

Hearing *God* in Conversation

10 WEEK SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

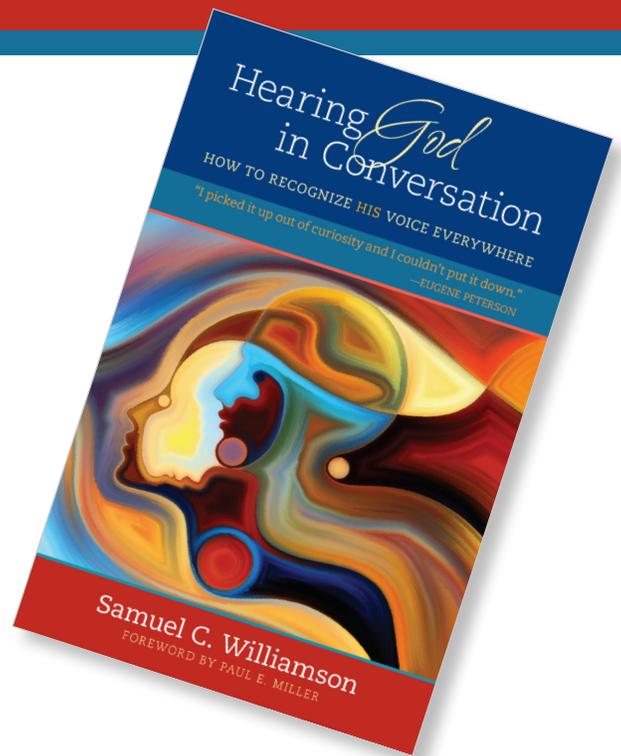
Instructions

Each week consider the questions posed for that week. Ask God to speak to you as you pray and think about your answers.

These questions are intended to be a guide to provoke valuable heart-to-heart conversations. Other questions may arise; that's good. Feel free to choose a subset of these questions or to add additional questions.

When possible answer these questions in advance in your own prayer time. Write down your answers in a notebook or journal, and bring those notes to the small group meeting.

May God be with you and speak to you.



We offer an 18 week or 10 week study guide.

To download copies, visit <http://beliefsoftheheart.com/study-guides>

Week 1

PREPARATION:

- Read the foreword, preface, and chapter 1 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. How do you get stuck in prayer? How can a conversational approach to prayer affect the way you pray?
2. What do you think of the idea of hearing God? Have you heard God in the past? What happened? If you haven't heard him, why do you think that is? Share your responses.
3. As Christians, what things are we saved *from*? What do you think we are saved *for*? How does that answer change your conversations with God? How does it change your Christian walk?
4. Like Sam on the playground hearing his girlfriend cuss, describe a time you had your ideas about God shaken.
5. Sam writes, "God always gives us what we most need, but he doesn't always give us what we *think* we most need" (p. 24–25). How are those different? What hope can you draw from this truth?
6. Why does it sound humble to say that God doesn't speak to "normal" people like you? What does Sam mean when he writes, "God never speaks to us (or others) because of our (or their) greatness. He speaks because of *his* greatness" (p. 27)?

EXERCISE:

- Summarize the eight methods described on pages 30–32.
- Take five minutes to write down examples of the methods you have experienced. Which would you like to experience more?
- Share.

PRAYER:

- Share personal prayer requests and pray for them.
- Ask God that each person this week receive a responsive resonance, spontaneous nudging, direct word, unbidden memory, or a recalled passage (see pp. 30–31).

