

L I F E
W I T H
G O D

*Reading the Bible for
Spiritual Transformation*

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with
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A Word to the Reader

This book grows out of a deep, heartfelt concern that you and I and all peoples everywhere might discover the *life with God* to which the Bible witnesses so eloquently. This concern has its roots in the five years of intensive work that I (along with many others) did to produce the *RENOVARÉ Spiritual Formation Bible*. As we worked intensively with the biblical witness, we all were profoundly struck by two great realities.

First, we found that the unity of the Bible is discovered in the development of life *with* God as a reality on earth, centered in the person of Jesus. Through Scripture we heard God whispering down through the centuries: “I am *with* you!” “I am *with* you!” “I am *with* you!” Then, we heard God asking a question that searches the human person to the depths: “Are you willing to be *with* Me?” The Scripture reveals that saying “yes” to this invitation thrusts human beings into life *with* God . . . daily . . . hourly . . . moment by moment.

Second, the biblical witness showed us how this with-God life works itself out in every conceivable way and in every conceivable circumstance. We learned how God was *with* God’s people in individual communion: *with* Adam, *with* Eve, *with* Enoch,

with Noah. Next, under Abraham we came to understand how God was *with* God's people in the development of family life. We followed the story as it continued on through the Exodus into the Promised Land and the building of a nation, in the people's rebellion, and ultimately into their exile. Through it all, God remained *with* God's people. Then we saw how God brought about the restoration and, in the fullness of time, we witnessed the coming of Immanuel. Ultimately, in the formation of the church we saw the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons, with God at its very center as its prime Sustainer and most glorious Inhabitant.

We perceived this "with-God" life as a cosmic principle that God has used all along in creation and redemption and restoration, extending out beyond human history into eternity.¹ We also came to the realization that this strange and eccentric Bible story is all over autobiographic of us. Just as God kept saying in ancient times, so God keeps saying today: "I am *with* you in all the love and terror and pity and pain and wonder that is your life. I am *with* you. Are you willing to be *with* Me?"

Our deep concern for the Bible as the foundational text for Christian spiritual formation continues in this little book, which has been developed to invite us into a deeper and more authentic life *with* God. It seeks to illuminate *The Immanuel Principle*—the dynamic of spiritual transformation intertwining divine action and human reaction—in all of human experience, from the stories of biblical characters through the generations of Christian tradition to our own lives today. Always, the purpose of such understanding is not that we will become proficient in our Bible knowledge. Rather, it is that we will be enabled to live out of this

“life that is life indeed” into ongoing discipleship to Jesus in such a way that our hearts and minds are progressively transformed into the very nature of the heart and mind of God (1 Tim. 6:19).

As the primary way of becoming intentional participants in this glorious vision, we explore the scripturally based, time-honored practices of the Spiritual Disciplines, which open the door to becoming more like the God into whose presence and life they usher us.

THE HIDDEN RESERVOIR

As we allow the Scripture to lead us into the process of transformation, we discover that it is not a matter of religious beliefs and behavior. No—we are entering into a dynamic, pulsating life! Our trusted friend the Apostle Paul writes, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of spirit of **life** in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:1–2, emphasis added). Paul is here using a very specific word to identify the secret of our life “hidden with Christ in God” (Col.3:3): *zoë*, the eternal, uncreated life that originates in God alone.

Scripture identifies two types of life: *bios*, the physical, created life; and *zoë*, the spiritual, eternal life. Likewise, there are two types of death: *teleute*, physical death; and *thanatos*, spiritual death. Thus, it is entirely possible for a person to be physically alive (*bios*) while spiritually dead (*thanatos*). But the salvation that is in Jesus Christ immerses us into the hidden reservoir of divine love and power. Jesus declares, “I am come that they might have life [*zoë*], and that they might have it more abundantly” (John

10:10, κϿν). In his first Epistle John writes, “God gave us eternal life [*zoē*], and this life [*zoē*] is in his Son” (1 John 5:11). And Paul writes, “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life [*zoē*]” (Rom. 5:10). Life. Life. Life. It is all about life: imperishable, unceasing *zoē*.

