

# **SOUL KEEPING**

## **by John Ortberg**

### **Summary by Mark R. Elliott\***

#### **PROLOGUE: The Keeper of the Stream**

Ortberg opens the book with the following allegory which is used throughout the book:

There once was a town high in the Alps that straddled the banks of a beautiful stream. The stream was fed by springs that were old as the earth and deep as the sea.

The water was clear like crystal. Children laughed and played beside it, swans and geese swam on it. You could see the rocks and the sand and the rainbow trout that swarmed at the bottom of the stream.

High in the hills, far beyond anyone's sight, lived an old man who served as Keeper of the Springs. He had been hired so long ago that now no one could remember a time when he wasn't there. He would travel from one spring to another in the hills, removing branches or fallen leaves or debris that might pollute the water. But his work was unseen.

One year the town council decided they had better things to do with their money. No one supervised the old man anyway. They had roads to repair and taxes to collect and services to offer, and giving money to an unseen stream-cleaner had become a luxury they could no longer afford.

So the old man left his post. High in the mountains, the springs went untended; twigs and branches and worse muddied the liquid flow. Mud and silt compacted the creek bed; farm wastes turned parts of the stream into stagnant bogs.

For a time no one in the village noticed. But after a while, the water was not the same. It began to look brackish. The swans flew away to live elsewhere. The water no longer had a crisp scent that drew children to play by it. Some people in the town began to grow ill. All noticed the loss of sparkling beauty that used to flow between the banks of the streams that fed the town. The life of the village depended on the stream, and the life of the streams depended on the keeper.

The city council reconvened, the money was found, the old man was rehired. After yet another time, the springs were cleaned, the stream was pure, children played again on its banks, illness was replaced by health, the swans came home, and the village came back to life.

The life of the village depends on the health of the stream.

*The stream is your soul. And you are the keeper.*

Question: How would you describe your current "soul maintenance" program?

Q: On a scale of one to 10, with 10 being the healthiest, how would you rate the health of your soul?

#### **INTRODUCTION: Holy Ground**

He provides an introduction to Dallas and Jane Willard and their home in Box Canyon, California. Several times in the book he refers to personal connect times with Dallas and the

lessons he learned. John provides a taste of the “pearls of wisdom” that shaped his soul. As John describes them: “Phrases that would quietly and patiently come out of Dallas’ mouth.” Like:

- “Being right is actually a very hard burden to be able to carry gracefully and humbly. That’s why nobody likes to sit next to the kid in class who’s right all the time. One of the hardest things in the world is to be right and not hurt other people with it.”
- “Hell is just the best God can do for some people.”
- “Your eternal destiny is not cosmic retirement; it is to be part of a tremendously creative project, under unimaginably splendid leadership, on an inconceivably vast scale, with ever-increasing cycles of fruitfulness and enjoyment—that is the prophetic vision which ‘eye has not seen and ear has not heard.’”
- “The most important thing in your life is not what you do; it’s who you become. That’s what you will take into eternity. You are an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God’s great universe.”

Q: Which of these four statements most resonates with you and why?

Q: Which of these four statements causes you the greatest “heart burn” and why?

## **CHAPTER 1: The Soul Nobody Knows**

“One of the most important words in the Bible is soul. We throw that word around a lot, but if someone were to ask you to explain exactly what the word soul means, what would you say?”

“Belief in the soul is ubiquitous: ‘Most people, at most times, in most places, at most ages, have believed that human beings have some kind of souls.’ We know it matters. We suspect it’s important. But we’re not sure what it means.” (page 27)

In the balance of the chapter, John describes the various ways we use the word soul.

Q: Let’s go back to John’s question, exactly what does the word soul mean to you?

Q: How do people you know use the word soul?

## **CHAPTER 2: What Is the Soul?**

A. “My outer world had changed a great deal since I had last seen Dallas. I was working at a church that—in the little world of my profession—was large and visible. There were more people on staff at this church than there were attendees at the church where I had last worked...My outer world was now larger and busier and more complex than it had ever been...But my inner world had not grown at all. My inner life is where my secret thoughts and hopes and wishes live.”

“I thought that such a large change in my outer world would bring a quick upgrade to my inner one—more fulfillment, more gratification. Instead, the very busyness and complexity of it was almost like a private blizzard that made it hard to navigate my internal world clearly...I asked him, ‘Why am I not happier, now that I’m getting to do what is in many ways a dream job?’” (pages 38-39)

Q: At this moment in time, are your outer and inner worlds equal or is one bigger than the other?

Q: As someone who has responded to God's call to the ministry, have you had times where you, like John, questioned your level of contentment?

Q: Describe the last time you felt that way. What did you do, if anything, to draw closer to God?

B. John continues with Dallas' response: "For that, Dallas said, we would have to talk about the care of the soul." John then writes, "I work at a church where my job involves saving souls, but if someone asked me, I'd have a hard time saying exactly what a soul is. Is soul just a word religious people throw around?" He then provides Dallas' response.

"Brother John, why is there such value and mystery to your existence? The really deep reason is because of this tiny, fragile, vulnerable, precious thing about you called your soul. You are not just a self; you are a soul. 'The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.' You're a soul made by God, made for God, and made to need God, which means you were not made to be self-sufficient."

John points out that in one of his books Dallas provides further explanation: "The soul is that aspect of your whole being that correlates, integrates, and enlivens everything going on in the various dimensions of the self. The soul is the life center of human beings."

Dallas also pointed out, "If your soul is healthy, no external circumstance can destroy your life. If your soul is unhealthy, no external circumstance can redeem your life." (pages 38-40)

Q: As preachers, there are times when all of us have stretched credibility by making a distinction between two words that are in most uses synonymous. Is Dallas doing that with the words "soul" and "self?" If not, why not?

Q: How do you respond to Dallas' statement: "If your soul is healthy, no external circumstance can destroy your life. If your soul is unhealthy, no external circumstance can redeem your life."

C. John probed deeper and asked Dallas, "But what exactly is the soul? Dallas took a napkin and drew the first of a series of concentric circles. The innermost circle, according to Dallas, is the human will—your capacity to choose...God made people to 'exercise dominion.'



But if the will is so central, why isn't spiritual life a lot easier? Why can't I simply tell people to use their will to do what God says or to feel God's presence?

'The will is very central, but it's also incredibly limited,' Dallas explained. 'Do you ever find yourself doing something that goes against your better judgment or values?...If you try to improve your soul by willpower, you will exhaust yourself and everyone around you.' (pages 40-41)

Q: How do you respond to Dallas' explanation of the soul?

Q: In your opinion, how do Dallas' statements "the will is very central, but it's also incredibly limited" and "If you try to improve your soul by willpower, you will exhaust yourself and everyone around you" fit with your life experience and your understanding of the Bible?

D. John continued the conversation by asking, "Why is that?"

Dallas drew a second circle around the first to illustrate. The next part of the person is the mind. In the ancient world, the mind referred to both a person's thoughts and their feelings. By thoughts I mean all the ways a person is conscious of things.'

That made a lot of sense to me....When I think thoughts that are false or unworthy, when I entertain desires that are in opposition to what God wants for my life, I damage my soul. The apostle Paul says, 'The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.'

Q: On a daily basis, would you say your mind is more controlled by your thoughts and feelings or by God's Holy Spirit?

E. "Dallas drew another circle that he said represents our bodies. 'The body is our little kingdom. That's the one place in all the universe where our tiny wills have a chance to be in charge...Our bodies are like our little 'power packs.' We couldn't be us without them. They are filled with all kinds of appetites and all kinds of habits...Our bodies are amazing. But they are not the whole story. I am not just the stuff my body is made of.'" (page 41)

Q: On a daily basis, would you say your mind is more controlled by your fleshly desires or by God's Holy Spirit?

