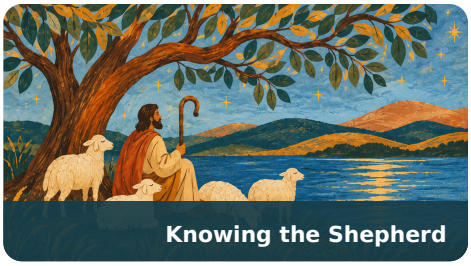
RS JOURNEYS
Go Deeper. Become More.

CHAPTER 2

Pursuing God



CHAPTER OVERVIEW

God's love doesn't begin with our search for him. Long before we turn toward God, he is already moving toward us.

Throughout Scripture, we encounter a God who calls people into relationship, remains faithful when they fail him, and acts to restore what sin has broken. His love is more than a passing feeling or a response to our faithfulness. It flows from who he is.

In these encounters, we'll discover the heart of the God who seeks us—and what his steadfast love means for learning to trust and follow him.

ENCOUNTER 1

The God Who Wanted Us

PREPARE

The Bible begins not with humanity searching for God, but with God creating a world and giving humanity a place within it. As you read, notice how God describes the people he creates, what he entrusts to them, and what his actions reveal about his purposes for human life.

PONDER

1. In Genesis, what distinguishes God's creation of humanity from the rest of creation? Consider the identity, responsibilities, and blessings he gives them. What might these reveal about the relationship God intends to have with humanity?
2. Psalm 139 moves from the creation of humanity to the psalmist's awareness of God's personal knowledge and care. How does reading these passages together deepen your understanding of God's intentions toward you? What assumptions about your own significance or worth might they challenge?

READ

Genesis 1:26–2:3 · Psalm 139:13–18

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice that God's first words to the humans he creates are words of blessing (Genesis 1:28)?

Before they have accomplished anything or demonstrated their faithfulness, God blesses them and entrusts them with a place in his creation.

The relationship begins with God's initiative. Return to Genesis 1:26–28 and consider what this reveals about the God who chose to create humanity in his image.

PRACTICE

Take a few minutes today to consider some ordinary aspect of your life—your work, relationships, abilities, or place in the world.

Rather than thinking first about what you must accomplish, reflect on the fact that your life begins with God's creative generosity. Offer a simple prayer of gratitude for the life and responsibilities he has entrusted to you.

PRAYER

Thank God for creating you in his image and giving your life meaning and purpose. Speak with him about anything that makes it difficult to receive your life as a gift, and ask him to help you see yourself and others through the dignity he has given them.

ENCOUNTER 2

Called Before We Were Ready

PREPARE

Abraham occupies a central place in the biblical story, but his relationship with God begins with an unexpected call. God invites him to leave what is familiar and follow a promise whose fulfillment he cannot yet see.

As you read, notice what God promises, what Abraham is asked to do, and how this calling fits into God's larger purposes.

PONDER

1. What does God initiate in his encounter with Abraham? Notice how much of the passage describes what God promises to do. What does this suggest about the foundation of Abraham's relationship with him?
2. Joshua later reminds Israel that Abraham's ancestors served other gods. How does this background change the way you understand God's choice and call of Abraham? What might it reveal about the kinds of people God calls and the purposes for which he calls them?

READ

Genesis 12:1–9 · Joshua 24:2–3

LOOK AGAIN

Look again at Genesis 12:2–3. God promises to bless Abraham, but the promise doesn't end with Abraham.

Through him, God intends to bless all the families of the earth.

Notice how God's initiative toward one person is connected to his purposes for the whole world. What does that suggest about the reach of his gracious love?

PRACTICE

Think about one responsibility, relationship, or opportunity in your life where you sense a need to respond faithfully to God but feel uncertain or inadequate.

Return to Genesis 12:1–3. Remember that Abraham's journey began with God's promise, not with Abraham's ability to see the entire path ahead. Ask God for grace to take the next faithful step available to you.

PRAYER

Thank God for taking the initiative to call people into relationship with himself. Speak honestly about where you feel unprepared or uncertain, and ask for a willing heart to follow his direction.

ENCOUNTER 3

The God Who Sees

PREPARE

Israel has been enslaved in Egypt for generations. When God appears to Moses, he reveals something important about his relationship with his people: he has seen their suffering, heard their cries, and knows their distress.

As you read, pay attention to what God says he has observed and what he intends to do.

