

The background of the cover is a photograph of a stone window with intricate tracery. The window is made of grey stone and features a central quatrefoil opening. The tracery consists of flowing, organic lines that form a complex, interlocking pattern. Through the window, lush green foliage is visible, including large, dark green leaves and clusters of smaller, lighter green leaves. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the stone and the vibrant colors of the plants.

Finding Rest and Direction  
in Contemplative Prayer

**WHEN THE  
SOUL  
LISTENS**

JAN JOHNSON

A gentle and engaging doorway to an intimate and transformative life with God. For those stuck in a dry, lifeless, impersonal prayer practice, this book is a must-read!

**NATHAN FOSTER**

Director of community life, Renovaré, and author of *The Making of an Ordinary Saint*

Jan Johnson's warm and honest wisdom illuminates the hidden, often shadowy parts of the interior world and guides us toward truth, love, and service. If you're ready to take that journey, *When the Soul Listens* is a practical guide to help you better understand yourself and God's purposes in your life.

**MINDY CALIGUIRE**

Founder of Soul Care and author of *STIR: Spiritual Transformation in Relationships*

Jan Johnson proves a faithful and trustworthy guide in helping me learn how to open space in my soul to listen for God's transformative, loving voice, and out of that listening to bring God's love and goodness into our world.

**KELLYE FABIAN**

Director of discipleship resources and experiences, The Practice at Willow Creek Community Church

Deeply rooted in Scripture, animated by Jan's own lively friendship with the Trinity, *When the Soul Listens* is a sane and refreshingly simple guidebook to the sort of intimate, interactive journey with God for which we were designed.

**CAROLYN ARENDS**

Author, musician, and director of education at Renovaré





**WHEN THE  
SOUL  
LISTENS**

Finding Rest and Direction  
in Contemplative Prayer

*Second Edition*

**JAN JOHNSON**

**NAVPRESS** 

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## FOREWORD

THE FIELD OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL FORMATION has been advancing steadily since 1990, particularly in Protestant circles. In the 1950s, churches talked about “Christian education” as the means by which the church enabled Christians to grow deeper in their faith. A great deal of emphasis was put on Sunday school as the primary means of formation, with an emphasis on the intellectual dimension of the Christian life. People attended Sunday school classes on, say, the Epistle to the Romans, and through study and fellowship, those people were impacted.

In 1978, Quaker author Richard J. Foster wrote a landmark book, *Celebration of Discipline*, a highly unlikely success (who wants discipline?) that was an overnight game changer for the church. By the mid-1980s, thanks to that book (and others by Roman Catholic writer Henri Nouwen), a shift had occurred. Churches were now talking about *discipleship*. Discipleship meant more than just Sunday school attendance; it also included prayer, solitude, fasting, and other lifestyle practices like simplicity and service.



As mentioned, another shift occurred in the 1990s. A new word was now being used in Protestant churches: *formation*. (It had been a familiar word in Roman Catholic churches for decades, referring mainly to the education and training of priests.) While discipleship focuses on spiritual *practices*, formation is concerned with the shaping of the *inner life*. The question was not *ought* we to pray, but *why* do we pray, and *what happens* when we pray. There was now a clearer recognition that we have souls, and that they are being formed.

Everyone is being spiritually formed, just as everyone is getting an education. The question is: What kind of formation? The answer in the church is: *Christian* spiritual formation.

The great philosopher, pastor, and spiritual formation teacher Dallas Willard predicted the rise of interest in Christian spiritual formation. But he also feared that the interest would rise far ahead of the strong biblical, theological, and historical foundation required to support it. We would need, Dallas believed, teachers and writers who could establish an intellectual yet practical understanding of the nature of Christian spiritual formation. Fortunately, in Jan Johnson, we have such a person. Jan has been a teacher, retreat leader, and writer in the field of formation for the past twenty-five years. Her work has gone a long way to establish this needed foundation.