Week 2

PREPARATION:

- Read chapters 2 and 3 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. Share one way you may have heard God this past week (revisit prayer requests from the end of last week).
2. Describe one relationship in your life that has the quality of conversation that Sam had with his dad? Why do we think conversation with God is different?
3. Do you ever just talk to God during the day, outside of a prayer time? Why or why not?
4. “Letting our nature or nurture restrict God’s voice also limits our capacity for friendship” (pp. 41–42). In what ways does your nature or nurture limit God’s voice? What kinds of things do you not expect him to speak to you about?
5. How do you get distracted in life “by the spectacular” so that you may not hear God’s whisper? Ask your Father right now to help you quiet your heart to hear him in everyday life.
6. Have you ever had nudges from the Spirit that you stifled? What happened?
7. What little changes can you make in your day-to-day life to help lessen the tumultuous clamor of noise that buries your Father’s voice?
8. Why is “obedience ... a major stepping-stone in learning to hear God” (p. 52)?
9. Some may say that Sam meeting the suicidal student in the stairwell was a coincidence (pp. 52–53). Do you think life is a series of coincidences? If not, how do you live like it is?

EXERCISE:

Sam's rule of thumb is simple: "If the obedience required is simple and moral—like going to a stairwell or praying for a brother—just do it. If the action is more involved... then ask friends for help with discernment, because it isn't always God's voice and we need help learning to distinguish the true from the false" (p. 53).

- Take five minutes to write down (a) a few nudges from God that you can obey right now, (b) an area or two for which you have some sense from God but which also requires discernment from friends, and (c) a few people you can go to for this kind of wisdom.
- Share with the group the few nudges from God that you can obey now, and share an area in which you need group discernment.

[Privately, perhaps later this week, ask your list of friends for help in discerning those senses you have for your major areas.]

PRAYER:

- Pray for personal pray requests.
- Ask God to increase our sensitivity this week to his still, small voice.
- Ask God to give us a conversational relationship with him during the "normal" parts of our day, such as driving to work, standing in line at the supermarket, or watching a movie.

Week 3

PREPARATION:

- Read chapters 4 and 5 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. In what ways do you live like the Bible is a maintenance manual for personal upkeep instead of a personal letter from God (p. 56)?
2. Sam writes, “A right understanding of Scripture makes all the difference in the world for hearing God. It means we meditate on Scripture to hear his voice. It is in meeting him there, in his self-revealed word, that we will hear him” (p. 57). Describe a time you met God in Scripture. What can you do to make this a regular part of life?
3. “Knowing wisdom doesn’t change us... Only when we know the Person of wisdom incarnate will we finally live the life we were designed for” (p. 57). How do you seek to know God, or how do you seek him for wisdom alone? How would your life look differently if you sought him for him instead of wisdom or answers?
4. What is a danger in pursuing Scripture for truth (p. 59)? How does that answer surprise you?
5. Chapter 4 discusses approaches to Scripture that are based on personal tendencies. Which is your natural tendency? (We all have them!) What are some remedies?
6. When you hear the word meditation, what is your instinctive reaction? How do you imagine a person in meditation looks like? How did this chapter challenge your thinking?

7. What in chapter 5 was a new thought for you? What was a reminder of something you have known but forgotten?
8. Are you more cerebral or emotive in your Scripture reading? What are the dangers of being one or the other? How is it better to have a healthy balance of both?

EXERCISE:

- Choose one of the following verses. Using Sam's meditation questions (page 65 and on the bookmark at the end of this guide), take six or seven minutes to meditate on the chosen passage.
 - For we are God's masterpiece, created in the Messiah Jesus to perform good actions that God prepared long ago to be our way of life. (Eph. 2:10 ISV)
 - The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. (Ps. 23:1)
 - And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:16–17)
 - For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. (2 Cor. 7:10)
- Share with the group what you heard from God in Scripture.

PRAYER:

- Ask for personal prayer concerns.
- Pray that each member learn to see God in Scripture and begin to regularly hear his voice in biblical meditation.

