

*Five Transformative Values  
to Root Us in the Way of Jesus*



# THE DEEPLY FORMED LIFE



UNCORRECTED  
PROOF



**RICH VILLODAS**

FOREWORD BY PETE SCAZZERO

Praise for  
THE DEEPLY FORMED LIFE

*“The Deeply Formed Life* is a book for our time. Honest, wise, insightful, funny, and—above all—deep. The way Rich and New Life Fellowship hold emotional health and racial justice together is beyond inspiring. This is spiritual formation for the future of the church.”

—JOHN MARK COMER, pastor of teaching and vision  
at Bridgetown Church and author of  
*The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*

“I’ve studied the Bible under Pastor Rich’s leadership for close to a decade. The core values he shares in this book serve as guidance, not only for how we should live as Christians in an ever-changing world but also for how we can live a life of purpose—that consistently and enthusiastically points to Jesus.”

—SUSAN KELECHI WATSON, actress from the award-winning television series *This Is Us*

“Rich Villodas masterfully integrates a wide range of sources—from contemplative to charismatic, monastic to missional, psychological to theological—in a way that is unmistakably Christ centered and gospel shaped. From his own deep spiritual journey, Rich has emerged with a voice that is warm and wise. His vulnerability is refreshing, and his distillation of these life-changing insights and practices is clear and compelling. I found myself smiling and feeling convicted by the Holy Spirit as I read it, and shouting, ‘Amen.’”

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

“The evidence is everywhere—Christians have been formed by our culture for shallowness. The way to a more deeply formed life is no great mystery, but it is, as Rich Villodas shows, filled with countercultural practices that require intention, purpose, and vision. These pages cast a vision for not only deeper, holistic formation of each of us as individual believers but also for a more deeply formed church as well.”

—KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR, author of *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life Through Great Books* and *Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More—Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist*

“Rich Villodas writes from the wellspring of a monastic spirit that has been woven into the fabric of his life for years. I know very few Christian leaders who embody the contemplative life in such a way that connects the complex social, cultural, and spiritual realities we face today. *The Deeply Formed Life* invites us to journey with God toward personal wholeness and a new moral imagination that creates a better world of justice, peace, and reconciliation. I highly recommend it!”

—BRENDA SALTER MCNEIL, author of *Becoming Brave: Finding the Courage to Pursue Racial Justice Now*

“*The Deeply Formed Life* is a powerful call to a holy pursuit away from the temptations of a shallow discipleship that encumber our generation. Rich masterfully weaves the experiences and disciplines of both personal and communal formation that inspire and empower us to a contemporary discipleship, which leads to spiritual health

and flourishing. This book is a gift that enriches us as we open every layer.”

—REV. DR. GABRIEL SALGUERO, pastor at Calvario City Church and president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition

“Rich Villodas understands that a pastor’s primary task is not to gather a crowd but to form people in Christ. Spiritual formation is not a practice reserved for the spiritually elite; rather it is the very heart of all Christian discipleship. He embodies my hope for the contemporary church in the Western world—for us to a shift toward spiritual formation. *The Deeply Formed Life* clearly marks the path we need to follow, making the essential practices of formation accessible to everyone.”

—BRIAN ZAHND, pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri, and author of *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*

“My friend Rich Villodas has been marked deeply by the spiritual directors of church history. And yet this book is not only about a call to engage in ancient practices so that we can have a more fulfilling life. Rich calls us to both personal refreshment *and* missional engagement, the kind of engagement that challenges injustice. I believe *The Deeply Formed Life* represents a new genre of spiritual direction, a kind modeled after Jesus, who both went away to pray and engaged the marginalized.”

—DR. BRYAN LORITTS, author of *The Dad Difference*

“*The Deeply Formed Life* tackles the endemic issue of non-discipleship within the Western church. The book is theologically rich, pastorally sensitive, and wonderfully practical. Rich does not shy away from addressing some of the most pressing issues in our day and how they affect our discipleship. This is much-needed!

—DEB HIRSCH, missional leader, speaker, and author of  
*Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form  
of Discipleship and Redeeming Sex*

“In a captivating and moving way, which is profound and personal, Rich Villodas shows us how we can be formed by God into a masterpiece. With shimmering insights and poignant stories, this rare and powerful book will take you deeper into God and make the world more beautiful.”

—KEN SHIGEMATSU, pastor of Tenth Church, Vancouver, BC, and bestselling author of *God in My Everything*

“Revealing our shallowness with grace and helping us see there is so much more to living, Rich Villodas leads us patiently into *The Deeply Formed Life*. Step by step, this pastor walks us through the malformations that plague our modern existence. He challenges us with content that has a personal spirituality and with nothing less than a full-orbed Christian discipleship. A powerful summons to the deeper life.”

—DAVID FITCH, Lindner chair of evangelical theology at Northern Seminary Chicago and author of *Faithful Presence*

THE DEEPLY  
FORMED LIFE







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Five Transformative Values  
to Root Us in the  
Way of Jesus

Foreword by Pete Scazzero

**RICH VILLODAS**



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For Rosie.

Your love has deeply formed me.

## FOREWORD

I never do this. Write forewords, I mean. On average, I turn down about one request per week to endorse books or write forewords. In fact, I even feel a little hesitant about this one, not because of the book (it's great, which I'll get to in a minute), but because I worry people will get the wrong idea and start asking me again and I'll stray from my God-given limits into a ministry that is not mine for this season.

But this book is worth breaking my rule to recommend. I love that it is, as Wendell Berry would say, *local*. It's grounded in a local church, where I hired Rich when he was just twenty-nine and where I've had the privilege to watch him grow, transition to become the lead pastor, and see him do great things for the congregation. This is important. Because Rich is fleshing these ideas out in *real* life, with *real* people. He's fleshing out ancient wisdom for this generation. He brings together both a rich breadth of reading, along with treasures discovered over time in the trenches of ministry. That's difficult. He's taken this

to the next level, addressing vast resources of spiritual formation to the pressing issues of racial reconciliation, sexuality, and Sabbath rest. This is very significant and important as we transition into the third decade of the twenty-first century.

