

*HOPE for the RURAL CHURCH,
SMALL TOWNS, & OVERLOOKED PLACES*

GROUP STUDY GUIDE
STRIP MINE JESUS
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PREFACE

KEY TAKEAWAY

You're not alone if you have wrestled with a sense that where you are from is a detriment to where you want to go.

CONVERSATION STARTER

At some point or another we each have to decide where and how to steward the life God has given us. How have you navigated decisions about where to make your home and the desire to live a meaningful life?

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION I Kings 19:1-18

What does Elijah's experience remind us about attending to the voice and presence of God?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How have you felt the tension described on pages 9-10 between place and significance?
- Do you think it is getting easier or harder to hear God's voice if God calls a person to root themselves in a small place or church?

ATTENTIVE PRACTICE

Spend fifteen minutes in prayer for your town and the people that call it home. Ask God to help you be more attentive to his presence in your life and in the places you experience every day. Close your time in prayer with a few minutes of silent, listening prayer as a way of increasing your attentiveness to the Holy Spirit.

INTRODUCTION

KEY TAKEAWAY

The places we are from form us for the callings God has for us.

CONVERSATION STARTER

Where are you from and how did that specific place shape your story? If you moved frequently, how did the absence of geographic rootedness shape your story?

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION John 1:43-51

Does it matter that Jesus was from the small, looked down on village of Nazareth? What can we learn from Philip's invitation to Nathanael?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What about the story of the strip mine stands out to you?
- What about your hometown or current community do you need to look at again with fresh eyes?
- When was the last time you seriously reflected on the fact that the God of the universe is attentive and active in the community you call home?
- How do you think the regular contemplation of God's attentive presence in your community and church might shape your outlook, actions, and ministry there in practical ways?

ATTENTIVE PRACTICE

Write a brief description of your hometown and list ways that place shaped you positively or negatively. Reflect on how God was present to you in that place. Do the same for the place in which you currently live.



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CHAPTER 1 | What You See Is What You Get

KEY TAKEAWAY

Love requires attention, and attention changes things.

CONVERSATION STARTER

Reflect on a time when paying attention or failing to pay attention made a difference in your life, church, or community.

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION Mark 10:46-52

How did Jesus attend to Bartimaeus? What did Jesus' attention do?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are the signs of attention or inattention in your town or church?
- What is it easy, even tempting, to look past or ignore in your town or church?
- What emotions or questions does G. K. Chesterton's quote about Pimlico on page 47 raise for you?
- Can you think of something or someone in your life, church, or town that was transformed by love?
- How attentive are you to God, people, and place? Which of these three are easiest to attend to? Which is hardest?

ATTENTIVE PRACTICE

Take a walk around your town or down your road. Try to pay attention to what you see, feel, smell, and hear. What do you sense God is saying about your community?

CHAPTER 2 | The Idols That Blind Us

KEY TAKEAWAY

We impair our spiritual senses anytime we prioritize an idol above God.

CONVERSATION STARTER

Reflect on a situation when sin, addiction, or a series of poor decisions blinded you or someone you know. What were the consequences of this inability to see clearly?

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION Psalm 115:2-11

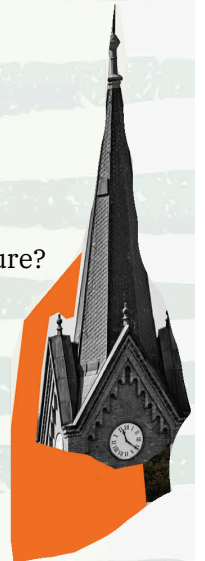
What is this passage saying about the way our idols shape our own ability to attend? Can you think of other places in Scripture that describe people who have eyes and ears but can't see or hear?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What aspect of modern life do you find the most distracting and disorienting?
- Tim Keller once described an idol as "anything more important to you than God" (61). If you consider your life with this concept of idolatry in view, what idols do you find to be the most enticing, and how have you sought to avoid them?
- Do you agree that things like celebrity, efficiency, and autonomy can become idols in our culture? Which of these three do you find most likely to influence your thinking and life decisions?

