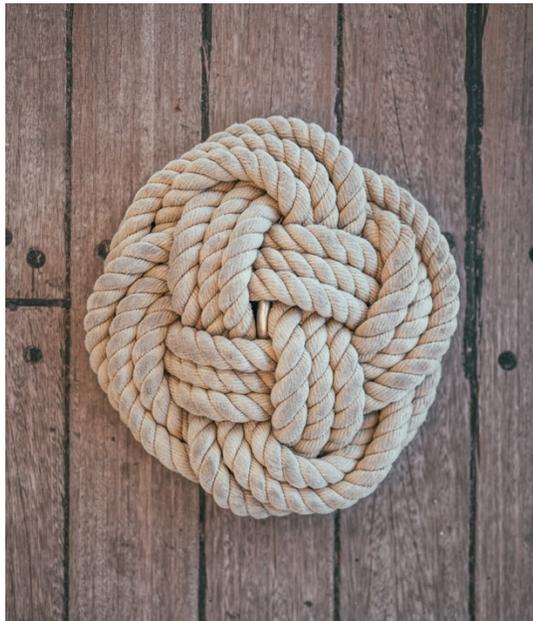

LIFE CIRCLES

for Peer Spiritual Formation

How much do we actually know God ourselves, rather than just knowing things *about* Him? In these sessions we will learn spiritual formation practices designed to help us grow in our awareness of God. We will also develop our ability to listen deeply and accompany each other as we seek to create a safe space to share what is truly happening in our souls.

If you have more than 8 people in your group, do the explanations with the whole group, then divide participants into circles of 4-5 people to share their answers. It is important that members attend every session, if at all possible, because learning grows step by step. Once participants have completed the sessions, they can go on to lead groups themselves.

We hope that you will make deep connections with each other, so that like the apostle you can say, *“Dear friend I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.”* (3 John 1:2 NIV)



SESSION 1: Knowing God

*“But we all, with unveiled faces, looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”
(2 Corinthians 3:18)*

Silence With God—Learning to become still

Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still and know that I am God.” Sometimes, we are so preoccupied we would not notice anything God might say. This week we will begin to learn the practice of waiting silently before God. It is a form of prayer—though you don’t say or even think any words. Let’s start.

Sit comfortably. Take a few deep breaths and relax. You may want to pray a phrase of welcome, like “Come Lord Jesus.” Then sit quietly. Stop your thoughts and slow your body down. Sit quietly like this for two minutes. Say Amen.

This week try to take two minutes of silence before God each day. (Eventually, it is good to work up to about ten minutes a day, but the beginning is the hardest, so start small.) You can think of this as a mini-vacation from busyness and worry.

Confidentiality Commitment

There are two essentials to make this group a safe space. First, we need to keep strict confidentiality. When someone offers their thoughts and experiences to the group, it remains *their* story. It does not belong to anyone else to share. Let’s repeat the confidentiality commitment together:

*“I promise to keep everything I hear in this group completely confidential.
I will not repeat it, or even hint at it, to anyone else.”*

The second aspect of a safe space is learning to value what people say by listening well.

Listening Time

In every session, each member of the group will be invited to share their response to one or more questions. The task of the rest of us is to listen *without judging, without giving advice, and without trying to fix the problem (or them)*. We won’t devalue that person by jumping in with our own story, or suggesting how to handle things. We graciously accept the gift of their self-revelation.

This may be new for us, so for several weeks we will listen *with no comment*. Each person will share for a few minutes. When they finish, we will all spend 1 minute in silent prayer for them. Please decide in advance how much time each person will have. When it comes near the end of a person’s time, facilitators please gently signal them.

To summarize, this is the listening format for the first few sessions:

1. Read the question(s).
2. Take turns sharing your response, while everyone else listens carefully.
3. After each person shares, spend a minute in silent prayer.
4. Next person shares their answer.

Here is this session's question:

Describe a time when you felt especially close to God. What happened?