### **Contemplative Prayer: A Primary Practice in Christian Spiritual Formation**

In this fine book, Jan provides a solid biblical, theological, and historical grounding for one of the most important

(perhaps the most important) practices of the Christian life: contemplative prayer. Jan defines it this way: “Contemplative prayer [is] simply being with God and listening whenever God may choose to speak.” Later in the book, she quotes from an illustration of an old peasant who went into a church each day to kneel and to pray. When asked to explain how he did this, he said simply, “I look at him. He looks at me. And we tell each other that we love each other.” It is hard to improve on these definitions.

As human beings, we are naturally concerned about *eternal life*. We wonder what will happen to us when we die and are naturally desirous that it be a blessed afterlife (if we believe in one at all). But Jesus never described eternal life as something that happens only when we die. He explained that it happens to us in this life: “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3, NKJV). Eternal life, according to Jesus, is found in *knowing God*. Eternal life is not merely life after death; it is a quality of life found in our present lives. It is the kind of life our souls are made for.

If eternal life—our souls’ and our bodies’ deep desire—is in knowing God, then the key question is, how do I come to know God? Certainly we have the Bible (which Jan quotes on nearly every page), and we have the writings of great Christian men and women who have described their life of knowing God (which Jan also quotes on nearly every page). But there is another way to know God: to become still, to focus on God’s presence, and to interact with God as we would with another person. This allows us not only to know about God,

but actually to know God firsthand. This is what contemplative prayer is all about.

### **Why, How, and What**

If our souls long for eternal life, and if eternal life is found in knowing God, and if knowing God comes through contemplative prayer, then we need someone to give us guidance about how to engage in this life-giving practice. Jan is a reliable guide. She has years of personal experience, as well as decades of study of the great masters of the inner life of prayer. Not only does she know from experience, but she is also a person of authenticity, integrity, and depth. She does not merely know things about the subject of contemplative prayer; she has lived and breathed it for years. Therefore, when it comes to the three crucial questions for which we need answers, Jan—particularly in this book—is our reliable guide.

What are those crucial questions?

- Why is contemplative prayer important? Or put another way, Why should I engage in it?
- How do I do it?
- What can I expect when I try it?

These are foundational questions that need answers, and Jan provides those answers.

The *why* question concerns our vision and our motivation. Jan casts a compelling vision for why we ought to be practicing this kind of prayer. The most compelling answer she offers: so that God can tell us we are his beloved. The *how* question

concerns the mechanics of the practice. Jan provides clear and simple (but not simplistic) answers to how we engage in it. The *what can I expect?* question concerns needed advice along the way. Jan offers a great deal of insight about what we can expect, drawing from her many years of personal practice, along with the wisdom distilled from characters in the Bible (David, Isaiah, Abraham) and great practitioners in the history of the church—from St. Augustine, Teresa of Ávila, and Oswald Chambers to Madeleine L'Engle, Henri Nouwen, and Dallas Willard. This book is, indeed, a reliable guide.

### **For the Sake of Others**

Many of the practices in Christian spiritual formation (Bible memorization, fasting, worship) can seem overly focused on the individual engaging in the practices. This is certainly true of contemplative prayer. It has often been mocked as a kind of navel gazing, having little to do with the needs of the world. Jan Johnson recognizes this and shows through her words—and especially her life (her devotion to working with the poor and disadvantaged)—that Christian spiritual formation is not simply for our own well-being (though it accomplishes that) but also for the sake of others. This is well illustrated in the life of Isaiah, whose ability to *listen* to God led him to be *sent* by God: “I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6:8, KJV).

But the best recommendation anyone can give to any *how-to* book is this: It somehow makes you long to do it yourself. That was certainly the case for me when I finished *When the*

WHEN THE SOUL LISTENS

*Soul Listens.* It made me yearn for a deeper, wider, and more consistent practice of contemplative prayer in my own life. Thank you, Jan.

*James Bryan Smith*  
*Founder, The Apprentice Institute*

## INTRODUCTION

# A DIFFERENT KIND OF LIFE WITH GOD

CHRISTIANS OFTEN TALK about having a “personal relationship” with Jesus. Some even emphasize that the Christian faith is not a “religion,” but a “relationship.”

