Deeper Conversation Guide

Going Deeper during Social Distancing and Shelter-in-Place

## How to Use

In a time when our relationships are restricted in certain ways, this document is meant to facilitate deepening relationships through meaningful conversations. Each topic reflects a unique spiritual need and growth edge that emerges in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This guide is not meant to be consumed in one sitting, so feel free to grab a partner and choose a section to discuss, or to make working through a section at a time part of a routine with a friend, discipler, or accountability partner. May the Lord bless your time in conversation and bring fruit in your life as you share and process what’s really going on in this turbulent time!

# Identifying the need for community and intimacy

What places/memories/times of community, intimacy, vulnerability, fun, etc. do you miss from your life on campus?

What is different now about your experience in community during shelter-in-place? What has been hard or painful to adjust to?

The social experiences that you miss and the longings that you have for community right now are painful, but they also offer an opportunity for greater self-awareness. They help us understand how deeply we are wired for relationships with people and to be in community. Reflect on your experience using the questions below.

* What messages (helpful or not helpful) about community during this time are you hearing from culture/news/social media/family around you?
* What do you tend to do in response to a lack of community? (withdraw or give up, force/control others into doing stuff with you, look to other places for a solution, etc)
* How might God be inviting you to respond in a new way to seek deeper community and intimacy, both in this season and once we go back to normal?
* **PRACTICE:** Discuss with your partner one thing you want to initiate with a friend or with your community this week. Make a plan and then debrief what that experience was like the next time you meet.

# Growing in the experience of solitude instead of isolation

Solitude and isolation can seem interchangeable but are not quite the same. Solitude is a choice to be intentionally alone for a period, while isolation is an experience of being required to stay alone or away from others. Most of us are experiencing some level of forced isolation in this season.

* Even when we are in isolation that we have not chosen, how might you cultivate an experience of solitude (intentional alone-ness) in the midst of it?
* Imagine intentionally setting aside two or more hours by yourself a day with no phone, music, or other distractions. What feelings or thoughts come up for you as you imagine this? How do you think God could meet you in solitude?
* **PRACTICE:** Two hours might be a tall order, but how long could you reasonably spend in solitude each day? Perhaps rather than one large block, it would be helpful to try 30-60 minutes a day being unplugged in intentional solitude. Choose a routine for this practice, try it for a week, and then debrief the experience in your next conversation.

As you begin to cultivate solitude in your life, here are things to notice. Discuss your experience of these questions in your next deep conversation.

* Often in silence and solitude, the "distraction committee" of our internal world starts speaking louder than it does when we are busy. In her book, Spiritual Disciplines Companion, Jan Johnson talks about how the members of this “inner committee” function. Which of these distractions are you tempted by as you find yourself alone more often?
  + **Looking Good Kid**, who says to you: *"Excel! Be smart! Look great! Achieve, achieve, achieve!"*
  + **Rescue the World Crusader**, who says to you: *"Help folks to the extreme, even if they don't want it."*
  + **Critic**, who scolds you and evaluates everyone around you, saying, *"Why aren't they doing what's right or what you want?"*
  + **Leisure Junkie**, who says to you: *"How long until your favorite TV show? Why don't you stop and get a doughnut, or ten doughnuts?"*
* What are the needs and yearnings that emerge in the silence and solitude? Consider your emotions, your spiritual engagement, your mind, and your body—what do you understand about the deeper longings that surface?
* When things are quiet, what areas of emotional, spiritual, mental, or physical fatigue do you discover? (Feel free to sleep in your time of solitude if you discover that need!)

# Learning to identify and process grief and loss

For some people, sadness and grief seem to come naturally, but for others of us, it can be challenging to get in touch with more vulnerable emotions.

