

# Foundations of Spiritual Formation

A Community Approach to  
Becoming Like Christ

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## CHAPTER 5

### THE SOUL AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Klaus Issler

The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.

—Luke 6:45

Recently, I was in a line of cars stopped at an intersection waiting for a red light when the railroad-crossing signal sounded off. The long mechanical arm lowered across the road to prevent my way forward. I happened to look in my rearview mirror and noticed a man in the car directly behind me. He was engaged in an animated conversation with someone, but I didn't see anyone else in the car. Then I realized he wasn't happy about waiting for the train to pass. Perhaps he was late for a business appointment. Maybe his wife was in labor at the nearby hospital. In the mirror, I was watching this man fully bursting with rage, yelling obscenities nonstop at the top of his lungs, while the train passed. He went from Silent Sam alone in his car to Raging Roger in ten seconds flat. But I chuckled—not at him but at myself. Before my own self-acknowledgment of sin in this same area, I would have been overwhelmed by feelings of contempt for this performance behind me. Although I'm far from being out of the woods on this, I'm still finding more peace inside. I'm becoming more aware of the dark side of my heart and of God's grace, which is healing more and more of my self-righteousness. So my chuckle was one of identification rather than judgment.

When life is moving along well, it seems it's much easier to be loving and joyful and peaceful. But when we hit the speed bumps of life, we often give evidence to a much different side of our character. Jesus tells us, "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. *For out of*

*the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks*" (Luke 6:45, emphasis mine). For the man in the car behind me, I observed a heart or inner life that had formed a readiness to erupt in an overt, angry tirade given certain circumstances. I get a bit short with my wife when I'm into my "on-task" mode at home or when I'm behind on a project that has come due and I'm trying to do some last-minute touch-up on that project before leaving for work. Can you remember a time recently when you were a bit short with family or roommates? Or perhaps someone was a bit short with you and you responded in kind. Or, if the stress was increased, consider your "worst" nightmare, twenty-four-hour period, when everything seems to go badly. How do you or I handle that? How do we respond to those around us? The question of this chapter confronts us: "Is it possible that a heart can be so formed that we infrequently or rarely bear such bad fruit, despite the circumstances?"

### Jesus Shows Us the Way

The last twenty-four hours of Jesus' life, before his tortuous death on the cross, was an extensive trial and test of the formation and rootedness of his heart. Imagine the wide range of thoughts and emotions that Jesus experienced, including the excruciating physical abuse. What is remarkable is that Jesus endured these extreme trials without ever sinning (Heb. 2:14; 4:15)! And I don't think we should explain away this triumph by saying that Jesus' perfectly formed heart was the result of Jesus' tapping into his own divine powers. That would cheapen the victory and Jesus' example for us.<sup>1</sup> Let us, then, ponder some of the difficult events of his last twenty-four hours.

In the upper room, thirteen men had gathered for the Passover Feast, all with dirty feet. Since no one had volunteered to do this menial task, reserved for the lowliest of slaves, Jesus humbled himself and slowly washed each foot (John 13:4–17). Later (or before) another dispute arose among the disciples as to who was the greatest among them (Luke 22:24–27; cf. Luke 9:46–48 for a previous dispute), an event that may have prompted Jesus' example of humility. He concluded his comments to them on humility with the words, "But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27). When the thought of his betrayal crossed his mind, Jesus became troubled in spirit and announced, "I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me" (John 13:21). A few minutes later Jesus sent Judas off to betray him, saying, "What you are about to do, do quickly" (John 13:27).

Jesus also warned the disciples, telling them, "Satan has asked to sift you [all] as wheat" (Luke 22:31). Then, addressing Peter, Jesus said, "But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32). But Peter

1. For further study of the example of Jesus' life, see my chapter, "Jesus' Example: Prototype of the Dependent, Spirit-Filled Life," in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Introductory Christology*, ed. Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 189–225.

wasn't comforted by Jesus' prayer for him; rather Peter defended his loyalty to Jesus, declaring he would go with Jesus even "to death" (Luke 22:33). Jesus then confronted Peter's pride, explaining that Peter would actually deny him three times! Later, following their last meal together and Jesus' teaching in the upper room, Jesus and the band of disciples (now without Judas) walked to the Gethsemane garden to pray, as was their custom. Perhaps it was here when Jesus' high priestly prayer was offered to the Father (recorded in John 17; John has no record of the struggling prayer in the garden).

In the garden, Jesus confided to his closest friends—Peter, James, and John—how horribly he felt, and he invited them to pray for him.

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." (Matt. 26:36–38)

After Jesus' struggle had been resolved with the Father, the betrayer and a multitude carrying swords and clubs arrived. The brief moment of Jesus' arrest displays a diverse array of personal challenges. Consider how Jesus responded to each. First, Jesus is betrayed by one of his own disciples, with the sign of a kiss. "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:48), Jesus asked. In frustration he commanded Peter to put his sword away after Peter had lopped off Malchus's ear: "Put your sword back in its place . . . for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matt. 26:52). "No more of this!" (Luke 22:51). After Jesus was seized and arrested, all the disciples abandoned him—including the three who were closest to him who couldn't keep watch for an hour (Matt. 26:56). Yet, in the midst of this sordid affair, Jesus' heart went out to Malchus, one of his "enemies." "And [Jesus] touched the man's ear and healed him" (Luke 22:51).

