

# awakening grace

spiritual practices to transform your soul

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# contents

Foreword	7
Preface	11
Acknowledgements	13
1. A Foundation	15
2. Scripture	24
3. Prayer	43
4. Worship	62
5. Mercy and Justice	82
6. Sabbath	99
7. Creation Care	116
8. Covenant Friendship	134
9. Generosity	151
10. Creative Expression	165
Conclusion	183
Notes	185

# 1

## a foundation

### from mastery to submission

Scribbled on an orange sticky note stuck to the back cover of a well-worn Bible is this charge: “When you open this beautiful book, aim for submission, not mastery.”<sup>1</sup> These words come from one of our mentors, J. D. Walt. Though simple, they illuminate a somewhat counterintuitive approach to spiritual formation.

We often see discipleship as the process of mastering the spiritual disciplines. The formula follows this pattern: If we can get a handle on these disciplines and perform them with excellence, then we can produce the proper and correlating fruit. But perhaps this approach is backwards.

### calling out

Aslan probably said it best. Somehow that’s not surprising, is it?

In his classic children’s tale *The Silver Chair*, C. S. Lewis wrote of two school kids and their unlikely adventure in the magical land of Narnia. Outsiders

Eustace Scrubb and Jill Pole desperately longed to escape the burdens of their boarding school. Connected by their shared hatred of that place, Eustace trusted Jill with a wild secret—a story of another world with talking animals and enchanted kingdoms. Hoping to somehow find a way into this world, they called out the name of Aslan, the mighty Lion and King of Narnia.

By some strange magic, their hopes were heard. Soon, Jill found herself face to face with the great (and good) Lion. To her surprise, he commissioned her for an important task.

“Please, what task, Sir?” said Jill.

“The task for which I called you and him here out of your own world.”

This puzzled Jill very much. “It’s mistaking me for someone else,” she thought. She didn’t dare to tell the Lion this, though she felt things would get into a dreadful muddle unless she did.

“Speak your thought, Human Child,” said the Lion.

“I was wondering—I mean—could there be some mistake? Because nobody called me and Scrubb, you know. It was we who asked to come here. Scrubb said we were to call to—to Somebody—it was a name I wouldn’t know—and perhaps the Somebody would let us in. And we did, and then we found the door open.”

“You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you,” said the Lion.<sup>2</sup>

And there it is. Deep theology disguised as a bedtime story. By way of the Lion, Lewis lets us taste the ways of God’s rich grace.

Before we ever recognized our need for him, his gentle strength was drawing us in. Before we even knew what name to call, he was calling ours. We could never find him if he hadn’t already searched us out. Grace is good like that.

The eighteenth-century Reformer John Wesley spoke of this “prevenient grace” (or “grace that goes before”) as the dawn breaking in on the human heart. It is the kind gift of God that calls out to us, so we can call out to him.

In his mercy, our Father draws us. He turns our heart toward him, enabling us to believe in his Son. Without this awakening grace, our sinful, broken hearts would remain hard as stone, refusing his free gift of full salvation.

His grace offers the gift. And his grace enables us to receive it. God’s love for us awakens our love for him.

Without God’s grace, our salvation is not possible. But we often miss that the same is true of the spiritual growth that happens after salvation. Just like salvation, discipleship is impossible without the same enabling mercy that first searched us out.

## **practicing the pathways**

We easily fall into thinking that the work of spiritual formation rests on us. That it is our duty to master the disciplines of Bible reading, justice, prayer, and service. But these practices are not the focus. God is. These practices are pathways that lead us to him. These disciplines are not the end but the means of grace.

Christian practices are patterns of cooperative human activity in which the inner life takes shape over time in response to the Word and work of Christ. Our practices become a conversation between our actions and our beliefs, and are a balance between being and doing. However, Christian practices must not be mistaken for duties, but rather patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us. They are places where the power of God is experienced. Therefore, in the end, Christian practices are forms of participation in the work of God.

As we engage these pathways, we humbly submit to God's work in our lives. We open ourselves up to what we call awakening grace.

## **awakening grace**

Awakening grace is the strength at work in these ancient and innovative practices that shape us into Christ's image. It is the grace that draws us into this process of spiritual formation and our guide along the journey. Alive in these practices—these means of

grace—is a power that is actively shaping, forming, and creating us anew into the likeness of Jesus, whom we pursue and are captured by.

It is vital to understand that the power is not in the acts themselves and certainly not in our performance of them. The power is initiated through God's own presence in the process. It is his engagement with us that gives meaning to our practice.