ATTENTIVE PRACTICE

Take ten minutes to do a self-inventory of your life. What desires or values shape your decisions and priorities? What impact do these have on your ability to live and serve wholeheartedly right where you are?



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CHAPTER 3 | The Beauty of Community

KEY TAKEAWAY

Embracing the community God provides roots us in a web of relationships and works as an antidote to autonomy.

CONVERSATION STARTER

We live in a world where we can have hundreds of “friends” and thousands of “followers” online but few real friends—the kind who ask you how your day was or who show up when you have to move something heavy across town. How have you witnessed the breakdown of friendship and community in your life, your town, or even your church over the years and where do you catch glimpses of beautiful relational connections that still endure?

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION Matthew 6:25-34

God has made us for relationship with him and with others. If this is a need, what does it look like to you to trust that God will provide for it?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What about Mandy’s fictional experiences on pages 81-83 rings true to you?
- How have you experienced the paradox of presence (84-86) over the past decade?
- Have you ever felt as if God didn’t provide the community or mentors you needed in a season? If so, how did you navigate these feelings?
- We tend to idealize things like intentional community and mentorship in our minds, but what if the beautiful community God has for us has been there all along? What might it look like to cultivate a deeper attentiveness to the accidental community God is currently providing in your life?
- Name and describe a key “weaver” (107-108) in your church or community. Are there steps you could take to become more of a weaver yourself?

ATTENTIVE PRACTICE

Cultivating a heart of gratitude is one of the most counter-cultural postures Christians can adopt in our self-focused age. In order to be grateful, sometimes we have to change how and what we remember. Take ten minutes to recall the names of as many people as you can who have encouraged you and befriended you throughout your life and faith journey. Try to get beyond the ones who come readily to mind and list those you may never have before appreciated as part of the beautiful community God has given you. Make it a point to call, write, or visit with one or two of these people to let them know how God has used them in your life.



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CHAPTER 4 | The Goodness of Stability

KEY TAKEAWAY

Stability in where we live and who we live among works against the platform-building of celebrity culture by letting us be known for more than what we do.

CONVERSATION STARTER

Stability works against celebrity. How have you thought about the presence or lack of geographic stability over the course of your life? If so, has geographic stability been a goal you worked toward, or has it felt more like a constraint you pushed against? What do you think lies behind your feelings about stability?

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION Jeremiah 29:1-14

This passage of Jeremiah is full of implications for how God's people can intentionally settle in whatever place they find themselves, even if that settling is only for a season. How do the rest of the verses in this passage impact the way you read the passage's most famous verse (i.e., Jeremiah 29:11).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Not all of us live near actual ghost towns, but we all encounter the boom-and-bust tendencies that mark modern culture—including parts of modern church culture. Where have you encountered boom-and-bust thinking? Where have you been tempted to buy-into a boomtime mentality yourself?
- How might you embody James Davidson Hunter's concept of faithful presence (122) in your own context? What does it mean to be faithfully present in your community?
- Would you describe yourself as living in a place that you have received, chosen, or returned to? How has this shaped your life and what might Stegner's concept of "settling" (120-121) look like for you in your context?
- What are some stories of settling that come to mind in your church or community?

ATTENTIVE PRACTICE

Write a note to your children or someone younger who is discerning how and where to invest his or her life. What would you want them to know about place, faithful presence, and the importance of settling?



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CHAPTER 5 | The Truth of Our Identity

KEY TAKEAWAY

We can only know who we are when we know whose we are. Rooting our identities in Christ helps us understand our vocations and avoid the reductionist, functional identities our efficiency-minded culture offers us.

