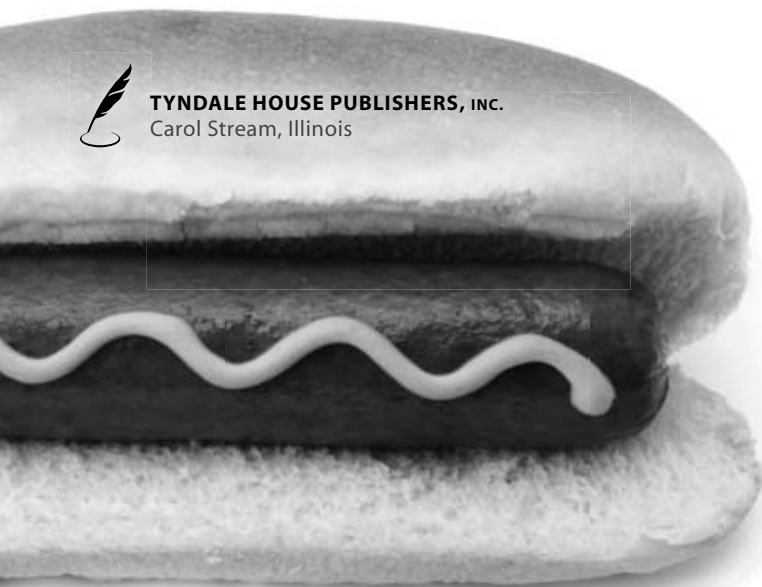


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*& discussion starters*





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365 opportunities to grow closer to God as a family

**NANCY GUTHRIE**

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*One Year of Dinner Table Devotions and Discussion Starters: 365 Opportunities to Grow Closer to God as a Family*

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## INTRODUCTION

**M**ost modern Christian families live with a nagging sense of guilt that they don't have any kind of consistent family devotions. Or maybe I should say *my husband and I* have lived with a nagging sense of guilt that we have not had any kind of consistent family devotions! But I don't think we're alone in this.

Getting the kids to turn off the TV and computer and gather to read the Bible, to have a meaningful discussion everybody participates in, and to pray over anything other than a meal seems like too much of a daily hurdle for most families. Besides, most of us don't feel like we are authorities on the Bible, so we hardly know where to start. But we want to do something. And we want more than a daily chore that our children dread and can't wait to be done with. We're looking for something that won't be resisted or rejected as "totally lame." We want a meaningful and personal discussion about things that really matter, something everyone takes part in.

That's why I've written *One Year of Dinner Table Devotions and Discussion Starters*. Because we need it at our house, and I'm guessing you might need it at your house too.

*One Year of Dinner Table Devotions and Discussion Starters* helps families start in a natural gathering place—around the dinner table. As the meal comes to a close, family members can take turns reading the dinner table devotion for that day. Each day's devotion includes readings on a specific theme from two or three Scripture passages

out of the accessible New Living Translation, a brief devotional thought, and three discussion-starter questions—all designed to be done together as a family in ten to fifteen minutes (before everybody helps with the kitchen cleanup!).

It is written for families with children in all stages—from elementary school to high school—who long for a way to have spiritual input in their children’s lives and who want Scripture to be naturally woven into their family life and conversations.

### **What Makes *Dinner Table Devotions* Different?**

Whereas most family devotionals focus on Bible stories or on practical moral lessons, *Dinner Table Devotions and Discussion Starters* focuses on biblical themes, concepts, and words, in ways that are understandable to children without talking down to adults or teens. It will help your family take a step back to look at the big picture of what God is doing in the world and his purposes and plans in creating and redeeming the world. Once you and your family have worked your way through this book, you will have discussed nearly every major attribute of God and a host of profound theological truths, such as justification, redemption, substitution, and sanctification—without all those daunting words. You will have looked into important concepts from the Bible, such as covenant, adoption, judgment, and redemption, as well as spiritual realities, such as hell, angels, resurrection, and glorification. This is not dry theology for theology’s sake, but living theology that makes a huge difference in how we do battle against temptation, deal with disappointment, and determine our futures.