Week 4

PREPARATION:

- Read chapters 6 and 7 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. Describe a time you rephrased someone else's direction to ensure you understood it yourself. How can paraphrasing help you meditate on a verse?
2. While paraphrasing Scripture helps make passages real to our hearts, what cautions should we exercise?
3. We often obsess about the things nearest to our hearts. What kinds of things do you meditate on? How are they biblical or unbiblical?
4. Describe a brainstorming time you've experienced (in work, school, home, ministry, etc.). How did that change your relationship with the people involved? Have you ever tried to brainstorm with God? Why or why not?
5. Typical brainstorming, like meditation, requires slowing down and taking time. But might it be possible to have mini brainstorms with God throughout the day when faced with the hundreds of mini decisions we make? If so, how would your life look differently?
6. Sam reminds us of one "*absolutely essential* rule: to the best of my ability, *I reject ideas from voices that aren't invited to the brainstorming party*" (p. 82). What does he mean?
7. What is so important about recognizing God's voice in Scripture, as opposed to simply hearing moral direction, inspiration, or doctrinal truth (all of which are also important)?
8. Write down two or three ideas embraced by secular or Christian culture (i.e. making one's spouse the absolute love of your life, or grasping for self-esteem). How are they just good counterfeits?

EXERCISE:

- Choose one of the following verses below and take ten minutes to write a paraphrase: (a) repeat the verse a couple of times in your usual translation, saying it aloud; (b) meditate on its meaning (what does it say about God and what does it say about you?); (c) look at two or three other translations of the passage; and (d) write your own paraphrase here or in a journal.
 - The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. (Zeph. 3:17)
 - We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:18)
 - If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)
 - I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)
- Share your paraphrase with the group.

PRAYER:

- Ask the group if anyone has a decision or question for which they wish to hear God. Pray for that person.
- Pray that each person receives “God-shaped thoughts” (32) this week as they meditate on Scripture in their prayer time.

Week 5

PREPARATION:

- Read chapters 8 and 9 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

Describe a time someone spoke a good word of encouragement or conviction to you.

1. Have you ever sensed the Lord leading you to say something to someone only to find out it wasn't from God? What happened? How did you feel afterward?
2. In Colossians 3:16, Paul urges us, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." How much do you see this practiced in real-world Christianity today? How can hearing God for others help you practice this?
3. Does the idea of a time of listening for a word from God in a group intimidate you? Why or why not?
4. Tell of a time in your life when you pleaded for an answer for something and God spoke to you about another topic altogether. What was your response? How can our own agendas, sin, or impatience taint our listening to God?
5. Is there an area of your life in which you are begging God for an answer and he seems to be silent? What else might he be talking to you about? Ask him for eyes to see how he is working, especially if it's different than you might expect.
6. In the gospel of John, Jesus says, "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:13–14). But in Isaiah God says, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isa. 55:9). How do we hold these two passages in balance? How can that tension shape our prayer and listening?
7. How can humility help your ability to hear God?

EXERCISE:

- Take five minutes to pray, each person praying for the person on their right. Ask God to give you a word for them, either a passage, a sense, a nudging, or a direct word (pp. 88–89). Put away your biases (we’re not looking for what you think God should say to them!). Ask for words of encouragement or insight, not words of direction (move to Timbuktu) or correction (quit spending so much money on mocha lattes).
- Go around the group and share what you heard for the person you were praying for. Remember to share with humility and gentleness—we might be wrong or not fully right (p. 90)! We wish to bring encouragement and joy in this time, not our opinions or heaviness.

PRAYER:

- Pray that God’s encouragement from this prayer time takes root and grows this coming week. Pray that miscommunication and misunderstanding take no root.
- Pray that each member be attentive in the coming week to nudges and senses of God’s encouragement for people around them, and pray for a gentle boldness to share.

