



▶▶▶ Group Study Guide

PRACTICING THE GOD AT WORK

A Bible Study on Work Inspired by
Brother Lawrence

By Mark D. Roberts ▶▶▶



LIFE FOR LEADERS

INTRODUCTION TO LIFE FOR LEADERS GUIDE SERIES

The *Life for Leaders* Guide Series helps you discover the difference that God makes in your life and leadership. Whether you lead in business, education, arts, government, media, volunteer work, church, or family, *Life for Leaders* will guide you into deeper biblical understanding and more faithful living. It will help you integrate your faith with all you do. It will encourage you to communicate with God, both as a listener and as a prayer, so that you might engage with God in every part of life.

The Guide Series is based on the *Life for Leaders* daily devotions (lifeforallleaders.depre.org/devotionals/) produced by the Max De Pree Center for Leadership (depre.org) at Fuller Theological Seminary. Devotions that address a particular theme have been collected, edited, and reformatted for in-depth biblical reflection and prayer related to that theme. If you're looking for study guides, check out the *Life for Leaders* Guide Series at store.depre.org.

The *Life for Leaders* Study Guide Series can be valuable resources for churches that are seeking to

encourage and equip their members for living their faith in the marketplace.

Life for Leaders, in all of its forms, assumes that God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture. It also assumes that God's Word speaks to the real, pressing issues of our lives, including our work as leaders. The team that has written and produced this devotional guide and the rest of the *Life for Leaders* materials hopes we can help you grow in your relationship with God, so that you might know God more deeply and live out your faith in him more significantly.

May God bless you in your faith, work, leadership, and growth in Christ.

Mark D. Roberts

Principal Writer and Executive Editor of Life for Leaders



HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

This study guide has been written for use in a small group, perhaps at church or during lunch with some colleagues at work. If you're using this guide for personal study or for a larger class setting, you can adapt it as you see fit.

The study has nine sessions, each one meant to take a little less than an hour to complete. Of course, conversation about the theme of a session could take longer if you have the time.

If you are using this study guide in a group, I'd recommend that you develop the practice of reading the assigned Scripture passage out loud in the group, even if you have read and studied it in advance. When we hear the Bible read aloud, we discover things we would otherwise have missed.

The guide does not build in time for personal sharing and prayer during each session. These could surely be added to the end of the session. But, I would strongly encourage you to spend some time in prayer

responding specifically to the biblical text and theme for the session. Model prayers at the end of each session will help you do this.

The agenda and questions for each session are suggestions, not requirements. If a group session goes in other fruitful directions, I'd encourage you to move with the wind of the Spirit.



INTRODUCTION TO PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD AT WORK

In this Bible study guide we will be inspired mostly by a single verse in Genesis. In chapter 28, we're told that Jacob woke up after having an amazing dream and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" (28:16). Jacob had experienced God's presence but was unaware of this glorious fact until afterwards. Sounds familiar to me! Maybe to you, too!

I cannot think about the presence of God without remembering the classic Christian book *The Practice of the Presence of God*. For more than four centuries, this book has inspired Christians to experience the presence of God in all of life, especially in their places of work. Authorship of this book is attributed to Brother Lawrence, a monk who spent most of his life in a monastic community in France. His job in the monastery was to work in the kitchen. There, doing repetitive, demanding, and ordinary work, work that he did not particularly like, Lawrence discovered how to be aware of and enjoy God's continual presence. After Lawrence's death in 1691, the director of his community, Father Joseph de Beaufort, collected notes

of his conversations with Lawrence as well as fifteen letters Lawrence had written. This collection was published with the title *The Practice of the Presence of God*, a phrase Lawrence had often used.

If you have not read this little book, I encourage you to do so. Since the book is in the public domain, you can find a copy online [here](#). Or you can purchase a print or electronic version very inexpensively. If you have read this book, you may want to take another reading lap. I do not agree with everything in this book, as you might expect, but there is great wisdom as well as great inspiration there.

Before we get to Brother Lawrence, however, I'm going to offer some reflections based on Jacob's experience of God's presence. Then, we'll find some inspiration from excerpts from *The Practice of the Presence of God*. I believe these will help us to think creatively about how, like Jacob, we might discover and delight in God's surprising presence in our workplaces.



SESSION 1: ENCOUNTERING THE SURPRISING PRESENCE OF GOD



BEGIN WITH THE BIBLE

After opening with prayer dedicating the time to the Lord, read Genesis 28:1-22, noting especially verse 16.



QUESTIONS TO GET STARTED

- *How do you respond to this passage of Scripture?*
- *What questions do you have? What thoughts? What feelings?*



REFLECTIONS

Have you ever been surprised by God's presence? Has God ever "shown up" when you didn't expect him?

This happened to Jacob in Genesis 28. The chapter begins with his father, Isaac, telling Jacob to go to Paddan-aram (a plain in upper Mesopotamia; 28:2) in order to marry someone in Jacob's kinship group. On his way to that destination, Jacob stopped to spend the night. There, he dreamed of a ladder (Jacob's Ladder!) that reached to heaven, with angels ascending and descending the ladder (28:12). The Lord spoke to Jacob, promising to give him the land where he slept and to bless him with countless offspring. Like his grandfather Abraham, Jacob would be blessed so that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed in [him] and [his] offspring" (28:14). Finally, the Lord promised to be with Jacob and keep him always (28:15).