Over the course of the next year, your family will go deeper into developing an understanding of who God is, what he is like, what he expects, and what he is doing. Together you can embark on a journey of understanding who we are, why we need a Savior, and what it means to place our faith solely in Jesus. Holy living flows out of that.

The format of a short devotion followed by three discussion questions is designed to turn the devotional time into a family-wide discussion rather than a one-person lecture or reading. This is not a continuation of the school day or Sunday school but an opportunity to apply biblical truths to the most important areas of life.

## **How to Use *Dinner Table Devotions* and Discussion Starters**

If you've rarely read and discussed God's Word together as a family, it can be awkward at first. But that initial awkwardness fades as conversations are sparked and understanding deepens. We have a treasure to pass on to our children—the Bible, which contains God's message to us and the answers to life's greatest questions. Because it is so important to us, we want to talk about it.

The goal of these devotions is to create an opportunity for dialogue and conversation. You as a parent set the tone as you allow yourself to be a learner and a seeker rather than a teacher or an authority. You do this as you are willing to say, "I don't think I really understand that completely" or "That is something I'd like to work on in my life to be more like Jesus." You do this as you affirm the input of every family member and maintain an atmosphere of acceptance and open participation.

Perhaps the most important way to encourage your dinner table devotions and discussions is something that happens away from the table. You want to make sure any confession of struggle or weakness expressed in your discussions is treated with respect and confidentiality. Nothing puts the lid on authentic sharing more quickly than when people's words are used against them. The best way to encourage vulnerability and openness is by creating a safe environment for sharing.

Each day's devotion is designed for everyone around the table to share and interact with it. You might choose to have different family members read the various verses, and you can encourage conversations by discussing the questions at the end of each devotion. The first question is answerable for family members of all ages, elementary and up. It is designed to draw family members in and to get everyone talking about their own thoughts and experiences. The next two questions are more thought provoking and in some cases more personal.

You may want to have different family members read the questions each time so that everyone has an opportunity to be on the asking end and the answering end. Many of the questions are "What do you think?" questions that may or may not have a "right" answer. Some are "Why do you think?" questions meant to encourage deeper thinking. And many are "How?" or "In what ways?" questions meant

to draw out practical application of the truths presented. There are no answers in the back of the book! When you come to a question that is challenging to everyone around the table, this presents the opportunity to acknowledge that God is a mystery to be probed and a treasure to be mined, and that the things of God are not always simple to figure out. But the rewards for pursuing them are great.

The most personal questions are those that ask participants to identify ways they need to change or ways they would like to change. This can be new territory for families, but it also presents a meaningful opportunity for family members to connect with each other and with God. As a parent, you can set the tone and example here in terms of a willingness to be humble and to show others in the family that you are still an “unfinished project” when it comes to becoming all God wants you to be.

### **Starting the Conversation**

In Deuteronomy 6:6-7, we read this instruction from God to the people of Israel: “You must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up.” What better place to practice “when you are at home” than around the dinner table?

The people of Israel were expected to understand Scripture well enough to talk about it with their children. They were to discuss the words of Scripture during their family activities and apply them to everyday life situations.

Our desire for our kids is that they develop a faith that is real and personal—not something they grow out of or leave behind. When they are pressed by the world, we want them to have the foundation to piece together what their faith really means and what makes Jesus worth knowing and following. We want them to be able to make an argument for him and feel comfortable talking about him as someone who is real, someone who matters in every area of their lives.

Now is the time to begin that conversation so it becomes as natural as breathing. It’s by talking about him that we weave our understanding of God through all of life and through the life of our families. As we talk about him, he enters into not only our discussions around the dinner table but also our entertainment choices, our spending



habits, our vacations, our time, and certainly our treatment of each other. By bringing him into our discussions around the dinner table, we saturate our lives with God. And isn't that what we really want?

Paul wrote, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). I'm praying for you as you seek to glorify God around your dinner table—that he will be pleased, and that your family will have some laughs, perhaps shed some tears, and grow together toward God.