F. "He drew another circle, and this one, he said, represents the soul. The soul is the capacity to integrate all the parts into a single whole life. It is something like a program that runs a computer; you don't usually notice it unless it messes up.'

According to Dallas, the soul seeks harmony, connection, and integration. That is why integrity is such a deep soul-word. The human soul seeks to integrate our will and our mind and our body into an integral person. Beyond that, the soul seeks to connect us with other

people, with creation, and with God himself—who made us to be rooted in him the way a tree is rooted by a life-giving stream...the word soul in both the Old and New Testament and elsewhere in the ancient world, is often simply a synonym for the person...

Your soul is what integrates your will (your intentions), your mind (your thoughts and feelings, your values and conscience), and your body (your face, body language, and actions) into a single life. A soul is healthy—well ordered—when there is harmony between these three entities and God’s intent for all creation. When you are connected with God and other people in life, you have a healthy soul.” (pages 42-43)

Q: As John completes Dallas’ explanation of the soul and how it relates to our body, mind, and will, do you find it to be a clear and compelling explanation? If not, what questions do you have?

Q: Using Dallas’ explanations above, how well integrated are you? Are there any changes you need to make to your daily life to help you become integrated?

G. In a section entitled *Unhealthy Souls*, John reflected on a businessman he knew who devoted his life to making money. His children always knew that they had less priority than his job. He then quoted Jesus’ statement, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” John then stated, “I have always thought this verse meant that in the long run it won’t do you any good to acquire a lot of money and have a lot of sex and other sensual pleasures if you end up going to hell.”

John writes, “Dallas, gently corrected me: ‘That is not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is not talking here about people going to hell. He explained that Jesus is talking about a diagnosis, not a destination...acquiring the whole world could not even produce satisfaction, let alone meaning and goodness. To lose my soul means I no longer have a healthy center that organizes and guides my life...That is the human problem. It is not some superficial thing that only relates to getting the right afterlife if you affirm the right doctrines. It has to do with the depth of the human conditions, which Jesus identified as nobody else ever has.’” (pages 44-45)

Q: What do you think about Dallas’ interpretation that Jesus is talking about the condition of the soul and not its eternal destination?

H. “Our world has replaced the word soul with the word self, and they are not the same thing. The more we focus on our selves, the more we neglect our souls...To focus on my soul means to look at my life under the care and connection of God. To focus on myself apart from God means losing awareness of what matters most.

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* cited a study that indicates that in the twentieth century, people who lived in each generation were three times more likely to experience depression than folks in the generation before them. Despite the rise of the mental health profession, people are becoming increasingly vulnerable to depression. Why? Martin Seligman, a brilliant psychologist with no religious ax to grind, has a theory that it’s because

we have replaced church, faith, and community with a tiny little unit that cannot bear the weight of meaning. That's the self. We're all about the self. We revolve our lives around ourselves.

Ironically, the more obsessed we are with our selves, the more we neglect our souls...Self is a stand-alone, do-it-yourself unit, while the soul reminds us we are not made for ourselves. The soul always exists before God.” (pages 46-47)

Q: Would you agree that in the last century, each successive generation became more self-oriented rather than soul oriented?

Q: If you are an older minister, have you seen this change take place over time? How has it manifested itself in your ministry?

Q: If the research mentioned above is correct, do you believe there are any solutions to self-centeredness apart from the soul being connected to God?

Q: What are some Bible verses that help you concentrate more on God than yourself?

### **CHAPTER 3: A Soul-Challenged World**

A. John opens the chapter by relating an experience he had at an event called Catalyst West—a gathering of young ministry leaders. After pointing out the stark contrast between Dallas Willard and the audience, he shared a moment from the on-stage interview he did with Dallas as they discussed ministry issues. One of Dallas' responses was, “What matters is not the accomplishments you achieve; what matters is the person you become.”

John writes, “He speaks of eternity, and how the soul is formed, and how temptation works, and why sin is so destructive. He speaks of the slow, unglamorous building of character. I worry about how this is going. Other speakers at this event speak with great passion while Dallas speaks in the cultivated monotone of an academic. Other speakers tell dramatic stories of radical devotion and hellish suffering, but Dallas tells no stories at all.

When he is done, the whole crowd of twenty-something, tattooed clergy dudes leap to their feet. Dallas is presented with a kind of Lifetime Achievement Award. I am at a loss to account for this response. And then it occurs to me: The soul searches for a father.”

Q: Have you found some younger men and women who are searching for a father figure—someone with spiritual depth and integrity?

B. Much of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of Jesus' Parable of the Soils and the fact that as we look at where the parable uses the word seed, we might replace it with the word soul. John then speaks of the various soils that the seed/soul can encounter.

The Hardened Soul is where the path is hard and dry, and the seeds don't have a chance. He points out that souls get that way. But he also states, that, “it takes a little, just a tiny little bit

of softness in the soil to give the seed a chance. The seed is strong—stronger than you can imagine. One tiny seed can break up a sidewalk if it can find a little room to breathe. The hardened soul is more vulnerable to being saved than it knows.”

The Shallow Soul is subject to the world where superficiality reigns. This reality conflicts with a depth to our soul that is beyond words. He points out that “the world conspires against our souls by blinding us to the depth and glory of their God-given design and tempting us to be satisfied with immediate gratification.”

The Cluttered Soul lives out the old adage, “if the Devil can’t make you sin, he will make you busy, because either way your soul will shrivel.” (pages 54-59)

Q: If you were to honestly evaluate the condition of your soul today, would you say it is deep and fertile, hardened, shallow, or cluttered?

Q: Can you describe a time when you experienced each of the four “soul” conditions?

#### **CHAPTER 4: Lost Souls**

A. “I had always thought that a lost soul referred to the soul’s destination, not its condition. But it’s the condition that is the real problem. If a car no longer works, it doesn’t matter much whether it ends up in a junkyard or the valet parking section of the Ritz Carlton. We are not less because we are going to wind up in the wrong place. We are going to wind up in the wrong place because we are lost...The soul integrates the will and mind and body. Sin disintegrates them. (page 62)

Q: How do you respond to the concept that lostness refers to condition more than it does destination?

B. John shares some of his personal struggles and then states, “I had a doctorate in clinical psychology because I believed other people needed help, but not me. Sin was in my pride. Sin was in my stubbornness.” After significant “soul searching,” John wrote, “The lost soul that I had gone into ministry to save was my own. (pages 64-65)

Q: Have you had a similar epiphany: the lost soul that drew you into the ministry was your own?

C. “As I unburdened myself to Dallas, I began to understand another soul truth: Confession really is good for the soul. The soul is healed by confession. Sin splits the self. It split me. It meant I tried to pretend in front of Nancy [John’s wife]. I tried to pretend before the church that I was better husband than I was. Sin divided my will. I wanted closeness, yet I wanted to inflict pain when I felt hurt.

As long as I keep pretending, my soul keeps dying...My friend Scotty says that sometimes we ask for forgiveness, but we know full well we will go back to the same sin tomorrow. We don’t really want forgiveness, we just want to get out of trouble. He says it would be better to

pray like this, ‘Dear God, I sinned yesterday. I sinned again today, and I’m planning to go out and do the same sin tomorrow. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

It may not quite reflect the maturity of ‘Thy will be done,’ but it is better to be an honest mess before God than a dishonest ‘saint.’ ‘You desire truth in the inmost parts,’ the psalmist said to God, and that’s soul-talk.” (pages 65-66)

Q: As a ministry leader, how important is it for us to be completely honest before God?