But we must seek this life out, pursue it, turn into it because there is also a principle of death within us, stemming from the fall. Therefore, we must be constantly saying “yes” to life and “no” to death. We must always be discerning life-giving actions and attitudes from those that are death-giving. This is why the Bible is such a help to us; it is regularly fleshing these things out in the rough-and-tumble of real-life situations. Scripture makes clear to us precisely how this “with God” life works in all the circumstances of human existence, both for individuals and for groups, both in specific historical periods and throughout all times.

A DWELLING PLACE FOR GOD

Now, all this struggling and learning to live “with God” has a rock-solid purpose to it: to transform us into the likeness and character of Jesus. God’s everlasting intent for human life is that we should be in every aspect a dwelling place for God. We are, in God’s time and in God’s way, to be set free from fornication and impurity and licentiousness and idolatry and sorcery and enmities and strife and jealousy and anger and quarrels and dissensions and factions and envy and drunkenness and carousing and things like these (Gal. 5:19–21). Conversely, we are, in God’s time and in God’s way, to take on the spiritual fruit of love and joy

and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self control (Gal. 5:22–23).

Heaven is most certainly an important part of this “with God life.” This life is, after all, eternal. Hence, we want to become the kind of person inwardly so that when we do get to heaven we will want to stay there. Our feelings and passions and affections will have been so transformed that we will feel right at home in heaven. Nor does this transforming process have to wait for heaven. Oh, no, it begins now . . . today. Entering a “with God life” baptizes us into the milieu of the Holy Spirit. Everything around us becomes scented with the fragrance of heaven, and this touches us in ways we do not fully understand. We begin to “turn, turn, turn ’til we turn round right,” as the old Shaker hymn puts it.

This is a subterranean, inner process of transformation. The heart is deeply and surely healed and restored and redirected by God alone. Old affections of hate and guile and envy are simply gone. New affections of faith and hope and love are in their place. Love and joy and peace in the Holy Spirit seem to flow from us; simply, naturally.

How, you may ask, does such a transformed life come into being? Vision. Intention. Means. These three operating under the grace of God will immerse us in a life that is penetrated throughout by love, that responds to everything in the light of God’s overriding governance for good, that has the power to overcome evil with Christlikeness. We will increasingly live a “with-God life.”

Richard J. Foster
Christmas Eve, 2007

Part 1

Catching the Vision

Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don't simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus' name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son.

—Eugene Peterson,
Eat This Book

Seeing the Bible Afresh

I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

—Isaiah 43:19

God has given us a written revelation of who God is and of what God's purposes are for humanity. And God has chosen to accomplish this great work through the People of God on earth. This written revelation now resides as a massive fact at the heart of human history. There is, simply, no book that is remotely close to achieving the significance and influence of the Bible. It is truly The Book (*hay Biblos*).

But the intrinsic power and greatness of the Bible does not make it easy for us to receive the life it offers. The average "Bible consumer," publishing research tells us, owns nine Bibles and is looking for more. This is mute but powerful testimony to a deep and abiding sense of *lack*—a sense that we have not really achieved a grasp of the Bible that is adequate to our needs.

In point of fact, we can often use the Bible in ways that stifle spiritual life or even destroy the soul. This happened to any number of people who walked with Jesus, heard him teach, and saw him exercise the power of the kingdom of God. For many, their very study of the Scriptures prevented them from recognizing who he was and from putting their confidence in him (John 5:39–47). And later, Peter speaks in very grim terms of how people can “twist” Scripture “to their own destruction” (2 Pet. 3:16).

Is it possible that this still happens today? Sadly, we must admit that it does. Think of the multiplied millions of people who say, sincerely, that the Bible is *the* guide to life but who still starve to death in the presence of its spiritual feast. This tragic situation is obvious from the usual effects (or lack of effects) that the study of the Bible has in the daily lives of people, even among those who speak most highly of it.

THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM

The source of the problem is rooted in the two most common objectives people have for studying the Bible. The first is the practice of studying the Bible for information or knowledge alone. This may include information about particular facts or historical events, or knowledge of general truths or doctrines, or even knowledge of how others are mistaken in their religious views, beliefs, and practices.

We know from experience how knowledge can make people arrogant—even knowledge of the Bible and of God. It is not surprising, then, that study that focuses on knowledge alone does

not lead to life transformation, which is the real human need. No wonder we who love the Bible keep buying more editions of it, hoping to obtain what we know in our hearts is there for us.

The second common objective people often have for studying the Bible is to find some formula that will solve the pressing need of the moment. Thus we seek out lists of specific passages that speak to particular needs rather than seeking whole-life discipleship to Jesus. To be sure, these needs are important, desperately so when we are trapped in the harsh realities of life. They can involve anything from needs for comfort or forgiveness, to physical healing, to conformity to a particular denominational or political persuasion, to special endowments or gifts of the Spirit, to works of social liberation. But in the end they always have to do with being “a good citizen,” “a good spouse,” or “a good something else”—perhaps even with being “a good Christian” by certain interpretations.

What we must face up to about these two common objectives for studying the Bible is that they always leave us or someone else *in charge*. They are, in fact, ways of trying to control what comes out of the Bible rather than entering the process of the transformation of our whole person and of our whole life into *Christlikeness*.

If we want to receive from the Bible the life “with God” that is portrayed *in* the Bible, we must be prepared to have our dearest and most fundamental assumptions about ourselves and our associations called into question. We must read humbly and in a constant attitude of repentance. Only in this way can we gain a thorough and practical grasp of the spiritual riches that God has made available to all humanity in his written Word. Only in this

way can we keep from transforming The Book into a Catholic Bible, an Orthodox Bible, a Protestant Bible, an “Ours Is More Accurate than Yours” Bible.

What will enable us to avoid this soul-crushing result?

THE SUPERNATURAL POWER OF LOVE

Jesus founded on earth a new type of community, and in it and through him, love—God-given *agape* love—came down to live with power on earth. Now, it is this God-given *agape* love that transforms our lives and gives us true spiritual substance as persons. Suppose, then, we simply agreed that the proper outcome of studying the Bible is growth in the supernatural power of love: love of God and of all people?

We could call this The First Corinthians 13 Test: “If I . . . understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (verse 2). And so the test of whether or not we have really gotten the point of the Bible would then be the quality of love that we show.

Knowledge of the Bible and its teachings would, of course, continue to be of great value, but only insofar as it leads to greater love: to greater appropriation of God’s love for us and for us to have greater love for God, others, and ourselves.

When we turn to Scripture in this way, our reason for “knowing” the Bible and everything it teaches would be that we might love more and know more of love. We would experience this love not as an abstraction but as a practical reality by which we are possessed. And since all those who love through and through

obey the law, we would become ever more obedient to Jesus Christ and his Abba Father.

Regarding the Bible, then, perhaps the most basic question is: Shall we try to control the Bible, that is, try to make it “come out right,” or shall we simply seek to release its life into our lives and into our world? Shall we try to “tilt” it this way or that, or shall we give it complete freedom to “tilt” us as it will?

Can we surrender freely to the life we see in the Bible, or must we remain in control of that life, only selectively endorsing it so far as we find it proper and safe from our “perspective”? Can we trust the living water that flows from Christ through the Bible, open ourselves to it and open it up into the world as best we can, and then get out of its way? This is the goal of reading the Bible for spiritual transformation.

LIFE WITH GOD: THE IMMANUEL PRINCIPLE

The Bible is all about human life “*with God*.” It is about how God has made this “with” life possible and will bring it to pass. In fact, the name *Immanuel*, meaning “God is with us,” is the title given to the one and only Redeemer because it refers to God’s everlasting intent for human life—namely, that we should be in every aspect a dwelling place of God. Indeed, the unity of the Bible is discovered in the development of life with God as a reality on earth, centered in the person of Jesus. We might call this *The Immanuel Principle* of life.

