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—WAYNE GRUDEM, Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies,  
Phoenix Seminary

I hope many will read, meditate upon, and put into practice the message of this book that will transform their lives.

—DR. NEIL T. ANDERSON, founder and president of Freedom in Christ Ministries

“What hope do I have for dealing with the sin in my life?” is the agonized cry of the believer in Jesus Christ. Robert Saucy gives a biblically based, spiritually powerful, experientially liveable answer. . . . He combines the deep wisdom of the sage and godly heart of the man of God to show us the way of growing to a truly satisfying Christlikeness.”

—GERRY BRESHEARS, PhD, Professor of Theology, Western Seminary

“Dr. Robert Saucy’s *Minding the Heart* should be on your list of must-read books. Certain to become a classic, Bob’s insights in this volume are transformative. Well researched and deeply grounded in God’s Word, with solid interpretive methodology, he has produced a work both profound and practical. I am happy to commend it in the highest terms to any who seek spiritual transformation.”

—W. BINGHAM HUNTER, Executive Vice President and Provost, Phoenix Seminary

“Dr. Saucy’s work on the ‘theological heart’ provides a much needed addition to our understanding of biblical anthropology and psychology. Sanctification has been defined as ‘the work of God that we participate in.’ Dr. Saucy’s book shows how the Christian participates in his or her spiritual growth and maturity. Every Bible teacher or student needs to read and digest this important study.”

—DR. EDWIN BLUM, general editor/translator of Holman Christian Standard Bible

“What do the Scriptures mean with all of the references to the heart? For most, such passages evoke warm fuzzies but very little light. *Minding the Heart*, by veteran scholar and gracious man of God Robert Saucy, causes these references to leap from the pages of the Bible and grip your heart with ethos, logos, and pathos. I love it when a top-level scholar writes something as cogent and helpful to the masses as this great read.”

—PAIGE PATTERSON, President, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“*Minding the Heart* is a product of the lifelong research, teaching, and personal transformation of Robert Saucy. It is now arguably the most important and comprehensive biblical and theological study of the spiritual heart, and culminates over fifty years of teaching on this subject. But it also draws upon Dr. Saucy’s personal transformation, as his spiritual heart has weathered and grown through personal tragedies and suffering. He is a wise, learned, profound, loving, and insightful man of God.”

—MICHAEL J. WILKINS, Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Dean of Faculty, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

“So much of what is published under the banner of spiritual formation these days is little more than personality theory splashed with holy water. *Minding the Heart* goes straight to the source of spirituality, theology, and transformation—the Scriptures—and displays, in a highly accessible style, a solid command of the linguistic, historical, and theological issues involved in authentic transformation of the heart.”

—Dr. Leslie T. Hardin, Professor of New Testament, Florida Christian College and author of *The Spirituality of Jesus*

# Minding the Heart

*The Way of Spiritual Transformation*

**ROBERT L. SAUCY**

 **Kregel**  
Publications

*Minding the Heart: The Way of Spiritual Transformation*

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*For Nancy,  
my blessed, loving companion on the  
journey to true life*





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# Preface

This book is about the personal transformation of life that the Bible teaches is for everyone who believes in the gospel of Jesus Christ. According to the Scripture, the person who believes in Christ and trusts him and his saving work for salvation receives a new life and becomes a new creation in his or her deepest inner person—a newness that is designed to grow in power and scope in the experience of daily life. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). The goal of this work is to help those who have received Christ as Savior to know that this abundant life can begin in the here and now and not just in eternity, and to know how they can grow in the daily experience of it.

This book has been simmering for a long time—admittedly on the back burner at times, but always there. As both a believer and a teacher of theology in a seminary the concept of growth was always present. But my interest in the direction of this work was particularly stimulated through co-teaching a course on the theology of human nature with a number of psychology professors. I was intrigued by the psychology readings that dealt with the depth of the person and how the unconscious affected life, and how those corresponded to things the Scriptures said about the heart. This developed into a lecture series that I presented at Western Seminary and subsequently used as reading material in our course on human nature and various other presentations.

On a personal level, I began to pay more attention to my attitudes and actions in relation to their source—which Scripture says is the heart—especially regarding my emotions, which up to that point I, like many men, had essentially ignored. I recognized that my emotions revealed the thoughts and beliefs in the depth of my heart, thoughts which shaped my attitudes and actions in life. All of this fueled my desire for further study.