If you read this book, it will stretch you. It will challenge you to think more broadly about discipleship, especially how formation influences the most difficult opportunities of life today. You will find practical rhythms that will impact your life. And you might just find the life—the deep life—that you’ve been craving for a long time.

We can often ignore deeply intentional spiritual formation. Like our emotions, its roots lie hidden under the surface of our lives. But the invitation Rich extends here, to a life deeply formed by five pressing values, has the potential to transform us as individuals and as a culture. I find myself asking: *What would a family look like if its members lived with this kind of depth? How might singles? How about a neighborhood? A city? A nation?* It would transform life as we know it into something so much richer, so much more like what Jesus intended for his people.

So without further comment, I recommend this excellent book by a great man following Jesus and pastoring one of the most multiracial, diverse churches in a unique place called Queens in New York City.

Read on, and be formed.

—PETE SCAZZERO, founder of New Life Fellowship in New York and Emotionally Healthy Discipleship, and bestselling author of *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* and *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*

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## INTRODUCTION: FORMED BY A SHALLOW WORLD

Every now and then while I'm home sitting on the couch, I channel surf, looking for a good movie to watch. As is probably the case with you, there are some movies that, no matter how many times I've seen them, I'll watch again. They are on my running list, which contains such movies as *The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Godfather*, *Good Will Hunting*, and the romantic classic *Hitch*, just to name a few.

In addition to these, I'm a sucker for, well . . . *Titanic*. Who doesn't press rewind to see the baby-faced Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) jiggling with the sophisticated Rose (Kate Winslet) on the lower-deck dance floor? This blockbuster hit (the first movie to hit the billion-dollar mark)<sup>1</sup> featured a fancy necklace, Celine Dion hitting all the notes, and of course, a compelling story. But when I watched it recently, I was taken aback by a contrast I'd somehow missed before.

On the upper decks of the *Titanic*, there was amazing luxury—conspicuous opulence and riches. In stark con-

trast were the lower decks, where poverty-stricken passengers resided. Of course, a few days after the *Titanic* sailed, it struck an iceberg, and disaster was shared by all on board, no matter their socioeconomic status.

It was immediately after the tragic iceberg moment that I noticed another disturbing contrast. For those up on top, there was a tragic obliviousness. Everything still looked magnificent; life was great. But on the lower level, where the iceberg hit, it was a different story. Soon enough, the issues (the water) of the lower level began to rise to the upper deck. And in the final moments of the movie (spoiler alert!), the *Titanic* broke up and was consumed by the icy depths.

You can see the metaphor: sooner or later the issues on life's lower decks, though we remain oblivious, will nevertheless rise to the top. Truthfully, there are many with us (in our families, churches, schools, and workplaces) who are in the same boat, all unwittingly in danger of being broken up and sucked down. In fact, it often can feel as though our entire world is going under.

Pushing the metaphor a bit further, on the upper decks of our social media lives, things can also look great—impressive, even. (At least our Instagram gives that impression.) We like to put ourselves forward as competent, capable people. But as a pastor, I've repeatedly seen the truth behind the images we carefully curate.

I routinely meet with people who, when I get up close, present a picture that's not reflected on social media. From time to time, I actually go back to their profiles to look at some of their photos (sounds a bit stalkerish, I know). I scroll for one purpose only: to be reminded that very often, things are not as they appear. Topside, people



can look so content, joyful, and successful, but privately beneath they'll confess suicidal thoughts, drug addictions, marital affairs, debilitating shame, inner rage, and so much more—I see the icy waters rising. It's a wake-up call. When I look at my own social media profile, I know that from my own depths, similarly threatening waters can be rising.

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We won't take time to go deep down within because we have often been discipled into superficiality.

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Actually, it is in those very lower decks where our spiritual lives take true shape and texture. But notoriously, we won't take time to go deep down within because we have often been discipled into superficiality—and in the name of Jesus, no less. This superficiality works against us as we try to navigate some of the most complex issues of our world, whether related to our emotional health or the complexities of race, sexuality, and justice.

How are we to experience wholeness in our own personal lives while being instruments of healing in a world that is breaking apart around us? To start, we must live in a different place. We have to go down to the lower decks.

At New Life Fellowship, the church I pastor, we decided to use the iceberg as our logo. But in our usage, it's not a device of destruction but a symbol pointing us to depth of transformation.

The iceberg brings to mind the goal of spiritual formation in Christ—namely, that Jesus wants to form his

life in us. Significantly, about 90 percent of an iceberg remains unseen beneath the surface.<sup>2</sup> And Jesus wants to transform our entire beings, not just the 10 percent that shows. Yet Christianity in the Western world is often marginalized as a life accessory rather than the means of powerful life transformation. Still, the emphasis upon surface change is ubiquitous within Christianity and finds expression across all traditions, denominations, and movements.

I thank God that for more than twenty years, I've spent time in a variety of Christian traditions that seek him and offer great gifts to the world. Yet I've also witnessed a kind of dichotomizing of faith where the emphasis is on the outward at the expense of the inward. For instance:

- In some conservative traditions, transformation is about getting the right theology in one's head while overlooking the inner work God wants to do.
- In some progressive traditions, transformation is about right action and engagement within the world but often at the expense of personal humility and mercy.
- In some Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions, transformation is about getting the right experience but without the deeper work of loving well and exploring our inner worlds.

At New Life, we've discovered time and time again, for more than three decades, that the work God wants to

do in us requires us to look within: to look deeper and be deeply formed. Why? Because we are covertly and consistently being formed by a culture fashioned by shallowness. In short, we are being shallowly formed.

### WE ARE ALWAYS BEING (SHALLOWLY) FORMED

Whether we know it or not, see it or not, or understand it or not, we are always at risk of being shallowly formed. We are formed by our false selves, our families of origin, the highly manipulated presentations of social media, and the value system of a world that determines worth based on accomplishments, possessions, efficiency, intellectual acumen, and gifts. So we need to be regularly called back to the essence of our lives in God. That essence is one of ongoing transformation; that is, Christ being formed in us. It's something I've needed to continually explore during all my years of following Jesus.