When Jacob woke up, he realized that this had been no ordinary dream. God had truly appeared to him and



spoken to him. Therefore Jacob said to himself, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” (28:16). We don’t know exactly how Jacob envisioned God’s presence. It’s likely that he thought of God as dwelling primarily in heaven. Yet the place where Jacob had his dream was also “the house of God” and a “gate of heaven” (28:17).

As I reflect on this story, I’m struck by Jacob’s statement that the Lord was present “and I did not know it.” For much of my life, and sometimes still, I have lived with the assumption that God was present mainly in worship services, mission trips, evangelistic efforts, and, most of all, heaven. I assumed, as many Christians did and still do, that God would every now and then “show up” elsewhere. But, for the most part, God was not present in ordinary spaces and everyday experiences.

One of those places where I had thought God was mostly absent was the workplace. Sure, God might use someone in a special way at work, to care for a hurting colleague or share the gospel with an associate. God might occasionally “show up” at work. But, mainly God was to be found elsewhere, in more obviously “spiritual” places and activities. What a delightful

surprise it has been for me to discover, along with millions of other believers, that God is truly present in every part of life, including the workplace. God is at work through his people at work. God is present with his church gathered and his church scattered in the marketplace. God is present where I work and where you work, whether we realize it or not.

As you look around your workplace, might you be able to say with Jacob, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it”?

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QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- *Can you think of times in your life when you had an experience like that of Jacob?*
- *Have you ever had a dream in which God spoke to you?*
- *Have you ever had an experience in which you were not aware of God's presence, only to look back and say to yourself, "God was there and I did not know it"?*
- *What might help you be more in touch with God's presence in your daily life, including your workplace?*



TAKEAWAYS: SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT, SOMETHING TO DO

- *What is one thing you will take away from today's study? It could be a new thought or a tangible action step.*
- *A possibility: During any 24-hour period, be quite intentional about looking for God's presence. Attend to what you see and hear, and also to your own heart. Be open to surprising ways in which God might be present.*





WRAPPING UP WITH PRAYER

As you conclude today's study, take a few moments to pray. I would encourage you to pray in two segments. First, pray specifically in response to your encounter with God's Word. Second, after you have done this, group members can share concerns and pray for each other.

Let the following prayer be a model for you:

Gracious God, I am so much like Jacob! I'm embarrassed to admit it, but, of course, it's no surprise to you. I tend to expect you to be present in places like worship services, chapel, prayer partnerships, mission trips, and the like. But I can go through my day completely unaware of your presence, like when I'm ordering my lunch or slogging through gobs of email or sitting in a meeting that is both interminable and wearisome. Forgive me for putting you in such a small and predictable box! Lord, may I be like Jacob, recognizing your

presence when I wasn't expecting it. Help me to be attentive to you at all times. Help me to expect you to be at work in me, through me, and around me.

To you be all the glory! Amen.

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SESSION 2: DOES GOD “SHOW UP” IN YOUR WORKPLACE?



BEGIN WITH THE BIBLE

After opening with prayer dedicating the time to the Lord, read, once again, Genesis 28:1-22. Also read Matthew 28:20 and John 1:14.



QUESTIONS TO GET STARTED

- *How do you respond to these passages of Scripture?*
- *What questions do you have? What thoughts? What feelings?*



REFLECTIONS

In Session 1, we examined the story in Genesis 28, in which Jacob has an encounter with the Lord in an unexpected place. After this experience of God, Jacob says, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” (28:16). As I reflected on this verse, I suggested that one place God surprises us with his presence is our workplace. We may assume that God is really present only in obviously religious contexts, but the truth is that God is present when we’re at work every bit as much as when we’re gathered for congregational worship or on a mission trip.

Today, I want to spend more time considering with you how God is present in our lives, especially in our workplaces. You may work in an office, a store, a warehouse, a field, a classroom, a kitchen, your home office, or even a church. No matter your workplace, God is there.

Sometimes the language we use to describe God’s presence can actually keep us from being aware of



God's presence. For example, I used to hang out with Christians who often spoke of God "showing up." If we had a particularly moving worship experience, or if we prayed for somebody who was healed, or if we were able to share our faith with someone, then God "showed up." What we meant was that God made his presence known in a particularly powerful way. Yet, by labeling these times as God "showing up," we ran the risk of implying that in most of life God had not "shown up." According to that language, God was not present in ordinary life, only in extraordinary experiences.

We would not have thought of God as present in the workplace unless something unusual happened, such as someone sharing Christ with a colleague.

My fellow believers and I associated God's presence with unusual displays of power rather than recognizing that God was truly present in all of life. Not everyone who uses the phrase "God showed up" thinks this way, of course. But I wonder sometimes if this manner of describing God's activity can lead us, negatively, to be unaware of God's presence, even as it might encourage us, positively, to expect God to act in dramatic and powerful ways.

The biblical answer to the question "Does God show up in your workplace?" is "Yes. All the time. Every day."

We might also recognize that God, who is always present with us, did once "show up" in a unique and astounding way. I'm referring to the Incarnation, when God took on human form in Jesus. If we want to use the language of God "showing up," then we might want to save this for talking about God's presence in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is truly human and truly divine.

The fact of the Incarnation reminds us that God cares deeply about human life, about his creation, about what we might consider "ordinary life." Remember, the Word of God made flesh didn't only preach, do miracles, and die on the cross for our salvation. In fact, the Son of God spent the majority of his waking hours on Earth working as a craftsman. The image of Jesus in his workshop reminds us that God is also present in our workplace.





QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- *How do you respond to the language of God “showing up”? Do you use this language? If so, what do you mean when you do? How does this way of speaking help you in your faith? How might it limit you?*
- *If God is truly present in our workplaces, how might we speak of his presence there?*



TAKEAWAYS: SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT, SOMETHING TO DO

- *What is one thing you will take away from today’s study, a new thought or action step?*
- *A possibility: If you tend to speak of God as “showing up,” try out some different ways of speaking. You might say that God “made his presence known in a special way.” Or you could say that God “worked in an amazing way.” I realize that these ways of speaking are not nearly as concise or memorable as saying that “God showed up.” Perhaps you can come up with another phrase that is just as catchy but theologically less problematic.*

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WRAPPING UP WITH PRAYER

As you conclude today's study, take a few moments to pray. I would encourage you to pray in two segments. First, pray specifically in response to your encounter with God's Word. Second, after you have done this, group members can share concerns and pray for each other.

Let the following prayer be a model for you:

Gracious God, thank you for “showing up” in our lives, all the time. Thank you for occasions when you make your presence known with power and glory. Thank you for the times when you speak in a still, small voice. Thank you for being with us always.

Help us, Lord, to learn to think of you as being present with us at all times. In particular, may we remember your presence when we're at work, no matter the task or the setting. May we seek to honor you in all that we do. May we be channels of your grace in our daily work. Amen.



SESSION 3: HOW RECOGNIZING GOD'S PRESENCE CAN CHANGE YOUR EXPERIENCE OF WORK



BEGIN WITH THE BIBLE

After opening with prayer dedicating the time to the Lord, read, once again, Genesis 28:1-22, Matthew 28:20, and John 1:14.



QUESTIONS TO GET STARTED

- *Do you see anything new in the Scripture readings for this session?*
- *How would you describe your experience of work? What is work like for you? What adjectives best capture what you experience each day?*



REFLECTIONS

In the last two sessions, I've used a passage from Genesis 28 to reflect on God's presence in our workplace. Even as Jacob was impressed by God's presence in a place he did not expect to find it, so it can be with us in our offices, shops, classrooms, and boardrooms.

I have spent most of my working life in pastoral ministry, both in churches and in other Christian organizations. Now, you might think that I'd have no trouble believing that God has been present in my work. This has been true sometimes. But there are other times—times when I'm sitting in long Human Resources meetings, times when I'm dealing with budget shortfalls, times when my work can feel just as godless as any other kind of work.

Yet, I've found that if I can keep in mind the fact that God is present in every bit of my work, then my experience of work changes distinctly. For example, if I'm getting ready to go into a long business meeting,



I can have a bad attitude about it and wish I were someplace else altogether. But if I remind myself that God will be present in the meeting, that what I'll be doing is for his pleasure, that God will be at work in my colleagues and me, and that God might have something planned that I'll miss if I remain stuck in my negative attitude, then my experience of the meeting will be different. I will be more attentive, not only to the Lord, but also to others. I will see evidence of God's activity that I might otherwise have missed. And, even if I have to fight boredom, at least I can offer myself to the Lord as his bored but faithful servant.

I don't mean to imply that if you attend to God's presence in your workplace everything will come up roses. Well, actually, roses might be a good analogy here. In our workplaces, even if we are aware of God's presence, we will still get snagged by plenty of thorns because our work has been tainted by sin. (Thorns and thistles in Genesis 3, remember?) There will be roses, yes, with lots of thorns. Yet, the more we work with an awareness of the reality of God's presence, the more we'll be able to find God's grace even in difficulties and frustrations.

You might hear this as good news. Or you might hear this with discouragement. Perhaps you've tried to

sense God's presence in your workplace, but it just hasn't worked. The combination of cultural pressure and personal bad habits might overwhelm your effort to be aware of God. If you feel stuck or discouraged, hang in there! Beginning with the next session, we'll be taught by a Christian who has helped millions to practice the presence of God, especially in the workplace. So, stayed tuned. For now, consider the following questions.





QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- *Can you think of times in your working life when your awareness of God's presence made a difference? What helped you to be aware of God being with you? What difference did this make?*
- *Think about aspects of your work life that are the least pleasant or rewarding for you. How might you experience these differently if you acknowledged God's presence?*



TAKEAWAYS: SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT, SOMETHING TO DO

- *What is one thing you will take away from today's study? It could be a new thought or a tangible action step.*
- *A possibility: A few minutes before a meeting that you are dreading, either because it might hold conflict or because you expect it to be boring, stop to pray. Ask the Lord to make his presence known to you in this meeting. Commit yourself to being attentive to his Spirit.*





WRAPPING UP WITH PRAYER

As you conclude today's study, take a few moments to pray. I would encourage you to pray in two segments. First, pray specifically in response to your encounter with God's Word. Second, after you have done this, group members can share concerns and pray for each other.

Let the following prayer be a model for you:

Gracious God, thank you for being present in every part of life. Thank you for being there at work. Thank you for being with us in good times and hard times. Thank you for caring about our work and for allowing us, through our work, to contribute to your work in the world.

Help us, Lord, to remember your presence in every place in which we work. We pray that, by your grace, we might sense that you are with us at all times, but especially in times of great challenge.

May all that we do at work, Lord, be an offering to you. Be glorified in and through us, at all times. Amen.

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SESSION 4: PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD AT WORK, PART A



BEGIN WITH THE BIBLE

After opening with prayer dedicating the time to the Lord, read Genesis 28:16 and Psalm 131.



