

Tim Chester

A
Closer
Walk
with God



Rediscovering Age-Old
Practices to Refresh Your Soul

“A widespread and chronic form of spiritual attention deficit disorder is abroad today, hindering our ability to meditate on God’s grace and stunting our spiritual growth. Here, in perhaps his most personal book to date, Dr Tim Chester shares a variety of disciplines he has learned from the past-masters of the contemplative life and developed to remedy this lethargy. While he is wisely conscious that not all of his own practices will seem equally suitable or helpful for every reader, few, if any, Christians will fail to discover something here to help towards a closer walk with God.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Author; Ligonier Teaching Fellow

“Put simply, this book is magnificent. Evangelicals too often talk in the abstract about having a Heavenly Father and a living relationship with Jesus. This book will help you move from knowing about God in theory to deepening your experience and relationship with him. It will help you stop finding prayer hard work and thinking of yourself as a failure when it comes to praying. A profoundly helpful, practical, liberating read.”

Marcus Honeysett, Author; Pastor-at-Large,
Living Leadership

“As a Bible-study author whose deepest desire is to see people know and enjoy God, I am thrilled by any resource that shares this heart. Tim Chester has given us a practical guide centered on essential biblical postures like listening to, communing with, and resting in God; along with clear steps to put them into practice. If you long for a deeper relationship with the Lord and want guidance beyond ‘read your Bible,’ this is the book for you.”

Colleen D. Searcy, Speaker; Bible Teacher; Author,
Meet Me in the Bible study series

“A rich, historical, refreshing look at how we pray. So much wisdom and practical help that can immediately impact our regular patterns of prayer.”

Jonty Allcock, Pastor, Globe Church, London;
Author, *More of Jesus*

“One of the greatest needs of our hurried and anxious times is a renewal of biblically-grounded contemplative spirituality that moves us toward the most important experience of all: reality with God. Throughout these pages, Tim serves as a faithful guide, leading us to door after door through which we can draw near to God and enjoy our union with him. Anchored in Scripture and loaded with pastoral wisdom, this book is a must-read for both young and old in the faith. Read it slowly, and let it fan your faith into a flame. ”

Adam Ramsey, Lead Pastor, Liberti Church, Gold Coast,
Australia; Director, Acts 29 Asia Pacific;
Author, *Faithfully Present, Truth on Fire*

“Daily communion with God has always been embattled. We all want it, and most of us struggle to find it and keep it. Tim Chester has clearly fought and won that battle over decades, and he took lots of notes along the way to help others, like me, experience fuller, more consistent joy in faith. With this book, he built a practical guide that weaves humble dependence on God with a growing hunger for God that leads to more vibrant communion with God. Because Tim Chester has lived it for a long time, the essential practices he lays out are filled with real-life texture and pastoral care, allowing them to fall like rain on distracted and thirsty souls.”

Marshall Segal, President and CEO, Desiring God

“This is a book to help us all fall deeper in love with Jesus. It doesn’t just teach us more about God (though it is soaked in Scripture), nor does it just get our quiet times going again (though it may well do that), rather it encourages us to drink deeply of the awe, the majesty, the beauty, and the wonder of Christ—and in the process come to desire him more. It does that by encouraging us all to slow down—to reflect, to meditate—and that’s something many of us find hard. That means this book may well take us out of our comfort zone at times—it did for me. But it is so worth it. Dripping with biblical truth and wise, practical hints, this book is a wonderful spur to take time and pursue a posture of love and trust before the Lord who is worthy of our all.”

Helen Thorne-Allenson, Director of Training and
Resources, Biblical Counselling UK

“Many of us long for a deeper intimacy with God and a sense of his presence and work in our lives. And yet we also wonder if this is possible, and perhaps we’re secretly afraid that it isn’t. In *A Closer Walk with God*, Tim proves to be a wise guide for those longing for more. He invites us to discover how different practices of prayer lead us into deeper communion with God and form the life of Christ in us. If you want more in your life with God, this book is a great place to start!”