This dynamic, pulsating, *with-God* life is on nearly every page of the Bible. To the point of redundancy we hear that *God* is *with* people: with Abraham, with Moses, with Esther, with David,

with Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos and Micah and Haggai and Malachi, with Mary, with Peter, with James and John, with Paul and Barnabas, with Priscilla and Aquila, with Lydia, Timothy, Epaphroditus, Phoebe, and a host of others too numerous to name. These varied stories form a mosaic illustrating how the “with” life works in all circumstances of human existence, both in specific historical periods and through all times.

This mosaic suggests a beautiful design for the way in which we view the Scriptures. From Genesis to Revelation we learn that The Immanuel Principle is, after all, a *cosmic* principle that God has used all along in creation and redemption. It alone serves to guide human life aright on earth now and even illuminates the future of the universe. It is the wellsprings of the river of life flowing through the Bible, surging with the gracious word of God to all humankind—“I am with you.” This river pours into the thirsty wastelands of the human soul, inviting us to enter with its insistent call, “Will you be with Me?” Now, once we decide to surrender freely to this river of life, we must learn how to see into the divine Life within the Bible, and increasingly receive that Life as our own, not just for us but for the sake of the world God so loves.

NURTURING THE INTENTION

God not only originated the Bible through human authorship; God remains with it always. It is God’s book. No one owns it but God. It is the loving heart of God made visible and plain. And receiving this message of exquisite love is the great privilege of all who long for life with God. Reading and studying and memorizing and meditating upon Scripture have always been the foun-

dation of the Christian Disciplines. All of the Disciplines are built upon Scripture. Our practice of the Spiritual Disciplines is kept on course by our immersion in Scripture. And so it is, we come to see, that this reading and studying and memorizing and meditating is totally in the service of “the life that really is life” (1 Tim. 6:19). We long with all our hearts to know for ourselves this with-God kind of life that Jesus brings in all its fullness.

And the Bible has been given to help us. God has so superintended the writing of Scripture that it serves as a most reliable guide for our own spiritual formation. But as in its authorship, so in its presentation to the world, God uses human action. So we must consider how we can ourselves come to the Bible and also how we can present it to all peoples in a way that does not destroy the soul but inducts it into the eternal kind of life.

We begin by opening our lives in Christian community to the influx of God’s life, and by experientially finding, day-to-day, how to let Jesus Christ live in every dimension of our being. We can gather regularly in little groups of two or more to encourage one another to discover the footprints of God in our daily existence and to venture out *with God* into areas where we have previously walked alone or not at all.

But the aim is not external conformity, whether to doctrine or deed, but the re-formation of the inner self—of the spiritual core, the place of thought and feeling, of will and character. “Behold,” cries the psalmist, “you desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:6, 10). It is the “inner person” that “is being *renewed [renovare]* day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16).

While the many Christian traditions have differed over the details of spiritual formation, they all come out at the same place: the transformation of the person into Christlikeness. “Spiritual formation” is the process of transforming the inner reality of the self (the inward being of the psalmist) in such a way that the overall life with *God* seen in the Bible naturally and freely comes to pass in us. Our inner world (the secret heart) becomes the home of Jesus, by his initiative and our response. As a result, our interior world becomes increasingly like the inner self of Jesus, and, therefore, the natural source of the words and deeds that are characteristic of him. By his enabling presence we come to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5).

This, then, provides the answer to our question about how we can present the Bible to human beings in a way that does not destroy the soul, but inducts it into the eternal kind of life. We simply do all we can to see clearly the Life that burns brightly on the pages of the Bible and to learn, by practical steps, how we can bring our entire life into that Life. An intelligent, humble, careful, intensive, straightforward reading of the Bible will direct us into Life in the kingdom of God.

