

## Testimonies

“*Your Best Life In Jesus’ Easy Yoke* came to me when I felt stressed out. *Jesus was relaxed, why was I anxious?* I couldn’t put it down! From the opening ‘Apprentice Prayer’ I was hooked! I needed to come to Christ and learn from Him — Bill pointed the way. The clear teaching with engaging Scripture meditations showed me that it was possible to actually walk in the peace and power of the Lord — not by trying harder, but by training in His easy yoke and light burden.”

Steve Harper

Executive Pastor of Grace Church in Cleveland, OH

“Eventually our well runs dry. Perhaps we dug into the arid ground of perfectionism, anxiety, overwork, or self-promotion. Here’s a map to show us where to dig deeply into the well-spring of God’s sustaining grace. I am so grateful for Bill Gaultiere, who lived *Easy Yoke* before he wrote it. He’s helped countless harried leaders — like me! — drink from the life-giving waters of Jesus.”

Larry Winger

CEO Provision Ministries in Irvine, CA

“Bill has taught me how to rest in Jesus’ grace-filled, easy yoke. I’ve been sharing these insights and practices with my therapy clients and with the pastors and leaders I help in Cloud and Townsend’s Ultimate Leadership intensives. We’re participating in the emotional healing that God brings!”

Eileen Callahan

Psychotherapist in Newport Beach, CA

“*Your Best Life In Jesus’ Easy Yoke* helped me to realign my life into the unhurried rhythms of grace. Bill does a fantastic job of helping people understand how to live relaxed, yet empowered lives in the Father’s world.”

Bobby Schuller

Pastor and President of the Hour of Power in Garden Grove, CA

“This book is so rich and practical. I identified with the personal stories from Bill and Kristi and clients they’ve helped. Being Jesus’ apprentice is helping me not to be stressed out in ministry and to overcome my anxiety and hurt from the past.”

Karin Mazzeo

Children’s Pastor in Riverside, CA

“I’m a business guy and I love this book! Learning to abide in the presence of Christ has made me more effective in my leadership on the job and in ministry.”

Lance Wood,

Tax Partner of PwC in Irvine, CA

“We used *Your Best Life In Jesus’ Easy Yoke* to introduce apprenticeship to Jesus at our church. The content is rich with a vision of new life in the kingdom of the heavens! It gives a spiritual formation pattern for overcoming false narratives and daily stressors to step into the heavenly reality. The spiritual experiments and prayers have helped us integrate abiding in Christ into daily life.”

Leroy and Mildred Gerner

Care Pastors at King of Kings Church in Omaha, NE

“I love The Apprentice Prayer! It’s helped me release my anxiety over the day to God’s loving control and given me courage. I’ve shared it with many people.”

Ron Thompson

Lead Pastor of Twin Cities Church in Grass Valley, CA

“What a treasure *Easy Yoke* is! I’m experiencing steady healing from anxiety, fear, control and worry as I apply the lessons in this very practical book. I’m thankful and amazed at how I’m learning to relax in God’s care and protection.”

Kevin Koberg,  
Business Leader in San Diego, CA

“I used to think the Christian life was hard work till Bill showed me that Jesus’ easy yoke for me is joyful and peaceful. Now I’m teaching this to all of our Bible study leaders and they’re sharing it in their groups.”

Sue Wood  
Teacher for Community Bible Study in Seattle, WA

“After absorbing and applying it’s principles in my own life for a year, I took my pastoral staff and elders through *Your Best Life In Jesus’ Easy Yoke*. It’s a practical, enriching, and transforming curriculum for Christlikeness. The new edition is even more engaging — I’m sharing it with my whole church!”

Steve Phillips,  
Lead Pastor of The Journey Church in Irvine, CA

“Your Best Life In Jesus’ Easy Yoke has been a field manual for me to learn how to live in the Kingdom of God as a disciple of Jesus and as a pastor to others. Bill’s theological, spiritual, and psychological insights have helped me to win the battle with unhealthy emotional patterns. I’ve discovered how to delight in Christ even in stressful circumstances!”

Aaron Damiani  
Rector of Immanuel Anglican Church in Chicago, IL

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Soul Shepherding offers a two-year TLC certificate training program in “Christian Spiritual Formation and Soul Care Ministry” for pastors and leaders. This features four retreats of five days in a beautiful and relaxing venue in Southern California.

Visit [SoulShepherding.org](http://SoulShepherding.org) for information, hundreds of free resources on Christ-centered spiritual formation and soul care, and Curriculums for Christlikeness that you can purchase.

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# **Your Best Life In Jesus' Easy Yoke**

*Rhythms of Grace  
to De-Stress and Live Empowered*

Updated Edition  
By Bill Gaultiere, Ph.D  
[SoulShepherding.org](http://SoulShepherding.org)



With gratitude to God for Dallas Willard  
who took many hours from his busy schedule  
to listen to me, pray for me, and teach me  
how to do all that I do in Jesus' easy yoke.



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# Introduction

There's an old saying, "When a student is ready the teacher appears." I am first and foremost Jesus' student.

One of the great blessings of my life was meeting Dallas Willard in 2003. I was at the beginning of a great spiritual renewal inspired by the ministry of Ray Ortlund, Sr. to me and so I was a ready student. Dallas quickly became my "key mentor," the one God has used to unlock treasure stores of "the knowledge of the glory of God in face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).<sup>1</sup> His influence is all over this book.

I had spent over 2,000 hours listening to Dallas' spiritual formation seminars and had met privately with him many times when I shared with him *Your Best Life In Jesus' Easy Yoke* (first version). He said to me: "This is groundbreaking! Pastors and others will come under this teaching and develop aspects of it in their own ministry."<sup>2</sup> He went onto explain his appreciation for how my book had unpacked the psychology of apprenticeship to Jesus.