As I gained more information, I began to realize that discussions related to the biblical heart were not prominent in church teachings or theology books. I had taught theology courses including the doctrine of sanctification, or spiritual growth. But aside from relatively brief explanations of the means of growth—the

Scriptures, prayer, church sacraments, fellowship, and so on—little was said as to how these means actually worked to bring about growth. Churches faithfully proclaimed what Christ had done for our salvation, and how to be saved; the Christian walk was rightly set forth, telling us what we should and shouldn't do; but not much was said concerning how to actually do some of these important things so that I actually knew what it was to experience them. For example, I knew that reading the Bible and studying it was important, but I don't remember hearing much about *meditating* on it, or how to actually practice meditation—something that according to Scripture is crucial for experiencing God in our life. The Christian life seemed more of a holy walk keeping away from sin rather than an abundant life of love, joy, and peace.

My life was blessed in these churches. Lives were changed. But I suspect that in many people there was a quiet longing for more. Daily life didn't seem to square with the abundant life Jesus talked about. The power of God was not very effective for overcoming life's problems. So many sought help elsewhere.

Once, after I had delivered a message about the power of God's love and challenged the people to a similar love, a young woman approached me. "We often hear messages like this which tell us what to do," she said, "but no one tells us how we can do it."

I came to see that the motivation and power for a holy walk and the experience of new life ultimately come not from knowing the Bible and theology, or even from trying to keep the commandments, but only from knowing God through a heart-to-heart relationship with him, through Jesus, by the Spirit. This led me to the focus of this work, which may be broadly described as seeking to understand the dynamics of Proverbs 4:23: "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life." What are the dynamics of the heart that make it the source of all that we do in life, and how can we watch over or guard our heart so that our life is different?

Without denying the value of what can be learned about living the spiritual life from the traditions of the church and its practices, this work is basically a study of scriptural teaching on the nature of spiritual growth or spiritual formation, and how any believer can experience a transformation of the heart and all of the daily activities and attitudes that come from it. Aspects of psychology, philosophy of psychology, and even neuroscience are utilized at times for their insight into the dynamic of human nature. These can be very useful in understanding how we tick and in diagnosing our condition, and therefore the underlying process of spiritual change revealed in Scripture. But since only God has the power to overcome sin and affect genuine spiritual transformation, in a

very real sense this work seeks to help the reader understand how we can come to have God actively working in our lives and actually experience more of his abundant life.

Many people have contributed to this work to whom I gladly give thanks. For arranging publication through Kregel Publications and continually encouraging me along the way with much patience, and reading over the work with editorial suggestions, I thank Jim Weaver. Thanks also to those who read parts or all of the manuscript and contributed helpful thoughts and wording: Mary Barnett, Ed Blum, Barbara Hillaker, Cameron Jung, John Mosqueda, and especially Ting Guevarra-Small who provided many helpful illustrations. Thanks also to Sandra Orr, my gracious and efficient secretary, who helped in obtaining books and essays and checking details in the manuscript. Thanks to Isaac Blois for help with the transliteration of Hebrew and Greek.

My gratitude also to the people at Kregel Publications who have been so gracious and helpful to work with: Dennis Hillman, Steve Barclift, Dawn Anderson, and Paul Brinkerhoff, whose careful editing was so helpful, along with the others who had a hand in producing this work.

I am grateful also to the administration, faculty colleagues, and staff at the Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, for their constant encouragement during the rather lengthy writing of this book. Their provision of an environment in which the transformation of the heart was highly valued along with academics was a great blessing.

For her help in ways that she doesn't even realize, I give my heartfelt gratitude to my dear life companion, Nancy. Her encouragement when progress seemed slow, prodding when I needed it, graciousness in letting me spend hours in the study, and most of all her love and provision of a good home undergird this work.

Above all, I am grateful to our Lord for drawing me to this study on the spiritual transformation of the heart. I count it a great blessing to have had the privilege of spending much time giving thought to this topic vital to all followers of Christ—how we grow in the experiential knowledge of our great God and Savior in our daily walk. Thank you, Father, for enriching my life!



# Introduction

Change my heart oh God  
Make it ever true  
Change my heart oh God  
May I be like you

EDDIE ESPINOSA<sup>1</sup>

**T**hese simple yet profound lyrics echo the cry of David: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10).\*

But questions about having this kind of heart arise. How exactly does God communicate his life-transforming power? What does God do in this process? And what do *I* have to do? In other words, *how does growth take place?*

The answer is the heart—the most important biblical term for the human person’s nature and actions. Indeed, the heart is the control center of life. It is the very place where God works to change us—and the place where *we* must work if growth is to take place.

The heart is one’s core. According to Scripture, it is who you and I are at our deepest and most private level. So profound is the hidden person of the heart that only God himself is able to plumb its unfathomable depths. The psalmist declared, “O LORD, You have searched me and known me” (Ps. 139:1). For the believer, that is good news, because God is the ultimate heart-changer.