PONDER

1. What do God's words to Moses reveal about his awareness of Israel's suffering? Notice the different ways he describes his attention to their circumstances. What picture of God's character emerges?
2. God tells Moses that he has seen Israel's suffering and has come down to deliver them. What does this reveal about the relationship between God's compassion and his determination to act? How does his promise to be with Moses (Exodus 3:12) add to the picture?

READ

Exodus 2:23–25 · Exodus 3:1–12

LOOK AGAIN

Return to Exodus 2:24–25. Before God speaks to Moses, the narrator says that God heard Israel's groaning, remembered his covenant, saw his people, and knew.

The language of remembering doesn't mean God had forgotten his promise. It signals that he is acting in faithfulness to what he has already committed himself to do.

Read those verses again. Notice how God's compassion and covenant faithfulness belong together.

PRACTICE

Consider someone whose suffering or difficulty might easily go unnoticed.

Take a moment to bring that person before God, remembering the One who sees and hears. If there is a practical way you can offer care or encouragement, take that step today.

PRAYER

Thank God that he sees and knows his people. Bring before him a situation of suffering or uncertainty, whether your own or someone else's. Ask him to deepen your trust in his attentive care and make you more sensitive to the needs of others.

ENCOUNTER 4

Grace in Our Weakness

PREPARE

Elijah has witnessed an extraordinary demonstration of God's power on Mount Carmel. Yet soon afterward, he flees into the wilderness, exhausted, afraid, and ready to give up.

As you read, pay attention to how God responds to Elijah's condition. Then consider the psalmist's description of God's compassion toward human weakness.

PONDER

1. Elijah is exhausted, afraid, and ready to give up. What does God do before addressing Elijah's fears or calling him forward again? What does the order of God's actions reveal about his character?
2. Psalm 103 describes God's compassion in light of his knowledge of human frailty. How does that description illuminate God's treatment of Elijah? How might these passages challenge the expectations you place on yourself—or imagine God places on you—during seasons of weakness?

READ

1 Kings 19:1–13 · Psalm 103:13–14

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice that Elijah receives food, water, and rest before God addresses him at Horeb?

God's first response is not a demand for greater effort. He provides what Elijah needs for the journey.

Now return to Psalm 103:14. What does God's remembrance that we are dust add to your understanding of his care for Elijah?

PRACTICE

Pay attention to a place in your life where you feel weary, inadequate, or spiritually discouraged.

Instead of immediately trying to correct your feelings or prove your faithfulness, acknowledge your need before God. Receive a moment of rest as a gift, remembering that his grace is not earned by your strength.

PRAYER

Speak honestly with God about your limitations, weariness, or discouragement. Thank him that his gracious care does not depend on your ability to hold everything together. Ask him to renew your confidence in his goodness.

ENCOUNTER 5

The God Who Keeps His Word

PREPARE

Israel has broken its covenant with God by worshiping a golden calf. Moses has pleaded for the people, and now God reveals something remarkable about himself.

As you read, pay attention to how God describes his own character. Then consider how Moses later reminds Israel why God chose them and remained faithful to his promises.

PONDER

1. In Exodus 34, God describes himself as compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Yet he also declares that he does not leave guilt unaddressed. What do these qualities reveal about the kind of God he is? How might they challenge the way you tend to think about mercy and judgment?
2. In Deuteronomy 7, Moses explains why God chose Israel and remained committed to them. What reasons does he give—and what reasons does he rule out? How does this deepen your understanding of what makes God's love and promises trustworthy?

READ

Exodus 34:5–9 · Deuteronomy 7:6–9

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice that God's declaration in Exodus 34 comes after Israel's rebellion with the golden calf?

Return to Exodus 34:6–7 and consider the significance of that setting. God reveals his steadfast love and faithfulness precisely when his people have demonstrated their unfaithfulness.

Then look at Moses' response in verses 8–9 (Exodus 34:8-9). He appeals to God's character as the reason God should continue with this sinful people.

What does that reveal about where Moses places his hope?

PRACTICE

Choose one phrase from God's description of himself in Exodus 34:6–7—perhaps compassionate, slow to anger, or abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Return to that phrase several times today. When you become aware of a failure, disappointment, or uncertainty, remember that God's character is not altered by your circumstances.

Allow his own description of himself to shape the way you approach him.

