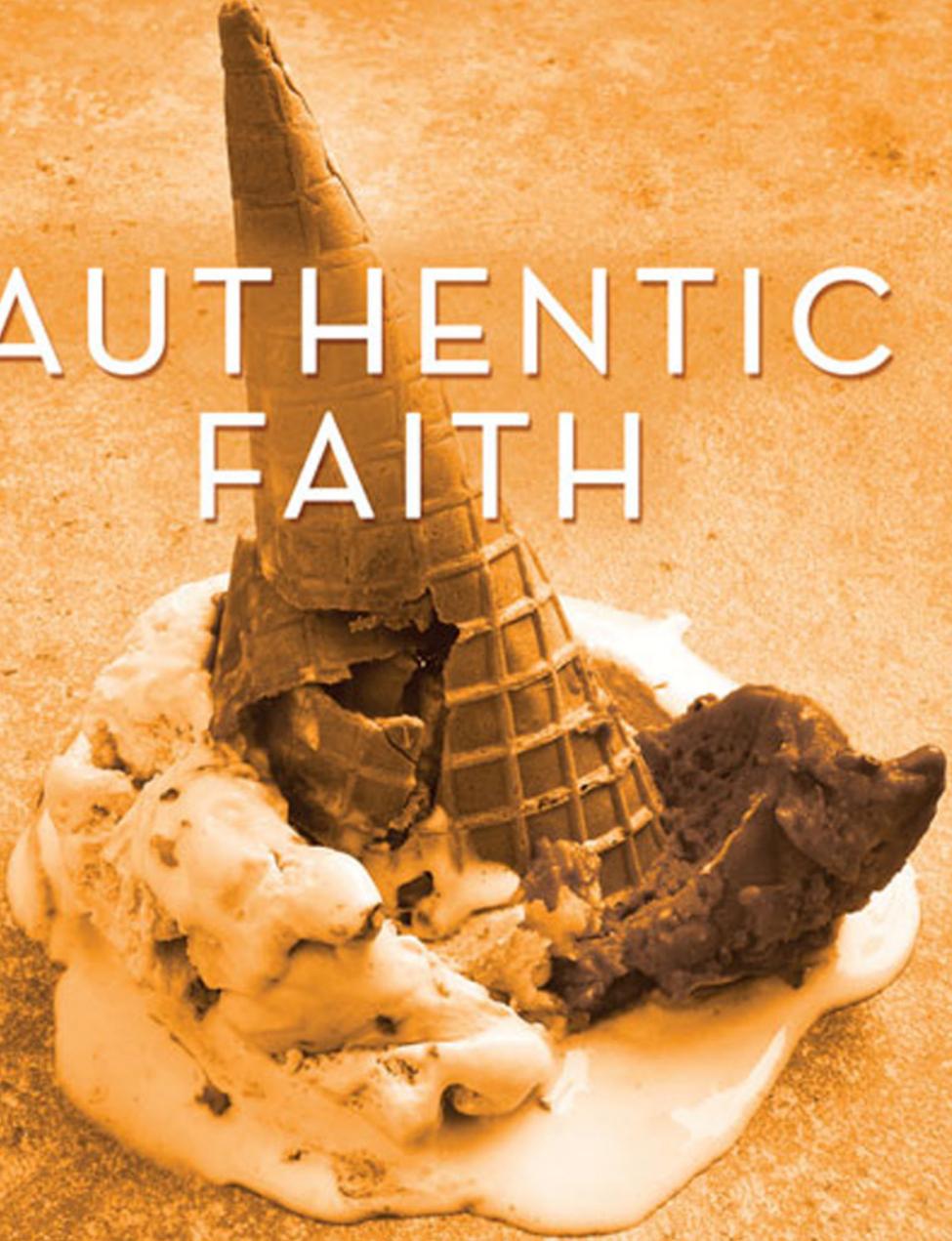


What if life isn't meant  
to be perfect but we are  
meant to trust the One who is?

A photograph of a chocolate ice cream cone melting on a sandy beach. The cone is partially submerged in a pool of white and brown ice cream, with the chocolate sauce dripping down the sides. The background is a textured, golden-brown sand.

# AUTHENTIC FAITH

 **GARY THOMAS**

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF SACRED MARRIAGE

STUDY GUIDE

# A Study Guide for Authentic Faith

by Gary Thomas

Study Guide Prepared by Dave Green

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## Chapter One

# Severe Gifts

1. In reflecting on the change following Mike's brain hemorrhage, Gary writes, "I think the main difference is that in college, when I was around Mike, I wanted to be like Mike. Now, after spending time with Mike, I want to be more like Jesus."

Do you think your life leads others to look to God, or to admire you? How do you feel about the possibility of God chastening you in such a way that your life points more directly to Jesus Christ rather than to human achievement?

2. While his brain hemorrhage took a lot away from him, Mike points out that it gave him even more.

Have you walked through (or are you now walking through) a difficult season in your life that you are grateful for? If so, how have God's severe gifts oriented you toward Him and His Kingdom? If you have not been through such an experience, how do you feel about maturing in this way?

