



# **You're Only Human**

## **STUDY GUIDE**

**Kelly M. Kopic**

With Henri Lowe and Susan Anderson

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# **Part 1**

## **Particularity and Limits**

# Have I Done Enough?

## Facing Our Finitude

### Discussion Questions

Have you experienced events in your life that reminded you of your finitude? How do you feel when you contemplate your own finitude?

What are ways in which you expect yourself to transcend finitude—to be infinite? How does God’s infinite nature put those expectations into perspective?

Do you burden yourself with unrealistic expectations? How could the concept of creaturely finitude encourage you to realign your daily expectations for yourself?

“What I mean is that we must rediscover that being dependent creatures is a constructive gift, not a deficiency” (10). Do you struggle to view human finitude and human limits as a gift? If so, how could you reconstruct your understanding of human finitude so that you recognize limits as a gift from God rather than a hindrance?

How do sin and finitude differ? What is the relationship between the two? Why are we so commonly tempted to brand our finitude as sin?

## Quotes

“We live in a fallen world. . . . Because of this we sometimes wrongly attribute all our problems to sin, when in fact they are often a matter of running up against the limits inherent in being finite creatures instead of being God. We are, by God’s good design, finite” (12).

“What does it mean that we have *these* talents and resources and not *all* talents and resources?”

“So what does it mean that we are creatures and not God? What does it mean that we have *these* talents and resources and not *all* talents and resources? What does it mean that we are finite, particular, and rooted, and not infinite, universal, or standing above all local circumstances? Answering these questions honestly will change how we imagine the world, ourselves, and our relationship to God and others” (14).

“We need to stop asking (or feeling that we should ask) for God’s forgiveness when we can’t do everything, and we need to ask forgiveness for ever imagining we could!” (14).

**ISAIAH 40:28B–31:** “The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (ESV).

**LAMENTATIONS 3:40:** “Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD!” (ESV).

## Outside Voices

In his *Creation and Fall*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains the human condition of finitude as evidence of the Creator and creature distinction, and as part of the pattern in which God made us. By tapping into the question of the nature of humans, Bonhoeffer meshes philosophy and theology, detailing the relationship between God and humans—God is himself our boundary and our limit.

This singular interrelatedness, which is basically only the interrelatedness of freedom and creaturliness, is expressed here in the particular language of the Bible in that the tree of knowledge, the forbidden tree that denotes the human being’s boundary, stands at the center. *The human being’s limit is at the center of human existence*, not on the margin; the limit or constraint that people look for on the margin of humankind is the limit of the human condition, the

limit of human technology, the limit of what is possible for humanity. The boundary that is at the center is the limit of human *reality*, of human *existence as such*. Knowledge of the limit or constraint of the margin is always accompanied by the possibility of failing to know any internal limit. Knowledge of the boundary at the center means knowing that the whole of existence, human existence in every possible way that it may comport itself, has its limit. There where the boundary—the tree of knowledge—stands, there stands the tree of life, that is, the very God who gives life. *God is at once the boundary and the center of our existence.*<sup>1</sup>

## Prayer

*Father, as we embark on this study, please change the way that we understand our own creaturely finitude. Help us to see it as part of your good design, and help us to rejoice in that, even as we struggle with our limits and finitude. Instead of succumbing to our own unrealistic expectations for ourselves, allow us to place our trust in you, our infinite God. Redefine our understanding of our own dependency, Lord, and help us as we explore the way that you made us. Amen.*

## Final Reflections

Studying finitude requires that we put aside some of our preconceptions about finitude and seek to embrace it as a divine gift rather than seeing it as a curse. Reflect on your current understanding of finitude. In the space below, jot down some thoughts you have about your own finitude as you begin this study.

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 86.

# Does God Love . . . Me?

## Crucified . . . but I Still Live

### Discussion Questions

God delights in you! Do you believe that God both loves you *and* likes you? How might that change your outlook on God's care for you?

Have you struggled with cultural expectations to be perfect in hopes of being accepted and liked? What are ways that those expectations have manifested in your life, whether in your self-perception or in the ways others have perceived you?

Sometimes, as this chapter explains, explanations of the gravity of sin bleed into unbiblical self-loathing, in which someone is told they have no worth but that "the Father no longer sees you but instead looks at Christ and his cross" (22). Is this a dangerous line of thought? Why might these explanations make it difficult to believe that God both loves *and* likes us?