*Easy Yoke* had a very long gestation period. Back in 1995 Kristi was pregnant with Briana, our third and last child, and the Lord led me to put a halt to writing books and going out on the Christian speaker circuit. I had published three books by the time I was thirty years old and sold 40,000 copies when God asked me to follow in the steps of Abraham and take my dream of being a best-selling Christian author and lay it on the altar — out of love for him, my family, and neighbors.

In the years that followed I went from depression ("Why doesn't God want my gift?"), to burnout ("I'm tired of helping hurting people all the time."), to jealousy and anger ("It's not fair that my colleague gets to write that book!"), to peace ("Hmm. I'm not so anxious anymore."), to exuding joy ("This simple life of

quietly loving God and the people in front of me is wonderful!”), to learning to bless my competitors (“Thank you Lord that *he* wrote that book – use it to bring honor to Jesus and to help many people.”)

Fourteen years after going to the altar, I was hiking in the High Sierras with my son David, a teenager at the time, when I awoke early one morning before we ascended Mount Whitney. As I watched the sunrise glow on the majestic mountain I sensed the Lord speak to my heart and release me to publish books again. I felt very close to God and honored that he trusted me.

But I wasn't asking God to let me write a book. In fact, I had little ambition for it. I had learned the joy of sharing my writings freely with people who asked for them. Instead of seeking to be popular and writing for masses of people “out there” as I'd done before, I was simply sharing what God was teaching me with the pastors and other servants of the Lord that I knew.

In 2010 I published the first edition of *Easy Yoke* as a series of lessons that I offered to two groups of pastors that I was leading in Christian spiritual formation and soul care. I cared for them and trained them to use the curriculum to lead “Easy Yoke Groups” for others. My thanks to Chuck, James, Jim, Paul, and Rocky in the men's group and Debbie L, Debbie T, Jan, Louise, Marge, and Sara in the women's group.

*Your Best Life In Jesus' Easy Yoke* is a completely updated and re-formatted version of the original. Whether you read it alone, with a friend, or in a group as originally intended, I pray it will be as “groundbreaking” for you as it's been for me and my friends.

*May you discover that your best life is in Jesus' easy yoke!*

*Bill Gaultiere*

*January 1st, 2016*

# The Apprentice Prayer

Many Christians today think that learning to be like Jesus is optional. Perhaps later they'll get more serious with God. We may believe in Christ yet have *whole areas of our life he's not part of*.

This was true for me in my late thirties. I was keeping my feet in two worlds: God's kingdom and my kingdom. I had lost the passion for Christ that I had as a young adult. I realized this one weekend in 2002 when Kristi and I were at John Eldredge's "Journey of Desire" conference. The Lord got hold of my heart and I began praying earnestly for Jesus to be my *First Love* again.

To stay close to the holy fire, I practiced disciplines like those that are featured in this book. Also, I met regularly with Ray Ortlund for spiritual mentoring and prayer over a number of years. I became a student of Dallas Willard, gleaning from his spiritual formation books and seminars and then meeting with him as I had done with Ray.

I wanted to learn from Jesus how to live my *whole life* in the Kingdom of God. I re-submitted and re-dedicated my life to Christ. I determined to live by Ray's heart-throbbing prayer: "Be all and only for Jesus!"<sup>3</sup> I determined to be a "true apprentice" to Christ (Matthew 10:42, MSG).

At the epicenter of this earth-shaking change was my prayer of devotion to Jesus that my friend Pastor Bucky Dennis dubbed "The Apprentice Prayer."<sup>4</sup> Most every morning for the first eight years of my renewal I offered this prayer from my heart. (My morning prayers to this day still draw on these themes.) I invite you to pray with me:

Jesus, I love you! Father, I adore you. Holy Spirit, I rely on you.

Lord Jesus, I seek to live as your apprentice in all that I do today. My life is your school for teaching me. I relinquish

my agenda for this day and I submit myself to you and your kingdom purposes. In all things today I pray, "Your will, your way, your time."

Dear Father, I ask you to ordain the events of this day and use them to make me more like Jesus. I trust you, Sovereign Lord, that you won't let anything happen to my family or me today, *except that it passes through your loving hands*. So no matter what problems, hardships, or injustices I face today help me not to worry or get frustrated, but instead to relax in the yoke of your providence. Yes, today I will rejoice because I am in your eternal kingdom, you love me, and you are teaching me!

My Lord, I devote my whole self to you. *I want to be all and only for you, Jesus!* Today, I seek to love you with all my heart, all my soul, all my mind, all my strength, and all my relationships.<sup>5</sup>

Today, I depend on you, Holy Spirit, not my own resources. Help me to keep in step with you.

Today, I look to love others as you love me, dear God, blessing everyone I meet, even those who mistreat me.

Today, I'm ready to lead people to follow you, Jesus.

Amen.

Thousands of people, even whole churches, have prayed this prayer with me. Many have put it on their bathroom mirror, beside their bed, in their pocket, or in their Bible. They've prayed it every day for a year or more. With enthusiasm they've told me that God has used it to help them experience their own spiritual renewal.

I hope you'll join us in offering The Apprentice Prayer each morning. The upcoming chapters will provide further insight and application to it, helping you learn to *do all that you do in the easy yoke of apprenticeship to Christ*.

## One

# Come to Jesus

One day I was having lunch with Dallas Willard and he asked me, “If you had *one word* to describe Jesus what would it be?”

How would *you* answer that question? If you could only use *one word* to describe Jesus what would it be?

Words for Jesus started *running* through my mind and out my mouth: *Love... Compassion... Holy... Lord... Teacher... Risen... Healer...* (These are *all* good words to describe Jesus.)