QUESTIONS TO GET STARTED

- *How do you respond to Psalm 131? What thoughts do you have? What feelings?*



REFLECTIONS

In the last three sessions of this study guide, we focused on Genesis 28, the story of Jacob's experience of God's presence. After encountering God in a dream, Jacob woke up and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it" (28:16). I suggested that many of us might say the same thing about our workplaces when we discover that God is present there.

I expect that most of us would like to be more aware of God's presence at work. I also imagine that many of us have tried to grow in this awareness but have come up short. Our own habitual ways of thinking keep us from attending to God's presence where we work. Moreover, most of us work in settings in which the corporate culture does not encourage awareness of God. In fact, for many Christians in today's world, the workplace is more anti-God than merely secular. If you talk about God at work, there's a good possibility you will be thought of as strange. You might even limit



your professional success. (I'm not just making this up. Recently, two people from separate businesses in a major urban area told me that they have to be very careful about anything religious or they could be in a mess at work.)

How can we learn to experience God's presence in the workplace? There are many ways, I'm sure. One of the best is to be taught and inspired by Brother Lawrence, the seventeenth-century brother who worked in the kitchen of a monastery in Paris. Brother Lawrence didn't write any books on his spirituality. But he did write some personal letters and have many conversations with his superior in the monastery, Father Joseph de Beaufort. After Brother Lawrence died, de Beaufort wrote down what he remembered of his conversations with Brother Lawrence and published some of his letters. De Beaufort's effort has become one of the most influential of Christian classics. It is known as the *The Practice of the Presence of God*.

There is much in this book about faith and work. Consider, for example, this statement from the "Fourth Conversation" recorded by Father Joseph: "'For me,' [Lawrence] said, 'the time of work does not differ from the time of prayer. Even in the noise and clutter of my

kitchen—when several persons are at the same time calling for different things—I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at communion.'" "Great tranquility!" I'm reminded of Psalm 131:2, where David writes, "I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me."

How do you respond to Lawrence's statement about "great tranquility"? I'll share with you some of my own responses. At first, it feels almost inappropriately boastful, until I remember that Lawrence said this in a private conversation with his superior, to whom he had a commitment to complete honesty. I might also be inclined to doubt Lawrence's claim here, except for the fact that he was well known among his peers for exactly the kind of intimacy with God about which he speaks. My skepticism is, no doubt, a reflection of my own impoverished experience of God, rather than of Lawrence's exaggeration.

Once I get beyond my resistance to what Lawrence says here, I find myself both relating and not relating to his statement. Though I don't work in a kitchen anymore (I did when I was a freshman in college), I regularly experience the "noise and clutter" of my work

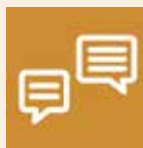


life, namely: emails, phone calls, travel arrangements, meetings, expectations, etc. I get the chaos of which Lawrence speaks. But what I don't get, at least not very often, is the experience of "possessing God in as great tranquility [at work] as if I were upon my knees at communion." Here's where I need Lawrence to teach me as well as to inspire me. Here's where I need the Spirit of God to awaken my heart and open my eyes to God's gracious and trustworthy presence as I do my work.

Thus, my response to Lawrence's claim to "great tranquility" includes a fair measure of envy. I wish I were like Lawrence! But then, as I offer my envy to the Lord, he replaces it with desire, a deep desire, not so much to be like Lawrence as to know God's presence and peace in the midst of my work, even when my workplace feels noisy and cluttered. I yearn to experience God more truly and profoundly when I am working, even this very moment. I expect you can relate to what I'm saying.

Let me encourage you to take time to consider with your group Lawrence's confession. I'll repeat it once again: "The time of work does not differ from the time of prayer. Even in the noise and clutter of my kitchen—

when several persons are at the same time calling for different things—I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at communion."



QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- *Have you ever read The Practice of the Presence of God? If so, how did it affect you?*
- *Are there ever times in your work life when you sense God's presence much in the way you might when celebrating communion?*
- *How might you experience God in the midst of the "noise and clutter" of your workplace?*





TAKEAWAYS: SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT, SOMETHING TO DO

- *What is one thing you will take away from today's study? It could be a new thought or a tangible action step.*
- *A possibility: Read the entire "Fourth Conversation" in The Practice of the Presence of God (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/lawrence/practice.iii.iv.html>).*



WRAPPING UP WITH PRAYER

As you conclude today's study, take a few moments to pray. I would encourage you to pray in two segments. First, pray specifically in response to your encounter with God's Word. Second, after you have done this, group members can share concerns and pray for each other.

Let the following prayer be a model for you:

Gracious God, thank you for the example of Brother Lawrence. Thank you for his discovery of your presence in his workplace. Thank you for Father Joseph, who recorded for us Lawrence's wisdom. Thank you for the invitation to experience you in every part of life, including our work. Through your Word, by your Spirit, and in the encouragement of your people, help us, like Brother Lawrence, to know you more deeply, more consistently, and more truly.

May I sense your presence today at work, Lord. May I offer my work to you this day and remain in communication with you all day. Amen.

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SESSION 5: PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD AT WORK, PART B



BEGIN WITH THE BIBLE

After opening with prayer dedicating the time to the Lord, read Genesis 28:16 and Psalm 42.



