

Consider the Lilies

Five Ways to Stop
Worrying and Enjoy
the Kingdom of
Heaven

Krin Van Tatenhove

Consider the Lilies:

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Enjoy the Kingdom of Heaven**

By Krin J. Van Tatenhove

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Dedicated
to Pieter and Hanna,
for your faith in the Father,
and to Donna,
for teaching me the joy of simple
pleasures

Note: The names of most people mentioned in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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***Who of you, by worrying, can add
a single moment to your life? -***

Matthew 6:27

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PREFACE

Flashback...

It was a bright spring day in the desert. Recent rain had released the sweet smell of creosote, but I barely took time to savor it. I was hurriedly crossing the playground of our campus, intent on using the bathroom, the phone, and the copy machine during my short teacher's break.

Suddenly, one of the third grade girls bounded up to me and tugged my arm.

“Mr. Van! Mr. Van! Will you listen to my speech?”

Select students from each grade were preparing for a regional speech meet. Porsha was one of them. She stood before me slightly breathless, red beads woven into her cornbraids, her dark eyes full of life. What a precious child! I placed my own agenda on hold.

“Of course I’ll listen to your speech.”

“It’s from the Bible,” she said. “Matthew, chapter six.”

With no other formalities, she reached into memory and began.

“Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what *you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.*

Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

So do not worry, saying ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

“That was great, Porsha!” I gave her shoulder a pat. “I’m impressed by your memory and by the *feeling* you put into it. Do you know who spoke those words?”

“Jesus.”

“Right. Do you know what he meant by them?”

“Not really,” she said. “My teacher tried to explain, but I don’t get it.”

“Do you want me to try?”

“Please.”

“Jesus is talking about worry,” I said. “Do you know what worry is?”

“Sort of. Like when I get nervous before taking a test.”

“Exactly. There are a lot of things people worry about. We worry about having enough money. We worry about our families. We worry about getting sick or growing old. We worry about what other people think of us. We even worry about whether God is there to help us.

“Does your family have any worries?”

The question was rhetorical. I knew for a fact that her parents were embroiled in a financial crisis, struggling just to pay their bills.

She nodded vigorously.

“It was the same in Jesus’ day, Porsha. People worried about all the same things. This made Jesus sad.”

“Why?”

“Because worry ruins our lives. It makes us angry and tired and sick. It causes us to be mean to other people. Worry hurts us in many ways. And when *we* hurt, *Jesus* hurts.

“So one day while He was speaking to a crowd of people, Jesus told them not to worry. He told them to look at the lilies—the beautiful flowers that were growing in the field around them.”

I was warming to my topic and I needed an object, something to make my lesson three-dimensional.

“Come with me, Porsha.”

I took her hand and led her to a brilliant row of rose bushes near the school office.

“Look here,” I said, pointing to a magnificent lavender specimen with hints of cream and purple swirled through its delicate petals. “What do you think of this one?”

“It’s one of the prettiest roses I’ve ever seen,” she said.

“Look at the way God takes care of it,” I said. “Look at the way the sun warms its petals. Do you think God loves this rose?”

She nodded.

“I do, too. I think God loves all of His creation. Every rock and tree and hill is precious to Him.

“Now listen, Porsha. Jesus said that if God cares for this rose that will only bloom for a few days, won’t He care even more for you and me—His own children He has created in His image?”

She nodded again. Slower this time.

“Are you getting it, Porsha? We worry *so much* about whether or not we’re going to be all right in life, that we forget God is taking care of us. We forget that He will make sure our needs are met. We forget that we can trust Him with every area of our lives. If He cares enough about this one little rose to make it *so beautiful*, don’t you think He cares enough to make sure *we* get everything we need?”

Some bridge was crossed, some connection made in Porsha’s mind. She smiled fully and nodded with confidence.

“Thanks for explaining it to me, Mr. Van.”

“You’re welcome.”

At that point I should have quit, but the preacher in me was on a roll.

“In fact, Porsha, you have some of Jesus’ most powerful words for your speech. I believe that if every human being were to follow this teaching and stop worrying, there would be a revolution in our world.”

She looked puzzled. I was sailing beyond third grade waters.

“A revolution is a *very big* change. If all of us were to stop worrying, just think of the changes that would sweep over our world! We would be more relaxed, more sensitive, more joyful. We would spend less time pushing and striving to get ahead, and more time enjoying the bonds of love. The world would be a much better place.”

By this time she was peering beyond me to the playground, where some of her friends were skipping rope. I could hear their singsong chant.

“Thanks, Mr. Van,” she said. She gave me a quick hug around the waist, then skipped off to join them. Class over.

I watched her bound away, then pondered the lavender rose. A bee had landed and was busily filling her leg sacks with pollen, a migrant worker humming happily in her own little world.

Who are you fooling? I asked myself.

Get real, teacher. Teach thyself.

The truth was that for weeks, even months, my life had been drenched in worries: financial worries, career worries, relationship worries, worry about why I was worrying. I went to bed at night trying to quiet their myriad voices, and I awoke in the morning trying to fend them off. Though I wore a cool mask around others, stress was often teeming beneath the surface. To make it worse, I was sorely aware that stress and worry had been the dominant patterns of my adult life. So much of my God-given time had been spent in worrying. It was an internal static, a background chatter, a habit that rarely gave way to silence.

Teacher, teach thyself.

I don't believe in lightning fast changes. I know Paul had his Damascus road experience, but the changes in my life have come through concentration, hard work, and discipline. However, I *do* believe there are certain moments that provide turning points in life. There are crossroads where we somehow muster enough presence of mind and willpower to change our direction permanently. It is only in looking back

that we, like Robert Frost, see how taking the road less traveled made all the difference.

Right then and there I vowed to seek God's peace with all my heart, mind, and soul. I vowed to move beyond a mere academic understanding of Jesus' teachings on worry. I decided my life would change. No longer would I merely talk the talk; I would walk the walk and practice what I preached. No longer would I follow the carpenter from Nazareth half-heartedly, nodding sagaciously at His wise words, yet never making them flesh in my own life.

Don't get me wrong. My decision wasn't an obedient act of servanthood. As much as I'd like to say so, I was not trying to be more faithful. My motives were more selfish. To put it plainly, *I was desperate to be free*. In a very real sense, I was choosing life over death, for I felt in my bones how worry had drained me of the joy of living. And I knew—both through discernment *and* experience—that only the Lord could give me peace. I heard His voice within me saying, "*Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come unto me, and I will give you rest.*"

That day, I began to prayerfully seek new disciplines that would set me free from the suffering of worry—free to love and be loved, day by day, with all the fullness of my being. It was a decision that resulted in this practical book I want to share with you.

If you are one of those people who never let anxiety get the best of you, you should feel exceedingly blessed! Either your natural disposition or your mastery of the mind has given you a perspective that is one of life's greatest treasures. I am sincerely happy for you! However, if you are like me and too often let your peace and self esteem be robbed by insistent worries, I pray you will journey through this book with me. I pray that it will equip you in some way to live a freer life.

I still remember that turning point and the feel of the sun on my face. I glanced again at the rose, just as the bee lifted into flight and soared toward home. I shifted my gaze to the playground. Porsha was jumping rope, her braids flying high in the air around her, an effortless joy in her smile.

The bell rang. Time for class.

INTRODUCTION:

The Strangling Arms of Worry

Our English word “worry” comes from the Old English *wyrgan*, meaning “to strangle.” How fitting, for this is exactly what worry does to us! It grabs us by the neck and chokes away the vitality from our lives. Worry steals our peace, weakens our potential, and sours our closest relationships. Just when it seems we have pried away its strangling tentacles, it throws out others we never knew were there.

From a psychological standpoint, worry is one of the most common presenting problems at a counselor’s office. The stress that it causes can lead to depression, addictions, hostility, and a host of other maladaptive behaviors. In more extreme cases, it is termed obsessive-compulsive disorder, leading people into increasingly irrational acts. These acts—checking the alarm clock five times, turning off the oven seven times, or washing one’s hands repeatedly—are rituals intended to bring confidence and security. Instead, they only fuel the worry cycle.

On a spiritual level, worry can be thought of as a “stronghold” of evil in our minds. These strongholds—fortresses of wrong thinking—are built on lies that sink shafts deep into our consciousness. These lies take on the power of truth. They capture our thoughts and take them hostage. If left unchallenged, they will continue to dominate our minds, our emotions, and our behaviors. They literally set up a false reality against which we measure our daily lives.

For the purpose of this book, our definition of worry will be synonymous with the term *anxiety*. Because these emotions are so tightly interwoven, it isn’t necessary to spend a lot of time with clinical definitions. The important thing is to gain mastery over worry. As Christian doctors at the Minirth-Meier Clinic have noted, “...few people realize how serious anxiety can be or how it can progress to a state of disability or that it currently is the number one health problem in America. The confusion is understandable. Anxiety comes in so many disguises and degrees that it defies labeling.”¹

To make matters worse, we’re not sure whether we even want to let go of our worries. As Henri Nouwen says,

“Worrying has become such a part and parcel of our daily life that a life without worries seems not only impossible, but even undesirable. We have a suspicion that to be carefree is unrealistic and—worse—dangerous. Our worries motivate us to work hard, to prepare ourselves for the future, and to arm ourselves against impending threats.”²

The problem with this line of thinking is that it’s a lie. The life of Jesus proves it otherwise. His lack of worry *never* took away His passion for His calling—the earthly ministry God had given Him. He worked tirelessly to preach and heal and minister to the people whom God put in His path. He was prepared for the ultimate future—His union with the Father in eternity—and not even the threats of the Pharisees or the Roman Empire had the power to quench His enthusiasm.

Most importantly, He did all of this without worry. Not without pain, for He was a man well acquainted with sorrows. He grieved over the lost generation around Him, and over the death of His friend, Lazarus. His heart was weighed down as He pondered the ultimate demands of the cross. He felt life in all its depths precisely because *worry did not distance Him from the present.* He was fully at home in the

moment because of His absolute trust in His Father's grace and love. This is one of the reasons John described Jesus as "full of grace and mercy." In Him, the present merged with the eternal so that the divine power of God could pour out into our world.

This same power is open to each of us! But it can only be experienced as we learn to trust God moment to moment with all that we have and all that we are. This can't happen if we persist in rationalizing the worries in our lives, for they will choke away our vitality until the day we die.

The purpose of this book is to help us pry away these strangling arms of worry. Since these arms often seem innumerable, it will help us to identify them as belonging within major categories. Let's pause for a moment and do this before we launch into the five disciplines that lie ahead.

MATERIAL WORRIES

The Bible makes it clear—from David to Solomon, from Isaiah to Jesus—that material possessions do not bring fulfillment. As Jesus said,

"Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where

no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Luke 12:33-34)

Intellectually, most Christians know this is true, yet we often cling to the addictive lie that earthly treasures provide security. We let this lie produce worries and stresses that drive us into overwork and financial debt.

As I’ve already highlighted, this is the area Jesus focused on most clearly in His revolutionary teachings—especially His Sermon on the Mount. His direct and honest challenge was needed in His day, but even more so in contemporary America! A sacred part of the American Dream is material wealth. Unless we live in a cave, there is no way to avoid the incessant demand of advertisers trying to stir our desire for possessions. Each commercial is artfully designed to create a feeling of discontent in our lives—discontent with our cars, our savings plans, our golf clubs, our clothes, our body shapes, our hair, etc. Once we are discontent, the ads promise security, youthfulness, greater self-esteem, enhanced social status, and even powerful spirituality *if we just buy the right product.*

In his book *Wake Up, America*, Tony Campolo warns of this latest trend—the selling of goods to meet spiritual needs. He gives pointed examples of consumer goods sold through the promise of spiritual fulfillment. He describes an older commercial where a throng of people was gathered on a hilltop. They represented all the races of our world, joining hands in a unity this planet has never known. Was it a symbol of the Kingdom of Heaven? Was it a call for racial reconciliation? No, says Campolo, it was a commercial for the Pepsi generation!³

Wake up, America, says Campolo! Commercials like these are insidious because they link eternal spiritual qualities to temporal products. Campolo puts it this way. “In our TV ads, it is as though the ecstasy of spirit experienced by a Saint Theresa or a St. Francis can be reduced to the gratification coming from a particular car, and the kind of love that Christ compared to His love for His church can be expressed by buying the right kind of wristwatch ‘for that special person in your life.’ In all of this media hype, things are sold to us on the basis that our deepest emotional and psychological needs will be met by having the right consumer goods.”⁴

Campolo's wake up call made me more discerning of the commercials I see on TV or the Internet. I am now sorely aware of how many of them really do promise a "new spirit" if we buy the right luxury car, the right jewelry, or take the right vacation. No wonder thinking like this creates strongholds of anxiety in the minds of Americans!

The upshot of this emphasis on material things is actually the opposite of what the ads promise. Materialism causes a decay of spiritual contentment. It increases our alienation from God and each other. Jesus knew this. It is why He said,

"I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:23-24)

Jesus didn't mean that people with money are categorically impossible to save. What He meant is that our possessions cause a preoccupation with the material, temporal aspects of life. All our "things" require payments and upkeep. They absorb our time and energy, worrying us and

distracting us from the prime objective of our lives—to know God and to glorify His presence eternally.

I have always likened people with many possessions to Gulliver as the Lilliputians strapped him to the ground. Each of the tiny ropes tying him down would seem insignificant alone, but placed together they were able to immobilize a giant.

TEMPORAL WORRIES

We all know how important it is to live in the present, to treasure each moment as if it were our last. Yet the culture of America is restless and driven. We are taught to worry about mistakes we made yesterday, or to anxiously anticipate problems looming on tomorrow's horizon. I call these *temporal worries*, because they are *related to or limited by time*.

Acutely aware of how temporal worries can kill, Jesus said, “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.” And He added an exclamation point when He said, “Which one of you, by worrying, can add a single second to your life?” He knew that the stranglehold of

temporal worries is tragic, and He longed to untangle us from its chokehold.

Some of you reading this book may resist the notion that worry about yesterday or tomorrow is deadly. After all, the wisdom of hindsight and the prudence of adequate preparation are the foundation of productivity. I agree, and so would Jesus. He never told us to disregard the past. Many of His teachings highlighted both the mistakes and successes of Israel in its historical dealings with God. He wanted the children of God to learn from their legacy. And He was also a master at preparing His disciples for the future. When He commissioned 72 of them to begin preaching in villages and towns (Luke 10:1-16), His instructions were very specific. He had a plan for the future of His ministry.

The difference lies in the area of control! Worry arises when we come to the end of what we can control, yet we still anxiously cling to an issue. We continue to worry about the consequences of a past mistake, or we try to anticipate a future outcome even after adequate preparation.

When we come to the end of ourselves is exactly the moment we must leap into the arms of our Heavenly Father. This is when we must trust that He is the master of yesterday and tomorrow, and He will protect us no matter what happens.

No wonder 12-step groups across the country emphasize the slogan “one day at a time.” No wonder they ask their members to commit Richard Niebuhr’s “Serenity Prayer” to memory. They know that these two eternities—yesterday and tomorrow—can become living hells in the minds of people prone to worrying.