*Nancy Guthrie*

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE



# Everything New

It's a new year. And don't we love new? A new outfit, a car that still has that "new car" smell, a new recipe to fix for dinner, a new video game to conquer? But all around us, instead of new, we see things that are used and broken down—neighborhoods that are run down, relationships that fall apart, bodies that don't work as well as they used to. The reality is that everything on this earth is wearing out. Everything breaks down.

And in the midst of that reality, God says, "I am making everything new!" When we hear this we typically think new in terms of replacing something old. But God doesn't say he is making *all new things*. He is making *all things new*—in other words, he's making things better, fresher, brighter, and stronger.

And this is good news for those of us who want a fresh start, those who don't want to surrender to "that's just the way I am, the way I've always been. I can never change." Even now God is moving into our lives that are full of mistakes, and he's making us new. The process begins when God makes himself known to us in the deadness of our sin and we awaken to him. He touches our lives, and the dead places become alive again, fresh again. Right now, God is giving his people new thoughts, new hearts, new purpose, new energy for this new year ahead. And he wants to do something new in *you*, too.



## DISCUSSION STARTERS

What are some new things you are enjoying now?

What things around you are old or broken?

How have you seen God's renewing work in your life and your family over the past year?

How do you hope he will work in this coming year?



The one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!"

**REVELATION 21:5**

Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse.

But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay.

**ROMANS 8:20-21**

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

**2 CORINTHIANS 5:17**

# Making Plans



Look here, you who say,  
“Today or tomorrow we are  
going to a certain town and  
will stay there a year. We will  
do business there and make  
a profit.” How do you know  
what your life will be like  
tomorrow? Your life is like  
the morning fog—it’s here  
a little while, then it’s gone.  
What you ought to say is,  
“If the Lord wants us to, we  
will live and do this or that.”  
Otherwise you are boasting  
about your own plans, and  
all such boasting is evil.

*JAMES 4:13-16*

Don’t brag about tomorrow,  
since you don’t know what  
the day will bring.

*PROVERBS 27:1*

But I will come—and  
soon—if the Lord lets me.

*1 CORINTHIANS 4:19*

**A** new year means a new calendar or daily planner. All those blank dates just waiting to be filled in! What are you planning for this year? Where will you go, and what do you hope to accomplish?

It is good to make plans. Jesus affirmed the person who made sure he had the needed resources before building a tower, and the king who made sure he had enough troops before entering into battle (SEE LUKE 14:28, 31). But there can also be a problem with making plans. The problem comes when we start assuming that we determine the course of our lives and the outcome of our plans, ignoring the fact that God is ultimately in control.

In the end, God is the one who determines the number of days we’re on this earth. Everything is filtered through his hands—what we accomplish and whether we succeed or fail. And God wants us to make our plans and speak of our plans in a way that reflects our firm confidence that he is in control. So James tells us that instead of pronouncing what we are going to do as if we’ve given no thought to God, we should say, “If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.” It is foolish to talk as if we chart our own destiny and determine the course of our lives. As wise Solomon says, “We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps” (PROVERBS 16:9).



## | DISCUSSION STARTERS

What kind of plans do people write down on calendars?

Is the phrase “if the Lord wants us to” something we need to say out loud about all our plans, or is it more of a heart attitude we need to have? Or is it a little of both?

What goals do you have for this year that you want to submit to God’s sovereign (all-powerful) plans?

# Think Change

**O**ur minds are not just computers that process data. We all have what we might call a mind-set (the way we think about life) and a viewpoint (the way we see the world). Our minds have attitudes and thought patterns that are ingrained in us—like habits. And our natural ways of thinking aren't perfect—they're fallen, like everything else in this world. None of us naturally think good and right thoughts about God. In fact, it's worse than that. On our own, we have thoughts about God that make him out to be less than he is, thoughts that set our hearts against him. Romans 1:28 says, "Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to their foolish thinking."