QUESTIONS TO GET STARTED

- *Have you experienced God's presence in your work recently? If so, would you be willing to share it? If not, don't worry. It takes time.*



REFLECTIONS

In the last session of this study guide, I began to share with you some reflections based on the classic Christian book *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. This book will help us, I believe, to think about how we, like Jacob in Genesis 28:16, might recognize God's presence in our workplaces, even if we have been unaware of his presence in the past. (By the way, I should mention that your workplace isn't necessarily a place where you earn money. Your workplace could be your kitchen at home, your classroom, or the youth center where you serve during the week.)

One of my favorite passages in *The Practice of the Presence of God* comes in the "Second Conversation" reported by Father Joseph de Beaufort. He was reporting on occasions when Lawrence had to do work that was difficult or unpleasant. In these times, Lawrence found encouragement in the fact that he was doing God's business. Father Joseph continues,



“Things have worked similarly in his duties in the kitchen, to which he naturally has a great aversion. He simply has accustomed himself to do everything there for the love of God. And on all occasions he performs his work with prayer, asking for God’s grace to do his work well. As a result, during the fifteen years that he has been employed there, Brother Lawrence has found everything to be easy.”

Part of what I love about this passage is its straightforward admission that Lawrence had “a great aversion” to his job in the kitchen, something he did for a long time, by the way. Lawrence is not portrayed in otherworldly terms here, as a super-Christian for whom faithfulness always comes joyfully. Rather, he is a genuine person, one who can hate his work, much as you or I might do upon occasion.

Yet, as Lawrence learned to “do everything there for the love of God,” his experience of his work changed. Moreover, he depended on God for the “grace to do his work well.” Thus, because his work was an expression of love for God, and because he relied on God’s grace to do his work, “Brother Lawrence has found everything to be easy.” This doesn’t mean he loved everything he had to do. Nor does it mean he

didn’t have to work hard at times. Rather, his work was easy because it was an act of love for God, an act empowered by God’s grace.

This quotation from *The Practice of the Presence of God* meant a great deal to me many years ago when I was the pastor of Irvine Presbyterian Church. The church and I were going through a rough patch together. I was receiving lots of criticism and feeling heavy discouragement about my work. I wouldn’t say I felt a “great aversion” to it, but there were many days when I thought about resigning and walking away.

During that challenging time, I turned to Brother Lawrence for wisdom and encouragement. When I read the passage quoted above, I felt as if God was speaking to me. Not only did I think and pray about this passage, but also I printed it out, framed it, and placed it in my office at church. Each day, especially in difficult times, I would ask God for the grace to work well, even when I would rather not be doing it. I would confess my great need of God’s help. I would quite consciously offer my work to God as an act of love for him.

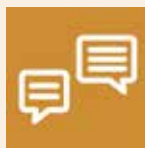
Did I find, like Lawrence, that everything became easy? No, that would be an exaggeration. But I did find comfort and encouragement as I sensed God’s

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presence in new ways. Moreover, by offering my work to God as a gesture of love, I found a measure of freedom from needing to please everyone in the church, especially those who were critical of me.

If you love your work, you can still learn to love God through your work and depend consistently on his grace. If, like Lawrence, you're feeling aversion for your work, or, if like most of us, you are somewhere in between love and aversion, then Lawrence's example can help you experience God's presence in your work, even today.



QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- *How are you feeling about your work these days? Love it? Hate it? Love and hate it? Not feeling much at all?*
- *Have you talked to God recently about how you're doing at work?*
- *What might help you do your work "for the love of God"?*
- *Will you imitate Brother Lawrence today by asking God for the grace to work well?*





TAKEAWAYS: SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT, SOMETHING TO DO

- *What is one thing you will take away from today's study? It could be a new thought or a tangible action step.*
- *A possibility: Like Brother Lawrence did, ask God for the grace to do your work well.*



WRAPPING UP WITH PRAYER

As you conclude today's study, take a few moments to pray. I would encourage you to pray in two segments. First, pray specifically in response to your encounter with God's Word. Second, after you have done this, group members can share concerns and pray for each other.

Let the following prayer be a model for you:

Gracious God, again we thank you for Brother Lawrence and for the chance to learn from him. Thank you, Lord, for being present in our work, whether we love it or hate it. Thank you for the chance to do our work out of love for you. Thank you for giving us the grace to work well.

Today, Lord, may we offer our work to you. May it be an expression of our love for you. And, in our work, may we consciously rely on you and your grace. Help us to work well, Lord, no matter what we're doing. May you be glorified in our work today. Amen.

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SESSION 6: PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD AT WORK, PART C



BEGIN WITH THE BIBLE

After opening with prayer dedicating the time to the Lord, read Genesis 28:16, Psalm 139, and 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22.



QUESTIONS TO GET STARTED

- *Have you had any experiences of God's presence in your workplace in the last week?*



REFLECTIONS

This session is the third that uses as its inspiration not only Scripture but also the classic book of Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. This seventeenth-century brother is helping grow in our experience of God's presence in our daily work.

Prayer was central to Lawrence's engagement with God in the monastery kitchen where he worked for years. In the "Second Conversation" recorded by Father Joseph de Beaufort, we read, "Brother Lawrence said that in order to form a habit of conversing with God continually—and doing all of our actions for Him—we must at first diligently implore Him for this ability. However, after a little practice, we will eventually find His love inwardly exciting us to this practice without any difficulty."

As I read this excerpt, I'm struck by Lawrence's "habit of conversing with God continually." From other things he wrote, we understand that this does not mean Lawrence was literally talking with God all the time.