Homework

Try to take 2 minutes each day for silence—a mini retreat in God's presence. Remember to keep everything you have heard here in strict confidence.

Prayer of Blessing

May the Lord bless you and keep you, May the Lord make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; The Lord lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace.

(Numbers 6:24–26)

SESSION 2 – The Peace of God

Confidentiality Commitment (Read this together)

I promise to keep everything I hear in this group confidential. I will not repeat it, or even hint at it, to anyone else.

Silence With God—Making space for clarity

Suppose I took a glass jar, and scooped water from the edge of a river. If I shook the jar, I would neither be able to see *into* the water, nor *through* it to the other side. However, if I set that jar down and let the water become still . . . eventually the dirt and debris settle to the bottom . . . and I can see clearly.

It works the same way if our minds are churning with thoughts and fears. We cannot see clearly inside, and our vision outward is blurred as well. However, if we can still ourselves, and calm our souls, then our own perception clears and we can also hear from God.

Take 2 minutes for silence. You may want to begin with a prayer like, "Come Lord Jesus."

Listening Time

In this session we will again listen without comment. This is to help us learn how to listen *slowly*—without interrupting or hurrying others. We show value for people when we give them a chance to complete their thoughts peacefully.

Facilitators please gently help people keep track of time so everyone has equal opportunity to share. After each person finishes take 1 minute to pray. You may want to begin by praying something like, “Lord Jesus, bring your peace” and end by saying, “Amen.”

Here are today’s questions:

**What makes you anxious?
What do you think God would like to say to you in those situations?**

Spiritual Formation Practice—Breath Prayers

Phrases like “Lord Jesus, bring your peace” or “Come Lord Jesus” are breath prayers. These short prayers can help us centre our thoughts at the beginning of a prayer time, and help us re-focus when our minds wander during a time of silence. You can choose phrases as you feel led. Two more options are “Speak Lord, your servant is listening” and “Loving Father, I trust you.”

Homework

Are you ready to increase your times of silence to 3 minutes per day?

Try to use a breath prayer whenever you feel your mind racing.

Don’t forget to be completely trustworthy with everything you have heard today.

SESSION 3 — Hearing God

“My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10: 27)

Silence with God—Learning to recognize God’s voice in the silence

Sometimes when we are in a time of worshipful silence, the Holy Spirit will bring thoughts to our minds. For example, we may remember something we need to confess, or think of someone we could encourage. God wants to communicate with us. In John 10 Jesus says repeatedly that we can safely hear his voice (verses 3, 4, 14, 16, 27). We are not talking about a booming, external voice, but the still, small voice of God that makes an impression on us internally—like a thought that comes to us unexpectedly. As long as that thought is in line with the Bible, try it out. Perhaps you are feeling led to kneel before God, or maybe He is stirring you to call someone. God has an infinite amount of great ideas. With practice we come to recognize His voice and follow him.

Observe 3 minutes of silence. You may want to start with the breath prayer, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.”

Confidentiality Commitment — Have you been keeping your promise?

Listening Time

Each person takes a turn to respond to one of the questions below, while the others listen prayerfully without comment. Then pray silently for a short time. You may want to begin with something like, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.” End with Amen.

Facilitators, please gently help people notice the time so everyone has a chance to share.

Share a time you felt you heard from God.

OR . . . Share a time you felt especially led by God.

OR . . . Share a time you felt a particular scripture really stand out to you.

Spiritual Formation Practice—Praying Scripture

God set apart the Levites to “stand before the Lord to minister to him, and to bless in his name” (Deuteronomy 10:8). There are many blessings in Scripture and we can use them to spur our thoughts and spirits as we pray for people. We can pray in faith (because it comes from the Bible) and praying Scriptures makes our prayers bigger and more faith-filled too. We know they are the will of God.