What barriers do you have as you try to identify grief and loss in your life? Some possible barriers include:

* **Comparison** (other people have it worse, so mine should not be named)
* **Lack of internalized belief that God cares deeply about our pain and loss**
* **Fear that community or God won’t hear or pay attention if you do identify them**
* **An instinct to ration how much compassion, empathy, and care you ask of others or God**

After you name barriers, share concretely about losses you have experienced through the pandemic so far.

* What things or experiences have you had to give up during shelter-in-place?
* What hopes or expectations about the near-future are now unlikely or impossible due to the pandemic, and how has that affected you?
* **ENGAGE SCRIPTURE:** Read Revelation 21. Verse 4 describes what will happen when Jesus returns and fixes all brokenness saying that the Lord will “wipe every tear from their eyes.” When you imagine the Lord with that level of compassion and involvement in your suffering, are there additional losses or points of grief that you are able to name?

The Bible’s term for expressing loss is *lament*. Glance over these steps for Biblical lament (articulated by Andy Crouch in the Art of Venn Podcast, [“Lament and Creativity: Part 1”](https://open.spotify.com/episode/6tVTmS7vZ4D50EZbqP0FpL?si=31kUeE8_Sx-t_rxHTB2CPQ)):

1. **Crying out to God**
2. **Affirming trust in God**
3. **Petitioning God to restore**
4. **Making additional arguments**
5. **Expressing rage against loss and injustice**
6. **Praising God in assurance of his promises to hear us**

* Which of these steps do you still need to do with regard to COVID-19?
* Which of these steps feel unnecessary? What would it take to engage in them anyway?
* **PRACTICE:** Listen to Andy Crouch’s podcast (linked above) and discuss it with your partner.

# Intentionally cultivating how we spend our days

Author Annie Dillard says, *“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”* As you experience your life in one place with less busyness to drive your choices, you have the chance to closely observe how you’re spending your time.

Imagine having to watch a video of an average day of your life.

* What would make you cringe?
* What small things do you do a lot of throughout the day without noticing? What unconsciously fills your time?
* What would you be pleased and proud to see?

We can be grateful that this season of social distancing has come at a time when we have unprecedented access to others through technology. It’s a huge gift! And at the same time, it creates a very real dynamic to manage in our days.

* What is your relationship with technology like on a daily basis?
* Think about how you feel after a given technological activity. Which do you find bring you a sense of energy, happiness, and contentment? Which do you find leave you drained, overtired, or dissatisfied?
* How could you begin to cultivate limits around the things that leave you drained, tired, or dissatisfied?
* **PRACTICE:** Choose a particular app or social media platform that you unintentionally spend a lot of time on. Discuss with your partner a healthy limit you want to impose on it (creating a screen time limit, deleting the app from your phone, only using it a certain number of times a day, etc.). Live into that limit for a week and then debrief the experience with your partner the next time you meet.

# Growing in our Closeness to Jesus and Personal Holiness

Think through your spiritual state from the last several weeks.

* What experiences have been spiritual highlights, where you felt close to Jesus and spiritually engaged?
* What experiences have been particularly spiritually dry?
* Are there any themes from the subtopics on this document that have repeatedly been part of those highlights or dry points?

What have you been praying for and talking to Jesus about lately? What responses or answered prayers have you sensed from him?

**ENGAGE SCRIPTURE:** Read 2 Corinthians 12:9.

* Where do you find yourself struggling spiritually and in need of God’s grace during this season of shelter-in-place and social distancing?
* What are the particular sin patterns or temptations that arise for you in this season? Share a few specific examples of times or ways you’ve struggled into which your conversation partner can pray or speak God’s grace.
  + *If your conversation leads you to share about sexual sin temptations or patterns, consider consulting the Accountability Guide and video we’ve created for additional resources.*
* Is there a question you hope no one asks you this week that would expose a weakness or struggle? If so, what is it and how can your conversation partner pray into that concern this week?

What is one thing you deeply need or want from Jesus this coming week?

* **PRACTICE:** Share with your partner and spend time in prayer for one another. Consider asking each other this question and praying together every time you meet.