Worries linked to the past and the future must be countered with the emotional and physical discipline of “letting go,” an art that can be learned by those who persevere. I have devoted a whole chapter to this discipline because it highlights a primary principle of this book. *So many of our worries will vanish as we learn to see and experience life through God’s eternal perspective.*

RELATIONAL WORRIES

Another strong area of worry arises in our relationships. All of us live in a matrix of human connections to relatives, friends, co-workers and neighbors. God placed these people in our lives as opportunities to love and serve. However, we often make these relationships sources of anxiety. Worries about other people center primarily around two issues.

The first has to do with worries about *what other people think of us*. If we come from a family where acceptance and love were conditional, we may spend the rest of our lives trying to prove our worth. We gauge this worth by the opinions that others have of us. Insecurity drives this desperation, and it can truly become an addiction. It can goad us into workaholic behavior as we try to win the acclaim of supervisors and coworkers. It can give birth to emotional dependence in our romantic relationships as we allow our self-esteem to rise or fall on the moods of our partners. It can

cause us to be emotional recluses, shunning contact with others because we fear their judgements and opinions. There is powerful scriptural remedy for this emotional disease, and we will talk about it throughout this book.

The second area of relational worries is again related to control. This happens when concerns over a loved one's behavior become so obsessive that we don't allow room for God to work. We may obsess over a child, a spouse, a parent, or a friend. The closer we are to the individual, the more acute our worries. We *want* to place him or her in God's arms. We *want* to relax and let go rather than complicate the situation with our anxiety, yet we persist in clinging and clutching.

It is an old adage that we can only change ourselves. However, we often try to mold the behavior of others, and this form of control leads to persistent worries about whether or not they will *ever* change. Letting go of this need for control is essential to a worry-free life, and I pray the disciplines of this book will help you.

SPIRITUAL WORRIES

Most people polled in the United States believe that God exists, and a great many of us are affiliated with churches

that help us express this belief. However, it is far different to live daily *as if* the promises of God are real. Deep inside many of us is a nagging worry about whether all the assurances of scripture really apply to *our* lives.

Take our belief in heaven, for instance. Every day, at countless funerals and memorial services across this country, Christians read the comforting words of Jesus,

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” (John 14:1-6)

Each Christian claims these central words of faith, but the depth of our belief is tested when we face our own mortality. As we experience the death of a loved one, or our own accelerated aging, we find out firsthand whether or not our belief in heaven is enough to sustain us.

I know a pastor who passionately taught about the reality of heaven for years. If you listened to any of his

sermons on the topic, you went away saying, “Now there’s a man who knows for sure where he’s going after death!”

When this pastor’s wife died after nearly forty years of marriage, he slumped into deep depression. Her excruciating bout with cancer called his easy affirmations into question. He went through a crisis of faith that forced him to find out whether God’s promises applied to him *specifically*, not just humanity in general. I’m happy to tell you that God was there for him.

Hebrews tells us that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for,” but if our personal reservoir of assurance is shallow, we end up with many worries about the promises Jesus made to us.

Another spiritual worry has to do with whether or not God will be faithful in redeeming the failures and sufferings of our lives. As we pass through trials, we may turn again and again to the promises of scripture. Romans 8:28 tells us:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

These are sublimely comforting words. However, when we suffer great loss—divorce, bankruptcy, illness, or the death of a loved one—it is hard to see the silver lining in the cloud. We may ask ourselves how our particular trials could *ever* be used for good. This question leads to worries about our future. We wonder if we have hopelessly squandered this one precious life God gave us.

Spiritual worries exist at the deepest level of our being. Victory at this level will help us conquer the other, more temporal worries of our lives. To do this, we need a transforming experience of the power of God's love *in the present moment*. This experience, the illumination of the Holy Spirit, assures us that God is real and will provide. We come to know—not in theory, but in our very spirits—the perfect love that casts out fear. The Lord takes up residence in the master bedroom (our hearts), not just in the attic (our heads). This is the experience that establishes trust, the foundation to lasting peace in our hearts.

All the disciplines of this book are designed to foster this experience of trust and intimacy with the living Lord of all creation.

Peter Marshall, a spirited Presbyterian who was Chaplain to the U.S. Senate in the early '40s, was a gifted preacher. I have always loved this excerpt from one of his sermons entitled *Mr. Jones, Meet the Master*.

“It is possible for you and me to live in this world as sure that the Lord is with us as we can be sure of anything—to have no fear at all, to be able to anticipate tomorrow with a thrill of delight, to have no fear of anything—neither of sickness, nor unemployment, nor loneliness, nor death, no anything at all...For if you let Him take control of your life completely . . . you will enter into that transforming fellowship which brings with it that glorious exhilaration, that indescribable peace, and escape from all bondage...”⁵

Do you want this glorious exhilaration? This indescribable peace? This escape from bondage? Read on!

THE NEED FOR DISCIPLINE

After reviewing these categories of worry, it's easy to see what a formidable foe we are up against. In order to respond with energy and clarity, we must affirm the need for discipline.

Discipline is not a popular term. We want quick answers, easy fixes, instant healing. Within Christianity there are many people who practice the art of deliverance—an instantaneous release of physical, mental, or spiritual bondage. They lay hands on others and pray over them until the illness is completely gone. People with chronic worries are often prayed for in this way, and I have no doubt that the experience of deliverance is valid and lifesaving for some.

Yet, I say again: my own experience tells me that lasting change requires hard work and discipline. I am often saddened by the extra layer of guilt and failure that is laid upon people who “get delivered,” then find they really haven’t changed. Recently I met a woman who had this experience. A lifetime of shame and the torture of an eating disorder finally led her to seek help. A Christian friend told her that she needed deliverance through the prayers of a particular pastor and group of Christians. The woman sought this help, but afterwards was more confused and guilty. She said to me, “Krin, I wanted something to happen, and I believe I left myself open to God’s presence. But when I woke up this

morning, I felt exactly the same. Is it because I don't have enough faith?"

My answer was an emphatic "NO!" Human behavior is complex. It takes work to dig deeply and uproot destructive thought patterns. The five disciplines outlined in this book are founded on the basic premise: **We need discipline!** Unless we are willing to learn new behaviors centered in the truths of God, worry will continue to plague us. The disciplines outlined here will focus primarily on two major areas of change.

CHANGE #1—RENEWING OUR THINKING

In the early 1970s, Dr. Albert Ellis condensed his theories into a style of humanistic psychology called "the rational-emotive approach." At the core of his system was a simple theorem: conscious and unconscious opinions, evaluations, interpretations, and philosophies are the cause of what we label our "emotions." Our thoughts—rational or irrational—have an enormous influence over our feelings and behaviors. In short, we are as we think.

Ellis' method and its influence over popular psychology has helped many people. But long before Rational-Emotive

Therapy and Transactional Analysis were in vogue, the Bible understood this fundamental truth. Romans 12:2 tells us,

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Have you ever stopped during the day and tried to track the course of your thinking? Many of us would find such a confusing swirl of thoughts and counter-thoughts that the effort would exhaust us. Our fast-paced lives, the demands on our time and energy, and the cacophony of messages transmitted at us through the media—all these things crowd the confines of consciousness. A mind stayed on God's truths is a rare thing.

Forms of meditation based on Hindu and Buddhist traditions seek to empty the mind of extraneous thoughts. Devotees attempt to focus solely on what they call the eternal presence of God that lives within each of us. When this presence is experienced fully, eternity and the present merge, liberating the devotee with cosmic joy and serenity. The Christian counterpart to this can be seen in monastic orders

throughout the centuries, where the emphasis is on chanting and extended solitude as ways to encounter the Holy Spirit.

I don't disparage this approach, but I prefer spiritual disciplines that are more dynamic. A man like Norman Vincent Peale became so immensely popular because he did not ask us to empty our minds. Instead, he called us to train our thoughts in positive directions through prayer and the repetition of scriptural principles. Rather than the power of "not thinking," this is the power of "positive thinking." This method is especially effective for individuals who have high energy and active minds (most worriers!). It helps us by using these gifts, rather than squashing them.

Renewing our minds is central to the disciplines emphasized in this book. Since most worry stems from wrong thinking, a primary task is to replace these toxic thoughts with eternal, life-giving truths from scripture. The habit of memorizing scripture passages is often thought of as an art of yesteryear, but it is needed by all of us as a powerful weapon in fighting worry.

Scripture makes it clear that this is true. II Corinthians 10:3-5 says,

For though we live in the world, we do no wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

In his passionate book *The Three Battlegrounds*, Francis Frangipane claims that the primary way the Enemy works in our lives is through unredeemed areas of our thoughts. Thus, the mind is the first and most important battleground on which we must achieve victory. As Frangipane says, “Pulling down strongholds is the demolition and removal of these old ways of thinking so that the actual Presence of Jesus Christ can be manifested through us.”⁶

Frangipane says that the primary contributor to false mental strongholds is “the world.” This is a broad generalization, but he has a concrete definition. “The steady stream of information and experience that continually shaped our childhood perceptions is the greatest source of strongholds within us. The amount of love (or lack of love) in our home, our cultural environment, peer values and

pressures, as well as fears of rejection and exposure—even our physical appearance and intelligence, all combine to form our sense of identity and our view of life.”⁷

Unfortunately for most of us, the steady stream of information and experience that shaped our lives has imbedded many lies deep in our minds. These lies, though highly irrational, become natural thought responses to the circumstances of our lives.

Dr. Chris Thurman, a Christian psychiatrist with the Minirth-Meier Clinic, does an excellent job of breaking these lies down into the categories of self-lies, worldly lies, distortion lies, and religious lies. Within each of these areas he pinpoints specific lies that many of us live with. Here are just a few.

- I must be perfect.*
- It's somebody else's fault.*
- You are only as good as what you do.*
- Life should be fair.*
- God's love must be earned.*
- All my problems are caused by my sins.*

Thurman's book helps us identify the deeply rooted lies that cause such great unhappiness. He, like many other

therapists in this country, uses a cognitive approach to therapy, helping his patients pinpoint these lies so that they can replace them with appropriate truths.⁸

The disciplines of this book are not meant to be a substitute for therapy. Some of us need professional help as we seek to sort out the tangled lies producing worry in our lives. However, having been a recipient of counseling, I know how cognitive therapy can become a matter of semantics—mere words that never touch the core of our being. It is the purpose of this book to lead others to an experience of the Holy Spirit, for I believe it is this cleansing experience of God’s majesty that truly sets us free. The dynamic of our minds being renewed through scripture happens because *these truths ignite the power of the Holy Spirit within us!*

CHANGE #2—REPRIORITIZING OUR TIME

In addition to the discipline of practicing new thought patterns, we can alleviate worry by setting aside time for certain types of activities.

Time is our most precious asset, yet we treat our other assets—especially money—with far more respect. We diligently save dollars for retirement, managing our portfolios to make sure our resources are well allocated. However, we skip lightly over the reality that time is our most vital resource. If we have the mindset that only later in life can we relax and enjoy time, we have made a grave mistake. Wise people—especially we who wish to live a worry-free existence—will manage our time. We will fill it with activities that promote harmony and inner peace through a rested mind.

Some of us reading this book have already set aside a regular time for prayer and devotion. We know how vital this is to maintain a Christ-centered focus in the midst of our hurried lives. I feel great joy when I see the growing number of daily devotionals that fill the shelves of Christian and secular bookstores. This testifies that more and more people are entering into quiet time with God, enjoying their love relationship with the Almighty. If you are one of these people, the disciplines of this book can simply become a part of your daily devotionals.

Others of us have yet to develop the pattern of regular devotions. For us, this book may finally convince us to do so—not simply because we “should,” but because it will help us choose life over death.

Either way will require an investment of time. Don’t get worried; you will not need to set aside a huge portion of your schedule. A small investment will yield great benefits. And if the mere thought of adjusting your schedule creates stress, you definitely need to reprioritize your time!

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

I need to make one final note before we get to the disciplines.

As the title of this book declares, experiencing the Kingdom of Heaven is key to a worry free life. What does this mean? We need a working definition of the Kingdom if this book is to have full impact.

Jesus had an urgent mission during the three years of His ministry. He knew that His audacity in challenging the religious hierarchy would lead to an early death. This gave Him a very limited time to share His message, so He focused on a key phrase that He repeated over and over to anyone who

would listen: *the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven.* Every one of his parables was an attempt to create pictures and analogies that pointed to the Kingdom.

Entire books have been devoted to examining what Jesus meant by this term. It is a new reality that contains elements of radical justice, fresh intimacy with God, and an emphasis on serving our enemies and the poorest of the poor. It also offers a promise of peace that passes understanding, a peace that comes from being in touch with eternity while living in the present.

This will be the definition of the Kingdom of Heaven that permeates this book. *It is a peace that comes from the eternal assurance of God's love and protection while living fully in the present.*

Jesus emphasized this peace on His last night with His disciples. He said,

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.”
(John 14:27)

This full awareness of the Kingdom of Heaven is the most precious experience of a lifetime. As the great Quaker, Thomas R. Kelly said, “Once discover this glorious secret, this new dimension of life, and we no longer live merely in time but we live also in the Eternal. The world of time is no longer the sole reality of which we are aware. A second Reality hovers, quickens, quivers, stirs, energizes us, breaks in upon us and in love embraces us, together with all things, within Himself.”⁹

What better place to be relieved of our worries than in the embrace of a loving God! No wonder Jesus used parable after parable to coax us into the living presence of the Father. In one of those parables, He likened the Kingdom to a man who finds a treasure in a field. He is so excited at the awesome prize he has uncovered that he goes and sells everything else he owns to buy that field. (Matthew 13:44)

Contained in this mini-parable are some of the truths I’ve already mentioned. First, the man most likely uncovered the treasure while plowing that field. He was working! The same holds true for us: we will never find the Kingdom in our own lives without hard work. Second, when the man realizes

the value of what he has discovered, he goes and sells everything else he owns in order to possess this new treasure. I believe that as we, too, are able to take hold of the new emotional and spiritual life Christ freely gives us, we will readily let go of all other worldly trappings and modes of thought that keep us chained.

Throughout my years as a pastor, I have seen the unnecessary pain we suffer due to harmful thinking and misspent time. I have shared in this suffering. However, I now have a greater understanding of what Jesus meant when He said, “then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”(John 8:32)

My prayer is that this book and its simple disciplines will help promote more freedom in your life. Freedom and the joy that attends it are the birthright of our adoption into the family of God.

Let’s claim this birthright and celebrate our freedom!

CHAPTER ONE: **The Deathbed Discipline**

Do you remember your first encounters with death? A number of them stand out vividly in my childhood memory.

There was the time a neighborhood friend coaxed me into shooting at birds with a BB gun. Against my eight-year-old judgement, I turned the sights toward a tree—just as a ruby-throated hummingbird lighted on a limb. It was an impossibly small target. Surely I would miss. I squeezed the trigger and the tiny iridescent bird plummeted to the ground. I ran to it, then held it in my hand, crying as it took its last breaths.

There was the time my handsome collie was struck by a hit-and-run motorcyclist. I buried him myself, then sat on the fresh grave until nightfall.