Read a phrase at a time and then pray based on that. Here is an example from Psalm 84:4–8

VERSE	PRAYER
<p>“Happy are the people whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.”</p>	<p><i>“Lord, I pray that my sister will be strong in you. Anytime she is afraid would you please show her your presence, give her wisdom, and rescue her.</i></p> <p><i>Lord, help her to always want to be with you, to keep taking pilgrimages in her heart by drawing near to you.”</i></p>
<p>“As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a source of spring water; even the autumn rain will cover it with blessings.”</p>	<p><i>“Lord, if possible, would you spare my sister from times of difficulty and weeping. But if those times must come, would you please send her refreshing in the middle of them. Please give her fresh mercies every morning. And as she comes out of that time, please shower her with blessings.”</i></p>
<p>“They go from strength to strength; each appears before God in Zion.”</p>	<p><i>“Lord, please help my sister to keep growing in you. Give her opportunities to learn. Give her mature Christian character. Make her very fruitful in your kingdom.</i></p> <p><i>“Lord, when she seeks you, would you please help her to find you. Give her genuine encounters with you. Help her to hear your voice and meet with you.”</i></p>
	<p>Amen</p>

Now take turns praying for each other from Ephesians 1: 16–19 or Philippians 1: 9–11

Homework

Try to spend 3 minutes each day in worshipful silence before God.

Pray Scripture over 1 other person this week. You can pray with someone else—asking their permission first—or just pray silently on your own.

Session 4 — Noticing God

Facilitator, if you want to post the confidentiality commitment somewhere in the room, then you may not need to refer to it during the session.

Silence with God

The first part of silence with God is learning how to become still—something we will need to continue working on throughout life. The next part is to open ourselves to commune with God. Then our silence becomes a time when we turn our loving attention to Him, so it becomes prayer without words. As we offer ourselves to God, it becomes worship (Romans 12: 1 and 2).

Observe 3 minutes of silence. You may want to begin with a breath prayer like, “Lord I give myself to you.” End with “Amen”

Spiritual Formation Practice—Gospel Contemplation

We often read the Bible to learn what to believe and how to act. But God also wants to meet with us through his word. The practice of Gospel Contemplation focuses on reading the Bible for *encounter* rather than *information*. Today we will read verses telling the story of the road to Emmaus. These disciples were so discouraged after the death of Jesus that they were leaving Jerusalem. Jesus joins them on the road but they are kept from recognizing him as they pour out their troubles.

Let’s begin. Sit comfortably and set your heart to seek God. You may want to begin with a breath prayer like, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.” As the facilitator reads Luke 24:27–35, imagine yourself in the scene. What does it look like? Sound like? Feel like?

Take a few minutes to share with each other:

**Where did you place yourself?
What did you notice?**

Listening time

This session we will again listen slowly, and without comment. Remember that deep listening shows we value the other person. However, this time, after each person shares, pray Scripture

over them. You could use Colossians 1: 9b–12 or 2 Thessalonians 2:16–17, or choose a different scripture.

Be careful that your prayers do not hint at your opinion, nor offer advice or correction. Make them simply prayers of blessing as you entrust that person to our infinitely wise and loving God.

Describe a time you felt caught up in worship.

(The Emmaus disciples described their feelings as “our hearts burned within us.” How do you feel when God is close or working in you?)

Homework

This week observe 3–4 minutes of silence each day. Listen for thoughts that might come from God and faithfully respond.

Remember to treat whatever others share as a treasure you guard. Do not tell anyone else.

SESSION 5 — Grace of God

Silence

Observe 3 minutes of silence. You may want to begin with a breath prayer like, “Loving Father, I trust you.”

Spiritual Formation Practice—Forgiveness (the difficult but essential path to freedom and maturity)

We all need the grace of God. God holds out his hands to forgive all our sins, mistakes and failures. But the Bible also explains that we are only able to *receive* grace as we *give* grace. We pray, “Forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

But there are deceptions that make it hard to forgive. They are not true. For example, It is not true . . . that forgiveness means *I let them hurt me again*.