Q: How important is it for us to be honest before our spouse, family, and church?

- D. In a section entitled *Disconnected from God*, John writes: “God designed us so that our choices, our thoughts and desires, and our behavior would be in perfect harmony with each other and would be powered by an unbroken connection with God, in perfect harmony with him and with all of his creation.

This is precisely why when somebody asked Jesus once, ‘What is the most important of all the commandments?’ he answered, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ It is not coincidental that all the parts of the person we have been talking about are here in the most important commandment.

That’s why the basic human problem is at the soul level. James uses a really interesting word—twice. In James 1:8 he says, ‘A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways.’ Then later he repeats, ‘Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.’ The word translated ‘double-minded’ is the Greek word *dipsuchos*. *Psuche* is the Greek word for soul, and literally it could be translated, ‘you double-souled,’ ‘you split-souled,’ or ‘you fractured soul.’ Sin fractures and shatters the soul.” (pages 66-67)

Q: How often do you find yourself torn within—‘double souled?’

Q: Until and unless our own soul is stable in all its ways, how can we truly love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength?

Q: If we are ‘double-souled,’ and love our neighbor as we do our self, how healthy can our love be?

- E. “But too often the will lacks the power to control the mind, allowing it to go places we don’t want to go. Our bodies are these collections of appetites that veer out of control and habits that drag us down paths we don’t want to travel.

Jesus made this diagnosis a long time ago when talking about temptation, ‘The spirit’—notice the language again—‘is willing, but the flesh [the body] is weak.’ This is very true and largely ignored and forgotten in our day. Habits eat willpower for breakfast. So there is the will, there is the mind, and there is the body. They are working badly, sometimes in ways that are kind of humorous to us, but often in ways that are horrible and unspeakably tragic.

Sin is the sickness that our souls have inherited.” (pages 69-70)

Q: How do you react to his statement, “Habits eat willpower for breakfast?”

Q: If that is true, what specific habit can you change that gives your “will power” an opportunity to gain its greatest victory?

## **CHAPTER 5: Sin and the Soul**

A. In this chapter, John provides plenty of ammunition for those of us who like to use empirical evidence from science to reinforce Biblical truths. For those who aren't enamored by all the science jargon, this summary only refers to the results. People who like details will want to read carefully this section of the book.

He begins with a Duke University study that reveals that when we are faking it in one area of our life we become more cynical in our attitudes toward other people.

Q: Take a few minutes and reflect on your own life. Has there been a time in their own life that this was true?

Now take a few minutes to answer the questions he asks in the book:

Q: How do I come to grips with the truth about my own soul?

Q: Why is it so evasive?

Q: Why can I often see other people more clearly than myself?

“Soul language has to involve sin language. Why? Because sin disintegrates, obliterates wholeness. Your soul cannot function properly if sin is present.” (page 71)

C. Referring to another study, John writes, “There is real neurological evidence for the power of spiritual reflection to make us aware of our sin. Christians actually use a different part of their brain to self-evaluate than non-Christians do. In a study conducted in Beijing, researchers found that Christians used the same part of the brain to evaluate themselves and others while non-Christians used one part of the brain to view their own actions and another part to evaluate the actions of others. Researchers hypothesized this is because Christians are actually using a kind of ‘Jesus reference point’ for self-evaluation; they were really asking, ‘What does God think of me?’

UCLA researcher Jeff Schwartz said that this study is one of the most important scientific papers published in the last decade. Prayer, meditation, and confession actually have the power to rewire the brain in a way that can make us less self-referential and more aware of how God sees us.” (pages 72-73)

Q: Did you notice that the research was done in Beijing, not in some bastion of Christian conservatism?

Q: The research indicates that Christians who love their neighbor as themselves, will also judge their neighbors as themselves. How can this make a difference in the day-to-day life of a true believer?

- D. Research by Duke professor Dan Ariely reported in a book entitled *The Honest Truth about Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves*, notes that we are driven by two primary motivations: One, we want to receive selfish gain, and we want it so much that we are willing to lie or cheat or deceive for it. Two, we want to be able to look in the mirror and think well of ourselves.

His book includes somewhat humorous research results as it relates to college students and their “excuses” for why a paper was late or why they couldn’t take an exam when it was scheduled. As it turns out, “grandmothers are ten times more likely to die before a midterm and nineteen times more likely to die before a final exam. Worse, grandmothers of students who are not doing well in class are at even higher risk. Students who are failing are fifty times more likely to lose grandma than non-failing students. It turns out that the greatest predictor of mortality among senior citizens in our day ends up being their grandchildren’s GPAs.” (pages 73-74)

Q: How do you react to the title of Ariely’s book: *We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves*?

- E. John points out that “every act of wrongdoing (sin) leads to the greater likelihood of another act... We tolerate jealousy, sabotage, and greed, but only enough so we can all feel good about ourselves—because we’re good people... When I cross over that line where I can’t pretend anymore, generally what will happen is that moral behavior will collapse completely. You see this sometimes in scandal-ridden companies or corrupt executives, in abusive families, in the nightmare of child molestation. Even in the unbelievably scarring words hurled at anyone who does not look or think like us. You reach a point where you know that what you are doing is so wrong, but you don’t care anymore. You see it in whole cultures: Rwanda, North Korea, Stalin’s Russia, The Third Reich.

Group discussion: You have heard the “slippery slope” argument before, and now we have scientific proof that it exists. Describe a specific area where our culture has experienced a significant moral decline because we were willing to early on accept “small sins.”

Personal reflection: As you reflect on your own life, and ask God to reveal absolute truth, what is one area in which you have permitted small sins to open the door to wider self-deception.

Group discussion: Reflect on our culture, can you list one or two areas in which we have let “group think” blind us to areas of major sin?

Group discussion: Reflect on your church. Can you think of one or two areas that you have become blinded or allowed sin to get a foothold?

- F. John closes the chapter with a section entitled *A God-Given Ache for Goodness*. “Conviction is not just the pain of getting caught or pain over consequences. It means a God given, really sober sense of remorse over what I ought to feel remorseful about. It’s a God-given ache for goodness.

A prodigal son comes to his senses. The mighty King David is humbled by a phrase: ‘thou art the man.’ A sinful woman aching for forgiveness bathes Jesus’ feet with her tears. In the same way the stomach hungers for food, the conscience hungers to be cleansed. It is a God-given ache for goodness.”

Q: Describe a time where you had “a prodigal son” sense of true Biblical conviction. How did that personal experience change your relationship with God?

Q: How did that experience change your relationship with another person?

## **CHAPTER 6: It’s the Nature of the Soul to Need**

- A. John opens the chapter with the following illustration: “In the 1991 comedy film *What about Bob?* Bill Murray plays the title character, a neurotic, phobic, obsessive-compulsive personality with innumerable needs. I quote (from memory): ‘Problems breathing. Problems swallowing. Numb lips. Fingernail sensitivity. Pelvic discomfort. What if my heart stops beating? What if I’m looking for a bathroom and I can’t find one and my bladder explodes?’ Richard Dreyfuss plays the exasperated, impatient therapist who is stuck caring for him. Your soul is Bob. You are Richard Dreyfuss. It is the nature of the soul to need.” (page 81)

Q: Have you seen the movie *What about Bob?* If so, how does it feel to have someone describe your soul as “Bob like?”

- B. The soul is a little like the king on a chessboard. The king is the most limited of chess pieces; it can only move one square at a time. But if you lose the king, game over. Your soul is vulnerable because it is needy. If you meet those needs with the wrong things, game over. Or at least, game not going well.