There was the time my favorite junior high teacher turned down the lights and read Shelley's *Ozymandias*, in which the statue of a once great Egyptian ruler now surveys only rubble and a vast expanse of sand. For just a second, my young mind understood. I realized how generations rise and fall. I grasped that even the greatest empires turn to dust.

In all these experiences I heard whispers of my own mortality, but those intimations quickly faded. One can hardly expect a youth to be humbled by death.

Yet how humbling is death to most adults. In a culture that emphasizes health and glamour, there is almost a taboo surrounding the subject of death. Medical advances hold out the promise of prolonged life, and we consider it morbid to contemplate our own demise.

It is far from morbid to think of our death. Daily recognition of our own mortality is actually a great tonic. It gives us new insight into how to live life to its fullest. Most importantly, it dwarfs our worries and sends them scurrying away.

Jesus wanted His disciples to have this awakening to what is truly important. One of His powerful parables was of the man who built the bigger barns. (Luke 12:13-21) The man's land had produced abundantly, and he suddenly found himself with a surplus. Did his newfound success put his mind at ease? No! It produced worries, for now he had to figure out what to do with all that grain. He devised a plan. He would tear down his existing barns and build bigger ones. That was

the ticket! Then he would have enough to give him security for years. He would eat, drink, and be merry. What a life it would be!

I can imagine the people listening to Jesus' story. They were probably thinking to themselves, "Wow, this man has it made! God has truly blessed him!" Jesus had them in the palm of His hand, creating a good dose of worldly envy. And just at that point, He added a stinger. God says to the man, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"

None of us know the hour of our death. We may eat the right foods, swallow herbal supplements, buckle our seat belts, and have our breasts and prostates checked regularly, but the fact remains that we could die tonight. Our natural tendency is to live as if we will always have a tomorrow. This is our brain's survival tactic, and it's pragmatic. Planning for our futures is prudent. We would be fools to do otherwise. But Jesus' parable points out that we are greater fools if we dwell on that future unduly, *or if we ever take it for granted.*

The art of a worry-free life is to plan for the future *while living as if this day is our last.* This happens when the reality

of our own deaths becomes an integral part of our daily existence. It happens when we no longer cling to life, but let it surround us with beauty and mystery.

The scriptures of both the Old and New Testament attempt to awaken us to life's fleeting quality. Throughout David's many Psalms, there is a clear recognition of life's shortness. In Psalm 102, he laments, "For my days vanish like smoke," and "My days are like the evening shadow; I wither away like grass." In Psalm 103, he continues with this theme:

As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it, and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.

The wisdom required for a worry-free life begins when these words do not merely create wistful moments of nostalgia over the past, but awaken us to life's fullness right now!

Since time began, cultures all over the planet have realized that how we embrace death relates directly to how we embrace life. Chilo, one of the seven wise men of ancient Greece, inscribed a motto on the walls of the great temple at Delphi. It said, "Consider the end." The Romans, who viewed

death as the end of pleasure, would often meditate upon it to heighten their enjoyment of present sensation. It was not uncommon for a skeleton to be brought among the guests at a party, and for the host to exclaim, *Vivamus dum licet esse bene*, “Let us enjoy life while we may.” Some cultures take this emphasis on death a step further. They devote entire festivals to ancestors who have died. Mexico’s Dias de los Muertos and Japan’s Obon Festival are active examples. These cultures realize that death is the most personal thing in life, and this makes it natural and familiar.

Many monastic orders of the middle ages were determined to get hold of this inner awareness of life’s brevity. To help them, they often carried around a reminder of death called a *memento mori*. The term is Latin and means, “Remember that you are going to die.” This item might have been a bone or a small carving in the likeness of a skull.

Can you imagine using such a concrete method to remind yourself of death? What about setting a skull on the table at your next staff meeting? Or propping one on a pole at the 12th hole of your favorite golf course? Or giving one to your child’s teacher instead of an apple?

This sounds preposterous, even morbid, to us. Yet my experience is that it takes a hard slap of reality to awaken some of us from our stressed out, worried lives. We need to connect ourselves internally with those Bible verses and life experiences that provide this slap on the cheek. I thank God for two experiences that have helped me with this.

One of them happened over a period of three years early in my ministry. During that time, alongside tending to the sick and dying of a large congregation, I volunteered as a chaplain at the local Hospice. I was often called to minister to men and women facing the final hours of their lives. Their bodies were shriveled, their thoughts addled by morphine, their loved ones gathered around them for the last time. I helped focus the presence of God in each of those situations through prayer, communion, shared laughter and tears.

All that close proximity to death had a curious effect on me. Instead of dragging me down through reminders of suffering and pain, it helped me focus on the miracle of each moment. I began to consider it a privilege to be allowed into the intimate final moments of a person's life. They looked to

me for the gift of eternal assurance, and they gave me the gift of affirming the present.

I remember a man named Bill, and the final moments I spent with him and his family. The bone cancer that racked his body had such a deep and searing pain that morphine could barely touch it. Mercifully, the doctors gave him a dosage that nearly put him in a coma. For a full week he lay barely breathing while his family kept the deathbed vigil. Then he suddenly awoke and was sharp and lucid. His family wanted me to pray with him, so they called me and I quickly made my way to the hospital.

When I arrived in Bill's room, it seemed that he had somehow risen above his pain. He had an almost carefree tone to his voice. At least a dozen members of his family had gathered around him, and he spoke personally to each of them. He reminded them of small incidents from the past that were stored in his mind. Each of the memories crystallized a positive character trait of that family member. They served as Bill's final blessings. I could quickly see that he had been a remarkable character, much loved by his family. The presence of God, released through the bonds of human love, steeped the

room in sacramental grace. I felt as if I was a special guest included in a rare moment of this family's communion.

When Bill turned his gaze on me, the carefree look in his eyes gave way to one of compassion.

"Young man," he said, "thanks for being my pastor in these final moments. I want to tell you something, and I want you to tell it to everyone you meet. *It all goes by so quickly! Life is a blink of an eye! Tell them! Tell them to savor every second!*"

I promised him that I would, and then I joined the family in a circle of prayer around his bedside.

I'll never forget the instant I walked through the lobby doors of that hospital to return to my car. The brightness of the moment froze me in my tracks. Sunlight splashed on my cheek and a dove cooed peacefully from a nearby tree. I felt a slight breeze around me, as if I was suspended in the breath of God. I drank deeply of the moment, opening my heart, mind, and spirit to His living presence. And then I did something that probably seemed queer to anyone who might have been watching: I lifted by arms in praise for the miracle of life.

Bill died that night surrounded by his family, but what a valuable gift he had left with them and me! I pass his gift along to you, just as I promised him I would.

Another, much younger man, has taught me about the preciousness of life. His name is Kevin Jones, and at the moment I write this sentence he is probably somewhere sharing his amazing testimony.

Kevin is an athlete who spent most of his adult life teaching soccer and playing on a semi-pro team. In his mid-40s, he looks much younger—fit and trim with clear hazel eyes. But that youthful exterior masks the reality of what has happened in his life. In 1997, he learned that he has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's Disease, a progressive and degenerative condition that attacks all the muscles of the body and eventually leads to death. By the time Kevin was diagnosed, the illness was affecting one of his arms and the vocal chords of his throat, causing him to sound as if he were permanently drunk.

Soon after his diagnosis, Kevin experienced a profound recommitment of his life to Jesus Christ. He received an internal message, a firm sense of call, that Jesus would use

him to witness to people about what truly matters in life. With that calling came absolute peace, a resting in the arms of God that took away all sadness, worries and fears.

In 1998, Kevin spoke to the assembled students and staff of our school. His sense of humor and his child-like trust in God moved all of us to tears. Because he had submitted himself to God's plans for his life, the Holy Spirit spoke clearly through his slightly slurred speech. I'll never forget his loving presence, nor a particular part of his message.

“I’m not afraid. Now I know in my heart, not just my head, the reason God has placed us in this life. It is not to make money or to become famous. It is to live every day in His love. It is to treasure our families, our friends, and the world God has created for us. It is to serve Him with all our hearts so that others will know the awesome love of Jesus.”

Kevin will soon release a book that details his amazing testimony. But even just a snippet of his story makes us catch our breath. Can we *really* accept the wisdom of what he says? Can we hear it and let it sink into our souls, bringing peace and a heightened gratitude for the miracle of this moment? Can we put down this book and walk back into our lives

steeped in the presence of God, trusting Him for everything we need?

As Morrie Schwartz said during his own bout with ALS, “The best preparation for living fully and well is to be prepared to die at any time, because impending death inspires clarity of purpose, a homing in on what really matters to you. When you feel that the end is near, you are more likely to pay close attention to whatever you treasure, especially relationships with loved ones.”¹

This is the same wisdom voiced in the 15th century by Thomas A Kempis, the monk who wrote the timeless devotional classic, *The Imitation of Christ*. “Ah, dear friend, from what great...fear you can be freed if you will always be...respectful of death. Strive to live in such a way now that in the hour of death you may rejoice rather than fear. Learn now to place Christ at the center of your life, that you may begin to live your life with Him. Learn now to let go of all things that stand between you and Christ, that you may go to Him freely.”²

Maintaining this clarity is easier said than done. The strongholds of worry in our lives have thick, nearly

impenetrable walls. The powers of this world's way of thinking pull at us in addictive ways.

One of my favorite writers, Henri Nouwen, found this out firsthand. He suffered a near fatal accident while walking along a roadside. The extended mirror of a passing van struck him and caused severe internal bleeding. While he lay in the intensive care unit of a nearby hospital, he had the strong premonition that he was dying. Unexpectedly, the presence of God filled him with a love and security that assured him of heaven's reality. It was an intense physical experience of Jesus being present with him in the room; something he had always preached about, but had never experienced so fully. His description of those glorious moments brought tears to my eyes.²

Why did I react so emotionally? **First**, because this man admitted that even *his* relationship with Jesus needed something more than just devotion and commitment of the will. I was not alone as a seeker of more intimacy with the Lord. What a great difference there is between love at a distance *and actually feeling Jesus' embrace!* **Second**, I cried because it took a near tragic accident to bring Nouwen into

this physical awareness of God's glory. **Third**, I cried because I thought of how often we *all* miss the richness of what God wants to pour into our hearts and spirits. So many other issues crowd in to diminish our joy.

Even after such a powerful experience, Nouwen recognized this insidious effect of daily living. Upon leaving the hospital and beginning his recovery process, he remarked that "the clarity of the meaning of life received on a hospital bed easily fades when the many daily obligations return and start dominating life again."³

I saw this same thing happen to a man named Marvin.

Marvin was a driven man all his life. He came from an impoverished urban family, and when he left home he never looked back. He moved west, established a successful business, and accumulated a large fortune. His life was his work. He was a man who lived and breathed the demanding details of his little empire twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. His wife and three children submitted to his forceful energy, giving Dad all the space he needed to charge forward in life.

Then, at age 48, Marvin hit the wall—a major heart attack that nearly killed him. I vividly remember my visit with him in the hospital. He was still in ICU following open-heart surgery. This man whose physical presence had always been overpowering, who had always seemed like an unstoppable force of nature, now lay before me with tubes coming from every orifice in his body. His skin was as pale as his sheets.

“Krin,” he said, “all I can do while I lay here is reflect back over my life. You’d think I’d be proud of what I’ve accomplished, but all I can think about is what I’ve missed. My kids will be in college in just a few years, and I feel like I don’t even know them. I wasn’t there for them. I wasn’t the Dad they needed, and I can never, *never* get those years back.”

Tears filled his eyes and streamed down onto the pillow.

“That’s true, Marvin,” I said. “You can’t get those years back. But you can start living this moment with the wisdom of how short life really is. You can heal, get out of this hospital, and go love your wife and children with new passion and commitment.”

He nodded and we prayed together that God would direct his path through daily reminders of what this near-death experience had taught him.

Just a few months later, Marvin was back at work, filling up his days with the details of his business—gone from home, gone from his family—a tense air about him. When I gently reminded him of what he had said that day in the hospital, he responded with the bluster of his old self. “Yeah, I’m getting there,” he said. “I’ve got a little trip planned with the kids this Saturday afternoon. And this summer we’ll spend a week in Hawaii.”

Marvin still hadn’t gotten it. Even death’s cold slap in the face was forgotten. Old thought patterns, grooved deeply into the soft tissue of our minds, die slowly, and sometimes they *never* do. I have presided over the funerals of many individuals who refused to change, people who never slowed down enough to enjoy their lives.

Realizing this tendency within him, Henri Nouwen made a keen observation following his accident. “As soon as I lose touch with the God who is Truth, Life, and Light, I will become entangled again in the myriad of daily ‘realities’ which

present themselves to me as if they are of ultimate value. Without a very explicit and self-directed attempt to keep God in the center of my heart, it will not take long before the hospital experience becomes little more than a pious memory.”⁴

Don’t get overwhelmed by the stories I’ve related. I tell them merely to show how tough these old thought patterns are. The good news is we *can* start living more fully in this moment! We *can* let God embrace us in a way that awakens us to each precious second! Millions of people through the centuries have busted through to this freeing reality. We can, too!

Nouwen recognizes the key. It is a to have a “very explicit and self-directed” way of keeping God at the center of our lives.

To start this self-direction, think of the contrast between Kevin’s life and Marvin’s life. Where are you in the continuum between the two? Is your life harried and hemmed in by daily tasks and worries? Or are you drinking deeply of the peace that passes understanding?

Now think of this. Time is such a mystery that it has often been called the fourth dimension. Yet except in movie fantasies of time travel, we think of it as linear, advancing second by second, moment by moment, sunrise by sunrise, year by year. There is a starting block, our birth, and a finish tape, our death. After that is whatever God has in store for us—that eternity we call heaven.

When we live in this linear mode, worrying and planning for tomorrow, we miss the awesome reality that *eternity starts now!* God wants us to draw near to Him this instant and experience the joy of heaven that is already unfolding around us.

Stop! Let me boldly state this again. ***Eternity starts now. The joy of heaven is unfolding around us this very second!***

This is the reality Jesus pointed to over and over again, a state of being that He enjoyed in communion with His eternal Father, and which He longs for each of us to experience. He longs to set us free. He longs for us to seek His Kingdom first, and trust that all our other desires will be satisfied through His care.

I'm not going to suggest that you go out and buy a small skull as a memento mori (though a cross hanging around your neck could do the trick!). And I'm certainly not going to suggest that you have a serious enough accident to bring you to the portals of death.

Instead, I suggest that you try practicing the following discipline. It will only take a few minutes of each day, and it could have an enormous impact on your life.

THE DEATHBED DISCIPLINE

Find a quiet place to sit—somewhere with no distractions. The first benefit of this discipline comes from finding quiet space.