What is the interplay between creation and redemption as it is outlined in this chapter?

How does union with Christ both preserve our individuality and draw us into a communal redemptive relationship?

## Quotes

“Have you ever felt that your parents, or spouse, or your God loved you, and yet wondered if they actually *liked* you? *Love* is so loaded with obligations and duty that it often loses all emotive force, all sense of pleasure and satisfaction. *Like* can remind us of an aspect of God’s love that we far too easily forget” (19).

“To start affirming our creaturely finitude as a good quality rather than an evil to be overcome, we must confess that God loves me and not just Christ instead of me” (26).

“Your Christian identity needs to be shaped by the fact that God in Christ loved ‘you,’ and gave himself for you—you! . . . God doesn’t just forgive generic sins: he forgives *my* sin. He doesn’t just save the cosmos; he saves *me*. Why? Because he loves you and me as particular people” (35).

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forgives *my* sin.”

**1 JOHN 4:16:** “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.”

**EPHESIANS 1:4–6:** “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.”

## Outside Voices

Karl Barth, in his significant volume *Church Dogmatics*, outlines in detail what the “life of the children of God” entails. One of his most profound and fitting assertions is that our ability to love our neighbor well rests solely in the love that God has first bestowed on us, in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This chapter taught us that God loves us *particularly*. We too can love the particular people God has placed in our lives through the assurance of our beloved status before God.

The love with which we reply to the love of God for us can begin and grow only when we go beyond what we can claim as our own love, when we recognize that we the unloving are beloved by Him. In other words, it can begin and grow only in the recognition of Jesus Christ and therefore in Jesus Christ Himself. That is how—in all the seriousness of our reality before God and in God as the one Lord—it really becomes our own love to God.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (London: T&T and Clark Ltd., 1956), 384.



## Prayer

*Father, it can be so tempting to despair over our sins, sometimes prompting us to wonder if you can both love and like us. Encourage us in the truth that you delight in our finite being and that you love and like us enough that you sent your incarnate Son to die for us. Help us to live in the delight that you feel for us. Remind us of our union with Christ and with other believers, and allow us to live in the outpouring of love from those close, communal relationships. Please, Father, constantly remind us of your delight in us. Amen.*

## Final Reflections

Recognizing that God loves us, likes us, *and* delights in us can be difficult to grasp. Reflect on the truth of God's love for us as it is explained in this chapter, and allow yourself to journal or sketch some of the ways in which this recognition of God's love shapes your understanding of who you are and who he is.

# Are the Limits of My Body Bad?

## Praise God for Mary

### Discussion Questions

What does the relationship between Genesis 1 and John 1 tell us about the incarnation?

How are we tempted to deny the holiness and goodness of the material and physical aspects of our existence? Of the incarnate Jesus?

What impact does our grasp of Mary's virgin birth have on our understanding of Jesus's humanity?

“While the Son of God is eternal, there is no embodied human being called Jesus of Nazareth *apart from Mary*. Let me be clear—Jesus gets his full humanity through his *mother*” (44). Reflect on the humanity of Christ in the incarnation. Does that notion make you uncomfortable? If so, why? What are some insights from this chapter about the humanity of Christ that you may not have considered before?

Reflect on Mary's role in the incarnation. How does the idea of Mary's importance, obedience, strength, and “earthy” birth challenge your preconceived notions of Mary?

What does Jesus's incarnation reveal about the inherent state of our flesh? “In Jesus, God incarnate (*en-fleshed*), we encounter God's resounding *Yes!* to his creation.” How might this challenge our conceptions about our own bodies?

## Quotes

“Let us not miss the immensity of the claim here. . . . The Creator somehow ‘becomes’ a creature. How? The way all humans come to be: born of a woman! The infinite is united with the finite in Mary’s womb. For the holy Son of God, ‘becoming’ finite is not sinful but an appropriate aspect of creaturely existence and something he freely assumes in the incarnation” (45).

“God’s concern is not to erase or destroy our humanity, but to renew it.”

“The God we worship is not embarrassed by his creation; rather, he loves it, and he acts from that love. . . . Some want the benefits of the cross without the earthiness of the Son’s birth, but you can’t have one without the other” (46).

“God’s concern is not to erase or destroy our humanity, but to renew it. Human flourishing comes not in the absence of our creaturely limits but in the healthy wholeness of them” (48).