We are limited in virtually every way: in our intelligence, our strength, our energy, our morality. We are limited in every way but one: we have unlimited desire...The truth is, the soul’s infinite capacity to desire is the mirror image of God’s infinite capacity to give. What if the real reason we feel like we never have enough is that God is not yet finished giving? The unlimited neediness of the soul matches the unlimited grace of God. (page 81-82)

Q: Take a few minutes to reflect on the analogy that your soul is like the king in a game of chess. Based on where you are today in your spiritual pilgrimage, how well is your chess game going?

Q: How well do the unlimited desires of your soul match all the things that are found in scripture that God wants to give you through His infinite capacity to give?

- C. “All sin involves idolatry. We all commit idolatry every day. It is the sin of the soul meeting its needs with anything that distances it from God...If your soul is devoted to something that becomes more important to you than God, that is your idol...I cannot replace an idol by turning away from it. I must turn toward something.

Good people—especially people of faith—do not like to think of themselves as ‘poor beggars’ who are ‘sin-sick.’ We fill our soul’s desires with everything that counters that image, trying to convince ourselves that everything is well with our souls. It isn’t. Our souls faint and yearn and cry out for God.” (page 85-87)

Q: It is obvious that materialism, personal pleasure, and sports have become huge idols in American life. However, the critical question is, “What are some of your idols?”

## **CHAPTER 7: The Soul Needs a Keeper**

- A. John writes about a time when he reconnected with Dallas, and he relates part of their conversation. “I told him that I felt frustrated because the people at the church I served were not changing more. I asked him what I needed to do to help our church experience greater levels of spiritual growth.’

Long pause...‘You must arrange your days so that you are experiencing deep contentment, joy, and confidence in your everyday life with God.’

‘No,’ I corrected him. ‘I wasn’t asking about me, I was asking about other people. I was wondering what I need to make the church do. I was thinking about a book everyone should read, or a program everyone should go through or a prayer system everyone should commit to.

‘Yes Brother John,’ he said with great patience and care. ‘I know you were thinking of those things. But that’s not what they need most. The main thing you will give your congregation—just like the main thing you give to God—is the person you become. If your soul is unhealthy, you can’t help anybody. You don’t send a doctor with pneumonia to care for patients with immune disorders. You, and nobody else, are responsible for the well-being of your own soul.’

‘I’m trying,’ I said. ‘I learned long ago about the importance of having a quiet time when I read the Bible and do daily devotions; I do my best to start each day that way.’

‘I didn’t say anything about having a quiet time,’ he gently corrected again. ‘People in churches—including pastors—have been crushed with guilt over their failure at having a regular quiet time or daily devotions. And then, even when they do, they find it does not actually lead to a healthy soul. Your problem is not the first fifteen minutes of the day. It’s

the next twenty-three hours and forty-five minutes. You must arrange your days so that you are experiencing total contentment, joy, and confidence in your everyday life with God.’

‘But how can I have total contentment, joy, and confidence?’ I responded. ‘My work isn’t going nearly well enough. Lots of people are not happy with me. I am inadequate as a pastor, husband, and father. Every week I carry the burden of delivering a sermon and knowing I’ll have to feel the pain if it doesn’t go well.’

‘I didn’t say you should experience total contentment, joy, and confidence in the remarkable adequacy of your competence or the amazingly successful circumstances of your life. It’s total contentment, joy, and confidence in your everyday experience of God. This alone is what makes a soul healthy. It’s not your wife’s job. It’s not your elder’s job. It’s not your children’s job. It’s not your friend’s job. It’s your job.’”

John closes the chapter by stating, I went to see Dallas “to seek ways to improve my church. I left with a greater understanding of the needs of my soul...The stream is your soul. And you are the keeper.” (pages 89-90, 97-98)

Q: Think about the last time you were like John and “felt frustrated because the people at the church...were not changing more.” What was YOUR solution to the problem, and how well did that work?

Q: Have you ever tried the solution Dallas suggested to John? If so, how did it work for you?

B. John quotes a couple of familiar worldly proverbs: “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.” To which he responds, “No I am its keeper, not its captain. I did not make it, and I cannot save it from death. That’s why soul-care is a different task than self-care. I do not care for my soul only for my own sake. It is only mine on loan, and it is coming due soon.” (page 93)

Q: How do you respond to the idea that your soul is something on loan from God?

Q: How different would you live, if EVERY thought and EVERY action were filtered through the reality that you are not your own, and that you were bought with a price? (I Cor 6:19-20)

C. John points out that, “Repeatedly in the book of Leviticus, Israel is told that if people do not properly observe the Sabbath, or Passover, or if they profane what is holy or despise the commandments, ‘...such persons must be cut off from their people.’ That may seem harsh, but an unhealthy soul is like a cancer in the community. I care for my soul because if it becomes unhealthy, it will infect others. You have seen it happen. Someone comes to the office in a foul mood and it casts its spell on everyone.” (page 96)

Q: Think about someone in your world whose spirit has become a “cancer in the community.” How is that person impacting the overall health of your community?

Q: Ask God to remind you of a time when your “unhealthy soul” negatively impacted your community. How did He help you find health and help the community heal?

Q: Is there an area of your life today, where the lack of health in your soul is negatively impacting your ministry. What is God telling you to do about it? Are you willing to do what He has commanded?

Q: Think about your church. Be brutally honest, is your church a benign growth, a cancer, or a healing balm to your community?

## **CHAPTER 8: The Soul Needs a Center**

A. John opens the chapter with the story of a man who lost his life when a sinkhole opened up beneath his Florida home and swallowed up his house. He then points to what Gordon MacDonald called the “sinkhole syndrome.” The syndrome can “be triggered by a failure at work, a severed relationship, harsh criticism from a parent, or for no apparent reason at all. But it feels like the earth has given away.

It turns out, MacDonald wrote, that in a sense we have two worlds to manage: an outer world of career and possessions and social networks; and an inner world that is more spiritual in nature, where values are selected and character is formed—a place where worship and confession and humility can be practiced.

Because our outer worlds are visible and measurable and expandable, they are easier to deal with. They demand our attention. ‘The result is that our private world is often cheated, neglected because it does not shout quite so loudly. It can be effectively ignored for large periods of time before it gives way to a sinkhole-like cave-in’... The sinkhole, says MacDonald, is the picture of spiritual vulnerability in our day” (pages 99-100)

Q: For those of us who have lived in an area where sinkholes exist, this is a powerful metaphor. However, even if you have never seen a sinkhole, how do you respond to the reality that there is an unseen part of your being that can undermine your very existence?

Q: How does the “sinkhole syndrome” undercut the contemporary idea that we can live a “compartmentalized life”—the idea that what we do in our private lives does not impact our public lives?

B. Under a section entitled When the Soul Lacks a Center, John wrote: “People whose souls are rooted in a center find it brings clarity to their decisions... When the soul is not centered, one is never sure what temptations are worth resisting or what sacrifices are worth making.” He then points to four areas of specific impact:

- A soul without a center feels constantly vulnerable to people or circumstances.
- A soul without a center lacks patience.
- The soul without a center is easily thrown—here he uses the illustration of trying to ride a mechanical bull.
- The soul without a center finds its identity in externals

His summary statement is that, “a very simple way to guard your soul is to ask yourself, “Will this situation block my soul’s connection to God?” (pages 100-104)

Q: How “centered” are you in your Christian walk?

Activity: The next time you are wrestling with a decision, ask yourself, “Will this situation block my soul’s connection to God?”

- C. The closing section of the chapter points to two main enemies that lead to our soul being disconnected from its center. John wrote, “One is sin. Sin cannot coexist with a soul centered on God...The other disconnect is what might be called the ‘trouble-some thought.’ It’s simply a way of thinking that does not take God into account...A soul disconnected from its center is like an unplugged computer. It is like a fish left on the banks of a river that would give it life. Eventually it crashes. It dies.” (pages 105-106)

Q: How “plugged in” are you to God’s will and His ways?