As he so often did in my conversations with him, Dallas waited quietly for me to keep thinking. *He was unhurried.* I was drawn into his silent prayer.

Finally, I asked, “Dallas<sup>6</sup>, what’s your word for Jesus?”

He smiled, “Relaxed.”<sup>7</sup>

*Relaxed?*

If anybody besides Dallas had said that I would’ve dismissed it. But he’d done so much to teach me to honor the supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ and bring my life to him in the Kingdom of God. I’d read every book of his more than once and spent over two thousand hours listening to him speak.<sup>8</sup> I found his distinctive insights consistent with the Bible and transformational in real life.

After that conversation I studied Jesus in the Gospels and found that in scene after scene he was indeed *at ease*:

- When it’s time to launch his public ministry Jesus is *unhurried* and goes to the desert to pray for forty days (Mark 1:12-13).
- When his family tries to manipulate him in front of a crowd he *calmly sets a boundary* (Mark 3:31-34).

- When crowds interrupt his retreat he *patiently* feeds them (Mark 4:32-44).
- When he's in a small boat at sea and caught in a life-threatening storm he *naps* (Mark 4:37-38).
- When he sees loan sharks and hucksters turning his Father's house into a marketplace and taking advantage of the poor he *takes time* to weave a rope to drive them out (Mark 11:11, 12:15-17).
- When religious scholars gang up on him with trick questions he *speaks the truth in love* to them (Mark 12:13-17).
- When he's sweating drops of blood in the Garden he *finds comfort* in God as Abba (Mark 14:36).
- While being tortured to death he *lovingly ministers* to everyone around him, even his enemies (Luke 23:34, 43).

In all these difficult and important situations the Lord is *relaxed*.<sup>9</sup>

*Wait a minute, I bet your thinking. Jesus wasn't relaxed when he cleansed the temple! He wasn't calm in the garden or on the cross!*

Certainly, Jesus has some very *un-relaxed* emotions in these and other situations. Anguish, excruciating pain, overwhelming pressure, fear, anger, and grief certainly work against *feeling* relaxed. But the Master shows us that even in crisis or pain a mature person who is attuned to and aligned with God's presence can be calm, joyful, and loving.

## Peace in Stress

The Easy Yoke of Jesus is not for an *easy life* — there's no such thing! Especially today in our 24 x 7 world. According to the World Health Organization stress is the health epidemic of the 21st century.

Kristi and I added an enormous stress to our full plates not quite two years after that lunch meeting with Dallas: we started

“Soul Shepherding, Inc.” as a 501c3 nonprofit ministry to help pastors and leaders cultivate their intimacy with Jesus and strengthen their capacity to care for others. *We couldn't have done this without knowing Christ as relaxed under pressure.*

We faced many challenges that tempted us to fear and worry. Setting aside successful careers to launch a nonprofit ministry in the middle of the worst recession in decades. Fundraising. Leading an organization and a Board of Directors. Consulting for high profile Christian leaders.

*How do you do what you don't know how to do? You need divine knowledge and power beyond your own abilities!*

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Rely on the risen Christ with you  
as your Leader and you'll relax.

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For instance, in that same conversation with Dallas I told him I was going to lead a retreat for the staff of a megachurch. I'd led many retreats for smaller groups, but not for 150 leaders! I didn't know how to facilitate intimacy with Jesus for such a large group.

He remarked, “I hope you're not anxious about it.”

I hesitated for a few moments. I *was* feeling stressed, but looking into Dallas' eyes I came back to my senses.

“No,” I replied. “*Jesus is leading the retreat* and I'm assisting him. I just want to draw people to him.”

“That's exactly right!” my mentor beamed.<sup>10</sup> I was thankful for God's “peace that passes understanding” (Phil. 4:6) — the *shalom* that is beyond anything we can figure out because it's from a hidden, heavenly source and it's obtained in ways that are contrary to the wisdom of our world. Indeed, the Lord helped me to remain in his peace-filled yoke as I led the retreat.

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## Easy-yoke is an oxymoron.

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### Relaxed, But Maybe Too Lax?

In Jesus' day a rabbi's teaching was called a yoke. The teaching-yoke of the religion scholars and priests was an endless list of laws, rules, traditions, and expectations that no one could measure up to — *it was nobody's best life!*

But Jesus offered to free the people, including the religious leaders, from this deadly yoke of legalism. He opened his heart to anyone who would listen and offered his life-giving yoke of love:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

Let's soak in Jesus' invitation: "Come to me... Lay down your heavy burdens... Receive my gentle love... Rest deeply... Be easy as you work in my power..."

*That's a God-blessed life!* And the weary common people thronged to Jesus to experience it. Even some of the religious leaders accepted Jesus' wonderful teaching.

"This teaching on the easy yoke is just what I need to hear!" an Executive Pastor said to me. "I overwork and don't leave enough margin to rest in the Lord. But I wouldn't want my Youth Pastor to hear this — he's already *too lax* about his ministry responsibilities!"

I clarified, "Actually, Jesus isn't inviting us to slack off or even to go on a spiritual retreat — *he's offering to put a yoke on us!*"

Probably we want the "easy," but not the "yoke." Yokes are binding and they're for working hard!

## A Lesson on Yokes

You probably haven't seen a yoke in awhile! Let's review the basics. The yoke that Jesus is referring to is a heavy wooden harness that fits over the shoulders of two oxen. It's used to attach them, neck to neck, and hitch up them up to a plow that they are to pull across a field to prepare it for planting a crop.