He certainly engaged in conversations with others, for example. Yet, even in these times, Lawrence did not “hang up on God,” so to speak. He developed an awareness of God’s consistent presence and an openness to hearing from God. Of course, what Lawrence describes here was encouraged by the Apostle Paul, who urged the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). I wonder what would happen in our daily work if we kept the communication channel with the Lord open all the time.

We who are oriented to achievement could easily turn Brother Lawrence’s practice of continual prayer into something we must do to earn God’s favor rather than viewing it as a result of God’s grace at work in us. Thus, we need to be reminded that if we seek to be in ongoing conversation with God, “we must at first diligently implore Him for this ability.” The ability to pray without ceasing comes not from our efforts but from God.

The content of our prayers also reflects our utter reliance on God’s grace. Later in the “Second Conversation,” we read, “[Lawrence] said that we should walk with God in the greatest simplicity—

speaking to Him frankly and plainly. We should implore His assistance in our daily affairs while they are happening.” According to Lawrence, we should ask God for help in our work, not only at the beginning of the day and the end of the day, but also “in our daily affairs while they are happening.” As you’re dealing with an angry client, silently ask God for patience and peace. Or, if you’re in a meeting that seems to be stuck, ask the Lord for wisdom. If you’re having a great day, thank God for this special grace.

As I write these words, I’m reminded of Howard E. Butt, Jr., for whom I worked during my years at the H.E. Butt Family Foundation. I can’t tell you how many times, in the middle of a meeting, as we were wrestling with some tricky issue, Howard would pray. Usually, he didn’t prepare the way by saying, “Let’s stop to pray about this.” Rather, he’d just start talking to God as if God were present in the room. Often, Howard’s prayers were short: “Lord, give us wisdom.” Sometimes they were longer. Howard had learned to pray in the mode of Brother Lawrence, speaking with the Lord, not just in designated times, but all the time. Howard’s example encouraged me when I was with him, and it still does today.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- *Have you ever known anyone who prays like Brother Lawrence or Howard Butt, Jr.?*
- *Do you remain in conversation with God throughout the day? Why or why not?*
- *What helps you to keep on speaking and listening to God as you go about your business?*



TAKEAWAYS: SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT, SOMETHING TO DO

- *What is one thing you will take away from today's study? It could be a new thought or a tangible action step.*
- *A possibility: Read the entire "Second Conversation" in The Practice of the Presence of God (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/lawrence/practice.iii.ii.html>).*



WRAPPING UP WITH PRAYER

As you conclude today's study, take a few moments to pray. I would encourage you to pray in two segments. First, pray specifically in response to your encounter with God's Word. Second, after you have done this, group members can share concerns and pray for each other.

Let the following prayer be a model for you:

Gracious God, as we sit now and reflect, we find ourselves yearning to be in more regular conversation with you. So, following Brother Lawrence's lead, we "diligently implore you for this ability." Help us to remain in communication with you today. Help us to speak to you as if you were present with us (because, of course, you are). Help us to listen as your Spirit whispers to us.

Thank you, Lord, for the encouragement and wisdom of Brother Lawrence. May we grow to experience your presence in every part of life. Amen.



SESSION 7: PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD AT WORK, PART D



BEGIN WITH THE BIBLE

After opening with prayer dedicating the time to the Lord, read Genesis 28:16, Psalm 46, and 1 Corinthians 15:9-11.



QUESTIONS TO GET STARTED

- *What impresses you in the Bible readings for this session?*



REFLECTIONS

Though my usual approach as the chief writer for *Life for Leaders* is to examine closely a passage of Scripture, drawing out from the text wisdom concerning the difference God makes in our life and leadership, in this study guide I'm doing something a little different. The last six sessions of this guide are based on Genesis 28:16, a passage in which Jacob recognizes God's unexpected presence. I also encourage you to read a psalm that adds to our understanding of God's presence. But I'm drawing wisdom mainly from a classic Christian book, *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. I believe we have much to learn from our mature brothers and sisters in Christ, such as the seventeenth-century brother. I know I do.

Brother Lawrence, who worked in the kitchen of a monastery for decades, learned to be conscious of God's presence at all times. How did he do this?

In the last session of this guide, we noted that the beginning for Lawrence was "diligently imploring God"



for the ability to remain in communication with him throughout the day. In other words, we learn to be attentive to God at all times, not merely by our own efforts, but through God's grace at work in us.

Yet, just because something happens by grace, this does not mean our efforts don't matter. In 1 Corinthians 15, for example, Paul explains that his apostolic ministry is a result of God's grace at work in him. But he adds, "I worked harder than any of [the other apostles]—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10). Grace and hard work go together like a hand in a glove when it comes to serving the Lord in our work.

In a similar vein, here's how Brother Lawrence explains how our awareness of God's presence grows in us: "In short, by often repeating these acts of consciously focusing on and communing with God, this practice becomes continuous. Eventually, the presence of God becomes natural to us" (an excerpt from the "First Letter"). So, as God's grace helps us, we repeatedly focus on God throughout the day and commune with him. We redirect our minds and hearts to the Lord as a grace-filled exercise of will. In time, we become so accustomed to fellowship with God that it is "natural to us."

What might help us remember to focus on God during the day? I know people who use physical reminders to point to the Lord. For example, every time they see a particular painting on their wall, they think of God. I know others who are in a community where people regularly remind each other of God's presence.

