

“Calming, encouraging, and profound.” —Matt Chandler

On Living Well

**Brief
Reflections
on Wisdom
for Walking in
the Way of
Jesus**

**SNEAK
PEEK**



**SAMPLE
ONLY**

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PROOF**

FOREWORD BY RICH VILLODAS

Eugene H. Peterson

PRAISE FOR
On Living Well

“Eugene Peterson is a voice that keeps pulling me back to where I was created to be. Through his insights, stories, and sermons, his words woo the weary soul into the comfort of God’s presence and power. *On Living Well* is calming, encouraging, and profound.”

—MATT CHANDLER, lead pastor
of the Village Church

“Among the many gifts of human language, the greatest is the use of words for the worship of God, who is the Word. On these pages, over and over, Peterson’s words raise our sense of God’s sheer worthiness out of the clutter of confusion and complication. The simplicity and strength of language in *On Living Well* is seldom found but should be greatly treasured. These words are pure acts of worship that will bring the reader into beautiful worship of the source of all beauty.”

—KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR, research professor
of English, as well as Christianity and Culture,
at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
and author of *On Reading Well*

“Wisdom literature in the biblical tradition helps us discern the good life as God intends it. Here we have a collection of Eugene Peterson’s pastoral wisdom, reflections on the Scriptures, and meditations on the life and way of Jesus. These words carry the tenderness of Peterson’s voice and the keenness of his insight. Here is fertilizer for our formation and flourishing in the Jesus kind of life.”

—REV. GLENN PACKIAM, associate
senior pastor of New Life Church
and author of *Blessed Broken Given*

“We don’t hear the word *sage* much anymore because there are so few sages these days. But Eugene Peterson was one of deep wisdom. In an age awash in banal how-to books, *On Living Well* is something else entirely—something we need. *On Living Well* is a series of meditations on what constitutes the good life, written by a man who indeed knew how to live well. This book brims with the wisdom our day needs.”

—BRIAN ZAHND, pastor of Word of Life Church
and author of *When Everything’s on Fire*

“Eugene insisted that the crux of Christian spirituality was to get all these God-truths lived, to get them moving into the street. God’s wisdom, Eugene knew, is always relational, always drawing us into the questions, complications, dangers, and joys of genuine life pursued before God and alongside one another. This is why the context of much that we read here—pastoral words written to Eugene’s small

congregation—matters so much. These pages are not pious abstractions but personal words to friends, inviting all of us to embrace God’s enchanting invitation to truly live.”

—WINN COLLIER, director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination at Western Theological Seminary and author of *Love Big, Be Well* and *A Burning in My Bones*

