

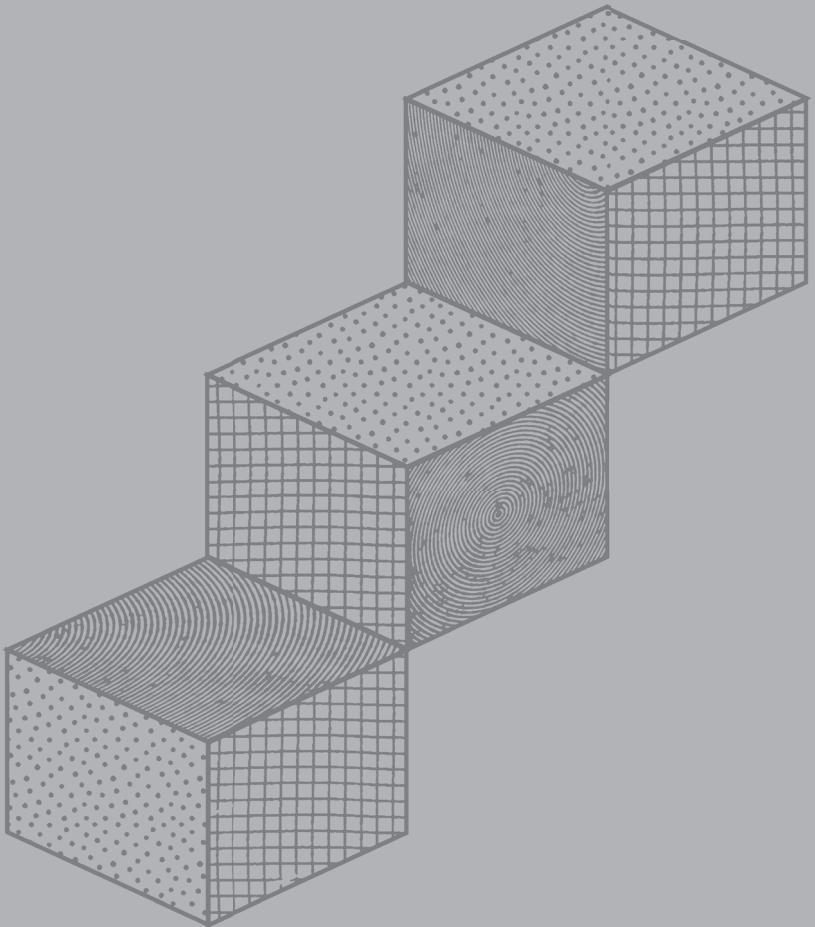
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CHAPTER ONE

