourselves. Then, to get things started, discuss one of the following questions:

- Why did you decide to join this study? What do you hope to learn?

— or —

- What is an area of your life where you'd like to experience more of Jesus?

WATCH | 20 MINUTES

Now watch the video for this session, which you can access by playing the DVD or through streaming (see the instructions provided with this study guide). As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts or concepts that stand out to you.

OUTLINE

- There is a longing in every human heart to experience the intimate presence of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit on a regular basis.
- The life of an ordinary mystic is meant to be the daily, normal Christian life, not something reserved for sages and prophets.
- Ordinary mystics are “amphibians”—those who can live comfortably in two worlds, both the spiritual realm and the physical.
- We are Disciples of the Internet—because it is the system that we turn to most for answers. This has less to do with the actual *content* than with what the *process* does to our souls.
- When you hear an insistence for the practical, you know you’re talking to a Disciple of the Internet. If God doesn’t answer the way the Internet does, we think he’s not listening or doesn’t care—or we don’t know how to pray.
- We live in a very punishing moment in history that’s designed to make us weary, practical skeptics—while eroding our capacity to enjoy God.
- It’s not that we’ve done something wrong. It’s that something wrong has been done to us in the absolute madness of this particular moment.
- Jesus says that unless we become as little children, we’ll never enter the Kingdom of God (see Matthew 18:3). We need to replace our obsession for answers with childlike wonder.
- Jesus invites us to lay down our cynicism and “prove it to me” attitude so we can recover the wonder, trust, love, and fullness of what life was meant to be with him.

NOTES

DISCUSS | 35 MINUTES

Now discuss what you just watched by answering the following questions.

1. A Christian “mystic” is simply one who regularly experiences the one true God as revealed in Jesus Christ and his vast, beautiful Kingdom. Given that definition, would you consider yourself to be a Christian mystic? Why or why not?
2. We are all Disciples of the Internet. We live life at an insane pace and take in way too much media. What damage do you think decades of this process has had on your soul?
3. How has this ability to find immediate answers to everything impacted your tolerance for mystery and your patience when asking God a question?
4. “It’s not that we’ve done something wrong. It’s that something wrong has been done to us.” How do you respond to this statement from the teaching about the shame or blame we may feel when we realize we are Disciples of the Internet?
5. Read Matthew 18:1–10. Why do you think it’s so hard for us as adults to embrace becoming like a child in terms of our sense of wonder, humility, and trust?

RESPOND | 5 MINUTES

Take a few minutes on your own to review the outline for the video teaching and any notes you took. In the space below, write down your most significant takeaway from this session.

PRACTICE | 15 MINUTES

At the end of each group time, you will be introduced to a spiritual practice for you to do on your own so you can experience more of Jesus. This week, you'll discover how to surrender things that have robbed you of your sense of childlike wonder and intimacy with God.

Begin by reflecting on what you've lost. Imagine the radical trust of a little boy leaping from the stairs into his daddy's arms. Or a young girl falling asleep after bedtime stories next to her father, at peace not because she has all the answers, but because her dad does.

Pause to consider how, over time, you've replaced this sense of wonder and rest with a drive to avoid mystery and know the right answers to everything. To make Jesus and his Kingdom practical is to strip it of all wonder, mystery, and *power*. Name examples of when you've done this . . . and the impact it's had on your heart.

Now it's time to practice surrender. Take a deep breath and get ready to release the baggage that's been weighing you down all these years. Be as specific as you can in this process.

Surrender your cynicism to God.

Surrender all your suspicion and unbelief.

Surrender your weary, practical skepticism.

Surrender everything . . . including your insistence on knowing things immediately.

As you release it all, ask God to heal the harm that's been done to your union, restore your capacity to experience him in new ways, and rest in the middle of mystery.

Now for the best part. Ask God to fill you once again with a greater capacity for childlike wonder, trust, and joy. Share your desire for more frequent encounters with his love. Request that he provide little nudges and winks in the upcoming week that remind you of his constant presence. Let him know you want to become a son or daughter who chooses the intimacy of a really good, always present Father over having immediate answers to every question.



PERSONAL STUDY

This section is your personal invitation to enter more deeply into the teachings and themes of *Experience Jesus. Really.* Each study will offer a short reading along with reflection questions that are designed to take you further into the ideas and practices that you discussed in your group time. As you work through each personal study, write down your responses to the questions and your reflections in the exercises. There will be time at the start of the next session to share your insights. If you are reading *Experience Jesus. Really.* along with this study, first review the chapters 1 and 2 in the book.