PRAYER

Praise God for the character he has revealed. Speak honestly about where you have been unfaithful or where you struggle to trust his promises. Thank him that his mercy and faithfulness arise from who he is, and ask him to form those same qualities in you.

ENCOUNTER 6

Love That Will Not Let Go

PREPARE

Through Hosea, God speaks about Israel's unfaithfulness using the tender language of a father remembering his child. The passage moves between affection, grief, judgment, and compassion.

As you read, notice what God remembers about his relationship with Israel, how the people have responded, and what his words reveal about his heart.

Then read the closing verses of Psalm 136, listening for the repeated description of God's love.

PONDER

1. What does God remember about his care for Israel in Hosea 11:1–4? How does that picture contrast with Israel's response? What do God's words reveal about how he regards the people who have repeatedly turned away from him?
2. Hosea describes both the consequences of Israel's rebellion and God's compassion toward them. How do these appear together in the passage? What does this reveal about the nature of his steadfast love—and how might it challenge an understanding of love that simply overlooks wrongdoing?

READ

Hosea 11:1–11 · Psalm 136:23–26

LOOK AGAIN

Look carefully at Hosea 11:8–9.

After describing Israel's rebellion and the judgment it deserves, God asks, "How can I give you up?"

Then comes a surprising explanation: "For I am God, and not a man—the Holy One among you."

Notice that God's holiness is not presented here as the reason he must abandon his people. It is part of the explanation for his extraordinary mercy.

Return to those verses and consider what they reveal about the character of the God who pursues his people.

PRACTICE

Think of a relationship in which someone's failure or unfaithfulness has made love difficult.

Without excusing wrongdoing or ignoring necessary boundaries, consider how God's steadfast love might shape your response. Is there a way to act with patience, pray for restoration, or refuse to surrender to bitterness?

Ask God for the grace to reflect his character in a way appropriate to that relationship.

PRAYER

Thank God for his steadfast love, especially when your own faithfulness has been inconsistent. Speak honestly about the ways you have resisted or neglected him. Ask him to deepen your understanding of his mercy and to form in you a love that is both compassionate and truthful.

ENCOUNTER 7

When God Seems Far Away

PREPARE

Lamentations gives voice to the grief of a people who have experienced the destruction of Jerusalem. Their suffering is real, and the consequences of their nation's unfaithfulness are devastating.

Isaiah also speaks to people who believe God has forgotten them.

As you read, notice how these passages acknowledge suffering without allowing it to become the final word about God's character.

PONDER

1. The writer of Lamentations moves from remembering his suffering to remembering God's steadfast love and faithfulness. What changes in his perspective, even though his circumstances have not yet changed? What does this reveal about the place of God's character in sustaining hope?
2. In Isaiah 49, Zion declares that the Lord has forsaken and forgotten her. How does God answer that accusation? What do his words reveal about the depth and endurance of his commitment to his people? How might these passages reshape the way you understand God's presence during seasons when he seems distant?

READ

Lamentations 3:19–33 · Isaiah 49:13–16

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice that the writer of Lamentations doesn't begin with confidence?

In verses 19–20 (Lamentations 3:19-20), he remembers his suffering and describes his soul as downcast. Only then does he say, "Yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope."

Look again at verses 21–23 (Lamentations 3:21-23). His hope does not come from discovering that his suffering was imaginary or that his circumstances have improved. It comes from deliberately remembering something true about God.

Consider the significance of that movement from remembering suffering to remembering the Shepherd's character.

PRACTICE

Bring to mind a circumstance in which God's care has been difficult for you to recognize.

Read Lamentations 3:21–23 slowly. Choose one statement about God's character and return to it during the day—not as a way of denying your circumstances, but as a way of remembering who God is within them.

If helpful, write the phrase somewhere you will see it.

PRAYER

Speak honestly with God about suffering, disappointment, or unanswered questions. You do not need to minimize your experience.

Thank him for the steadfast love and faithfulness revealed in Scripture, and ask for grace to remember his character even when you cannot clearly see what he is doing.

ENCOUNTER 8

The Promise Still Stands

PREPARE

Jeremiah speaks to a people whose covenant unfaithfulness has brought devastating consequences. Jerusalem faces destruction, and exile threatens everything Israel has understood about its place in God's purposes.

Yet in the midst of these warnings, God speaks of everlasting love and promises a new covenant.

As you read, notice what God says about his commitment to his people and what he intends to make new.