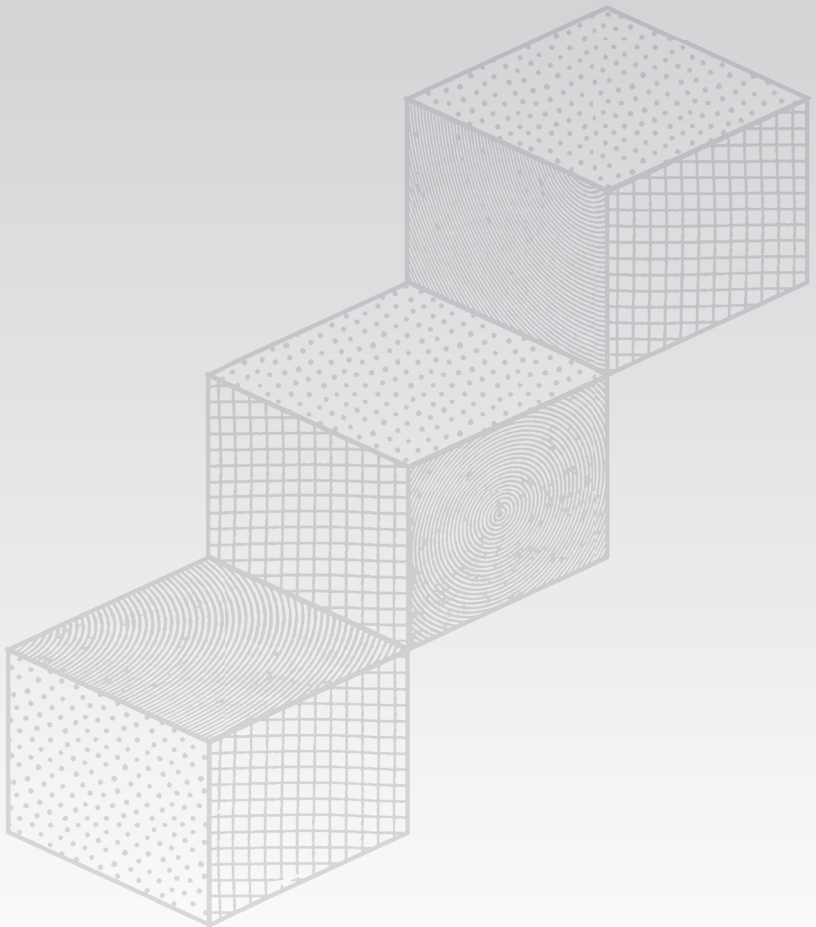
Who God Is

(and What That Means for
Your Spiritual Habits)



CHAPTER ONE

1. God starts.
2. God wants to be with you.
3. We can't see God, but He is there.
4. God prefers to work slowly.
5. God is gracious.



Learning from Peggy

As I stare out my kitchen window toward my backyard, my eye is naturally drawn to a gray and white dappled beech tree. In the summer, I'm thankful for the shade it provides. In the fall, I have more mixed feelings about it, as it deposits what feels like tens of thousands of leaves in my yard. Most of the time, though, I love this tree.

Because the beech tree dominates the backyard, my daughter, naturally, has named it—Peggy.

Farther back, through the woods, I can see another dozen of these beeches. Some of them have names, but most don't. The oldest of the bunch, by my estimation, is probably about fifty or sixty years old. As beech trees go, that's not terribly old. Beech trees are remarkable for their longevity, growing for hundreds of years. Some of the oldest beech trees in the United States are older than the country itself.

I think of this fact often, trying to imagine what life was like when Peggy was only a sapling. My house didn't exist. My neighborhood didn't exist. Hardly anybody I know existed.

Peggy's older relatives—her two-hundred-year-old cousins—grew up in a world of farmers and horse-drawn carriages, not airplanes and internet. Even “young” Peggy has lived through hundreds of freezing cold winter nights and just as many blazing hot summer days. Through it all, she doesn't seem any the worse for wear. Her only scar appears to be relatively recent—an emblem of the hopeful love of “KC + TL” etched in her trunk and surrounded by a heart.

Peggy reminds me that some of the most impressive change happens slowly, almost invisibly, over long periods of time. On any given day, I can walk outside and pull up a dozen small beech saplings without any effort. And I could have done that to Peggy at some point. But not in her present form. For me to take Peggy down now would require machinery roughly the size of my house. That's the power of slow, steady change.

When it comes to spiritual change, we should spend a lot more time trying to emulate Peggy.

FIVE ROOTS FOR OUR SPIRITUAL HABITS

Over the course of the following chapters, we're going to talk a lot about spiritual habits, offering small steps you can take to make your spiritual habits *stick*. But before we get to all of the steps, we need to make sure we've got our roots firmly planted in the soil. Like Peggy, our spiritual lives will never grow taller than our roots allow.

What are these spiritual "roots"? They are five fundamental truths about God, each of which should shape a healthy approach to your spiritual habits. These aren't necessarily the five most important truths about God—just the most relevant when we are thinking about how spiritual habits work.

Skip these five truths and you'll feel an ever-increasing weight on your already drooping shoulders. But ground your life in these truths, like roots embedded into the earth, and you'll find your spirit not only encouraged, but empowered to change.

Root 1: God Starts

From the first scene of the Bible ("In the beginning, God created . . .") to the last ("Come, Lord Jesus!"), God is the One setting the action in motion. In the lives of every saint in Scripture, God begins. He creates Adam and Eve. He calls Noah and Abraham and Moses. He rescues His people—from Egypt, from the Philistines, from themselves. In the life of Jesus, He chooses His twelve disciples. Through His Spirit, He sends out Paul and Barnabas. At

no point in your Bible does a human being decide to go looking for God. God starts. Every. Single. Time.