Week 6

PREPARATION:

- Read chapters 10 and 11 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever had an encounter with a good listener, someone who draws out the very deepest parts of you in love? Describe it.
2. How do you feel when someone asks questions to help you articulate what you've never said aloud?
3. God's first encounter with Adam and Eve after their disobedience is filled with questions: "But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, '*Where are you? ... 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? ... 'What is this that you have done?'*'" (Gen. 3:8–13, emphasis added). Why might God ask Adam and Eve questions when he already knows the answers?
4. What does Sam mean when he writes, "questions from God are pruning tools for our hearts" (p. 107)?
5. How can asking questions of God deepen your relationship with him? How can questioning God harm that relationship? What is the difference?
6. Pick one of the passages below and write three questions of God that stir in your heart as you meditate on these verses.
 - For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being

rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:14–19)

- So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. (Phil. 2:1–3)
 - I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. (2 Tim. 1:3–7)
7. Sam writes, “If emotions are responses to beliefs (hopes, desires, and loves), then they leave a breadcrumb trail to our inner life. They offer an opportunity for curiosity, a chance to explore with God. We can’t do it without him. We are all blind to the deep things of our own hearts; we need him to open the eyes of our heart—not just to our own beliefs and hopes, but also to our deepest, unknown longings” (114). What does this mean? How do you see that in your own life?

EXERCISE:

- Below are five questions (out of hundreds) that God asks in Scripture. Pick one and answer it back to God. Take at least five minutes. As you answer, let God dig deeper by asking your more questions. Be alert in your spirit to the quiet whisperings of God's follow-up questions.
 - “What is the matter?” (Gen. 21:17 swp)
 - “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.” (Job 38:4)
 - “Can any of you add a single moment to your life by worrying?” (Matt 6:27 swp)
 - “Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye and yet fail to see the log in your own eye?” (Matt. 7:3 swp)
 - “Do you believe I can do this?” (Matt. 9:28 swp)
- Share with the group the question you chose, how you answered it, and what you heard from God.

PRAYER:

- Ask God to ask you questions this week—in Scripture study, conversations, or even billboards—and answer them back to God.
- Pray that each person's heart be protected this week from doubts, assaults, and questioning *of* God instead of questions *to* God.

Week 7

PREPARATION:

- Read chapters 12 and 13 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. What signs have you been told that indicate whether a message is a word from God or not? Have you ever heard, “You will always recognize God’s voice by the great peace you feel”? How has this sense of peace been true or untrue in your life?
2. Compare Hebrews 5:14 (“but solid food is for mature people, whose minds are trained by practice to distinguish good from evil,” swp) and Proverbs 11:14 (“a nation falls through a lack of guidance, but victory comes through the counsel of many,” swp). How do these verses relate to discernment?
3. Describe one time you experienced conviction of sin when seeking to hear from God?
4. List several elements of what a good friendship looks like. How does your relationship with God look like that, and how does it differ?
5. Explain what Sam means when he writes that problems in the world are often caused by false beliefs about God (p. 129).
6. When you think of God, what is your mind’s picture of him? What false pictures of God have you encountered in our culture?
7. List two or three ways that you know *about* God and then list another two or three ways that you’ve come to know God himself. How does the latter bring more life?

EXERCISE:

- Read Mark 2:1–12 as a group.
 - Ask God to make this passage real to your hearts.
 - Ask God to reveal himself through the mysteries of his Word. Discuss what mysteries exist in this story.
 - Ask and discuss, “How would I have acted?” (Put yourself in the shoes of various people in the story.)
 - Ask and discuss, “What would I have thought?”
 - Look for “seeming inconsistencies” between this story and any other story or truth in Scripture. How can these seeming inconsistencies enhance your understanding?

PRAYER:

- Let each person, in their own words, ask to know and be known by God.
- Pray that you can see God in the story of the healed paralytic, so that in seeing God you can see your life anew and walk into that life with God.

Week 8

PREPARATION:

- Read chapters 14 and 15 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever had a time in your life when you inadvertently sought an emotional experience of God instead of God himself? What was going on in your life? What happened?
2. Describe a time you had a belief-altering experience of God that resonated with the faith inside your heart more than with your emotion.
3. How is “aiming for euphoria” more like the world around us than followers of Jesus should be?
4. List a couple circumstances in your life that are perplexing or seem at odds with how you think life should go. What might God be up to? Spend a few minutes in prayer for those circumstances, whether they are situations, people, or needs.
5. What detours have you walked through (or are you walking through now) with God? How did (or might) things go differently than you thought they would?
6. Looking back, how do you see God’s hand in past detours? How does that encourage your faith for the future?
7. Describe a time in your life when great growth came in a time of deep trouble? What might God say to you today about that experience?
8. Following God in the detours requires us to be watchful for when he opens up new roads. When you come across scientific oddities, theological oddities, hardships, or disillusionment, what is your first response? Ask God to shape you into one who turns quickly to him when a detour bars your path.

