

STUDY GUIDE for *THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY* CHAPTER 1

ENTERING THE ETERNAL KIND OF LIFE NOW Based on Chapter 1, *The Divine Conspiracy*

We're currently flying upside down – without knowledge of what is right or how to do what is right. But it doesn't have to be that way. Jesus Christ lived in this world, teaching us how to live so that our life counts. He enables us to mesh our existence, will and work with the work of God in this world. This is how we enter the kingdom of God and begin to fly right side up.

OVERVIEW

Taking a pulse of our culture reveals that we are in a moral “free fall.” We are “flying” without a compass to guide us through the many moral and ethical decisions and dilemmas that face us daily. Even for Christians, spirituality relegates Jesus to a position of “Savior,” the great forgiver of sins, but sees little effect of him within the “real issues of life.” Jesus is simply not a person you would think of as having much ability outside the realms of salvation.

In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes, “Very few people today find Jesus interesting as a person or of vital relevance to the course of their actual lives. He is not generally regarded as a real life personality who deals with real-life issues but is thought to be concerned with some feathery realm other than the one we must deal with, and must deal with now” (introduction, xiii).

Because we all behave according to our core thoughts, our misunderstood ideas of Jesus and his gospel keep us from flying right-side up. Jesus invites us to a life that does have a compass that keeps us from flying upside down.

Willard talks about Jesus' invitation: “We are invited to make a pilgrimage – into the heart and life of God. . . . The major problem with the invitation now is precisely overfamiliarity. . . . People think they have heard the invitation. They think they have accepted it – or rejected it. But they have not. The difficulty today is to hear it at all. Genius, it is said, is to scrutinize the obvious” (p. 10).

God's divine conspiracy asks that we scrutinize what has always been standing before us in Jesus. Jesus the king came into this world to proclaim and reveal the life of his kingdom. And Jesus invites us to enter this kingdom in which we discover the “abundant life” through discipleship to him. He will turn us “into the same kind of thing as Himself” (p. 20). He enables us to mesh our daily life into his life. This is entering the kingdom of God. This is flying right side up!

SCRIPTURE MEDITATION

Read Colossians 1:15-17; 2:1-3, 9-10. The Apostle Paul experienced Jesus beyond his ability to forgive sin. He saw Jesus as one positioned to know the mysteries of the universe and the keys to all knowledge, both seen and unseen. In what areas of knowledge are you

unaccustomed to viewing Jesus as an authoritative expert? Geology? Nuclear physics?
Human relations?

This week, reflect on the aspects of your life -- family, job, friendships, leisure, ethics, morality
-- and ask yourself,

Do I regard Jesus as a sufficient guide and teacher to me in those areas?

Do I believe Jesus really has “all wisdom and knowledge” about everything, as this
Colossians passage declares?

In what ways do I have confidence in Jesus to guide me in those areas of my life?

In what ways do I not have confidence in Jesus about these areas of life?

QUESTIONS

LIFE IN THE DARK

1. In today’s world, what guidelines are used to fly right-side-up? Having an education? Being a careful thinker? Being empowered with personal freedoms?

Why Be Surprised?

2. Recall the story of the student of Harvard University Professor Robert Coles who experienced the disdain of another student. This student got high marks in an ethics course, but behaved unethically toward her. She asked, “What’s the point of *knowing* good if you don’t keep trying to *become* a good person?” This shows how people routinely put intellectual effort into knowing facts about ethics, but not into knowing what it takes to be a good person. If knowing facts about goodness doesn’t make a person good, what does make a person good?

The Incredible Power of “Mere Ideas”

3. In contemporary culture, we try to solve problems without examining the ideas behind them and how they’re communicated. For example, we look for solutions to violence among young people, yet enjoy media with an uncompromised artistic obsession with violence. What “mere ideas” have had drastic consequences in your lifetime?

Smothered with Slogans

4. Consider these current thoughts as summarized in this chart

What Is Trivial Is Thought To Be Profound	What Is Profound Is Thought To Be Stupid, Trivial or Boring
All I ever needed to know I learned in kindergarten.	“I don’t know what I need to know and must now devote my full attention and strength to finding out.”
Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty.	Practice routinely purposeful acts of kindness and intelligent acts of beauty.
Stand up for your rights.	Stand up for your responsibilities.

Look at the right column. What character qualities (or moral and spiritual aptitudes) are involved in these attitudes?

5. What other “sound bite slogans” betray a lack of depth or seem downright silly in your mind?

How does the “cute wisdom” of slogans starve the “need of the soul”?

WORD FROM A DIFFERENT REALITY

A World Historical Force

6. People have so much well-intentioned misinformation about Jesus that they “do not understand who he is and what he” (p. 13). How do you think this misinforming happens?

7. Read aloud the section, “Entering the Ordinary,” listening for what startles you about Jesus.

Habitation of the Eternal

8. When in your life have you exhibited egotism? (“**Egotism** is pathological self-obsession, a reaction to anxiety about whether one really does. It . . . can be prevented and healed only by the experience of being adequately loved” {p. 15}.)

When, if ever, has an “experience of being adequately loved” healed your egotism? If so, how?

Compare the above experience with another when you sensed “the drive for significance”?