Q: When around strong faithful Christians, do you ever feel like a fish out of water?

## **CHAPTER 9: The Soul Needs a Future**

- A. John points out that the main reason people give for leaving a relationship, or a job, or a home is that there is no future in it. He then quotes Isaiah 40:6 in the context of a people living in comfort where the prophet stated, “The grass withers, the flower fades...but the word of our God stands forever.” After pointing out that this is the reality of our fleshly existence, John states, “there’s another truth about the human condition: ‘[God] has also set eternity in the human heart.’” He continues that thought as he wrote, “The Bible says the reason God has done that is that we were made for an eternal existence with him. And the most important thing we are doing in this life is preparing for the life that is going to come.” (pages 107-108)

Q: What happens to people who focus only on the fleshly reality of our existence?

Q: Looking back at your life, how has a growing relationship with God through Jesus Christ helped you to find balance between the finite fleshly side of life and the eternal spiritual side?

Q: If you continue along the current path of spiritual development, does it lead you closer to God or further from Him—Why?

- B. John uses an insightful illustration from the life of a friend (Bill Hybels) to point out what a life out of balance looks like. One day Bill was in a restaurant studying the Bible for a sermon when a young woman looked over and asked,  
“Why are you reading *that*?”  
Bill looked back and said, “Because I don’t feel like going to hell when I die.”  
She retorted, “There is no such thing as heaven or hell.”

Bill thought, This is gonna be interesting. He turned, “Why do you say that?”

She said, “Everyone knows that when you die, your candle goes out...poof!”

“You mean to tell me there’s no afterlife?”

“No.”

“So that means you must be able to just live as you please?”

“That’s right.”

“Like there’s no judgment day or anything?”

“Right.”

Bill continued, “Well, that’s fascinating to me. Where did you hear that?”

She said, “I read it somewhere.”

“Can you give me the name of the book?”

“I don’t recall.”

“Can you give me the name of the author of the book?”

“I forgot his name.”

“Did that author write any other books?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it possible that your author changed his mind two years after he wrote this particular book, and then wrote another one that said there is a heaven and a hell? Is that possible?”

“It’s possible, but not likely.”

Bill: “All right, let me get this straight. You are rolling the dice on your eternity predicated on what someone you don’t even know wrote in a book you can’t even recall the title of. Have I got that straight?”

She looked back. “That’s right.”

Bill summarized, “You know what I think, my friend? I think you have merely created a belief that guarantees the continuation of your unencumbered lifestyle. I think you made it up, because it is very discomfoting to think of a heaven. It is a very discomfoting thought to think of a hell. It is very unnerving to face a holy God in the day of reckoning. I think you made it all up.”

Q: Can you recall similar conversations you have had with people who don’t believe in eternity? What did you say to them?

- C. He includes another Dallas Willard quote: “You are an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God’s great universe.” John adds, “God did not plant death in the human heart. Death came because of sin.”

Q: How does it make you feel to know you are “a spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God’s great universe?”

## **CHAPTER 10: The Soul Needs to Be with God**

- A. After calling the Hebrew Scriptures “the Great Soul-Book of human literature,” John quotes several OT passages and then states, “My mind may be obsessed with idols; my will may be enslaved to habits; my body may be consumed with appetites. But my soul will never find rest until it rests in God.” (page 116)

Q: Would you agree with John that the “soul will never find rest until it rests in God?”

- B. John then pointed to several Biblical characters who “walked with God,” beginning with Enoch. Then he shifts to the story of a seventeenth century man named Nicolas Herman, who was an uneducated household servant from a poor family who came to Christ, entered into a monastic community, and spent his life in the kitchen as a cook and dishwasher. “When he died, friends gathered some of his letters together and turned them into a book. The book is called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. It has become the most widely read book in the history of the human race other than the Bible.” The uneducated dishwasher is better known as Brother Lawrence. (page 119)

Q: Have you ever read *The Practice of the Presence of God*?

Q: How does it make you feel to know that God can use “insignificant people” to make a huge impact in the world?

- C. John then challenges us to see that it is now our turn “to be with God.” He wrote, “I begin each day by challenging myself: *How many moments of my life today can I fill with conscious awareness of and surrender to God’s presence?*” He then wrote, “When it comes to the soul’s life with God, here are three assumptions to put to the test:
- God wants to make every moment of my life glorious with his presence.
  - The best place to start doing life with God is in small moments.
  - People will look different when I see them with God. (page 120-125)

Activity: Using the principles above, see how many moments of your life today can be filled with a conscious awareness of and surrender to God’s presence.

## **CHAPTER 11: The Soul Needs Rest**

- A. The chapter opens with the following statements: “In the Bible, God never gives anyone an easy job. God never comes to Abraham, or Moses, or Esther and says, ‘I’d like you to do me a favor, but it really shouldn’t take much time. I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.’ God does not recruit like someone from the PTA. He is always intrusive, demanding, exhausting. He says we should expect that the world will be hard and that our assignment will be hard...Jesus [said] ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened...and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.’...The soul was not made for an easy life. The soul was made for an easy yoke.”

Years ago, a Christian psychiatrist named Frank Lake worked with many people who wanted to serve noble causes but the stress and demands and difficulties got to them, and soon they became drained and bitter and cynical and discouraged.

John continues by sharing that Frank Lake worked with Swiss theologian Emil Brunner to reflect on the life of Jesus to see what He did to overcome the day-to-day stress of ministry. He noted, “When they looked at Jesus’ life, they saw a pattern to it, different from the pattern

of the lives of the missionaries Frank Lake saw burning out. All human beings face challenge and pain and demands. Jesus, however, lived in a divine rhythm where grace was constantly flowing into him and then flowing out of him.” The balance of the chapter is a summary of the four areas of grace that Lake and Brunner identified: Acceptance, Sustenance, Significance, and Achievement. (page 126-127)

Q: Do you know individuals who have found the yoke of Christian service to be too heavy for them, and they ended up resigning?

Q: Have you ever experienced times when you too thought the yoke was too heavy? When you experienced “burn out?”

Q: What did you do and how did God help you through the experience?

- B. Under the “Grace of Acceptance” section, John notes, “You cannot earn acceptance. Interesting fact: The day on which your sheer existence is celebrated is your birthday. But you get no credit for your role in that event at all. You were never less competent on any day of your life than the day you were born: You were weaker, slower, dumber, slimier, least coordinated, least developed in IQ, and of a higher nuisance factor that day than any other day of your existence.

Jesus depended on God’s acceptance because he faced massive human rejection. God’s acceptance is stronger than human rejection...The alternative to soul-acceptance is soul-fatigue.” He then points to three sources of soul-fatigue:

- There is a kind that attacks the body
- There is a kind that attacks the mind
- There is a kind that attacks the will

“They combine to make us feel separated from God, separated from ourselves, and distanced from what we love most about life and creation. This is soul-fatigue.” (page 127-129)

Q: How easy is it for you to find confidence and inner peace based upon God’s acceptance of you?

- C. Under the “Resting in Sustaining Grace” he wrote, “Jesus engaged in certain practices that allowed God’s grace to keep replenishing his spirit.” He then lists several activities that have come to be called spiritual disciplines. John then points out that, “A common problem is that people think of spiritual practices as obligations that will actually drain them...instead he stated, we need to engage in practices that connect us to God’s grace and energy and joy...The test of a sustaining spiritual practice is: Does it fill you with grace for life? What are your sustaining practices? Do you want to explore some new ones?