What was the key to Jesus' sense of security and passive reception to the arrest? At that moment, the attention of all the powers and principalities in the heavenlies was centered on the activities in the garden. And yet, despite the great temptations of distraction to sin, Jesus remained centered, centered in God's will and God's love, completely dependent on the Father. To Peter, Jesus affirmed, "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?" (Matt. 26:53–54). "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (John 18:11).<sup>2</sup>

2. Perhaps, in confronting the multitude, Jesus also experienced some anger at Satan for bringing this evil into the world: "But this is your hour—when darkness reigns" (Luke

But the “nightmare” did not end there; this was just the beginning. Jesus endured “mock trials” before Annas, father-in-law of Caiaphas the high priest (John 18:13–24), before Caiaphas (Mark 14:53–65), before the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:1), twice before Pilate (John 18:28–19:16), and before Herod (Luke 23:6–12). In the midst of false accusations, severe beatings in the face and head, being spit upon, and being scourged by professional soldiers—portrayed so abusively in the movie *The Passion of the Christ*—Jesus’ capacity to remain silent (Mark 14:61; Luke 23:9; Matt. 27:14) and not respond in kind “amazed” even Pilate (Mark 15:5). Furthermore, the hatred of his own nation and its religious leadership was so spiteful that they preferred that Pilate release a murderer rather than extend any grace to Jesus (Matt. 27:20–21)!

Finally, having endured so well all the abuse to this point, including lack of sleep and food, Jesus was nailed to the cross, one of the cruelest forms of torture known to humanity. And his first recorded words were, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34)! Later, Jesus extended grace to the thief crucified next to him (Luke 23:42–43) and also gave his mother into the care of his disciple John (John 19:26–27).<sup>3</sup> The gospel writers record as the judgment for the sins of the world was being paid, Jesus cried out in anguish and desolation, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34; cf. Ps. 22:1). Soon after came Jesus’ cry of triumph, “It is finished” (John 19:30), followed by his words, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46; cf. Ps. 31:5) and his passing from death to life. Can we fathom such quality of a formed heart that endures such abuse, offers such grace, and bears the sins of the world, all while steadfastly remaining secure in the Father? As Dallas Willard notes, “A carefully cultivated heart will, assisted by the grace of God, foresee, forestall, or transform most of the painful situations before which others stand like helpless children saying ‘Why?’”<sup>4</sup> And it is this kind of heart that God wishes to form in us, “to be conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Rom. 8:29; cf. Eph. 4:24).

### Giving Sufficient Emphasis to Cultivating Our Heart

#### *External Versus Internal Righteousness*

In his parable contrasting the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14), Jesus reminds us we can’t rely only on external righteousness and obedience. The external life for this Pharisee (not an adulterer, one who fasted, and tithed)—good actions by themselves—sadly stemmed

22:53), he said. He knew that Satan had entered into Judas (Luke 22:3; John 13:2) and had requested to sift like wheat the remaining disciples (Luke 22:31).

3. It’s likely that John was a cousin of Jesus; that Mary, Jesus’ mother, was John’s aunt. See Michael Wilkins, *Following the Master: Discipleship in the Steps of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 156.

4. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 14.

from an arrogant heart. The tax collector humbly beat his chest, recognized his sin, and begged for God’s mercy. Jesus concluded, “I tell you that this man [tax collector], rather than the other [Pharisee], went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14). This parable highlights the need to bring not only our external life into harmony with God’s kingdom but our internal life as well. “Good” external actions apart from a humble heart mean nothing to God.

In his teachings, Jesus often makes a distinction between outer actions and the internal movements of the heart.

Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. . . . For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. (Matt. 12:33–35; cf. Matt. 6:21; 15:18–20; Mark 7:20–23)

These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. (Matt. 15:8)

You [Pharisees] are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight. (Luke 16:15; cf. 1 Sam. 16:7)

Furthermore Jesus teaches that we must forgive from within our inner life (“from [the] heart,” Matt. 18:35) and that doubt within (“in [the] heart,” Mark 11:23) is a barrier to our prayer life.<sup>5</sup>

After years of ministry as a pastor and now seminary professor, I was clueless about the deep layer of self-righteousness that permeated my own soul, a subtle pride that limited God’s work in me and through me. At age forty-six I took time away from the routines and usual demands of life for a three-week “guided” spiritual retreat. God performed open-heart surgery, uncovering dark broodings of pride. Every day on the retreat, I visited with a spiritual mentor for an hour. The rest of the time was spent alone wasting time with God: praying, reading Scripture, singing, and journaling.

During the third week, prompted to read Romans, I knelt at my bed and read chapter 1. When I read verses 30 and 31 the words jumped out at me: “arrogant,” “boastful,” “unloving,” “unmerciful.” They became living and active words of conviction. For two hours, I sobbed in God’s presence

5. For additional passages that emphasize the importance of the inner life over external deeds, see 1 Corinthians 13:1–3 and Revelation 2:1–5. An extreme case is mentioned by Jesus of those who do great works but have no personal relationship with him and will not enter Jesus’ kingdom (see Matt. 7:21–23).

as I slowly reread God's Word. Tenderly yet forcefully the God who is holy pierced my pride. He exposed me at a deep experiential level regarding my desperate need for his mercy and continuing work in my life. Even today this profound, divine encounter continues to mark me as I am in the ongoing process of becoming more transparent, more merciful, and more loving. What I've been learning is that we can't just focus on *external* obedience—an exclusive focus that my outward actions are in line with biblical directives.

Consider Psalm 19:14: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer." Gerald Wilson explains, "The final plea is the psalmist's attempt to achieve alignment with God's will through inner ('meditations of my heart') and outer ('words of my mouth') integrity. The psalmist is submitting all to the will and purpose of Yahweh."<sup>6</sup> Or, as Henry Cloud and John Townsend frame it:

Not only does obedience deal with all of life, but it also encompasses all of us, both *inside* and *out*. Obedience is far more profound than simply refraining from external sins such as lying, stealing, and committing adultery, though it certainly includes those. Obedience has also to do with submitting our values, emotions, and hearts to Christ's lordship. . . . This external and internal nature of obedience helps us to grow up spiritually. It helps us integrate various parts of our character that are either in conflict with or alienated from one another.<sup>7</sup>

Spiritual formation involves attention to *both* inside ("heart work") and outside ("mouth work"). The emphasis in this chapter centers on matters of the heart—of our inner life.