This is also true of our spiritual stories. Whether you've been a Christian for fifteen minutes or fifty years, your story begins with the phrase, "In the beginning, God . . ."

In the divine dance between you and God, God always plays the lead.

What does this mean for us and our spiritual habits?

So how does the truth that God starts (not us) shape our spiritual habits? Since He starts, our responsibility is to receive and respond. Spiritual life, like physical life, isn't something we earn or build. It's a gift. And the main thing you're supposed to do with a gift is receive it. God brings the initiative. We bring the open arms.

This runs against the grain of our hearts, which seem much more inclined to *work* our way to God. But the gospel message should destroy, every day, any sense of needing to climb a ladder to God's presence. When it comes to initiative, it's hard to imagine a more lopsided relationship! While we were far from God, He sent His Son, Jesus, to bring us back to Him. Jesus lived a perfect life, died for us, then rose from the dead.

And us? We don't do any of that. We simply believe and receive.

Once a person believes, of course, everything changes. Following Jesus means *doing* things. But at no point should our *doing* be confused with *earning*—or even initiating. God started this relationship. Every spiritual practice grows from the soil of God's initiating work. He speaks, we listen. He walks ahead, we follow. He calls, we respond.

Practically, this will mean that our spiritual habits are more open to God's leading, less fixed by our own disciplines. They may change as our season of life changes. They may look very different from one person to the next. God doesn't want all of us doing precisely the same habits. He wants all of us looking to Him, listening to Him, responding to Him. Since His conversation with each of us is unique, our responses will be, too.

I'll admit: Something about this thrills me and frightens me at the same time. It's thrilling to realize that God plays the lead in my spiritual habits. That really takes the pressure off. But it's scary, too, because I'm a big fan of control.

So to all of my fellow control addicts, and to myself, let's remember: God starts. He always has. And it's better that way.

Root 2: God Wants to Be with You

The primary tension in Scripture centers on this theme: God wants to be with His people. But again and again, something gets in the way. Adam and Eve, for instance, were personally created by God and lived with Him in the garden of Eden. But because of their sin, they were forced to leave. God, previously close enough to walk with them, now felt absent.

This problem persisted all throughout the Old Testament. In Noah's day, violence reigned because everyone forgot God. In Moses' day, God's people were enslaved, crying out to God for some kind of intervention—but He felt far off. In the days of the exile, God's people felt adrift, far from God and far from their home.

The central problem of the Bible echoes the central problem of many world religions: We sense, deep down, that God is out there. But something prevents us from actually connecting with Him.

What makes the biblical story beautiful, though, is how persistently God works to overcome this distance. The Bible is a chronicle of the many ways God chose to draw near to His people—through prophets, through dreams, in a pillar of fire, in the temple. And all of this culminates in Jesus, God in the flesh. Through the incarnation of Jesus, we see, once and for all, God's radical commitment to being with His people.

Jesus' life and ministry model this, too. Over and over again, the Gospels record Jesus' invitation for His followers to simply spend time with Him. "Come with me," He says to the disciples, "to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31 NIV). His call might *end* by sounding like, "Do as I do." But it always *begins* with the much simpler invitation: "Be where I am."

What does this mean for us and our spiritual habits?

So how does the truth that God wants to be with us shape our spiritual habits? If the goal of our spiritual habits is spending time with Him, that provides a helpful unity to all of our spiritual disciplines. In prayer, I enter into a conversation with God. In silence, I listen for God's voice—or simply sit quietly knowing I sit *with* God. In reading my Bible, I remember that I'm not primarily trying to memorize facts, but to better know a person.

Seeing the goal of spiritual habits as communion with God also lowers the pressure we put on ourselves. For instance, if we think of spiritual habits primarily as tools to make us better people, then there's always a scoreboard looming over us. *Did I read enough chapters of the Bible this year? Did I pray long enough?* In this approach, the key word in our spiritual habits is that nasty one, "enough." Whether we're doing a little or doing a lot, it never feels like enough. The scoreboard keeps telling me I'm a loser.