**LUKE 1:46–49:** “And Mary said: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.’”

**PHILIPPIANS 2:5–8:** “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

## Outside Voices

As we consider the earthiness and reality of the incarnation, we should consider anew [Mary’s Magnificat](#), which stresses the bodily importance of Mary in Christ’s incarnation. Luke 1:46–55 helpfully meshes with this chapter’s discussion both of Mary and of the incarnation of Christ.

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich

he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” (ESV)

## Prayer

*Father, you have made us embodied creatures, and that fact can be eminently uncomfortable, particularly in a tradition that often overlooks the physical aspects of the incarnation. Remind us of the bodily incarnation of Christ and the work of Mary, who bore Christ in her body. Assure us, through our reflection on the incarnation, that our bodies are gifts rather than traps or objects of sin—allow us to rest in this truth and absorb it, praising you for the good gift of physical embodiment. Amen.*

## Final Reflections

As discussed in this chapter, we are so used to considering Mary’s pregnancy and motherhood as a divine matter that we often forget the humanity, embodiment, and earthiness that resonate so strongly in the incarnation. Using Philippians 2:1–11 as a guide, take a few minutes to reflect on Christ’s taking on humanity—and, with that, an embodied, finite body. Consider what this means about your own finitude and how God views your finitude.

# Why Does Physical Touch Matter?

## Images, Trauma, and Embodied Worship

### Discussion Questions

How might the idea that we are more “spiritual” than bodily, or that our souls are more important than our bodies, prove incorrect and problematic to a theology of embodiment?

“Even dependence, contrary to the individualist philosophy of our culture, is part of the blessing of human existence” (53). How can this idea challenge your understanding of your own dependence? Is there any area of life in which you are not depending on God?

How have unrealistic images, advertisements, and expectations (particularly sexual ones) influenced your own understanding and conception of your body? How have these unrealistic bodily expectations and standards affected both men and women?

How do you understand the importance of physicality in worship, or *embodied worship*? Did COVID-19 affect your view of embodied worship? If so, how?

In what ways has the church affirmed or encouraged healthy embodiment? In what ways has the church denied or harmed healthy embodiment? How can we create a safer space for individuals whom the church or ministries have bodily harmed?

How can you and those in your circle foster healthier habits of physical touch without fostering problems?

## Quotes

“How we view ourselves and others is inseparable from how we perceive our bodies. Our flesh is not an insignificant, disposable container carrying an internal spirit, although we are sometimes tempted to see the body as unimportant and only the soul as valuable” (51).

“Our physicality opens us up to interactions with each other and with the world around us. And even the limitations of that physicality become elements of our creativity. Being human has always been an embodied state, and that has always been a good, not a bad, thing” (53).

“We are designed for communion with each other, and our physicality supplies a medium for that communion. This communion itself exemplifies a kind of need: for God, our neighbors, and the earth” (53).

“Being human has always been an embodied state, and that has always been a good, not a bad, thing”

**GENESIS 1:27:** “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

**ROMANS 12:1–2:** “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

## Outside Voices

In **Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s** first publication, *The Communion of the Saints*, he offers profound insights about the communal nature of the Christian life. Here, he reminds us how the bodily presence of our fellow believers can be an encouragement to our faith. He writes:

In the congregation, moreover, I do not, as if I were communing alone with the Word, speak and hear at the same time. But there is someone else speaking, and this gives me an incomparable certainty. Someone completely strange to me is proclaiming God’s grace and forgiveness to me, not as an experience, but as God’s will. He helps me to grasp in concrete form that the church and its Lord are guarantors for my certainty that I shall receive grace. The fact that there is someone else promising me grace makes me certain of the church, and rules out any danger or possibility that I might be lost in illusions. The certainty of faith arises not only for solitariness, but also from the congregation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of the Saints: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1960), 158–59.

This is an example of how God has given us our physical bodies not only as a gift to ourselves but also as a gift to others through our presence. Whether we are in times of sickness or health, we greet the familiar faces of our congregation and are reminded of God's faithfulness to sustain his children and bring us back to worship week to week.