“Spiritual formation for the Christian,” writes Dallas Willard in *Renovation of the Heart*, “basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of

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\* Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB). The NASB uses more literal translations of the Hebrew and Greek words for “heart” than most other modern translations, and it frequently provides a marginal note indicating the literal sense when the original language word for “heart” is translated as some other word. This aids in understanding the biblical meaning of the heart as the seat of all personal functions (see chapter 4).

Christ himself.”<sup>2</sup> Willard adds: “Christlikeness of the inner being is not a human attainment. It is, finally, a gift of grace.”<sup>3</sup>

But it is also a process in which we participate. In fact, we are responsible before God for embarking on a spiritual journey that produces ever-increasing change and renewal within our hearts. God works to effect this change—and so do we. “Work out your salvation,” wrote Paul, “for it is God who works in you” (Phil. 2:12–13 NIV).

The transformation of which I speak is nothing less than the liberating, joyful experience of increasing freedom from the power of sin’s bondage. It is exchanging the dysfunctional and dark works of our self-centered, sinful nature in favor of the wholesomeness and delight of the fruit of God’s Spirit.

The focus of this book will be on the command center: your heart. We’ll compare the biblical description of our natural heart (the heart in its fallen and sinful condition, with which we were born) with the heart that God desires for his spiritually born children. In doing so, we’ll come to see that, in reality, life’s problems are none other than *heart problems*. Or, as has been said, “The heart of every problem is a problem of the heart.”

Thus, we’ll discover that *spiritual growth, at its root, is the transformation of the heart*. “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23).

This pithy statement reminds us that the heart is the center of our thoughts, emotions, and actions. But how do they function together? How can they be harnessed so that deep spiritual transformation happens? By using the Bible, along with selected scientific studies, we will explore how to make lasting heart change and show how we can achieve the joys of Christlikeness in an intentional manner, not in a hit-or-miss kind of way. We’ll also consider the social dimension of human nature and how relationships with other believers contribute to spiritual growth.

Finally, we will seek to tie our study together by looking at some fundamentals of biblical spiritual formation. What is the essential nature of our growth—what really changes in our life as we grow more like Christ? And how does this finally take place?

In the end, of course, all glory goes to God whenever we are changed. The renewing of the heart is an inescapable human need, but the solution lies only within the realm of the divine. A growing relationship with God through Jesus Christ is the only means by which our hearts can be transformed. He alone has power over sin; he alone can break its hold on us.

# Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
BCOT	Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
BDAG	Bauer, W., W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3rd ed. Chicago, 2000
EBC	<i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
GNT	Good News Translation
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
IDB	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by G. A. Buttrick. 4 vols. Nashville, 1962
lit.	literally
MSG	<i>The Message</i> , Eugene H. Peterson
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NET	NET Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDNTT	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> . Edited by C. Brown. 4 vols. Grand Rapids, 1975–85
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OTL	Old Testament Library
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, 1964–76

- TDOT* *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgreen. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 8 vols. Grand Rapids, 1974–2006
- TLOT* *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Edited by E. Jenni and C. Westermann. Translated by M. E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, MA, 1997
- TOTC* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
- TWOT* *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Edited by R. L. Harris, and G. L. Archer Jr. 2 vols. Chicago, 1980
- WBC* Word Biblical Commentary



# Born to Grow

*Moving beyond Forgiveness to an Abundant Life*

I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

JESUS OF NAZARETH

It is only when we live with Christ that life becomes really worthy living, and that we begin to live at all in the real sense of the word.

WILLIAM BARCLAY

**N**o one is going to catch me and make me a man." So said Peter Pan, a fictional character who never grew up from childhood. Though he had exciting adventures in Neverland with fairies, pirates, and mermaids, soon enough other children in the story grew up to be adults, even Wendy, Peter's dear companion. At the tearful ending of the book, she said to him, "I grew up long ago." Peter protested, "You promised not to!" To which she retorted, "I couldn't help it."

Written by J. M. Barrie more than a hundred years ago and still a popular children's story, *Peter Pan* is often associated with escapism, or even developmental disorder. Growing up is a fundamental fact of human existence.

Change simply happens. Life is a constant progression (or regression), both in the body and the inner person. We see and feel change in our bodies, but in the inner person, change is often subtle, giving an illusion that we're somehow standing still. But we are changing even when we are not aware of it.

When it comes to the life of the person who believes in Jesus Christ, that change should ever be *upward*. In the same way that we are born physically to grow to maturity, we are born again spiritually to grow to maturity. We are not born again just so we can be in heaven someday, but we are born from above by the Spirit of God to actually live a brand-new life in Christ now. A life that grows. *Excelsior!*

The message of Scripture is that our life in Christ is more than the forgiveness of sins, more than the escape from God's condemnation, but a new way to live, a new source of zest that thirsts and hungers for more.

