

Renovation of the Heart in Daily Practice

by Dallas Willard and Jan Johnson

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes it's bad to just *read* a book. We also need to interact with the ideas in the book and soak in them. This is especially true with a book such as Dallas Willard's *Renovation of the Heart*. It is not to be quickly "devoured," as we say. The preferred interaction is described by C. S. Lewis talks as "receiving" a book instead of "using" it. A "user" sees reading as a pastime, but a "recipient" rests in the ideas. To receive it is to explore what is being said and to let the author take you on the bicycle ride of your life.¹ You take in all the scenery and let yourself be challenged. You respond to God about what you've read. When we receive a book instead of using it, it adds to our life.

This book is designed to help you interact with the rich material in *Renovation of the Heart* in a few ways. One is that you get to see how someone else has interacted with it—me. Each 300+ word selection from *Renovation of the Heart* is followed by my description of how one might process the content and what it might look like to walk it out.

Each of my entries also includes "Today's Experiment," which varies from simple little activities you might use to explore the ideas (often interpersonal or physical activities) to interacting with God's written Word in a right-brain imaginative way (to help you hear God) to pondering a few reflective questions. These "experiments" are not work; in fact, many are fun. If you don't resonate with a particular exercise, tweak it to fit you.

You may want to get a spiral notebook for the purpose of doing the exercises and responding to God. Don't be intimidated by the idea of journaling. Call it "scribbling" if you like. If possible, begin by addressing God, but don't be afraid to be exactly who you are in your "scribbling." Engaging in back-and-forth conversation between you and God is what this book is prodding you to do.

This book also invites you to interact with *Renovation's* ideas by jotting down notes as you go along. These aren't notes like the ones you took in school, but "notes to yourself"—deep, yet practical things you don't want to forget. These notes may become, in fact, part of your interaction with God. So we invite you to underline phrases in books that speak to you and even consider marking the text in this way:

star = *key ideas* for me to remember

your initials = *next steps* for me

favorite phrases=write these on one of the back blank pages

Be open to God speaking to you, even in the smallest phrases. An idea may be a key one for you because you've been hearing it from God in several different ways in the last year. And if you reread the book in two or three years, you may mark different things. You may even want to keep a "favorite phrase" list of the ideas that spoke most deeply to you. If so, go back to this list often. Pray about those ideas and discuss them with friends.

Our goal is for you to truly interact with God—not just to read a book.

¹C. S. Lewis *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 88-89.

RETREATING

WITH RENOVATION OF THE HEART DAILY PRACTICES

Perhaps you'd like to use this book to do your own personal retreat, but you're not sure how. Here are some guidelines for having a personal retreat and some suggestions for how you might focus the retreat on areas in your life discussed in *Renovation of the Heart*.

GUIDELINES FOR A PERSONAL RETREAT

If you are embarking a personal retreat, congratulations! This is what Jesus did regularly and I believe he really looked forward to those times.

One of the purposes of a retreat is for you to interact with God and so you want to promote that kind of conversation. This book will hopefully bring forth ideas that God wants you to consider. Responding to God is very important. It's not a conversation unless you respond. And, God really likes hearing from you!

Here are some tips to help you.

- Don't be surprised if you feel lost once you get settled in. You may even question yourself, Why am I here and what gave me the crazy idea I could take off from all my responsibilities to sit here and do nothing? Don't let this bother you. If Jesus needed a forty-day retreat, you're OK in taking a few days or hours to retreat.
- Don't be a martyr when taking a personal retreat. Be comfortable. Unless you've done quite a bit of this, don't fast at the same time.
- Bring a journal. If journaling intimidates you, call it scribbling. Don't worry about spelling and grammar—just let it flow. You don't have to write a lot but make some notes about what comes to you. Ideally, a journal entry will begin with, "Dear God, . . ." Writing the prayers is helpful because otherwise prayer can become just muddling over things. When you write it, you think more precisely. You may be very surprised at times by what you write. Truths about your deeper self may flow unexpectedly. Watch for that.
- Schedule yourself loosely. You can adhere to the "sitting" structure such as the one below, but it doesn't rule you. The retreat was made for you; you weren't made for the retreat (as Jesus worded the Sabbath principle, Mk 2:27).
- Address feelings of resistance. You may get into the material and find that you'd much rather think or talk *about* God than actually speak to God. At that point, it's best to admit that to yourself and perhaps laugh about it. It might help to change venue, however. Take this book or your journal and go for a walk. Continue to mildly pray about your interaction with God and see what else comes to you.