3. How is spiritual infatuation with God like infatuation in a human relationship? How is it different? How does the ability to move through infatuation in both these instances result in deeper relationships?

4. Take an inventory of your recent prayers. What do you find yourself talking to God about, or asking Him for? How do these things reflect your relationship with God?

5. Describe what you most want your life to be marked by. As you look at your own life, does the way you spend your time, money, and energy match up with this vision?

6. This chapter opens with G. K. Chesterton's quote "The Church is the one thing that saves a man from the degrading servitude of being a child of his time...."

How does being a member of the body of Christ draw us out of our culture's enslavement? How does this help us more deeply embrace God and the building of His Kingdom? In what ways do you see this happening in your own life and involvement in your local church?

7. If "...a non-believer were to stand up in many a Christian church and cry out, 'Why should I become a Christian?' it is likely that more than eighty percent of the responses he would receive would be focused on his personal advancement-what his faith will do for him, how it will make his life easier, secure his eternal destiny, and so on."

How would you now answer someone's question "Why should I become a Christian?"

8. Gary describes coming across a beautiful maple tree in a clear-cut patch of land, and says, “Beauty surrounded by beauty begins, after a time, to seem mediocre. Beauty in the midst of chaos or ugliness is stunning.”

What are “patches of land” in your life (e.g., work, school, family, friends, community involvement, clubs, etc.) where God’s presence in your life would stand out beautifully?

9. Not one of us has pure motives. How are you like the Pharisees in their legalistic obedience? Like those “who see God as their ticket to comfort and ease”? Like those who see Christianity “as yet another means to ‘improve ourselves’ and become ‘more disciplined’”?

10. Have you ever been or are you now disillusioned with your faith, or with God? If so, in what ways have these views reflected perversions of the Christian faith? How do you face your skewed views, and what has aided in your past transformation?

## Chapter Two

## Living Beyond Your Self

1. In what ways are you like the little boy surveying the damage left by Hurricane Andrew, concerned chiefly with how the broken lives of others affect you?

2. Gary shares a story of how his own self-centeredness crept into even the seemingly worthy desire of wanting to get good seats in church.

In what ways does self-centeredness creep into the seemingly righteous areas of your life?

3. Consider Paul's astonishing statement "I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible" (1 Cor. 9:19), remembering that, as Gary writes, "Paul was a 'king' in his culture."

Now, paraphrase Paul's statement in terms that reflect the contemporary context of your own life and offer a challenge for you to live out:

I make myself a slave/servant to [person(s)], in order to [the aim of your love].

What would your life look like if you lived out this statement as Paul did?

4. “[Paul] didn’t improve on his morality after meeting Christ, because Pharisees went out of their way to live blameless lives. Paul didn’t pray more as a Christian, because Pharisees were devoted to regular and public prayer. Paul didn’t fast more, because the Pharisees were masters of spiritual discipline. The only real difference in Paul’s life is that he became centered on the freedom of Christ’s provision, which enabled him to love God by serving others instead of being obsessed about his own religious achievements.”

Discuss what is meant by the “freedom of Christ’s provision.” How does it free you to love God by serving others instead of focusing on “religious achievements”?

5. Gary writes, “So we ask ourselves: are we, as Peter urges us, truly ‘loving the brotherhood of believers’? (1 Peter 2:17) I’m not talking about ‘loving’ in the all-too-American sense, offering a casual ‘How are you doing?’ while not really caring about the answer. How concerned are we, truly, about God’s church, and what sacrifices are we making on its behalf to give evidence to that love? Are we so busy with personal, individual pursuits that our passion for the church has dimmed?”

In what ways are your individual pursuits (albeit good pursuits) dimming your love for building up the church? What sacrifices would you make (or have you made) on the church’s behalf to give evidence to your love?

6. Consider the Apostle Paul’s statement “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.” (Col. 1:24) What does joining Christ in the world’s suffering accomplish for his church?

7. “In *Beyond Personality*, C. S. Lewis writes, ‘The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you’ll find your real self. Lose your life and you’ll save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep nothing back. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.’”

What do you find most difficult to give over to God? What do you need in order to give these things to God?

8. The Apostle Paul’s motives for service were that others would come to know Christ, that the church would be built up, and that God would be glorified. Think of a specific example (or examples) of your own service. What are your motives behind your service?

9. What does it mean to depend on God’s strength and not your own in your ministry? How will you exercise the strengths (i.e., gifts or abilities) you have been given in light of your answer?

10. In what ways has God blessed you? To repeat Gary’s question, “Now how are you going to use that blessing to bless and build up others?”

11. How are you being restrained from serving God's purposes by concealed pride, the desire to hold back for fear of failure? Can the church perhaps help you overcome what holds you back so that you can minister more freely?

12. Gary writes, "God-dependence also means that we will slow down in the midst of our ministry, making way for God's still, small voice to guide us."

Respond to Gary's question: "The next time you're listening to someone pour out their heart, or voice a complaint, or ask for your advice, what will you draw from?" How can we distinguish God's "still, small voice" from our own inner drives?