PONDER

1. In Jeremiah 31:2–6, what does God reveal about his continuing love for Israel? Notice the language of everlasting love, faithfulness, rebuilding, and restoration. What does this suggest about the Shepherd's determination to keep his promises despite his people's failures?
2. In verses 31–34 (Jeremiah 31:31-34), God promises a new covenant. What will be different about this relationship? How does the promise reveal not only God's willingness to forgive but also his desire to transform his people from within?

READ

Jeremiah 31:2–6, 31–34

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice how often God describes what he will do in Jeremiah 31:31–34?

He will make a new covenant. He will put his law within his people and write it on their hearts. He will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

Now return to verse 32, where God recalls the covenant his people broke.

Consider the contrast: Israel broke the covenant, yet God is the One who promises to establish a new relationship.

What does this reveal about the depth of his commitment to restoration?

PRACTICE

Take a few minutes to look back over the Scriptures from this movement.

What description of God's character has most captured your attention—his steadfast love, patience, mercy, faithfulness, or determination to restore?

Choose one passage that particularly reveals that quality. Return to it today, allowing God's own words and actions to shape your understanding of him.

PRAYER

Thank God for his faithfulness across generations and for the promises he has kept despite human unfaithfulness.

Ask him to continue shaping your heart so that your trust rests increasingly in his character. Invite him to deepen your desire for the renewed relationship and holy life he promises his people.

ENCOUNTER 9

The Father Who Welcomes

PREPARE

Jesus tells a story about a son who leaves his father, squanders his inheritance, and eventually decides to return home. But the story is about more than the son's failure or his decision to come back.

As you read, pay particular attention to the father. Notice what he does, how he responds to his son's return, and what his actions reveal about the relationship he desires.

PONDER

1. What does the younger son expect when he decides to return home? Compare his expectations with the father's response. What do the differences reveal about the father's character and his desire for their relationship?
2. The father doesn't simply permit his son to return. He runs to meet him, embraces him, and celebrates. What does this reveal about the way God regards repentant sinners? How might it challenge the way you imagine God responding when you turn back toward him?

READ

Luke 15:11–24

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice that the son prepares a speech asking to be treated as a hired servant (vv. 18–19)?

When he finally returns, he begins his confession, but the father responds by ordering a robe, ring, sandals, and a feast.

Return to verses 20–24. Notice that the father doesn't merely offer the son a place to work. He restores him to the family.

What does this reveal about the kind of reconciliation the Father desires?

PRACTICE

Consider whether there is an area of your life where you have been reluctant to approach God because of failure, shame, or a sense that you must first make yourself worthy.

Return to Luke 15:20–24. Spend a few moments considering the father's response. Rather than attempting to prove your worthiness, come before God honestly, trusting his willingness to receive those who turn toward him.

PRAYER

Speak honestly with God about where you have wandered or resisted his love. Thank him for the mercy he extends to repentant sinners. Ask him to deepen your confidence in his desire to restore relationship rather than leave you at a distance.

ENCOUNTER 10

The Cost of Coming Home

PREPARE

We've seen the father welcome his returning son and the Shepherd remain faithful to his promises. But reconciliation raises another question: what does it cost to overcome the estrangement caused by sin?

Paul describes God's love through what Christ has done for people who were still sinners and enemies. John likewise points to God's initiative in sending his Son.

As you read, pay attention to who takes the initiative, the condition of those being reconciled, and what God's actions reveal about his love.

PONDER

1. Paul describes humanity as powerless, sinful, and estranged from God when Christ died for us. What does the timing of God's action reveal about his character? How does this challenge the idea that reconciliation begins when we become worthy of his love?
2. Both passages describe God's love through the sending and sacrifice of his Son. What do they reveal about the lengths to which God goes to restore relationship with us? How does the cross deepen your understanding of the Shepherd's steadfast love?

READ

Romans 5:6–11 · 1 John 4:9–10

LOOK AGAIN

Look carefully at Romans 5:8–10.

Paul doesn't merely say that God loved us despite our sin. He emphasizes that Christ died for us while we were still sinners and that we were reconciled to God while we were enemies.

Now return to 1 John 4:10. John makes a similar point: love begins not with our love for God but with his love for us.

Notice how both writers direct our attention away from human achievement and toward God's initiative.

What does this add to the picture of the Shepherd you've encountered throughout this chapter?

PRACTICE

Spend a few quiet minutes with Romans 5:8.