READING WITH UNDERSTANDING

In seeking to discover this with-God life it is helpful to read the Bible in four distinct ways.

First, we read the Bible literally. Reading from cover to cover, internalizing its life-giving message. By reading the whole of Scripture, we begin to apprehend its force and power. We enter into the original dynamics and drama of Scripture: struggling

with Abraham over the offering up of the son of promise; puzzling with Job at the tragedies of life; rejoicing with Moses at Israel's release from the house of bondage; weeping with Jeremiah "for the slain of my poor people" (Jer. 9:11); bowing in awe with Mary at the messianic promise.

Second, we read the Bible in context. This means allowing the way in which the author originally depicted life with God to establish the standard for understanding our life with God today. We read with a firm determination to discover the intent of the original author, and then allow that intent to control our comprehension of the passage. All this helps us grasp the way God continues to shape human life today.

Third, we read the Bible in conversation with itself. In other words, we seek to understand how the whole of Scripture gives structure and meaning to each of its parts. The unfolding drama of Scripture often raises puzzling questions that are resolved only when more obscure and difficult passages are held under the light of clearer, more straightforward passages. In biblical interpretation, systematic passages interpret incidental passages; universal passages interpret local ones; didactic passages interpret symbolic ones. In this way the whole Bible guides us into a better understanding of its particular parts.

Fourth, Christians read the Bible in conversation with the historic witness of the People of God. The Church learned from the Synagogue that it is the community that reads the Bible. This, in part, is what we mean when we speak of "the communion of saints." Christians throughout the centuries help us understand the nature of life with God and provide insight and discernment that enrich our own spiritual life. So we read the Bible in

conversation with Origen and Jerome, Augustine of Hippo and Hildegard of Bingen, John Chrysostom and John Calvin, Martin Luther and Richard Baxter, Watchman Nee and Sundar Singh—and many others, including wise and mature interpreters of Scripture today. This corporate reading of the Bible illuminates for us the multifaceted ways The Immanuel Principle is experienced in ordinary life.

READING WITH THE HEART

Finally, as we approach the Bible it is helpful to slow down, breathe deeply, and read with the heart. Now, this “reading with the heart” way of approaching the sacred text has a very long and time-honored history among the People of God. It even has a name, *lectio divina*, Latin for divine or spiritual reading.

What does *lectio divina* mean? Well, it means *listening* to the text of Scripture—really listening; listening yielded and still. It means *submitting* to the text of Scripture; allowing its message to flow into us rather than our attempting to master it. It means *reflecting* on the text of Scripture; permitting ourselves to become fully engaged—both mind and heart—by the drama of the passage. It means *praying* the text of Scripture; letting the biblical reality of this with-God life give rise to our heart cry of gratitude or confession or complaint or petition. It means *applying* the text of Scripture; seeing how God’s Holy Word provides a personal word for our life circumstances. And, it means *obeying* the text of Scripture; turning, always turning, from our wicked ways and into the way everlasting (Ps. 139:23–24).

UNDERSTANDING THE MEANS

The with-God kind of life that we see in the Bible is the very life to which we are called. It is, in fact, exactly the life Jesus is referring to when he declares, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10, κϵϵν). It is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is solid. It is serene. It is simple. It is radiant. It takes no time, though it permeates all of our time.

But such a life does not simply fall into our hands. Frankly, it is no more automatic for us than it was for those luminaries who walk across the pages of our Bible. There is a God-ordained means to becoming the kind of persons and the kind of communities that can fully and joyfully enter into such abundant living. And these “means” involve us in a process of intentionally “training . . . in godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7). This is the purpose of the *Disciplines* of the spiritual life. Indeed, Scripture itself is the primary means for the discovery, instruction, and practice of the Spiritual Disciplines, which bring us all the more fully into the *with God* life.