## Chapter Three

## That Excruciating Exercise: The Discipline of Waiting

1. If you were to rate your “need for speed” in day-to-day living on a scale of 1-10 (10 being the most rushed), where would you fall?

2. As we consider the pace with which our Lord often works, it would initially seem from a human perspective as if he were unconcerned with “getting things done.” What things are we typically concerned with getting done in daily activity? As you look at Scripture, what does it appear our Lord is more concerned with “getting done”?

3. As you consider your own life and what you value most, what simply cannot be rushed (e.g., intimacy in relationships)? Why is that true of what you value in particular?

4. Read the following verse: “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him. Do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.” (Psalm 37:7)

Waiting for justice often extends beyond this world and into heaven. How does this make you feel? It is difficult for many to live with one foot on Earth and one foot in heaven regarding justice. Does your response reveal anything about your belief in the reality of heaven and ultimate divine justice? If so, what?

5. Trust is usually built over time, so that through repetitive experience we come to rely on how something behaves, or believe that what a person says is dependable. But what are specific ways we can grow in trust that God will ultimately set things right, when what we hope for will not come to pass until after this life?

6. Gary writes of his friend from college, “What amazed me is that his email reminded me of what he had been like, but over the years, I had almost forgotten about that. God has so worked through this man’s life, that over time he has forged not a different personality, but a more mature one. The same quick thinking and good humor remain, but they’ve been refined, ‘baptized’ so to speak, and are usually put to good use rather than bad.”

Do you have any personality traits that God has baptized? If so, what are they? How did He do so? Are there any that you are praying God will continue to work on?

7. “The Christian classics talk about a ‘soul sadness’ or ‘inquietude’ that comes about when we proudly demand a state of character development that we do not yet possess. Though pursuing holiness seems like-and is-a noble aim, and wanting to experience greater depth in holiness appears like-and is-a godly pursuit, it’s possible that our desire for increased growth may be fueled by pride, ambition, and self-interest-and our attitude as we wait is often the best indicator of what our true motivation is.”

Examine your pursuit of holiness. Are you pursuing it with “patience, meekness, humility, and tranquility”? What is your attitude as you wait for your sanctification? In what ways is your attitude subtly fueled by pride, ambition, and self-interest?

8. Patience goes hand in hand with waiting. How is what seems like zeal in your life really impatience colored with pride? On the other end of the spectrum, how is what seems like patience in your life really apathy?

9. “Francis [de Sales] tells us that mature spiritual growth is more like that of a woman who conceives and only after waiting gives birth.”

Consider this metaphor. How is spiritual growth like the growth of a child in the womb and its subsequent birth? How is waiting for this growth like the waiting of the mother?

10. Gary writes, “Every reputable teacher of prayer I’ve ever read has warned that if you truly want to push forward in intimacy with God, you will have to overcome some degree of boredom. It is not realistic to expect that you can fill your mind with endless diversion, static and noise for twenty or thirty years, and then suddenly stop and pray for hours in rapturous delight.”

Do you find this true of your human relationships as well? Why do you believe this is so?

11. “[Madame] Guyon asks a bold question: ‘What if the Lord called upon you to spend your whole lifetime waiting for His return to you? How would you conduct yourself if this were the lot the Lord should mete out to you for all the rest of your life?’”

How do you respond to Madame Guyon’s questions? What do they make you feel toward God? Why?

12. Consider Gary's stretching roll of rejection slips from editors. He writes, "I've met too many young Christians who mistakenly think that if they're called, God will 'open every door.' What they mean by this is that the road will be easy and that God will 'bless' their obedience. They think there will be no waiting, or perhaps only a minimum amount of time between the promise and the fulfillment."

Does the fact that God doesn't necessarily open doors right away for us when we're "called" confuse you? What examples in Scripture can you think of in which He delays opening doors for those He calls? In those instances, is there anything you can discern about His motive for the delay?

## Chapter Four

## Fragments of Frustration (Difficulty and Suffering)

1. How do you view suffering-as a curse from hell, or as a severe gift from God? Can it be either one at different times?

2. Gary writes, “The fact is, my body belongs to God. If, in his wisdom, he can use physical suffering to strengthen my soul, that is a choice he can make as God.”

Respond to this statement. What does your response reveal about your concept of suffering and God’s ways?

3. Consider the following passage: “Among his findings, [Thomas] Watson wrote that affliction works as our ‘preacher and tutor.’ He said that sometimes a sickbed can teach us more than a sermon. If we value wisdom more than comfort, we won’t casually dismiss the role of suffering. Watson also said that in prosperity we can be strangers to ourselves, but affliction teaches us to know ourselves, including the corruptions of our hearts.”

How has affliction taught you to know yourself? What did you learn about yourself through your experience?

4. Gary writes, “It is only through discomfort, therefore, that we can ever learn to persevere. And it is only through perseverance that we can develop character. The Greek word here references a proven character, which is a thoroughly biblical concept. There is no such thing, really, as potential character. Character is forged only when we pass through the fire. If character is not tested it’s not really character, at least not in this biblical sense.”