Our inner life encompasses various aspects, including those of which we are conscious, such as our thoughts, our self-talk, our conversations with God, our desires, and our aspirations. Yet our internal world also includes matters of which we are often unaware, such as nervous habits (e.g., clicking a ballpoint pen off and on) and more serious compulsions and addictions that often manifest themselves in outward actions as "blind spots"—what is obvious to others but not at all on our radar screen (e.g., usually turning in projects late because they have to be done just right to the nth degree [perfectionism], biting one's fingernails, always having to be doing something and feeling guilty when you relax [workaholic]). Furthermore, in some cases, we are aware of emotional states that can range from great joy and a

6. Gerald Wilson, *Psalms, Vol. 1, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 372, emphasis mine.

7. Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *How People Grow: What the Bible Reveals About Personal Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 284, emphasis mine.

settled peace to painful grief and woundedness. At other times, we are unaware of the emotional texture of our life (e.g., "I am not angry!" said with a bit of defiance, or erupting in defensive indignation when someone raises an innocent question about your goals).

#### *Is Our Inner Life Really That Important?*

But we might wonder, how is growing deeper in our relationship with God and our spiritual formation tied up with being more aware of our inner life? Why bother? We should "bother" because honesty before God is highly valued by God, as indicated in David's psalm of confession: "Surely you desire truth in *the inner parts*; you teach me wisdom in *the inmost place*" (Ps. 51:6, emphasis mine). Gerald Wilson explains that "the instruction to assume an attitude of intimate vulnerability with God uses two unusual terms to get the idea across."<sup>8</sup> The first term "inner parts" (Heb. *tuhôt*) is rarely used and occurs in only one other place, Job 38:36 (NASB and NIV translate it as "mind"). The other term, translated "inmost place" (Heb. *satûm*), appears more often, yet typically in a different context, that of "'plugging up' available water sources (wells, springs, channels) to prevent their use by another party" (e.g., Gen. 26:15, 18; 2 Kings 3:19, 25; 2 Chron. 32:3–4, 30). Another use occurs in Ezekiel 28:3 and Daniel 8:26, that of "hiding away." Wilson draws the connection to Psalm 51:6: "God seeks open access to those parts of our lives that we chose to keep deeply hidden within our inner world."<sup>9</sup> To ignore God's invitation to be open to his searching gaze would indicate a willful resistance to his loving embrace in the deep parts of our life.

According to Jesus, we are often clueless about our own foibles, blind spots, and vices. Our focus is on identifying the speck of sawdust in another's eye, but we cannot see the huge plank jutting out of our own (Matt. 7:3–5)! So it will take some effort to turn our attention toward our own limitations, weaknesses, and sins—it's not natural. And we can invite God into this inner search. David the psalmist challenges us, "Examine me, God, and know my mind; probe me and know my anxieties [*šerāpîm*]. See if you can find in me the way of idolatry and guide me in the age-old way" (Ps. 139:23).<sup>10</sup> We may want to hide within, but if we wish to continue walking with God, particularly as we immerse ourselves in God's Word, God promises his divine promptings within, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:12–13).

8. Wilson, *Psalms*, 778.

9. *Ibid.*, 779.

10. Translation by Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150, Word Biblical Commentary* 21 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 318.

*Knowing God and Knowing Oneself*

Thus, knowing God more deeply cannot be accomplished without simultaneously being willing to *know oneself*—what is often referred to as the “double knowledge”: knowledge of God and knowledge of self.<sup>11</sup> John Calvin (d. 1564) opened his magisterial *Institutes of the Christian Religion* within this guiding framework: “Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God. . . . Without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self.”<sup>12</sup> The concept is evident in other writers, as well. Augustine (d. 430) wrote, “God, always the same, let me know myself, let me know Thee, I have prayed.”<sup>13</sup> And Blaise Pascal (d. 1662) said, “Knowing God without knowing our wretchedness leads to pride. Knowing our wretchedness without knowing God leads to despair.”<sup>14</sup> Hiding and personal detachment will only prevent deeper engagement with God.

**The Formation of the Heart in Our Emotional Life**

When we’re in a boat on a windy day, it’s fairly easy to feel the rocking and rolling movement of the boat as the waves lift us up and down. For some, this rolling action sets off physical sensors, and motion sickness takes over. Yet how adept are we at noticing the various movements and turbulence within our heart? One entry point for the formation of our heart that we need to give attention to is our emotional life.

Throughout the Old Testament the term “heart” (Heb. *lēb*) represents the self, including thoughts, feelings, and the will (e.g. Ps. 22:26; 1 Kings 3:12; Exod. 36:2); the word can even be interchangeable with “soul” (Heb. *nepesh*, e.g., Josh. 22:5, 1 Sam. 2:35).<sup>15</sup> Normally the New Testament follows this usage for “heart” (Gk. *kardia*, e.g., Luke 21:34, Acts 14:17, 2 Cor. 5:12) and is also occasionally used in parallel with “mind” (Gk. *nous*, e.g., 2 Cor. 3:14–15).<sup>16</sup>

Yet on a few occasions the Greek term *kardia* (“heart”) refers specifically to our emotional life (e.g., Phil. 4:7, more detail below). For example, in the upper room Jesus acknowledged the grief in the disciples’ hearts (John 16:6, 22a), but he desired that they not be troubled in heart (John 14:1, 27). Jesus

predicted that when he would see them after his resurrection their hearts would be filled with joy (John 16:22b). This particular usage of “heart” is similar to how we often use this word in conversation today. For example, someone might respond to a good Bible study by saying, “The truth not only reached my ‘head’ (my intellect), but it also touched my ‘heart’ (connected at a deep affective level).”