The Spiritual Disciplines, then, are the God-ordained means by which each of us is enabled to bring the individualized power-pack we all possess—the human body—and place it before God as “a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). It is the way we go about training in the spiritual life. By means of this process we become, through time and experience, the kind of person who naturally and freely expresses “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23).

MANY AND VARIED

What are these Spiritual Disciplines of which we are speaking? Oh, they are many and varied: fasting and prayer, study and service, submission and solitude, confession and worship, meditation and silence, simplicity, frugality, secrecy, sacrifice, celebration, and the like. We see such Spiritual Disciplines cropping up repeatedly in the Bible as the way God's People trained themselves and were trained by God toward godliness. And not only in the Bible; the saints down through history, even spilling over into our own time, have all practiced these ways of "growing in grace" (see 2 Pet. 3:18).

Biblical examples abound of individual listings and common groupings of Spiritual Disciplines in much the same way that athletes have a basic regimen of training for particular sports. And this makes perfect sense since these biblical personages were (and we are) the *athletae dei*, the athletes of God. As the athletes of God they trained (and we train) to participate fully and freely in this with-God kind of life. The Psalms virtually sing of the meditations of the People of God: "My eyes are awake before each watch of the night, that I may meditate on your promise" (Ps. 119:148). The psalm that introduces the entire Psalter calls us to emulate those whose "delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night" (Ps. 1:2). Daniel "turned to the LORD God" with prayer, supplication, fasting, and confession (Dan. 9:3). Jesus, "in the morning, while it was still very dark . . . got up and went out to a deserted place" (Mark 1:35). The Christians at Antioch were "worshiping the Lord and fasting" when they received Divine

guidance to commission Paul and Barnabas to their missionary task (Acts 13:1–3). And on it goes.

We can see this process not only in the Bible but also in the stories of God's people throughout the ages. Perhaps you have read or heard of *The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola or Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* or Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying* or William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. These writings, and many others like them, all discuss Disciplines of the spiritual life for training in righteousness.

So groupings and patterns of Spiritual Disciplines abound. But, we should never look for some exhaustive list of the Spiritual Disciplines. Nor for any "formula for blessedness." No, this interactive life "with God" is far too dynamic for that.

Now, through all this we need not fear. We are not left to our own devices. God is with us. Christ is our ever-living Teacher. The Spirit will guide and direct. Wise Christian counsel abounds in both Scripture and among loving and mature friends. We will be taught which response is right and when. And which Disciplines are needful and when. Our only task is to listen. And obey.

THE PRINCIPLE OF INDIRECTION

When we engage in the Spiritual Disciplines, we are seeking the righteousness of the kingdom of God through "indirection." You see, we cannot by direct effort make ourselves into the kind of people who can live fully alive to God. Only God can accomplish this in us. Only God can incline our heart toward him. Only God can reprogram the deeply ingrained habit patterns of sin that

constantly predispose us toward evil and transform them into even more deeply ingrained habit patterns of “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). And God freely and graciously invites us to participate in this transforming process. But not on our own.

We do not, for example, become humble merely by trying to become humble. Action on our own would make us all the more proud of our humility. No, we instead train with Spiritual Disciplines appropriate to our need. In this particular example that would most surely involve learning numerous acts of service for others that would incline us toward the good of all people. This indirect action will place us—body, mind, and spirit—before God as a living sacrifice. God then takes this little offering of ourselves and in a divine time and in a divine way produces in us things far greater than we could ever ask or think—in this case a life growing in and overflowing with the grace of humility. It is, to repeat, the righteousness of the kingdom of God by indirection.

WHAT IS A SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE?

Now, to move forward in this life, we must understand clearly what a Spiritual Discipline is in the first place. *A Spiritual Discipline is an intentionally directed action by which we do what we can do in order to receive from God the ability (or power) to do what we cannot do by direct effort.* It is not in us, for example, to love our enemies. We might even go out and try very hard to love our enemies, but we will fail miserably. Always. This strength, this power to love our enemies—that is, to genuinely and uncondi-

tionally love those who curse us and despitefully use us—is simply not within our natural abilities. We cannot do it by ourselves. Ever.