Gary’s statement is a strong one. Do you believe it is true? Why or why not?

5. Are you more apt to try to “cure” people of their suffering than bear with them in it? If so, why does the attempt to cure come more naturally as a response? If not, how are you able to respond the way you do? What does either response say about your view of suffering?

6. “In talking about holiness, it’s important to stress the ‘desert of detachment.’ True holiness, according to the ancients, is experienced through such a desert. As far as emotional satisfaction is concerned, there may be a ‘dip’ before there is a ‘rise’ until we learn to live without the narcotic of sinful behavior/attitude. We usually engage in sin to meet some immediate demand or need. Merely stopping the sin does nothing to address the yearning that led to the sin in the first place, which is why we must pass through the desert to embrace the virtue of detachment. That is, we must separate ourselves from anything that takes the place of God in our life.”

Are you able to see the “desert of detachment” as a positive step? Why or why not? What do you fear about this desert? Do you feel safe crying out to God in your desert thirst?

7. “When we’re ruled by our aversions, we are no less slaves than are those who are riddled by addictions. Keep this in mind: aversions direct and influence us every bit as much as addictions do, even though they rarely get spoken about.”

Are you ruled by any of your aversions? Are they indicative of idols in your life? How do they keep you from intimacy with God and the work of His Kingdom?

8. Gary writes of pitching to his son, Graham, “I threw side-armed because I love Graham and want to help him grow, not because I enjoy being mean or malicious. Graham knew what I was doing. He even smiled about it, totally giving me the benefit of the doubt.”

Consider your fears. Is God throwing side-armed to you to help you overcome them? Are you able to experience this as an act of love? Why or why not?

## Chapter Five

# Titanic Testimony: Persecution

1. Gary writes, “The good news is, hatred from the world often signifies friendship with God.”

Does hatred from the world serve as a litmus test of our friendship with God? Give an example demonstrating why or why not.

2. Do you value obedience to God over comfort? What do you value over comfort?

3. Consider the following quote: “After they were flogged-their backs slowly and methodically ripped open with thirty-nine lashes-the disciples didn’t suffer a conflict of faith. There was no moment of second-guessing (‘How could a loving God let this happen to us?’). On the contrary, they actually rejoiced that they had “been counted worthy of suffering for the Name.’ (Acts 5:41)”

Would receiving thirty-nine lashes tomorrow afternoon cause a conflict of faith for you? Would you see it as cause to rejoice for being “counted worthy of suffering for the Name”? Why or why not?

4. Gary points out that though we “love to ‘spiritualize’ ‘Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it,’ in context this verse is explicitly addressing martyrdom. There is nothing metaphorical about it. In fact, the word ‘martyr’ derives from the Greek word for ‘witness.’”

Does this correspondence between witness and martyrdom draw you to a deeper commitment to witness in your own life situation? Why or why not?

5. “The Letter of Diognetus (160-200 A.D.) described the early patterns of this curious group of people who were called Christians”:

It is by the soul, enclosed within the body, that the body is held together, and similarly, it is by the Christians, detained in the world as in a prison, that the world is held together.

Do you agree with what Diognetus says of Christians and their relationship to the world in this excerpt? Why or why not?

6. Do you agree that “martyrdom is the ultimate statement that we are living for another world”? Why or why not?

7. Consider the following verse: ‘Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.’ (Luke 6:26)”

In what ways is receiving the praise of men more important to you than pleasing God?

8. Respond to the questions Gary raises regarding the opposition Michael W. Smith received for his song “Kentucky Rose.” Gary writes, “I’ve...watched godly, humble, and committed women and men be laughed at, mocked, and ridiculed. Michael’s story brings up an important point: if persecution is guaranteed to come, how should we face it? What should be our response?”

9. In “...one of Scripture’s most amazing passages, Jesus actually calls the betraying Judas ‘Friend’-even when Judas is in the very act of betrayal! (Matthew 26:50) Pascal explains why: ‘Jesus disregards the enmity of Judas, and sees only in him God’s will, which he loves; so much so that he calls him friend.’”

“This is an attitude that the apostles worked hard to emulate. Paul exhorted the Romans, ‘Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.’ (Romans 12:14)”

Discuss how we can cultivate this attitude both personally and corporately as a community.

## Chapter Six

## The People of God's Heart (The Discipline of Social Mercy)

1. “We are told to take an active role in defending the cause of the poor: ‘Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.’ (Prov. 31:8-9) This means our spiritual obligation isn’t fulfilled merely by not doing harm, but by actively getting involved to confront and challenge injustice.”

Does the crucial importance of taking an active role challenge you? Does it change your perspective on what it means to help the poor? If so, how?

2. “Even business dealings were to take the poor into concern. Leviticus 23:22 tells the Israelites not to reap the corners of their fields but to leave that for the poor and for the stranger.”

What would following this practice look like for the “business” you’re involved in, whether at home or at the office?