God used Philippians 4:6–7 to open the gate for me to finally welcome feelings as an important part of my life before him. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Gerald Hawthorne explains that “this expression, ‘the peace of God,’ is found nowhere else in the New Testament. . . . Paul seems here to be referring to the tranquility of God’s own eternal being, the peace of God which God himself has, the calm serenity that characterizes his very nature . . . which grateful, trusting Christians are welcome to share.”<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, Hawthorne clarifies that although the term *kardia* (“heart”) in characteristic Hebrew fashion usually designates the whole person, a narrower focus is intended in this passage. “But here, where Paul places *kardia* [heart] alongside *noema* [mind] grammatically in such a way as to distinguish the one from the other . . . *kardia* [heart] very likely has its meaning narrowed simply to that of designating the seat of one’s emotions or deepest feelings, or simply to the emotions and feelings themselves. . . . Together these words refer to the entire inner being of the Christian, his emotions, affections, thoughts and moral choices.”<sup>18</sup>

I may be stating the obvious, but the promise of Philippians 4:7 is based on my ability to recognize when I’m anxious or worried—an emotional feeling (Phil. 4:6). If I’m not aware that I’m anxious, I won’t be prompted to share my concerns with God and then receive his deep peace—another emotional feeling.

**Do We Tend to Downplay the Importance of Emotions?**

Only later in life have I come to appreciate the important role of my emotions. A “train diagram” I learned many years ago communicates a helpful albeit incomplete truth. In a campus ministry I was involved with, we used this particular analogy to emphasize the importance of believing in the factual truth of what the Bible taught, yet we unknowingly *deemphasized* the value of our feelings. The train diagram connected three key concepts together: fact, faith, and feeling. The train’s engine represented “fact”; the coal car represented “faith”; and the caboose represented “feeling.” The main point of the illustration was that

17. Gerald Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 43:184.

18. *Ibid.*, 185.

11. James Houston outlined the development of the “double knowledge” in a lecture at Biola University: “The Recovery of the Double Knowledge: Self-Knowledge in the Light of the Knowledge of God” (Institute for Spiritual Formation Lecture, Biola University, October 11, 1999).

12. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:35, 37. In the footnote section, the editor cites others who use the notion of the double knowledge (see 36–37).

13. Augustine, “Soliloquies,” II, i, 1, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, first series (1888; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 7:547.

14. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees and Other Writings*, trans. H. Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), fragment 225, p. 64.

15. T. Sorg, “Heart,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 2:181.

16. *Ibid.*, 182.

the train could run with or without “feeling,” but “facts” and “faith” were essential—our faith in the biblical facts is the ground of identity as believers, regardless of how we feel about our relationship with God at any particular time.

The underlying motivation of the analogy is commendable: to encourage those whose conversion experience and Christian life did not come with or evidence any particularly strong emotional responses. If you didn’t feel any different *after* responding to Jesus’ call for his saving grace or during your subsequent walk with Jesus than you did *before* you became a Christian, then that was acceptable. Yet the unintended effect of this teaching was to present a nonemotional model for conversion and Christian living that actually became the *norm* for how to live the Christian life! Too much emotion was considered suspect, so “it’s better to tone down that side of our life” we were told since “it really isn’t that important anyway.” For most of my Christian life I downplayed the legitimate role of emotions, but not anymore.

Henry Cloud and John Townsend share the story of a man who was a member of a small group. He desired greater intimacy with God, and his group encouraged him in this direction, but he wasn’t yet free to talk at a “heart” level. He could communicate only from his “head”: he talked about his thoughts and opinions rather than his feelings, or he would just change the subject to something more comfortable to talk about.

Then one night he confessed how lonely he was, but at the same time how afraid he was of having others know him inside. The group grew closer to him, as they could feel his heart, and they had a great empathy for him. A marvelous thing happened. He began to sense the presence of both God and others within. He was no longer blocking people out. His confession began the process of repair.<sup>19</sup>

Just as this man did, I’m growing more in my emotional life as I’ve begun to trust others to guide me into a deeper and richer emotional life.

The remaining part of this chapter focuses mainly on this aspect of the heart, the inner world of our emotional life, and offers some suggested means for nurturing this kind of heart formation to encourage inner obedience and growth in Christlikeness.

### Our Emotional Life Is an Essential Feature of Being Human

By God’s design, we are all *emotional* beings. The sooner we can acknowledge this basic fact of life, the sooner we can make significant headway toward growing a tender heart that can listen to God and others. In his humanity, our Lord Jesus Christ displayed a wide array of emotions: he openly wept (John

11:35), he felt deep compassion for people (Mark 6:34), and he even displayed righteous anger (Mark 3:5). Some aspects of his emotional life were surveyed previously in his amazing demeanor during the final hours before death.

As mentioned earlier, during an extended time of retreat God abruptly made me aware of the deep stirrings and churnings of my soul that were hidden to me. He brought a deep-felt conviction to my heart of arrogance, self-righteousness, and pride. I pondered how this could be. For many years I’ve studied a lot about God, having been a pastor and now a seminary professor. Shouldn’t I know any better? But I was clueless nonetheless. How did God do this? How did he begin tenderizing this proud and stubborn heart so that even my wife, Beth, felt more secure that I wouldn’t just look out for my own interests, reacting to her and defending myself? It doesn’t happen overnight. Over the years God has been slowly transforming a stoic, stubborn, workaholic into someone whose heart is now much more receptive to God, more open to hearing truth about myself, and more ready to weep with those who weep.

This growth process can be especially difficult for us males in Western culture. It’s acceptable for men to engage themselves with full emotional energy at the baseball park or in front of the television watching the football game or even while singing with gusto at church. But otherwise men are expected to contain themselves, to be strong and silent. Weeping is considered wimpy. Not only men but also women in our culture may need to learn about experiencing a more healthy and robust emotional life for mature Christian living.

I’ve asked Beth to pen the following paragraph to offer an idea of what happened in our marriage that began the process by which God stirred both our hearts, independently of each other, to move closer to him and each other.