I vividly remember words spoken to me in my early twenties by a college professor at the end of a class on leadership, three years after I'd become a follower of Jesus. I had the task of reading a book on postmodernism and the church and presenting my findings to the class. Problem was, I didn't read the book.

Sure, I had done my own study of postmodernism: skimming the dustcover and chapter outline of the book. And then I gave my own presentation of the topic. Half-way through, the professor stopped me midsentence and said, "Rich, you haven't read the book, right?"

I sheepishly responded, "No, I haven't," and heard the snickers and whispers of my classmates. I had ten

more minutes left to go in my presentation. I thought I would be asked to sit.

Instead, he said, “Keep going.”

At the end of the class, the professor asked if he could have a word with me. As I stood in front of him with one strap of my book bag hanging over my shoulder, in no uncertain terms he spoke a word of warning to me: “Rich, you have a gift for reading the dustcover of a book and being able to give a thirty-minute presentation on it. But you also have a curse. The curse is, you will be tempted to believe that you can live your life off your gifts and not do the deep work of character formation. Your gifts can take you only so far. But there are no such limits when it comes to a life marked by deep character.”

Those words pierced my heart. To be sure, I resented him for a few days. The nerve of him to say that I had a curse. But that moment was a turning point for me, even at the young age of twenty-two. I was learning about being deeply formed.

### UNTIL CHRIST IS FORMED IN YOU

In one of his letters, the apostle Paul named the painful and astonishing desire he had for a body of Christ followers in Galatia (in modern-day Turkey). He wrote to a group of people marked by a preoccupation with religious changes that kept them from experiencing deep transformation in Christ. How Paul’s letter began makes it clear how shocked he was by their way of life. A few verses into the letter, Paul wrote, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the

grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:6–7).

The Galatians had drifted away from the simple message of God’s grace found in the Christ that Paul preached. Certainly, this message (the gospel) had begun to transform them. Soon after, however, certain teachers started infiltrating the church, teaching another gospel. This other gospel was cosmetic.

The false teachers in that church basically said that faith in Jesus was not enough. If you were a man, in order to be accepted as part of the people of God, you needed to be circumcised, you had to observe specific holy days, and you especially had to maintain the customs of Jewish religious culture. In essence, they were saying, “If you believe in Jesus and do these things, you will be the people of God. If you do this, you will be the covenant people. If you do this, you will prove yourself to have been properly ‘formed.’”

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What use are the superficial changes we  
make if we neglect the deep work God  
wants to do inside us?

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But Paul spoke an unequivocal *no!* We are not transformed from the outside in; we are transformed from the inside out. One is transformed by saying yes again and again to Christ’s self-giving, poured-out, redemptive love. We receive it and are to be formed by it. This was Paul’s

fixation. He later in this same letter described his concern for his “little children” by saying, “I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!” (4:19).

Paul had one solitary focus: that Christ be formed in them. What use are the superficial changes we make if we neglect the deep work God wants to do inside us? Although Paul was writing to a church two thousand years ago, this issue they were facing is the very same in our day. Instead of being deeply formed, we settle for being shallowly shaped.

### MY STORY OF BEING FORMED

I’m a New Yorker of Puerto Rican descent, born and raised in the East New York section of Brooklyn. In the 1980s and ’90s, this area of Brooklyn was regarded as one of the most overlooked, under-resourced, drug-infested areas in New York City. Growing up in this neighborhood offered me a mixed bag of experiences. I have fond memories of playing street football and frightening memories of seeing a couple of dead bodies in the street.

I have stories of profoundly joyful moments playing with more than a dozen cousins who lived down the block from me and heart-wrenching stories of relatives dying prematurely because of drug use and violence. I have grown up with wonderful examples of men and women of faith around me (some who were my grandparents and aunts), as well as examples of familial dysfunction. All of these experiences have formed me.

I grew up in a home that was indifferent to the things

of faith. I didn't have many negative views about the church or God. I rarely thought of them. During my childhood, my parents attended church once a year at best, but they made up for their indifference by regularly sending me to church with my grandparents. At first, I thought my parents wanted to instill in me good religious values and such, but I would come to find out that these trips to church gave Mom and Dad a much-needed break. (Those two especially lacked religious curiosity if it meant sitting through four hours of a Pentecostal church service spoken in Spanish.)

This church I attended shaped my first conceptions of God. As early as elementary-school age, I learned that God was unpredictable and powerful. At any moment, someone in the congregation could be the meeting place where the holy converged with the human. As a kid, I curiously and fearfully watched people fall on the ground, dance, shout, and cry. When this happened, there was both a normalcy and sacredness that filled the congregation. It was all a bit too much for me to absorb, but I was intrigued.

I would also learn that God was in the business of healing and welcoming. I recall moments when drug addicts would come into a church service (usually attended by twenty people) to make their presence known. One person who walked in often was an inebriated uncle of mine, and in the process of his grand, disruptive entrance, he would be met by a couple of deacons who would welcome him, pray for him, and winsomely escort him out if needed. I would see from an early age that the house of God was a sacred place for hospitality and a safe place for the hurting.



As a twelve-year-old, I asked my parents if I could stop going to church, and they obliged. But five years later, I found myself back in church as a senior in high school. I had started to date a pastor's daughter. (That got me back into the church enthusiastically.) The relationship lasted a couple of years, and when it ended, I was sent into a tailspin of anxiety and depression. I needed some kind of peace in my life, so on one August Sunday night, I returned to the church I'd visited as a child. In that moment, I encountered the love of God in a way that broke through my despair.

I walked into the church, which had about one hundred people in attendance. It was a long, narrow storefront building filled to capacity. After the loud and boisterous time of singing, I listened to a former drug-addict-turned-preacher give a sermon from Ezekiel 37, a story about God breathing life into a valley of dry bones (see verses 1–14). As he preached (in English and Spanish without a translator), he paced back and forth, sometimes dancing up and down the center aisle, with fancy brown alligator shoes and a matching belt.