3. “Early on, the Old Testament connects our ‘spirituality’ with our works of kindness. From the biblical record, a truly spiritual person is a truly caring person. The book of Proverbs suggests that God’s willingness to hear our prayers is contingent on our willingness to hear the cry of the poor (Prov. 21:12). If we stop up our ears to the cry of the poor, God stops his ears to our own prayers of petition.”

Why do you believe God’s willingness to hear our prayers is contingent on our willingness to hear the cry of the poor?

4. Discuss why social mercy is “effective” evangelism, using the Tabor’s ministry through REACH as an example.

5. “We must beware of the warped spirituality that separates the spiritual life from caring for others. In a self-based Christianity, faith is entirely about how we learn to overcome our sins, grow in the spiritual disciplines, and build healthier, happier families. These are all wonderful things, but authentic faith urges us to take our newfound victory over temptation, the character forged by practicing the disciplines, and the stability offered by having a strong family, and then put them to use by reaching out to those who need God’s love the most.”

Put this statement into action. Who around you “needs God’s love the most”? What could you do to put your victories into action?

6. Why was Jesus’ ministry to the poor evidence that he is the Messiah?

7. Do you choose to be with those who are not Christians? How about the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind? Who in your own life could you begin to build relationships with?

8. Does Jesus’ care for his widowed mother during the Crucifixion (John 19:26-27), the most important work in the cosmos and his work requiring the most attention, inspire you to be attentive to others’ needs in the midst of your “busy-ness”? In what ways specifically?

9. “When Guterson probed Ralph Broetje to find out why he would spend millions of dollars on workers who, just miles away, fend for themselves in a makeshift village at zero cost to orchard owners, Broetje admitted that while it might increase productivity by cutting down on turnover and building a more motivated workforce, ‘if you just look at the bottom line, it doesn’t make financial sense to spend so much on Vista Hermosa. But it does make human sense.’”

Talk about Ralph Broetje’s idea of “what makes human sense.” Does this change your perspective? How so?

10. “It’s helpful for Christians who are eager to get their ‘hands dirty’ to first do a motivation check. Are you doing this to be loved back? Are you doing this to save a life? What if the person doesn’t want to be saved? What if the addict refuses to quit? What if the crisis pregnancy center client gets pregnant again? Will that make you quit?”

Respond to Gary’s questions. What if your motives are mixed-what steps will you take?

## Chapter Seven

# Giving Up the Grudge (The Discipline of Forgiveness)

1. Consider the story of reconciliation between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.

How is God's glory served by forgiveness?

2. "Joseph could so easily have made his brothers pay. Instead, he took the noble path of authentic faith and not only refused to harbor a grudge, but actually provided for the very brothers who had treated him so terribly. It's one thing to not strike back; it's something else entirely to respond by blessing someone who has hated you."

Blessing the very ones who have hurt us is not easy. Do you find it difficult to hold true to forgiveness in the face of continued offense? What models (biblical or otherwise) do you have of those who remained true to the course of forgiveness, blessing the very ones who inflicted pain?

3. As you silently examine your own life, do you find any unforgiveness, compounded by obstinacy, which stands in the way of your relationships? Write these down so that you can continue to exercise forgiveness.

4. “It is inevitable that people will let us down, sin against us, or even deliberately malign us. If we spend our energy trying to get back at and ruin the other person, we debase ourselves; even worse, we become like the very person we despise.”

Does getting even with someone who has wronged us really make us like the “very person we despise”? Isn’t that simply justice, an eye for an eye, so to speak?

5. Gary writes, “Another reason the wise person learns to forgive is because the Old Testament makes it unequivocally clear that vengeance belongs to God: ‘Do not say, “I’ll pay you back for this wrong!” Wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you.’ (Prov. 20:22; c.f. Prov. 24:29; Lev. 19:18)”

Does leaving vengeance to God relieve you or frustrate you? Why? What does your response reveal about your faith?

6. Gary opened this chapter with a quote from William Law: “If religion forbids all instances of revenge without any exception, ‘tis because all revenge is of the nature of poison.”

How do you believe we should exercise forgiveness in matters of world politics (e.g., embassy bombings or the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon of September 11)? Is forgiveness in these cases the same or different from forgiveness for individual grievances? When are we to “turn the other cheek”?

7. How do you respond when you are wronged? How do you want to respond? Do you believe it is all right to be angry? Do you act as if it is all right to be angry?

8. “As he reflected on the Gospel, it occurred to [Dr. Lewis] Smedes that ‘forgiving fellow human beings for wrongs done to them was close to the quintessence of Christian experience.’”

Do you agree that “forgiving...[is] close to the quintessence of Christian experience” Why or why not?

9. “Dr. L. Gregory Jones, Dean of the Divinity School and Professor of Theology at Duke University, points out that forgiveness is a process. ‘Forgiveness is not an all or nothing affair....It involves the healing of brokenness, and involves words, emotions, and actions. If persons continue to have feelings of bitterness toward another, there may not be the fullness of forgiveness, but that doesn’t mean there is no forgiveness. Rather, the persons are involved in a timeful process.’”

“...It is a mistake to assume that ‘letting go’ is always going to be a one-time event. Far more often, it is an ongoing commitment.”