It is also not true . . . that *not* forgiving hurts the other person. The truth is that unforgiveness is like a poison that burns us from the inside. It is like a prison that we keep ourselves locked in. When we forgive, we set ourselves free. When we forgive, we begin to heal. When we forgive, we trust God to do what is just.

Spiritual Formation Practice — Gospel Contemplation

Sit comfortably, and begin with the breath prayer, “Loving Father, I trust you.”

The facilitator is going to read part of Jesus’ parable of the Lost Son.

For the first reading, imagine you are the prodigal. You are the one who went your own way and are now returning to God. As you listen, consider:

How do you feel? How would you describe your father?

(Facilitator reads Luke 15:20–24 while others listen with their eyes closed.)

Now for the second reading, imagine you are someone watching the prodigal come up the road. Remember he squandered part of the family inheritance, he soiled the family reputation. He was selfish and immoral. He has caused grief, and worry, and pain . . . and here he (or she) comes. As you listen, consider:

Who is it in your life that has caused grief? Imagine them coming up the road.

What does the father's face look like as he or she comes?

(Facilitator reads Luke 15:20–24 while others listen with their eyes closed.)

Listening time

Take turns answering the following questions:

Why is it hard to forgive?

If you can do it anonymously – share a situation where you were deeply hurt.

Remember that we listen without judging. That means we do *not* try to decide who is right or wrong in a situation. Only God knows the full story. This session we will add another step. After someone shares their response, we will ask a question that invites them to tell us more—that welcomes them to share more deeply. Here are some sample questions:

Can you tell me more?

What impact has that had on your life?

Have you ever experienced a situation like that before?

What is one step you feel God wants you to take?

What would be the perfect ending to this story?

These situations can be very tender. It is important that you treat your sisters gently and that you are extremely careful not to tell anyone else what you hear. Read the confidentiality commitment as you close.

I promise to keep everything I hear in this group confidential. I will not repeat it, or even hint at it, to anyone else.

Homework

Begin each day by picturing the father welcoming his beloved prodigal. Then spend 4 minutes in silence. Does God bring anyone to mind? Ask God for the grace to forgive them. Receive God's grace and forgiveness in your own life.

SESSION 6 – Awareness of God

Remember when Moses saw the burning bush in Exodus 3? How easily he could have passed by—perhaps even remarked on it afterwards. However, it was not until he stopped and “turned aside” that he met with God. How many times is God working in and around us but we don’t pay enough attention to recognize him?

Spiritual Formation Practice—Prayer of Examen

This is an ancient practice of reviewing each day to notice what God was doing in and around us. There are many versions. Normally it is done at night, but let’s try one now.

Close your eyes and sit comfortably. Ask God to help you recognize Him. Observe 1 minute of silence. Beginning with the morning, prayerfully remember what happened during the day. Ask the following questions and then respond.

Lord, when did I notice you? (give thanks)
Lord, when did I withdraw from you? (confess, receive forgiveness)
Lord, what are you doing in my life?
Lord, what do you want to do in the situations around me?

Listening time

Again, this week we will practice asking open questions that invite people to share more of their experience. This openness makes it even more important that we be trustworthy. Read the confidentiality commitment together before you begin:

I promise to keep everything I hear in this group confidential. I will not repeat it, or even hint at it, to anyone else.

**If there were no barriers (i.e. if you had unlimited time, resources, and training) . . .
What would be your dream of how God could use you?**

After each person shares, choose one follow up question from the list below. You can take turns choosing the question.

Is there any scripture that seems to apply to this?
How does this make you feel?
How has God been preparing you for this?
What do you think God might be doing in your life now?

Homework

Try to pray several times each day, “Lord, let me notice you today.”
Each night, pray the Examen.

SESSION 7—Filled with God

Silence With God

Remember our goal is to slow down, still our hearts and minds, pay attention to God. This is our time to simply be with God—without asking him to do anything for us. Psalm 131:2 says, “I have calmed and quieted myself. I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content.”