So how do we change our minds? How do we begin to think differently? We feed them better food. We fill our minds with truth from Scripture, conversations about God, and ways of thinking about God and the things of God that are right and true and worthy of someone so great. We welcome the Holy Spirit to show us our old ways of thinking—*me first; got to get ahead; if it feels good, do it; I deserve it; I am the master of my own destiny*—and we invite the Holy Spirit to change how we think, what we want, and even how we feel.

The Holy Spirit can change our natural ways of thinking about things as he helps us understand and apply the Bible to our lives. The Bible gives us a new filter that all our thoughts run through—an eternal perspective that reshapes our value system, realigns our priorities, and reworks our personalities.



## | DISCUSSION STARTERS

Our society values an "open mind." What do you think that is? Is it valuable?

How do different people you know use their minds to please or glorify God?

In what ways would you like to use the intellectual ability God has given you?



Let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes.

*EPHESIANS 4:23*

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.

*ROMANS 12:2*

Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.

*ROMANS 8:5-6*

# Knowing His Name

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Moses protested, “If I go to the people of Israel and tell them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ they will ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what should I tell them?”

God replied to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. Say this to the people of Israel: I AM has sent me to you.” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: Yahweh, the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you. This is my eternal name, my name to remember for all generations.”

*EXODUS 3:13-15*

**W**e interact with a lot of people without ever knowing their names. But when we learn people’s names, they become more real to us as unique people, with their own unique personalities and histories.

God wants us to know him—not in a generic or shallow way (as in “the Man Upstairs”). He wants us to know him personally. He wants us to recognize that he has his own personality and character and preferences. So he has told us his name. He doesn’t have a name like Joe or Christopher or Sarah or Emily. His name is unique and holy, just like he is. In fact, the Jewish people saw God’s name as so holy they didn’t say it out loud.

The name used most often for God in the Old Testament (almost seven thousand times) is a name that is translated into English as “I AM WHO I AM.” You will see this name written as *LORD* in all capital letters in your Bible. In Hebrew this name had four letters—YHWH—and was pronounced something like “Yahweh.” Out of honor and reverence to how holy God is, Jewish people substituted the word *Adonai*, which means “my Lord,” rather than saying “Yahweh.” So when we read *LORD* in the Bible, it refers to God’s proper name. When we see it, it tells us that God wants to be known—not as a vague, distant deity, but as a person. And then he took another step toward us when he became a human in the person of Jesus, who said, “Come to me!” By covering us in his own holiness, Jesus made it possible for us to be known by a holy God.



## | DISCUSSION STARTERS

Who are some people you are around often but you don’t know their names? What difference might it make if you knew their names?

What does God’s name tell us about who he is? How would things have been different if God had never told us his name?

What are some ways we can show appropriate respect for God’s name?

## Are You a Sinner?

**H**ave you ever known someone who had the chicken pox? Maybe it started with one little, red, itchy spot. Pretty soon that person had several itchy spots and it became obvious that the person was sick. But there didn't have to be a bunch of visible spots to know it was the chicken pox. When there was just one spot, it showed that the chicken pox virus was in that person's system.

Sin is like that. Just thinking or doing one wrong thing shows you have the fatal disease of sin. Just one sin reveals that you're a sinner.

"Now, wait a minute," you might want to say. "I'm a good person. I may have made some mistakes, but I'm not a sinner." None of us want to think of ourselves that way. But until we see ourselves as sinners, we'll think we have no need for Jesus. Jesus came to save sinners, not good people. He actually resists people who think they're good, and he is drawn to people who recognize their own deep sickness of sin.

We are not sinners because we sin. We sin because we're sinners. It is inside us, running through our bloodstreams. Sin is not merely a matter of breaking the Ten Commandments or any other list of dos and don'ts. More than what we do, it is who we are. We are all natural-born sinners.

But that's not the end of the story—there is hope for sinners like us. God knew we'd never be good enough, and he knew we'd need someone to save us from our deadly disease of sin. So he sent Jesus to be the cure for us. The good news of the gospel is that we can be transformed from guilty sinners into forgiven sinners through faith in Jesus.

### | DISCUSSION STARTERS

Think of a time when you were really sick. What were some of your symptoms? In what ways is sin like a sickness?