Some people believe that they shouldn’t be feeling anger if they “already forgave.” Do you believe Dr. Jones that forgiveness is an ongoing commitment? Why or why not? Does hearing that forgiveness is a “timeful process” liberate you?

10. “The process of forgiveness involves overcoming negative emotions (such as resentment), thoughts (such as harsh judgments), and behavior (such as revenge-seeking) toward the person who did the wrong, and substitutes instead a more positive emotion (wishing them well), thought (remembering all of us have sinned), and behavior (perhaps even doing something to ‘bless’ them). It is the ‘art of substitution’: wishing well instead of wishing ill; blessing instead of cursing. Forgiveness thus involves the total person, every thing that makes us human.”

Are there grievances in your life that still require your ongoing forgiveness? How can bringing your emotions, thoughts, and behavior into the forgiveness process help in healing?

11. Think again of whether you harbor any unforgiveness in your heart. Consider the following: If you were to pray a prayer of blessing for the person who has offended you, what would it be? Write it down.

12. “Calvin stresses that we have a special duty to forgive fellow believers. ‘If we have been injured by the members of the Church, we must not be too rigid and immovable in pardoning the offense.’ He writes that while forgiveness is generally urged upon us toward all men, we are ‘harder than iron’ if we do not become especially eager to forgive members of God’s own family.”

For many, it is more difficult to forgive members of the church than those outside the church. Is this true of you? If so, why do you think this is?

13. Articulate the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Can we have forgiveness without reconciliation?

## Chapter Eight

# Mourning's Promise (The Discipline of Mourning)

1. Gary writes of Mark, the former drag queen, “To Mark, feeling sadness and pain was a great relief, a certain sign of the Gospel’s reality and ability to literally make him ‘born again.’”

Is sadness and pain a sign to you that you are in step with the heart of God? Why or why not?

2. Consider the story of the woman on television who claimed that she was delivered from mourning, and would ‘never be sad again.’

How do you see being delivered from mourning as being delivered into a lonely existence, “cut off from real life, and even worse, cut off from real love”?

3. “In the wisdom literature, mourning isn’t seen as something to run from, but something to learn from.”

Does this distinction help you more deeply enter into mourning? If so, how? Have you already experienced the truth of this statement in your own life?

4. On the whole, the contemporary evangelical church avoids mourning or sorrow in its music and preaching. Why do you think this is?

5. “In many ways, what we mourn over is a benchmark of our maturity-or at least, what we hold dear.”

What do you find yourself mourning?

6. “Mourning is the handmaiden of repentance, and repentance is the doorway to humility. When my attitudes and actions become marked by pride, it’s usually been much too long since I’ve repented and experienced the key discipline of mourning.”

Take a personal inventory. Do you find specific attitudes and actions of yours marked by pride? When was the last time you repented or mourned?

7. “Ralph Venning, a seventeenth century Puritan, urged believers to mourn over other men’s failings as well as their own. Not to do so, he argued, is tantamount to being an ‘accessory’ to other men’s sins. ‘All sin is against God,’ he wrote, ‘and for that reason he who truly grieves for his own sin will grieve for other men’s too.’ Venning adds, ‘Oh, that there were more crying persons, when there are so many crying sins!’”

How does mourning over other’s sins acknowledge and honor God? Do you believe Ralph Venning that not to do so “is tantamount to being an ‘accessory’ to other men’s sins”?

8. Like David Duval’s friends, who tried to squelch his grief following his heart-wrenching loss at the Masters at Augusta National, the friends of Old Testament Job tried to explain away his grief. How can you best come alongside someone in his or her grief?

9. Consider the story of Larry, whose mourning for his father's salvation eventually led to his father's conversion. Gary writes, "Mourning-so often feared and shunned by our culture-broke up the hardened ground and renewed Larry's efforts and prayers to see his father come to faith. Had Larry insisted on immediate comfort, had he refused to feel the pain or face the agony of possibly watching his father pass into eternity without salvation, his father might still be lost in his sin, and eventually die apart from grace."

Can you think of a specific example(s) in which your mourning could help someone near you? How could it help you?

## Chapter Nine

## Tyrannical Expectations (The Discipline of Contentment)

1. Of their family trip to Disneyland Gary writes, “My then six-year-old daughter Kelsey was having the time of her life. After about three hours of this, however, I noticed something curious. She jumped off some little cars; earlier, she had ridden a train, a log ride, a Ferris wheel, a flying school bus-you name it. Her words, however, revealed a spirit that was getting more hungry, not less: ‘What’s next?’ she asked, with a slightly desperate edge to her voice.”

As you look at your own life-your own work and play-how does Kelsey’s attitude toward contentment sometimes resonate with your own?

2. “Contentment is nothing more than soul rest. It is satisfaction, peace, assurance, and a sense of well-being, cultivated by pursuing the right things. Instead of more power, more money, more pleasure, and more control, we seek an “abundance” of grace and peace (1 Peter 1:2), inner qualities of a spiritual nature. Contentment is the opposite of striving, aching, restlessness, and worry.”

