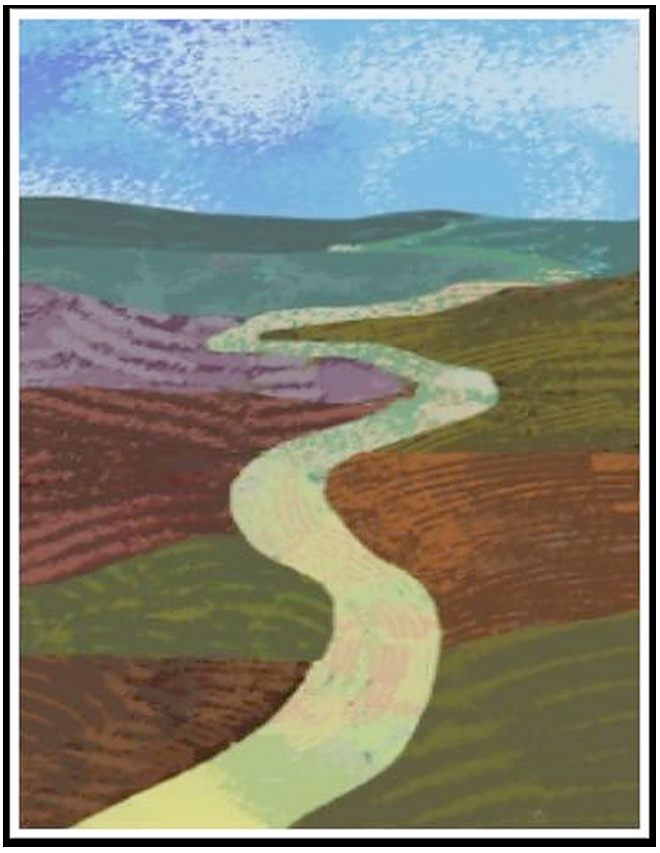
Beholding the Triune God

A Lifelong Journey of Spiritual Transformation and Service



Ralph C. Ennis

Introduction: A View from Above

Walking through life at ground level often feels like hacking a path through a jungle. We see the next vine, the next obstacle and the next decision, but rarely the shape of the whole landscape. Sometimes we need to climb into a helicopter, rise above the treetops and look at the big picture.

This paper is an attempt to take that kind of view of the spiritual journey of a follower of Jesus. Perhaps you prefer to stay on the ground, where life feels concrete and practical. That is fine. We will take this flight together, and when we land again, my hope is that you will hold a clearer map for the journey still ahead of you.

So take a seat, and keep a pen or a notes app close. As you read, jot down your thoughts, your "aha" moments, your questions and the steps you sense God inviting you to take. The reflection section at the end will help you gather what you have written and turn it into prayer and practice.

> *But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.*
>
> — 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NASB)

Peter's Perplexing Journey

Some days, life seemed very clear to Peter. Other days it brought nothing but emotional chaos. His relationships worked well for a while, and then pain would overwhelm him again.

Some time earlier, a close friend had confronted Peter about his selfishness, his greed, his emotional distance and, at times, his plain rudeness. Peter knew his friend was right. Over the past year of walking with Jesus, he had seen real changes, and even his friend had noticed them. But Peter wanted more change, and he wanted it now. The crush of daily life, with its relationships, money worries and the demands of work and school, never seemed to leave him time to deal with his inner world. He had enough to do just holding things together.

Peter truly wanted his heart and soul to be transformed. Yet slowly he was learning something surprising: the desire for transformation can become a mask for self-centeredness. It can make us like a bride who is more in love with her lovely dress than with

her bridegroom. The more Peter focused on himself, the more he felt his soul shrinking from life.

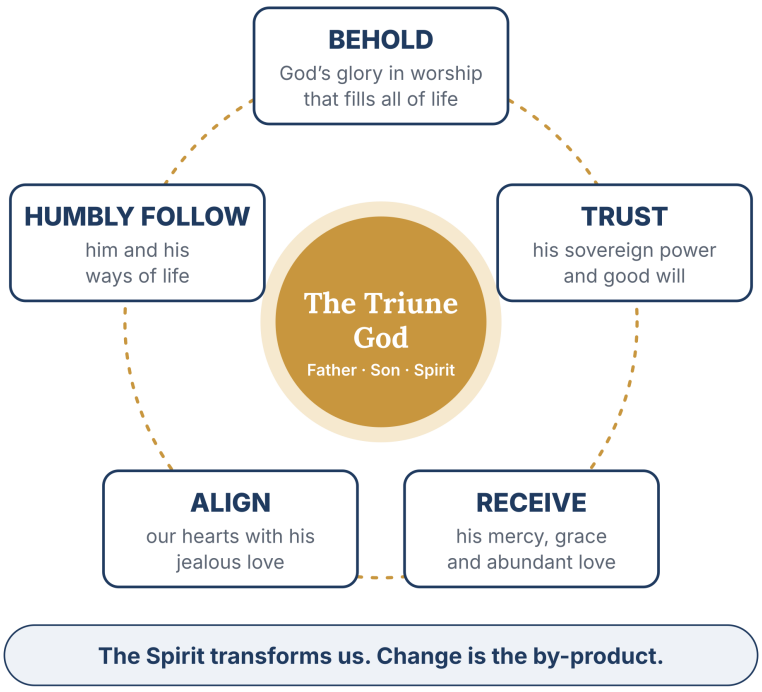
Peter's struggle is common among sincere believers. We want to grow, so we make growth our project. Then we discover that our project has quietly put us, rather than God, at the center.