The idea that faith is personal and relational often appeals to newcomers to faith. They recognize that “a power greater than ourselves” not only exists but also wants to connect with them in a personal way. God continually reaches out to people to interact with them.

From the very beginning of the biblical revelation, human beings are blessed by God personally and engaged by God in a face-to-face relationship renewed by periodic visits (Gen. 1:27-31; 2:7-3:8). . . . Even when they turn their back on the Father and put themselves on the cosmic throne, he continues to visit human beings and makes every possible provision for their salvation.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, God is so relational, personal, and communicative that God is actually a community of Three in One and One

in Three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The dynamic Trinity is so keen on interacting with humans that before the foundation of the world God thought of each one of us and thought we were a really good idea (Ephesians 1:4)! It would fit Christian theology to suppose that this Trinitarian community of persons said in one voice, “Can’t wait for [insert your name] to show up!”

Our aching for connection with a personal spiritual being is not just a human whim to fill an emotional vacuum or to find ourselves involved in an adventure more far-reaching than our day-to-day existence (although those play a part). Nor is it a me-centered selfishness that wants the Creator of the universe to think we’re special. Because we were made in the image of God, we have a “longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality.”<sup>2</sup> Since “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), we don’t want to miss a thing! We were created for life in union with our Creator, which begins now and keeps growing; without that life, we are only half alive.

### **Prayer Not So Personal**

What’s puzzling is that people hungering for a “personal” relationship with Jesus are often advised to do things that aren’t so personal. For example, prayer—a way to communicate with God personally—gets reduced to step-by-step techniques. Following such advice, I kept a prayer notebook for many years with page after page of requests that included an extended chart for answers. I had three other sections in this



notebook with lists of qualities of God to praise God for, lists of character flaws that I could confess, and lists of things to be thankful for. I was much admired by those few who knew about this notebook. But I grew weary of it all. Prayer became a mental chore. I was not truly interacting with God. Prayer was just my nonstop talking until I got to the end of the lists. I longed to know how to connect with God.

I also saw that life with God gets bypassed and depersonalized when we assume we can hear God only through *other people*—that the reason we go to church is to “get fed.” I saw great value in going to church and Bible studies, but wasn’t God willing and capable of nurturing me directly? Going to visit God on Sundays and hearing someone else talk about their life with God or what life with God is supposed to be about doesn’t satisfy what we’re looking for. I grew more frustrated. My soul felt starved for divine companionship.

I also saw that none of this was making much of a difference in my life. I tried to love people, but it wasn’t from the heart; I was making it up as I went along. God was impersonal to me and I was impersonal to others.

### **Invitation to the With-God Life**

Now and then I heard ideas such as “The real Son of God is at your side. He is beginning to turn you into the same kind of thing as Himself.”<sup>3</sup> I wondered if it was possible to sense the real Son of God at my side in prayer or even better, all day long.

This drew me to passages of Scripture that spoke about having a life with God: “Whoever has the Son *has life*” (1 John

5:12, emphasis added); “I came that they may have *life and have it abundantly*” (John 10:10, ESV, emphasis added); “Even when we were dead in our trespasses, [he] made us *alive together with Christ*” (Ephesians 2:5, ESV, emphasis added). The life described in these verses is about going to heaven when we die, yes, but it is also about living real life here and now: “To be ‘saved,’” wrote Dallas Willard, “was to be ‘delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the Kingdom of his dear Son,’ as Colossians 1:13 says.”<sup>4</sup> As William Barclay put it, “‘Eternal’ (*aionios*) life begins now and refers not only to *length* of life but also the *quality* of life in which we experience wholeness and union with God.”<sup>5</sup> Because of this connection with God, Willard concluded, “We who are saved are to have a different order of life from that of the unsaved. . . . [Christ] really does live on in us. The incarnation continues.”<sup>6</sup>

I wanted a personal relationship with Christ: to “*know Christ and the power of his resurrection*” (Philippians 3:10, emphasis added), or as *The Message* puts it: to “know Christ personally.” I sensed that if I *knew* Christ, God would reshape my inner self—intentions, longings, everyday thoughts. I wanted to live as Jesus did, with “eyes wide [open] in wonder and belief, . . . body fill[ed] up with light” (Matthew 6:22, MSG). I had a hunch this different kind of life, one of deep connection with Christ, came only from interacting with God.