At the close of his sermon, he invited all who wanted “the breath of God” (see verses 5–6) to come forward for prayer. I knew I was spiritually and emotionally suffocating and took him up on the offer. My soul was like that valley of dry bones, and I longed for God's life, so I went forward. As the preacher prayed for me, with sweat dripping down his forehead and tears flowing down my face, I became that meeting place where the holy converged with the human. I (along with about fifteen of my family members) received the gracious invitation to life in Christ.

From this point on, something was unlocked in me. I found myself praying all the time. I attended every church service and Bible study my local congregation offered. I would be in church five to six days out of the week, participating in the prayer meeting, youth group, and men's ministry—even the weekly women's Bible study. I invited myself into every home prayer group I could find. When I wasn't at a church meeting, I was sitting shoulder to shoulder with my grandfather in his bedroom, being mentored in the Scriptures. It was hard to explain what was happening, but I had found something for which my soul was thirsting.

That was the beginning of my continuing spiritual journey forward. Along the path, I would be exposed to many different ways of following Jesus. As a twenty-one-year-old college student, I would be exposed to the desert fathers and mothers and would begin experimenting with practices of silence, solitude, and contemplation. As a twenty-three-year-old, I would learn more about how God transformed people through the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit. As a twenty-five-year-old, I would come to know of God's particular and preferential care for the poor. I learned with great clarity that the spiritually, emotionally, *and* socially poor mattered to God and should matter to me. As a twenty-eight-year-old, I would begin a journey of interior examination, integrating the world of my feelings and emotions into my spiritual formation. As a thirty-year-old, I would be introduced to the radical vision of God's reconciling power across racial, cultural, economic, and gender barriers.

Throughout this book, I will share the stories, insights, and failures that have marked my journey. I've

been shaped by shoutin' churches and silent experiences. I've sung Taizé and memorized Black gospel songs. I've prayed at 3:00 a.m. with Trappist monks to start the day and at 3:00 a.m. with Pentecostals to close the night. I've been enamored with liturgy and slain in the Spirit. I've preached on justification by faith and faith that leads to justice in our world.

For more than twenty years as a follower of Jesus, I have been privileged to be shaped by a wide assortment of streams and traditions, and I've learned that to be deeply formed requires one to be widely informed—not on a cognitive level alone but also in a way that the very makeup of our lives is profoundly shaped. I have discovered repeatedly that faithful Christian witness requires us to hold on to the beautiful and diverse manifestations of God's action among his people, stretching ourselves to be more faithful than ever to Jesus and his kingdom in the age in which we live. The best way I can illustrate this is through the example of redwood trees.

### A POWERFUL ROOT SYSTEM

On a recent speaking trip to the San Francisco area, my family and I spent a weekend at a camp that was surrounded by what seemed like an endless number of redwood trees. When we first encountered these majestic trees on our drive to the camp, I gasped in wonder and amazement. I'm a city guy. I'm used to tall buildings and crowded streets. But seeing these tall trees crammed together like New York City subway riders during rush hour opened up something in my soul.

After settling in our cottage, we walked around the campgrounds. For fifteen minutes, I walked with my head craned upward, contemplating these trees that were as tall as two hundred feet. I would learn that some redwood trees grow up to almost four hundred feet, similar to a thirty-seven-story building. It was almost too much for me to take in.

What I learned about redwood trees that weekend would give me a vision for this book. As I waited to preach one of the sessions, a pastor named Will from the church that hosted us stepped onto the stage to lead the congregation in prayer. Will also was of Puerto Rican descent, with long thick dreadlocks that reminded me of the redwood trees.

He offered some words about community life and gave a short lesson on the root system of the redwoods, informing us that these redwood trees are centered and strong because their roots are robustly intertwined with each other. The roots often go only five or six feet deep, but they extend outward up to a hundred feet from the trunk. Each tree is deeply sustained by the larger, wider system of roots that provides stability, enabling them to grow high into the sky.

As I learned this new information and studied redwood trees further, I came to the realization that a redwood tree is the core metaphor for Christian spiritual formation that we need in our day. God longs for us to be fully alive, soaring into the sky and bearing witness to God's good life that is available to us. But if we hope to be shaped and changed in this way of life, we must have a root system powerful enough to hold us together.

What I want to propose is that there is a root system

from which our lives and surrounding world would greatly benefit. A deeply formed life is a life marked by integration, intersection, intertwining, and interweaving, holding together multiple layers of spiritual formation. This kind of life calls us to be people who cultivate lives with God in prayer, move toward reconciliation, work for justice, have healthy inner lives, and see our bodies and sexuality as gifts to steward.

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Although this might sound like an impossible standard, I believe that by God's grace, the presence of the Spirit, and the support of the body of Christ, we can all intentionally and incrementally move to a more comprehensive view and practice of life in Christ. What I propose as the goal of this book is not a quick-fix strategy to solve all our problems but rather a long-term vision to help us have greater depth and maturity as we engage our problems.

## THE DEEPLY FORMED LIFE

In this book, I will explore five values in which we need to be deeply formed. I recognize that this is not all there is to engage, but these are five areas that nonetheless need to be held together. As we seek to follow Jesus, we

need to harness a multilayered approach of Christian identity and mission. We do need these.

1. *Contemplative rhythms for an exhausted life.* Most of us live at a nonstop outward pace, which leaves no time to be with God and actually does violence against our souls. As one who has been shaped by the ancient desert and monastic traditions, I see the riches and resources available to root us in a way of life that is slow, vibrant, and transformative. I will offer a vision for a life that isn't consumed by the hurried and harried ways of the world.

2. *Racial reconciliation for a divided world.* Because the church I pastor has people from at least seventy-five nations, the hostility of our world has often come right into our community. We have journeyed more than three decades together, offering a way forward as a prophetic community in a deeply partisan and ideologically segregated culture. I will present a pathway of reconciliation for us to take together.