Unless, of course, you've got a slightly different temperament. Maybe you're more naturally disciplined than others. You don't resent the scoreboard mentality. You relish it. This might feel nice for you, but it's not actually any better. Because while the scoreboard may be telling you that you're winning, it's not what Jesus is after.

Our spiritual habits aren't meant to make us feel like winners *or* like losers. They are meant to bring us closer to God, to know Him and open our hearts so we can experience His love. The goal is relationship—and in relationships, "winning" and "losing" aren't relevant categories. Intimacy is.

Root 3: We Can't See God, But He Is There

The third root might seem incredibly obvious to you, but we've found it influences our spiritual habits more than most people give it credit for. It's a truth that is simple and ancient and a little confusing: we can't see God, but He is there.

It might help to think about this one in conjunction with our second root—"God wants to be with you." It sounds really heartwarming that God

wants to be with you. But you're smart enough to recognize it's not that simple. God isn't like us. We can't just invite Him over for dinner. Sure, there *was* a time when I could have found Him walking around and sharing meals with people. But that was two thousand years ago. Jesus isn't walking the streets of Raleigh, North Carolina, where I live. Not in the same way, anyway.

Even before Jesus, things seemed a bit simpler. For the ancient Jewish people, you could measure your nearness to God in geographic terms. God's presence dwelled in the temple: the closer to the temple, the closer to God. (We'll explore this idea a lot more in chapter 5. Hold tight.)

But for us today? The temple is gone. Jesus is gone. In their place, we have the Holy Spirit. Granted, Jesus said that having the Holy Spirit would be better than having Him stick around (John 16:7). And we believe Him. It *is* better. But it's also pretty confusing.

If God didn't exist, spending time with Him would be irrelevant. If God were confined to one physical location—a person or a temple, say—spending time with Him would be straightforward (though incredibly difficult to share). But God is real *and* God is invisible. We can't see God, but He is there.

What does this mean for us and our spiritual habits?

So what does this obvious and confusing truth mean for our spiritual habits? Three implications come to mind.

First, it reminds us that spiritual practices will often feel awkward. Relationships aren't easy anyway. But relationships with invisible people are bound to be even tougher. That's not to say we give up. It's simply to remind you that just because it's awkward doesn't mean you're doing it wrong.

Second, this truth reminds us about the importance of Christian community. God's Spirit may not be present the way He was in Jesus, but God's Spirit is still active today. The vehicle for God's Spirit, according to the apostle Paul, is the community of God (1 Cor. 12). We've felt this to be true: it's much easier to hear God's Spirit from others than from our own hearts. When a thought pops into my head, for instance, it *might* be from the Spirit, but I find

it very easy to explain it away. But when my friend brings a word of encouragement or exhortation that resonates with what God has been teaching me, I sense that God really is speaking.

Third, this reminds us that much of the Christian life is about discernment. Since we can't see God, understanding where He is moving is not a scientific or straightforward process. It requires sensitivity and slowness—which is why many of the Christian spiritual disciplines involve slowing down. God invites us to discern what He is doing in the world. And the right spiritual habits can help us sharpen that discernment.

Root 4: God Prefers to Work Slowly

Most of us are fascinated with stories of God working miraculously and quickly, whether those stories are in Scripture or the lives of our friends. When God splits the Red Sea in a moment, our hearts leap. When Jesus heals paralytics and opens blind eyes, we wish we could be there to watch it happen. This is what we long for in our lives, in the lives of those we love. We want God to intervene in an instant, transforming us into who we ought to be. We want Him to kill the addiction, to restore the relationship, to heal our body. And we long for it to happen *fast*.

The trouble is, God rarely acts this way. God prefers a much slower method.

In his book *Three Mile an Hour God*, Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama makes the case that God, by design, prefers to move at the speed of a walk—about three miles an hour. This is how Jesus operated in His ministry. He was never in a hurry. He lingered. Because He loved people deeply, He took His time with them.

God intends to radically change every one of us. In fact, He may change much more about us than we even anticipate. But He will also work much more subtly, much more slowly than most of us imagine. If we are to walk with God, we need to get used to walking at His pace.