All too often, sincere believers find themselves trying the usual Christian practices—reading the Bible, attending church, praying—with little, if any, success. Disappointed and defeated, they wonder: “Why is nothing really *different*? The same fears and anxieties are with me. My attitudes and actions toward things don't seem to be any different. What do I have to do to experience more of this new life? How does it all work?”

Believers want more than knowledge of biblical and theological doctrines. *They want to experience God.* They want to know how this new life operates. They want to know how they can grow in this new life. Like all important areas of our life—physical, intellectual, and ethical—spiritual growth involves time and effort. It is a process, and Scripture gives light to the *means* of growth and the *dynamic operations* of these means.

### Born to Grow

The gospel is not only the “Good News,” but the “best news” anyone could ever receive. Through simple faith in Jesus Christ, God's Son, a person can be born again into a new life, an *eternal* life.

Unfortunately, the meaning of “eternal life” is lost to many Christians. Instead of conceiving eternal life in terms of its *quality*, their thought is more on its *quantity*—the fact that it lasts forever. This is certainly understandable. Our sins are forgiven and we are given Christ's righteousness. Consequently, we are freed from God's wrath and sin's punishment of eternal death—thus we live forever.

Our new relationship with God, as children freed from his wrath, is correctly seen by believers as the foundation of the Christian life. But for too many Christians the matter ends there. Radical transformation of our life takes place only when we meet Christ. Yet in the meantime we live as heaven-bound, forgiven sinners with very little expectation of any real change in the quality of our life and our behavior, except perhaps for some reduction in the most blatant outward forms of sin.

Scripture paints a totally different picture. Our “new birth” is the starting point of a continuous process of growth in a new kind of life. As “newborn babies,” we are told to “crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (1 Peter 2:2 NIV). In the words of a song by the popular rock band Switchfoot, “There's a new way to be human.” This new kind of life is the

quality of life lived first by Jesus Christ and subsequently by those who've known him well and followed him closely.

The apostle Paul exemplified this in his own life. Meeting Christ on the road to Damascus was only the beginning of his new life. His passion was to “gain Christ” and to “know Him” (Phil. 3:8, 10). The Christian life for Paul was not simply waiting and hoping for his final perfection. Rather, as he expressed it, “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. . . . Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12–14 NIV).

In saying that he “pressed on” Paul uses strong language, a Greek word that refers to *zealous pursuit*. From the time that Christ laid hold of him, his life took off in a completely new direction. He would not allow either his past failures or achievements to divert him from his pursuit of Christlikeness. We “are *being transformed* into . . . [Christ’s] image with ever-increasing glory” (2 Cor. 3:18 NIV).\*

Our growth as believers is *a continuous process*. This is underscored by the frequent use of Greek present-tense verbs that denote continuous action. In the verse above, 2 Corinthians 3:18, and in Romans 12:2, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” the word translated as “transformed,” literally means, “be continually being transformed.” Likewise, we are to be “renewed [continually] in the spirit of our mind” (Eph. 4:23; see also Col. 3:10).

Moreover, our present outward life, which C. K. Barrett has described as “subject to a thousand troubles and under sentence of death,”<sup>1</sup> may be trending downward, but our inner person is designed to continually grow. “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are *being renewed* day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16 NIV).

God’s design for our continuous spiritual growth can be both encouraging and challenging. On the one hand, it is encouraging to know that though our physical bodies are going through wear and tear, our spiritual life can still go from strength to strength. On the other hand, this is a challenge, because it does not allow any excuse for complacency or neglect or being “too old” to make any spiritual progress.

The growth of believers as a continuous process is also underscored by Scripture’s use of the imagery of “journey.” A journey is more than developing a good road map or having knowledge to navigate the way, that is, it’s more than

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\* Throughout, italics in Scripture quotations were added for emphasis.

## Living Step by Step

Because nomadic life in ancient times was defined by a continual walking from place to place, the Bible emphasizes the importance of a person's steps and feet. As one Old Testament scholar explained, "Although the Hebrew is keenly aware of the role the hand plays in human actions, [it] still places more emphasis on the significance of the foot than modern languages. Human action consists of spatial forward movement to a goal."<sup>2</sup> Old Testament wisdom and poetry frequently use the metaphors of "steps" (*'ashur*) for "living." This is picked up by New Testament authors, who use the term for "walking around" (*peripateō*) as a metaphor for "living" or one's "lifestyle."