Transformation Is a By-product

The mystery of the Triune God, and of how God transforms us, defies simple explanations and predictable steps. Yet God has revealed a great deal through the Scriptures. This paper explores a lifelong journey of *beholding God*, which means coming to know him deeply. It is a journey that transforms us to be like Christ in the innermost places of our souls and throughout all our relationships. Each person's journey is a unique story that unfolds within God's grand story of creation, redemptive love and eternal kingdom.

Here is the central claim of this paper: **spiritual transformation is a natural by-product of an authentic relationship with the Triune God.** We do not grow mainly by working on ourselves. We grow as the Spirit of God transforms us while we:

- **Behold** God's glory in worship that fills all of life, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week;
- **Trust** his sovereign power and his good and authoritative will;
- **Receive** his mercy, grace and abundant love;
- **Align** our hearts, minds and souls with his godly, jealous love for us; and
- **Humbly follow** him and his ways of life.



Transformation grows out of a relationship. As we behold, trust, receive, align and follow, the Spirit changes us.

Second Corinthians 3:18 captures this process beautifully. As we gaze at the Lord's glory, we are "being transformed into the same image." The verbs are telling. We behold; the Spirit transforms. Our part is to look. His part is to change us.

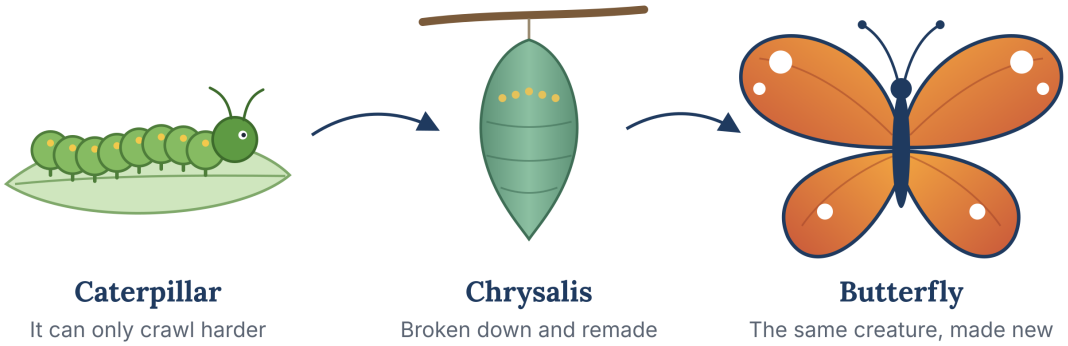
This transformation touches everything about us: who we are, what we do and even what we imagine. Our souls are gradually shaped into a beauty that reflects the beauty of God's holiness, the image of Christ himself. And the change does not stay hidden inside us. It radiates into all our relationships, with family, friends, enemies, society, the church and the natural world. Paul says that to some people this new life smells like the fragrance of life, and to others like the smell of death (2 Corinthians 2:14–16).

God takes the first step

Long before we respond to God, he is already drawing us to himself in his jealous love, a love free of the possessiveness that so often damages human relationships. He is the one who starts the work of reconciliation. When we genuinely respond to his drawing, we become new creatures, adopted children in the family of God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit. From that moment we begin a progressive journey of being transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

That journey in this life leads toward our final glorification in eternity, where we will be completely like Christ and reign with him as co-heirs. A picture of this change in nature is

the grubby caterpillar remade into a beautiful butterfly. No one looking at the caterpillar could imagine the butterfly. In the same way, our fallen human nature cannot climb its way into the beauty of God's holiness. Transformation is an act of God.



A caterpillar cannot become a butterfly by trying harder. Transformation is God's work.

God chose both to make us new creatures in Christ immediately (2 Corinthians 5:17) and to empower us, through his Spirit, for a lifelong journey of progressive change. We are complete in Christ now, and we are also being completed. Because our minds are bound by space and time, while God's work is not, much of the spiritual life feels paradoxical. That limitation invites us to trust the One who is not bound by time and space. In the end, he will glorify us. We will be like Christ and co-heirs with him, but we will not be "God." Only God is God.