Which side of the following do you find yourself falling on, and in what ways specifically?

Contentment Discontentment  
Soul rest Agitated spirit  
Satisfaction Continual disappointment  
Peace Frustration  
Assurance Anxiety  
Sense of well-being Bitterness

3. What forms do the “desire for more” take for you now? What forms have they taken in the past? How have those past cravings diminished?

4. “Our brain becomes accustomed to a certain standard of living, and once we become accustomed to something, it is only a matter of time until we become bored with it.”

“It is vital to understand this process if we are ever to rid ourselves of this spiritual sickness, which has a fundamental physical foundation. Spiritually speaking, we become sick when we start tolerating God’s blessings instead of being thankful for them. The Bible prescribes thankfulness so that we can counteract growing accustomed to our affluence.”

In what ways does thankfulness work as an antidote to growing accustomed to emotional and material affluence? What are examples from your own life that demonstrate this truth?

5. “Jesus...said we can’t serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). Notice, Jesus didn’t say it is hard to serve both God and money, but that it is impossible. We will inevitably hate one and love the other. In this passage we are specifically instructed not to worry about physical provisions. Though the pagans run after these things, we are called to seek first the Kingdom of God (6:33) and his righteousness. Our pursuit should be a spiritual one of character and the advancement of God’s kingdom.”

Why are these two masters-God and money-so diametrically opposed? How can we be deceived into believing we can serve both masters?

6. “[John] Wesley held to a rather strict view of Paul’s advice to Timothy. He believed that anything beyond the ‘plain necessities of life’ should be given to the poor or the propagation of the faith. That this wasn’t typically done was merely proof to Wesley that many professed believers are ‘living men but dead Christians.’ ‘Any “Christian” who takes for himself anything more than the plain necessities of life,’ Wesley wrote, ‘lives in open, habitual denial of the Lord.’ Such a person has ‘gained riches and hell-fire!’”

Wesley’s standard is difficult to measure up to. What is your response to his perspective? Why do you respond as you do?

7. At the death of Satyrus, Ambrose thanked God for the time he had had with this brother and ardent supporter of his work as bishop.

Think of something you have enjoyed, but have lost. Are you thankful for these opportunities after they’ve been taken away? Why or why not? If you are dissatisfied with the loss, do you see your dissatisfaction as dissatisfaction with God? Why or why not?

8. Paraphrasing what he was told by Gordon MacDonald while teaching a seminary class together, Gary writes, “real satisfaction is found in relationships-with God and others. It is shortsighted at best, and misguided at worst, to think deep soul satisfaction will ever come from achievements alone.”

Do you value your relationships more than your achievements? If not, what do you think you will lose by changing priorities?

9. Woody Allen confesses in the documentary *Wild Man Blues*, “I’ve got the kind of personality where when I’m here in Europe I miss New York and when I’m in New York I miss Europe. I just don’t want to be where I am at any given moment. I would rather be somewhere else. There’s no way to beat that problem because no matter where you are, it’s chronic dissatisfaction.”

Do you experience this chronic dissatisfaction that Woody Allen speaks of? In what ways?

10. Gary writes of Jim, a pastor, “I’m convinced that his time at B & B was God’s way of putting Jim through ‘seminary,’ only this was a character-laden seminary with final exams in contentment and humility, two key virtues for any believer, but especially for a pastor.”

Are there any present situations in your life that you are experiencing as a character-building “seminary”? What is God teaching you in these “classes”?

11. Respond to the questions Gary concludes this chapter with: “We can always think of ways to ‘improve’ our lives, but then again, we can also always think of things to be thankful for. Which mental pursuit marks your days? If God were to send you a telegram, would it be, ‘Well done thou good and faithful servant,’ or would it resemble the one sent to Tolstoy? ‘In the name of God, stop!’

## Chapter Ten

# Not My Will (The Discipline of Sacrifice)

1. “So what you’re really saying,” God seemed to reply [to Gary’s unwillingness to lend their van], “is that you’re willing to act like a Christian only as long as it doesn’t cost you anything.”

Are there areas in your life in which you’re unwilling to sacrifice if it costs you something (e.g., possessions, money, time, risk of embarrassment, etc.)?

2. Gary writes, “It’s a fine line to walk, because, in general, we will prosper when we follow God’s wisdom for handling money. Our relationships and families will be stronger when we adopt the attitudes and virtues of Jesus Christ. We will experience more joy as we walk in obedience, and God does bless us in many ways-but if any of these blessings become the focus, or even worse, the purpose, of our faith, we have slipped from practicing an authentic faith and substituted instead a gross distortion.”

This distinction is so subtle. How can keep the focus on our relationship with God over and above the blessings he gives?

3. “Abraham, the father of our faith, defined sacrifice as ‘worship.’ To this spiritual forefather, worship wasn’t merely about emotional satisfaction or personal blessing. On the contrary, when he left, intending to sacrifice his only son, he told his servants, ‘Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.’ (Gen. 22:5)”

Read Genesis 22:1-19. Do you see sacrifice as a form of worship? How so?