What remedy or cure does God offer to people who are sick with sin?

Does it discourage you or encourage you to realize that you sin because you are a sinner? Why?



When Jesus heard this, he told them, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners."

*MARK 2:17*

The person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws.

*JAMES 2:10*

Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.

*ROMANS 3:23*



I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called—his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance. I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God’s power for us who believe him.

*EPHESIANS 1:18-19*

We keep on praying for you, asking our God to enable you to live a life worthy of his call. May he give you the power to accomplish all the good things your faith prompts you to do.

*2 THESSALONIANS 1:11*

## Better than Chatting

**S**ome social situations call for the skill of “chatting,” or the art of casual conversation. It’s the ability to talk pleasantly with someone you don’t know well about stuff that doesn’t matter all that much.

If we’re not careful, we can find ourselves reducing prayer to “chatting” with God, limiting prayers to superficial topics, surface issues, never getting to the heart of things. Have you ever noticed that when people offer prayer requests, they are usually about physical needs and rarely about spiritual needs? We ask God to heal physical ailments, to provide safe travel, and to “be with us.” It’s not that God doesn’t care about these things. He cares about us, and what matters to us matters to him. But prayer is much more than that. It’s a spiritual process toward a spiritual end. God wants to do a deep work in our inner lives, rubbing off the rough edges and cleaning up our character. So why do we settle for talking to him only about the shallow stuff?

When our prayers move from the superficial to the significant, we find ourselves inviting God to do no less than a deep, transforming, life-changing work in our lives and in the lives of those we’re praying for. We talk to him about our fears, we invite him into our failures, we confess the ways we fall short. We open up our lives for him to do a significant spiritual work.



### | DISCUSSION STARTERS

What kinds of things do you talk about when you “chat” with a person?

What kinds of things do you talk about when you have a meaningful conversation with someone you trust?

What are some spiritual matters you’d like your family to pray about for you?

# We've Never Heard Anyone Speak like This!

Some speakers are hard to listen to—sometimes it is something about the person's voice, and other times the speaker is just boring, or what he or she is saying seems unimportant. So we tune the speaker out and day-dream rather than listen.

No one who listened to Jesus speak got bored and tuned him out. People listened to him all day, not even wanting to take a break to eat. They followed him wherever he went, wanting to hear more. It wasn't that he was humorous, although he did tell interesting stories. And it wasn't that he was always easy to understand. People were often mystified by what he said, trying to figure out what it meant. His messages often caused controversy and discomfort, and he asked people to do hard things.

The people were amazed at Jesus' teaching—no doubt they got goose bumps. There was a sense of reality and authority to what he said that made their hair stand on end. What he said was profoundly true and in some cases profoundly troubling. What Jesus says both convicts us and comforts us. He speaks both judgment and salvation. No one else speaks like Jesus. And no one's teaching matters as much as his does.

## | DISCUSSION STARTERS

What do you think it was like to hear Jesus teach on the hillside or in the Temple?

What are some things Jesus said that are troubling to you? What things are difficult to understand?

What are some things Jesus said that comfort you? What things challenge you?

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The people were amazed at his teaching, for he taught with real authority—quite unlike the teachers of religious law.

*MARK 1:22*

When the crowds heard him say this, some of them declared, "Surely this man is the Prophet we've been expecting." Others said, "He is the Messiah." . . . So the crowd was divided about him. Some even wanted him arrested, but no one laid a hand on him.

When the Temple guards returned without having arrested Jesus, the leading priests and Pharisees demanded, "Why didn't you bring him in?"

"We have never heard anyone speak like this!" the guards responded.

*JOHN 7:40-41, 43-46*



# What We Want



The one thing I ask of the LORD—the thing I seek most—is to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, delighting in the LORD’s perfections and meditating in his Temple.

*PSALM 27:4*

Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart’s desires.

*PSALM 37:4*

In my inner being I delight in God’s law.

*ROMANS 7:22, NIV*

**D**o you know how to get what you want from your parents or a teacher or a boss or a friend? Is it all in how you ask or in choosing just the right timing?