## Prayer

*Father, though we admit that you have made us as embodied creatures, we know that how we think of our bodies is often strained. We struggle both with discomfort with our bodies and with societal expectations of what our bodies ought to do and look like. Sometimes it feels like our bodies are used against us, Lord, causing trauma and pain within us. For those of us with difficult relationships with our bodies, comfort and heal us, Lord, and bring others alongside us to encourage and lament with us in that difficult process. Bring healing to those who have been hurt, abused, pained, and discouraged, Lord. Let our bodies become a reminder of your faithfulness to us, now and in the age to come. Amen.*

## Final Reflections

Bodies are not easy subjects! Our relationships with our own bodies, physicality, and embodiment are often mired in shame, misunderstanding, trauma, or discontent. Reflect on ways that God has encouraged you in the midst of issues with your body and embodiment. Then take some time to consider the ways that your body connects you to others and how your physicality (and theirs!) helps to define those relationships.

# Is Identity Purely Self-Generated?

## Understanding the Self in Context

### Discussion Questions

How are our dependence and relationality demarcated by our belly buttons?

How do you conceive of yourself? Do you tend to think of yourself as a self-made, isolated individual or as a relationally formed, contextualized individual? How does this impact the way you perceive your relationship to God and the church?

After the exercise in this chapter, try to introduce yourself (if you're with a group) or write about yourself (if you're alone) without providing any background or information about "groups in which [you] hold membership." Can you figure out a way to do it, or does it prove too difficult? What does this exercise reveal about our situated social dependence and relationality?

What is the interplay between our own cultures, cultural ties, and relationships, and our identity in Christ? Why are both vital to our Christian lives?

"The liberated self is always necessarily a *self-in-relation*" (83). Why is liberation necessarily tied to relationship, and particularly relationship with and in Christ?



## Quotes

“When our search for identity in Christ includes a healthy view of creaturely finitude and particularity, then we see something truly beautiful and unique take shape. The church starts to look like it was meant to look: diverse, united, gracious, and most of all, loving” (73).

“When our search for identity in Christ includes a healthy view of creaturely finitude and particularity, then we see something truly beautiful and unique take shape.”

“The Christian insight is that ‘I’ flourish not so much by exalting myself as by learning to love and sacrifice for others as well as learning to accept such love and sacrifice from others” (79).

“As a finite creature, I am from a particular place and people; I don’t ignore my ethnicity, native language, socioeconomic setting, or the relationships that surround me. As God’s child, I am called not to deny my context or past but to see all of these relationships changed in and through God’s holy love” (94).

**ROMANS 6:8:** “Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”

**2 CORINTHIANS 5:17:** “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”

## Outside Voices

Pope Paul VI, in his *Gaudium et Spes*, affirms human identity as fundamentally mired in relationship, with both God and others.

For Sacred Scripture teaches that man was created “to the image of God,” is capable of knowing and loving his Creator, and was appointed by Him as master of all earthly creatures that he might subdue them and use them to God’s glory. “What is man that you should care for him? You have made him little less than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him rule over the works of your hands, putting all things under his feet” (Ps. 8:5–7). But God did not create man as a solitary, for from the beginning “male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Their companionship produces the primary form of interpersonal communion. For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential. Therefore, as we read elsewhere in Holy Scripture God saw “all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen. 1:31).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican Archive, December 7, 1965, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

## Prayer

*Father, it's so easy to conceive of ourselves as isolated, decontextualized, self-made individuals. Help us to understand the ways that you have made us and shaped us within particular contexts, allowing us both to express our own personalities and to be molded by our circumstances and relationships. Allow us to see ourselves as unique individuals, made in the image of God, who are marked by union and relationship with Christ. Please help us to understand our identities as contextual, finite, embodied creatures, marked and shaped by relationships, most notably our relationship with Christ. Amen.*

## Final Reflections

Our contexts are not the only indicators and determinants of our identities; however, our identity in Christ does not subsume our individual cultural identities. God has given us our contexts, including relationships and personality. We enter into union with Christ still carrying these contexts—and that is something to celebrate. Reflect on your personhood as a unique individual who experiences communion and union with others and with Christ. Consider the contexts and relationships that shape you and your identity.



**Part 2**  
**Healthy Dependence**

# Have We Misunderstood Humility?

## Joyful Realism

### Discussion Questions

How does Christian humility acknowledge the reality of the relationships and contexts discussed in the last chapter?

What is the distinction between self-loathing and humility? What should humility be rooted in *instead* of self-loathing? What is the foundation of Christian humility?

“Humility is built on the Creator/creature distinction; its response to sin emphasizes our further need for God to restore us to the fellowship that he always intended us to inhabit” (103). How does human finitude and dependence characterize our humility?