First the new ox needs to be "broken in." To train a young ox wise farmers are careful not to pair it with another young ox or an ox that's been poorly trained. Young oxen might be strong and energetic, but they don't know how to wear the yoke and they don't know how to pull the plow. They jerk and strain to try to get out of the yoke. They charge forward to rush to the end of the job, chaffing their necks and choking themselves. Or they try to wander off to graze in a meadow.

But if you take a young ox and pair it with a mature ox who has been well-trained then it learns. The lead ox shows the younger how to wear the yoke *loosely and lightly*. It pulls the brunt of the weight of the plow and leads the younger one to pull the plow slow and steady, step-by-step, straight ahead — without getting bruised or worn out.

Jesus is the mature ox we need. But sometimes I find myself *un-yoked* to the Sovereign Lord and *un-easy*! When Kristi sees me reverting to my old pattern of self-reliance and getting weighed down by my work she reminds me, "Bill, it's God's field, not yours! You don't have to plow the field all by yourself — he's inviting you to participate in His work." *Thank you Lord, this book is your project, not mine!*

Kristi needs my help too. Sometimes she sees "hard" disciplines that I or others are using and thinks she should follow suit, but I remind her, "Don't get in anybody's yoke but Jesus'. He custom fits his yoke to be a 'light burden' for you." It's the same for you reading these words. *The Savior adapts his yoke according to your needs — so don't compare yourself to other people!*

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To be un-yoked to the Lord is an un-easy life!

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## Ravished For Jesus!

I was forty years old when I discovered the Gospel of Christ as an Easy Yoke and *the Lord inflamed my heart with his love!* I learned to live with the blessed awareness that the risen Christ is standing beside me, smiling and opening his arms to me!

This is true for you, *right now*.

“Come to me,” the Radiant Son says to us. “Follow me and I will give you life — real life, my life in God, abundant and eternal living, more vitality than you could imagine, more joy than you can contain, the peace that you’ve always longed for.”<sup>11</sup>

If only we would let Jesus *ravish our hearts!* If only we would appreciate the glorious gift of Christ crucified and risen. If only we would see that awaiting us right now is the opportunity of a lifetime: to be Jesus’ apprentice, to bring our lives into his classroom, to make our world his kingdom, to shine his light to people all around us.

When we behold in our hearts the goodness and beauty of Christ then we *will* be captivated by him! We’ll leave behind anything that distracts us. We’ll lay down our burdens. We’ll take his hand and follow him wherever he leads. Indeed, person after person in the New Testament *chased* after Christ.

People shouted out at the top of their lungs and made fools of themselves to get Jesus’ attention. They pushed their way through crowds or crawled in the dirt and between people’s legs to touch him. They walked across deserts, sat in the hot sun for hours and hours, and skipped meals to listen to him teach. They left their businesses and their families to follow him. They endured ridicule and abuse to be his disciples. They jumped out of trees, ripped the

roofs off houses, and gave up their life savings to fall at his feet and worship him!

How will you give your heart afresh to Jesus? How will you step out of your comfort zone to grow in your apprenticeship to Christ the Lord?

We talk about “giving up everything to follow Jesus,” but we need to start small — like giving up a little pride to lift our hands in worship or talk with a stranger while praying for a natural opportunity to bring the name of Jesus into the conversation.

A little thing I’ve done is to *literally skip with joy that I get to be one of Jesus’ students!* Some people think I’m crazy. One day I got an email from one of the readers of our weekly Soul Shepherding Devotional email.<sup>12</sup> She wrote:

I like the way you want us to ‘delight’ in the Lord like a ‘child,’ as I’ve always felt this is the way God would love us to approach him. But I don’t know if I would ‘skip’ like a child and then say, ‘*I am the disciple Jesus loves!*’ I think my roommate just might call the ‘men in the white coats’ on me!

I replied: “Bring on the white coats! I’ll be crazy for Jesus!”

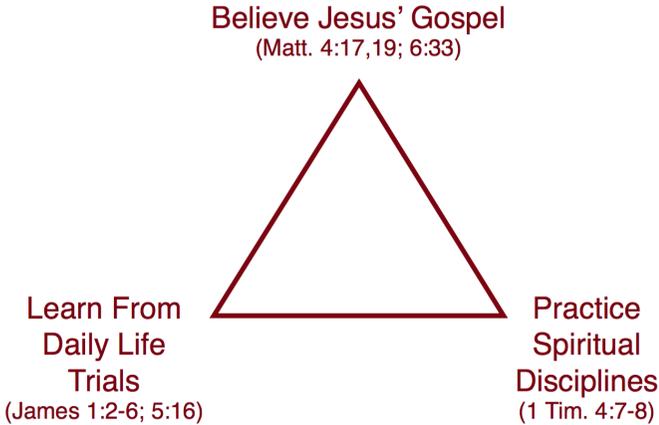
## The Triangle of Soul Transformation<sup>13</sup>

Jesus ministers the word of the Gospel to us: “Don’t try to run your own life — you’ll *ruin* it! God’s glorious kingdom is available to you. I’m welcoming you into my Trinitarian society so put your confidence in me.”<sup>14</sup>

Looking to Christ is the key that opens this portal to heaven. So we begin The Apprentice Prayer exclaiming, “Jesus, I love you! Father, I adore you. Holy Spirit, I rely on you.” There are three general ways to look to the Word and Spirit of Jesus. These make up a triangle that summarizes Soul Shepherding’s “Curriculum of Christlikeness,” which is the basis of this book:

# The Triangle of Soul Transformation

God's Word and Spirit minister to us  
in community and we respond to:



## 1. Believe Jesus' Gospel (Be Captivated!)

Each chapter in *Easy Yoke* will de-bunk a deceitful and damaging assumption held by most people. We'll shed the light of Christ on Satan's lies and our culture's foolishness. We'll *captivate* our minds and hearts on our precious Lord and the transforming truth of his Gospel: "Re-think your strategy for life because God's kingdom is open to you now" (Matthew 4:19 paraphrased).<sup>15</sup>

Studying and meditating on the Bible, especially the Gospels, is essential for our spiritual formation in Christlikeness. We all have been "conformed to the pattern of this world" and by God's mercy need to "be transformed by the renewing of our minds" in Scripture (Romans 12:1-2). It is singularly *the life of Jesus Christ* — and learning to participate in his life by his Spirit of grace — that unleashes the goodness and power of the Bible to renew our minds. So each chapter will look at an aspect of Jesus' holy and wholesome character which he offers to us.