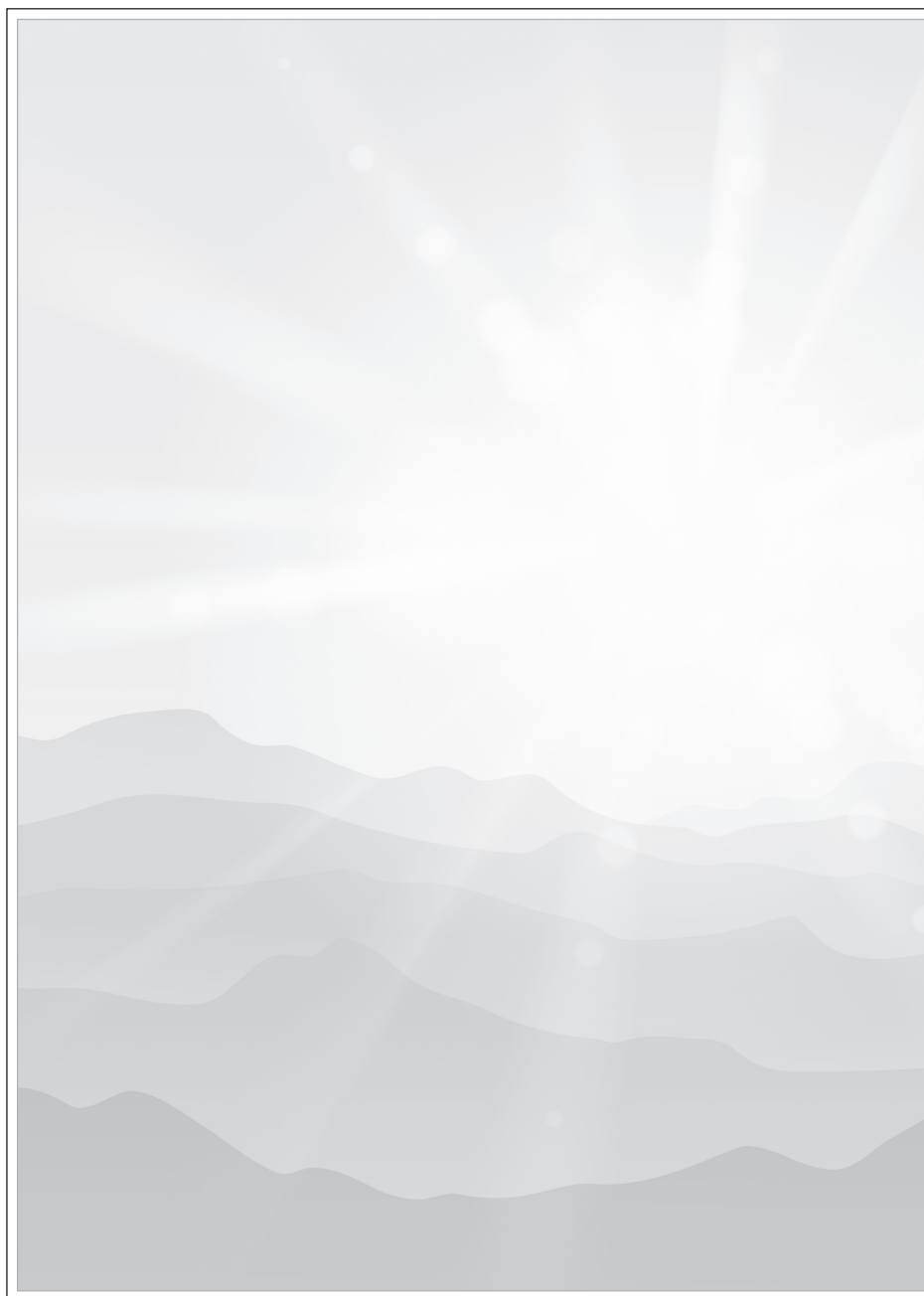
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On Living Well



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on Wisdom for Walking
in the Way of Jesus



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ON LIVING WELL

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Peterson, Eugene H., 1932–2018, author.

Title: On living well : brief reflections on wisdom for walking in the way of Jesus /
Eugene H. Peterson.

Description: First edition. | Colorado Springs : WaterBrook, [2021] | Includes
bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021017532 | ISBN 9781601429797 (hardcover) |
ISBN 9781601429803 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian life—Meditations.

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .P47525 2021 | DDC 248.4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021017532>

Printed in Canada on acid-free paper

waterbrookmultnomah.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

Images on title page and part-title pages: copyright © iStock.com/funnybank

Book design by Victoria Wong

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Start with GOD—the first step in learning is
bowing down to GOD;
only fools thumb their noses at such wisdom.

Proverbs 1:7, MSG

Foreword



I remember exactly where I was when I first came across a book by Eugene Peterson. It was the spring of 2006 in downtown Brooklyn. I was on my lunch break, doing what was an almost-daily practice then—haunting the local bookstore. I walked up and down the aisles, looking to spend money I *really* didn't have, being the twenty-six-year-old pastor I was. That day, I encountered a title that intrigued me: *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*.

What an odd title, I thought. The author's name was vaguely familiar (I did own *The Message* but didn't know it was Eugene's work). I picked up the book and opened it—with just five minutes remaining on my lunch break—and started reading.

Twenty minutes later, I found myself engrossed in Eugene's delightful prose and penetrating theological insights, not realizing how much time had elapsed. Frantically, I hid the copy—the last one remaining—in a different section of the store. When lunchtime came the following day, I ran out of the office, remembering exactly where I had placed the book. I bought it and soon had marked up almost every page. A soul was growing in Brooklyn. Since that moment, this has been my story with Eugene: if he wrote it, I read it.