How does humility acknowledge the gifts and talents that God has given to us and to others? How does this acknowledgment differ from unhealthy pride?

Are you comfortable delighting in and acknowledging your talents? What about the talents of others? Do either prove difficult for you? How can you better cultivate delight in and acknowledgment of both your talents and the talents of others?

## Quotes

“True Christian humility does not simply bow down and worship our triune God; it also elevates others and gives us an appropriate assessment of ourselves” (99).

“Instead of starting with sin, we must ground our theology of humility in the goodness of creation. Humility is a distinctly biblical virtue *because it begins with the knowledge that there is a good Creator Lord and we are the finite creatures he made to live in fellowship with him*” (103).

“Humility consists in a recognition of (and a rejoicing in) the good limitations that God has given us; it is not a regrettable necessity, nor simply a later addition responding to sinful disorders” (103).

“Humility consists in a recognition of (and a rejoicing in) the good limitations that God has given us.”

“While our struggles with sin and the ways sin distorts our lives can, of course, reinforce the need for taking a posture of humility before God, his actions of creation and redemption alone (not our sin) are the solid foundation on which we can build our doctrine” (104).

**JAMES 3:13:** “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.”

**1 CORINTHIANS 4:7:** “For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?”

## Outside Voices

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s “[The Greatness of Humility](#),” which is quoted in this chapter, details the importance and radical nature of humility in the Torah. His exposition may help illuminate some of the key themes of Christian humility that we have touched on in this chapter.

Humility means that you are secure enough not to need to be reassured by others. It means that you don’t feel you have to prove yourself by showing that you are cleverer, smarter, more gifted or successful than others. You are secure because you live in God’s love. He has faith in you even if you do not. You do not need to compare yourself to others. You have your task, they have theirs, and that leads you to co-operate, not compete. This means that you can see other people and value them for what they are. They are not just a series of mirrors at which you look only to see your own

reflection. Secure in yourself you can value others. Confident in your identity you can value the people not like you. Humility is the self turned outward. It is the understanding that “It’s not about you.”<sup>5</sup>

## Prayer

*Father, when we ruminate on humility, our thoughts often center on a twisted version of the virtue, and when this happens we end up thinking more of our sin and less about you as our good Creator and Sustainer who loves how you made things interdependent. We are tempted to ground our self-perception in shame rather than in dignity and love. Help us to embrace a humility that gratefully acknowledges both our finitude as part of our created being and our God-given gifts and talents. Please allow us to cultivate gratitude for our and others’ gifts, and for the limits that you have given us as finite creatures. Amen.*

## Final Reflections

When we ask God to humble us, we often imagine that he will humble us by casting us down, reminding us of our frailty and somehow telling us, “I told you so! You have no reason to be proud—you are nothing!” Reflect on this tendency. Is this your conception of humility? Reflect on how you could instead embrace a biblical, relational humility that affirms your finitude as a divine gift and encourages you to realign your relationships with others.

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “The Greatness of Humility,” Rabbisacks.org, September 5, 2016, <https://rabbisacks.org/shoftim-5776/>.

# Do I Have Enough Time?

## Clocks, Anxiety, and Presence

### Discussion Questions

*Reification* is a concept sometimes employed in philosophy to explain the reduction of human persons to their capacity to perform labor—essentially, the reduction of persons to their productivity and mechanistic capabilities. Do you ever find yourself obsessed with your own productivity or lack thereof? Do you think that modern culture encourages reification, or even the *deification* of productivity?

How does the discussion of clock time and ecclesial time in this chapter prompt you to rethink your perceptions of time? How could you rethink your relationship with time to focus more on the present and to acknowledge different seasons of life?

What is your relationship with technology? How do your devices, like phones or laptops, impinge on your ability to be present? How might you quell some of the distractions that result from overworking yourself?

What is the difference between stress and anxiety? What kinds of stressors have you adopted as natural in your life, and what kinds of unreasonable expectations for yourself have those stressors cultivated?

“Anxiety whispers in your ear not that you are a good creature made by God but that you are insignificant, a disappointment, even a failure. Anxiety confuses limitation with sin, thus convincing us that we are letting God down” (132). How does anxiety twist the gift of human finitude?

How can the concept of “the fear of the Lord” help ease our anxiety? How could fearing the Lord contribute to our ability to be more fully present and less overwhelmed by stressors?