"My steps have held fast to Your paths. My feet have not slipped." (Ps. 17:5)

"The steps of a man are established by the LORD, and He delights in his way." (Ps. 37:23; cf. 31)

"Our heart has not turned back, and our steps have not deviated from Your way." (Ps. 44:18)

"He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm." (Ps. 40:2)

"Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." (Rom. 6:4; cf. 2 Cor. 12:18)

constructing a philosophy or theology of life. It is the actual travel on the road, the living of this new life. A journey is more than its destination. As Derek Kidner put it, the "path of life" (Ps. 16:11) is so called, "not only because of its goal but because to walk that way is to live, in the true sense of the word, already."<sup>3</sup>

In the ancient world, especially among nomadic people, life was lived on foot. They walked step by step along a "path" or "way" in search of food and water for their flocks and herds. As a result, walking became a metaphor for the journey of life. We are called "to live [our lives] before God in such a way that every single step is made with reference to [him] and every day experiences him close at hand."<sup>4</sup> To each of us, God says as He did to Abraham centuries ago, "Walk before me" (Gen. 17:1).

Walking, however, is never simply walking per se. It is always walking along a particular way. We can walk along "the way of the LORD" (Gen. 18:19)—"the way of the righteous" (Ps. 1:6; cf. Prov. 8:20; 2 Peter 2:21), "the path of life" (Ps. 16:11; Prov. 10:17), "the good way" (Jer. 6:16), and "the way of the truth" (2 Peter 2:2). Or we can tread the alternative route—"the way of the wicked" (Pss. 1:6; 146:9), the "dark and slippery" way (Ps. 35:6), and "the false way" (Ps. 119:104, 128).

The point is that each one of us is on our own spiritual journey, always walking, always stepping, always moving along *a path*. One path is like the “light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day” (Prov. 4:18), while the other is a path of pain and grief and ultimately final destruction (Ps. 1:6). Thus we need to pray with the psalmist: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any *hurtful way* in me, and lead me in the *everlasting way*” (Ps. 139:23–24).

The picture of continually walking may be unpleasant and tiring to us. To constantly pay attention to our next step—always thinking about whether it’s along the path of life or along the way of destruction—takes a lot of thought and effort. Wouldn’t it be nice just to be able to get off the road and relax for a while? Or, as someone put it, “Lord, please give me the vacation of a second!”

We may never have thought of the Christian life in this way. But in reality, we may be practicing it by relegating our spiritual walk to well-defined religious activities such as church attendance, group Bible studies, and personal times of “devotion.” The rest of our life—whatever else consumes our time—is not part of the journey. It’s a vacation. It doesn’t count.

This is contrary to Scripture. In God’s eyes, our journey includes *all* of our life. We are always on our journey, making decisions and taking steps in one direction or another. Even when we avoid deciding about something, we are deciding, taking a step in some direction—no decision is a decision. Thus our spiritual growth or heart transformation includes all of the activities of our life—work, family life, social life, recreation, physical exercise (if we do it), and so on. Later we will see that changing our heart involves changing our thoughts, emotion, and will and thus our actions to conform to the thoughts, emotions, and will of God. Since these functions are continually active in our life, there is no aspect of our life that is not involved in our transformation.

The Scriptures say, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). As the goal of our life is to live to the glory of God, this is also the goal of our spiritual transformation. As such, therefore, no matter where we are or what we are doing, we are either nourishing and strengthening our new life or weakening and stunting it.

In many ways, the new life of the Christian is like all of life. According to Erwin Schrödinger, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, something is considered to be alive “when it goes on ‘doing something,’ moving, exchanging material with its environment, and so forth.” A living organism avoids decay and death, only “by eating, drinking, breathing and (in the case of plants) assimilating” life-nourishing elements from outside itself. This continuous process is called

*metabolism*, which comes from the Greek word *metaballein*, meaning change or exchange.<sup>5</sup>

Plants absorb light and other elements from the atmosphere. They extend their roots into the soil in search of nutrients and moisture in order to sustain life and to grow. Animals also look for similar life-giving provisions. In the same manner, human life is a continual metabolism, drawing in life from outside of ourselves. One of the key Hebrew words related to human nature, *nefesh*, is often translated “soul.” The term depicts the human person as a being of desires, drives, and appetites that must be fulfilled in order to be alive.<sup>6</sup> In short, *it is our very nature to live by hungering and thirsting for nourishment from sources beyond ourselves.*

However, we do not always take in what is good for us or what is truly life-enhancing. For example, a glazed donut and a rich, bold cup of coffee gives a surge of life, but the subsequent letdown lets us know that some “life sources” can be specious. Nevertheless, as long as we’re alive, this fundamental process of drawing life from outside of ourselves never ceases. We’re continually taking in either healthy nourishment that promotes life and growth or imbibing harmful toxic material that leads to sickness and death.