Read the verse slowly, paying particular attention to the words while we were still sinners.

Consider what this reveals about the God who loved you before you could make yourself worthy of his love. Allow that truth to become an occasion for gratitude rather than another obligation to fulfill.

PRAYER

Thank God for the love revealed in Jesus Christ and for the reconciliation made possible through his death.

Speak with him about anything that makes it difficult to receive his grace. Ask him to deepen your understanding of the cost of redemption and your gratitude for his self-giving love.

ENCOUNTER 11

Come to the Waters

PREPARE

Through Isaiah, God invites thirsty people to come and receive what they cannot purchase for themselves. The invitation is generous, but it also calls them to reconsider what they have been pursuing.

In Revelation, the risen Christ speaks to a complacent church, confronting its spiritual condition while inviting renewed fellowship.

As you read, notice both the generosity of God's invitation and the response he calls for.

PONDER

1. In Isaiah 55, what does God offer those who come to him, and what does he ask them to leave behind? How does the contrast between what people spend themselves pursuing and what God freely gives reveal his desire for them?
2. Jesus' words to the church in Laodicea include both rebuke and an invitation to fellowship. How do these belong together? What do these passages reveal about the Shepherd's love for people who have become distracted, complacent, or distant from him?

READ

Isaiah 55:1–9 · Revelation 3:19–22

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice the connection between God's invitation and his covenant promises in Isaiah 55:3?

God doesn't merely offer temporary relief to those who are thirsty. He promises an everlasting covenant grounded in his steadfast love for David.

Now look again at Revelation 3:19. Jesus explains that his rebuke and discipline arise from love.

In both passages, God's invitation to return is rooted in his enduring commitment to relationship with his people.

Consider how this deepens your understanding of the Shepherd who calls us back to himself.

PRACTICE

Pay attention today to something you regularly pursue for satisfaction, security, or a sense of worth.

Return to Isaiah 55:1–3 and consider what God offers in contrast. Choose one small way to turn your attention toward him—perhaps setting aside a distraction, spending a few quiet minutes in Scripture, or deliberately bringing a misplaced desire before him.

PRAYER

Thank God for his gracious invitation to come to him. Speak honestly about the things that compete for your attention and affection. Ask him to awaken a deeper hunger for his presence and a willing heart to respond when he calls.

ENCOUNTER 12

Loved into New Life

PREPARE

Throughout this chapter, we've encountered the God who takes the initiative to create, call, seek, sustain, and restore. We've seen his steadfast love endure through human failure, suffering, and rebellion.

Now Ezekiel describes God's promise to give his people a new heart and a new spirit. John describes the love that begins with God and becomes visible in the lives of those who know him.

As you read, notice what God promises to do within his people and how his love becomes the source of their love for others.

PONDER

1. In Ezekiel, what does God promise to do for his people that they could not accomplish simply by trying harder? What does this reveal about the Shepherd's determination to restore not only their circumstances but also their hearts?
2. John says that love comes from God and that we love because he first loved us. How does this illuminate the pattern you've encountered throughout this chapter? What might change in your understanding of your relationship with God when you recognize that even your response of love begins with his gracious initiative?

READ

Ezekiel 36:25–27 · 1 John 4:7–12, 19

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice how often God says "I will" in Ezekiel 36:25–27?

He promises to cleanse his people, give them a new heart, put a new spirit within them, and move them to follow his ways.

Now return to 1 John 4:19: "We love because he first loved us."

The Shepherd's pursuit doesn't end when his people return. His grace continues working within them, making possible the very life to which he calls them.

Consider how these promises bring together what you've discovered about God's character throughout this chapter.

PRACTICE

Take a few minutes to look back over the encounters in this chapter.

Which picture of God's pursuing love has most deepened or challenged your understanding of him? Perhaps it was his initiative in calling Abraham, his care for Elijah, his steadfastness toward rebellious Israel, or his willingness to reconcile sinners through Christ.

Return to that passage and consider how it has changed the way you recognize the Shepherd's character.

Choose one simple way to respond to his love today—not to earn his favor, but because his grace has already been at work in your life.

PRAYER

Thank God for the ways he has sought, sustained, forgiven, and restored his people throughout the biblical story.

Speak with him about what you've discovered of his character and where your understanding of his love has changed.

Ask him to continue renewing your heart so that you increasingly recognize his grace, trust his faithfulness, and reflect his love in the world.