*Now, imagine you are lying on your deathbed. You know that you only have a few hours left to live. You look back over your life and realize that all the worries—all of them—that seemed so important on all those many days, have now been reduced to nothing. You realize that all the time you spent absorbed in the minutia of those worries was **wasted time**. It only kept you from more fully enjoying the love of God and the people in your life.*

Now, imagine the faces of those family members and friends who are most precious to you. Gather them around the side of your deathbed. Visualize them fully. See their smiles. Hear their voices. Feel the touch of their hands on your forehead or the softness of their lips on your cheek as they lean over to kiss you goodbye. Feel and begin to savor your love for them. Let the moments you spent with them, the most intimate memories flood back into your mind. Let the love that you feel for them move through your spirit until it possesses you completely.

Now draw a breath and hold it. Do you realize that even that breath was a gift from God, that everything you have ever felt, seen, heard, tasted, or smelled was a gift from Him? Do you know that He has been as close as the air to you all your life, longing for you to experience His Spirit more fully? Awaken to Him now! Turn your heart towards your heavenly Father and thank Him for not only providing for your needs, but for finally allowing you to experience the miracle of heaven that is unfolding this present moment. Choose life and let your gratitude for the gift of every moment become your new point-of-view.

*Now open your eyes. Your whole day—**just this one**—is in front of you. The people you love will give you many opportunities to show how much you treasure them. Seize this one day and live it as if it were a gift you didn’t expect. Call a loved one and say, “I love you.” Home in on what it is you really treasure. Be free, grateful, and without worry, remembering the lessons you learned on your “deathbed.”*

CHAPTER TWO: The Outback Discipline

The young man's eyes, intensely blue, lit up even brighter as he told me his story.

He was a trained mountain climber, skilled in the use of ropes, cramp-ons, and high altitude survival techniques. On a solo climb of Mt. Shasta in northern California, he was unable to make the summit. A severe blizzard engulfed the peak, forcing him to backtrack and take shelter in a snow cave he had spotted on his ascent. As he neared the entrance to the cave, he came upon two climbers who were in dire straits. Not nearly as experienced as he, they were disoriented and desperate. He invited them to join him in the cave.

Once they were huddled in the recessed chamber, shivering against the cold, the young man noticed that one of his new companions was suffering from altitude sickness. It soon became clear that it was the worse form imaginable, including pulmonary edema—water on the lungs—a potentially fatal complication. *They had to get down from the mountain.* Their only viable option was to try the descent at night in the midst of a full blizzard.

They packed up and started down, helping the ailing man as he staggered from one foot to another. Around them was a complete whiteout, the snow obliterating all visual contact. Going by memory, one step at a time, the young man led the threesome down a steep slope. During those hours, though his adrenaline was pumping from the challenge, the young man thought to himself, “Why do I come on these trips? Here I am, freezing and aching. I’ve wasted two days of my life without ever getting to see the summit. Why am I here?”

Hours later, the snow around them began to shine brighter, and they realized it was dawn. A shaft of sunlight broke through the gloom. Just as suddenly as the storm had arisen, it now dispersed. The men found themselves in a shallow valley, the sun peeking over a ridge. Ice was still flying through the air, and as crystals caught the early sun, they became multi-colored prisms hurtling in all directions. It was a riotous display of neon colors! For a moment, the young man forgot all about the trials and worries of his trip. His spirit soared upwards with the beauty of creation. “Praise God,” he whispered. “Now I know why I’m here!” Long after he had

gotten the ailing hiker to a hospital, it was that prismatic moment of splendor that remained in his spirit.

That young man's experience highlights the core of our second discipline. Just as awareness of our mortality connects us with the preciousness of life, so does contemplation of the natural world God created for us. Immersing ourselves in nature can reorder our lives and help set us free from worry.

I'm not talking about a hurried visit to the countryside in a sport utility vehicle. Advertisers continually pitch the latest 4x4 with promises that we can live a hectic business life and still squeeze in a few scenic moments outback. We get images of businessmen parked near beautiful lakes, still working on laptop computers and sending email through cellular phones. This approach to enjoying the wilds is symptomatic of our desire to control, our need to fit everything into *our* schedules and *our* frameworks. It is this mindset of domination that continues to destroy so many forests and species of animals each year.

What I'm calling for is a true *time apart*, a disconnection from the daily grind and its strangling worries. This is not an easy prescription for many of us. Even on our

vacations, it often takes several days before our inner springs begin to unwind. For some of us, the spring *never* relaxes. Our vacation agendas are more frenetic than our business lives. We have to see and do *everything*, and we drag unfortunate family members and friends along with us.

I confess to being a hurried vacationer in my own life. Before writing this book and taking a long, hard look at myself, my wife and I made a whirlwind tour of New Mexico. She had always wanted to see Santa Fe, but I had been there many times, having lived for a while in Albuquerque. Instead of honoring her request to leisurely soak in the sights of one area, I made her agree to a swap. If I went to Santa Fe, she would have to drive to Carlsbad Caverns, take a quick tour, then cross the state line into Texas and climb up Guadalupe Peak, the highest point in the Lone Star State. She agreed, but I could see the reservation in her eyes.

I should have heeded her misgivings. Our vacation was a blur. We zoomed from one end of New Mexico to the other (*in a rented SUV!*), covering hundreds of miles with the pedal to the metal. We saw Santa Fe, a few pueblo ruins, then sped down the eastern fringe of the state. We pushed ourselves, saw

the caverns, climbed the peak, stayed a few moments at the summit, took mental snapshots of the awesome view, descended, jumped in our car, then started the long drive back to catch our plane in Albuquerque. By the time we were finished, we needed a vacation from our vacation. Neither the mental snapshots, nor the bragging rights of “bagging a peak,” made the pace of our visit worthwhile.

In contrast to that trip, I *have* spent many quality hours alone with God surrounded by the beauty of His creation. My hobby for many years has been to hike to the highest points in different states. Not all of these trips have been rushed. Many of them have been special journeys into the wilderness, days that unfolded a deeper intimacy with God. These were times when a connection with the raw basics of life drained away the worries of my hurried life.

It is *this* type of retreat that I mean when I use the term “outback discipline.” I choose the word *outback*, with its Australian overtones, because of a remarkable book I recently read: *Mutant Message Down Under*, by Marlo Morgan. It is the half-real/half-fictional account of an American woman who travels to Australia in her work as a teacher of preventive

health care. While there, she gets an invitation to the countryside near Perth. An Aboriginal tribe wishes to honor her for her involvement with their people. Expecting a luncheon or awards banquet, she goes, meets a young Aboriginal man at her hotel, and allows herself to be transported by jeep hundreds of miles over rutted roads to a remote location.

She finds no meeting halls or lodgings, only the assembled tribe. They greet her with her award—the announcement that she can join them on a *walkabout* across the Australian continent. This is a great honor, because no western person--no *mutant*--has ever journeyed with them before. Her first impulse is to refuse, but since she has no return ride to civilization, she reluctantly accepts her “privilege.”

What ensues is an experience that changes her life. At first, the disconnection from modern amenities makes her feel vulnerable, even desperate. There are no showers, hair dryers, flush toilets, ATMs, or Internet providers! Soon, however, the unfettered quality of their march across Australia sets her free from her stress and worry. She digs into the recesses of her

spirit to find physical stamina and emotional courage she never knew was there.

But the greatest change comes to her through sharing in the spiritual quality of Aboriginal existence. She is amazed and blessed by their connection with life. Every hill, every animal, every cloud that passes overhead is sacred to them. They believe that God's Spirit is in and through *all things*, and that by uniting yourself with the texture and rhythms of the natural world, you unite yourself with God's presence. Only then do you cease to be a "mutant" and become a real human being blessed with eternal perspective.¹

Some Christians will immediately renounce this type of spirituality as "unsaved paganism." Part of me agrees. As a Christian, I reject animism that endows even rocks and other inanimate objects with spirits of their own. However, western people have a lot to learn from the Aboriginal religions of every continent. Here in America, we have still disregarded the wisdom of our land's original settlers (at least before they became champions of slot machines). We have yet to fully heed Chief Joseph's awesome words as he sadly surrendered Nez Pierce lands to the invading white man. "Man did not

weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”

Worship of God through mystical connection with His creation should not be left to other faiths. We have a rich tradition of it within Christianity. My favorite example is the life of St. Francis of Assisi.

Francis was born and raised in the Italian town of Assisi during the late 12th and early 13th centuries. His father was a wealthy merchant who provided a luxurious life for his family. At age 20, seeking adventure, Francis fought in a war between Assisi and Perugia, a neighboring city-state. He was taken prisoner and spent a year in captivity. Upon his return, he led a very privileged life, enjoying the legacy of his wealthy family. His pattern was to attend one party after another, where he was often dubbed “the king of the feasts” because of his intellectual brilliance and refined culture. He threw his father's money around at these parties like he was a prince, yet he wrote that he often returned home from them with an aching sense of inner emptiness.

Still longing for adventure, he again volunteered for a war in southern Italy, but severe illness forced him home. It

was during that illness—as much spiritual as physical--that he had one of the most dramatic and significant conversions of history. God began an inner dialogue with him that led him to renounce all possessions and to begin preaching a love for Jesus that was marked by humility, service to others, and pure ecstatic joy.

That conversion experience was depicted beautifully in the movie *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, directed by Franco Zeffirelli. It shows Francis lying in his bed at home. He is unable to sleep, tortured by the images that fill his mind and spirit from recent battles. This was a man who had looked upon the face of death and let it affect the tenor of his life. Suddenly, Francis hears a bird chirping on the sill of his open bedroom window. The sound seems to awaken his spirit because it is so simple, so joyful, so at one with the presence of God. He goes to the window, speaks to the bird, then puts out his hand for it. It climbs upon his finger, completely unafraid of his gentle spirit.

We'll never know exactly what happened to Francis at the moment of his conversion, but it is a well-known fact that he celebrated the presence of God in nature. To Francis, God

could be seen clearly in flowers, birds, the ripple of a stream, or the swirling colors of a sunset. All creatures were his brothers and sisters. If he saw that even a single insect or twig was damaged, it bothered him. This sounds overly romantic or extremely sentimental in our day and age, but it was essential to the soul of a saint.

It is said that Francis loved nature so deeply that he once preached to the sparrows in his joy. “First, he congratulated them on the way they were dressed, leaving gaudy, floral patterns aside, so that no one would be offended, and on the sublime independence their wings conferred on them. They had all the skies to frolic in. They lived without a care for the morrow; their food was generously provided for them every day. How God loved them! And, said Francis to his brothers the birds, they ought to thank the Lord all day long.”²

Another time, he is said to have tamed a marauding wolf solely through the power of his love. I believe these stories, because his famous words to the hymn *All Creatures of Our God and King* are a sublime recognition of God’s presence in the natural world. Do you know the lyrics of this hymn? Listen to three of its beautiful verses.

All creatures of our God and King,
Lift up your voice and with us sing
Alleluia, Alleluia! Thou burning sun with golden beam,
Thou silver moon with softer gleam,
O praise Him, O praise Him,
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Thou rushing wind that art so strong,
Ye clouds in heaven that sail along,
O praise Him, Alleluia! Thou rising morn in praise rejoice,
Ye lights of heaven find a voice, O praise Him, O praise Him,
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Thou flowing water, pure and clear,
Make music for thy Lord to hear,
Alleluia, Alleluia! Thou fire so masterful and bright,
That givest man both warmth and light,
O praise Him, O praise Him,
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!³

Throughout the Psalms, we hear this same resounding of nature in praise to the Creator. Like Francis, David's poetic heart captured this beauty in many ways. Consider Psalm 98.

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music...Let the sea resound and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy...(vs. 4, 7-8)

To both David and Francis, all of creation sang to God because that was His purpose in creating it. Just as painters or writers want their works to “sing” to others, so does God want all of creation to enjoy the light and love of His presence. This holds true for us as human beings. Our chief purpose for living is to enjoy God and worship Him forever. It is so much easier for us to remember this when we are in the presence of God’s natural handiwork. This connection sets us free from our anxieties. There are many reasons why this is true. Let’s take a look at a few of them.

First, *nature is worry-free*. This may sound funny, but it’s true. Only man is self-conscious enough to disconnect from the fabric of life and create an inner chaos of anxiety. This separation is the result of our fall and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The natural world is free of this dichotomy. From spiraling atoms to spiraling planets, all nature submits unconsciously to the imbedded order of God’s physical laws. Nature *simply is*, and when we connect with it, an eternal present opens up that staggers us with its mystery and power.

Second, *nature is steeped in beauty*. There is nothing like a deeply aesthetic experience to awaken us to the sheer joy of living here and now with our Creator. Even those who have not made the leap of faith feel the stirring of God within them as they witness the beauty of nature.

A great example of this is in the life of John Muir, the explorer and naturalist who did so much for the conservation of wilderness in America. His most beloved haunt—the Sierra Nevada Range of California—inspired most of his writing. Throughout thousands of lines of prose, he rarely refers to God—instead lauding Nature with a capitol N as the designer of the beauty he sees.

Yet that Nature stirred him to divine descriptions like this. “Climb the mountains and get their glad tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as the sunshine flows into the trees. The wind blows freshness into you and the storms their energy, while cares drop away like the leaves of autumn.”⁴

Though Muir didn’t seem to go beyond these feelings to a personal relationship with God, it is not uncommon for seekers to find that nature leads them to His throne. One of my favorite poets, Theodore Roethke, was a keen observer of

both small and large details in the natural world. In *Meditation at Oyster River*, he says,

*Among the shy beasts, the deer at the salt-lick,
The doe with its sloped shoulders loping across the
highway,
The young snake, poised in green leaves, waiting for its fly,
The hummingbird, whirring from quince-blossom to
morning-glory—
With these I would be.*⁵

He would rather be among these creatures because “All finite things reveal infinitude.” As he and his poems became more metaphysical—searching for ultimate meaning in that infinitude—it seemed that only nature’s beauty could release him from his existential wrestling with death. He longed for the change this beauty could work in his heart.

*As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows it is morning,
I know this change:
On one side of silence there is no smile;
But when I breathe with the birds,
The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing...*⁶

As the blessing of God through nature wrought a deeper and deeper change in Roethke, he became less afraid

of his joy in the divine. His later poems mention God explicitly. In one of them, he clearly states where God has taken him through this immersion in nature.

*The Lord God has taken my heaviness away;
I have merged, like the bird, with the bright air...⁷*

All of this reaches a crescendo in the poem *Once More, the Round*, where he aligns himself with the great Christian poet, William Blake.

*What's greater, Pebble or Pond?
What can be known? The Unknown.
My true self runs toward a Hill
More! O More! visible.*

*Now I adore my life
With the Bird, the abiding Leaf,
With the fish, the questing Snail,
And the Eye altering all;
And I dance with William Blake
For Love, for Love's sake...⁸*

Men and women who analyze life solely through the grid of pragmatic reason often have an arduous journey to God. Those who are more open to God's simplicity in creation seem to discover this joy far earlier. One of the blessings my

father has left with me is the description of a moment when natural beauty affected his life. He grew up on a mid-western farm during the Depression. One summer night, the farmhouse was so stuffy and humid that he took a blanket outside and slept on the lawn. The night was crystalline, deep and dark with no moonlight to wash out the sky. As he gazed up at the Milky Way, the sheer mystery of all those stars, planets, and galaxies was nearly overwhelming. Yet instead of feeling confused or insignificant, he felt joy, power, and love. The living presence of God—the intelligence that brought order to all that vastness—was present in his own heart! The breath of God breathed through him. Years later, as he spearheaded the financial logistics for the Apollo program, I saw that same childhood desire to reach out and connect with infinity.