What does this mean for us and our spiritual habits?

If God prefers slow work over rapid change, how does that shape our spiritual habits? It means we allow God to work at His pace—and we do our best to walk at that pace with Him.

Because God works slowly, we can forgive ourselves for not having it all together right now. God doesn't expect us to change in an instant. He's looking at a much longer timetable, and He's patient enough to soften our hearts over a lifetime.

Because God works slowly, we can celebrate small wins in the short term. You and I may be tempted to dismiss a small spiritual habit—say, reading a psalm a day—as insignificant. But walking at God's pace, we can celebrate that small step, just like a parent celebrates the first unsteady steps of their child.

And finally, because God works slowly we can recognize the beautiful invitation of rest inherent in so many of the traditional spiritual disciplines. Sabbath, for instance, is an invitation to slow down, enjoy God, and enjoy His world. Prayer is an invitation to slow down and know God. Our society may be filled with frantic demands to move faster, do more, achieve more. But the spiritual disciplines aren't like that at all. They offer our weary souls a place of rest.

Root 5: God Is Gracious

In his book *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey records an anecdote from the life of C. S. Lewis:

During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were

discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."¹

We simply cannot overstate the importance of grace in the life of the Christian. God created us, even though He didn't need us (Gen. 1:26–28). That's grace.

God made Himself known to us, even though we weren't seeking Him (Isa. 65:1). That's grace.

God rescued us, even while we were His enemies (Rom. 5:10). That's grace.

God began His work in us before we knew it—or even wanted it (Eph. 1:3–10). That's grace.

God promises to finish His work in us (Phil. 1:6). That's grace.

God forgives us when we falter (Ex. 34:6–7a). That's grace.

God makes His very presence available to us (Isa. 41:10; Matt. 28:20). That's grace.

God gives us His Word to teach us, His Spirit to guide us, a community of faith to encourage us. That's grace, grace, grace.

From beginning to end, our spiritual lives dance along to the melody of amazing grace. Which means that God doesn't just *start*; because of His grace, He promises to *finish*, too.

When Jesus walked among us, He lived a life that the apostle John summarized as "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The truth piece is easy to recognize: You don't have to read long in the Gospels to see how fiery of a truth-teller Jesus could be! His sermons cut people to the heart, often infuriating them—especially the religious leaders. But the heart of Jesus overflows with grace. Over and over again, Jesus invited people in. To the broken, the sinful, the outcast, He said, "Come to me."

Jesus' gracious heart shows us the heart of God. This was the same God who, when Moses met Him on the mountain, announced Himself as "the LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious" (Ex. 34:6). God lists several

other attributes after this, but it is no accident that the first two He mentions are *mercy* and *grace*. This is who God is.

If we are to follow Jesus, we walk not only at His pace; we walk in His grace.

What does this mean for us and our spiritual habits?

So how does God's grace shape our spiritual habits? Simply this: It changes the tenor and tone of our attempts. Since God is gracious to us, we can feel the freedom to fail. Since God is gracious to us, we can return to Him after long gaps in our spiritual practice. Since God is gracious to us, we can always, always, *always* try again.

Just think: How would Jesus respond to your failures if He were here in the flesh right now—if He found out, for instance, that you hadn't prayed for a month, or that you forgot to read your daughter her nighttime Bible story for ten straight days (or that you've never even *thought* to do that)? He wouldn't scowl at you and demand you do better. He would invite you in. He would open his arms to you. In grace, He would simply say, "Come to me."

Spiritual life—and the habits that flow from it—doesn't have to feel like a bunch of homework you're always behind on. Experiencing spiritual life that way can feel like holding your breath through some hard exercise or experience. Do you know that feeling of gutting out your Bible reading or prayer? It can feel like being underwater, starving for air.

But realize that God is abundantly gracious, and suddenly your spiritual life can feel more like breathing after you've been holding your breath for far too long.

That's how we view spiritual habits, and how we'd encourage you to view them, too—as the *inhale and exhale* of a healthy spiritual life. Throughout this book, we're going to encourage you to focus on *one* spiritual habit. Just one. Which one should you pick? And what is a spiritual habit anyway?

So glad you asked.