Two ditches beside the road

There are two ditches on either side of this road. The first ditch is self-focus. To fix our attention mainly on our own transformation can lead us into a subtle self-worship, as Peter discovered. The second ditch is apathy. Worship that never leads to change becomes disconnected from real life, and it can slide into disillusionment, a sense that God is not relevant to how we actually live. Often that disillusionment begins with routine, half-hearted worship, a comfortable illusion wrapped around genuine indifference toward God.

Beholding God as the passion of our hearts and minds keeps us out of both ditches. Both self-worship and apathy are propped up by self-righteousness, and both fall away when we are truly looking at him.

No two journeys of beholding God look the same. Some believers pass through seasons that have been called "dark nights of the soul." Others spend long periods serving the poor or praying for the sick. God guides each of us through the stages he desires for us. Our task is to stay sensitive to his leading without comparing our journey to anyone else's. God clearly

enjoys variety; just look at how much of it he created. He delights in the uniqueness of your story.

Six Lifelong Directives

Along this lifelong journey, God has given us directives that help us embrace his purposes, plans and ways as we experience his glory. Different Christian traditions emphasize different directives. The six below are offered as foundations for beholding God in worship and service throughout all of life. Practices such as baptism, the Lord's Supper, prayerful Scripture reading and care for the poor can be seen as outworkings of these six.

1. Love God: the Great Commandment

Jesus summed up the heart of God's law this way: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27, NASB). This command assumes that we are growing in a firsthand knowledge of who God is, and that we genuinely *like* him. To truly love someone means that we long to know them. Yet this knowing is not a distant, head-only pursuit. It is knowledge with intimacy of soul.

Loving God with understanding means beholding his glory: the glory of creation, the glory of his Son and the glory of his kingdom. God's glory is a beauty worthy of honor that stirs a sense of awe. John wrote, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14, NASB). Beholding God includes beholding Jesus, who lived, died, rose, lives today in heaven and will return on a day no one can predict.

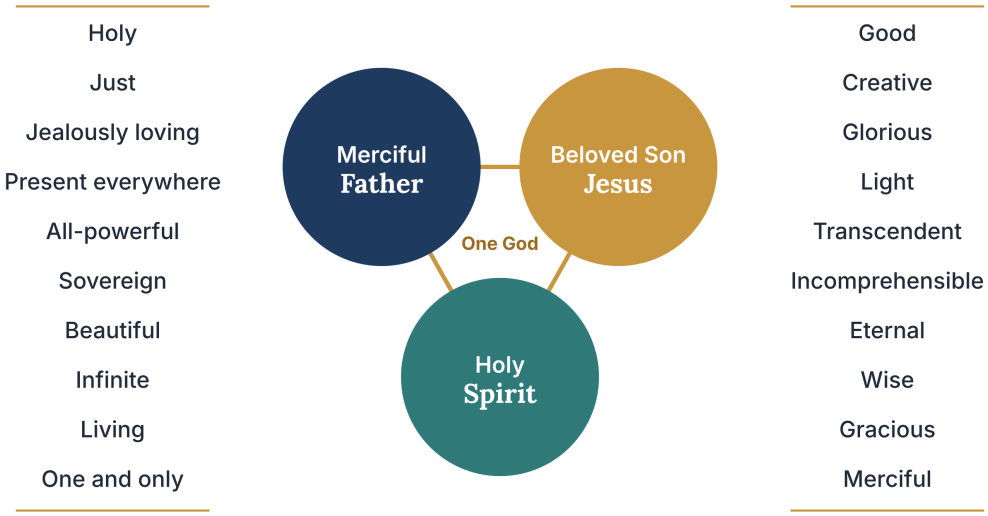
God's glory also shines through creation, from the smallest cell to the farthest galaxy (Psalm 19:1–6; Romans 1:20). King Solomon wrote, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings" (Proverbs 25:2, NIV). Few of us are kings, but all of us can know the joy of exploring the glory God has hidden in mystery, nature, mathematics, music, relationships and human societies.

Loving God also requires trusting him when we cannot see the whole picture. A common part of our journey is questioning God's intentions in the face of pain. Job, who lost nearly everything, is our guide here. At the end of his struggle he said, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You" (Job 42:5, NASB). Seeing God clearly while also seeing ourselves clearly reshapes our relationship with him, even in seasons of suffering. In such times we discover the severe mercy of God in a broken world, a mercy so costly that he sent his Son to bear the full weight of sin's evil for our reconciliation.

Finally, loving God means loving what he loves. God reveals that his very name is “Jealous” (Exodus 34:14). His is not the possessive jealousy that cripples human relationships, but a jealousy that frees us, delights in us and protects us as his dear children. As we grow in love, we face his jealous heart and surrender our competing loves: wealth, approval, comfort or anything that claims to be more worthy of our devotion than he is. The lifelong journey of transformation slowly aligns the jealousies of our hearts with the jealous heart of the Triune God.