Soul-fatigue damages our relationships with the people in our lives. A study of dual-career couples revealed that when they got home they had no energy left for their relationship. They had extended all of their relational energy at the office.

He closes the section by listing indicators of soul-fatigue, which he states are very subtle.

- Things seem to bother you more than they should. Your spouse’s gum-chewing suddenly reveals to you a massive character flaw.
- It’s hard to make up your mind about even a simple decision.
- Impulses to eat or drink or spend or crave are harder to resist than they otherwise would be.
- You are more likely to favor short-term gains in ways that leave you with high long-term costs.
- Your judgment is suffering.
- You have less courage. The same disciples who fled in fear when Jesus was crucified eventually sacrificed their lives for him. What changed was not their bodies, but their souls. (pages 129-132)

Q: What spiritual disciplines do you use on a weekly basis? Which ones do you do out of obligation and drain you and which ones energize you?

Q: When was the last time you tried a new spiritual discipline? Is it time to try something new to revitalize your walk with God?

Q: Jesus continually modeled for and taught his disciples the basic spiritual disciplines. Who are you currently discipling in these areas?

Q: As you look at the indicators of soul-fatigue listed above, which ones have you experienced?

Q: Are there any of the soul-fatigue indicators that you would have to admit are currently part of your regular life experience?

D. Under the “Finding Significance Outside of Performance” section he opens with the statement, “We were made to make a difference beyond ourselves.” Then he points to three specific areas:

- Jesus had great clarity about the significance of his life, often described in his great “I am” statements.
- Jesus would then state the significance of his follower with “You are” statements: “You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth. You are a city on a hill.”
- The third area involves grace not just flowing into us but also now through us and out into others for their sake.

He continues by writing, “The grace of significance liberates me from the need to hurry. Dallas pointed out to me once that there is a world of difference between being busy and being hurried. Being busy is an outward condition, a condition of the body...Being hurried is an inner condition, a condition of the soul. It means to be preoccupied with myself and my life that I am unable to be fully present with God, with myself, and with other people.”

He later writes, “The space where we find rest and healing for our souls is solitude...The psalmist says our job is not to heal our souls, but to make space for them so that healing can

come, 'He makes me lie down in green pastures he leads me beside quiet waters. He refreshes my soul.' Where are your green pastures? Where are your still waters?

It is not always the 'world' that squeezes us into its mold. We all too often distract ourselves. Being completely alone with nothing but our thoughts can be frightening, so we will use anything to distract us from experiencing the soul-healing that comes in solitude... 'He makes me lie down.' He doesn't invite us to lie down. He doesn't plead with us to lie down. He makes us. When it comes to the rest we need to restore our souls, we're like our own little children at bedtime. Kids just don't want to go to bed, no matter how tired they are. So at some point as good parents, we pick them up, carry them into their bedrooms, and make them go to bed. Is it bedtime for your soul? (pages 133-137)

Q: Have you discovered your unique significance in God's eternal plan? If you are struggling in this area, it might help you to do a search of all of Jesus' "you are" statements.

Q: Using John's powerful imagery of putting an exhausted child to bed in spite of their protest that they are not tired, let me ask again his question: Is it bedtime for your soul?

Q: If it is bedtime, where are your green pastures, and where are your still waters?

E. In a final short segment entitled "Resting in Achievement," he wrote: "Jesus achieved a great deal. He taught, healed, befriended, recruited, trained, traveled, confronted, defied, and launched the greatest movement in human history. To achieve—to bear fruit—is crucial to the soul. But fruitfulness is just as much a matter of grace as acceptance is. The fruitful soul is also a Sabbath-soul."

"Whether with an entire day or periods of time set aside every day, your soul needs rest. Not a change of scenery or a spiritual retreat—those are fine and may contribute to rest. But to remain healthy, our souls need solitude with no agenda, no distractions, no noise. If someone asks you what you did in your 'time apart,' the correct response should be, 'Nothing.' Doing nothing does wonders for the soul." (pages 139-140)

Q: When is the last time you had a significant time of spiritual retreat?

Q: What do you do on a weekly and daily basis to experience "Sabbath times?" If you struggle in this area, calendar a specific time of rest over a thirty day period and journal how God uses it.

## **CHAPTER 12: The Soul Needs Freedom**

A. John opens with a challenging statement followed by several Biblical illustrations to support his hypothesis. "The ability to have anything you want actually can cost you your freedom. Samson had an unquenchable desire for Delilah; the rich young ruler was consumed by his desire for money; Saul coveted the power that came with his throne; Cain gave in to his desire for revenge. How did that work for them?" (page 141)

Q: How would you define the word freedom?

Q: Do you know anyone whose desires and passions caused them to lose their freedom?

Q: If you were honest with yourself, could you list one or two areas of your life in which your passions and desires have actually cost you your freedom?

- B. In a section entitled *Conflicted about Freedom*, John writes, “The soul cries out to be free, but the common perception is that Christianity stands in the way of freedom...Does becoming a Christian mean somebody dictates what you do, what you think, how you live? Even Christians sometimes adopt this view. They may affirm their belief in Jesus as the Son of God and accept his gift of salvation, but retain their ‘freedom’ to decide for themselves how they should live.”

He suggests that “We do not delight in the law of the Lord; we delight in keeping it better than other people, or using it to prop up our sense of being ‘set apart,’ more pure than the rest of the world.” John then provides two illustrations of how our legalisms restrict freedom. The first is from Philip Yancey’s book *What’s so Amazing about Grace?* In the book Yancey describes the impact of growing up in a fundamentalist church culture. John then points to the “no’s” that permeated John Calvin’s Geneva including, “naming children after anyone but figures in the Old Testament.” (page 143)

Q: In what ways have you felt like your Christian faith restricted your freedom?

Q: If you grew up in a Christian environment, did you experience any “restrictions” that you now believe to be “legalisms” rather than Biblical admonitions? What were they?

- C. “The Ten Commandments were never designed to be a stand alone list of rules. They come within a relational context...They flow out of how we were designed, who we were meant to be, We read them as ‘this is what you have to do,’ but God was saying, ‘this is who you are.’ That’s why we don’t so much break the Ten Commandments as we break ourselves when we violate them.”

“I believe the soul is actually revived by law. Think of freedom coming in two flavors, two kinds of freedom. There is freedom from external constraints, somebody telling me what to do. This is freedom *from*. But there is another kind of freedom that might be called freedom *for*. There’s the freedom for living the kind of life I was made to live, freedom for becoming that man I most want to be—freedom *for*.”

“You don’t have to be an expert to recognize that the kind of freedom our culture craves is freedom from external restraints. Tell someone he can’t do something, and he’ll probably find a way to do it.”

“Remember that the soul is what integrates our parts. If our will is enslaved to our appetites, if our thoughts are obsessed with unfulfilled desires, if our emotions are slaves to our

circumstances, if our bodily habits contradict our professed values, the soul is not free. The only way for the soul to be free is for all the parts of our personhood to be rightly ordered.” (pages 144-146)

Q: How did you react to John’s statement, “we don’t so much break the Ten Commandments as we break ourselves when we violate them?”

Q: Have you ever used the freedom *for* versus the freedom *from* argument as you discussed the Ten Commandments?

D. “How do you get the freedom that your soul craves? This is the great irony about freedom. To become truly free, you must surrender...[Because] “You are not the center of the universe. You are not the master of your fate. You are not the captain of your ship. There is a God, and you aren’t him. True freedom comes when you embrace God’s overall design for the world and your place in it.”