After twenty-two years of marriage we needed some help. Over the years, I (Beth) had closed my heart to Klaus and begun to protect myself. Oh, we looked all right on the outside, dutifully doing all the things that committed Christian couples do together, but there was a growing defensiveness in my heart. I had tried over the years to get at the root of our issues, but for the most part I just reacted and didn’t have a clue what was going on. The Lord kept nudging me that something was wrong, but I was too busy dodging the pain to really examine root causes. That came to a halt when Klaus had a devastating eye accident and I had to supervise his life and mine for several months. I realized I was competent and could do without him and all this pain that I thought he was causing in my life. That scared me. I was committed to my marriage vows and seeing them threatened really sobered me. From that point on, it took several years for both of us to realize we had contributed to the pain and what we both needed to do to repair it.

19. Cloud and Townsend, *How People Grow*, 254–55.

### The Hidden Layer Underneath Disagreements

The state of our inner life affects our relationships. For example, a continuing difficulty in my marriage is how Beth and I resolve conflict when we disagree, or better, how we have difficulty fully resolving our conflicts. We would often generate more heat than light, and either the strongest on a particular issue would “win,” or the one who gave in first would “lose.” In the last couple of years, we have begun to make greater headway toward healthier disagreements by recognizing there are at least two important layers of any discussion and disagreement.

One layer relates to the *issue* of the disagreement. It’s the most obvious layer, and so it was the one I focused on exclusively with my “head.” Yet another layer was hidden from me but just as important. It relates to our *feelings* and *reactions*, about *how* we approached each other in a discussion, about our feelings regarding the points of our disagreement—matters of the “heart.” It’s critical to identify our feelings along with attending to the issue of the disagreement. This little insight has been saving us much emotional energy—energy we were expending uselessly during our disagreements without knowing it. It’s a continuing struggle for me to focus on the feelings of the matter, not just the issue of disagreement.<sup>20</sup>

Within every one of our relationships, our emotions always have some part to play. And this fact also applies to our relationship with God. If we desire to deepen our intimacy with God, we need to become more aware of how our emotional life affects our walk with God. How we feel can either move us closer to God or move us farther away.

Our emotions can become a window to look into the state of our soul. But if we’re basically unaware of our feelings—as I was for most of my life—then our emotional life actually becomes the hidden momentum and engine behind many of our actions. We *think* we’re in the pilot seat of our life. But in reality, our dark emotions drive us forward unaware, and we do stupid and sinful things. When looking back over these mistakes and disasters of life, we wonder, “Why couldn’t I see how dumb that was at the time?” The word *emotion* itself includes both the word and the idea of “motion”—emotions *move* us. So the more we take notice of our emotional state and move into healthier emotional places, the more we can allow God to guide and sustain us by his grace to experience more of the abundant living Jesus promised (John 10:10).

### Being Formed to Be Emotionally Healthy

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who took on humanity, showed us how to be a strong leader and yet emotionally healthy and even compassionately

20. For those of us who teach and write about God’s Word, I wonder to what extent our own limited emotional growth has conveyed a rather distorted view of God to our listeners and readers? For example, believers are no longer under God’s judgment and wrath (e.g., Rom. 8:1; Eph. 2:3–5), yet how often does the tone and texture of our own judgmentalism or anger in our teaching actually taint the biblical picture of God, who genuinely loves the people he has redeemed?

tender at the most challenging times. An encounter between Jesus and a “sinful” woman illustrates how sensitive Jesus could be regarding the emotional tone of a situation, while at the same time being aware of the condemning tones of some Pharisees (Luke 7:36–50). During a meal at the home of Simon, a Pharisee, another “guest” dropped in. Having learned that Jesus was nearby, a woman entered with an alabaster jar of perfume and stood right behind Jesus at his feet. Overwhelmed by feelings of love for Jesus, her Savior, and her sense of being forgiven by God, she began to weep, her tears falling on his feet. Perhaps a bit embarrassed, she quickly stooped to wipe them away with her hair and then kissed his feet. With the expensive oil she had brought, the woman anointed Jesus’ feet. What remarkable courage for her, in the presence of these “holy” and austere Pharisees, to demonstrate her deep love and appreciation for her Savior. Jesus discerned her deep need for affirmation of divine forgiveness, a forgiveness she had already received from God. Compassionately, Jesus soothed her soul with these gracious words of comfort: “Your sins *have been* forgiven”; “*Your faith* has saved you; go *in peace*” (vv. 48, 50 NASB, emphasis mine). In contrast to his encouragement to the woman, Jesus rebuked Simon’s lack of love for Jesus: “But whoever has been forgiven little loves little” (v. 47 TNIV).

Like Jesus, we experience a wide range of emotions, though we may not always be aware of them. Jesus’ life illustrates that facing challenging situations requires significant emotional maturity and sensitivity.<sup>21</sup> The encouraging note is that our emotional interactions with each other can be formed like Jesus.

### Learning to Talk About Our Emotions

So, once we recognize we do have feelings, another challenge many of us face is not knowing how to describe or label our various emotions in order to easily discuss our feelings. Like learning a foreign language, we need to acquire a new vocabulary that helps us describe our inner world. After discussing this problem with a psychologist friend, Bill Roth, I developed a simple five-label checklist that continues to help me become aware of how I’m feeling. I reduced the range of feelings to five broad categories, using two sets of words that sound very similar for ease of memory: “glad, sad, mad” and “dreads and dreams.” When in conversation with our spouse, roommate, or close friend, we can each talk about our day by moving through the list, first one sharing and then the other.

Many fruitful times of conversation have opened up for Beth and me

21. Two studies can be recommended for further study of Jesus’ emotional life. A popular treatment is by Dick and Jane Mohline, *Emotional Wholeness: Connecting with the Emotions of Jesus* (Shippensburg, PA: Treasure House, 1997). A more technical study is a Ph.D. dissertation by Gregory J. Mazak, “The Emotional Life of Jesus as a Guide for the Christian” (Bob Jones University, 1990).

by using the checklist. It's important to share something for *each* of the categories even if it's very brief because it's easy to get sidetracked and just talk about the joys and then move on to other matters. The benefit of this simple practice is moving through the *whole range* of categories, especially into arenas where we are "sad," "mad," and have "dreads."<sup>22</sup>

### Talking About Our Emotions

1. Was I *glad* today (i.e., joyful, pleased, happy, "up")? Share one event.
2. Was I *sad* today (i.e., sorrowful, "down," disappointed)? Share one event.
3. Was I *mad* today (i.e., frustrated, annoyed, irritated, "ticked off," angry)? Share one event.
4. What do I *dread* (i.e., makes me concerned, bothered, worried, anxious, fearful)? Share one event.
5. What are my *dreams* for the future (i.e., longings, yearnings, wishes, hopes)? Share one event.