CONVERSATION STARTER

Most of us have been insecure at one point or another. Think about how insecurity has shaped your own understanding of yourself or of a time when a leader in your town or church acted out of insecurity. What did this insecurity lead to in your life or in the example you shared?

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION Psalm 139:1-18

What does this passage remind us about God's attentive presence in our lives?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Have you ever been a new kid in school or a new person in town? If so, how did that experience shape the way you thought about others? How did it shape how you thought about yourself?
- C.S. Lewis once described the major thrust of his writing as being "against reductionism" (149). Our desire for efficiency still tempts us toward the reductionist thinking C. S. Lewis identified as a problem of the modern world. How are you tempted to think of yourself or others in a reductionistic way?
- Are you tempted to prioritize efficiency in your life? If so, how does this shape your attentiveness to people and places? How can you tell if you are over-emphasizing efficiency?
- Have you ever considered the intentional inefficiency of God (164-169)? How might this concept help us think better about our own limits and the people around us?
- How does Plantinga's concept of primary and secondary vocations (161-164) map onto your life? What are things you are called to?

ATTENTIVE PRACTICE

Read Psalm 139:1-18 twice slowly and then ask the God to remind you of his love for you and his attentive concern for your life.



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CHAPTER 6 | Suffering and Hope in Small-Town America

KEY TAKEAWAY

To love a place and its people is to open one's self up to suffering, but God can use suffering to help us step into our callings in ways we could never have imagined.

CONVERSATION STARTER

Recall a moment or a season when your family, church, or community experienced suffering. Did this event bring your community together or drive people apart? Why do you think this specific type of suffering had the effect it did on the community?

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION Romans 8:16-30

What does this passage remind us about God's attentive presence in our lives?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Suffering comes in a variety of ways. Some events are sudden and public, others have a longer onset and may seem to creep up on us (e.g., watching young people leave an area or seeing a place we love change for the worse over time). Which of these two types of suffering feels most pertinent in your life, church, or community?
- How does the suffering of Jesus speak to us in our suffering?
- How might suffering you have witnessed in your life, community, or church be redeemed according to this passage?
- Can you think of a time that you felt dissatisfied with (or even suffered) because of a place you found yourself living? If so, what emotions did this produce in you?
- What in Tolkien's story "Leaf by Niggle" or in Kenneth's account of his decision to return to Uganda stood out to you? What do both of these stories demonstrate about suffering's impact on our vocations?

ATTENTIVE PRACTICE

Take ten minutes to reflect on the ways you wept with those who wept and rejoiced with those who rejoiced over the past year. What did joining others in these moments stir up in your mind and heart? Where were there times when you held back participating in either suffering and joy? Evaluate what prompted your hesitancy.



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CONCLUSION | Living Toward Hope that Lasts

KEY TAKEAWAY

God's attentive presence makes it possible to live toward hope that lasts no matter where we are.

CONVERSATION STARTER

Think of a time you were oblivious to something that you should have noticed? What was it that initially kept you from noticing, and what was it that eventually helped you see?

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION Revelation 21:1-7; 22:1-5

What does this passage remind us about God's attentive presence in our lives?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- As you've read through this book how has God helped you attend to the people and places you see everyday?
- How does the reality of God's redemptive presence in your community shape your work today and your hopes the future?
- What about God's promise of a new heaven and a new earth gives you the most hope?
- What do you think about Keller's idea of "the Great Horizon?" Are you willing to consider committing yourself?
- How is your place broken? How are you longing for it to be restored? What would it look like to say "I always knew you could be like this. I got glimpses of it on earth, but now look at you!"

ATTENTIVE PRACTICE

Take ten minutes to reflect on what your family, church, or community might look like if our prayer that God's kingdom would come and his will be done on earth as in heaven were answered today? What would change? What would stay the same? How can you live now toward that hope? Spend some time in prayer to both intercede for your community and thank God for his continuing mercy and his power to redeem the people and places you experience every day.

CONCLUSION



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