Along the way, Eugene's incisive words and penchant for

integrating insights from often-overlooked or compartmentalized spaces have profoundly shaped me. In many ways, Eugene's work was my "gateway drug." New vistas of theological insight and literature began to open to me. (I read novels and poetry today in large part because of him.) Through his witness, I was confronted with a refreshing burden for holy preaching flowing out of the unforced rhythms of grace.

His all-consuming commitment to Christ, the Scriptures, and the church's witness in the world gave me a vision for the kind of faith and pastoral imagination I knew God called me to—one that named and resisted the idols of efficiency, anxious power plays, and superficial discipleship metrics. It's a vision I continue to strive toward.

We desperately need the emphases of Eugene's spiritual formation today. We need new calls to *presence* with God, fresh encounters with the One who meets us in the biblical narrative, and a radical practice of discernment amid the noise and values of our culture. In short, we need training on how to live well—instruction for a long obedience. *Wisdom*. My heart's cry is to live in this manner: wisely plumbing the depths of God's countercultural ways, with full confidence that love, joy, and peace are realities the Spirit graciously leads us into.

The book you are holding offers a path toward that end. I've been reading Eugene for over fifteen years, yet in this book I was once again struck by his love for words and the beautiful distillation of wisdom in them. In this book, Eugene covers a wide array of themes we desperately need formation around, all aiming toward an everyday life lived well.

To live well is not about achievements, possessions, or comfort. Those words are far too superficial. Living well is about congruence, integrity, and, most importantly, love. Living well flows out of a commitment to interiority—examining the movements of the heart in full recognition that God comes to us in

those spaces. To live well is to embrace our “embodiedness,” which helps us savor the sacred in all we do, whether at work, play, or rest. Living well is revealed in our ability to be present to the presence of God and the presence of others. Living well emerges out of contemplation, nuanced thinking, relaxed dialogue, long naps, and certainly good wine. If there’s anything the world needs, it’s wisdom on living well. The reflections in this book offer just that.

As you read this book, pay close attention to the invitations God will offer you. There is something here for everyone—whether you are a pastor, a new believer, or simply someone searching for the divine. Some of the sections, short though they are, require a kind of *Lectio Divina* (i.e., an unhurried, repetitive, prayerful reading) to access the depth of wisdom before us. As Eugene faithfully modeled, a life lived well is unthinkable if we are skimming, rushing, and cutting corners. Consider reading this with a journal nearby, ready to chew on the truth being served to you. And, of course, utilize this book as a springboard for prayer, because the words you will encounter here are not just about new information but are for our formation in Christ.

—RICH VILLODAS
New York City, 2021

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Editor's Note



Eugene H. Peterson believed in the extraordinary spirituality of ordinary life. Rather than drawing us away from the earthy, rough edges of living, he urged Christians to become more human, not less so, as they grew in the life of Jesus. Everyday existence is a place of great beauty, real danger, and frequent humor, and walking in wisdom is the trick to navigating the complexities the world has put in our path. To encourage this walk of Christian wisdom, Eugene pastored, preached, taught, wrote, and, most of all, *lived*.

Among Eugene's extensive archives and unpublished resources are countless examples of the beautiful, earthy wisdom born from this vision of life in Jesus. Many of them are very brief—an aside here, a parenthetical statement there—but, in the tradition of great spiritual writing, *deep*. They come from an earned and rooted wisdom, all carrying a keen point: to help others walk in the way of Jesus with a little more faithfulness, skill, and understanding.

On Living Well collects many of the best of these gems. Much of the material here was drawn from more than two decades of *Amen!*, a weekly letter Eugene circulated to his beloved members of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland. The quality and depth of the short pastoral writing that Eugene included in nearly every edition of that

newsletter is a remarkable testament to his craft as a writer and his commitment to excellence in even the smallest opportunities. Other material was taken from sermons preached at Christ Our King during the same period or from other short, unpublished writings he produced as a working pastor. Our editing has been very limited: we've updated some dated cultural references, made various small additions or subtractions for clarity and crispness of language, and then organized them into a meaningful whole. While readers are encouraged to encounter these short sections in any order (or no order at all), readers who do choose to move from the first page to the last will be rewarded with, we hope, a sense of crafted cohesion and a natural flow in which Eugene would have delighted.