### Welcoming Our Tears

Another arena to express our emotions involves welcoming our tears when they come. For example, Jesus wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus, before calling him back to life (John 11:35). As Jesus approached Jerusalem following his triumphal entry, his sadness for the situation was reflected in his tears over the city (Luke 19:41). On the Isle of Patmos, John wept greatly "because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside" (Rev. 5:4).

The Old Testament story of Joseph is instructive on welcoming tears of grief and joy. He had been separated from his family for twenty years when his brothers came to seek food in Egypt due to the famine. At their first meeting, he wept and had to turn away (Gen. 42:24). On their second trip the brothers dined in Joseph's house. At the sight of his younger brother Benjamin, Joseph had to leave to find a private room in which to weep (Gen. 43:30–31). He then washed his face and came back for the dinner. The brothers left but when the steward caught up with them, they had to return to Joseph, since a cup was

22. For a helpful resource on emotions, see Dan Allender (Christian psychologist) and Tremper Longman (Old Testament scholar), *The Cry of the Soul: How Our Emotions Reveal Our Deepest Questions About God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994).

found in Benjamin's sack. The brothers pleaded with Joseph to let Benjamin return home, otherwise their father would die of grief. Joseph could no longer control his emotions. He commanded all the Egyptian servants to leave, while his brothers remained in his presence. "And [Joseph] wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it" (Gen. 45:2). Finally, when his father, Jacob, arrived in Egypt, Joseph "threw his arms around his father and wept for a long time" (Gen. 46:29). Through his tears, Joseph was able to process both the inner turmoil over the many years of separation from his family and the joy of being reunited.

Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes 3:4 that there is a legitimate time for weeping. And Paul commands us to weep with those who are weeping (Rom. 12:15). A healthy emotional life can welcome tears of grief and tears of joy. When was the last time we allowed tears to come to our eyes or processed our emotions by having a good cry?<sup>23</sup>

### Discerning the Dark Side of Our Emotions

One classic framework identifies three basic emotional tendencies: an "approach" toward (participation and engagement with or toward a person, object, or event); an "avoidance" away from (moving away from, withdrawing, evading, dodging, escaping); or moving "against" (standing one's ground, defending, defeating).<sup>24</sup> Of course, each of these movements can be a very appropriate response within a given situation. Yet in certain situations, these tendencies may actually be a response energized by one or several of our sinful compulsions. Often these coping strategies were developed during our childhood to protect ourselves when adults wouldn't or couldn't, and they remain now as sinful compulsions that substitute for relying on God's power and grace.

How can we tell whether it's an appropriate, good movement or one that is sinful? These are complex phenomena and require mature discernment. For example, regarding my dogged "approach" when I'm writing a paper or a book, why do I keep working on a writing project as if I have all the time in the world, ignoring the looming deadline? Why can't I begin to wind down my efforts? Might it be my perfectionism kicking in? I want to chase one more rabbit trail on an issue that just "needs" to be included in the chapter. I want to tweak those phrases over and over again, so they sound just right, even though most would make good sense out of these sentences as they are. I can easily rationalize missing a deadline ("avoidance") with the claim that my reputation (or grade) is on the line. And, I reason, this additional section in the particular paper or book is necessary. People expect me to perfect my writing craft. But am I able to cease my "striving" and accept the good quality that is already there?

23. After Peter had denied the Lord, their eyes connected, and Peter wept bitterly (Luke 22:61–62). When was the last time we cried over a sin?

24. Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization* (New York: Norton, 1950), 19.

### Being Alert to the Spiritual Battle

Can I let it go and meet the deadline? If not, perhaps my compulsion is energizing me. Our goal is to be *drawn* by the Spirit, not *driven* by our compulsions.

Perhaps we can start noticing if there is that *added energy* that suddenly compels us into action. From down deep, something moves us from within overtaking us, an energy that seems somewhat out of line or beyond what would be appropriate in the immediate situation. I'm feverishly working on a project, and Beth calls from another part of the house asking about a task she is working on. On some occasions I get angry over that interruption. At that moment I'm not free to exude patience and grace and instead give a short answer laced with harshness or anger. I am much more energized negatively than the situation requires. Of course, in an emergency, this sudden energy can be very fitting. But at other times, it may indicate a reaction beyond what the situation calls forth. It's an *overreaction*.

Peter's prideful defense of his faithfulness to Jesus prevented him from hearing Jesus' warning about Satan and the assurance that Jesus had already prayed for Peter (Luke 22:31–32). "But [Peter] replied, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death'" (Luke 22:33). Later, while Peter was warming himself around the fire, he was accused of being a companion of Jesus. Peter's fears overwhelmed him, just as the waves had distracted his trust in Jesus while walking on the water (Matt. 14:28–31). His bravado evaporated, and he resorted to old sinful coping strategies of reliance on self. In moments of crises, our sinful compulsions become very obvious. Yet we need not go back to our old ways. Jesus' example of inner strength as he rested in the Father during his own trials can encourage us to do the same.

Compare Peter's overreaction with King David's response to curses aimed at him, as he and his retinue left Jerusalem during his son Absalom's rebellion. As David approached the town of Bahurim, Shimei, one of King Saul's clan, came out to curse the fleeing king and to pelt David and his officers with stones. He cried out, "Get out, get out, you murderer, you scoundrel! The LORD has repaid you for all the blood you shed in the household of Saul, in whose place you have reigned. The LORD has given the kingdom into the hands of your son Absalom. You have come to ruin because you are a murderer!" (2 Sam. 16:7–8 TNIV). Abishai, one of the officers, asked the king if he should execute the man for treason.