John points out that “the disease that really threatens our soul is sin. I am complicit in the sickness of my soul in a different way than in diseases that attack my body. I say yes to greed and lust in a way I don’t say yes to colds and strep throat. (page 147-148)

Q: Have you ever thought of sin as a “disease” and specifically a disease that doesn’t attack your body, but one that you willingly choose?

Q: What are some of the symptoms you are currently experiencing from the “disease of sin” that is afflicting you?

Activity: Take time to reflect on your past week. Think of a few specific moments when you had a choice to allow sin to creep into your being or to choose a path of freedom. Which did you choose? Why do you think you made that choice?

E. In the balance of the chapter he asks us to “understand how the soul becomes enslaved and where freedom truly lies, we need to consider three different levels where the soul gets trapped. One way to think of this is to imagine a target with three concentric circles moving from the outer edge to the bull’s eye.”

The first he calls *Sinful Acts*. He reminds us that “the soul enslaved by sinful acts cannot be healed if we deny that those acts are really our responsibility...The next ring on the target goes deeper and has to do with our orientation...My sinful acts are premeditated; my *Sinfulness* is more like a habit I can’t control...One study from Duke University found that more than 40 percent of the actions people take every day aren’t decisions, but habits. Good habits free us, but when sin becomes a habit, our souls lose their freedom...Habits eat willpower for breakfast...The bull’s eye is *Original Sin*...Mere human efforts (education, environment, therapy) cannot cure the sin problem...But we serve a perfect Savior who is patient and always ready to forgive us when we fail.” The chapter closes with the epitaph that is written on Ruth Graham’s headstone (the wife of Billy Graham who died in 2007): “*End of construction. Thank you for your patience.*” (pages 148-151).

Q: As church leaders we have preached and taught about the human condition and the only cure, Jesus Christ. But have you taken time to ponder the reality that 40% of what we do on a day-to-day basis we do simply out of habit, and that habits eat willpower for breakfast?

Q: Reflect on a few of the “bad habits” that you have developed in your Spiritual journey. What is one of the most urgent areas in need of construction?

Q: In what ways is that habit blocking you from claiming the promise Jesus made in John 8:36 “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

### **CHAPTER 13: The Soul Needs Blessing**

“My friend Dallas used to tell me, ‘Churches should do seminars on how to bless and not curse others...’ then one day I got a seminar from Dallas on how to bless... There are two great words in the bible, Dallas said, that describe the posture of our souls toward other people. One is to bless. The other is to curse. We are creatures with wills, and in every encounter with other people we will what is good for them, or we fail to do so: we will what is bad. We cannot help ourselves. Blessing is not just a word. Blessing is the projection of good into the life of another. We must think it, and feel it, and will it. We communicate it with our bodies. Blessing is kind of like an ancient dance of the Hokey-Pokey; before you finish you have to ‘put your whole self in...’ One of the difficulties of blessing nowadays is that you may have to grab on to someone to get them to hold still long enough to receive it. Receiving a blessing is as much an art as giving one. We think we’re unworthy, or we start to plan on giving a blessing back. Blessing-giving should be asymmetrical. It’s not a form of barter. It’s grace.” Dallas told him “it’s hard to improve on God.” He then quoted Numbers 26:24-26 and then he explained the meaning behind each phrase:

The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” (pages 152-156)

Q: If you were honest with yourself, would you say you tend to bless more than you curse others?

Q: Have you ever experienced the power of a blessing from someone you respected? Reflect on that experience and make a note of the things that person did.

Q: How good are you at receiving a blessing from someone else—that is without having to reciprocate or deflect the blessing?

Action: This week specifically ask God how you can be a blessing to someone. Also ask Him to give you the grace to receive blessings that come your way.

## CHAPTER 14: The Soul Needs Satisfaction

- A. “The Hebrew word for soul, *nephesh*, is repeatedly described as longing or wanting or desiring or striving...The Bible talks about the soul being hungry or thirsty or hollow or empty, not satisfied. You read statements like these: It’s better to be satisfied with what the eye sees than to live with a craving *nephesh*, a craving soul, which we all have...Our souls are always craving, never satisfied.

A research group affiliated with the University of Chicago recently listed the ten least happy jobs in the world and the ten happiest jobs in the world. What they found was the ten least happy jobs actually were more financially lucrative and offered higher status than the ten happiest jobs. The difference? People in the happiest jobs had a higher sense of meaning. Less money, less status, but a higher sense of meaning. The main thing you bring home from your work is not a paycheck. The main thing you bring home from work is your soul. Work is a soul function. We’re made to create value. There is nothing better for a person than that he should make his soul enjoy good in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God...The soul craves to be secure. The soul craves to be loved. The soul craves to be significant, and we find these only in God in a form that can satisfy us.” (pages 163-164)

Q: Have you ever thought about the fact that the craving of our souls can never be satisfied? This is reflected in the fact that usually when someone asks, “How much is enough” the answer is often “Just a little more than I have today.”

Q: As is always true, good scientific research will affirm what the Bible teaches us about humanity. In the case of the University of Chicago research we find that a sense of contentment does not come from how much we possess, but how much of us God possesses. Which leads to the question, how happy are you and why?

- B. “Jesus said if you devote your life to pleasing yourself, you will actually destroy your soul, whereas if you place honoring God above pleasing yourself, then your soul will be truly satisfied. ‘For whoever wants to save their soul will lose it, but whoever loses their soul for me and the gospel will save it.’ The psalmist echoes this paradox when he wrote, ‘My heart is not proud, O Lord, My eyes are not haughty...I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with his mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me...’ How do you wean a child? You do it by strategic disappointment. You deliberately withhold from the child what she wants so the child learns she can be master and not slave of her appetites.

This metaphor suggests your soul is becoming like that weaned child. It’s not constantly troubling you with unsatisfied desires all the time. You are learning that your soul can be satisfied with God even if all the appetites of your body or the desires floating around in your mind are not being gratified every moment because, in fact, gratification of mind and body will actually dismantle your soul.” (pages 164-165)

Q: Psalm 131:1f: “My heart is not proud, O Lord, My eyes are not haughty...I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with his mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.” How weaned are you from the passions and appetites of your body?

- C. “Philosophy professor Kent Dunnington writes about a paramedic he knows who received an anonymous call that a heroin addict was near death in a nearby abandoned building. When the paramedic got there, the poor man was shivering in a corner, already unresponsive and near death. The apartment was foul-smelling and littered with trash and drug paraphernalia.

Kent asked his friend what it was like. The paramedic’s comment was stunning: ‘It was terrifying, but for the first time in my life I understood what worship looks like.’

Addiction, Kent explained, is a kind of worship, a kind of counterfeit worship. For the soul was created to worship. The soul requires a center to give it identity, to have a purpose for its activities, to give it a hope and a foundation. There is no such thing as an uncommitted person. An addict is the supreme example of trying to satisfy the soul with all the wrong things. The more it’s fed, the more it craves. One of the ways to diagnose your ultimate commitment is to ask yourself: What do you get most irritated about when your soul is threatened?

The paradox of soul-satisfaction is this: When I die to myself, my soul comes alive. God says the wrong approach to soul thirst is through human achievement and material wealth. So soul-satisfaction is not about acquiring the right things but about acquiring the right soul. It is not something you buy, but something you receive freely from God.

Hear these great words of the prophet Isaiah: ‘Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me and eat what is good, and [your soul] will delight in the richest of fare.’ And it will be satisfied.” (pages 167-168)

Q: Have you ever thought of addiction as a form of worship?

Q: Re-read the Isaiah passage above. With it in mind, do you agree with John’s statement, “soul-satisfaction is not about acquiring the right things but about acquiring the right soul.”