To love God is to love the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We come to know the merciful, tender heart of the Father, who loves his Son. We encounter Jesus, who came as a child, lived as a servant, died as if a criminal, rose as Savior and will return as reigning Lord. And we welcome the Holy Spirit, our Counselor and Guide, whose presence within us assures us that God will keep every promise.

An incomplete view of the incomprehensible Triune God



... and infinitely more

God is inexhaustible. No list of his attributes is ever complete, which is why beholding him never grows boring.

2. Love others as Jesus has loved us

Loving God leads to loving others, because he loves us all. Our love must reach not only the lovable but also the unlovable, just as his love reached us when we were unlovable. That includes family, friends and enemies; the poor and the rich; the powerful and the overlooked; people of every race, ethnicity and nation.

Our human love is always limited. We can never meet every need of even one person, let alone the world. Yet God has given us both the privilege of loving and the power to do it

through his Spirit. That does not make love simple or easy. It does mean that loving God is the solid ground from which we learn to love others.

Loving others also involves accepting ourselves as creatures God made. If we rage at ourselves and treat ourselves with contempt, we indirectly show contempt for the One who made us (Isaiah 45:9). The journey inward to face pride, envy and lust often leads through feelings of anger, fear, shame and guilt. Some people respond with self-condemnation ("I hate who I am"). Others respond with denial ("It isn't true"). Beholding God leads us instead to accept his tenderness toward us, until we are truly at peace with ourselves as well as with him.

Jesus' story of the prodigal son shows what this looks like (Luke 15:11–32). The son came home knowing he was undeserving. His father, however, ran to him and dressed him in a robe, a ring and sandals. Part of the prodigal's journey was waking up the next morning and learning to be at peace wearing clothes and a ring he had not earned. For many of us, the road to that kind of peace is long and full of shame. God is patiently peeling away our layers of shame and dressing us in robes of righteousness.

Jesus then raised the standard even higher: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, *even as I have loved you*, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34–35, NASB). We cannot love like that on our own. This new commandment means we must first *receive* Jesus' love before we can offer it. As we receive it with openness and trust, we become agents of his love to others. As Jesus said of the woman who washed his feet with her tears, the one who has been forgiven much loves much (Luke 7:36–50).



Love for God overflows into love for others, and it grows best among people who walk the journey together.

3. Partner in the Great Commission

Once we embrace God's loving heart for us and for others, Jesus' Great Commission becomes compelling rather than burdensome: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19–20, NIV).

Our words, actions, relationships, unspoken attitudes and creative work all give off a kind of fragrance that God uses to draw people to himself. As we walk with God, we also discover the spiritual gifts he has given us (1 Corinthians 12), each one designed to serve others in love and truth.

At the center of this commission is what Paul calls "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18). That reconciliation runs in two directions: between God and people, and between people themselves, as individuals, families, ethnic groups, races and nations. To pursue one and neglect the other shortchanges our calling. Jesus himself linked them when he taught that our forgiveness of others and God's forgiveness of us belong together (Matthew 6:14–15). The commission also looks ahead to *spiritual generations*, believers who disciple others who will in turn disciple still others, among the very young and the very old, across every nation.

4. Engage the Culture and Nature Commandments

God's first directive to humanity was this: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing" (Genesis 1:28, NASB). Jesus honored this calling by working for years as a carpenter, serving his community with his hands before he began his public ministry.

Being fruitful leads to families, cultures, societies and nations, and the goodness of the gospel should show up in all of them. Our love for God also shapes how we treat the natural world. God called his creation "good" and delights in it. When our hearts are aligned with his, we too delight in creation and care for it rather than "destroying the earth" (Revelation 11:18). Respecting nature honors its Author.

5. Live life well with Jesus

Paul urged believers to "make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands … so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders" (1 Thessalonians 4:11–12, NIV). Living well in daily life means following the very ways of Jesus: love, humility, mercy, truth and the cross. I call the way of the cross *the power of powerlessness*.

It is easier for human nature to love the lovable, expect honor, demand justice without mercy and try to conquer evil by force. Even at the end of Jesus' earthly life, his disciples were still competing for positions of honor. Sadly, the church has sometimes reversed the ways of Jesus while still reciting accurate creeds about him. When the ways of Jesus are faithfully lived in ordinary life, they are radical good news to everyone who sees them.

6. Put off and put on

Because we are new creatures in Christ, we are called to put off pride, lust, greed and the behaviors that grow from them, and to put on humility, respect and contentment: a life of love and sacrifice (Ephesians 4). Paul urges us "to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called" (Ephesians 4:1, NASB). This is not a journey of legalism, of earning God's approval by keeping rules. It is a journey of profound grace and growing wholeness. We were designed to be like Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit we can embrace our new identity and live it out.

An Active and Passive Journey

The journey of beholding God is both passive and active. God alone can transform us. We simply do not have the power, or even the holy imagination, to do this miraculous work. He has placed his Holy Spirit within us to bring about the change. In that sense, we are always passive.