I have another, more distant relative who witnessed to the presence of God in nature. My great-great-grandfather, Lucius Edelblute, was part of a group of men who blazed the first trail to the famous Cariboo Goldrush in British Columbia during the 1850s. Known as Cariboo Ed, he was a pugnacious man, full of spit and vinegar, with an indomitable energy.

Death tried to snare him through starvation, freezing weather, and numerous skirmishes with criminals who preyed on miners. But he always bounced back. He embodied the brash pioneer spirit of the Far West's original settlers.

His diary has been published as a book, and there is a moment in it that opens a window to his soul. He had just survived an attack by the Ute Indian tribe in which many men were killed. Seated around the campfire that evening, he wrote this. "The night was calm and pleasant, and the moon's bright rays lit up the distant mountain peaks, all of which gave me a serene feeling of wonderment and of God's protecting care..."⁹

Across the ages, people have recognized that the beauty of nature surpasses any artistic achievement of humankind. Have you ever:

- Watched sunlight dance on the surface of a mountain stream?
- Heard the power of an approaching thunderstorm as it rolled and echoed over your head?
- Crushed a sprig of sage and held it under your nose?
- Seen iridescent prisms in the wings of a dragonfly?
- Gazed at neon colored tropical fish as they glided gracefully back and forth through tentacles of seaweed?

- Listened closely to a mockingbird as it trilled its varied repertoire?
- Absorbed the beauty of a southwestern sunset arrayed against a turquoise sky?
- Examined the many colors and textures of lichen covering an alpine boulder?
- Smelled the exquisite fragrance of orange blossoms on a late summer evening?
- Tasted fresh blackberries while hiking in the woods?
- Felt the briny spray of ocean waves on your face?
- Seen a spider web jeweled with morning dew?

If so, then you know firsthand that nature is full of limitless beauty. However, in our hurried lives, we siphon out this beauty in order to keep our noses to the grindstone. We actually consider it a luxury to absorb ourselves in nature's beauty! *It is not a luxury*; it is a daily gift from God that draws us out of ourselves and extends the gifts of restoration and healing.

During the 1960's, many people sought this healing through artificial means. A great interest arose in the use of psychedelic drugs as a way to connect with life's beauty. Those who "tripped" on LSD or mescaline reported a dissolving of the boundaries between themselves and the natural world. It was as if they have become a part of life's pulse, at one with

every sensory experience of the moment. But it was more than a sensation—it was the recognition that a great energy binds all of creation together.

The late Alan Watts described this experience vividly. He was in a garden at night, awash in the colors of the plant life and the dome of the night sky above him. Feeling a joyful at-one-ness with everything around him, he tried to find meaning in it. “All at once,” he says, “it became obvious that the whole thing was love play, where love means everything that the word can mean, a spectrum ranging from the red of erotic delight, through the green of human endearment, to the violet of divine charity, from Freud’s libido to Dante’s ‘love that moves the sun and other stars.’ All were so many colors issuing from a single white light and, what was more, this single source was not just love as we ordinarily understand it; it was also intelligence, not only Eros and Agape but also Logos.”¹⁰

It is sad to me that Watts had to reach his experience through drugs. This loving intelligence he describes—the Logos which suffuses the universe—is what came to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John says clearly,

In the beginning was the Word (logos), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

(vs. 1:1-5)

When we experience the light of love that radiates through all of God's creation (without drugs), we are experiencing the Holy Spirit of Jesus, the love that brings order to everything. This is not pantheism; it is recognition of the living presence of our Lord through the beauty of His handiwork.

Finally, there is another quality of nature that helps relieve our preoccupations with ourselves: *nature is a union of life and death*. The cycle of life and death is everywhere around us when we are outback. A moth trapped in a spider web, the fallen leaves of an autumn tree, a stump being mulched by termites, a hawk descending upon a rabbit—all of these are reminders that life and death are intricately interwoven. As we experience this quality of nature, we again

connect with the fact that we are “dying in the midst of life,” and this in turn awakens us just as the death-bed discipline does.

Many a poet has tried to capture this interplay of death and life in words. In *Hydrangeas*, Carl Sandburg notes how even as early as September, “a line of brown” runs through the petals of these flowers, and that “one sunset after another tracks the faces.”¹¹ Likewise, Robinson Jeffers, in describing a Pacific Ocean scene, says “Light nor life sounds forever; here where enormous sundowns flower and burn through color to quietness.”¹²

How can we hold on to our self-centered cares in the face of this timeless panoply? How can we do anything else but drink in its liberating beauty through the senses with which God has endowed us?

I know a man who is a professional counselor by trade. Throughout his years of listening to his patients’ problems, he became deeply aware of how much human misery is self-created. More specifically, he realized how much of this suffering is the result of a lack of perspective. So many of the so-called problems that plagued his clients would evaporate if

they were able to connect with a wider, more eternal view of their lives. Out of this observation, he created a new business that blended his counseling skills with his hobby of wilderness hiking. He now takes people on 3-7 day excursions advertised as “eco-therapy,” a unique way to balance one’s life through getting in touch with the rhythms of God’s presence in nature. The business is successful in more ways than one. It not only draws numbers of people, it allows the counselor to serve them in a way that goes beyond surface symptoms and gets to the root of unnatural anxiety.

I’ll never forget a mountaintop experience that gave me more than my share of “eco-therapy.” By telling it to you, I have to admit my stupidity. Oh well, the illustration is worth the embarrassment.

I was hiking with some friends and family in the Great Basin National Park, one of the newest of our nation’s preserves located along the eastern border of Nevada. We had decided to climb Wheeler Peak, 13,102 feet, the second highest mountain in that state. It was the middle of July, and there were signs everywhere in the park warning hikers not to get caught on exposed ridgelines during a summer

thunderstorm. I knew that. I was an experienced hiker. That would never happen to me. Right?

Wrong! As we got above the timberline and could clearly see our objective, we also noticed ominous clouds rolling in from the southwest. My family warned me to come back and try it another day. However, my friend, a gung-ho fighter pilot, and I crazily thought we could beat the storm. We took off at a lope up the steep, rocky trail, our lungs burning in the thin air. We made the peak all right, and the view was one of the most spectacular I have ever experienced. Steep, craggy gorges dropped off thousands of feet on all sides. It was like an island of granite suspended in heaven.

However, we also noticed that the incoming storm was right upon us, the bottom of the gray cumuli forking lightning into the gorges.

“We’d better start back,” I yelled.

My friend nodded and we turned to retrace our steps. As I moved swiftly down the trail, I began to hear a buzzing sound. I thought it was some kind of insect, perhaps grasshoppers, stirred up by my passage. Then I noticed with a pang of fear that the hair on my forearms was standing on end.

The buzzing became crackling, and I saw that it was ignited every time I moved my arms.

The air was literally charged with electricity from the storm clouds! My friend and I had become human lightning rods, seconds away from being lit up. Our first mistake was to be on that peak; our second mistake came right then. We decided to run, which is the worst thing we could have done. We should have lain flat and waited for the storm to pass, keeping our bodies as close to the ground as possible. Talk about stupidity! We ran pell-mell down the trail, nearly slipping on every rock, racing to get away from our near-death experience.

God was with us that day; our terrible mistakes did not cost our lives. When we were away from the brunt of the storm, we stopped in mid-trail and bowed our heads in silent thanks. As we neared our family, we saw that another lone hiker had joined them. He is a British immigrant who makes his home in San Francisco. His hobby, like mine, is to spend much of the summer roaming wilderness pathways, enjoying the presence of God in nature. He knew we had had a scare, and so he left us with an old Celtic blessing that is one of my

favorites. You'd better believe I was in touch with my own mortality at that moment, so his words ministered to me directly. They still do, anytime I repeat them.

Deep peace of the running wave be to you.

Deep peace of the flowing air be to you.

Deep peace of the shining stars be to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth be to you.

Deep peace of the Son of Peace be to you.

THE OUTBACK DISCIPLINE

Schedule a trip of 3-5 days somewhere in a remote wilderness area. It is important that this not be a tourist spot, because the sound of RV electric generators or the roar of speedboats and jet skis will not work for this discipline. It is also important that the trip not be rushed. Make sure you have a leisurely day or two to prepare for it, and an equal amount of time to settle at home once you return.

I suggest a backpacking trip into a local national wilderness area. If this is too strenuous for you, set up camp somewhere and take a day hike from that base camp. The U.S. Forest Service office in your area can suggest many such places for a short or extended getaway.

While you are there, take a morning or afternoon by yourself and find a tranquil place off the beaten path. Sit with your back against a tree or a rock, making sure that you have an expansive view of the surrounding wilderness. A meditating spot next to a stream or lake is especially nice, because the presence of water has a soothing effect on the human spirit.

Now, practice a heightening of your senses, an immersion of your whole being into the majesty of God's creation.

Close your eyes and start with your sense of hearing. Listen closely and deeply to every sound around you. Hear the wind in the trees, the scattered songs of nearby birds, the buzz of insects, the rustle of the grass, the murmur of a stream, or the lapping of waves on a lake. As you focus solely on listening, you will be amazed at the many tiers of sound that surround you in the wilds. This is the music of creation, a melody and harmony we so often miss.

With your eyes still closed, let your sense of smell gather up every fragrance around you. Smell pine trees, sage, wildflowers, or the odor of dust and wood baked by the

sun. Then let your sense of touch operate by feeling the wind and sun on your skin.

Now open your eyes. Scan the wonderful scenery around you. Begin with those things closest to you, perhaps an ant as it makes its way over the bark and stone. See the multi-colored lichen that clings to the trunk of a nearby tree or the patterns of light on a stream or lake. Then expand your field of vision. Look deeply. This is not a Kodak moment. You are not simply an observer of scenery. You are part of all that you see. Let yourself merge with the fabric of life. See the colors, the textures, the shapes, and recognize them as the eternal stamps of God's design.

Later, when you go to bed, try sleeping out in the open. Let the deep infinity of the night sky draw you into God's presence again. Wrap your thoughts around the fact that the nearest of those stars you see is about 25 trillion miles away! Then realize that some of the star clusters you see are actually clusters of galaxies, themselves filled with as many stars and planets as our own Milky Way! Meditate not only on the infinite expanse of space, but of the time in which God created it.

Do your worries seem insignificant now? I hope so. I hope you can feel them dissolving in the presence of the Spirit that enfolds not only every one of those stars, but your own life as well.

And if all this experience of vastness makes you feel insignificant, remember these reassuring words from Psalm 8.

“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth...When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him ruler over the works of your hands....”(vs.1, 5-6)

My personal prayer is that this time apart in the “outback” will awaken you to God’s soothing and uplifting presence in the natural world. When this discipline is practiced in the wilderness, it stays with us when we return. It is something that can be repeated at a local park or in our own backyards. It can happen as we watch a sunset through the windshield of our car, or hear an early morning bird

through our bedroom window. It can happen as we watch a harvest moon ascend from the horizon. It can simply happen as a cool breeze brushes our cheek.

It is a gateway to letting God cleanse us from worry.

CHAPTER THREE: **The Searchlight Discipline**

I was near the end of touring Alcatraz, that notorious prison on a rock island in the San Francisco Bay. The tour guide asked if any of us would like to step inside one of the old solitary confinement cells, just “to see what it was like.” It was a cramped enclosure with steel walls. There was no source of internal light, and the only air came through a vent to the foggy Bay. Men were stripped naked and left in damp darkness for weeks as punishment for breaking prison rules.

A number of us stepped in thinking it would be a unique experience. It was a bit like packing into an elevator. The tour guide made sure we were safely inside then closed the steel door with a heavy thud. The sudden darkness and silence were stunning. A couple people giggled. One lady said, “Honey, is that your hand?” We laughed again. And then the full force of the blackness fell over us. No one spoke, aware of how suffocating that darkness would quickly become. One man whispered, “Imagine being in here for weeks.” The thought made me shiver.

When the tour guide opened the door, I welcomed that first sliver of light as if it were a drink of water in the desert.

In Psalm 130, David describes longing for the Lord with a metaphor of waiting for light.

My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.
(vs. 5-6)

The image is simple and powerful. A soldier given the graveyard shift is stationed on the high walls surrounding Jerusalem. After the cold and dark of a long night, he waits for the warmth and illumination of those first rays of sunrise. David's poetry likens this to our soul waiting for the warmth and illumination of God's light in our lives.

Light is one of the most powerful metaphors of the Bible. Emanating from God, it is a symbol of wisdom and transformation.

The poetry of the Psalms is alive with images of light. Consider just a few.

- Psalm 18:28**—You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.
- Psalm 27:1**—The Lord is my light and my salvation: whom shall I fear?
- Psalm 43:3**—Send forth your light and your truth; let them guide me.
- Psalm 89:15**—Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O Lord.
- Psalm 119:105**—Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

With the coming of Jesus, God's light was revealed in brilliant 3-D glory. Jesus told us,

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. (John 8:12)

If we tried to sustain contact with this light through our own limited means, we would surely fail. Realizing this, Jesus promised a gift that would never fail us. On the night he was arrested, he told his disciples that after he was gone the Holy Spirit would come and “reveal all truth.” The Greek word that Jesus used for the Spirit is Paraclete, which we most often

translate as helper or guide. Another translation is “mediator,” one who continually mediates a way between God and us. For those who have embraced God’s presence, the Spirit indeed plays this role—throwing wide the shutters to God’s light through the medium of our conscience.

Just what is our conscience? For centuries, philosophers and scientists have tried to answer this question. It has been described as an innate set of rules inherited through human evolution, an accumulation of values based on individual experience, or a set of behaviors adopted from our parents. Freud believed it is a faculty within the mind that allows the superego (internalized notions of what is right and wrong) to be communicated to the ego (our sense of self).

In popular culture, we have the image of Jiminy Cricket from *Pinocchio*, that little “conscience” that reminds us of our responsibilities. And the cricket is not always welcome. As Bono of the rock band U2 says, “It’s no secret that a conscience can sometimes be a pest.”¹

All these definitions of conscience are humanistic, meaning they are bounded by the limits of human understanding. Christians believe something far richer and

deeper. We believe that conscience comes to us from beyond the boundaries of human ability. We believe it is part of God given to us, the light of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. We believe that heightened sensitivity to the Spirit's light helps us live in harmony with God and other people. Most importantly, we know that to have a completely clear conscience is vital if we are to live a worry free life. This is so important that I want to restate it: *a completely clear conscience is vital if we are to live a worry free life.*

Let's begin our look at this by using a description of human life that comes from Hinduism.