I have been trying an experiment of a different kind. I have set several reminders in my phone, so that at certain hours of the day I'll receive the message "God is here." I'm hoping that these simple messages will open my heart to a deeper and more consistent awareness of God's presence. Maybe you will want to join me in this experiment. Or maybe you can think of something on your own.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- *What helps you to remember God's presence in your life and work?*
- *Can you think of something simple you could add to your life so that you might grow in a consistent awareness of God's presence in your work?*



TAKEAWAYS: SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT, SOMETHING TO DO

- *What is one thing you will take away from today's study? It could be a new thought or a tangible action step.*
- *A possibility: Why not join me in my experiment? Using a reminders app, calendar app, or something similar, send yourself several times throughout the day a simple note that reads, "God is here." Pay attention to the difference this message makes for you.*



WRAPPING UP WITH PRAYER

As you conclude today's study, take a few moments to pray. I would encourage you to pray in two segments. First, pray specifically in response to your encounter with God's Word. Second, after you have done this, group members can share concerns and pray for each other.

Let the following prayer be a model for you:

Gracious God, how we thank you that you are with us always. Thank you for your Spirit who dwells in us and among us as your people. Thank you for the countless times you have made yourself known to us.

Help us, Lord, to grow in our awareness of you. By your grace, may we practice your presence until we become consistently aware of you. Help us especially in settings where we are apt to forget you.

May all we do this day glorify you and draw us closer to you. Amen.



SESSION 8: PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD AT WORK, PART E



BEGIN WITH THE BIBLE

After opening with prayer dedicating the time to the Lord, read Genesis 28:16, Psalm 23, and Mark 12:41-44.



QUESTIONS TO GET STARTED

- *How do you respond to this session's readings?*



REFLECTIONS

Recently, I was speaking to a group about the challenge and opportunity of seeing our work as an essential element of God's own work and a central part of our discipleship. Before my talk, a successful business owner shared with the group about how he saw his work as an expression of his faith. After I finished, a man approached me. His face suggested that he was upset. After we shook hands, he said, "I'm not happy about what happened tonight. All of this faith and work stuff is just fine for people who work in executive jobs, for business people and other professionals. But I'm getting sick and tired of faith and work conversations that feature business owners, entrepreneurs, and successful CEOs. Sure, they can be creative in following Jesus at work. But what about ordinary people? What about those of us who go to work, punch a clock, and do manual labor? What about those of us whose jobs are physically demanding or very boring? How does God make a difference in this kind of work?"



As I listened to this man, after corralling my defensiveness, I realized that his critique was an accurate one. All too often discussions of faith and work happen among those who enjoy considerable power and privilege. We can easily overlook the reality of millions upon millions of people throughout the world whose work seems more like a curse than a blessing, people for whom work feels like a matter of necessity rather than an exercise of freedom and fulfillment.

In response to my unhappy brother in Christ, I wish I had thought to mention Brother Lawrence. He offers a distinct perspective in *The Practice of the Presence of God*. For many years, Lawrence worked in the kitchen of his monastery. He did not naturally like this work, which was physically demanding and quite repetitive. Yet, it was in the context of this work that Lawrence experienced deep fellowship with God.

Though some of us find great joy in our work, others experience it as walking “through the darkest valley,” or what the King James Version called “the valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23:4). Even when our work reminds us of death or makes us wish for the relief of

death, we can affirm with David, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.”

In Father Joseph de Beaufort’s summary of the “Fourth Conversation” he had with Brother Lawrence, we read, “He also counseled that we should not grow weary of doing even little things for the love of God. God does not regard the greatness of the work, but only the love with which it is performed.” This is not the wisdom of some theologian writing from the comfort of a library. Rather, a man who worked with his hands at a tough job he did not like encourages us to do “even little things for the love of God,” the little things that the world might not value, the little things we don’t enjoy. These can be actions of love for God.

Moreover, according to Lawrence, God is not impressed by “the greatness of our work.” Rather, the Lord values “only the love with which it is performed.” This statement reminds me of Jesus’s comment about the poor widow who contributed “only” a couple of pennies into the temple treasury, in contrast to the wealthy who contributed large sums. Jesus said of the woman, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put



in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury” (Mark 12:43). By analogy, the one whose seemingly insignificant work is done for love of God may, from God’s perspective, have worked more significantly than the “faith@work” hero whose heart is divided.

The example of Lawrence reminds us to make sure our conversations about faith and work include all of God’s people, not just those who have naturally rewarding jobs. But Lawrence’s example also encourages all of us in our work, no matter how difficult and unnoticed our work might be. By God’s grace, we can discover how to do our work as an expression of love for God. As we do, not only do we find deep meaning in our work but also God takes delight in our acts of love for him.



QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- *What do you think of the man’s comments to me about ordinary work at that group meeting?*
- *How might we make the conversation about faith and work more inclusive of all of God’s people?*
- *Do you do your work as a conscious act of love for God? If so, what helps you to do this? If not, why not?*
- *How might you be able to love God through your work today?*





TAKEAWAYS: SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT, SOMETHING TO DO

- *What is one thing you will take away from today's study?*
- *A possibility: Find someone in your workplace who does fairly menial work, but work that helps you to do your work well. Communicate your gratitude to that person, not just with a simple thanks, but by saying, "I really appreciate you and your work because . . ."*



WRAPPING UP WITH PRAYER

As you conclude today's study, take a few moments to pray. I would encourage you to pray in two segments. First, pray specifically in response to your encounter with God's Word. Second, after you have done this, group members can share concerns and pray for each other.