## Quotes

“If we are ever going to have a healthy Christian response to the challenges of time, stress, and anxiety, we don’t just need better time management; we need to rediscover the fear of the Lord: that is, we need to become attentive to divine presence” (135).

“We don’t just need better time management, we need to rediscover the fear of the Lord.”

“Those who ‘fear the Lord’ are not those who are most frightened of God, but rather those who trust him; they have eyes to see and ears to hear his presence and work all about them” (138).

“The fear of the Lord allows us to face stress and the uncertainties of life with confidence, not because everything will turn out as we wanted, but because it puts everything in perspective. In the fear of the Lord we now see everything in light of God, rather than trying to make space for God within everything” (142).

**PHILIPPIANS 4:6–7:** “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

**PSALM 111:10:** “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.”

## Outside Voices

The poet [John O’Donohue](#), who is quoted and discussed in this chapter, explains that “stress is a perverted relationship to time.” In that interview, he elaborated:

Now there are big psychological tomes written on stress, but for me, philosophically, stress is a perverted relationship to time, so that rather than being a subject of your own time, you have become its target and victim, and time has become routine. So at the end of the day, you probably haven’t had a true moment for yourself to relax in and to just be. Meister Eckhart [a German theologian], whom I love, said, “So many people come to me asking how I should pray, how I should think, what I should do. And the whole time, they neglect the most important question, which is, how should I be?” And I think when you slow it down, then you find your rhythm. And when you come into rhythm, then you come into a different kind of time. Because you know the way, in this country, there’s all the different zones—I think there are these zones within us, as well. There’s surface time, which is really a rapid-fire Ferrari time. . . . I think that if you take time not as calendar product, but as actually the parent or mother of presence, then you see that in the world of spirit, time behaves differently, actually. I mean when I used to be a priest, it was an amazing thing—you’d see somebody



who would be dying over a week, maybe, and had lived, maybe, a hard life where they were knuckled into themselves, where they were hard and tight and unyielding, and everything had to err in its way to their center. And suddenly, then, you'd see that within three or four days you'd see them loosen. And you'd see a kind of buried beauty that they'd never allowed themselves to enjoy about themselves surface and bring a radiance to their face and spirit.<sup>6</sup>

## Prayer

*Father, anxiety often seems ever-present, permeating all aspects of our lives. We expect so much of ourselves and often deny our limits and finitude in these expectations. Grant us the patience and courage to slow down and reconsider our relationship with time. Help us to be present in everyday moments, and instill in us the fear of the Lord and the reminder of your presence with us. Give us the contentment and wisdom that stem from a life in the joyful fear of the Lord. Amen.*

## Final Reflections

Anxiety proves painful—it drains our energy, our confidence, and our composure. Reflect on the ways that your misconceptions about your finitude cause you to feel anxious and insecure. Then consider ways in which you could rework your understanding of time and your own finitude and how this reworking might bring you greater peace.

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<sup>6</sup> John O'Donohue, interviewed by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, February 28, 2008, <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty-aug2017/>.

# Why Doesn't God Just Instantly Change Me?

## Process, Humanity, and the Spirit's Work

### Discussion Questions

What is the relationship between creaturely finitude and process?

How does God's delight in process correspond to our sanctification?

Do you ever struggle with sanctification being a process rather than an immediate change? What are some examples of this impatience in your life?

What in this chapter encourages you to see sanctification as a valuable process?

In an earlier chapter, we discussed the idolization of productivity. This chapter asserts that efficiency and productivity are not God's "main goals." What are his main goals, and how does process exemplify these goals?

"Apparently it was significant that, as the mediator between God and humanity, the incarnate Son experienced the fullness of human life" (159). What does Jesus's experience of human life reveal about the importance that God places on process and the patterns of process?

This chapter explains that the renewal brought about by sanctification can be "understood in terms of love and communion." Do love, communion, and relationship seem more process-oriented than instantaneous change? How can these concepts help us to understand the necessary process of sanctifying change?

## Quotes

“God doesn’t fret about process, but seems to enjoy and value it. . . . Part of the goodness of his finite creation is that the infinite God doesn’t rush when he works; he has always valued process” (147).

“Ordinarily God changes our lives by persistently picking us up when we fall and slowly but consistently drawing us to the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Spirit. In this process he reconnects us with others, replacing our callousness with compassion, our hatred with love, and our fears with hope” (166).

“Do not lose heart: he who began a good work in you will see it to completion” (166).