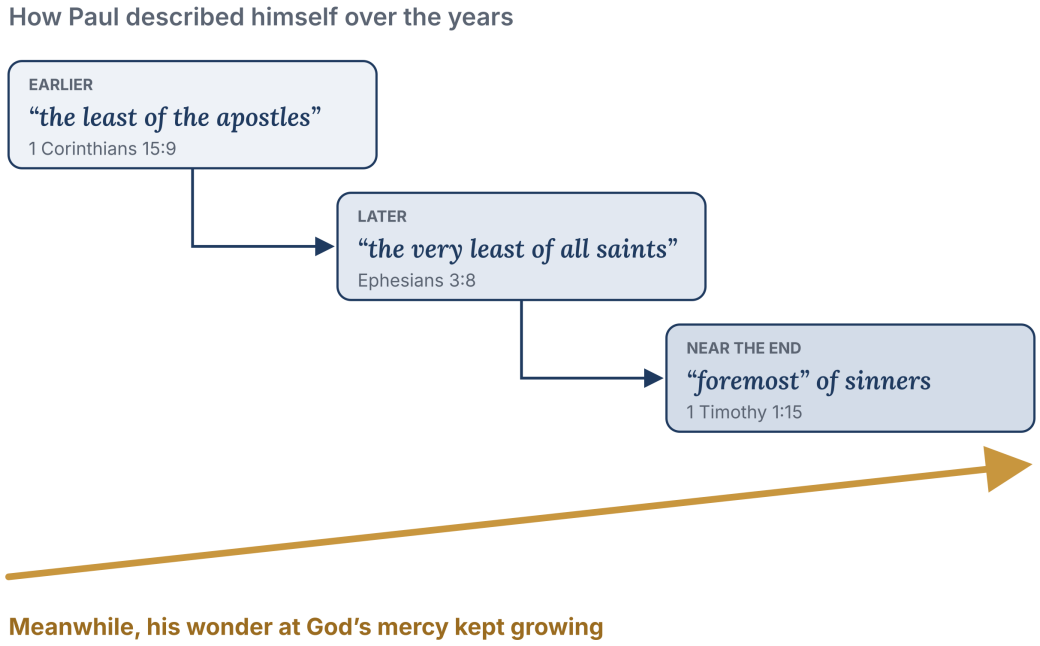
Yet God also created us to be active. We cannot sit back and expect transformation to happen without real engagement with him. To move deeply into the heart of God requires that we move, and that God carries us!

Transformation and service are therefore by-products of our relationship with God. The Triune God must remain our focused passion; any other primary passion is idolatry. Trying to transform ourselves without God may produce some change in character, but spiritual transformation goes much deeper. It reaches our very identity as well as our hearts, minds and behaviors.

Living in the power of the Spirit is what makes the ways of Jesus possible. Without his power, those ways are beyond human effort. This daily reliance on the Spirit is more than an obligation; it is a delight. The Spirit of the living God delights to dwell within us, and he becomes our delight.

Along the way, failures will come. We violate the beauty of God's holiness through envy, pride and broken relationships, and yet God extends forgiveness. The process is often messy, but it is always rich as we keep our gaze where Hebrews directs it: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2, NIV).

The apostle Paul's letters show how this journey shaped him. Early in his ministry, he called himself "the least of the apostles" (1 Corinthians 15:9). Later he described himself as "the very least of all saints" (Ephesians 3:8, NASB). Later still, he called himself the foremost, or chief, of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Paul's descent reveals a growing awareness of his own sinfulness, of God's holiness and of God's mercy. God had seen all the ugliness of Paul's self-righteousness from the beginning, and he loved him anyway. Whatever our failures, God's kindness can forgive them as he draws us deeper into his heart.



As Paul beheld God more clearly, he saw himself more honestly, and his amazement at God's mercy grew.

Relational Practices

Many practices can deepen our relationship with God and open us to his transforming work. These include Bible study, extended time alone with God, Scripture memory, worship with others, baptism, the Lord's Supper, fasting, solitude, silence, *lectio divina* (slow, prayerful reading of Scripture), generous giving and acts of love toward friends, enemies, the oppressed, the poor and the imprisoned. They also include ordinary things: working faithfully, raising children, making art and music, singing and reflecting on everyday life.

None of these practices earns God's love. Think of them instead as relational habits, ways of spending time with Someone we love.

Why does this matter so much? A. W. Tozer argued that our idea of God, and how closely it matches who God truly is, is of immense importance. He believed that nearly every error in

doctrine or failure in Christian living could be traced back to “imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God.” If Tozer was right, then beholding God is not optional. Seeing God beyond the veil of our culture’s misconceptions is essential, not only for our own journeys but also for the health of the church and the good of society.



Practices do not earn God’s love. They are ways of spending time with Someone we love.

Ten Guiding Questions

The ten questions below can help guide the practice of beholding God, being transformed into the image of Christ and serving in his kingdom. You may have different or additional questions, but the aim is the same.