Let the following prayer be a model for you:

Gracious God, thank you that all work matters to you. Thank you for the opportunity we all have to work as an expression of our love for you.

Help me, this day, to do my work in this way. May I consciously offer my work to you as a gesture of love.

And help us, Lord, as we talk about faith and work, to include all of your people in the conversation. May we learn from each other. May we be challenged by each other to discover deeper truth and deeper love. Amen.



SESSION 9: PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD AT WORK, PART F

BEGIN WITH THE BIBLE

After opening with prayer dedicating the time to the Lord, read Genesis 28:16, Psalm 40, and Romans 12:1-12.

QUESTIONS TO GET STARTED

- *What in these biblical passages sparks your interest or curiosity?*

REFLECTIONS

In the past five study guide sessions, I have been using the wisdom of Brother Lawrence to help us learn how we might recognize God's presence in our workplaces. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were to get to the point where, unlike Jacob in Genesis 28:16, we might say about the places where we work, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did know it! In fact, I know it every day!"

Today, we end our reflections based on *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. I want to draw our attention to a couple of sentences in the "Fourth Conversation" between Lawrence and Father Joseph de Beaufort. The focus of these sentences is sanctification. That's a word you don't hear much anymore, though it's an essential dimension of our growth in Christ. Sanctification is the process by which we become more like God, more holy. When we first receive God's grace in Christ, we are declared holy by God. We are saints. But our lives are not instantly transformed and perfected. Rather, we begin a lifelong process of becoming more and more sanctified, more and more like God.

We often think of sanctification in terms of new things we do to help us grow in godliness. We devote ourselves to prayer, worship, Bible reading, Christian community, generosity, justice, and the like. Through actions motivated by the Spirit, we are shaped in heart, mind, and behavior. We participate in a process of



sanctification, something motivated, empowered, and governed by God through the Spirit.

What Lawrence has to say about sanctification is a bit different from the standard Christian understanding. He explains, “Our sanctification does not depend upon changing our works (assuming they are not sinful of themselves). Rather, sanctification depends upon doing for God’s sake what we commonly do for our own sake.” So, becoming more like God is not primarily a matter of doing new things. Instead, it is learning to do “for God’s sake what we commonly do for our own sake.”

How fascinating! And challenging! When it comes to work, then, sanctification is a matter of doing my daily work—not primarily for my benefit, and not so that I might be fulfilled or make money. Rather, I will become more like God when I learn to do my daily work for God’s sake, for his purposes and glory.

This perspective reminds me of a passage in Ephesians, where Paul says that slaves should do their work not primarily for their earthly masters but, rather, for their heavenly Master. They are to be “slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart” (Ephesians 6:6).

Lawrence would add that by working for God’s sake, they become more like God in the process.

Thus, our work has value, not only because of what it accomplishes “out there,” but also because of what it facilitates “in here.” Our work can be a means of sanctification, a way to help us become more like Christ. May it be so, Lord!



QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- *As you consider your daily work, does it make sense to you to do this work for God’s sake?*
- *If you were working each day for God and his purposes, how might this make a difference in the way you work? In your goals? In your relationships? In your practices?*
- *Can you see how God is using your work to form your soul and your behavior so that you will be more like Christ?*





TAKEAWAYS: SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT, SOMETHING TO DO

- *What is one thing you will take away from today's study? It could be a new thought or a tangible action step.*
- *A possibility: Take some time to reflect on how your work shapes you, your thinking, your feeling, your behavior, your assumptions, your hopes, your dreams, your fears. Are you pleased with the impact of your work upon your soul?*



WRAPPING UP WITH PRAYER

As you conclude today's study, take a few moments to pray. I would encourage you to pray in two segments. First, pray specifically in response to your encounter with God's Word. Second, after you have done this, group members can share concerns and pray for each other.

Let the following prayer be a model for you:

Gracious God, thank you for the calling you give each of us to live our whole life for your sake. Forgive us for how easily we seek to serve you in some things but not in others.

Teach us how to do for you that which we do for ourselves. In particular, we ask that you would help us to do our daily work for you. May you be glorified in our work and may we become more like you in the process. Amen.



Some Helpful Resources for Faith and Work Integration

If you are looking for additional resources to help you think wisely and act biblically when it comes to faith and work integration, I would suggest the following:

Theology of Work Project - theologyofwork.org

TOW describes itself this way: “The Theology of Work Project answers the question ‘What does the Bible say about work?’ by producing Bible commentary, topical articles, and audio/video resources that examine faith and work from a Christian perspective. The Bible and work are meticulously analyzed in our commentary, and lessons are driven home through case studies and videos.” The resources on the Theology of Work Project website are vast.

Made to Flourish – madetoflourish.org

A network of pastors who are leading their churches “to connect Sunday faith to Monday work.” Lots of resources on this site for pastors, churches, and marketplace leaders.

Oikonomia Network – oikonomianetwork.org

Though intended primarily for seminary professors, ON has resources of value for marketplace leaders as well. See, in particular, their Economic Wisdom Project (oikonomianetwork.org/resources/economic-wisdom-project/).

Denver Institute for Faith & Work – denverinstitute.org

Lots of great resources here, plus opportunities to participate in excellent events.

The Washington Institute – washingtoninst.org

The Washington Institute helps people with faith and work integration by seeing life in terms of vocation, the call of God to each of us. Thoughtful blog posts and dozens of resources.

Center for Faith and Work – faithandwork.com

Sponsored by Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, the Center sponsors outstanding events and publishes valuable resources.





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