(“Unlike egotism, the **drive for significance** is a simple extension of the creative impulse of God that gave us being. . . . It is outwardly directed to the good to be done. . . . We were built to count, as water is made to run downhill” {p. 15}.)

Proprieties Aside

ENTERING THE KINGDOM

ENTERING THE KINGDOM BEFORE CHRIST	ENTERING THE KINGDOM WITH CHRIST
Through the official practices of Jewish institutions; through the Law and the Prophets	Personal need and confidence in Jesus permits any person to blunder right into God’s realm.

9. Notice the difference in how people enter the kingdom in the chart above. The harlot who anointed Jesus at Simon’s house is given as an example of someone who blundered into God’s realm. Can you think of examples of other blunderers full of personal need who put their confidence in Christ -- in the gospels, or perhaps among your acquaintances?

God’s Rule Extended Onward Toward Us

10. C. S. Lewis said: “[Jesus] is beginning to turn you into the same kind of thing as Himself” (p. 20). How have you seen this transformation occur in your life so far? Or, how would you like to see that happen?

MADE TO RULE

God’s “Creation Covenant” with Human Beings

11. How does this idea of “ruling” in life circumstances mesh with how humans need to depend on God?

Use these ideas about the concept of “rule,” if you wish.

- “Having a place of rule goes to the very heart of who we are, of our integrity, strength and competence. . . . The deepest longings of our heart confirm our original calling. Our very being still assigns us to ‘rule’ in our life circumstances” (pp. 22-23).
- Personal rule: our decisions over the things we have “say over” in life.
- Human job description: responsible to God for life on earth
- We are meant to exercise our “rule” only in union with God, as he acts with us. He intended to be our constant companion or co-worker in the creative enterprise of life on earth.

IN THE MIDST OF MANY KINGDOMS

12. Read the Key Terms below about the kingdom of God note that people who have been “invaded by the eternal kind of life” may still have “places where God’s effective or actual rule is not yet carried out” within them (p. 30). Ponder for a moment the places within your life that haven’t been invaded by the eternal kind of life. How does it make you feel that this eternal kind of life is available to invade the less cooperative parts of yourself?
13. Read the last paragraph of this chapter on p. 33. Which phrases in that paragraph give you hope?

TRANSFORMATION EXERCISES

Choose one or more of the activities below to help you absorb the truth of what you read in *The Divine Conspiracy*.

Journal Exercise: Reflect and write about three specific areas in your life where you have not trusted Jesus’ ability to guide, lead or inform you. Write about why this is so, or write a prayer that expresses your desire to trust him.

Journal Exercise: Write a prayer in the form of a confession and request about this week’s scriptural reflection from Colossians. Articulate your need for Jesus to become the kind of Lord Paul described in this passage.

Activity: Take thirty minutes to sit quietly in a nurturing outdoor setting and focus on an aspect of God’s creation (a bird, a flower, an insect). Reflect on the detail of its design and beauty. Ponder the fact that the intimate aspects of your life are more important to God than even his non-human creation. Marvel at the great abilities of God that are available to you in your situations of life. Talk to God out loud about your needs, and thank God for that sufficiency.

KEY TERMS

Rule, governance, kingdom: the range of a person’s effective will. (See pp. 19-20.)

The kingdom of God: the present, available, direct rule of God offered to humanity in the life of Jesus. “On earth,” the kingdom may or may not be present in individual hearts or social and political realms “as it is in heaven.” The kingdom of God is not confined, however, to the inner world of human consciousness. It pervades the whole physical universe, including planet Earth, except for the satanic for a while (p. 26). The kingdom of God has always been a constant theme in the Bible, but God’s revelation of accessing it has

changed, particularly in the coming of Jesus. The invitation to “all” now supercedes the limited ethnic availability through the Jewish nation.

“Within the kingdom”: everything that obeys God and the actions of his will, whether by nature or by choice, is within the kingdom. (See p. 25.)

Kingdom of the heavens: the same as the kingdom of God, but this is Matthew’s rendering of the phrase. (See pp. 26, 71ff, and 257 to compare.)

“Other kingdoms”: are present on earth along with the kingdom of the heavens. For example, the kingdom of darkness and the kingdoms (or rules) of individuals who are “trying to run their own show.”

“the gospel of the Kingdom of God”: the news of the present, available rule of God, like never before experienced, but revealed in Jesus. Our common understanding of the gospel appeal is this: When you come to Jesus and accept him, he will forgive you of your sins and you can be assured of eternal life. This gospel is a passive gospel, however, because there is nothing left for you to do but die or wait for Christ’s return. This limited version of the gospel eliminates the more primary message of Jesus and his call to the kingdom, which is a surrender (a call for repentance) to his rulership for living life. This brings true freedom, and in exchange, we receive his new life birthed within us which now begins to change us into his likeness. This is the gospel.

FURTHER STUDY

The Gospel of the Kingdom. Popular Expositions on the Kingdom of God by George Eldon Ladd offers more information about the kingdom of God.

Interior Castle by Teresa of Avila (This work is also included in many compilations of her writing.) Teresa works through the many rooms of the interior castle (the soul where God takes his delight).

My Heart Christ’s Home by Robert Munger is a simple, yet profound expression of the process of salvation and a contemporary version of Teresa’s interior castle of the soul.

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