## 2. Learn from Daily Life Trials

We will also focus on a common stress-related problem in each chapter. Rather than directly seeking relief from anxiety and distress (which doesn't work), you'll be encouraged to seek God and his heavenly kingdom in the middle of your daily life difficulties (Matthew 6:33). Seeing our trials as tests of our character and accepting them as learning opportunities is crucial to experiencing enduring joy in God (James 1:2-6). To keep trusting Christ and to prevail over our problems we need to be vulnerable with grace-giving friends (John 16:33; James 5:16).

Each of us needs to be part of a community of apprentices to Jesus in order to become more like him, which is why *Your Best Life In Jesus' Easy Yoke* is meant to be shared among sacred companions. We need to support and care for one another in order to persevere and grow through the difficulties of our lives.

## 3. Practice Spiritual Disciplines (To Love Others)

Paul says, "Train yourself to be godly" (1 Timothy 4:7). He's urging his young assistant pastor to use disciplines to grow in Christly character. We need to use a variety of these exercises under the leadership of the Holy Spirit in order to apply the gospel of grace to our daily lives. We do these *experimentally*, adjusting what we do and how we do it based on what is most helpful for our healing and growth in Christ.

For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus introduces three qualities of genuine righteousness: generosity, prayerfulness, and self-denial. To help us become this kind of person there are related disciplines that we can practice: giving/service, praying Scripture (especially the Lord's Prayer), and fasting (Matthew 6:1-18).

Each chapter of *Easy Yoke* is followed by a "Spiritual Experiment" section aimed at the specific need for de-stressing soul transformation being discussed. You'll be guided to make quiet space to engage with God through praying Scripture. Then

you'll be encouraged to share your experiences and insights with friends on the journey by responding to the "Soul Talk" questions.

## It's a "Golden Triangle"

The Triangle of Soul Transformation is about "being transformed into [Christ's] image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). We're seeking to *internalize* and *imitate* Christ Jesus with our true self and total personality.<sup>16</sup>

This triangle is "golden" in that its three priorities integrate to work together: you can't do one well without also doing the other two, as each feeds into the others. It's best to begin at the top with the Gospel, but in practice you can "start" anywhere on the triangle and move in any direction as long as you keep the three priorities together and balanced.

For instance, our belief in Christ and his Gospel (top corner) is tested in trials which motivate us to seek support from other people (left corner). To overcome our sin and stress and to be more loving we need to practice disciplines for life in the Spirit (right corner). These learning experiences lead us to worship the the Lord or to re-think our faith-strategy for life (top corner).

## Experiment

# Lectio Divina

In the 6th Century Benedict of Nursia in Italy taught the monks who followed Christ with him to meditate on Bible passages using a process he called “Lectio Divina” (Latin for “Divine Reading.”) In the centuries since then, Benedictines and others have refined his approach. The method that Kristi and I learned is adapted from the Benedictine monks at Saint Andrews Abbey in Valyermo, CA.

Our method of Lectio Divina is especially focused on listening to Scripture with our heart. It’s different than, but complementary to Bible study. Instead of studying and analyzing the text (which we do at another time), we enter into the passage *experientially*, feeling our emotions and needs, listening to the Holy Spirit speak into our daily life, and resting in God’s grace. In our Soul Shepherding ministry we’ve found it very helpful to share this contemplative and personal experience of the Word with spiritual direction clients, small groups, and ministry teams.<sup>17</sup>

I’d like to lead you in Lectio Divina on our Master’s easy yoke teaching in Matthew 11:25-30 from *The Message* version. This Scripture meditation will be carried into each chapter of *Your Best Life In Jesus’ Easy Yoke*.<sup>18</sup> We’ll discover many fresh insights and applications for experiencing and sharing with others the Lord’s life-giving rhythms of grace!

Imagine that you and some friends are in a Soul Shepherding group with me following our Lectio Divina Guide for “Step Into Jesus’ Easy Yoke.”<sup>19</sup> It’s a confidential group and as the leader I ask everyone to follow my prompts for the pacing of each element and what to do next. (To do this meditation on your own now you’ll want to allow about thirty minutes. Later you may want to

share this with a friend or small group in which case you'll want to allow more time.)

*Lectio Divina Process (Repeated for Three Readings)*

1. Read the Scripture passage ("Lectio")
2. Reflect on the focus question below ("Meditatio")
3. Respond in quiet prayer/journaling ("Oratio")
4. Rest in God's invitation for you, then pray/share out loud if you want ("Contemplatio")

*Introduction/Context of Passage*

Jesus has just denounced the cities where he did most of his miracles because they did not turn from their sins and put their trust in him as Lord and Savior. He's pronouncing God's judgment on those cities when *suddenly he stops to pray*. Then he changes his tone to tenderness and invites the people to join the "easy yoke" of his intimacy with the Father.

*Scripture Reading*

Three group members take turns reading the passage out loud. For each reading there is a focus question to guide the time of prayerful listening with optional journaling.