### **How Might God Nurture Me?**

I began noticing that the Bible is full of people who related to God in a personal way. Abraham had conversation after conversation with God (Genesis 12–22). Jacob wrestled with

an angel who blessed him (Genesis 32:22-32). God gave Joseph answers to difficult dreams so that a civilization was saved from famine (Genesis 41:25-36). God gave David specific battle plans that saved Israel (1 Chronicles 14:14-15). Daniel operated as a politician in a foreign land, always in prayer (Daniel 6:10; 9:4-19); God and Nehemiah conversed as he organized unruly people to build a wall to protect Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:4-5; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14). In the New Testament, Joseph, Peter, and Paul received guidance as needed (Matthew 1:20-21; 2:13, 20; Acts 10:9-16; 16:9; 22:17-18). All of these people interacted with God; their good external behavior flowed from the heart.

Christians of other eras understood that growth comes from letting God nurture us. For example, Amy Carmichael, a missionary to India whose spiritual vision kept her strong in the face of hostile threats and abandonment by her own mission board, wrote: “Keep close, keep close. If you are close you will be keen. . . . You will drink of His spirit. . . . You will live to share your joy in Him. Nothing else will count for much.”<sup>7</sup> This understanding of just how *personally* God relates to us began my journey down the contemplative trail.

*Contemplative* comes from the Latin words *con* (meaning “with”) and *templa* (“the place where God dwells”). I wanted to live and move and have my being in the place God dwells—within me! That connection took shape primarily through the interactive practices described in this book: hearing God in Scripture “conversations,” waiting on God, delighting in God, asking God questions, and sometimes hearing God in contemplative prayer.

The contemplative approach isn't so much about *doing* these practices as about *living with Christ in the midst of them* so that they shape my life with God. All my past training in Bible study and prayer blossomed in a new way. I could now relate to God unhurriedly, without lists, and with great delight. It was time to know and be known by God.

Let this book be an invitation to you to interact with God in personal ways. At the end of each chapter are not only questions you may wish to discuss with someone or journal about, but also exercises that invite you to interact with God. Please don't skip them. Entering into them becomes a place to stop listening to the chatter in our heads and start listening to what God wants us to know today. Enjoy, or be challenged, or simply "be."



## WHEN PRAYER STOPS “WORKING”

I SAT IN MY CAR in the evening darkness, frustrated by how a man had disrupted the meeting I'd just left. (I'll call him “X” since I was so irritated I wanted to X him from the group.) He demanded that we do the fund-raiser at our town's annual event differently from how we had done it before. The rest of us wanted to do what we'd done for years, with great success. The meeting had become a contest of wills: X against us. With every suggestion he made, the others pounced on him. We were getting nowhere, so I was glad when the meeting ended.

As I sat in the car, waiting for my son to finish his own meeting, I prayed for X. Or what passed for prayer. I ranted to God: “He's so stubborn! Change this man!”

I exhaled loudly, laid my hands in my lap, and relaxed my hunched shoulders. As my pounding heart slowed, I heard the echoes of the me-centered, controlling prayer I'd just

offered. It was as if I was telling God what to do: “Make X cooperate with the group because he irritates me!”

I closed my eyes and repeated familiar words: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Breathing more calmly, I sensed quietness coming into my soul. I felt grateful for the companionship of God. A favorite prayer came to me: “Show me this person’s heart.” (I couldn’t resist adding, “If he has one.”) I waited in peace.

At that point, my son, Jeff, got into the car and said he needed to stop at a drugstore. I mentioned X’s name, and Jeff responded by telling me about his having fought in Vietnam: “He said he’d had no control over his life. Sometimes he had to obey orders that he hated obeying.” I remembered how this man was also laid off from a large company where he’d managed all the computers.