Ten questions to help us find our bearings on the journey.

1. Worship and intimacy. *Am I growing in worship of and intimacy with the Triune God, both as an individual and in community with other believers?* God never forces intimacy on us. He invites us to draw near with confidence (Hebrews 10:22). True intimacy with God includes reverent worship, because he is the Creator and we are creatures. He is the awesome and holy God, never to be trivialized as "just like us, only bigger." Yet the closeness he offers is beyond our wildest imagination (Ephesians 3:14–21). This journey is also shared. Jesus promised, "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst" (Matthew 18:20, NASB). And because God is present everywhere, in pleasure and pain, at work and at home, worship can fill every hour (Psalm 139:7–8).

2. A grand view of reality. *Am I embracing God's view of reality as revealed in Scripture?* Do we see life and death, creation and eternity, knowledge and relationships from his viewpoint? This requires much time in his Word. Reality is his kingdom, and he is the King. That kingdom includes angels who serve believers (Hebrews 1:14), and it also includes spiritual forces in rebellion against God. God's view often requires us to think in terms of *paradox*, where two things that seem true separately appear contradictory together, such as human freedom and God's sovereignty, or one God in three Persons. Paradox often leads us deeper into the beauty and complexity of God.

3. Identities in Christ. *Am I living into my new identities in Christ?* We are no longer strangers to God (Ephesians 2:19). We are his children, disciples, friends, bride and ambassadors, and he is our Savior, Lord, Teacher, Friend and Bridegroom. As we journey with him, we let God define us rather than the voices of our culture, our families or our own fallen imaginations. Then we can live to please him instead of chasing glory from others, and we can shed the false images we project to the world.

4. Heart issues. *Am I facing the deep issues of my heart, such as unforgiven sin, shame, fear, anger and legalism, and growing in the fruit of the Spirit?* The human heart is filled with pride, envy, bitterness, greed and fear. The Spirit displaces that mess with "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23, NASB). Like a surgeon restoring health, the Great Physician reveals what he already

knows about us so that he can heal us. Often the true state of our hearts shows up in the crises and opportunities of life.

5. The ways of Jesus. *Am I reflecting the ways of Jesus in all my relationships: with believers, family, people different from me, my work, society and nature?* God placed each of us in a specific time and place (Acts 17:26–27). The ways of Jesus move through merciful forgiveness toward loving the unlovable with humility. We are also called to help build ethical societies, whether in a visible role, as Daniel did in Babylon, or quietly, as Jesus did as a carpenter.

6. The ministry of reconciliation. *Am I intentionally working toward reconciliation between God and people, and among individuals, families, groups, races and nations?* Do we seek peace across human divides, or are we content to live behind walls that keep hostility at a distance? Jesus has torn down "the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:14, NIV). Reconciled relationships display the beauty of the gospel.

7. Spiritual generations. *Am I seeing spiritual generations of believers who live among and disciple all kinds of people?* Our roles and resources differ, but together we long to see faith passed from one generation to the next across the nations.

8. The life cycle. *Am I growing through the stages of life, becoming a responsible adult who embraces life's transitions?* The questions of a teenager differ from those of a forty-year-old or an eighty-year-old. God is present at each stage, helping us become people who are strong-willed yet submitted, creative and generous, receiving everything, even life itself, as his gift.

9. Discern, resist, overcome. *Am I putting on the armor of God, discerning good from evil, resisting Satan and overcoming evil with good?* We live in a fallen world, yet in Christ we are victorious (Ephesians 6:13–18; 1 Peter 5:8–9). We are called to discern our culture (Hebrews 5:14) and to "overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). Today's flood of words, music and images, much of it designed to shape what we desire and buy, requires special discernment. Otherwise those images can quietly lead us where we never intended to go, into pride, greed and lust, trading the beauty of holiness for the empty promises of sensuality and materialism. Overcoming evil the way Jesus did means bold humility, love for enemies and prayer, not the world's weapons.

10. Groaning with joy. *Am I groaning with joy while living in a world that groans under sin?* We live in Jesus' victory, yet both people and creation still groan (Romans 8:18–25). It is an emotional paradox to rejoice and weep at the same time, but Jesus showed us how. He offered his disciples joy and peace even as he cried out to the Father on the night before his crucifixion. He did not put on a happy face for appearances; he lived honestly

before his friends. Paul longed to know Christ, "and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (Philippians 3:10, NIV).

Perceivable Transformation

The visible by-product of this journey is a beauty that reflects God's glory in our whole being: "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18, NIV).