Matthew 11:25-30 (*The Message*)<sup>20</sup>

Abruptly Jesus broke into prayer: "Thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth. You've concealed your ways from sophisticates and know-it-alls, but spelled them out clearly to ordinary people [even little children]. Yes, Father, that's the way you like to work."

Jesus resumed talking to the people, but now tenderly. "The Father has given me all these things to do and say. This is a unique Father-Son operation, coming out of Father and Son intimacies and knowledge. No one knows the Son the way the Father does, nor the Father the way the Son does. But I'm not keeping it to myself; I'm ready to go over it line by line with anyone willing to listen.

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. [Take my yoke upon you for I am gentle and humble in heart and we’ll pull the plow across the field together.] Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace [that go with my easy yoke]. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

*Focus Questions for Prayer (With Space For Journaling)*

1. *1st Reading:* What is one word or phrase the Holy Spirit impresses on you? Meditate on that.
2. *2nd Reading.* Enter into the Scripture passage. What do you feel? What specific situation in your life today relates? Write down a prayer or pray quietly.
3. *3rd Reading.* What is God’s personal invitation for you from the Scripture? You can write down what God may be saying to you or a prayer of thanks. Or rest quietly in God.

## **A Breath Prayer From the Bible**

Near the end of each chapter in *Easy Yoke* we’ll share in a “Breath Prayer.” This is not a New Age practice! It goes back to the Christian Fathers and Mothers of the third century who lived in the desert and learned to pray without ceasing using the Jesus

Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” (We’ll re-visit the Jesus Prayer later.)

A few Christians criticize Breath Prayers as being the “vain repetitions” of pagans that Jesus told us to avoid (Matthew 6:7). But he was referring to meaningless babbling, not savoring a verse of holy Scripture! In the Bible itself the Psalmist often directs us to repeat short prayers of the heart like, “Your love endures forever” (e.g., Psalm 136). Similarly, in the Psalter we often take a “Selah” (“say-lah”) of quiet reflection during the singing of a Psalm. (We’ll explore Selah in Chapter Six.)

The breathing prayers that I do are from the Bible and I do them as a simple and practical way to take my meditation on God’s word from my mind into my physical being and all the way down into my heart. Like raising my hands in worship or kneeling in prayer, I’m purposefully using my body to engage personally with the Lord.<sup>21</sup>

The first Breath Prayer I’d like to share with you will help foster your apprenticeship to Christ Jesus and your experience of his peace. It’s just six words long, but to write it took me *two months!* I had been praying Psalm 20 and was particularly drawn to verse seven: “Some trust in chariots and some trust in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.” As I ruminated on this like a cow chewing it’s cud it reminded me of our Lord saying, “My yoke is easy.”

I asked the Holy Spirit to help me write a simple and heartfelt breathing prayer that I could carry with me throughout a day. I kept coming back to this until a couple of months later I finally came up with: “In Jesus’ name... Not my strain.”

In other words, we’re praying: “Jesus, I trust you and rely on you alone... Not what I can achieve or who I can please.”

Let’s try this breathing prayer now. *How sweet it is to appreciate the precious and powerful name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!* This is an opportunity to release our worries and our

burdens to the Lord and find peace in him. Inhaling and exhaling this little prayer is as easy as it is delightful! Try it this way:

- Breathe in as you pray with a whisper or thought: “In Jesus’ name...”
- In the same way, breathe out: “Not my strain...”
- Repeat this a number of times...

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Apprenticeship to Jesus is total reliance  
on his name and letting go of all strain.

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## Training for Breathing and Praying God’s Word

To draw all the sweetness and strength from this prayer you need to keep practicing it so that it’s Biblical content and rhythms begin to *live in your body as an unconscious habit*. You can train your mind, body, and heart with these steps:

### 1. *Deep breathing.*

When you’re stressed, hurried, or under pressure you’re breathing tends to become shallow, which takes you out of enjoying God in the moment. Practice breathing in deep... Holding your breath... And breathing out slowly... You may want to inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth... Relax...

### 2. *Making your breathing a prayer.*

Train your mind to associate inhaling with receiving a gift of grace from God and exhaling with letting go of (or renouncing) strain, anxiety, anger, or self-condemnation. Your pattern of breathing is becoming a prayer that is so deep in you that it has *unconscious* (bodily) meaning. You’re learning to Breathe in tandem with the Holy Spirit.

### 3. *Pray Scripture.*

Now add the words to the breathing rhythm. Inhale, "In Jesus' name..." Exhale, "Not my strain..." Continue with this until you feel connected to the Prince of Peace.

### 4. *Watch and pray.*

Jesus teaches the importance of preparing for temptations and trials (Matthew 26:41). Perhaps you're struggling with finances, a conflict, or a challenge... Ask God to help you trust him in that situation as you breathe: "In Jesus' name... Not my strain..." Keep praying this, while visualizing your circumstance, until you can shift from stress to peace...

## Soul Talk

At the end of each chapter of *Easy Yoke* you'll have opportunity to reflect and pray on a few questions. You may want to write your responses down in your journal to prepare you to share with your friends.

1. What was your experience with The Apprentice Prayer?
2. Which Gospel example of Jesus being relaxed under pressure is especially helpful to you? Why?
3. What are your thoughts about how The Triangle of Soul Transformation can instruct your path of growth in Christ?
4. How did it feel to do the breathing prayer, "In Jesus' name... Not my strain"?

## Two

# In Jesus' Non-Anxious Yoke

In 2009 I won a medal for finishing the “Surf City” marathon in Huntington Beach, CA. I ran 26.2 miles in under 4 hours. It was the fifth marathon I’d completed and it was actually my slowest one, but it might be the one I’m the most proud of because I did it at 46 years old. The other four I did in the physical prime of my life, between ages 17 and 21.

You’re probably thinking to yourself: “Running 26.2 miles is too hard!”