Melinda Hendry, Ministry Development Lead:
Women in Ministry, Living Leadership

Tim Chester

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with God

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Practices to Refresh Your Soul


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A Closer Walk with God
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*Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the LORD.
(Psalm 27:14)*

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How to Read This Book

I've had an interest in prayerful contemplation and communion with God ever since my teenage years. A number of the spiritual practices in this book were ones I first adopted as a student. But the busyness of life and ministry somehow squeezed out time with God. Even as I write the previous sentence, it seems a crazy thing to say, but that was the reality. In mid-life I found myself running out of steam. And then I hit a crisis—or rather a crisis hit me. I was left completely floored, overwhelmed by fear and guilt. I needed Jesus. I longed for God.

Of course, I'd always needed Jesus, but now the sense of that need was visceral. In the midst of an emotional breakdown, every day I had to find refuge in Christ afresh. I found myself saying with King David, "I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water" (Psalm 63:1). Yet, despite that period being the toughest time in my life, I wouldn't turn back the clock, for it has led me into a richer, deeper relationship with the Lord.

You might find it helpful to think of this book as a toolkit or menu. You don't use every tool in the toolbox every time you mend something, and you're certainly not advised to eat everything on a restaurant menu at one sitting. In the same way, you don't have to do everything this book suggests all at once.

I recommend you read the first couple of chapters (Part 1) and then work through the other chapters more slowly, pausing to put each one into practice before moving on. You could aim to read a chapter a week or month. I would rather you start praying than finish reading!

If at any point it all feels a bit overwhelming, then I suggest you skip to the end and the final section entitled "Begin Here". Follow the lead you find there and begin praying. You can come back to the rest of the book another time.

This book has some accompanying audio meditations (one or two for each chapter) which you may find helpful to use. These meditations will walk through the process of putting the chapter into practice. They can be found at www.redeemerrecords.com/acloserwalk. They often correspond to the "Suggested Next Step" with which each chapter ends.

In this book, I've drawn from a range of older spiritual writers. The Reformers and Puritans are well represented, as are the Church Fathers and medieval spiritual writers. I've also included ideas from some more recent Catholic and Orthodox thinkers. This is not to give an unequivocal endorsement of all medieval, Catholic and Orthodox spirituality! Nor can we pick and choose what takes our fancy without recognising the theological frameworks from which these practices emerge. I've previously highlighted some of the problems with these traditions from an evangelical perspective.¹ But the focus of this book is

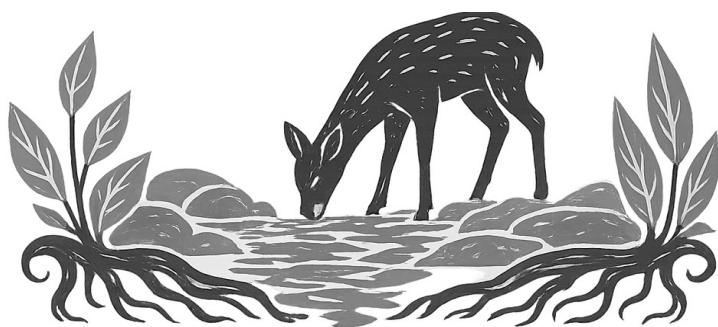
more on the positive side—on what I think evangelicals can learn from their spirituality while wanting to ensure we set what they offer within a gospel-centred framework. If this book inspires you to read more widely in the field of spirituality, then the companion volume, *Seeking the Lord: A Biblical Perspective on Contemplative Prayer*, is intended as a guide to help you navigate that exploration. It highlights the main pitfalls you may meet along the way. *Seeking the Lord* also provides the supporting biblical and theological arguments for the approach in this book. If talk of contemplative practices makes you nervous and you want to go deeper into the theology, then you might find that book helpful, although chapter 1 of this book offers a quick overview.

The title of this book is taken from a hymn by William Cowper, the 18th-century poet and friend of John Newton. Its opening verse forms a good prayer for us as we begin:

*O for a closer walk with God,
A calm and heavenly frame,
A light to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb!*



Part 1





1

An Invitation

This book is an invitation.