## **CHAPTER 15: The Soul Needs Gratitude**

- A. “Try a little experiment. It will take all of two days, but it will teach you an important soul lesson. Today, when you greet people, begin your conversation with a little complaint...Tomorrow, try to greet people with a word of gratitude...After you try this little experiment, ask yourself which day left YOU [my emphasis] feeling vibrant, more alive, and closer to God? We feel better when we are grateful because the fundamental mind-set of the life of the soul gratitude.” (page 169-170)

Activity: Try John’s experiment and see what God does in your life. If it is as John suspects, then ask others to do the same experiment.

- B. “More gratitude will not come from acquiring more things or experiences, but from more of an awareness of God’s presence and his goodness...Gratitude is a by-product of a way of seeing things, and it always involves three factors:
- First, the benefit. In order to be grateful, you have to receive and recognize a gift that you believe is good. ‘Praise the Lord, my soul...and forget not all his benefits.’ Psalm 103:2-5
  - Second, gratitude requires that there be a benefactor. To be grateful as a Christian, you must believe that the good that is in your life comes from God. Not from your own efforts or merit. Not from others who might want to impress or manipulate you for their gain. ‘Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.’ James 1:16-17
  - The default mode of the sinful human race is entitlement, the belief that this gift or that experience that God placed in my path is rightfully mine. I am owed. This goes against the third factor: there needs to be a beneficiary—one who receives the good gifts of God. Gratitude always comes from a posture of humility. (pages 170-173)

Q: What do you think about John’s statement that gratitude is a by-product of benefit, benefactor, and beneficiary?

Activity: Using these concepts, describe the last time you expressed true gratitude.

- C. “I began this chapter with an experiment, and I would like to close it with two more. Consider these experiments ‘gratitude training.’ The first one is to write what I call the ‘gratitude letter.’ Think of somebody who has impacted your life for the good...Somebody without whom you’d be a different person. Then take the time to write them a letter telling why you are grateful to God for them.

After you write your ‘gratitude letter,’ try to meet with that person face-to-face...When you get there, pull out that letter and read it to them word for word...You might want to have a copy to give to them.”

The next experiment is to pray your own benedictions—brief statements that recognize the good that comes from God.” He then provides the following examples:

- Blessed are you, O Lord, for giving me my children.
- Blessed are you, O Lord, who gave me life and good health today.
- Blessed are you, O Lord, for helping me get through this difficult day.
- Blessed are you, O Lord, who forgives me when I sin.
- Blessed are you, O Lord, for the great sunset you let me enjoy.

As Thornton Wilder put it, ‘We can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures.’ (page 174-176)

Q: Have you ever written a “gratitude letter” or developed your own “benedictions list?” If so, how has God used those experiences to draw you closer to Him?

Action: If you have yet to try these experiments, schedule a time to do them.

## CHAPTER 16: Dark Night of the Soul

- A. “If you ask people who don’t believe in God why they don’t, the number one reason will be suffering. If you ask people who believe in God when they grew most spiritually, the number one answer will be suffering.

Because the soul is the deepest expression of the person, the soul is the place of greatest pain. We do not speak of the dark night of the mind, or the will, or even the spirit. Only the soul. The phrase the dark night of the soul comes from a brilliant Carmelite monk who devoted his life to reforming the church, but his attempts were heavily criticized, and he ended up in prison. It was there in confinement, with his dreams lost, that he wrote his most famous work: *The Dark Night of the Soul*. It is an account of how God works to change us not just through joy and light, but through confusion, through disappointment, through loss...The dark night of the soul, as he described it, is not simply the experience of suffering. It is suffering in what feels like the silence of God.

It’s possible for me to grow cold toward God because I cling to sin, or prefer an idol, or simply become lazy. These are all real occurrences that require wise response. But they are not the dark night. The dark night is God-initiated.” (pages 179-182)

Q: Using the definitions above, describe the last time you experienced a “Dark Night of the Soul.”

- B. “In my own darkest time some years ago, my greatest disappointment was deep and unfixable. I questioned my calling. I didn’t think about suicide, but I definitely thought that if my life were over, I’d be grateful for the end of pain. I would talk to a few close friends, and they would generally give sympathy and support, for which I was grateful.

But then I did what I have so often done when I cannot think or pray or reason my way out of something. I called Dallas. I walked him through the circumstances and the heartbreak and the pain, eager for his answer. Long pause.

‘This will be a test of your joyful confidence in God.’ Silence.

I did not miss the challenge in his sentence, all the more goading for its gentle phrasing...If there is a God who is worthy to be the Father of Jesus. I can trust giving this situation as well as my own feelings joyfully into his hands. If there is not, I have infinitely bigger problems than a merely human circumstance. Either way it is true: this will be a test of my joyful confidence in God.

Modern churches with linear models of spiritual growth and large-scale models for devotional life rarely speak of or help people with the dark night. We are uncomfortable with it because we want to do something—because we sell formulas and steps and programs, and the dark night of the soul is not our program. The dark night is for souls that learn to wait.” (pages 184-185)

Q: How do you react to the statement, “This will be a test of your joyful confidence in God?”

Q: And how about the statement, “The dark night is for souls that learn to wait?”

## **CHAPTER 17: Morning**

John begins the closing chapter with Hebrews 6:19: ‘We have this hope as an anchor of the soul, firm and secure. Then he states, “The soul is a ship that needs an anchor.

In the heart of the chapter, John relates a time when Dallas Willard was preparing for surgery. A small group of family members and friends were gathered. In the setting Dallas shared, “What matters is the work of helping people know that God is alive and present and loves them; that this reality that Jesus called the kingdom is among us and available; and that life is precious, yet is wasted with terrible ease.”

‘Do you regret anything?’ Someone asked him.

‘I regret the time I have wasted,’ he answered.

“If there is any human being on the planet who has not wasted time, it is Dallas. I don’t think he’d know what a television was if one hit him on the head. He is either reading or teaching or doing ministry. Or doing bits of carpentry around their place in Box Canyon, or mentoring students, or praying. If Dallas is guilty of wasting time, the rest of us may as well sign up for vagrancy hell right now. “

“I think Dallas said he regretted all the time he wasted, not because he compared himself to other more efficient people, but because he began to see what life could be...I watched him and thought of what a redeemed soul can be:

- To be able to say yes or no without anxiety or duplicity.
- To speak with confidence and honesty.
- To be willing to disappoint anybody, yet ready to bless everybody.
- To have a mind filled with more noble thoughts than could ever be spoken.
- To share without thinking.
- To see without judging.
- To be so genuinely humble that each person I see would be an object of wonder.
- To love God.” (pages 189-191)

Q: How well do you “redeem the time?”

Q: Reflect on the bulleted points above that John describes as “what a redeemed soul can be.” Which of the qualities would you say you reflect best? Which quality, do you need the most help from God to achieve? On the latter, what is one thing you can begin to do today that will make a difference?

Activity: Take a few minutes to flip back through the book. What section spoke to you the most? What specific applications can you begin to implement in your life that will draw you closer to God?

\*Mark R. Elliott served as a Director of Missions (Associational Mission Strategist) in western Iowa and eastern Nebraska for almost three decades. He is a strong advocate for obedience and Biblically based disciple making. As such, he knows that making healthy disciples requires Christian leaders to be constantly pursuing spiritual maturity—be lifelong learners. Because of the time constraints of ministry, most pastors focus their reading list on resources that assist them in teaching and preaching the Word of God. As such, books focusing on church health, leadership development, and church growth tend to find their way to the bottom of the stack. With that reality in mind, Mark has written discussion summaries on several books that have helped him to personally grow in Christ and that tend to find themselves on the bottom of most pastor's stack. Many pastors have found them helpful as they are able to more quickly process great insights from other pastors and authors.