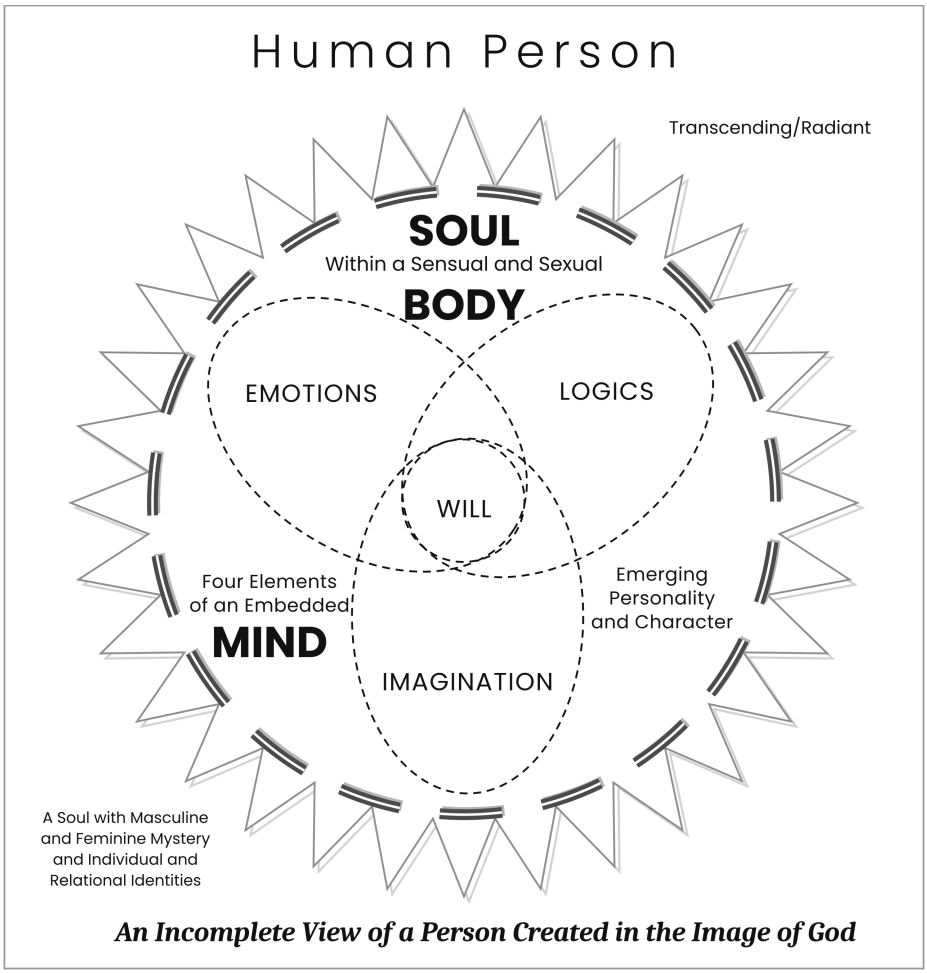
There will be times on the journey when you do not feel beautiful at all. The ugliness of your own heart may overwhelm you until you conclude that real change is impossible. In those moments, remember the apostle John's words: "This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:19–20, NIV). Whether our own hearts or other people condemn us, God remains faithful and good.

One helpful image of spiritual growth is a glass of dirty water that God is purifying. Sometimes we see great progress. Some of that progress is real purification, and some is simply the dirt settling to the bottom. At times God stirs the water so that the settled dirt can be seen and dealt with. We humans often prefer to accept settled dirty water rather than pursue truly clean water. God does not. In his goodness, he stirs the water at the right times.



God sometimes stirs the water so that hidden dirt can be seen and removed.

God's transforming work reaches our whole being: our emotions, wills, minds, imaginations and bodies. The diagram below is not a final word on what it means to be a person made in God's image and marred by the fall. It is offered for reflection and prayer. Ask God to transform each part of who you are. Over time you will see his handiwork. Some changes may come quickly; others may take decades.



Ask God to transform every part of who you are.

The power for this kind of life is not in us. Human life is not self-sustaining, but life in the Spirit gives us the strength to follow Jesus and be transformed all the way into eternity. Our transformation will be complete when we join Jesus as glorified people with new bodies. Even now, Paul says, what is mortal is being "swallowed up by life" (2 Corinthians 5:4, NASB).

A Call To and a Call Away From

We are called *to* the Triune God, and we are called *away from* idols, the entanglements of the heart that crowd out our devotion to him. Through the prophet Hosea, God said to his people, "In that day … you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master'" (Hosea 2:16, NIV). And again, "I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion" (Hosea 2:19, NIV).

How passionate are you for God? The Triune God, who is love and who offers love, is the jealous Lover of our souls. He desires a relationship with us, not because he is needy, but because love is his very nature. He calls us to respond. As anyone in love knows, daily responses form the fabric of a relationship and deepen how well two people know each other. Beholding God, the Lover of our souls, transforms us into the beauty of Christ and delights his heart. Paul describes Christ preparing his church as a radiant bride, "without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:27, NIV).