I don't want you to read it as a list of requirements but as an invitation to go deeper with God.

Have you ever wished your relationship with Christ was more alive? Or more constant? Have you ever finished your quiet time wondering if there might not be more to a relationship with God than this? Do you love the idea of abiding in Christ but wonder what it might look like in practice? What would you say to someone who feels spiritually dry? Is the best we can offer, "Read your Bible and hope for the best"? This book is the story of my attempt to address those questions.

It's a book about contemplative practices. That's simply a fancy way of talking about enjoying a relationship with God—not just as an objective fact but as a lived experience. Paul describes the Colossian Christians as "the faithful brothers and sisters *in Christ*" (Colossians 1:2). Christians are united to Christ in a covenant bond, which means that Christ's righteousness is now our righteousness and his

resurrection is now our future. If you've put your faith in Christ, then, whatever you're feeling today, that's a fact. But Paul also speaks of the mystery of "Christ *in you*" (v 27). Christ is not only the one who secures our status before God; he's also the one who comes to dwell in our hearts. God sends the Holy Spirit to reassure us of his fatherly love and make Christ present to us.

The word "spirituality" simply refers to our ongoing, everyday life in the Spirit. Our union with God in Christ is meant to lead to *communion* with God—a close and cherished relationship of love. That's what this book is about. Its focus is our life of prayer—especially forms of prayer that supplement asking God for our needs. But really, it's about a living relationship with God. That's my invitation to you.

An Invitation to Communion with God

One of the words the Bible uses to describe our relationship with God is "communion". It's often translated "sharing", "participation" or "fellowship". Paul says God "has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:9). John says, "Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).

We get a lovely picture of communion with God in Genesis 3:8. The Lord God comes to the first human beings to walk with them in the cool of the day. What was that like? We're not really told. Perhaps there was conversation. Perhaps there was shared delight in God's newly created world. Perhaps there were moments of contented silence when they were happy simply to be in one another's presence.

The tragedy is that this description comes just at the moment when that communion has been destroyed. Humanity has rebelled against God, and so now humanity

is hiding from God (v 8). God's presence no longer feels like a delight; now it feels like a threat. Our view of God has changed; Satan has persuaded us to see God as a tyrant. At best, hanging out with God now feels like hanging out with a strict headteacher. And who wants to do that?

Perhaps that's still how you view God, even as a Christian. You know God loves you, and you are grateful that he's saved you, but you don't find yourself really wanting to hang out with him. The thought of an hour in prayer doesn't exactly excite you. Perhaps you imagine an hour of being on edge or just being bored.

But it's striking that a godly life is often portrayed in the Bible as walking with God. One of the things that God requires of us, says the prophet Micah, is "to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8; see also Deuteronomy 5:33; 10:12; 1 Kings 2:4; 8:23—ESV). It's language that takes us back to Eden—back to evenings spent *walking* in communion with God. The New Testament, too, pictures the Christian life as walking with God (often translated "living" in the NIV). We've been raised with Christ so that we might "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4, ESV). We now "walk in the way of love" and "in the light" (Ephesians 5:1-2, NIV US; 1 John 1:7). We can do this because we've been given the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we "walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:4, ESV). Once again, God—in the person of the Holy Spirit—is walking beside us. And, in his presence, we experience life, love and light. Our job is to keep walking closely beside God. "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16, 25). We're called to live in communion with God.

The Puritan Thomas Goodwin uses the image of friendship to describe this communion with God. He's picking up the language of Scripture: "I no longer call you

servants,” says Jesus. “Instead, I have called you friends” (John 15:15; see also Exodus 33:11; 2 Chronicles 20:7; Song of Songs 5:16; Isaiah 41:8; Matthew 11:19; James 2:23). Friends don’t just call round when they have a problem, says Goodwin. Sometimes that happens and that’s fine—that’s what friends are for. But the next time it happens, we might make a joke: *You only ever call when you want something!* That sort of joke has a bit of edge to it. The more friendly thing to do, says Goodwin, is to call round simply to see your friend for their own sake and not just for what you can get from them. The same is true of God, he suggests. It’s good to call on God when you have a problem. That honours him because it treats him as a willing and able Friend. But to be truly friendly, we also need to spend time with God *for his own sake*.²

The contemplative practices in this book bring many benefits. God may use them to provide an anchor in the busyness of life, a refuge in times of trouble, a source of true fruitfulness, a reorientation away from self or healing for a wounded soul. But in the end, *God is his own reward*. The ultimate “Why?” of authentic spirituality is communion with the triune God.