This reality in our physical life is equally valid in our spiritual life. Understanding this truth is vital for understanding our spiritual growth. We are continually assimilating from our environment either true life from our Creator/ Redeemer, or counterfeit “life” from the Deceiver, which is no life at all. As we will see later, it is the very nature of our heart—our inner person—to be open to outside influences that shape and form who we really are. It is no wonder that Scripture urges us to “watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23).

## **Growth in the Life of God**

But what does this spiritual growth in our new life look like? How do we know if we are really growing? Are we growing in our spiritual life when we gain more Bible and theological knowledge? Does growth mean increased faithfulness in Christian practices—Bible reading, church attendance, witnessing, good behavior, loving actions and so forth? Or does spiritual transformation mean more religious feelings, more zeal and passion in worship, or more “spiritual” experiences?

All of these things may be evidences of growth. But they also could be of our own doing rather than actually flowing from our new life. Genuine spiritual growth is an increase in the experience of the new life of which Jesus spoke when he said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (NASB) or “life in

all its fullness” (John 10:10 GNT). Or as Paul described it, “life indeed” (1 Tim. 6:19 NASB) or “that which is truly life” (ESV).

This new life is the indestructible life of the living God himself. It is Christ’s life lived in us *as our own life*—this is what the apostle had in mind when he wrote “Christ, who is our life” (Col. 3:4) and said of himself “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). In short, it is Christ’s life produced in us by the “Spirit of life” (Rom. 8:2; cf. 8:6; Gal. 6:8).

Our natural human life manifests itself in thoughts, feelings, and actions. The more we think, feel, and act, the more we are alive. *These same capacities are also the means through which our new life is expressed.* Our new life in God is also evident in thoughts, feelings, and actions that are according to the pattern of God’s life. Instead of confused thoughts, feelings, and desires that are corrupted by the patterns of this world and complicated by the burden of guilt and depression, in our new life in God, we think Christ’s thoughts, feel his emotions, and live our life as it was designed by our Creator.

According to the Scripture, Christ has made it possible for us to “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). We are becoming like God in “life and godliness,” taking on a divine quality of life that exhibits a godly moral walk, as opposed to the “corruption” or destructive decay of the world (2 Peter 1:3–4)—a life that increasingly reflects “the image of God” we were created to embody as human beings.

We are also said to be “partakers of Christ” (Heb. 3:14; see also 1 Cor. 1:9) and participate (or fellowship) in the Spirit (Phil. 1:2; 2 Cor. 13:14). All of this does not mean that growing spiritually is becoming a divine being. No, God will always be God and we will always be human. But what it means is that God through his Spirit is continually working to form us into Christlikeness. Like an embryo develops into the form of a human, so our new life is gradually taking the shape of Christ’s life (Gal. 4:19).

What this new life looks like is therefore exemplified in the human earthly life of Christ. It is also seen in the many instructions and commands for our life and the biblical examples of the lives of many godly men and women. Perhaps there is no better description of this life than the qualities described as the “fruit of the Spirit” who is himself “the Spirit of life”—“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). These are rightly termed “fruit,” for they are the produce or product of the “Life-Giver,” rather than human manufacture.

The understanding of this Spirit-produced life is enhanced when we consider its opposite described as “the deeds of the flesh,” or the dysfunctional outcome

of living apart from the life of God—“immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these” (Gal. 5:19–21). As Christians, we are not totally free from these old “deeds of the flesh.” But at the core of our being, our heart, the life of God through the Spirit is implanted and designed to grow the fruit of the Spirit.

## Love

The first three elements of the Spirit’s fruit—love, joy, and peace—are especially prominent throughout the Bible as the qualities of the life that God designed for us. The prime position of love at the head of the list suggests that the other virtues somehow flow from love.

It is only natural that our new life in God is characterized by love since God himself is love. As John wrote, “Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. . . . if we love one another, God abides in us, . . . *God is love*, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:7, 12, 16). Moreover, “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death” (1 John 3:14).

This love is not the love of the world’s songs and poetry—a natural love that cares for those who are dear to us and who usually treat us as we would like to be treated. It is the radical, unlimited, unconditional love of Christ, who willingly gave up his glory, power, honor, and finally his very life, not just for his friends, but also for his enemies. It is the perfect love that has existed between the Father, Son, and Spirit in eternity that has been “poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:5).