But David, even during this difficult crisis, while fleeing from his palace to save his life, had a heart of mercy and one open to what God might be doing: "David then said to Abishai and all his officials, 'My son [Absalom], who is of my own flesh, is trying to take my life. How much more, then, this Benjamite! Leave him alone; let him curse, for the LORD has told him to. It may be that the LORD will look upon my misery and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse today'" (2 Sam. 16:11–12 TNIV). David exemplifies a heart resting in God's love and protection.

Yet there is more. This reactionary energy and our compulsions and coping strategies are not the only factors that keep us from taking on the inner life of Jesus. As believers, we also must acknowledge the active participation of the Devil and demons. For example, when Jesus announced his coming suffering and death to his disciples for the first time, Peter was not a happy camper, and he gave Jesus a piece of his mind. "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'" (Matt. 16:22). Peter's sinful negative reaction to Jesus was not energized merely by his compulsions. Peter's response was stirred by Satan himself, for "Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men'" (Matt. 16:23). After Pentecost, when Peter was indwelt by the Spirit, he became much more sensitive to Satan's movements. As recorded in Acts 5, Peter challenged Ananias, "How is it that *Satan has so filled your heart* that you have lied to the Holy Spirit?" (Acts 5:3, emphasis mine).

We must become more aware of possible demonic involvement in our own actions. James warns, "But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, *of the devil*. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every *evil practice*" (James 3:14–16, emphasis mine). Although Christians cannot be demon-possessed, we can be strongly influenced by Satan (e.g., 1 Peter 5:8).

In fact, Scripture tells us our patterns of sinful anger can become an open gate for regular demonic harassment. Paul tells us, "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a *foothold*" (Eph. 4:26–27, emphasis mine). New Testament professor Clint Arnold explains, "The most natural way to interpret the use of *topos* (foothold) in Ephesians 4:27 is the idea of inhabitable space. Paul is thus calling these believers to vigilance and moral purity so that they do not relinquish a base of operation to demonic spirits. . . . When [Paul] cautions them about surrendering space to the devil, he is warning them against allowing the devil (or a demonic spirit) to exert a domineering influence in an area of their lives. For a Christian to nurture anger, for example, may grant a demonic spirit inhabitable space."<sup>25</sup>

Although Christians cannot be demon-possessed (be completely in Satan's control), we can give Satan a "foothold"—a place in our lives from which he can influence us toward continuing or greater evil. When believers persist in patterns of sinfulness—whether or not we are aware of the specific area that does not reflect God's glory in our inner life—we actually may invite an opportunity for increased demonic influence in our lives!

25. Clint Arnold, *Three Crucial Questions About Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 88–89.

As James reminds us, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (4:6). If in our pride we remain imprisoned in our compulsions, God will oppose us. But if we humble ourselves before God, his grace will empower us to grow a more humble heart, ready to listen to God and to how God may be speaking to us through difficult encounters like the one King David faced.<sup>26</sup> This transformation will not take place overnight. But with persistent effort given to specific spiritual practices to open ourselves to the Spirit’s transforming work, God will slowly release us from our compulsions and liberate us to be whole beings, in both mind and heart.

If we permit our compulsions to dominate our life, we’ll miss opportunities for good and hinder our growth toward the kind of inner reality that was formed in Jesus. Therefore we need to be vigilant and seek God’s help in addressing Satan’s various footholds in our lives by attending to our feelings and overreactions, for God wishes to tenderize our heart to manifest more and more of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Along with God’s power and grace, we need to invite trusted others to help us notice, monitor, and begin to limit and defeat these sinful reaction patterns so that we can grow more and more into the settled rootedness of Jesus’ inner life.<sup>27</sup>

### Much More Is Possible

As believers our hearts have an increased capacity for greatness and goodness, more than we can possibly imagine. Consider how Madge Rodda responded to a repulsive evil done to her. Although she was seventy years old, Madge still played the church organ. It was her way of serving God and her church. During the week she practiced the organ—sometimes into the wee hours of the night. One late night, after finishing her practice time at the church, Madge dropped by an all-night coffee shop. But when she went to the restroom, her night of terror began. A man with a stocking pulled over his face grabbed her, sexually assaulted her, stole twenty dollars, and then slit her throat from ear to ear. In responding to some of her comments, the attacker’s parting words were, “I believe in God too. But Satan has poisoned my mind.”

Madge believed that God saved her life, and God’s power also gave Madge the ability to forgive her twenty-three-year-old attacker. “There was never any time when I didn’t forgive him. Nobody else in the world

may love this man, but God loves him.” At the sentencing the attacker received seventeen years in prison for attempted rape, sexual assault, and robbery. Madge was there to offer him forgiveness and a Bible. She hoped to visit with him before he was sent to prison. “He’ll be there in the jail for about a month. I consider this a wonderful, rare opportunity. . . . I’ll tell him that it doesn’t matter what he’s done.” Prosecutor Jo Escobar admitted, “It’s extremely unusual. Most of us are more desirous of revenge. Never in my dealings with Ms. Rodda has she expressed that. I find her attitude sincere. I admire Madge very much.”<sup>28</sup> It’s a testimony of God’s powerful grace in the midst of evil. Much more is possible than we can imagine.

I have never experienced such evil as Madge, yet I have come to know the freedom of a forgiving heart in a more mundane situation—dealing with my mild road rage. I didn’t realize I have an angry side until I was reading Dallas Willard’s *Divine Conspiracy*.<sup>29</sup> Of course I was often frustrated with my computer when it wouldn’t perform, but I didn’t have contempt for it. Through Willard’s discussion of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:21–22, God convicted me of my contempt for those “turkeys” and “jerks” on the freeway who couldn’t wait their turn or endangered others by squeezing in front to get ahead. Jesus’ words hit me hard, piercing my heart: “But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Matt. 5:22 TNIV). I became aware of my problem and was willing to admit it to God—that’s the first step. And I asked him to help me develop a forgiving heart that would be gracious and not hold contempt or pour curses on these kinds of drivers.