Hindus believe that we are layered beings. Their devotional literature is filled with detailed discussions of this, but for our purposes, we can look at four main layers. First is the physical layer represented by our bodies. Next comes our conscious personality, that part of our mind and experience that we are aware of on a daily basis. Third is the realm of the individual subconscious, made up of the accumulated experiences of our private life throughout the years. Finally, there is a region beneath all these that they call Being Itself, the presence of God focused in the individual. ²

Christians believe that this inner presence of God, this light within, is the Holy Spirit that takes up residence in us upon our acceptance of Christ. And no one has greater knowledge of our life's struggles than the Spirit does. As Romans 8: 26-27 says:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

What this tells us is astonishing. We have an agent of God within us, the *Paraclete*, who prays for us daily in our struggles, expressing our deepest needs to God. How does this relate to the conscience? Directly! When there is an issue in our lives that needs to be dealt with, the Holy Spirit—as He prays--sends up flares in our conscience. This has sometimes been called “a pang of conscience,” but often it isn’t so searing. It may come in a much gentler way, and it is up to us to be sensitive to the Spirit’s prompting.

There is another way to say this. Since the Spirit is continually praying for us in the recesses of our life, there is a

direct connection being made between God and us daily—*even when we aren't aware of it!* As we practice disciplines of devotion and prayer, we actually become attuned to this inner dialogue and what it can teach us.

This takes great sensitivity. In trying to develop this sensitivity to the Spirit's light within us, it is important to avoid two major pitfalls.

The first pitfall is that we must be careful not to ignore the signals within our conscience. If we do, we are practicing denial, which is actually a hardening of our conscience. Once our conscience is disregarded, it becomes easier to ignore it on other occasions. But the residual effects of denial **never** cease. The truth is that unless we have a sociopathic personality with no moral compass at all, an ignored issue in our conscience *never* goes away completely. It is like a nugget of uranium that we have tried to bury, but which still gives off radioactive poison into our bodies. This poison is noticed as a general sense of uneasiness, a lack of peace, or an *unnamed worry* that works away at us throughout the day.

We may have practiced denial for so long that we can no longer connect our anxiety to its source. The original issue or incident is deeply buried, yet we still pay a heavy price for not having a clean conscience. The manifestations are stress, irritability, a lack of focus in our work, and insensitivity in our relationships.

It is important to realize that the Holy Spirit is not trying to cause guilt or shame in our lives, but to provide wisdom and guidance. The Spirit's purpose is never to condemn, but to heal. He may even be trying to highlight an issue that has little to do with a recent behavior, but is related to deeper areas of healing necessary for our freedom. Again, some of these are so buried—so covered with layers of time and experience—that we are out of touch with their source.

Let's say we grew up in a home where love was conditional, based more on our performance than our identity as a child of God. We may spend much of our time—consciously or unconsciously—seeking the approval of others. This can lead to perfectionism, heaping unreal expectations upon others and us because of this deep feeling of inadequacy.

Or, we may harbor scars from abandonment. Perhaps our parents or other key individuals were absent during critical periods of our lives—either physically or emotionally. This can lead to a profound lack of trust in our current relationships with others and with God. We want to take a leap of faith, we want to go out on a limb believing that the love of God will sustain us, yet we are nagged by these deep and overpowering fears.

Still another example has to do with guilt that has been stockpiled from life experiences. For instance, we may have suffered through a divorce, and have now taken on enormous loads of guilt related to the divorce's effect on our children. This guilt permeates our unconscious mind and influences our behavior throughout the day.

I have experienced some of these troubles myself. I have also witnessed their effect on countless people whom I have counseled. And a primary fact was clear: *the Holy Spirit was sending up flares for new awareness that were not being fully grasped.* The art of healing, both for others, and myself means to ally ourselves more fully with the healing and wisdom of the Light that lives within us.

By now, you see my point. The Spirit works in us not only to convict us of transgressions, but also to give us life-changing wisdom. He wants to liberate us, and if we listen carefully He will often dig beneath our levels of denial to show us the chains that are keeping us imprisoned. His searchlight is uniquely equipped for this.

The second pitfall related to issues of conscience can be summed up in the word obsession—unduly focusing on something until it is magnified out of proportion. We know we did something wrong. The Spirit, through our conscience, has convicted us of this. But instead of accepting God's forgiveness and letting the issue go, we pile on a heap of other worries. These obsessive, secondary worries are usually related to imagined consequences—the fear of being exposed, or concerns about the opinions of others. Each of these secondary worries thrives on the question “What if?” and can fill our waking minds so thoroughly that we find it hard to work, eat, or sleep. I have heard many a person describe these obsessive thoughts swarming over them in their beds as they awoke in the middle of the night.

Both of these responses to our conscience cause unnecessary stress, even physical illness. It is important to cultivate a discipline that allows us to trust the warmth and healing of the light within us, one that avoids both denial and obsession.

We can start by bringing ourselves more fully into the searchlight of God's love. We can practice transparency before our Creator. One of my favorite scriptures, Psalm 139, shows that for those who are in relationship to God, this transparency is natural, even unavoidable. David eloquently expresses his awareness that God searches us at all times and all places. The penetrating light of His presence is at the center of our lives.

O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely, O Lord...Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I rise on the wings of dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast...For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb...All the days ordained for me were

written in your book before one of them came to be. (vs. 1-4, 7, 9-10, 15, 16)

What a sublime description of God's omnipresence! The old saying is absolutely true, that "even when no one else is watching, God is." His knowledge of us started before we were born and extend into eternity. There is literally nowhere we can hide from the searchlight of God.

We can react to this realization out of fear and obligation, as if God is like Big Brother in Orwell's 1984, some sort of Thought Police forcing us adhere to the rules. Many stubborn and rebellious souls have fought against God's watchfulness. Or we can realize that His presence is actually the *light of love aflame in our minds and hearts*. When we see the presence of His Spirit in this way, we want to submit to His guidance because we know that God desires only health and abundant freedom for us. We begin to welcome His companionship even if it requires radical change.

David came to this point in his life, especially after his sinful chapter with Bethsheba and Uriah. He threw himself prostrate on the ground before the Almighty. It was

experiences like those that brought forth the beautiful conclusion of Psalm 139.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (vs. 23-24)

The Apostle Paul put it another way in Ephesians.

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. Everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. (5: 8-11, 13)

In the 12 Steps of AA, which have worked miracles in the lives of millions, allowing the searchlight of God to expose our dark areas is called “taking inventory.” Inventory is a rather clinical, business-like term, but it fits. When we open our hearts, minds and spirits to God’s shining love, we objectively need to put our own passions and judgements—our emotional baggage—aside for a moment. Only then can

the Holy Spirit, working through our consciences, highlight the issues we must release into His love. These can be small or large details. Here are just a few things we might find.

- Harsh words spoken to a friend, family member, or co-worker.
- Times we gossiped about other people.
- Lies we have told.
- Resentments we are harboring.
- Unhealthy sexual thoughts and/or acts in which we participated.
- Opportunities for loving service we callously disregarded.
- Ways we have cheated others.
- A judgmental and critical spirit towards others.
- Feelings of fear or inadequacy.

The human heart is a battleground, capable of the entire gamut of known emotions. It reminds me of a comment I once heard a photojournalist make about his work in Somalia during some of that country's worst violence. He said that in the course of a single day he would see human hands used to savagely beat an innocent person to death, and then see

human hands used to hold a cup of water to the parched lips of a war-ravaged child. It impressed upon him the range of behaviors—from hatred to love—that emanate from the human heart.

We don't need to visit a foreign battleground to see these stark contrasts. We can see them in our own hearts as we let the searchlight take its inventory. The content of what we find will vary in each of our lives, but it is important that this inventory is absolutely searching. This may be especially difficult for those of us who feel we have done nothing wrong. Deeper issues like pride, competitiveness, self-centeredness, or a lack of sensitivity to those who are hurting—qualities that permeate our personalities—are more difficult to see in the light of God's love. But without seeing and releasing them, it is impossible for us to live a worry-free life.

The more we practice allowing the light of God into our lives, the more the Holy Spirit can assist us throughout every minute of every day. The Bible calls this discernment, a wisdom that enables us to see more of life through the eyes of Christ. This happens by allowing every detail of the world around us to be examined in the light of His love.

Thomas R. Kelly describes this kind of life as living on two levels at once: the level of the outward world, and the inward level of the light within us. He says, “the religious man is forever bringing all affairs of the first level down into the Light, holding them there in the Presence, reseeing them and the whole of the world of men and things in a new and overturning way, and responding to them in spontaneous, incisive and simple ways of love and faith.”³

As we bring our lives into the light of God’s love, it will become clear what we are to release. The next step, then, is to confess these issues to God and another person. As James 5:16 says,

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

This is also an important part of the 12 Steps. It is called “cleaning house,” and it is absolutely essential if we are to have minds and hearts that are free and serene.

It is not the place of this book to examine the long history of confession within the Christian church. The bottom line is that without confessing our sins to God on a regular

basis, we lose true fellowship with Him. Pride is the father of all sins, for it places *us*, rather than God, in an exalted position. Confession is a daily acknowledgment that He is Lord and we are His children. It is a recognition that we *always* fall short of His glory, and that apart from His love we can do nothing. It strips away the layers of self-centeredness. Most importantly, it is a discipline that reminds us of the core of our Christian faith—the undeserved, free gift of grace-filled forgiveness that is ours through the cross of Jesus.

What I am more concerned about in this book is that our confessions before God become an *actual, physical act of letting go*. Throughout my years of ministry, I have seen how people take part in corporate confession during worship, then leave with their sins still plaguing them. It is vital that confession not just be a mental and verbal exercise, but a physical release. We will use the searchlight discipline to prepare ourselves for letting go. Then, in the next chapter, we will talk about the physical discipline of releasing. But before all this, let's take a brief look at the issue of confessing to another person.

12 Step programs emphasize that confessing to another person *the exact nature of our wrongs* is essential for peace of mind. In many ways, I agree with this. In all my experiences as pastor, counselor and teacher, I have seen the changes brought about through transparency. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to others is a powerful way of airing out our consciences. It gives others the chance to love us unconditionally, putting into flesh the mercy of God.

At a time in my own life following a series of personal failures, I opened up to a small community of Christians. They asked permission to surround me and pray for me. I will never forget the power of the Holy Spirit that flooded through my brothers and sisters in Christ as they laid hands on me and prayed for me in my brokeness. Quite simply, I experienced the infinite love and grace of Jesus *made flesh* in the presence of fellow believers. I wept before them with no sense of shame, only acceptance and love.

Such unconditional love and grace is perhaps the greatest gift the Christian church has to offer the world. It is certainly a compelling reason for confessing our sins and shortcoming before others.

Yet there are some issues we may want to confess only to Jesus. 12 Step adherents frown upon this because they believe that people who are addicted—like many of us are to worry—are adept at the art of self-deception. If we confess only to God “as we know Him,” we have no one to hold us accountable—either to a Biblical view of God, or our own promises of action.

Accountability is indeed the greatest benefit of confessing to another person. This can happen with a single prayer partner, or within the context of a small group that is pledged to confidentiality and unconditional love. God will use these people to help keep us on a path that is centered in His good will. They provide evaluation points along the path of our recovery, and help remind us of our commitments.

However, non-Christian 12 Step groups underestimate the personal, physical relationship that believers have with Jesus through the light of His Spirit. Our walk with Him is not a connection to some abstract higher power. It is a living, breathing friendship, and I see no problem with confessing certain sensitive issues to Him and Him alone. If He is truly alive in our daily lives—actively speaking words of love to us

through His Spirit—then He will surely hold us accountable to that we have lain before Him.

As God's searchlight illuminates our lives, the greatest result is humility. We see with naked clarity the depths of our own self-centeredness. We see that even our noblest motives are often tainted with self-interest. We see how clearly we fall short of what God requires of us.

This recognition does not need to cripple us, *but it must break us!* Humility is the result of a broken heart and a submitted will. It is the dying of self that Paul pointed to when he said,

I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

How does this relate to our worries? Very directly and powerfully! Worry is rooted in willfulness, a false belief that all our anxious ruminations will make a difference. We become enraptured with our own power and self-sufficiency. Humility crushes the idols of self and control. We see our

worries as fruitless before God's sovereignty. We realize that the only good that can come from us is the good that comes through submitting to Christ's Lordship over all areas of our lives.

Francis Frangipane has some powerful words on humility. "The strength of humility is that it builds a spiritual defense around your soul, prohibiting strife, competitions, and many of life's irritations from stealing your peace...Remember, Satan fears virtue. He is terrified of humility; he hates it because humility is the surrender of the soul to the Lord, and the devil is terrified of Jesus Christ."⁴

Let's review how the searchlight of the Holy Spirit helps set us free from worry. **First**, it illuminates—thought our conscience—the unresolved areas of our inner lives, readying us for the physical act of letting go. **Second**, it dissolves our willfulness like shadows dispersed in light, breaking open our hearts to receive the cleansing and releasing power of the Spirit.

Are you ready to let this light set you free?

THE SEARCHLIGHT DISCIPLINE

This discipline can be thought of as a bridge to the one in the next chapter: The Open-Hands Discipline. The two should be practiced together.

Again, preparation for this is similar to the others we've practiced: find a quiet place set apart from your busy schedule. This is the Lord's time, committed solely to Him so that He can grace your life with new freedom.

Close your eyes and begin with these words from Psalm 139. Commit them to memory so they are a natural part of your times of confession.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

With your eyes closed, remain still and allow the Holy Spirit to illuminate areas of your life that need to be confessed and released.

Silence does not come easy. We must settle into it until the jabbering in our minds slows down. Deep breathing helps with this. Take it slowly, and if you become distracted by a number of rushing thoughts, don't worry. Each time, redirect

your thinking using the words from Psalm 139. Slowly, the deeper issues of our lives will surface.

We may see things we have done, words we have spoken, and hurtful thoughts we have harbored or relished. The faces of people we have sinned against may come to mind. Resentments and jealousies are exposed.

In order to increase my own transparency, I find it helpful to imagine standing before the cross during Jesus' final moments. I imagine His loving eyes turned upon me, and I hear those awesome words: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The light of His eyes penetrates deeply into my heart. It makes me want to lay all that I am at His feet.

If you are a person prone to "building mountains out of molehills," the first rushes of conscience during a quiet time might seem overwhelming. Don't fight the flow. Let the Spirit be real for you and begin to flood your mind. Stay with it, for the next step is a way of releasing your issues one step at a time.

Now, with your eyes still closed, allow a single issue to be held in your mind. Say these words out loud: "Lord, I

confess (name the issue).” Be as specific as possible, moving from the general to the particular. For instance, instead of saying, “Lord, I confess that I have been insensitive,” say, “Lord, I confess that I have been insensitive to my wife. I see this in the way that I have not paid full attention to her at the end of the day—instead focusing only on my own problems.”

With your eyes still closed, hold one of these confessed issues or incidents in mind. You will it use to practice the next step.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Open-Hands Discipline

Let go and let God. It's a phrase we've all heard popularized by 12 Step programs until it has become part of our national folk-wisdom. I've seen it displayed on bumper stickers right next to "One Day at a Time." Like many aphorisms, these two have infinite wisdom. If we were able to put them into immediate action, we would quickly experience liberation for our hearts, minds, and spirits.