When we read Psalm 37:4, “Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart’s desires,” we’re tempted to see it as a formula for getting what we want from God. We might read it as, “Get close to God, and then he’ll give you what you want.” We might think that if we give God our obedience and interest and compliments, we can get what we want from him in return.

But delighting in God is not a way to get what we want from him. That is manipulation or bribery. Genuine delight has no ulterior motive, no additional demands. Delight is saying thank you to God for his many blessings, such as good food to eat, a house to live in, people who love us, and a school or a job to go to. But delight also means saying to God, “I will not worship these things by making them more important than you. And I will not demand them from you.”

If we see this verse as a formula for getting what we want from God, we’re settling for much less than what God is offering. *God wants to change what we want.* He wants to free us from the slavery of wanting what will never completely satisfy us. He wants to give us what he knows will completely satisfy us forever: himself.



## | DISCUSSION STARTERS

What are some things you take delight in? What makes you happy?

What is something you really want or have been asking God for? Do you think God will give it to you?

God wants to change what we want instead of just giving us whatever we desire. Why is that better?

# Knowing God versus Knowing about God

**D**o you know your mail carrier? How about your grandparents? How about the Queen of England? How about your best friend? There are different ways of “knowing” people, aren’t there? Some people we actually just know about. And even among those we know personally, there are different levels of knowing—we know some more intimately than others.

The Bible says that we are made to know God. But a person can know a lot *about* God and not really *know* him. We can be interested in theology (which is a fascinating subject!) and know the books and stories of the Bible, and hardly know God at all. We can also go to church and read lots of Christian books and be up on the latest teaching and yet not know God at all.

We get to know other people through personal interaction and involvement, by sharing life with them. We listen to what they say, observe how they interact with others, see what they value, find out what they enjoy. And it is similar with God. God is so magnificent that he is worth spending the rest of our lives listening to and studying and enjoying, so that we are constantly getting to know him better. As we get to know God better, things that confused us before about how God works begin to make more sense. Knowing him better helps us trust him more.



## | DISCUSSION STARTERS

Who are some of the people you know best? How did you get to know them?

What is the difference between knowing about God and knowing him?

In what way would you like to know God better than you do right now?



Those who wish to boast should boast in this alone: that they truly know me and understand that I am the **LORD** who demonstrates unfailing love and who brings justice and righteousness to the earth, and that I delight in these things. I, the **LORD**, have spoken!

*JEREMIAH 9:24*

This is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth.

*JOHN 17:3*

Everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

*PHILIPPIANS 3:8*

## Joined to Jesus



If you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

*JAMES 1:25*

Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives.

*COLOSSIANS 3:16*

The word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable.

*HEBREWS 4:12-13*

**W**hen two people get married, it's usually because they want to be together. They want to spend the rest of their lives talking and listening to each other, spending time with each other, and caring for each other. Can you imagine two people who go through a marriage ceremony and never talk to each other again? Would that even be a real marriage?

When we join ourselves to Christ, we're not just going through a religious ceremony or one-time experience. We're entering into a personal relationship, a love relationship. And if we want to have a real connection with God, then we will spend the rest of our lives talking to him, enjoying being with him, and listening to him. It's not that we expect to hear an audible voice when he speaks to us. We listen to him by reading, thinking about, and memorizing his Word, the Bible. We draw strength from it and rely on it to help us make decisions. It makes us happy, and we like to listen.

If you were married to Mr. Smith, you might call yourself Mrs. Smith to show you were connected to Mr. Smith. Calling yourself a Christian is the same idea: It means that you are intimately connected to Christ. And the ways we relate to Christ day by day are through his Word and prayer. These are the ways we stay connected to him in an authentic and not just a ceremonial way. We get close and stay close to God by talking to him through prayer and listening to him as we read the Bible.



### DISCUSSION STARTERS

What would you think about two people who had a wedding but never talked to each other?

What does it mean to really listen to God's Word and not just read it?

What should a person do who doesn't especially like to read the Bible?