The journey into the heart and mind of God is both complex and simple. It is complex because it lasts a lifetime and defies formulas. It is simple because at its center is a single devotion to Jesus. Paul expressed his concern for the believers in Corinth this way: "I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3, NIV). That sincere and pure devotion is the heart of everything in this paper.

C. S. Lewis once observed that God is present everywhere, even when we fail to notice him: "The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito." My prayer is that each of us will grow in worship and intimacy with the Triune God beyond our wildest imagination, this year and every year after. God can answer that prayer, for he is far more than our minds can conceive or our hearts can hold.

For Reflection

This section is meant to be worked through slowly, over several days or weeks, either on your own or with a few friends. Have your journal or notes app ready. Let these questions lead you into honest conversation with God, not just into thinking about him.

Looking back over the journey

1. Where do you see yourself in Peter's story? In what ways has your desire to grow ever put *you* at the center instead of God?
2. Which of the five movements (behold, trust, receive, align, humbly follow) comes most naturally to you? Which is hardest right now, and why?
3. Which ditch do you drift toward more often: self-focus or apathy? What does that drift look like in your daily life?
4. Read Job 42:1–6. Has there been a season of suffering in which you came to *see* God more clearly? What did you learn about him and about yourself?
5. Are you at peace "wearing the robe and ring" of the prodigal son? Where do shame or self-contempt still have a hold on you?
6. Which of the six directives (love God, love others, the Great Commission, culture and nature, living life well, putting off and putting on) is God highlighting for you in this season?
7. Think about the muddy glass of water. Is God stirring something up in your life right now? How might you cooperate with his cleansing rather than resist it?
8. What idol or entanglement of the heart is God calling you *away from*? What would it look like to answer his call *to* him more fully?

A ten-question check-in

Use the table below as a personal check-in. For each guiding question, rate where you are now from 1 (just beginning) to 5 (growing well). Then write one small, concrete step you could take in the next month. Consider repeating this check-in every few months and comparing your answers.

#	Guiding question	Now (1–5)	One next step
1	Worship and intimacy with the Triune God		
2	Embracing God's grand view of reality		
3	Living into my identities in Christ		
4	Facing heart issues; growing in the fruit of the Spirit		
5	Reflecting the paradoxical ways of Jesus		
6	The ministry of reconciliation		
7	Spiritual generations		
8	Growing through life's stages		
9	Discerning, resisting and overcoming evil with good		
10	Groaning with joy		

Seven days of beholding

For one week, set aside 15 to 20 minutes each day. Read the passage slowly, perhaps twice. Notice what it reveals about the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit. Then respond to God in prayer, and write one sentence in your journal.

Day	Passage	Behold	Respond
1	John 1:1–18	The Word who became flesh and revealed God's glory	Thank Jesus for one aspect of his glory you noticed.
2	Psalm 139	The God who is present everywhere and knows you fully	Name one place in your life where you need to sense his presence.
3	Luke 15:11–32	The Father who runs to embrace his child	Ask God to help you accept a gift of grace you feel you don't deserve.
4	Job 42:1–6	The God who is greater than our suffering	Bring one painful question honestly to him.
5	Ephesians 3:14–21	Love that surpasses knowledge	Pray this passage for yourself and for a friend by name.
6	Galatians 5:16–26	The Spirit who produces his fruit in us	Ask the Spirit to grow one specific fruit in you this week.
7	2 Corinthians 5:1–21	The God who reconciles and makes us new	Take one step toward reconciliation with someone.

A prayer for the journey

> *Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I want to behold you. Draw me into your jealous, faithful love. Show me your glory in your Word, in creation and in the faces of the people around me. Where my heart is muddy, stir the water and make me clean. Free me from focusing on myself, and free me from apathy. Teach me to trust you, to receive your mercy, to love what you love and to follow you humbly. Transform me, from glory to glory, into the likeness of Jesus. Amen.*

Journeying with others

If you are reading this with a small group or a mentor, choose two or three of the questions above to discuss each time you meet. Share one thing God is showing you, and pray for one another by name. Transformation is not a solo project. It happens among people who encourage one another, tell one another the truth and carry one another when the road is steep.



Transformation happens among people who walk the road together.

Related Resources

The following resources by Ralph Ennis and others are available at ralphennis.com:

- *The Shame Exchange: Trading Shame for God's Mercy and Freedom*
- *Worth a Thousand Words: The Power of Images to Transform Hearts*
- *Connect* Bible study series: *God*, *Identity*, *Soul*, *Relationships*, *Life* and *Freedom*
- *Searching the Ordinary for Meanings* (image set)
- *Breakthru: Discovering My Spiritual Gifts* and *Breakthru: Discovering My Primary Roles* (inventories)

About the Author

Ralph C. Ennis, holds a master's degree in intercultural relations and is an independent researcher in Raleigh, North Carolina. He has been married to Jennifer for 53 years; they have four married children and fifteen grandchildren. His latest co-authored work is *Minds That Matter: How Ethical DNA Can Save Us from Our Smartest Machines*.

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