However, cliches are long on prescription and short on instruction. I don't know about you, but sometimes I actually find them irritating. I remember a particular incident. I was in the middle of a stressful, worried week. A well-meaning acquaintance smiled at me and said "just let go and let God." A part of me felt like shouting, "Stop saying that! I already know I **should** let go and let God, but I don't know **how**. *It's not that easy!*"

This is the problem with simplistic mottoes: they take practice and discipline to put into effect. Ask people who are working recovery programs from alcoholism, overeating,

gambling, or any other addiction. You can be sure they heard the national slogan “just say no” a million times, but it wasn’t until they allied themselves with a conscientious program—a detailed set of steps—that they could actually reach their goal.

The same holds true for much of the advice we find in the Bible. Consider the Proverbs, that collection of wise sayings passed on through generations of Israelites, then to the Gentiles, then down through history into our 20th century pews and homes. Open to one of the chapters of Proverbs and hear again how the wisdom of a single verse jumps out at you. Take chapter 3, verses 5-6.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean
Not on your own understanding; in all your
Ways acknowledge him, and he will make your
paths straight.

Great advice, right? Easy to put into practice, right?

Wrong! Everything about our stubborn, willful natures wants to put us first in life, as if *our* understanding and *our* willpower are the source of a successful existence. To do the opposite—to place God daily at the center of all our decisions

and efforts—takes humility, surrender, and years of prayerful devotion. This proverb is far from simple.

Jesus' sayings are also deceptively simple. Consider what He said to his disciples at the Last Supper: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12) Nothing could be simpler, right? Actually, nothing could be more demanding! Just ponder the sacrificial love shown on the cross, and this saying suddenly commands a lifetime of learning and self-discipline. There is nothing simple about it!

If we are to "let go and let God" in our lives, a motto alone won't cut it. We need a concrete, physical discipline that we can practice on a daily basis.

Allow me to make an analogy to the sublimely frustrating game of golf. Ever since I picked up a club and took my first swing, I realized that golf requires a state of mind that seems like an oxymoron—a contradiction in terms. At first I called this state of mind "forced relaxation." I knew that if my brain were concentrated on any stressful thoughts, the fluidity of my swing would be lost. I would hook, slice, top, and even miss the ball. More than once I slammed my clubs into the

ground and wondered why I continued with such a ridiculous, irritating game! But I did. Why? Because when I hit a good shot and watched it sail towards the green, it was *so, so good!*

As I committed myself to learning the golf swing, I changed my term for the state of mind I needed. I now call it “disciplined relaxation,” and it comes from a curious thing that golfers call “muscle memory.” When golfers practice a correct swing countless times at the driving range, their muscles memorize the complex movements until they become unconscious—as natural as swimming, walking, or running. When this muscle memory is in place, a golfer can start focusing more on course management and game strategy.

It’s like a baby learning to crawl, something I recently watched happen with my youngest child. First came rolling over, then pushing himself up on his arms, then settling back on his knees and rocking. He was very tentative and shaky, his legs and arms like those of a puppet with loose strings. Finally, when the muscle memory of those first components was in place, he was ready to launch forward. He crawled, and his grin showed how much he enjoyed his new freedom. Of course, he fell on his face more than once, but even that was

part of getting “muscle memory” imbedded in his unconscious.

We need this kind of automatic physical response if we are to regularly let go of the worries that plague us. Letting go is a discipline that is not natural to most of us. We are more apt to live in quiet desperation, carrying our accumulated emotional baggage from day to day, week to week, year to year.

I recently spoke to a friend of mine. She is a competent public school teacher with a bright mind and caring heart. As a single woman she is also very lonely. This gnawing desire to share her life with a partner drives her to clinging and clutching. She has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and rationally she knows that only Jesus can satisfy the emptiness in her life. However, there is another stronghold in this woman’s mind. This lie tells her it will be a man—one who needs her and accepts her—that will *really* fill the emptiness.

On the day we spoke, she was especially aware of how this futile and addictive line of thinking was driving her into unhealthy relationships. She had gotten herself deeply involved with an alcoholic man. He used her to meet his own

needs, but refused to return her overtures of love and commitment. She was severely agitated, filled with fear, frustration and tension, worried that this deeply grooved pattern of thinking and behaving would never end. Words like “never” and “hopeless” lead to depression, and as my friend spoke, I could fully empathize. There have been too many times in my life when I was unable to “let go and let God.” Being stuck brought a sense of despair.

My friend finally said, “Krin, help me. How can I let go of all this worry and stress?”

What I said to her, I remind myself of daily. The first step is to bring ourselves fully into the presence of God. We must first experience his peace *physically*—not just as an idea. We must develop a discipline that accomplishes this, because until we know how to call upon His presence and let it set us free, we will always be strangled by our worries.

By now you realize that all the disciplines of this book take place in a time set apart for God. This time alone with the Lord is half the battle in ridding ourselves of worry. And it is no small feat! Everything about our fast-paced lives will conspire to make our time of devotion a last priority. If,

instead, we put it *first*—if we commit ourselves to *never* letting a day go by without solitary communion with God—His light and wisdom will begin to permeate all aspects of our lives. Commit this absolute truth to both memory **and** practice—*daily time alone with the Lord is the foundation of spiritual health!*

Once we are in the presence of God, we can then practice the physical discipline I'm about to suggest. But before we look at it, I want to briefly revisit our discussion of mental strongholds. I want us to remember how fortified they become in our minds. I do this to emphasize again the need for disciplined perseverance.

To use an analogy from nature, think of a coral reef. Each coral polyp is a small animal in and of itself, but they build on top of each other until they form huge reefs that defy battering waves, great white sharks, and the hulls of massive ships. The same holds true for the mental fortresses that rise up in our minds. They start off as simple lies, but as these powerful lies draw other thoughts their way, they add layer after layer until walls and turrets, even drawbridges and gargoyles are in place!

We have the confidence that God's Word working through us is sufficient for the work of tearing down these strongholds. *But it takes concentrated attack time.* Our persistent efforts, brought about through disciplines like the ones in this book, will batter away at the walls until they fall. Like the Israelites who surrounded Jericho until it collapsed, we will have victory!

It is important not to become impatient in this battle. Consider Biblical history. The Israelites only arrived at the border of Canaan after 40 years of wandering in the desert—a time of overwhelming worry! Even after the decisive battle at Jericho, it took many more battles before the Promised Land was theirs.

God's timing will be different for each of us. Upon practicing this discipline, some of us may experience deep release after only a short amount of time. Others of us may only be able to let go of portions of our worries, still aware of the stronghold standing dark and tall in our lives. Do not be afraid; its walls will crumble as we connect with the power of God's presence.

This will be true not only with our worries, but with the other strongholds that have long taken too much space in our minds. The Open Hands Discipline can be used with resentment, fear, guilt, and even grief. Since each of these emotions may seem resistant to attack, we need patience and perseverance.

THE OPEN-HANDS DISCIPLINE

At the onset, this discipline is best practiced at that time and place we have set aside for prayer and conscious contact with God. Later, you can practice it spontaneously throughout the day at work or home.

Sit in a comfortable chair with your feet placed on the ground and your hands on your lap. Begin by practicing the Searchlight Discipline. Pray the words of Psalm 139, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me...”

Now expand the word “offensive” to not only apply to sins and shortcomings, but also any worries you are presently holding on to. Are you worried about your finances, or your job, or someone else’s feelings about you?

Are you worried about whether a plan of yours for the future will materialize? Are you worried about your health or the health of a loved one? Are you worried about the welfare of one of your children? Perhaps your worries are a mixture of several of these.

Take one worry in particular and concentrate on it. Clench your fists as you do this. Since unresolved issues create a definite physical response—tightening of muscles, adrenaline, nervous stomach, and shortness of breath—this concentration will not be comfortable. That's exactly the point; now you can feel how lingering worry affects the entire body.

*Now ask yourself out loud, in a clear voice, “Are you willing to let go of (name the worry)? It is important to do this out loud and to name the worry **as specifically as possible**. For instance, instead of saying “Are you willing to let go of your worries about money?” say “Are you willing to let go of how much that new water heater will cost?” Instead of saying, “Are you willing to let go of your resentment?” say “Are you willing to let go of your anger over that insensitive comment your boss made?” Instead of saying “Are you*

willing to let go of your fear?” say “Are you willing to let go of your fear about making that presentation at work next week?”

Try to be very specific in naming the worries and other hurtful feelings that are holding you back from freedom.

Now, answer your question to yourself. This may sound silly, but believe me—there are people who would rather hold on to their misery than let it go. By focusing your own response in a question and answer, you will come into physical contact with your deepest desires.

DO YOU WANT TO BE FREE? DO YOU REALLY WANT TO BE FREE OF THESE HURTFUL EMOTIONS YOU ARE CARRYING IN YOUR HEART, MIND AND SPIRIT?

If so, say, “YES, I WANT TO LET GO OF (NAME THE SPECIFIC FEELING OR ISSUE).

God has the power to set you free. It is not simply an effort of your will, but of His perfect and liberating love moving through you.

Now, place your clenched fists upward on your lap. Repeat this prayer or any similar prayer that springs from your heart.

“Lord Jesus, I praise You for the gift of this day and for the grace of Your Holy Spirit living inside me. I praise You for Your power over all areas of my life. At this moment, I confess my trust in Your plan for my life. I believe that all that has happened before this moment, and all that will happen after it, are safely in Your hands. I confess to You that my deepest desire in life is to know You and trust You more fully each waking moment. Because of this, I now let go of (name the worry or hurtful emotion), and place it in Your hands. Lord, fill me with the gift of Your peace so that I may live to praise You and serve You in the freedom of Your Spirit. Amen.”

When you get to the “letting go” part of this prayer, open your fists and expose your palms upward. Physically feel yourself letting go of your hurtful emotions. You have been holding tight to them, but now feel them being released. Give them over fully to God. This is a powerful way of focusing yourself in the present, and you may want to repeat

*the line “I now let go of (name the worry or hurtful emotion)”
a number of times, feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit
move through you with liberating, cleansing love.*

CHAPTER FIVE: **The Battle Cry Discipline**

I recently went to watch my teenaged daughter compete with her school in a volleyball tournament. The event took place in a new gymnasium with shining hardwood floors. At four different nets, teams from all over southern California were competing intensely. The noise was deafening! Each team of girls, egged on by their coach, warmed itself up with chants, shouts, even loud drumming on the floor. It was meant not only to boost team spirit, but also to intimidate the opposition. It was a battle cry!

Primitive warfare almost always included battle cries. These shouts were used to muster inner resources of courage, and to convince enemy forces that they were meeting a formidable foe. Such a strategy helped Gideon defeat 135,000 Midianites with only 300 Israelite warriors (Judges, chapter 7). The 300 surrounded the enemy encampment by night. At Gideon's signal, they blew trumpets, lifted torches, and shouted "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" The sleeping Midianites awakened in terror, rushing from their tents and killing each other in their confusion.

We, too, can use battle cries in our victory over worry. The words for these cries come directly from scripture. Let's take a moment to understand why they are so powerful.

When we practiced the Outback Discipline, we immersed ourselves in the exquisite textures of nature. We were filled with awe by the wonder of this world God created for us. Through the powerful words of Psalm 8, we reminded ourselves that human beings are the crowning glory of this creation—an insight not meant to inflate us, but to bring us into union with God's presence. His presence reminded that we truly have been created in His image.

The Battle Cry Discipline helps us expand on this lofty view God has of us.

To put it plainly, at the heart of the Biblical story is God's unfailing affirmation of humanity. From the moment He made a covenant with a nomadic desert tribe, to the moment He sacrificed His Son on the cross, He never stopped believing in our potential. Nothing we could do caused Him to turn His back permanently on us. A rainbow followed the flood. A Promised Land followed the wilderness. Rebuilding followed the exile. A Savior followed the prophecies. And

despite our rebellious ways, that Savior died for us in the most magnificent act of love the world has ever known. As Romans 5:6-8 says,

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Even before his ultimate sacrifice, Jesus spoke fluently of His love for us. He likened Himself to a shepherd who attends to our needs, a light that calls us out of the darkness, and a door we pass through to find eternal peace. At the Last Supper, His prayer for His disciples is a prayer for any of His followers. In it, He said:

Father...I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them. (John 17:25-26)

The Gospel narrative is God's resounding "YES" to the existence of His children here on earth. And if you read the life and ministry of Jesus closely, it becomes clear that He reserved a special love for those who are sinful and hurting

(like chronic worriers!). He came under great criticism for His association with “unclean” people like prostitutes, tax collectors, Gentiles, and those with emotional or physical diseases. When such criticisms came His way, He simply said, “Those who are well do not need a physician.”

What a positive and enduring love our Lord has for us! It is this divine view of humankind’s eternal and precious significance that is at the heart of the Christian faith. When you consider this high opinion God has of us, you see why it is essential to find disciplines that help us see ourselves as He does.

This sense of our eternal worth will not come from the world around us. Despite the lofty words of our Declaration of Independence and Constitution, American society—like the social order of all empires before it—is based on inequity. Money, physical beauty, athletic prowess, political power and prestige—these forces still rule the day. Worth is tied to temporal accomplishment. To be free, we must fight against these forces. We need weapons to cut through the lies that try to enslave us.

In this fight, scripture is a powerful ally. When we commit God's battle cries to memory, they work miracles—bringing strength and peace where there was weakness and chaos. II Timothy 3:16-17 says:

All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Notice that belonging to God is not enough; we must also be in training. Any of us who have accepted Christ as our Lord and Savior, yet *still* struggle with worries, can attest to this. We know we are Christ's and that He lives within us through the power of His Holy Spirit. But when it comes to tearing down our mental fortresses, we need a concentrated discipline. We need scripture to correct us and train us in righteousness. Paul says this is what makes us proficient—able to live and serve in this world with Christ-centered clarity of purpose.

A mere humanistic view of the Bible—one that equates it with other sacred texts—only creates a shield against its miraculous power. An American as great as Thomas Jefferson

succumbed to this mindset. He was a strong voice in the Age of Enlightenment during the late 1700s—a period of philosophical ferment that reacted against the control of the church. Its leading proponents looked to human reason and ability as the new touchstone, a movement that gave birth to modern secularism. Jefferson, rational to a fault (and I *do* believe that is possible), refused to believe anything that his senses and reason could not prove. Yet Jesus, like a gadfly, would no leave him alone. To come to grips with this, Jefferson decided to abridge the New Testament into a form that fit his intellectual leanings. He literally used a scissors to clip out of the Gospel *all* references to the Spirit and the miraculous. No more divine healings, transfigurations, angels or God-given visions!

What remained—popularly called Jefferson’s Bible—reads like a moral primer. Jesus is certainly a good teacher, full of advice about living a life of love and self-sacrifice, but He is not God incarnate. He is no longer the resurrected Savior of history. He loses His ultimate power and is relegated to the place of a sage—a man who simply sharpened the moral faculty that all human beings possess.¹

I see this same kind of humanistic mindset in the life of a long-time acquaintance. The man has a voracious intellect. His incisive and inquiring mind is able to take on almost any mental task. He is extremely well read, often tackling volumes of history and science that would scare other people away. As part of his general education, he has studied most of the world's great religions, trying to get a feel for their basic beliefs. His own faith, however, is non-existent. He is a confirmed existentialist, believing that we come from nothingness and return to nothingness. He has no place in his life for that which cannot be verified by his senses or his reason. To him, all the elaborate belief systems of the world, though they have their beauties and truths, are simply attempts to wish away the finality of death—life's absurd, tragic conclusion. Don't get me wrong; he's not a bad person. He is simply a man without faith. Because of this, all his wisdom seems like foolishness to me. As Psalm 14:1 says, "Only the fool says in his heart 'There is no God.'"