The wisdom in this book represents Eugene at the height of his pastoral work, speaking with candor, warmth, and directness to those under his care. It is the hope of the WaterBrook team, in close partnership with Eugene's family, that you will feel yourself pastored from beyond the limitations of years by his timeless biblical insight and keen love for the wonders of the Christian life in the real world. Yes, our world.

Live well.

—PAUL J. PASTOR, editor

Introduction



We've never done this before—*lived*, that is. We are novices at life, having to learn as we go. The animals have instincts that carry them pretty well through their life spans; we have to learn it all firsthand. But it doesn't have to be all trial and error.

We can take note of men and women who have done this well and keep company with them. We can see how they have done it, hoping to get the hang of it ourselves so that we will live well, live completely, live in great love with the people around us, and live in great faith in God.

We can look for lives worth watching. We can look for those who did this well, who lived in love and lived in faith. We can look for those who leave little unlived life around them, who can show us what is possible for ourselves, and who can whet our appetites for the best—the human best.

The Christ best.

PART ONE



On Beginnings

Forget about what's happened;
don't keep going over old history.
Be alert, be present. I'm about to do
something brand-new.
It's bursting out! Don't you see it?
There it is! I'm making a road
through the desert,
rivers in the badlands.

Isaiah 43:18–19, MSG

The Word Was First



Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah 1:5

The Word was first. The Word was previous to everything else. Before we were conceived and took shape in our mothers' wombs, before we were born, before anything happened, there was the Word.

Before there was a sun or a moon or stars, there was the Word. Before there were trees and flowers and fish, there was the Word. Before there were governments and hospitals and schools, there was the Word.

If the Word were not first, everything would have gone awry. If the Word were second—or third or fourth—we would have lost touch with the deep, divine rhythms of creation. If the Word were pushed out of the way and made to be a servant to the action and program, we would have lost connection with the vast interior springs of redemption that flow out of our Lord, the Word made flesh.

When the Word is treated casually or carelessly, we wander away from the essential personal intimacies that God creates . . . by his Word.

On Birth



Every birth is a wonder. The world is invaded by life. Space and time are penetrated by being. Emptiness is displaced by shape and movement. Silence is filled with tone and melody. Solitude becomes society. A birth produces tremors and shakes us in the depths of our person, moving our very universe.

Uncalculated energies are released; unpredictable creations are formed. We are moved by those energies, changed by them, and loosed from death and plunged into life by them. Birth is both a physical experience and a faith event.

Our first birth thrusts us kicking and squalling into the light of day. Our second birth places us singing and believing in the light of God. By acts of love previous to us, we are launched into ways of seeing and being that become truly ours. We are launched into *life*.

Though an everyday reality, birth is always awesome, whether as a new baby in the world or as a new creature in Christ.

We Are Not Stuck



Distracted, inconstant people like us need a large attention-getting device for noticing the main show, seeing the huge God-dimensions of our lives, and listening to the large God-story into which all our stories fit.

There is much about those stories that we, of course, cannot change. We cannot change our heights or our ages. We cannot change our basic intelligences. We cannot change our places of birth or our parentages. We can, at best, make modifications on only our bodily shapes and emotional temperaments. There is a great deal of sheer *givenness* in our lives, circumstances, and conditions that we must deal with as it is.

Frequently, we project fantasies of what we want onto the church and then walk away grumpy because we don't find what we expect. Other times, we become paralyzed with guilt because we feel the church isn't living up to its calling, but all our guilt does is drain more energy out of us. What we simply must do is attend to what is going on—this Holy Spirit work that is continuous between the Acts of the Apostles and the acts of the Christians of our community, here in our place, now in our time.

But still, we are not stuck with these lives of ours the way they are. We can change—can *be* changed. That is the promise of God in Jesus Christ and the experience that is at the heart of Christian living: *conversion*.

What this means is simple. At the center, at the core of our beings, change is possible. A change from being lost to found, a

change from self-centeredness to God-centeredness, a change from anxiously grasping to confidently receiving the life of faith in Jesus Christ.

These changes are going on all around us. Sometimes they are taking place in us. An American view of conversion sees it as characteristically sudden and dramatic, and if it isn't sudden and dramatic, then it doesn't qualify. But most conversions are long and quiet. We miss the drama of these stories because we are not sufficiently trained biblically to discern Spirit work.

You don't have to stay the way you are.