An Invitation to Contemplate God’s Glory

The phrase “contemplative” comes from the word “contemplate”. It gathers up a number of biblical ideas: considering, meditating, pondering, gazing, seeing, looking.³ If petitionary prayer is prayer in which we *speak* to God, contemplation is prayer in which we *gaze* at God (though in reality the boundaries are blurry).

“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory,” says 2 Corinthians 3:18, “are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit”. It’s not a call to be

transformed into the image of Christ—not first and foremost. It’s a call to contemplate Christ’s glory. Just that. To gaze, to ponder, to enjoy. But a funny thing happens when we contemplate God: we love what we see, and that love reshapes our priorities. If you spend time contemplating the attractions of sin, then sin will seem attractive. Spend time contemplating the attractions of Christ, and the attractions of sin fade. “A constant view of the glory of Christ,” says the Puritan John Owen, “will revive our souls and cause our spiritual lives to flourish and thrive”.⁴

At the moment, of course, we can’t physically see God’s glory. “For we live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). Instead, we see God with what Paul calls “the eyes of [the] heart” (Ephesians 1:18). But seeing by faith is not an act of make-believe. There’s a real encounter with the real God. “Though you have not seen him, you love him,” says 1 Peter 1:8; “and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy”. Sometimes it’s as if God envelopes us like a beautiful melody with deep, rich harmonies. Sound has no physical form (except the vibrations of air molecules). In the same way, God has no physical form with us, but, through the Holy Spirit, the music of his presence stirs our hearts.

What’s the goal of prayer? John Owen answers: “The spiritual intense fixation of the mind, by contemplation on God in Christ, until the soul be as it were swallowed up in admiration and delight ... are things to be aimed at in prayer.” And, he adds, through the grace of God, these things can be “frequently enjoyed”.⁵

An Invitation to Abide in Christ

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,” says Jesus, “and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). How’s that going for you? Does your Christian life feel like a life

of rest? Jesus continues: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (v 29-30). Again, is that your experience? Does being a Christian feel easy? Is the burden of service light?

Many of us are busy Christians. We’re busy at home—trying to raise godly families or maybe just hold it together for another day. We’re busy at work—trying to honour Christ in the world or maybe just survive the rat race. And then, while everyone else has a day off, we’re busy on Sundays in church or on a Friday night at the youth club.

It may be that our over-busyness is driven by a need to prove ourselves. We want to demonstrate that we’re good parents or employees or Christians, so we work hard. But you’re only as good as your last performance—so, even after a good day, we have to start all over again. We mistake activity for fruit and so behave as if more activity equals more fruitfulness. Or maybe what drives our busyness is a need to control our world. We want to protect our families, to secure our future, to save the world. But the world never feels under our control. We’re like children digging in dry sand—the faster we dig, the faster the sand collapses back into our hole. It’s relentless, and so we end up weary and burdened.

And still Jesus is saying to us, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened”. We’re trying to be our own saviours—to justify ourselves or secure our futures. Jesus says, *I’ll do that. Let me take care of it. Let me carry that burden. I’ll carry it all the way to the cross. Find your worth in me. Trust me for the future. There’s still a yoke to carry—I still want you to serve me, but your future no longer depends on it. So come to me—just as you did when you first became a Christian. Come to me, and I will give you rest.* Eugene

Peterson paraphrases Jesus' words like this: "Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly" (v 29-30, *The Message*).