I have witnessed to this man, but nothing I've said has been able to penetrate his intellectual defenses. He is living witness to the fact that once the mental fortresses of

humanism get firmly established in our psyches, they are nearly impervious to destruction.

I remember the summer he read through the entire Bible. He wanted to understand the historical basis for our Judeo-Christian heritage, and I sensed that he also wanted to find out more about the man named Jesus. Despite his confident presumptions about life, I saw a stirring of dissatisfaction in him, a longing to connect with life in a more meaningful way. I prayed fervently that God would use the scripture to awaken faith within him.

It didn't happen. After he had finished his summer reading, he could intelligently discuss the role of prophets in the history of Israel. He could comment on the apocalyptic flavor of the early Christian church. But he was no closer to a relationship with Jesus. To him, the Bible remained a historical document, dead letters attesting to a distant past. He had begun with that viewpoint, and the mental fortress stood strong. Because his lips could not confess "I believe," his mind was closed to the voice of God.

Faith makes all the difference. Once we receive Christ into our lives through faith, the Holy Spirit begins to

illuminate our minds. This illumination allows us to start understanding the infinite depths of scripture. We see that the Holy Spirit not only inspired scripture when it was written, but that the *Spirit still lives and breathes through it!* The Bible is not simply a historical document with partial relevance to the modern world. It is a living testimony to the living God. It has the power to change lives when its truths are grasped by a faith-filled mind. Paul pointed to this quality of faith in one of his letters to Corinth.

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgements about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment. “For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (I Corinthians 2:12-16)

I recently witnessed the miraculous conversion of a mind through faith. A woman in her eighties was baptized in our church. All her life she had longed to worship with a congregation, but neither her family of origin nor her late husband shared that desire. She allowed herself to be influenced by them, and stayed unattached to a community of faith.

However, in her own quiet times she read the Bible, her heart and soul hungry for words of life. Intellectually, she understood the stories, but on another level they never connected. They never poured into her the life-giving power of the Good News.

Then, at her advanced age, she confessed her faith in Jesus Christ publicly, sealing that promise through the sacrament of baptism. We embraced her with tears and open arms. Her obvious joy in the Lord gave testimony to the fact that it is never too late to begin walking with God.

In the first few days after that service, she reread the Gospel of Matthew and this time the grace-filled words of Jesus emblazoned themselves on her mind. She said it was as

if the words were leaping out at her, full of life, making sense in ways they never had before!

Just think of this miracle that happens to you when you receive the gift of faith. You are given the Holy Spirit as a new way of understanding the world. The Spirit begins a work of regeneration within you that eventually gives you the mind of Christ. This is a powerful statement of communion with our Lord. It actually says that once we become a part of His Body, we can look out upon this world of ours through His eyes!

I recently saw another dramatic example of this in the life of my teenaged son, Pieter. Throughout his childhood, I raised him to know the Biblical story. I took it for granted that he had a solid relationship with the Lord.

Then he hit his teens. What happens to so many youth also happened to him. In his own quiet way, he began to question his spiritual foundations. He was struggling to determine whether this faith of his was inherited or authentically his own. He pulled back from involvement at church, and rather than fight him, I did two things: one, I remained in constant prayer for him; two, I kept our lines of communication open in a non-judgmental way.

As an answer to prayer, God sent one of Pieter's friends to invite him to the youth group of another church. Pieter instantly found a home there. The magnetic personality of their youth director captivated him. He heard the Word of God communicated in a new way, and he experienced the fellowship of like-minded peers.

Pieter recommitted his life to Christ—a decision that authentically gave witness to his personal faith. Once that faith was reconfirmed, his mind began to be renewed through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. I vividly remember him telling me: “Dad, I’m starting to see everything in a different way—TV, movies, the behavior of other kids at school. I am always wondering what God would think of the things I see.” He also began to discuss single verses from the Bible with me, commenting on how deeply meaningful they had become.

The mind of Christ was being established, through faith, in my son!

Only when faith generates new life in each of us, will we begin to see the living power of scripture. We now have, as Paul says, a spiritual mind that can understand God’s eternal teachings. And another amazing thing happens. As we

surrender more and more of our daily lives to God's presence, we see that scripture has ever-new depths of power and meaning. It's applications, like the limitless love of God, continue to unfold—meeting new challenges with new understanding.

I have seen this demonstrated vividly in Bible studies. When examining a particular piece of scripture, I always leave ample time for participants to see what God wants to say to them through it. I come prepared with a lesson, but I also come prepared for surprise. I have found that even with familiar passages, the Spirit may leap out at people and give them startling new insights. These insights, rather than my preparation, may become the starting point for our discussion. Such revelations are often accompanied by exclamations of, "I never saw it this way before!"

Even single verses apply differently to our lives as circumstances change. The truth of a particular passage may only be unlocked once we have experienced something to which God wants to apply it. At that moment, the mind of Christ—activated by the Spirit within us—gives us the life-changing insight that we need.

It should now be clear why scripture is so important in combating the lies that take residence in our mind. It should also be clear that this will never happen until we spend time with the Biblical text and commit key portions of it to memory. Unfortunately, I know many Christians who rarely crack open their Bibles. They leave it to their pastors on Sunday morning. I even attended a church recently where people did not have their Bibles with them. Worse, there were no Bibles in the pews. The pastor read a brief passage then went on to preach a sermon that was only topically related to that text. He said some fine things, but he never helped his congregation dig into the actual words of scripture. I left feeling hungry. The living Word of God is like food that satisfies us deeply. When we don't serve it up in our churches, it will be hard for our members to grow in their faith.

In this chapter, I will point out scripture verses to help us combat particular worries in our lives. However, for this to work, each of us must be aggressive in using them. I want to stress the word *aggressive*. Practice, practice, and more practice is the key! While the other disciplines of this book have accented peaceful meditation and prayer, this one must

be thought of in terms of battle. The battle cry scripture must be turned up if it is to drown out the cacophony of lies that have taken up residence in our minds. Let me give you a simple but vivid example of how this works.

During part of my tour as an Army chaplain, I served in a Basic Training battalion. Every eight weeks, new classes of recruits arrived to fill the barracks. They came from every walk of American life—urban, suburban, and rural—representing the great racial and cultural diversity of this country. However, they all quickly had one thing in common—the stress of their Drill Sergeants driving them through the emotional and physical rigors of basic training.

In the first two weeks of every training cycle, I counseled dozens of young people who were convinced they wouldn't survive the stress. They were physically worn out and emotionally drained. Yet it was not the demanding training schedule that was defeating them. It was the fact that they had allowed a lie to roam freely in their minds. That lie said, "*you can't accomplish your goal! This training is too much for you*"

I let them vent their stress and pain, but I **never** accepted their false thinking. I told them to start practicing an aggressive use of scripture every time their Drill Sergeants got in their faces and started yelling. On the exterior, I told them to salute and say “Yes, Drill Sergeant!” but on the interior I told them to repeat this simple phrase, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!” (Philippians 4:13)

I had them practice it in my office until they were stating it with confidence and conviction. This would be their battle cry, I told them. As they endured the physical training for external combat, they could use this battle cry of scripture to win an inner victory of the Spirit. I told them that with such a powerful ally on their side, there was nothing this world could use to defeat them. The louder their Drill Sergeants got, the louder they needed to repeat this scriptural battle cry as an internal response.

This simple discipline helped many trainees endure to accomplish their goal of graduating from training. When I watched them march across the parade grounds during graduation ceremony, I had the inner satisfaction of knowing they were marching with Jesus beside them.

I ask you, too, to think of scripture as a battle cry in the most literal sense. Use it to make you bold in combating the false idols and dark thinking this world throws at you. Battle your Enemy with Words of truth that will send him fleeing.

Before I recommend specific Bible verses, I want to make a disclaimer. In no way am I claiming simple answers with this method. I believe that the content and power of our secular mindset is so fortified that we will need to work quite hard to tear it down. However, I do believe that when false thinking is replaced with scriptural truth *on a regular basis*, miraculous changes begin to happen in our lives. We are freed up to be the people God intended us to be. We discover firsthand what Jesus meant when he said,

“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32)

I want to stress again that we must be bold and persistent in this effort. As Paul said to Timothy, “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.” (II Timothy 1:7)

Amen!

THE BATTLE CRY DISCIPLINE

Some of the most paralyzing worries in our lives stem from fear of failure. We can drive ourselves mad with unanswered “what ifs?” about plans for our careers, finances, or relationships. Some of us answer these “what ifs?” with disaster scenarios. We imagine irrational, hellish outcomes to our plans, and the toxic effect of these visions sinks into our present lives until we are living **now** in a hell on earth.

This fear could also be called fear of the future, the eternity of tomorrow looming fearfully before us because we have failed to place it in God’s hands. We cling to it as if all our anxiety will somehow make a difference. What makes us think we are so powerful? We would do well to listen to the instructive browbeating God gave to Job. “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know...Have you given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place...? Have the gates of death been shown to you?

Have you seen the gates of deep shadows?” (Job 38:4-5, 12, 17)

Tell us, O God! Speak the truth until we see our worries as pride lifted up against your sovereignty!

With such self-centered lies at the center of our lives, we need strong, insistent, repetitive declarations of God’s truth to reproof and correct our minds. God spoke to Job for four chapters. So let’s identify some strong passages of scripture to help us in our battles.

Romans 8:35 and 37-39 (Memorize all of it!)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or
or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us, for I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I believe this is the most powerful statement of Christ’s love offered to us through the Bible. Its majesty attests to the divine inspiration of scripture!

Commit this passage to memory, using whatever version of the Bible you prefer. Once it is emblazoned in your mind and has raised a fortress for the Lord in your thinking, begin to personalize it. Do this by replacing some of its words with particular worries or situations of your own. Paul meant to span all things in his writing, assuring us of Jesus' unfailing hold on our lives. So let the breadth and depths of these words encompass your personal worries.

For instance, you might repeat the passage like this.

*Who will separate me from the love of Christ?
Will financial worries, or stress at work, or family
problems? No, in all these things I am more
than a conqueror through him who loves me. And
I am convinced that nothing that happened yesterday,
nor anything that will happen tomorrow, will be able
to separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus
my Lord.*

You can get more specific as you go along.

*Who will separate me from the love of Christ?
Will my latest VISA bill, or my deadline for that
report at work, or my son's problems at school...*

You get my point. Be creative and specific. Fill in the blanks daily with the worries or stresses that have dared to chip away your joy. The purpose of this is to remind us that the greatest victory of all time is ours—the joy and saving grace of Jesus poured into our lives! Let the sufficiency of His love overrule all other worries and concerns, for no matter their size and power, they pale in the light of what He has done for us!

Here are some other powerful verses to use when you are worried and fearful about your future.

Romans 8:28 – And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Luke 12:32 – Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.

Psalm 46:1-3 – God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way, and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.

Isaiah 43:1b-2 – Fear not, for I have redeemed you: I have summoned you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass

through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through fire you will not be burned; and the flame will not set you ablaze.

Psalm 27:1, 3, 5 –The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock.

John 14:27 –Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.

Psalm 91:9-13 – If you make the Most High your dwelling, even the Lord, who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

Isaiah 54:17 – No weapon forged against you will prevail.

Isaiah 41:13 – For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear, I will help you.

Psalm 23:4 – Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.

POWERFUL BATTLE CRIES FOR HELP IN LETTING GO OF OTHER ISSUES

When you have asked for forgiveness, but the guilt lingers.

I John 1:9 – If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Psalm 103:12 – As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

II Chronicles 30:9b – For the Lord your God is gracious and compassionate. He will not turn his face from you if you return to him.

Isaiah 43:25 – I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.

II Corinthians 5:17 – Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Romans 8:1-2 – Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

When you're feeling down and long for the joy of the Lord.

Isaiah 55:12 – You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

Habakkuk 3:17-18 – Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines...yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will be joyful in God my Savior.

Psalm 30:4-5 – Sing to the Lord, you saints of his; praise his holy name. For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

Nehemiah 8:10b – Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

Psalm 16:11 – You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

Psalm 51:8, 12 – Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.

John 16:20b – You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.

I Peter 1:8-9 – Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Romans 14:17 – For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

When you are worried about your physical health.

Jeremiah 17:14 – Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved; for you are the one I praise.

Jeremiah 30:17 – But I will restore you to health and heal your wounds, declares the Lord.

Isaiah 53:5 – But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Psalm 103:1-5 – Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

When you are impatient about the slow unfolding of your plans.

Romans 5:2-5 – And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Hebrews 6:10-12 – God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherited what has been promised.

CONCLUSION: One Day in the Kingdom

Listen to these life-giving words from Psalm 84.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even
the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest
for herself, where she may have her young—a place
near your altar, O Lord Almighty, my King and my
God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they
are ever praising you.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have
set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through
the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go
from strength to strength, till each appears before God
in Zion. Hear my prayer, O Lord God Almighty; listen
to me, O god of Jacob. Look upon our shield, O God;
look with favor upon your anointed one.

Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked. For the Lord God is
a sun and shield; no good thing does he withhold from
those whose walk is blameless.

O Lord Almighty, blessed is that person who trusts in you.

Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere! Only a man who thrilled to God's Presence could have written those words. They came from the lips of one who understood that eternity begins now, and that the glory of our Lord—*the Kingdom of Heaven*—is the greatest treasure a human being can possess.

Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere! You can call it poetic overstatement, but the Psalmist was saying this: “You can have all that I am, O God—**even the span of my life**—just allow me to stand in the brilliant illumination of your love!”

As you have read this book, I hope that your soul has developed a deeper yearning for God's Presence. I pray that in your times alone with Him, you have passed through His gates into a new knowledge of the joy and freedom that is your birthright as a born-again child of the living God!

You have read of (and hopefully *participated in*) five disciplines to help you enter the Kingdom. Now think of this: these disciplines, as they are practiced persistently, will become an organic part of every waking moment. I believe this

is what Paul meant when he said, “pray without ceasing.” (I Thessalonians 5:17)

It is this moment-to-moment contact with God, this daily reality of holy living, that Thomas Kelly entered into the final years of his short life. He put this state of being into beautiful, timeless words. “One can live in a well-nigh continuous state of unworded prayer, directed toward God, directed toward people and enterprises we have on our heart. There is not hurry about it all; it is a life unspeakable and full of glory, an inner world of splendor within which we, unworthy, may live. Some of you know it and live in it; others of you may wistfully long for it; it can be yours.”¹

Do you hear that? The Kingdom can be yours. Practice the Presence of God until the Kingdom surrounds you with its glory. Do not be discouraged for long, but press on, for the prize you seek is worth more than all the pale substitutes this world can offer.

NOTES

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