“Part of the goodness of his finite creation is that the infinite God doesn’t rush when he works; he has always valued process.”

**LUKE 2:52:** “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.”

**PHILIPPIANS 1:4–6:** “In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

## Outside Voices

For the last chapter’s “Outside Voices,” we considered [John O’Donohue’s](#) thoughts on time; for this chapter’s, we consider more of O’Donohue’s thoughts on time and process, which bleed into each other seamlessly. After discussing time, O’Donohue notes, succinctly and beautifully, that sanctification can be both seismic and quiet: “I mean I always think that that’s the secret of change—that there are huge gestations and fermentations going on in us that we are not even aware of. And then, sometimes, when we come to a threshold, crossing over, which we need to become different, that we’ll be able to be different, because secret work has been done in us, of which we’ve had no inkling.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John O’Donohue, interviewed by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, February 28, 2008, <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty-aug2017/>.

## Prayer

*Father, we struggle to value process, and we struggle to believe that you value process. We grow impatient and disappointed with ourselves when we continue to struggle with sins and our shortcomings. Remind us that you value the process of sanctification and that you do not expect us, in our finitude, to instantaneously change. Remind us that part of our creaturely finitude entails a process of change to become more and more like Christ. Encourage us in this process, and help us to rejoice more and more in it. Amen.*

### Final Reflections

Accepting that sanctification is a process is itself a process! Though we know it to be the case, it can be hard to truly grasp that we are in process—and that God delights in our slow process to become more like Christ, and like he designed us to be. Consider the gift of process and your patience (or impatience) with it. Reflect on how you can better accept and delight in your sanctification.

# Do I Need to Be Part of the Church?

## Loving the Whole Body

### Discussion Questions

This chapter affirms that “at the core of the church’s being and nature is love for God and one’s neighbor” (171). How is the church both political and apolitical? Where should Christians’ loyalties ultimately lie?

How does the multiplicity of individuals who compose the body of Christ offer us freedom in not having to do everything? What does it mean for you personally that you are part of a larger body, with individual gifts, talents, and callings?

How does the story of Charles Taylor Studd remind us that we are finite, with finite and particular callings? Have you ever witnessed or experienced spiritual burnout yourself?

“We are not rugged individuals; we are an interconnected body. Jesus does not overburden his flock; he affirms who they are in their life as a whole.” Why is participation in a church body a necessity for believers? How does the church healthily affirm both our finitude and our gifts?

Consider those you know who are in ministry, and particularly in pastoral roles (including yourself, if you are!). What does burnout look like for those in pastoral roles? Have you ever witnessed this kind of exhaustion or burnout? How can you better support those in pastoral or ministerial roles in your church body?

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your view and experience of church? Did it reveal things to you about the importance or beauty of corporate, corporeal worship? Did extended periods of online or distanced worship, if your church implemented these, cause you to yearn for physical worship in a new way? What did you miss the most? Why? Have you struggled to go back to the routine of church, or has it been easy for you and your family?

What does faithful dependence look like within the church? How does the church evidence our creaturely finitude and dependence?

## Quotes

“We are not rugged individuals; we are an interconnected body. . . . Living in Christ means that we imitate him: but it takes the *whole* church to fully reflect the Messiah” (180).

“It takes the *whole* church to be the one body of Christ.”

“The gospel entrusted to the church preaches a grace that restores and unites neighbors who are not naturally drawn together. When we gather, we do so not because we are so similar but because our Creator Lord calls us out of our differences to unite together in worship” (189).

“Praise God. It takes the *whole* church to be the one body of Christ” (190).

**ACTS 2:42–44:** “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common.”

**1 CORINTHIANS 12:27:** “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

## Outside Voices

The theologian **John Zizioulas**, in his 1985 *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, introduces theories of how one’s person relates to the church. He says that “man appears to exist in his ecclesial identity not as that which he is but as that which he will be.” The Eucharist, he continues, acts as a communal relationship, in which the person who takes it becomes integrally related to others through the bread and wine. The biological and ecclesial, he explains, become intertwined in the person’s very being (ontologically).