Choose a breath prayer to start. These sessions have mentioned, “Come Lord Jesus,” “Lord Jesus, bring your peace,” “Speak Lord, your servant is listening,” “Loving Father, I trust you,” “Lord, I give myself to you” and “Lord, let me notice you.”

Take 4 minutes for silence. End with “Amen.”

Listening time

As Christians, we believe in one God in three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All are God and each one is absolutely holy and trustworthy. Jesus was “full of the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:1). Acts 13:52 tells us the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit made them bold and effective for God (Acts 4:31). God wants (even commands) us to “Be filled with the Holy Spirit” too (Ephesians 5:18).

But sometimes we are afraid. Let’s talk about that today.

In this session each person answers both questions:

**What has been your attitude to the Holy Spirit?
How would you like to have him released in your life?**

After each person responds, choose one follow up question. You can use one from previous weeks, or try one of these:

How would you like God to help you with this?

How has your view of God been changing?

What is holding you back?

Closing

Divide into pairs. Ask your partner what their soul is longing for. Pray for that for them. Remember to keep confidences.

Homework

Try to pray the Examen each night.

Look for God’s presence during the day.

SESSION 8 — Love of God

When you love someone, you long for them to love you back. God wants us to love him, but it is because he first loved us. It is not selfish, nor childish, to want to deeply know the love of God. In fact, Paul prays that disciples would “know Christ’s love that surpasses knowledge” (i.e. go beyond facts to genuine experience) “**so that** you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” Knowing deeply that God loves us is the foundation of maturity and fruitfulness.

Silence With God

As we take time to seek God, begin by reading John 15:9, “As the Father has loved me, I have also loved you. Remain in my love.”

Begin with the breath prayer, “Lord let me know your love.”

Today we will pray the Examen, so just observe 1 minute of silence now.

Listening time

Invite each person to answer one or both of the following questions. Facilitators, please gently help them guard each other’s time to share.

**What is the next step on your spiritual journey?
What is holding you back from saying an unreserved yes to God?**

Remember to listen with grace—without interrupting, without criticism, without trying to give advice or fix things, and without diverting the conversation to your own experience.

Choose one question to invite them to share more. Here are the questions we have covered in these sessions:

Can you tell me more?
What impact has that had on your life?
Have you ever experienced a situation like that before?
How does this make you feel?
What would be the perfect ending to this story?

What do you think God might be doing in your life?
How would you like God to help you with this?
How has your view of God been changing?
Is there any scripture that seems to apply to this?
How has God been preparing you for this?
What is one step you feel God wants you to take?
What is holding you back?

Spiritual Formation Practice — Examen

Today we will use the Prayer of Examen to reflect on all these sessions. The facilitator will read the summary and questions while participants sit prayerfully, with eyes closed.

Sit comfortably. Pray, “Lord, let me notice you.”

Facilitator reads:

In session one we learned about confidentiality. We talked about developing stillness in our souls through the practice of silence. We began to practice listening to others deeply and with respect. Session two was about the peace of God and learning breath prayers.

Lord, when did I notice you?

Facilitator reads: In session three we learned about hearing God, and began to pray Scripture over one another. In session four we did gospel contemplation about the road to Emmaus.

Lord what have you been saying to me?

In session five we began to ask questions to welcome our sisters to tell us more. We did gospel contemplation on the prodigal son. Lord, forgiveness is so hard.

Lord, what is the next step you are inviting me to take with you?

In sessions six and seven we learned the prayer of Examen, and how to ask more questions. We thought about the Holy Spirit.

Lord, what is holding me back from trusting you in complete surrender?

Prayer

Take turns to pray Scripture over each other. In these sessions we have used:

Numbers 6:24–26, Psalm 84:4–8, Ephesians 1: 6–19, Philippians 1: 9–11, Colossians 1:9b–12, 2 Thessalonians 2:16–17

Confidentiality Commitment

Affirm your ongoing commitment together:

*“I promise to keep everything I hear in this group completely confidential.
I will not repeat it, or even hint at it, to anyone else.”*