When Jeff went into the store, I closed my eyes again. As I waited on God in the stillness of the evening, a thought came to me: *This man has lost control of so many things—his past, his career.* I began to ask God if that was why X was so determined to control things such as our fund-raiser. I continued to wait on God until my son returned to the car.

As we drove home, a compromise came to me: *Our corner booth has two windows. Let him run his project out of the window we don’t use, and we can go ahead with our effort as usual.* I called the group leader, who liked the idea. “You’re such a peacemaker,” he said to me. My husband thought that was funny because I’d never been called a peacemaker before! This time I’d actually forged peace! Was God changing me?

Perhaps in the past I would have called a few people and

we would have brainstormed on how to pressure X to do what we wanted. Or I would have suggested we simply outvote him and let him *lose*. But in this contemplative process, I found that God had changed the condition of my heart. I no longer wanted to avoid the man when I saw him coming. In future meetings, I felt compassion for him because I had interacted with God about him.

### **Awareness of God’s Presence**

In the heat and pressure of daily living, it’s easy to forget that God is present with us and to slide into self-referenced thinking in which we are consumed with what we want and how (stressed) we feel. Our minds flash from one thing to another as life pulls us in many directions among the demands of work, family, health, and finances. Perhaps that’s why meetings of Christians often begin by asking God to be with us, as if God had found something more interesting to do. But contemplative prayer helps us set aside distracted, irritated feelings and find peace in God’s company.

*Contemplative prayer* is prayer in which we still our thoughts and emotions, and focus on God’s own self in an unhurried way. The stillness of contemplative prayer helps make us aware that God is truly with us and allows us to hear when God chooses to nudge, guide, direct, or even challenge us.

Contemplative prayer is reflective and expansive, allowing us to set aside our notions of what we think *should* happen and open ourselves to receiving God’s help in refocusing our thoughts and feelings about life situations.

Contemplation—thoughtfully considering God’s desires,



even waiting on and delighting in God—reconnects us with God in the midst of our scatteredness. When I pause in contemplation, I sense that the God who holds the universe together can also hold me together. In the quiet, I recall how God has helped me in the past. I once again remember that I am one whom God *so loves*. For this reason, contemplative prayer is sometimes referred to as “the prayer of silence.”

Does that seem too loose, not correct enough for you? While there’s a place for taking our entire agenda to God in prayer, that’s not always the case. Picture for a moment two people meeting to go out on a date. One of them shows up with a script in hand and says, “Here’s the script for the perfect date. Don’t stray from it.” How would the other respond? Isn’t dating about relating to each other? We often show up in prayer with a script or outline or even a formula we learned. Again, sometimes that can be helpful, especially if we’re confused about what to say. (Picture the tongue-tied couple dating!) But what if God wants to talk about something else today? Am I willing to let God set the agenda? Without a set agenda, we simply enjoy the companionship of God.

### **Restoring the Soul**

When I first learned to pray more contemplatively, I discovered I actually *liked* praying! Instead of prayer being mostly an intellectual task of framing my request, I could just “be” with God. If I was frustrated, distracted, or confused, I could reconnect with God, finding peace and strength in the quiet. Instead of being stuck in a limited perspective about a person or situation, I found myself open to a higher view that

allowed me to *respond* with patient wisdom instead of *reacting* out of my limited assumptions.

Eventually, I understood how inner transformation can take place in prayer. In contemplative prayer, we begin by bringing our real selves that are focused on our desires, demands, and needs, saying, “I want.” Then by fixing our attention on God who loves us, we let go of our desires to manage people, circumstances, ourselves, and feelings. As we acknowledge God’s willingness to empower and partner with us, we find ourselves saying, “God, knowing you is enough for me.” We sense the peace of God that is beyond human understanding (Philippians 4:7).

I also began to see that a life of *wanting God for God’s own self* was very different from *wanting God to help me*. As I began to experience the peace of God’s company, I turned to God in small snatches of time as I did in my car that night. I began to wonder how I had walked through life without it. I continue to be surprised by the empowerment, challenge, and prompting from God I experience.