- Break up your retreat time into “sittings” (or sessions). Normally these should not be for more than an hour; stop while you’re still enjoying it. Consider these sessions “prayer periods”—times of more formal interaction with God. Sittings might take this flow: Read a selection and then do “Today’s Experiment.” If you finish one, do the next one. Don’t be concerned about how many you finish. Some might move quickly; others you may even want to repeat. Journal as needed.
- Between sessions, enjoy doing something that doesn’t require concentration such as taking a walk or hike. Using the right brain is particularly helpful here: do woodworking or stitchery; paint pictures; listen to orchestral music (classical or wordless soundtracks) or Taize worship; look through a book of great art. If you have worship music with you and a certain song is resonating with you, play that as well. Do not do anything that distracts you (checking email and so on). Even reading a novel or watching a video will change the train of thought God has had you on. (I do, however, recommend the DVD, “The Gospel of John.”) You do not want to interrupt the flow of your conversation with God.

A SPECIALIZED FOCUS FOR THE RETREAT

Jumpstart focus You may use this retreat to begin talking to God about renovating your heart. Start at the beginning of the book and move at a pace that suits you (see further instructions below). When you return home, continue as you’ve started. Be sure to keep your notes from the retreat to reflect upon.

Since you won’t be able to get through the entire set of devotions, you may want to focus narrowly on a certain topic that is central for you.

VIM focus Devotions 17-20 introduce the VIM pattern (Vision-Intention-Means). Devotions 21 and 26 also mention the VIM pattern in relation to the renovation of the mind. In addition, Devotions 52-55 brilliantly portray the Vision (V) in the idea of our becoming children of light.

Ruined Life and Restored Life Consider using Devotions 10-13 to look at the way our self-preoccupied life is typically lived. Then move onto Devotions 14-16, which focus on the restored life, which is life in the kingdom of God here and now. This latter section is really about death to self, an all-important topic rarely mentioned today.

Healing for Damaged Emotions Spiritual formation is difficult for people who have suffered emotional trauma or have been ruled by their emotions. A retreat setting is an ideal place to focus on this using Devotions 27-32. Besides these sessions, you may want to use favorite psalms or memorize Romans 5:1-8.

Healing for my Thought Life Since the first freedom is where you put your mind, you may want to focus an entire retreat on this central issue. Use Devotions 21-26 (noting how the mind affects the emotions—Devotions 27-32), perhaps memorizing Colossians 3:1-17.

Transforming the Will If you feel that nothing will ever change, you might want to focus on Devotions 33-36. They emphasize spiritual disciplines so you might want to take books on that topic along for further study. Also, if you were confused about why the heart and will and spirit are the same, take a concordance and enjoy studying that.

Transforming the Body Devotions 37-41 help you look at how your body has been captive to responses that betray both you and Jesus. Because the important ritual in Devotion 39 (dedicating the body) is easily set aside, a retreat is an ideal time to do it without hurrying.

Transforming the Social Dimension If relationships are troubling you (or just people in general!), Devotions 42-26 allow you to step back and look at how God is working with you. Though some exercises aren't doable in solitude, your solitary pondering of them at such a distance may be an advantage.

Transforming the Soul Talking to one's soul (aloud) in the style of Psalm 103 may be awkward for you at home, but a retreat provides you with the privacy to try it (Devotion 48). Devotions 47-51 provide more of what you need to do that.

Transforming the Body of Christ If you're concerned about your local church and want to pray and ponder how spiritual formation might work there, use your retreat to move through Devotions 56-61. Again, use the section on the children of light to give you a vision of what is possible (Devotions 52-55).

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