That’s how many people feel about the Christian life. “The road is really narrow and difficult,” we say. But when Jesus contrasted the narrow and broad roads his point was actually *the opposite!* The broad road leads to destruction that keeps getting worse all the way into eternity. The narrow road leads to life that keeps getting better and better. Jesus is concerned that we not miss out on the best way of life (Matthew 7:13-14).

Yes, there is a cost of discipleship. We give up sinful pleasures. We endure many trials. We’re persecuted for our faith in Christ. Satan and his demons attack us.

But *the cost of non-discipleship is actually much more!* Not only in eternity but also in this life, though it often doesn’t look like it based on *outward appearances*. Compare the long-term effects of addiction to those of self-control and moderation, or chronic lying to honesty. Clearly, “virtue is its own reward” is a true saying. So Paul teaches us the law of sowing and reaping and urges, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

Jesus is being most sincere when he motions to us, “Come to me... My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Walking in Jesus’ rhythms of grace doesn’t eliminate our stress (difficult or

challenging situations), but it helps us *not to internalize stress and become anxious*. Living freely and lightly in the Spirit of Jesus doesn't mean we won't experience loss and disappointment, but it helps us *not be weighed down with depression*. Intimacy with Jesus and sharing in his work are so delightful, so honoring, and so encouraging that all of life, including the hard and painful parts, *can* be filled with grace and peace.

## “Try Harder!”

Most people think that to be successful in anything they need to try really hard. Most of my life I've thought that way. We say to one another and to ourselves things like...

- “If at first you don't succeed, try, try, and try again.”
- “It's up to me to make it happen.”
- “I have to take control of the situation.”
- “I need to get a grip on my emotions.”
- “Life is hard.”

Are these true statements? Is this God's wisdom for you and I to live by? In life, is God urging us: “C'mon. Try harder!”?

No. They may be half true, but ultimately they are *false belief systems*. Imagine trying to finish a marathon just by trying hard! You're determined to run 26.2 miles without stopping or even walking — even though you haven't run one mile in years. But you're motivated! You're going to run hard! You're going to push yourself to keep running no matter how tired and sore you get!

Your body and my body won't let us run long distances without building up to it over time. It doesn't matter how much will power we exert. If we try to force ourselves to run farther or faster than our capacity then we'll run out of breath or be in too much pain to continue. And if we somehow keep making ourselves run anyway then eventually we'll start throwing up, get injured, or collapse in exhaustion.

There is no doubt that effort is required to run a marathon, but it is *not sufficient*. The spiritual life works the same way. You can't sustain godly behavior by telling yourself that you must do what you should. You've told yourself things like, "Be kind... Don't get stressed... Don't get angry... I need to pray more..."

You've tried and tried harder to do what you should and sometimes you've succeeded (which usually leads to pride) but then eventually you weren't able to sustain your good behavior — discouraged, you may have given up trying altogether.

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Living in Jesus' non-anxious yoke begins  
with understanding our stress points.

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The religious Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day tried hard to do what they should. Theirs was a legalistic righteousness that was depressing, destructive, and deadly. Jesus called them "whitewashed tombstones" — on the outside they were clean, manicured, and surrounded by flowers, but inside they were full of rotting flesh and dead bones (Matthew 23:27-28). He said that our righteousness must go far beyond theirs (be a totally different kind!) if we want to enter the Kingdom of God (Matthew 5:20).

### Survey: Do You Have A-N-X-I-E-T-Y?

The "try harder" mentality leads to anxiety. Let's see how you're doing with anxiety. Try my screening test to identify any symptoms of A-N-X-I-E-T-Y that you may struggle with. Each of the seven categories of anxious symptoms has two or more related questions. Answer each question with yes or no, meaning it's "mostly true" or "mostly not true" of you. Then underline your yes responses.

- *A gitated.* Are you easily frustrated? Do people irritate or upset you? Do you lose your temper often?
- *N ot sleeping/relaxing.* Are you having trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep? Do you often wake up and not feel rested? Is it hard for you to be still and relax?
- *X fears.* Do you have any fears that you accommodate by avoiding situations? Are you afraid of social situations, interpersonal conflict, rejection, failure, public speaking, leaving home, airplanes, spiders, knives?
- *I n your body.* Have you been experiencing shortness of breath, heart palpitations, tightness in your chest, discomfort in your stomach or bowels, headaches, twitching, shaking hands, sweaty palms, or tingling?
- *E scalating worries.* Are you worried about problems you're facing? Do you keep thinking over and over about your stress? Do your thoughts race out of control?
- *T raumas relived.* Does your mind keep re-experiencing an upsetting event(s)? Are you having nightmares?
- *Y es all the time.* Do you feel pressured to say yes to accommodate other people? Satisfy your perfectionism? Give into compulsive desires that won't go away?

If you have yes responses in three or more categories (or any yes answers that are disruptive for you) it suggests that anxiety may be shutting you off from God's peace, draining your energy, diminishing your effectiveness, or distracting you from opportunities to love God and the people around you.

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If you keep internalizing stress anxiety gets  
into your body and it takes time to get it out!

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## Jen's Quivering Lip

Jen<sup>22</sup> sought my help when she couldn't get her lip to stop quivering with anxiety when she talked. This embarrassed her socially and it became a problem for her in her job because as the Women's Ministries Director in her church she often had to speak in front of audiences. She knew that she was anxious about her lip and what people were thinking about her, but she didn't know that she had a problem with *trying to control things*.

In everything she did Jen tried to do better. She wore the latest fashions and got her hair professionally styled every few weeks. She prided herself in making healthy meals for her family and being involved in her kids' lives. And after she put her kids to bed she stayed up late preparing the weekly Bible Study for working mothers which she led in her church.