## Joy

Joy is another prominent trait of our new life in God. As William Barclay rightly stated, “Joy is *the distinguishing atmosphere of the Christian life*. We may put it this way—whatever be the ingredients of the Christian life, and in whatever proportions they are mixed together, joy is one of them.”<sup>7</sup>

Like love, this joy is of God. The joy of our new life is joy “in the Lord” (Phil. 4:4). It is Christ’s joy of which he said to his disciples, “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15:11; see also 17:13). It is the joy with which he welcomes his servants into his presence for eternity—“Enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:21, 23).

Again, this is not the joy that depends on something in this world—the present world system that is passing away and can never be permanent (1 John 2:17).



## What Is Joy and Happiness?

Joy is “that spiritual gladness which acceptance with God and change of heart produce. . . . It is opposed to dullness, despondency, indifference, and all the distractions and remorse which are wrought by the works of the flesh. This joy is the spring of energy, and praise wells out of the joyful heart. Where the heart is gladness, the instinctive dialect is song.”<sup>9</sup>

It is sometimes said, “God wants us to be holy, not happy,” suggesting that God is not really interested in our happiness. While happiness may come at times as a side benefit, his real goal for us is obedience to his commands. To be sure God desires that we walk in obedience with him, but does that exclude joy also as his goal? The objective of wise parents is not to make their children happy every moment by giving them everything they desire or protecting them from every hurt. But any hurtful maturing experience that parents allow their child to experience or active discipline they administer has the goal of a richer future life of peace and joy for their child.

It is no doubt correct to say that God wants more for us than “happiness” if our happiness is determined merely by *happenings*. But if happiness is conceived in a broader biblical sense, we cannot exclude it from God’s desire for us. For included in the Spirit’s fruit life is not only love and peace, but joy. In fact, “Joy is more conspicuous in Christianity than in any other religion and in the Bible more than any other literature.”<sup>9</sup>

In reality there is no disjunction between holiness and an abundant, joyful life. Holiness means that we’re set apart for the living God, who is the source of all life. And, as Fenton John Anthony Hort rightly says, “There is no life, worthy to be called life, entirely separate from joy and gladness.”<sup>10</sup>

It is not based on our circumstances, as in the example of Paul repeatedly mentioning “joy” (seven times) and exhorting to “rejoice” (nine times) in his letter to Philippi while he was in prison.

The troubles and sorrows of this world cannot extinguish this joy. Paul Tournier, the well-known Christian Swiss psychiatrist, knew something of this joy. Telling of his deep sense of loss in the passing away of his dear wife, he said, “I can truly say that I have a great grief and that I am a happy man.” The joy of Tournier is well expressed in Fenton John Anthony Hort’s explanation: “He whose heart has learned to make answer to the Lord comes to find that the power of life and joy lives on with him while outward things are taking their course of obstruction or decay. He has a life exempt from being dried up, for it flows not from within himself or from any part of the perishable creation but from an ever living fountain in the heavens.”<sup>11</sup>

## Peace

Perhaps the most comprehensive description of our experience of God’s kind of life is the third term of the life-giving Spirit’s fruit—peace. The association

of peace with life is apparent in Paul's words, "For the mind set on the flesh [i.e., the self-centered mind] is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is *life and peace*" (Rom. 8:6; cf. Prov. 3:16–18). Peace is also often found as the equivalent of salvation. The Savior is the "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6; cf. Acts 10:36), and the gospel of his saving work is the "the gospel of peace" (Eph. 6:15; cf. 2:17).

The peace of the Bible is more than the absence of turmoil or hostilities. The fundamental meaning of the Hebrew word for "peace" (*shalom*) denotes "completeness, wholeness, harmony." It has the idea of "unimpaired relationship with others and fulfillment in one's undertakings."<sup>12</sup> Thus the peace produced by the Spirit may be summed up as "everything that makes for a person's highest good and that promotes the best relationships."<sup>13</sup> Praying for the blessing of peace as in the climax and culmination of the well-known Old Testament priestly blessing—"the LORD lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace" (Num. 6:24–26)—is therefore asking for "the sum total of all God's good gifts to his people."<sup>14</sup>

We all know something of this peace and we long for it. It is, to put it simply, the way things ought to be—that sense that everything is right. As a sick person knows the feeling of health and longs for its return, so every human being in the depth of his heart longs for this peace—the health of "*universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*."<sup>15</sup> It is the peace of life for which we were created—though now disordered—that still remains in us, even as the memory of health remains in the sick person.

## Abundant Life

The new life in Christ through the Spirit characterized by love, joy, and peace expresses itself in various ways depending on our personality type. But whether we are affable, melancholic, cranky, pragmatic, or any combination thereof, this life is an abundant life (John 10:10)—it will always have a certain enthusiasm. The Bible describes it as "living water" that satisfies and brings renewed vitality—a picture that had powerful meaning in arid biblical lands (Ps. 63:1; Jer. 2:13).