### **From Mechanical to Relational**

This new approach was such a relief from my previous mechanical approach to life with God, which I call “checkbox spirituality.” We check off the good things that good Christians are supposed to do: read the Bible, pray, go to church, serve, and so on. We would never say this, but somewhere in the back of our minds is the idea that because we do these things, God is more likely to give us what we ask for. We pray to get problems solved, not to interact with God,

who loves us and partners with us. Our faith is reduced, as author Flannery O'Connor put it, to little more than "an electric blanket."<sup>1</sup> We pull it out, hoping God will cover the cold, exposed areas of our lives.

To be blunt, we *use* God to get quick answers and blessings. Then we're forced to hold our breath and live on the edge of our seats, wondering, "Will God do what I want, or not?" This mechanical approach quickly becomes a consumeristic version of God-on-demand. Or even worse, God is an opponent to be manipulated. If we just pray the right way, God will be "won over" into doing what we ask.

When we shift to a relational approach to life with God, prayer becomes a place of meeting God. We are more likely to hear from God, creator of the universe, and experience the Trinity's unshakable love as well as surprising challenges and nudges to move forward in shared mission. This results in having an interactive relationship with God.

The difference between the mechanical and relational approach could be pictured like this: Let's say you'd been taught how to get written directions from God to go any place you wanted to go. You could get in your car and hold these instructions in your hand, printed clearly in black and white. That's what many people want from God: "Just tell me what to do!"

But Jesus will not have it! Jesus is relentlessly relational. He gets in the car with you, takes the instructions out of your hands, and grins as he tears them up. "Start the car!" he says.

You feel uneasy; you just want the instructions! You protest: "How will I know when to turn?"

He smiles and challenges you to risk trusting him: “I’ll tell you when to turn. Start the car!”

You protest again: “I need to know ahead of time!”

But Jesus replies, “Trust me. We’re going to stop at restaurants you’re going to love; we’re going to see beautiful places; we’re going to stop alongside the road and help people you can’t stand. It will be wonderful. *Start the car.*”

If you’re wise, you start the car’s engine and love this moment-by-moment life with God. God created us not to make us map-reading, rote followers, but to be communicating, cooperating “friends” (John 15:15).

### **Technique Takes Over**

I confess I used to love phrases such as “Prayer is the key that unlocks the storehouses of God’s riches.” I was hungry for those riches and imagined I could use prayer as a technique to get them. I somehow missed the point that the riches are God’s own self, not the advantages I want God to provide.

Turn-of-the-century writer Evelyn Underhill pinpointed the problem: “We mostly spend [our] lives conjugating three verbs: to *want*, to *have*, and to *do*. Craving, clutching, and fussing, . . . we are kept in perpetual unrest.”<sup>2</sup> My prayers were full of what I *wanted*, what I thought I should *have*, and what I wanted God to *do*. It’s not surprising when these demanding prayers go unanswered.

Then the legalistic voice inside us begins to say, *God is ignoring your prayers because you’re not praying the right way*. So then we intensify our efforts, which often results in practices such as *formula praying*. We work hard to find better, more “effective”

ways to persuade God to do what we want. Reading the latest book on prayer or praying according to a certain format is trusted, instead of seeing prayer as a way to align ourselves with God's powerful, loving will and partnering with God in adventures of living in the Kingdom.

Eventually we develop a *devotion to the tools*. Persistent and regular use of certain activities becomes a guarantee for so-called success. For example, people say, "Read your Bible and pray. You'll be fine." So we push ourselves to finish today's reading plan or at least get to the bottom of the page of a reading, instead of seeing the goal as to meet with God today and Bible reading as a means to that end. Essentially we are trusting tools and our human efforts to use them well, instead of trusting a loving, self-giving God who listens attentively to us and is eager to do whatever is needed to draw us deeper into a discipling relationship with the Trinity.

