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*Finding Faith—A Search for What Is Real*  
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## Chapter 1 Preview

# How Might I Experience God?

This chapter introduces five of twelve ways in which people commonly experience God: ritual, nature, obedience, worship, and community. It includes a number of stories that illustrate each means of experiencing God.

### **Who Should Read This Chapter?**

If you are interested in actually experiencing God in some way, chapters 1 and 2 will be very important for you.

### **What Questions Does It Address?**

How can God be experienced through ritual? Why should we expect to find God through nature? How does doing what you don't necessarily want to help you experience God? Why is worship more appropriate than analysis for experiencing God? Why is involvement with other people important in experiencing God?

*The birds . . . became a key whereby I might unlock eternal things.*

Roger Tory Peterson, author of  
*A Field Guide to the Birds*

*I say that this search for God was born not of reason but of an emotion because it was a search that arose not from my thought process—indeed, it was in direct opposition to my thinking—but from my heart. It was a feeling of dread, of loneliness, of forlornness in the midst of all that was alien to me; and it was a feeling of hope for someone’s help.*

Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*

## How Might I Experience God?

Many of us need to grapple with a list of important intellectual questions before we can seek faith. Those questions are like obstacles in the road that must be cleared; we can't pretend they are not there and we cannot avoid dealing with them. Others of us, though, assume from the beginning that we will never "fit God into our heads," and so we set another goal—to try to get our heads, and hearts, "into God." In other words, it makes sense to us that we will experience our way into God before we think our way to God, if we are ever going to get connected to God at all. Even those of us (like me) who must grapple with intellectual questions (the kind we address in *Finding Faith—A Search for What Makes Sense*) often reach a point where we say, "Yes, I believe I can find answers to my questions that will make some sort of honest faith in God possible. But what will push me from believing faith is possible in general to actually believing something in particular?" The conclusion we usually make is that some sort of spiritual experience would be helpful in our quest.

But what do we do? Go sit under a tree somewhere until enlightenment falls upon us like an apple? That's possible for some people, I suppose, but if you have diapers to change, bills to pay, contracts to sign, soccer games to attend, kitchens to clean, patients to see, or other normal daily responsibilities, the "sit under a tree" approach seems rather exclusive. As an alternative,

perhaps we should just put the burden of proof on God: if God wants us to believe in her, him, or it, God will need to get our attention somehow. Until then, we will continue as agnostics or atheists or whatever. Sometimes we place the burden of proof on God because trying to figure out how to find God seems overwhelming, but that approach seems rather passive. Where, then, do we start? How do we know how to begin?

Fortunately, human beings have been trying to connect to God for thousands of years, and their experiences can teach us much about what people have done through the centuries to make themselves susceptible to the experience of God. Not only that, but when certain ways of experiencing God are fine-tuned through the ages, we have reason to believe they have more value than a random shot in the dark or a passive “see what happens” approach.

Before we look at a dozen or so common ways of experiencing God (starting with five in this chapter), it would help to define what we mean by the term *experience*, but that won't be easy. For example, people with severe mental illnesses often experience hallucinations, and those experiences seem very real, but we are seeking something more than that. Perhaps we could say we are seeking a *true* experience, but how do we know that our experiences are true? After all, people often experience falling in love—*true* love, they call it—and they experience intense ecstasy in the company of a person who later turns out to be a jerk. Looking back, they feel the experience of true love blinded them to reality instead of helping them touch reality.

This is our dilemma. We want and need experience, something we feel, something that happens to us, something that goes beyond ideas or arguments. But we can't trust experience alone;