The psalmist described God as the "fountain of life" who gives his people "drink [from] . . . the river of [his] delights" (Ps. 36:8–9). Jesus offered "living water" to the Samaritan woman, telling her that it becomes "a well of water *springing up* to eternal life" in everyone who drinks of it (John 4:14). Eugene Peterson captured the exuberance of the Greek expression "springing up"<sup>\*</sup> in

<sup>\*</sup> A related form of the Greek word is used to describe the man who had been crippled from birth and was now "leaping" joyfully in the temple after being healed through Peter and John (Acts 3:8).

his paraphrase: “The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life” (MSG). An artesian spring has ground water that flows upward by natural pressure, without any need for pumping. The new life is life that bubbles up—it just flows.

Jesus later describes this life bubbling up *in* the believer’s heart as *flowing out* as rivers of living water in love and service to others (John 7:38). Leon Morris aptly summed up the zest of this life: “The life that Jesus gives is no tame and stagnant thing. It is much more than merely the entrance into a new state, that of being saved instead of lost. It is the abundant life ([John] 10:10), and the living Spirit within people is evidence of this. . . . When the believer comes to Christ and drinks, that believer not only slakes his thirst but receives such an abundant supply that veritable rivers flow from him.”<sup>16</sup> Our salvation is not only *from* sin, but also *to* newness of life.

In short, our new life in Christ—and the transformed lifestyle it produces—should be felt in our daily experience in increasing measure during our journey on earth. According to the Bible, that’s exactly what God intended.

### Fountain of Life

The great nineteenth-century Irish-born Cambridge biblical scholar Fenton John Anthony Hort, referring to the psalmist’s words “with You is the fountain of life” (Ps. 36:9), gives us a good description of our new abundant life in Christ:

The perennial spring of water that leaps and flashes as though it were a living thing, breaking ceaselessly forth from a hidden source, is the best image of that higher life bestowed on him to whom God has unveiled His face. . . . He whose heart has learned to make answer to the Lord comes to find that the power of life and joy lives on with him while outward things are taking their course of obstruction or decay. He has a life exempt from being dried up, for it flows not from within himself or from any part of the perishable creation but from an ever living fountain in the heavens. . . .

In Christ life was given in its fullness . . . . This is the one character of the Gospel which takes precedence of all others: its many partial messages are unfoldings of its primary message of life. Salvation according to the Scripture is nothing less than the preservation, restoration, or exaltation of life.<sup>17</sup>

### Understanding the Way of Growth

The presence of the new life in a person inevitably creates a hunger and thirst for more. The more we experience the abundant nature of this life, the greater our desire for it. Once we realize that God designed us to grow in our new life,

and graciously makes available to us everything that we need to grow, we're left with practical questions such as: How does growth take place? What does God do in this process, and what must I do? How does God's power transform my daily walk? How can I have a lasting change in my thoughts, attitudes, and actions?

The answers to these questions lie in the heart, the most important biblical term in relation to man's nature and actions. The heart is the control center of life. It is the place where God works to change us and the place we also must work if growth is to take place. Hence the Bible counsels, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life" (Prov. 4:23).

We will begin with the biblical teaching on the importance of the heart as the center of our being. Because God works his renewal in and through our heart, it will be helpful to understand something of its nature and how it functions. *The heart is who we are.* It is the seat of our thoughts, emotions, and actions. Understanding the heart will help us grasp the process of our transformation.

We will also study what God does and what we can do in the process of transformation. The Bible makes it clear that God is the ultimate heart-changer. Ultimately, only a growing relationship with our Savior Jesus Christ can transform our heart since he is the One who has power over sin and has broken its hold on us. After all, our growth is nothing less than an increasing freedom from the power of sin's bondage and enduring experience of God's bubbling zest in our daily lives.

But our growth also entails our activity. The apostle Paul's words, "Work out your salvation . . . for it is God who is at work in you" (Phil. 2:12–13), are central to our spiritual transformation. This process, as the Bible indicates, involves two elements: the part that God plays, and the role that the believer plays. A greater understanding of both of these can help us grow in our new life in Christ.

Unlike Peter Pan, we can indeed, and in fact must, grow up. And Scripture tells how.

## Questions for Thought

1. Since you became a Christian, what has been your attitude toward growth in your new life? If you were concerned to grow, what was your concept of spiritual growth and how one grows in one's spiritual life?
2. Looking back on your life since you became a Christian, what changes if any do you see in your spiritual life along the way—times of positive

growth or times of slipping back? Describe them and explain why you think they occurred.

3. From the description of our new life in Christ, what characteristics of that life are most prominent in your life? What are least prominent?