Sometimes Jen's husband got frustrated with her that she didn't relax more and didn't have more time to go to shows, take bike rides to the beach, and do the things that they had enjoyed before having kids. But she always reassured him that things would get better when the kids were older.

Everyone who looked at Jen's life, including Jen, thought she had the perfect life. But Jen's quivering lip wouldn't stop. She found herself tightening her lips to try to get them to stop trembling. She was losing her smile! She was becoming more and more self-conscious and anxious about the talks she gave at church and the small group she led in her home.

*The harder Jen tried to keep up her ideal, put-together image, the more anxious she became.* Hiding her "flaw" wasn't working.

## Anxiety is a Control Problem

You may not have an obvious anxiety symptom, but probably there are times that you internalize stress and worry. As we'll discuss further in Chapter 3, stress (as in outward changes, challenges, and responsibilities) is part of life and in moderation it's good because it activates us. *But to convert stress into internal*

1 All Bible quotations are from the New International Version (1984 or 2011 edition), unless indicated otherwise. Other versions cited: MSG is The Message, NLT is New Living Translation, ESV is English Standard Version, KJV is King James Version, NKJV is New King James Version, NASB is New American Standard Bible, and AMP is Amplified Bible.

2 Personal notes from a conversation with Dallas Willard on December 31, 2010.

3 Ray Ortlund, Sr.'s book, *Lord, Make My Life a Miracle!* (Regal Books: 1974), is filled with his enthusiastic insights on living for Christ, loving one another, and reaching the world with the Gospel.

4 "Apprentice" is a term that Dallas Willard uses for disciple. Sadly, our understanding today of discipleship to Jesus has become quite watered down. Apprenticeship to Jesus is concrete and practical; it emphasizes that we learn from being with Jesus and working side-by-side with him over a long period of time.

It used to be that to be a "Christian" was to be a disciple of Jesus. In fact, in the New Testament the word "Christian" is only used three times and the word "disciple" is used 269 times! The New Testament was written by disciples of Jesus, for disciples of Jesus, about discipleship to Jesus. All the promises of the New Testament are for disciples of Jesus. See "Discipleship: For Super Christians Only" by Dallas Willard in his books *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (Harper: 1988), pp. 258-265 and *The Great Omission* (Harper: 2006, pp. 3-12.)

5 These are the dynamics of a person that Jesus identified in the Greatest Commandment (Mark 12:29-31). Dallas Willard teaches that your heart is the core of your being and refers to your intentions and choices. Your soul is your personality from the inside out, the flow of your being. Your mind includes your thoughts, ideas, images, and feelings. Your strength is your body and energy. Your relationships include all the social interactions and ties you have with people. He explains that each function of your self needs to be understood and it needs to interact with God's grace-giving Word and Spirit for healing and growth so that your whole person can be transformed to be more like Jesus. See his "Circle Diagram" in *Renovation of the Heart* (Navpress: 2002) p. 38

6 Dallas Willard didn't want to be called "Dr. Willard" or even "Professor." He said, "Just call me Dallas." He exalted God and humbled himself in the manner that Jesus taught (Matthew 23:8-12). By the way, he was named after the county he was born in: Dallas, Missouri.

7 Personal notes from a conversation with Dallas Willard on September 26, 2007.

8 See Dallas Willard's books, *Hearing God*, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, *The Divine Conspiracy*, *Renovation of the Heart*, *The Great Omission*, and *Knowing Christ Today*. Also DWillard.org has a section of Dallas' seminars on CD.

9 "Relax with Jesus" by Bill Gaultiere (SoulShepherding.org: 2014) is a Bible study that includes more examples of Jesus ministering his non-anxious presence.

10 Personal notes from a conversation with Dallas Willard on September 26, 2007.

11 Author's paraphrase from John 10:10.

12 You can sign up to receive these free weekly devotional emails at SoulShepherding.org.

13 The Triangle of Soul Transformation is adapted from Dallas Willard's "Golden Triangle of Spiritual Growth," which focuses on (1) The Action of the Holy Spirit, (2) Ordinary Events of Life: Temptations, and (3) Planned Disciplines to Put on a New Heart. Each are centered in the mind of Christ (See *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 347). See also "Adopting the Narratives of Jesus" by James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love With The God Jesus Knows*, (IVP: 2009) p. 24.

14 Author's paraphrase and elaboration of Matthew 4:17.

15 James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*. Smith identifies “false narratives” that undermine trust in Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom.

16 Internalizing and imitating Christ go together. You can’t imitate him without receiving and relying on his Spirit. At the same time, if you think you’ve taken in the Spirit of Jesus, but you’re not becoming like him you need help learning to truly trust Christ with your heart.

17 “Lectio Divina Groups” by Bill Gaultiere (SoulShepherding.org: 2010, 2008) discusses Lectio Divina’s history and rhythms. It also features applications for small groups and private devotions.

18 Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Navpress:1993). Portions of Peterson’s paraphrase of Matthew 11:25-30 will be quoted throughout this book without citing the reference.

19 “Lectio Divina Guides” by Bill Gaultiere on (SoulShepherding.org: 2012) includes an archive of over sixty PDF’s, each is one page and free. They feature a Bible passage on a spiritual formation theme, brief introduction, Breath Prayer, the text, and reflection questions with space for journaling.

20 The bracketed text are easy yoke phrasing imported from traditional translations.

21 “Breath Prayers” by Bill Gaultiere (SoulShepherding.org: 2010, 2006) discusses the Biblical and Christian history of this discipline and instructions for using various breathing and meditation rhythms. (See also “Breath Prayers From the Bible.”)

22 This is not her real name and certain details have been changed. This is the pattern throughout this book.