EXERCISE:

- On pages 138–39, Sam explains the almost inseparable connection between feelings and beliefs. Think of an area of your life in which you feel a strong emotion (mad, glad, sad, scared, ashamed, etc.).
- Take five minutes and individually ask God to reveal to you hidden beliefs that trigger this emotion. As you pray, brainstorm with God, bounce ideas around with him, and ask him to speak to you more of himself and his truth.
- Share with the group your emotion and what you heard from God.

PRAYER:

- Ask God to reveal himself and speak to each person this week in their joys, sadness, and anger.
- Pray for each person that God speaks with them more conversationally this week.

Week 9

PREPARATION:

- Read chapters 16 and 17 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. In one sentence, describe the difference between a formative test and a summative test? Which come from the heart of God? Tell of a time you felt a test was summative only to discover later that God was “teaching you to fly” (p. 154).
2. What distractions regularly fill your life that keep you from willfully hearing God?
3. What in Scripture teaches us that we can ask God anything (even about where to go for vacation)? What in Scripture would prohibit asking God for the tiniest of directions?
4. It is often easy to read quickly over details like the angel touching Elijah (1 Kings 19:4–8), but God loves us in those quiet ways as well as in meeting our needs. Describe a few quiet details in which you have seen God touch you when you didn’t even notice it at first.
5. What does Sam mean when he says there are some things God cannot tell us but must show us? Have you even had one of those times in your life?
6. Why do you think Joseph’s heart—and our hearts—needed the quiet whisper of God’s voice amid lengthy suffering for him to really change? What is it about the human heart that doesn’t always change in response to the loud and quick?
7. At the bottom of page 166, Sam quotes C. S. Lewis: “Can it be that the more perfect the creature is, the further this separation must at some point be pushed? It is saints, not common people, who experience the ‘dark night.’ It is men and angels, not beasts, who rebel. Inanimate matter sleeps in the bosom of the Father. The ‘hiddenness’ of God perhaps presses most painfully on those who are in another way nearest to Him.” What does Lewis mean?
8. Consider either the story of Joseph (Genesis 37–50) or the book of Esther. Then reflect on what God did . . . *in his silence*. List below anything that surprises you or strikes you in a new way.

EXERCISE:

- Scripture says, “God speaks time and time again—but nobody notices” (Job 33:14 ISV). If so, God is often speaking in very ordinary circumstances and moments we are unaware of.
- Think of a recent ordinary moment—when you accidentally overheard a conversation, or a movie scene moved you, or a passage you read stirred you. Take five minutes to ask God what he might be saying in that twinkling of an eye.
- Throw away agendas (what you *want* God to say), brainstorm with God, and seek him for what he might be saying to you.
- Share the moment and any word you might have heard.

PRAYER:

- Pray that each member hear God’s voice in the midst of an ordinary moment—a still, small voice amidst the thunder of the world around.
- Pray for friends, family, and neighbors that they too begin to hear God’s voice in their lives.

Week 10

PREPARATION:

- Read chapter 18 of *Hearing God in Conversation*.
- Consider in advance the questions listed below.