PROGRAMMED FOR IMMEDIATE ANSWERS

We believe ourselves to be disciples of Jesus.

We're actually Disciples of the Internet.

If that seems unfair—if you repel the idea that you might be a Disciple of the Internet—consider this: You are a disciple of the system that tutors you, where you turn on a daily basis for guidance on living. For most people, that makes them Disciples of the Internet, even if they call themselves disciples of Christ. If you have a question, you go look it up—new developments for children with ADHD; how often normal married couples have sex; memory care for aging parents; the proper temperature to bake a potato. We do this all day, every day.

However, I'm not referring to whatever content it is you search for online.

I'm talking about what we have learned from years of *the process itself*.

For one thing, the Internet has disciplined your soul to expect immediate answers. You inquire and you are answered—immediately. Three million results in 0.003 seconds; there is no waiting. The saints of ages past would be aghast at that. Waiting was considered formational for the soul. They planted crops in the spring and harvested in the fall; there was no rushing things. If you wanted something from the market, you walked there and then you walked back, moving at a pace of about three miles an hour.

But now, when you turn to Jesus and you are not answered in the way the Internet answers, you feel he isn't listening or that you can't hear from him. You sadly believe the two of you are distant from one another, because your soul has been *programmed* for immediate responses. The notion of *lingering* before God doesn't fit with the pace we've come to expect.¹

READ | Psalm 27:14; 33:20; Mark 9:23–24; Romans 8:23–25

REFLECT

1. What insights do Psalm 27:14 and 33:20 offer about what it means to wait on the Lord? What do Mark 9:23–24 and Romans 8:23–25 say about placing your faith in God and trusting your hopes to him?
2. When do you feel the pull to go first to the Internet or social media for answers rather than God? What are ways you can choose to seek God first with those questions?
3. According to the reading, how did saints of ages past view waiting? How does this differ from your reaction when you have to slow down or wait?

4. If it is true you are programmed for immediate answers, then who or what is the programmer? Do you sense the outcome of the programming is intentional or accidental? Explain your response.
5. Does your current pace of life provide space for you to linger with God? How difficult would it be to choose God's rhythm for each day rather than the speed of the world?

PRAY | You are a weary Disciple of the Internet. Your soul has been conditioned to take in massive amounts of content every day—far beyond the soul's ability to absorb. You might think that's normal, but it's not. So today, simply linger with Jesus in prayer.

As you spend time with Jesus, don't seek an answer to a problem. Don't rehash all your needs. Simply enjoy his presence. Express how much you love him. Don't be in a hurry. Take deep breaths. Allow the time to be spacious rather than efficient. Listen for what he wants to say to you.

Ask Jesus to help you go throughout the day at his pace. And to be at peace without having all the answers, remembering that you have him, and that is enough.

ORDINARY MYSTICS

There is a tradition within Christendom that can help us out of the terrible bind we're in as Disciples of the Internet (not to mention every other fatiguing thing this age has done to us). A beautiful, historic fellowship within the Christian story of men and women called (by others) "Christian mystics."

Once upon a time, the label *mystic* was intended as a term of respect or reverence, as in "saint" or, better still, "true follower of Jesus who has regular experiences with God." Today, the words *mystic* and *mysticism* carry some baggage, but we needn't be afraid. These are good words and need to be reclaimed by the Christian community.

To ensure we don't get hung up about the use of the word *mystic*, let's clarify Christian mysticism. The ordinary mystic, the friend of Jesus . . .

- Enjoys the palpable presence of Jesus, their Papa, and the Holy Spirit.²
- Hears the voice of God in daily living.
- Is able to enter into an inner communion with Jesus, who dwells in their heart.
- Draws their life from God.
- Is not surprised by things like miracles breaking into everyday life.

If you look through the biblical narrative in the Scriptures and read the saints down through the ages, it is impossible to miss the invitation—we are *all* meant to experience God and the beauty of his Kingdom in deep and profound ways. In this light, the apostle John was a mystic, as was Saint Paul. David was a mystic; certainly Adam and Eve were.

Which makes Jesus of Nazareth the greatest mystic of all, for his life was unbroken communion with God his Father, and his experiences are *windows* into what it is like to live in God's full Kingdom.