I was surprised when God brought to my mind those powerful words of Jesus on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). As I meditated on his words, I came to realize that if we really understood the devastation brought on others by our sinful words and actions, we probably would sin less and less. Yet we are often blind to that; we justify our sinful actions against others as fitting to their “crime” against us. But Jesus showed me that another way is possible.

So as I drove to work I asked God to help me become aware of my anger and contempt and to grow a forgiving heart in me. The healing process involves revisiting the first step for *each* outburst of anger and contempt that arises in a particular situation. Initially I became aware of my anger later in the day, as God would keep prompting me until I finally listened and acknowledged my wrong. Learning to listen to God will take some time if we haven’t been receptive to hearing him.

28. Kristina Horton, “Man Gets 17 Years—and Forgiveness,” *Orange County Register*, March 6, 1993, A1, A26.

29. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

26. For further information about divine guidance and hearing God, see Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999); and chapter 6 of my book, *Wasting Time with God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

27. For helpful insights into the dark side of our emotions and our compulsions, see the following resources: David Seamands, *Healing Your Heart of Painful Emotions* (Nashville: W Publishing, 2005) [four previous books in one volume]; Charles Kraft, *Deep Wounds, Deep Healing: Discovering the Vital Link Between Spiritual Warfare and Inner Healing* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine/Regal, 1993); and Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988).

Over the months of this intentional project, the time between the outburst of vain words and my recognition and confession to God became shorter and shorter. Soon I was becoming aware of my outburst *just after* the event prompting it; then in the *midst* of the outburst, then just *as* I was about to give the driver a piece of my mind. It required my continuing intentionality of inviting God to tenderize my heart toward these drivers, sensing his conviction in my heart, and bowing to his righteous ways. Finally, “graduation day” arrived about twelve months later when someone cut in front of me and I had no outburst at all. My heart actually remained in a state of peace throughout that event! A while ago on the way home from our Sunday morning worship and driving in the right lane of the freeway, I was so filled with God’s grace that I was able to extend grace to another driver who was trying to exit the freeway from the middle lane. Of course I’ve had my lapses, and God is able to extend me grace for these as well. In this way I’m learning that my heart can be formed according to Jesus’ way. I’m learning that it’s possible to become more fully like Jesus.

### Time Alone with God

Finally, spiritual formation is not a work we do alone or in isolation from God. We intentionally make space for God to do his work in us. For example, despite the demands of Jesus’ public ministry (e.g., Luke 5:15), “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16). We can’t expect to deepen our inner life with God if we continue a busy pace of life. Henri Nouwen counsels, “Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. . . . We do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside time to be with God and listen to him.”<sup>30</sup> I’ve begun to take brief “pause button” breaks throughout my day to connect with God. Jason, one of my students, let these pause breaks with God become a part of his life as well.

Jason explained, “Once I began to purposefully do this, I started to see how important that step was to helping me engage. It took about three weeks before I started to see any effects from this spiritual discipline. In the third week it began to take on special importance. It became a sanctuary in the midst of my busy life and a place that I wanted to enter more often. . . . The greatest benefit of this practice has been to remind me that God is always there to interact with me.”<sup>31</sup>

We may also wish to dedicate one hour a week for a special time with God, or even an overnight away.<sup>32</sup> It becomes a dedicated time—to just hear his

30. Henri Nouwen, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 69, 71. For additional ideas about taking time with God, see my *Wasting Time with God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

31. Personal communication; used by permission.

32. For further study of taking pause breaks with God and other spiritual disciplines, see J. P. Moreland and Klaus Issler, *The Lost Virtue of Happiness: Discovering the Disciplines of the Good Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006).

voice, to let down our defenses so that God can restore our weary and burdened souls. An extended time of retreat with God—a “vacation with God”—can test our resolve to pursue a deeper and closer relationship with him.

### Conclusion

“Heart” work is an important component of spiritual formation that has not been on the radar screen for most of my life. As I attend to matters of internal obedience as well as external obedience, I am finding greater freedom and more peace. Since becoming more aware of my own troubled soul, I am sharing more of my anxious thoughts with God and, as God promises in Philippians 4:7, I am experiencing more of his peace in my life—much more peace than in the past. In addition, the psalms have become more personal to me. Of course, Psalms is mostly about our emotional life before God. Although it was the dynamic hymnbook of Israel, for me it was mostly distant historical theology. I could make sense of the words, but I hadn’t developed the emotional sensitivity to enter into the wide range of emotions described in words like these: “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God” (Pss. 42:5, 11, 43:5). For example, on a recent retreat, the very words of Psalm 35, a lament psalm, helped me express my own feelings to God regarding some past wounds that had come to light. As I read and reread this psalm as my prayer request to God, the Lord ministered to me. I sensed that he knew my pain and he affirmed his love for me.<sup>33</sup>

Although I’m not yet ready to “dance before the Lord with all my might,” as David did when he welcomed the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:14), I am beginning to experience deeper emotions from within, as I praise our great God during our corporate worship. Moreover, the Spirit is slowly transforming my emotional life to manifest more and more of *the fruit of the Spirit*, which mostly involves significant *emotional* features that bless all of our relationships: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). So, as we grow in our emotional capacities, not only can we be more honest with God, but we are also being slowly transformed by the Spirit to experience these essential Christlike affections in the depths of our soul.

Perhaps these reflections on Scripture and my own journey may stimulate a desire to explore aspects of your own heart.

For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. (Luke 6:45 TNIV)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be pleasing in your sight,  
O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Ps. 19:14)

33. For a helpful introduction to Psalms, see Tremper Longman, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).