4. God's economy is not our own. Gary writes, "God told Jeremiah to buy a field in Anathoth (Jer. 32), even as the Babylonian army was besieging Jerusalem." Can you think of examples in which God asked you or someone else to make a seemingly illogical sacrificial act on behalf of his Kingdom? What was it?

5. Read Luke 21:1-4. Articulate why you believe God is more concerned with the size of the sacrifice than the size of the gift.

6. Respond to Gary's question, "Are your daily decisions based on what brings you the least amount of discomfort and the greatest amount of affluence (which we conveniently call 'blessing')?"

How would you like your decisions to be made?

7. Gary writes, "One of the 'subtle turns' of self-love is turning sacrifice into a stage instead of a cross."

In what ways do you do this, or have you done this in the past? Give specific examples. Can you articulate why you do it?

8. Respond to someone who says, "Christians are masochists for being so into sacrifice."

9. Lance Armstrong, who battled back from cancer to win the Tour de France, credits his cancer with helping him to win the tour: “There is no question in my mind that I would never have won the Tour if I hadn’t gotten cancer. The truth is, it was the best thing that ever happened to me, because it made me a better man, and a better rider.”

How does sacrifice make us better people, and better at what we do for God and his Kingdom?

10. Gary and Lisa were disappointed that they would take a financial loss on the sale of their home, when one morning Lisa felt God asking them, “Has it ever occurred to you that I wanted you in that neighborhood to reach other people rather than to boost your financial situation?”

Ask yourself the question they asked themselves: “Does my theology leave room for serving a God who would lead me to make what turned out to be a poor financial situation, but a profitable spiritual one?”

In what terms do you tend to think when making decisions? Financial? Spiritual? Emotional?

11. How do we maintain a balance between sacrificing for everyone who asks us for help and doing other things we truly believe we are called to? How did Jesus handle this tension?

12. Gary writes, “I needed to remind myself of this because part of me wants Kelsey to have a really easy life. Part of me hurts at the thought of Kelsey ever really suffering or sacrificing. But for her to mature in Christ, God will have to break her. He’ll humble her, as he has humbled me and as he has humbled my wife, and he’ll teach her the joy of obedience and surrender. It’s not a pleasant process, but ultimately it’s a glorious one.”

Are you willing to let God care for those you love? How is it difficult for you? What helps you to a place of deeper trust?

## Chapter Eleven

# Well Done...Depart From Me! (The Discipline of Rewards and Punishments)

1. Gary writes, “I’ve talked to people who, because they have ‘prayed the sinner’s prayer,’ believe they are somehow immune to the consequences of their actions.”

What does such a person’s attitude reveal about his or her understanding and relationship with God?

2. “Jesus uses his disciples’ desire for greatness as motivation, not as something that is shameful. He’s not telling his disciples that their problem is desiring the wrong ends, but rather that it is adopting the wrong means to that end-if we really want to be great in heaven, we must become the servant of all on earth.”

In what ways do you desire to be great? Does the way Jesus responds to his disciples help redirect your own desires for greatness as well? How so?

3. “While our individual sins are washed away by Christ’s sacrifice, an overall judgment will still be made regarding the character we allowed God to develop in us. Though our salvation is not riding ‘in the balance,’ God may well ask what we did with our salvation.”

How does this quote change the way you view your responsibility and stewardship of your gift of salvation?

4. Consider Hebrews 12:6-7: “The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons.”

How have your views on God’s discipline changed? What brought about this change?

5. “Our fear of God has been sadly replaced by the less noble fear of man. By this, I mean that many of us sometimes fear exposure of our sin more than we fear facing the wrath of God. Rather than living in genuine concern that we might offend the powerful God of the universe, we are more concerned that other people will discover and disclose our moral failings and so embarrass us.”

How do your fear of man and your fear of God compare? How can we escape fearing man more than God?

6. Why is confession on a human level important if we’ve already confessed to God?

After you have answered the question above, read the following: “You’ll know whether you are more concerned with public exposure than offending God by whether you choose to engage in Christian confession, revealing your sins to another brother or sister in the Lord. The Bible is clear that we need to fellowship with each other to live a holy life. Keeping habitual sins secret reveals a heart that is more concerned about self-image than real obedience.”

7. What does the phrase “fear of the Lord” conjure up for you? Are your responses or feelings positive? Negative?

8. “Dr. Bruce Waltke points out that ‘the heart that both fears and loves God at one and the same time is not divided but unified in a single religious response to God.’ ‘Fear’ and ‘love,’ in fact, can be considered religious synonyms.”

Do you see “fear” and “love” as religious synonyms? Why or why not?

9. Gary writes of his own schedule, “I was made to realize that every single act of that day—the fact that I would be asked to work on a book, or write an article, or speak at a retreat, or teach a seminary class—every single item is there by God’s mercy, and God’s mercy alone. If God had acted ‘justly’ with me, giving me what I deserve, I wouldn’t be allowed to do any of it.”

How can we cultivate this attitude, that “every single item is there by God’s mercy alone”?