3. *Interior examination for a world living on the surface.* Many of us lack the tools to effectively navigate our interior worlds. Our unawareness cripples us with anxiety, and we miss opportunities to grow into mature people who love well. I will serve as a tour guide for helping us explore the notoriously uncharted waters of our inner worlds.

4. *Sexual wholeness for a culture that splits bodies from souls.* We often don't know what a healthy integra-

tion of our spiritual lives and our bodies looks like. We will explore the process of loving God with our whole selves and seeing our bodies as gifts to steward for the flourishing of our own lives and relationships.

5. *Missional presence for a distracted and disengaged people.* What does it mean to make space in our lives for others? How do we engage the troubling realities of injustice, poverty, and spiritually struggling people? Studying this theme will help us move out into the world to be a presence of healing and hope for others.

Each of these five values will have two corresponding chapters. The first offers theological and biblical vision to help us see the big picture, and the second offers simple (yet not easy) practices that can position us on the deeply formed journey.

### A WORD ABOUT THE PRACTICES

The deeply formed life is not possible without an intentional reordering of our lives. This is why you'll find many different ways to flesh out the content of this book in the real world. However, before we consider them, I need to offer a few words about the practices themselves.

First, the practices don't save us or make God love us more. We are saved by God's free and faithful love in Christ. God's love is steadfast, meaning there's nothing we can do to make him love us more, and there's nothing



we can do to make him love us less. Rather, these practices are meant to help us receive and express God's love in deeply formed ways.

The practices have personal and communal elements to them. Some practices don't require the involvement of other people, but each practice is strengthened by the presence of others on the journey. The practices are best held together in a community where we are surrounded by different people who powerfully bear witness to an area of formation in which we might not be so strong. We are all, in some area of our lives, like the paralyzed man in the Gospels (see Mark 2:1–12). From time to time, we need friends who have the strength to bring us before Jesus.

The practices are meant to complement and enliven such core spiritual practices as Sunday worship, receiving the sacraments, hearing the gospel preached, and gathering with others for prayer and friendship. Practices are not just about what we do; they're also a means of re-framing how we think and see.

The practices take time. It's called practice because we can always learn something new. There might be some practices that you begin to implement quickly and, in the process, you experience significant fruit. There might be practices that take a long time to get a handle on. Give yourself the same grace God has granted you.

### MY PASTORAL CONTEXT

I have the great privilege of pastoring New Life Fellowship Church in Queens, New York City. We are a multi-

racial, urban, multiclass, immigrant, ethnically diverse, multigenerational community of people trying to love Jesus and each other well. We live in the city that never sleeps and have the same struggles of every city dweller. I note this because most books about spiritual formation are often written with mountains, the woods, and monasteries pristinely positioned in the background. I write, think, and live with the background of sirens blaring, homeless men pouring into our church building for showers, and neighbors frantically running to catch the subway. The deeply formed life is not simply for people who have the benefit of environments conducive to silence and solitude. From personal experience, I can assure you that it's for people of all walks of life who long to be shaped by God's gracious love. My hope is that in these pages, God will invite you into a profound encounter of that same love.

This brings me to our first area of focus: living with contemplative rhythms.

THE DEEPLY  
FORMED LIFE

## Contemplative Rhythms for an Exhausted Life

In 1901, an American doctor named John Harvey Girdner coined the term *Newyorkitis* to describe an illness that had symptoms including edginess, quick movements, and impulsiveness. At the time, he said it was “a disease which affects a large percentage of the inhabitants of Manhattan Island.”<sup>1</sup> As a native New Yorker, I can’t help but laugh and also gasp at these words. I laugh because Girdner is describing a world long gone: a world without the internet, high-speed cars, and other technological advances that inform everything we do. I gasp, however, because if *Newyorkitis* is what Girdner observed more than one hundred years ago, where does that leave us today?

Girdner saw something in 1901 that captured the dangerous pace at which we often unwittingly live. Our world hasn’t slowed down. Our world continues on, faster and busier, and we are reminded that our souls were not created for the kind of speed to which we have grown accustomed. Thus, we are a people who are out of rhythm, a people with too much to do and not enough

time to do it. This illness is no longer a New York phenomenon—it has infected people around the world. And I see it every day.

Recently on a Saturday morning, I was walking through my neighborhood, and as I neared my apartment building, an older man frantically shouted across the street, “Are you Jewish?” He waved his hands at me as if he had been stranded on a deserted island and I was his ticket back to civilization. He repeated again as he drew closer, “Are you Jewish?” This was a strange question, but it occurred to me I had been growing out my beard, so that might explain the question.

I responded a bit too loudly for an early Saturday morning, “No, I’m Puerto Rican.”

“Okay, great,” he said as he tried to catch his breath, wiping sweat from his forehead. “I need your help. I have to get my ninety-year-old mother downstairs.”

It was a slow morning for me, so with curiosity I followed him into his apartment building. When we got to the elevator, he pointed at the buttons while distractedly looking in the other direction. “Press six, please,” he said—another strange moment, but I willingly did so. On the ride up, we exchanged names and then awkwardly stared at the numbers. His breathing was heavy and labored. I looked at him from the corner of my eye to see him talking under his breath.

We took the elevator up six stories. Then, as he was about to step into his small apartment, he shouted, “Ma, Rich is here.”

His mother shouted back with irritation, “Who’s Rich?” (This was quite a New York moment.)

I stepped in and saw a frail, well-dressed elderly woman

grasping her walker. She had on a large pearl necklace and heels that looked a bit too big for her. With exasperation, she grumbled things like, “I’m so busy,” “There’s never enough time,” and “How am I going to finish everything?”

Soon I found out that this mom-and-son duo were heading to the local synagogue but that he couldn’t press the elevator button due to Sabbath prohibitions. All he wanted me to do was press the elevator button—nothing more, nothing less.

I look back at that moment and chuckle. But what struck me most in this whole encounter was that this elderly woman was stressed out because of the fullness of her life. Here she was, overwhelmed, on the Sabbath of all days, with too much to do at ninety years of age.