Elsewhere Jesus says, "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me" (John 15:4). Bearing fruit doesn't happen through relentless activity but through remaining or abiding in Christ. Do you believe that? Of course you do. Jesus said it, so it must be true. But in practice we so easily default to trying to bear fruit by working harder. Some of us may need to do more by doing less.

Jesus himself often withdrew from ministry to spend time with his Father. *Very* often (Matthew 4:1-2; 8:18; 14:13, 23; 26:36; Mark 1:35; 6:31-32, 46; 9:2; 14:13; Luke 4:1-2; 5:15-16; 6:12; 9:28-29; 11:1). That's because, as he himself said, "The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (John 5:19, 30). Jesus was dependent on God the Father, and so he found time to reconnect with the Father. Now we're dependent on Jesus, and we need to find time to reconnect to Jesus. We need to stop, be still and abide in Christ. Otherwise, we'll be running under our own steam, and sooner or later our own steam runs out. Reconnecting to Jesus re-energises us as well as giving us a bigger perspective on whatever is happening to us.

But There's a Problem⁶

So far, so good. But there's a problem. Lots of Christians are wary of contemplation and spirituality. Some are outright hostile. Maybe you're one of them. Or perhaps you've picked up on that suspicion. Maybe someone raised an

eyebrow when they saw you holding this book! So let me say upfront: I have a lot of sympathy with that suspicion. There's a lot to be suspicious about. Let's name the elephant in the room: there's a lot that's wrong with a lot of contemporary spirituality.

In common parlance, the words "spirituality" and "mysticism" have come to mean some kind of experience of transcendence that moves beyond doctrine. The implication is that experience trumps creeds and spirituality transcends theology. Worse still, "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (as Paul describes God in Ephesians 1:3) has been replaced by an impersonal deity. This allows adherents of other religions and people who have no affiliation with Christianity to be seen as fellow travellers. Spirituality has become an account of human feelings.

But this is *not* how God himself defines the word "mystery". In the New Testament the mystery is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). This message of Christ-in-you was hidden below the surface of the Old Testament. But now the mystery has been revealed in the coming of Christ (v 25-27; Ephesians 3:1-9). Biblical mysticism is an encounter with God in Christ as he's revealed in the Scriptures.⁷

Sometimes people quote 2 Corinthians 3:6 to justify a spirituality that transcends doctrine: "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." But the contrast here is not between doctrine and experience. It's between the old and new covenants. The old covenant was only life-giving by pointing to the new covenant in Christ—a new covenant empowered by the Spirit. When the letter of the old covenant was viewed apart from that orientation to Christ, it became lifeless and oppressive. So, the Spirit doesn't lead us away from doctrine. Quite the opposite. It's the Spirit who has given us the record of Christ in the Scriptures.

But a lot of contemporary spirituality has little time for the Bible. Or it uses the Bible as mere source material which we can then interpret according to our feelings. It doesn't let the Bible evaluate our experience or shape our thinking. Evangelical Christians then look at this thing which people are calling "contemplative spirituality" and decide it's best to steer clear. Rightly so.

But that's not the only version of "contemplative spirituality" on offer! We mustn't lump it all in together. We don't ditch theology just because there's some bad theology around. Instead we teach good theology. In the same way, we shouldn't avoid contemplation just because there are some bad contemplative practices around. Instead, we need to affirm what is good and reject what is bad. Of course, we need humility; none of us has a monopoly on truth. But our goal should be a spirituality shaped by the teaching of Scripture and the creeds of the church. (The companion volume to this book, *Seeking the Lord*, more explicitly seeks to navigate between the good and bad of contemplative spirituality.) In short, authentic Christian spirituality is a relational encounter with the triune God, built on our union with Christ, received by faith, and so for all God's people. It is mediated by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace, and embedded in the life of the church.

The triune God is continuously involved in our lives—whether we're aware of his involvement or not. But contemplation encourages us to discern his work in our hearts. As we do this, we can expect God to comfort us with his care, to confront our disobedience, to reassure us of his grace, to unsettle our pride, to grow our desire for him and to invite us to surrender to his will.

So let's get going...



For an accompanying audio meditation,
scan the QR code.