But this fact of life does not mean that we do nothing. Far from it! Instead, by an act of the will we choose to take up Disciplines of the spiritual life that we can do. These Disciplines are all actions of body, mind, and spirit that are within our power to do. Not always and not perfectly, to be sure. But they are things we can do. By choice. By choosing actions of *fasting* we can learn experientially that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Deut. 8:3; Luke 4:4). By choosing actions of *study* we can learn how the mind takes on an order conforming to the order upon which it concentrates, which is precisely why we seek to turn our mind toward all things “true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil. 4:8). By choosing actions of *solitude* we can become intimately acquainted with the many things that control us so that we can be set free from them by the power of God (Mark 6:31). And so forth.

Now, the Spiritual Disciplines in and of themselves have no merit whatsoever. They possess no righteousness, contain no recitude. Their purpose—their only purpose—is to place us before God. After that they have come to the end of their tether. But it is enough. Then the grace of God steps in and takes this simple offering of ourselves and creates out of it the kind of person who embodies the goodness of God; indeed, a person who can come to the place of truly loving even enemies.

Again, Spiritual Disciplines involve doing what we *can* do to receive from God the power to do what we cannot do. And God graciously uses this process to produce in us the kind of person who automatically will do what needs to be done when it needs to be done.

This ability to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done is the true freedom in life. Freedom comes not from the absence of restraint but from the presence of discipline. Only the disciplined gymnast is free to score a perfect ten on the parallel bars. Only the disciplined violinist is free to play Paganini's "Caprices." This, of course, is true in all of life, but it is never more true than in the spiritual life. When we are on the spot, when we find ourselves in the midst of the crisis, it is too late. Training in the Spiritual Disciplines is the God-ordained means for forming and transforming the human personality so that in the emergency we can be "response-able"—able to respond appropriately.

GRACE, GRACE, AND MORE GRACE

It is vitally important for us to see all this spiritual training in the context of the work and action of God's grace. As the great Apostle reminds us, "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). This, you see, is no "works righteousness," as it is sometimes called. Even our desiring of this with-God kind of life is an action of grace; it is "prevenient grace," say the theologians. You see, we are not just saved by grace; we live by grace. And we pray by grace and fast by grace and study by grace and serve by grace and

worship by grace. *All the Disciplines are permeated by the enabling grace of God.*

But do not misunderstand; there *are* things for us to do. Daily. Grace never means inaction or total passivity. In ordinary life we will encounter multiple moments of decision where we must engage the will saying, “Yes!” to God’s will and to God’s way as the People of God have been challenged throughout history. The opposite of grace is works, but not effort.

“Works” have to do with earning, and there simply is nothing any of us can do to earn God’s love or acceptance. And, of course, we don’t have to. God already loves us utterly and perfectly, and our complete acceptance is the free gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. In God’s amazing grace we live and move and have our being. But if we ever hope to “grow in grace,” we will find ourselves engaging in effort of the most strenuous kind. As Jesus says, we are to “*strive* to enter through the narrow door” (Luke 13:24, emphasis added). And Peter urges us to “make every *effort* to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love” (2 Pet. 1:5–7, emphasis added).

GO AND DO LIKEWISE

As you read the Bible, be on the lookout for the formation—indeed, the transformation—of those who walk across its pages. Pay attention even to those who resist God’s initiatives and are never really formed into Christlikeness: the Esaus and the

Balaams, the Ahabs and the Manassehs, the Jezebels, and the Judases. Note the struggles. Look for the intention, or the lack of intention. Observe the various and sundry Spiritual Disciplines used. Watch the movement back and forth: defiance and obedience, rebellion and submission, loyalty and unfaithfulness.

Give special attention to those who do come through on the other side—albeit with many slips and falls. Note their joy. Their peace. Their strength. Their love. They are the ones who are experiencing ever more fully The Immanuel Principle, the with-God life. Then, go and do likewise.