Differentiating between devotion to God and devotion to spiritual tools may seem trivial, but this was a primary difference between Jesus and the Pharisees. These well-educated leaders fasted, prayed, and gave alms. They witnessed, understood the fine intricacies of spiritual correctness, knew the facts of Israel's history well, and discerned right from wrong in their culture (Matthew 23:15-16, 30). They were much admired and respected for being like Moses; they were honored at public events and recognized in the streets as spiritual people (23:2, 6-7). They tithed even from their spice racks: mint, dill, cumin (23:23)!

Jesus' assessment of the high-achieving Pharisees was this: Yes, they appeared to be righteous (23:27-28), but they

were dead and corrupt on the inside, lacking justice, compassion, and faithfulness. They were full of greed and self-indulgence, hypocrisy, and wickedness (23:23, 25, 27-28). These best of the best resisted and even persecuted Jesus.

Somehow these keepers of the Book were knowledgeable about Scripture but did not recognize God in the flesh. They seemed to know a lot *about* God, yet did not know God’s own self.

Like many people through the ages, the Pharisees became more devoted to practicing spiritual tools than *knowing* Yahweh, who as maker of heaven and earth longs to connect with us, save us, and make us whole. They not only focused on external behaviors such as Sabbath-keeping but also seemed to *trust in* them, as if doing activities somehow made them holy (rather than God making them holy). They doubted Jesus’ spirituality because he did not do these things in the detailed way they prescribed; instead, Jesus reached out in compassion to the suffering who needed to be healed. For Jesus, such practices were a means to an end: a way of connecting with God. For the Pharisees, the tools were the “end.” Doing them was the point!

Concentrating on practices and tools of our faith (and how well we’re doing them) can be a sign of *self-centeredness* rather than *God-centeredness*: *Have I prayed today? Did I pray long enough, sincerely enough for it to “count” with God?* We may congratulate ourselves for our consistent practices or regret our lack. We focus on our efforts so that we essentially trust in ourselves, as the Pharisees did (Luke 18:9). We become, in effect, “stars” of our own spirituality, concentrating on our own performance.

In fact, Jesus must be the star of our spirituality—the focus of our attention and the one who does the heavy lifting.

Oswald Chambers, author of the classic work *My Utmost for His Highest*, said, “Beware of being obsessed with consistency to your convictions instead of being devoted to God.”<sup>3</sup> When we turn our eyes back on our own performance too closely, our spirituality is about *us*, not about God. This focus on self and self-improvement can become the “trapdoor in transformation.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Meeting the Needs of the Soul**

This is not to say that outward actions do not matter. They not only affect people dramatically but also indicate what’s going on inside. The type and health of a tree is evidenced “by [its] fruit” (Matthew 7:20). However, God looks *first* upon the heart (1 Chronicles 28:9; Psalm 119:10; Jeremiah 29:13).

Instead of focusing mainly on external behaviors—praying enough, reading Scripture enough, trying to be nice—we need to let the Spirit work in our inner being first and let outward actions flow from that. The apostle Paul spoke of the “God who works *in you* to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13, emphasis added). The Word of God is “at work *in you* who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13, emphasis added). The Spirit pays careful attention to nurturing the soul, opening us to God’s work there. As David said, “In the *innermost being*, . . . You will make me know wisdom” (Psalm 51:6, NASB, emphasis added). And Paul prayed, asking that God “may strengthen you with power through his Spirit *in your inner being*” (Ephesians 3:16, emphasis added).



Our external behaviors conform organically to Christ's life as we become the kind of person within who has the right heart to do those things instead of forcing ourselves to be nice or well-behaved or confident. As we are empowered to fix our attention on God, we are gradually healed from our scatteredness as well as from a variety of unhealthy spiritual conditions.

### *Spiritual Dryness*

My friend Don once reflected on “the good old days” of the university fellowship group he attended while in college. In their Bible studies, he and other college students marveled at God's truths. No matter where Don goes to church now, he is never as motivated as he was in those days. “I wouldn't even know where to begin now,” Don said. “My faith isn't gone, but it's been a long time since I've seen God anywhere. I can't even say I want to obey God. I wish I did.”