When we understand mysticism as simply *the daily experience of God and his Kingdom*, we can say that mysticism is the normal Christian life. Which is to say, it is human existence put back on track. This is what Eve and Adam enjoyed, and it is central to God's restoration of humanity.³

READ | Genesis 2:15–25; 3:8; Psalm 42:1–2; Acts 9:1–19; Revelation 1:1–20

REFLECT

1. Before beginning this study, what was your impression of a Christian mystic? What is it now?
2. Which of the five traits of a Christian mystic (in the bullet points from the reading) comes most naturally for you? Why?
3. On the flip side, which of the five traits is the hardest for you to embrace or practice? Why?

4. Were you surprised to hear that John, Paul, and David were Christian mystics? What about Adam and Eve? What's an example from one of their stories in the passages you read today that reflects their lives as mystics?
5. Jesus is, without question, the greatest mystic ever. What can you learn from his example about what it means to be an everyday Christian mystic?

PRAY | Pray that God will reveal what it looks like for you to live as an ordinary Christian mystic. If there's something about this phrase that may be getting in the way, ask God to reveal what it is. Ordinary Christian mystics are simply the friends of Jesus who enjoy the palpable presence of God and draw their life from God. Consider asking him to redeem this phrase for you as he invites you into deeper union with him.

BECOME LIKE A CHILD

Children have an uncanny ability to experience joy because they don't allow doubt to get in the way. But adults . . . not so much.

If you tell a child, "We're going to the beach tomorrow!" their immediate response is not, "Yeah . . . maybe. We'll see. Did you even check the weather?" That's the adult response. "Maybe we shouldn't—did you see online that there is a sewage issue on the coast this year?" A child simply receives the promise of adventure, and they will have the joy of both a day full of anticipation of going to the beach as well as going to the beach itself! Double the joy! Because children don't operate from a posture of weary skepticism, cynicism, and, "I'll believe it when you show me the science."

Maybe remembering this will help us grasp what Jesus was trying to address when he said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3).

Never enter are pretty strong words. Never?

Jesus often acts like a firefighter rescuing victims trapped in a burning building. He says extremely serious things because the situation is extremely serious.

Here, he is trying to rescue us from the barrier to experiencing God and his Kingdom that has been formed *within* us by the time we reach adulthood—the weary, skeptical cynicism . . . the *guardedness*. Jesus says, "I have so much to show you, so much to offer you. But you're going to have to let go of the cynicism, skepticism, and pragmatism. Open yourself up to belief again. Simply trust, like a child does."

Doing so allows us to have a calm peace and deep sense of contentment and trust that isn't dependent on having all the answers or knowing all the details.⁴

READ | Matthew 18:3; 19:16–22; Mark 10:14; Luke 10:21

1. In Luke 12:1-13, why does Jesus tell the disciples not to tell anyone about the signs and wonders he is doing?

- ## 2. Think miss? V

4. When Jesus says in Matthew 18:3 that we must change and become like little children, in what ways do you sense he's wanting us to be different?
5. Imagine you had the ability to go back in time and speak to your younger self right now. What would you say to that little boy or girl? How might those words change who you are today?

PRAY | This world forces us to grow up fast. In the process, we let go of the childlike traits of faith and trust. Today, ask God to help you regain what was lost or set aside in that rush to “grow up” and have all the answers. Pray for God to replace worry with wonder. Ask him to restore your ability to not know everything and yet remain at peace—because even though you don’t have the answers, he has you.

CATCH UP AND READ AHEAD

Take time to connect with a group member and talk about some of the insights from this session. Use any of the prompts below to help guide your discussion.

- How would you describe what it means to be an ordinary mystic?
- What does the realization that we're all Disciples of the Internet stir in you?
- How has the process of having immediate answers at your fingertips changed your experience of asking God a question?
- While every moment in history is unique, do you think we are in one of the more punishing ones on the human soul? Why or why not?
- What does it mean to approach this life as an "amphibian"?
- Why is it essential for you to recapture your childlike sense of wonder and trust with God?

Use this time to complete any of the personal study and reflection questions from previous days that you weren't able to finish. Make a note below of any questions that you've had or significant insights and breakthroughs that you've gained.

Read chapters 4 and 6 in *Experience Jesus. Really.* before the next group session. Use the space below to make note of anything that stands out to you or encourages you.