QUESTIONS:

1. When we are in our darkest moments or when we feel utterly lost, we tend to think our greatest need is for direction from God. How might your *real* need be a conversational relationship with God? What perceived needs are you clinging to instead?
2. Confess to God some of the things you perceived as your real needs instead of him.
3. As Sam asks on page 178, in your personal journey, what are some of the ways you've experienced God's guidance through your circumstances?
4. Proverbs 3:5–6 is such a common passage that it's easy to read it quickly without thought. Sam paraphrases it this way: "Trust in the Lord, not your own ideas; acknowledge him in all your plans, and he will direct your paths" (p. 173). If we took those verses seriously, how would our prayer and decision-making look differently? What does it mean to acknowledge God?
5. Summarize the various methods God uses to give us his guidance (pp. 177–79). Which of those have you experienced in your life? Which would you love to experience?
6. How is it freeing to think that God uses our desires in his plans for us?
7. How does Scripture encourage you that you *can* have a conversational relationship with God?

EXERCISE:

- Sam summarizes Proverbs 3:5–6 like this:
 - After prayer, counsel, and wisdom: *make a plan*.
 - Then: *commit that plan to God*.
 - Finally: *let God direct your path*.
- Take five to seven minutes to consider a small decision you need to make and for which you wish for God’s guidance. Pray, ask God for help, consider options (try on the dress [or kilt!]), and make a plan.
- Commit that plan completely to God, give it over to him, and ask God to direct your path.
- Share with the group your small need for direction, your considerations, and your plan.

PRAYER:

- As a group, commit all the plans to God and ask God to direct your paths.
- Pray for each member of the group that they grow in a conversational relationship with God.
- Pray for friends, neighbors, and family that they too grow deeply in a divine dialogue with the Lord.

Acknowledgments

Several months before publication, Kregel Publications asked me to create a study guide for *Hearing God in Conversations*. I quickly agreed.

I agreed too quickly.

I spent hours poring over my manuscript, desperately and fruitlessly trying to develop questions that would engage the heart. I pulled out my hair (it grew back) and questioned everything I knew about writing, study, prayer, and the universe. I was just too close.

Shortly after its publication—and a month after the study guide was due—a reader posted a review on Amazon: “I loved this book. While visiting my parents, I stole it from my Dad, and promptly devoured it.”

Anyone who would steal a book from her father was a kindred spirit. That reader was Lydia Leggett. I asked if she would take this confusing burden from my shoulders and write these study questions for me.

She quickly agreed. And just as quickly she sent me a draft that eventually became this study guide.

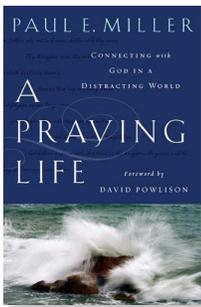
Lydia Leggett, I cannot thank you enough. And Bob Allums (her father), you raised a great daughter. Just let her keep the book!

—Sam

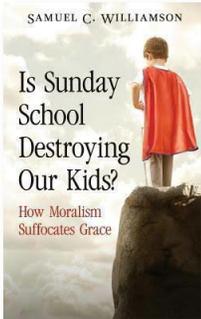
RESOURCES

We offer an 18 week or 10 week study guide. To download copies, visit:
<http://beliefsoftheheart.com/study-guides>

Sam conducts retreats on hearing God based on *Hearing God in Conversation*. For more information, go to:
<http://beliefsoftheheart.com/speaking>.



A Praying Life
by Paul E. Miller



Is Sunday School Destroying Our Kids?
by Samuel C. Williamson

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BELIEFS OF THE HEART SCRIPTURE MEDITATION PLAN

MEDITATIONS

MEDITATION QUESTIONS

What does this reveal about God?
Why would God want to reveal it to me?

What does it reveal about humanity, believers, and me?

Why does this passage intrigue me?
What about it stirs my curiosity?

What would my life look like if I believed it were true?

How does my culture twist, distort, or reject it? How has that affected me?

Why don't I really believe this truth deep down? What stops me from embracing it?

How does this truth make me love God more? How does it reveal his beauty?

What do I need to change in order to realign my heart with this truth?

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MEDITATION BOOKMARK

Cut out and use as a guide you for prayerful reflection on the passages you've read.