Newyorkitis is alive and well.

### DANGEROUSLY DEPLETED

Our lives can easily take us to the brink of burnout. The pace we live at is often destructive. The lack of margin is debilitating. We are worn out. In all of this, the problem before us is not just the frenetic pace we live at but what gets pushed out from our lives as a result; that is, *life with God*. Educator and activist Parker Palmer makes a compelling case that burnout typically does not come about because we’ve given so much of ourselves that we have nothing left. He tells us, “It merely reveals the nothingness from which I was trying to give in the first place.”<sup>2</sup>

What would it look like to live at a different pace? What if there were a rhythm of life that could instead enable us to deeply connect with God, a lifestyle not domi-

nated by hurry and exhaustion but by margin and joy? As long as we remain enslaved to a culture of speed, superficiality, and distraction, we will not be the people God longs for us to be. We desperately need a spirituality that roots us in a different way.

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As long as we remain enslaved to a culture of speed, superficiality, and distraction, we will not be the people God longs for us to be.

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No matter our walks of life or professions, our struggle is all too real: single parents trying to find just a moment of oasis from the incessant bickering of children, doctors caught in the unending pressures of life-and-death choices, and pastors over-functioning to the point of breakdown. There are schoolteachers whose work never really ends, sleep-deprived students floundering through exams, immigrant small-business owners struggling to make ends meet, and therapists and social workers overwhelmed with the bottomless crises they need to resolve daily. The pace of our lives can be brutal.

Without denying these realities, we are invited to a different way of being in the world. The late Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama wrote a book titled *Three-Mile-an-Hour God*.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Koyama was trying to convey that if we want to connect with God, we'd be wise to travel at God's speed. God has all the time in the world, and as a result he is not in a rush. Thus, Koyama's claim that God travels at three miles an hour is not an arbitrary figure. On average, humans walk at this pace. And it's in

just such ambling, unhurried, and leisurely moments that we often encounter God. N. T. Wright similarly affirmed, “It is only when we slow down our lives that we can catch up to God.”<sup>4</sup> This is the paradox of contemplative rhythms.

Now, don’t get me wrong; I’m not advocating that we go back to dial-up internet service and take boats instead of airplanes to our destinations. Speed has helped remake our world in ways that are wonderful and liberating. But speed has also caused our connections with God and others to be incredibly superficial. There’s a severe lack of depth in our lives and communities because we have allowed ourselves to be swept up by a world under the influence of addictive speed. And as philosopher Dallas Willard famously said, “Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day.”<sup>5</sup>

In the face of this crisis of speed, distraction, and superficial spirituality, there is a way that has been tried and tested through the centuries. It’s a way that has marked my life from the time I became a Christian as a young adult. It’s the way of the monastic, contemplative life. We live in a time when we must learn from the monastery. We desperately need a way of thinking and living that isn’t captive to the powers of efficiency, speed, and performance. We need a way of living according to a different understanding of time and space. We need the treasures of monastic imagination.

### A MONASTIC IMAGINATION

Before you dismiss this notion as an old, irrelevant idea from the Dark Ages, let me attempt to reveal the monas-



tic approach as an important correction to our way of life and faith. As pastor Ken Shigematsu stated, “Every one of us has a monk or nun ‘embryo’ inside of us.”<sup>6</sup> Deep in our souls, we crave space with God that is defined by silence, stillness, and solitude.

My first experience of this kind of monastic spirituality was in college, and it forever changed me. As a student at Nyack College in Rockland County, New York, I was required to take a personal spiritual-formation class my senior year. Part of the class was to go on a weekend retreat at a Franciscan monastery. During the weekend, the students were placed in different parts of the grounds for about eight hours to just “be with God.” In my case, I was told to remain on the platform of an outdoor chapel, with no Bible, only a journal. My assignment was to remain in solitude and write about the experience. This was one of the most challenging and exhilarating days of my life.

I would close my eyes and listen to the beautiful sounds of birds chirping and then in the next moment stare into the ground and see a colony of ants working diligently. In the stillness of the moment, every part of creation somehow connected me to God.

I’d look out into the empty rows of wooden chairs, wondering about my future life of preaching. I’d fix my gaze on the statue of baby Jesus being tenderly held by Joseph at the center of the platform. As I closed my eyes and took deep breaths, I imagined God holding me in that tender embrace. There were moments of delightful contemplation when I heard words of God’s grace spoken deep within my heart. I journaled many pages of

prayers, fears, and requests, and when I got tired of writing, I just stared out into the monastery grounds.

Now, I don't want you to get the idea that it was all heavenly; it wasn't. There were also times of sheer boredom and dread, when I was disinterested and wanted to be somewhere else. I mean, after just an hour of solitude and silence, I was ready to go home. But I was stuck there. To break up the monotony, I'd jog in place, do push-ups, and (not sure I should confess this) take power naps on the sturdy Eucharist table.

Yet something happened in me that day. From that moment, the appetite of my soul was awakened. Upon returning to my college campus, I found myself sneaking off to the library or to quiet spaces to pray, as if I were doing something illicit. Something was planted in me, and I knew I needed to follow this path more intentionally.

Some five years later, I joined the New Life Fellowship pastoral staff. I was reintroduced to the riches of monasticism, as this church had been drawing from this tradition for a long time. In my years on staff, I have had the privilege of spending many hours in prayer at monasteries and in study with monks. What I've learned has reinforced the truth that unless we live with an intentional commitment to slow down, we have no hope for a quality of life that allows Jesus to form us into his image.

Monastic spirituality means slowing our lives down to be with God. In a world that operates at a frenetic pace and with the addiction of achievement, slowing down brings us to a place of centeredness and stillness before God. It gives us the opportunity to be present to God throughout the day.

## PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD

This concept of being present to God throughout the day was popularized by a man named Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was a seventeenth-century Carmelite monk who wrote a famous book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. The concept of the book is straightforward. In every activity in which you are engaged, remember that God is present and offer your heart to him in prayer. If you're washing the dishes, writing a paper, or watching the Mets play (Lord, please help my Mets), we are to be present to God. Simple enough, right? Well, in my life and in the lives of people I have spoken to about this, being present to God is one of the most difficult things to do.

As I reflected on Brother Lawrence's life, it struck me that I sometimes forget that he lived in a unique setting. His ability to "practice the presence of God," difficult as it might have been, was still more attainable because of the structure and rhythm of his life. When followers of Jesus try to implement the practice of the presence of God in the way of Brother Lawrence, without the structure and rhythm of his life, it can easily lead to perpetual disappointment and disconnection.

The problem, as I see it, is that we forget he lived in a monastery, which ought to give us some insight (and relief) into his life situation. There were fixed hours of prayer he observed. He prayed in community and in solitude. His entire life was ordered in a way that was conducive to communion with God. Now you might be thinking, *That's fine, but I don't live in a monastery*. Neither do I. Nevertheless, I have discovered that any effort

given to ordering my life around rhythms of silence, solitude, and prayer has significantly enriched my life.

For many Christians, the word *monastic* carries cultural baggage and theological misunderstandings. Consequently, far too many people dismiss the gifts and culture offered by this tradition. As we consider the historical and biblical aspects of monasticism, hopefully we will be open to applying this approach to our full and busy lives.

### MONASTIC MOMENTS IN SCRIPTURE

The monastic life is rooted in the pages of Scripture. The word *monk* comes from the Greek word *monachos*, which means “solitary.” Monastic life is ordered by a value and urgency to be united with God in prayer. Although there is much more to monastic life (such as vows of poverty and celibacy), I’d like to highlight the monastic distinctives of prayer, silence, and solitude.

When searching for theological grounds for monastic practice, I found that the Bible is replete with examples of people who lived a life shaped by solitude, silence, and a slowed-down spirituality. Let me offer brief sketches of Moses, David, Mary, John the Baptist, and Jesus.

*Moses*: a man of the desert. While early on he had been molded in the ways of Egypt, he was gripped by the oppression of the Jewish people and tragically took matters into his own hands. In a moment of justice-fueled anger, he murdered an Egyptian and fled into the desert.

During his forty years in this place, he lived an existence marked by silence and solitude. Think for a moment of what it might have been like for Moses on a

given day: no Wi-Fi, no car, and no crowds. Every day, Moses dwelled for hours in silence while watching over his flocks.

We don't have anything in Scripture that gives detail to his spiritual practices, but it's not a coincidence that God chose to reveal himself to Moses in the silent context of a burning bush.

*David*: a man after God's own heart who was shaped in monasticism. Much of the psalms that David wrote sprouted from a place of silence and solitude. David was a man of contemplation, a man of silence. In one psalm, he wrote, "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple" (27:4).

David's life as a young man was one of stillness. Certainly, his younger years were also marked by sheepshearing, songwriting, and fighting giants, lions, and bears. But even in the chaos and unpredictable life he lived, he guarded the stillness to prioritize God's presence.

The songs he wrote and music he played flowed from a context of monastic rhythm. David wrote psalms about quieting his soul (see 131:2), making his soul "wait in silence" (62:5), and being still and knowing that God is God (see 46:10). Psalms is the prayer book of the Bible, and it is one that emerges from the depths of contemplation and reflection.

*Mary*: a young woman formed by contemplative pondering and deep reflection. When the angel Gabriel offered her good news from God, Mary "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

Mary was one who beheld the Lord in stillness and

solitude. She listened to the Word of God carefully and intently, allowing herself to be formed by it. She entered into meditation, pondering the sheer absurdity of the angel's message and marveling at the astonishing invitation therein. She was one given to depth of thought, opening her entire being—physically and spiritually—to the God who graciously came.

*John the Baptist:* a solitary prophet who spent much of his life in the wilderness. He was a man given to prayer, solitude, and silence (and some strange eating habits). John cultivated life with God in the wilderness, and it was out of that place that he offered prophetic and powerful words of God's heart to prepare the way of the Lord for a people who had gone astray.

*Jesus:* Son of God, Son of Man—he cannot be truthfully understood apart from his deep commitment to a monastic kind of life. Jesus was regularly active in preaching, healing, casting out demons, and far more, but his life would be self-contradicting apart from the long hours spent with the Father in silence and solitude. One could make a strong case that the fully human Jesus was able to live the life he did because of the constant time and energy put into being with the Father in prayer.

In the gospel of Luke, after Jesus was baptized, the voice of the Father broke through the sky, and Jesus received a word of affirmation: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (3:22). Immediately following this scene, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the Evil One. Alone and in the setting of the desert, Jesus encountered Satan and refused to be identified by anything other than the affirmation of the Father.

It was after this grueling battle that Jesus returned to

civilization and recited, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me” (4:18). Over and over in the Gospels, Jesus conveys the power of God, and then he returns to be in communion with the God from whom that power flows.

### MONASTICISM IN THE EARLY CENTURIES

Beyond the testimony of Scripture, monastic spirituality has marked the story of the early Christian church. In the first and second century after the resurrection of Jesus, men and women would flee to the desert to be with God for a variety of reasons. The early desert fathers and mothers were people who felt a strong call to prayer, solitude, silence, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines. It’s hard to truly know who was the first to establish this way of following Jesus, but for our purposes here, one of the most noteworthy explanations of the remarkable surge of monasticism came as a result of Christian faith losing its distinctiveness and radical call.

For the first few centuries, Christianity was a marginalized and persecuted religion. The book of Acts describes the resistance and cost one experienced for being a follower of Jesus and claiming him Lord of the world. Despite the unrelenting danger of confessing Jesus as God and King, Christianity spread like wildfire.

Christians were people on the edges of society, proclaiming the radical message of the kingdom of God, serving the poor, healing the sick, and subverting the way of the empire. But something shifted in the cultural

landscape in the fourth century, leaving devout Christians with an important decision on how they would live.