To sit in silence before God restores the soul.<sup>5</sup> We don't expect tingly feelings but recollect God as revealed in scriptural truths: God never leaves us; God knocks at our heart's door; God's limitless love and direction are always available. God does not change even though our circumstances do. Because God “is immense, His love is an incomprehensibly vast, bottomless, shoreless sea before which we kneel in joyful silence.”<sup>6</sup> God's love waters our thirsty souls.

### *Guilt and Shame*

Recurring sins nag at us. Feelings of inadequacy never end. Lack of purity plagues us. Uneasy questions drive us away from God: *Shouldn't I feel ashamed of asking God's forgiveness*

*over and over for the same sin? Is God tired of me? Is there hope for me? When will all these sermons click and I'll finally stop snapping at my kids or yelling at other drivers on the road?*

In contemplation we see ourselves as the lost sheep whom the shepherd has come to find (Luke 15:1-7). Even after the shepherd places us joyfully on those broad shoulders, we may wonder: *I've been found, but am I still welcome? Am I still included in the fold? Am I still someone God can use?* Yet the shepherd is so joyful and talks about throwing a party for this wayward sheep (Luke 15:6).

#### *Lack of Direction and Purpose*

When I'm not fitting in or understanding what's going on around me, I need to hear the directing voice of the Father. A. W. Tozer, an influential evangelist of the twentieth century, wrote, "Most of us go through life praying a little, planning a little, jockeying for position, hoping but never being quite certain of anything, and always secretly afraid that we will miss the way."<sup>7</sup> In uncertain times, I want to trust God that my life will count, that God will use me even as ordinary and as inadequate as I am. I become more uncertain as I see the skills, opportunities, success, and faith others have—and I begin to compare myself and my circumstances, until I'm telling myself, *I can't* and *I'll never be*. When we're stuck in such inner currents, a heart relationship with God does not seem possible. We feel disconnected.

Being quiet with God allows me to be immersed in the biblical truth that I am someone God *so loves*, possessing "hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11). As I absorb God's

truthful words, my doubts and fears are challenged. A sense of trust develops. I can rest in God, who knows what’s going on even when I don’t. I can regain sight of God as the One who is eager to nurture me and get me up and walking again.

### **God Becomes the Companion of Our Souls**

As we free ourselves from trying to employ correct mechanics of prayer and allow ourselves to be still and know that God is God, prayer becomes a meeting of the hearts where we rest in God’s presence. It is no longer hard work but a source of rest and new possibilities. Even when we have nothing important to say to God, we are satisfied in the divine rhythm of coming and going, working and resting. Finding a good plan is not our chief goal; rather living in the company of God is.

Slowly we learn to live more of our life in ongoing union with God; we no longer go for hours in forgetfulness of God and God’s work on the earth. Instead we “lead our lives before God in an open, adventurous, and reflective manner.”<sup>8</sup> Prayer in a contemplative approach becomes, as it was for me that night in the car, not so much about “answers” as about a way to be in the world.

### **Questions for Discussion or Journaling**

1. When was the last time you *wanted* to pray? When you found prayer to be *fun*? What made the difference in your attitude toward prayer?

2. Which image describes how you might view an interactive relationship with Jesus?
  - sitting together on a park bench
  - sitting across the table from each other at a coffee shop
  - running side by side
  - sitting across from a good friend in private conversation (such as spiritual direction)
  - other:

### **Exercises in Moving toward a Relational Approach**

- Read Luke 15:3-7 and picture yourself as the lost sheep. No doubt you became lost through your lack of focus or a tempting distraction. Notice that the shepherd doesn't scold you but joyfully puts you on his shoulders. Feel the closeness of being grasped by the shepherd's strong hands, of being wrapped around his neck. You are safe and secure. You are well loved. This is where you truly belong. Stay with this picture for a few minutes. Then respond to God with a word or two about why this idea is important to you.
- Ask God to bring to mind someone who irritates you. Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Turn the palms of your hands upward and say something like, "Show me this person's heart." Be open. If nothing comes to you, keep this prayer gently in mind for the rest of the day.