On Growing



Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

Matthew 4:1–2

It is hard to be a human being. Of all the creatures in this world, we have the toughest task. It is easy to be a crocus: no decisions to make, no schedules to keep, and no disappointments to endure. The crocus sleeps all winter, and then as the snow recedes and the sun warms the earth, the crocus breaks through the ground with blossoms that bring standing applause from all of us. It is easy to be a cat: no anxieties about aging, no perplexities about world affairs, and no guilt about real or imagined adulteries. The cat grooms itself on the carpet, purrs on any convenient lap, and holds the opinions of the servile humans in haughty disdain.

But being human is not easy. Not at *all* easy. The seasons do not automatically develop us into maturity. Our instincts do not naturally guide us into a superior contentment. We falter and fail. We doubt and question. We work and learn. And just when we think we have it figured out, something else comes up that throws us for a loop.

Jesus is the best look we have at what it means to be human—*really* human. We look at him and see the incredible

attractiveness and profound wonder of being a woman or a man. We also see how difficult it is. We see him in contest against every force that would diminish us into something less than human. We see him confront and deal with every influence that would divert us from living to the glory of God.

We get our basic orientation in the difficulties of being human by carefully attending to what Jesus said and did in his forty days of temptation and testing in the wilderness. To become like him, we must be changed, shaped, and deepened by the Word of God.

Fresh Salt



Remember the words of our Lord when he said, “Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?” (Luke 14:34).

The answer to his question is simple.

It can't.

You have to go back to the salt mines. You have to dig some fresh salt.

Saints, Not Cogwheels



For a long time, all Christians called each other saints. They were all saints regardless of how well or badly they lived, of how experienced or inexperienced they were. The word *saint* did not refer to the quality or virtue of their acts but rather to the kind of life to which they had been chosen: life on a battlefield. It was not a title given after a spectacular performance; it was a mark of whose side they were on.

Saint means being set apart for God's side. That word means that a human is not a cogwheel. It means that a person is not the keyboard of a piano on which circumstances play hit tunes or parade music. It means we are chosen out of the stream of circumstantiality for something important that God is doing.

What is God doing? He is doing what he has always done. He is saving. He is rescuing. He is blessing. He is providing. He is judging. He is healing. He is enlightening. There is a spiritual war in progress in our world, an all-out moral battle. There is evil and cruelty, unhappiness and illness. There is superstition and ignorance, brutality and pain. God is in a continuous and an energetic battle against all of it.

God is for life and against death. God is for love and against hate. God is for hope and against despair. God is for heaven and against hell. There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square foot of space is contested.

And every one of us is enlisted on his side in the contest.

An Unanswered Question



What gets our attention? We are bombarded with ideas, invitations, arguments, and enthusiasms that claim to make us better or happy or safe. We are yelled at, bartered with, urged, and pushed. All of it can't be true. All of it can't be important. But some of it must be.

How do we distinguish between the central and peripheral? Where do we get an orientation in this dizzying whirl of argumentation? How do we find our way home through the blinding storm of controversy? How do we purchase a personal place to stand in the pushing and jostling crowd of people who claim to tell us the truth of our lives?

What gets our attention? The loudest voice? The cleverest slogan? The biggest promise?

On Square Pegs



The present age prepares roles for people and expects us to fit into them. These are roles in which we are asked to smoothly function: as good consumers, as indulgent hedonists, as proud owners, as ruthless competitors, as satisfied customers. But there is a problem: Christians don't fit. People of faith have sharp, awkward edges. We are square pegs in round holes.

Society relentlessly whittles away at those sharp edges so that we will be well adjusted, profitable, and safe. The massive energies of journalism, entertainment, education, and advertising pour over us like the powerful, persistent flowing of water over rock, working to erode us into smooth, secularized surfaces.

We resist. We have been warned by Paul, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within" (Romans 12:2, PHILLIPS). But how do we keep our recovered, original, sharp-edged identity as Christians in a world in which the pressures to conform are so powerful?

Christians have long agreed that our spiritual practices are the core technology for keeping the angles sharp. With prayer and intention, we must encourage and direct the basic practices of faith to maintain our sharp identity—as creatures a little less than God—against the world that is trying constantly to adjust us into the comfortable mediocrity of being little more than animals.

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