### **a simple shift**

This book proposes a simple shift in our view of spiritual formation. The shift concerns the agent of action in the growth process, placing the emphasis on God's grace at work in the practice instead of on our performance of the action. Of course, this is not a new idea, but it seems to be a lost one. This simple shift is illustrated by three mini-shifts.

#### **from mastery of a discipline to submission to grace**

As mentioned earlier, we often view the spiritual practices as disciplines that we should master. We strive to be better at prayer, reading Scripture, and worship—all of which, we conclude, will make us better Christians. While we absolutely need to engage with these practices, we must never think that we wrestle our way into Christian maturity by the sweat of our souls. Yes, we work at it. Yes, we struggle. But we always acknowledge that the agent of change in this journey is the grace of God.



Our invitation in discipleship is to submission. We submit to the will of the Father, to the shaping work of the Spirit, and to the pattern of Christ. We don't perfect our way to being better Christians. We submit ourselves to Christ. (If you think this amounts to a lazy Christianity, then perhaps you haven't walked the difficult trail of submission lately.) As we examine these practices in the coming chapters, resist the temptation to master them and embrace the counterintuitive invitation to surrender.

### **from practice as a tool for growth to practice as a teacher of the soul**

Another mistake we make when approaching these spiritual practices is to view them as a tool in our hands rather than a teacher of our souls. We use them to accomplish our own purposes rather than listen to what they can teach us. We read Scripture to increase in knowledge, rather than hear from the heart of God. We pray to get what we want rather than enter into communion with the Holy Spirit. We worship to feel refueled or recharged, rather than give praise and ascribe glory to the resurrected King. In this, spiritual practices become utilities for leveraging quick growth. Instead, we should hear their invitation to sit at their feet and learn.

In this book, we view the spiritual life less like a factory and more like a farm—less industrial and more organic. These practices are not components of

a spiritual assembly line. They are more like open fields and hidden trails to be explored in the cultivating company of the Father, Son, and Spirit. They do not promise faster results or shortcuts around the process. In this landscape dominated by machinery and efficiency, we are called living branches nourished by the Vine, under the watchful care of the Gardener.

**from growth as certain formula to discipleship as unpredictable journey**

We like formulas. They clearly spell out the specific series of steps toward a desired destination. They promise us a set end if we correctly follow the prescribed measures. Formulas are predictable. Formulas are safe. Formulas are certain.

But discipleship is not. Discipleship is an unpredictable journey that promises danger and risk. Discipleship follows Jesus into the unknown (to us, never to him) and disrupts the stagnant status quo. This life with Jesus is far more like an experiment in grace. So, as we explore these spiritual practices together, do not approach them as steps in a formula to trigger a predetermined outcome. Instead, engage them as pathways to walk with Jesus. They will twist and turn, taking you deeper into the heart of the Father and fellowship with the Son, all while the Holy Spirit implores you to take the next unsure step.

## **the framework**

As you journey through this book, you'll find that each chapter challenges an active response to what you've read. After exploring each of the ancient or innovative practices through the framework questions of what, why, and how, each chapter ends with the catalytic question, "So, now what?" To assist you in the formational practices, we suggest several next steps in this section for you to explore as an individual or in the context of a larger group. Also included at the end of each chapter is a built-in study guide and collection of questions to encourage further engagement. Use the questions for your own study or to facilitate a shared journey with a small group.

## **the invitation**

Do you feel a longing to grow closer to God? Do you want to know him more? Is there something in your soul that calls out to him? Then consider that awakening desire your invitation into the deep places of discipleship. Place yourself in his hands, and allow him to shape and form your life into one that looks like Jesus? After all, you never would have called out to him if he hadn't already been calling you.

## study guide

1. How do you define grace?
2. How have you experienced grace in your life?
3. What does grace have to do with spiritual growth and discipleship? (We understand the role it plays in salvation, but what about discipleship?)
4. What does it mean to “aim for submission, not mastery” when engaging the spiritual practices?
5. Why do we refer to this as a counterintuitive approach? How does your own experience match up or disagree with this idea?
6. What is meant by the title *Awakening Grace*?
7. Why is discipleship described as an unpredictable journey and an experiment in grace?
8. What is the difference between an industrial approach and an organic approach to spiritual formation?
9. Looking ahead at the spiritual practices explored in this book, what practices are you excited to study? Why?
10. Likewise, which practices make you a little nervous? Which ones do you dread discussing? Why?
11. What do you hope to get out of this experience? How do you hope to grow? What are your expectations and reservations?