When it is understood in its correct and primitive sense . . . the eucharist is first of all an assembly (*synaxis*), a community, a network of relations, in which man “subsists” in a manner different from the biological as a member of a body which transcends every exclusiveness of a biological or social kind. The eucharist is the only historical context of human existence where the terms “father,” “brother,” etc., lose their biological exclusiveness and reveal, as we have seen, relationships of free and universal love. . . . There Christ is “parted but not divided” and every communicant is the whole Christ and the whole Church. The ecclesial identity, consequently, in its historical realization is eucharistic. This

explains why the Church has bound every one of her acts to the eucharist, which has as its object man's transcendence of his biological hypostasis and his becoming an authentic person, like those acts which we call "sacraments."<sup>8</sup>

## Prayer

*Father, while we recognize the importance of your church in the Christian life, we can easily become fatigued and overwhelmed by the needs of the church. When we are overwhelmed, remind us of the collective makeup of the church. Thank you for the body of Christ, in which different members perform different kingdom tasks and minister and participate in different ways. Allow us to support the other members of the body, while we contribute in our own individual ways with our individual gifts. Help us to live within and steadfastly cling to the church body and to encourage one another (including our ministers) in the Christian life. Amen.*

## Final Reflections

The church is a challenging entity—it is a great gift from God, but it can also be a source of trauma, abuse, or pain for some. We must recognize this reality while simultaneously thanking God for the work and mission of the church, and its acting as a voice of hope in a broken world. Reflect on what the church means and has meant to you, both good and bad, and consider the gifts that you can contribute to the body of Christ.

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<sup>8</sup> John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 60–61.

# How Do We Faithfully Live within Our Finitude?

## Rhythm, Vulnerability, Gratitude, and Rest

### Discussion Questions

As Christians, we often discuss the idea of being in different “seasons” of life, which include both joyful and sorrowful aspects. Part of living faithfully within our finitude, according to this chapter, involves living in the present and recognizing the existence of different seasons of life. What are ways that you can, practically and daily, acknowledge the season of life in which you have found yourself? How can this acknowledgment allow you both to live within your creaturely finitude and to rest in the peace of the Lord?

Do you struggle with vulnerability? How could you live more vulnerably, before the Lord and before others?

Lament is a natural, faithful part of recognizing our finitude and acknowledging the brokenness of the world. Do you struggle with lament? If so, why do you think it is difficult for you? If not, how have you cultivated healthy lament?

Lament must be balanced with gratitude—we can lament the world and our circumstances while thanking God for our finitude and for the joys that we have. How do you balance lament and gratitude? Do you struggle with equilibrium between the two?

How does the close presence of God encourage you to rest faithfully in your finitude?



## Quotes

“Different times of life bring different callings. . . . What may be healthy in one season can be unhealthy in another. Only when we appreciate our finitude and the rhythms of life can we embrace such seasons without growing resentful or despairing” (199).

“Despite pressures from both outside and within the church, lament and thanksgiving are not in a contest. The Bible calls us to both” (206).

“Beloved, you and I are secure in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Spirit. May this security allow us to celebrate our limits as part of God’s good work. . . . Let us appreciate the goodness of our finitude as we rest in the love and provision of our infinitely good God” (222).

“Let us appreciate the goodness of our finitude as we rest in the love and provision of our infinitely good God.”

**ECCLESIASTES 3:1:** “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.”

**PHILIPPIANS 4:4–5:** “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”

## Outside Voices

It seems fitting to conclude our “Outside Voices” section with a familiar scriptural text reminding us of the frailty of life, the beauty of our finitude, and the necessity of the fear of the Lord. **Ecclesiastes 12:1–14** reads:

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low—they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets—before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity. Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people

knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (ESV)

## Prayer

*Father, as we conclude this study, help us to embrace habits and patterns that allow us to live faithfully within our good limits. Allow us to live in the present, acknowledging the rhythms of the stages we are currently navigating; allow us to cultivate vulnerability and gratitude with those around us; and help us to rest, in both sleep and Sabbath, trusting in you to provide in the midst of our finitude. Thank you for loving us and caring for us in our finitude, Lord, and help us to live in light of that finitude, fully trusting in you, our infinite Father. Amen.*

## Final Reflections

Lament, gratitude, rhythm, and rest are all natural and necessary parts of the human life; furthermore, they are all indicators and reminders of our finitude. Rather than being discouraged by these markers of our dependence, we ought to welcome these practices and seasons as divine gifts from a Creator who loves us in our finitude. As you come to the end of this study, reflect on the ways in which your view of human finitude has expanded and grown. Remember: God delights in you, the finite, dependent, image-bearing creature that you are! Rest in that.