On the eve of a battle in the early part of the century, Constantine (who would become emperor of Rome) claimed to have had a revelation. In the revelation, Constantine said he was instructed to place a Christian symbol on the shields of his soldiers. Church historian Justo González explained: “Constantine ordered that his soldiers should use on their shield and on their standard or *labarum* a symbol that looked like the superimposition of the Greek letters chi and rho. Since these are the first two letters of the name, ‘Christ,’ this *labarum* could well have been a Christian symbol.”<sup>7</sup>

Having done so, Constantine achieved victory over his enemies and in turn transformed the way the empire related to Christians. In a sweeping turn of events, Christianity went from persecuted religion to friend of the empire. In light of this significant shift, new questions on faith and discipleship arose.

For many Christians, a different kind of crisis of faith surfaced. González further wrote, “The narrow gate of which Jesus had spoken had become so wide that countless multitudes were hurrying through it—many seeming to do so only in pursuit of privilege and position, without caring to delve too deeply into the meaning of Christian baptism and life under the cross.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, Christianity had experienced a drastic cultural shift whereby people purported to enter into life with God and the church not by renunciation of the ways of the world system but by appropriating it through political and cultural power.

It was in this context that men and women decided to



take up their cross and go into the desert. No longer was there a significant price to pay to follow Jesus. No longer was there a clear and powerful delineation between Christianity and conformity to the political ways of the world. In order to resist the temptations of worldly power, men and women went into the desert to maintain a cross-shaped life that would be marked by prayer, renunciation, and formative spiritual practices.

The genesis of monastic life in a post-Constantine world in the fourth century serves as a powerful reminder for us today. In short, the way of worldly power, values, and priorities can easily take precedence in our lives, with Christianity being either complicit in the perpetuation of the world system or irrelevant in the social landscape.

The desert fathers, mothers, and later monastics remind us that the way of following Jesus requires a steadfast refusal to get caught up in the pace, power, and priorities of the world around us. We are called to have our lives shaped by a different kind of power, pace, and priorities, offered to us by God.

### LEAVING THE WORLD

In the same way of these early monastics, we are invited to leave the world, along with its enticements and false messages of assurance. The deeply formed life is one that takes seriously the call of renunciation. We are regularly being formed by the pace, noise, and values of the surrounding world. Yet to be deeply formed is to regularly come back to a different rhythm—a rhythm marked by communion, reflection, and a life-giving pace that en-

ables us to offer our presence to the present moment. But living at this pace means we need to leave the world. This is the paradox of following Jesus. It's only when we leave the world that we can truly be at home in it.

Theologian and poet Thomas Merton once wrote, "Solitude is to be preserved, not as a luxury but as a necessity: not for 'perfection' so much as for simple 'survival' in the life God has given you."<sup>9</sup> Contemplative rhythms enable us to leave the world in order to not only survive but thrive in it. Let me show you how this has been working out in my own life.

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This is the paradox of following Jesus. It's only when we leave the world that we can truly be at home in it.

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During a recent personal sabbatical, I decided to fast for nearly four months from all social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram). At the beginning of that fast, I set aside four days to be alone with God. As I deleted the apps from my phone, I was already starting to feel anxious. I began to think, *What's going on in the world? What are people saying about me? What bit of information am I missing? Did the Knicks trade for Kevin Durant?* Yes, earth-shattering questions. These thoughts bombarded me for many minutes, revealing my addictive behavior. So in place of the constant flow of information, images, and folly that's found on social media, I decided to cultivate silence in prayer.

I had four days to myself, and at the start of my re-

treat, I took thirty minutes to close my eyes and be with God. The purpose of this time was not to get anything out of it but simply to be still—to do nothing, say nothing, and just be in God’s presence. As I closed my eyes, I began to think about the impact of my ministry, as well as the identity that I have built before others. I saw the ways that I insidiously live according to the value system of the world.

The world says, “Show yourself. Prove your worth. Make a name. Build a platform.” I began to think, *Who am I apart from the retweets and likes? Why am I so enamored and preoccupied with the quantity of voices approving and affirming me? How can I say that my identity is grounded in God’s love when I give most of my attention to approval of people I’ve never even met?*

In my time of silent prayer, those questions were answered, but it was in the form of an invitation to leave these questions behind for something altogether different. In this extended period of silence and in my absence from social media, I was disappearing from the world. I was finding myself in another dimension of reality, unaware of what was being spoken of me, whether good or bad, or whether anything was being said about me at all. In a very real sense, I was leaving the world and the grip it had on me. But I was not leaving for good. For a disciple, to leave the world is to enter back into it from another door: the door of God’s love and acceptance, the door of God’s way of being. This is how, in the leaving, I found myself arriving at home.

Isn’t this what you yearn for? Aren’t you tired of living at a pace that blurs out beauty, peace, or joy? Don’t you want to be at home? The speed we live at does violence

against our souls. The inner and outer distractions minimize the capacity for us to see God's activity around and within us.

I sometimes imagine a scenario in which someone is locked inside of a supermarket and dies of starvation. Can you imagine? You might say this is impossible. Yet in our spiritual lives, this happens every day. Whether we know it or not, we are locked inside the supermarket of God's abundant life and love. It's all available to us. Even so, people are spiritually starving. But it doesn't have to be this way.

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The inner and outer distractions minimize  
the capacity for us to see God's activity  
around and within us.

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God is committed to our transformation. He is not in the business of simply improving our lives; he wants to infuse them with his life. Every day, he moves toward us in love, reaching, seeking, and pleading with us to pay attention. This is the essence of contemplative rhythms—the goal of monastic life. We have to open ourselves to God's way of being; that is, we have to leave but enter back in through another way. Like the apostle Paul said, we are invited to “live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit” (Galatians 5:16, MSG).

But how do we practically flesh this out? In the next chapter, I will explore four indispensable practices that can ground our lives in this slower, more intentional way of contemplative rhythms.

*Five Transformative Values  
to Root Us in the Way of Jesus*



# THE DEEPLY FORMED LIFE



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