

INCLUDES DISCUSSION GUIDE

Simplify your spiritual life

*90 Ways to Make
the Spiritual Disciplines
Less Overwhelming
and More Sustainable*

DONALD S. WHITNEY

*Author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

Finally—a short, simple book packed with practical guidelines to develop a lifestyle of biblical spirituality without sacrificing substance or resorting to mysticism, legalism, or license. *Simplify Your Spiritual Life* fills a major void. If you practice even half of what Don Whitney recommends, your spiritual life will improve. Give this book a quick read, then go back and carefully read one chapter each day, pray over it, and implement it.

DR. JOEL R. BEEKE, chancellor, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

Whitney has done it again! *Simplify Your Spiritual Life* is a marvelous tool for repairing the foundations of your life by going back to study the basics of genuine spirituality, such as the triune God, Christ, Scripture, biblical meditation, and prayer. Though quickly read, each of the sections in this book can help you to know what you long for in the depths of your being—soul refreshment and ‘the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.’

DR. MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN, professor of church history and biblical spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; director, The Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies

In these fast-paced times, most people feel too overwhelmed and overworked to spend very much time with God. But in this biblical, practical, and best of all, simple book, Don Whitney gives dozens of helpful suggestions for cutting through all the clutter in ways that will help us grow in Christ. Most of us know we need to simplify; this wonderful book shows us how.

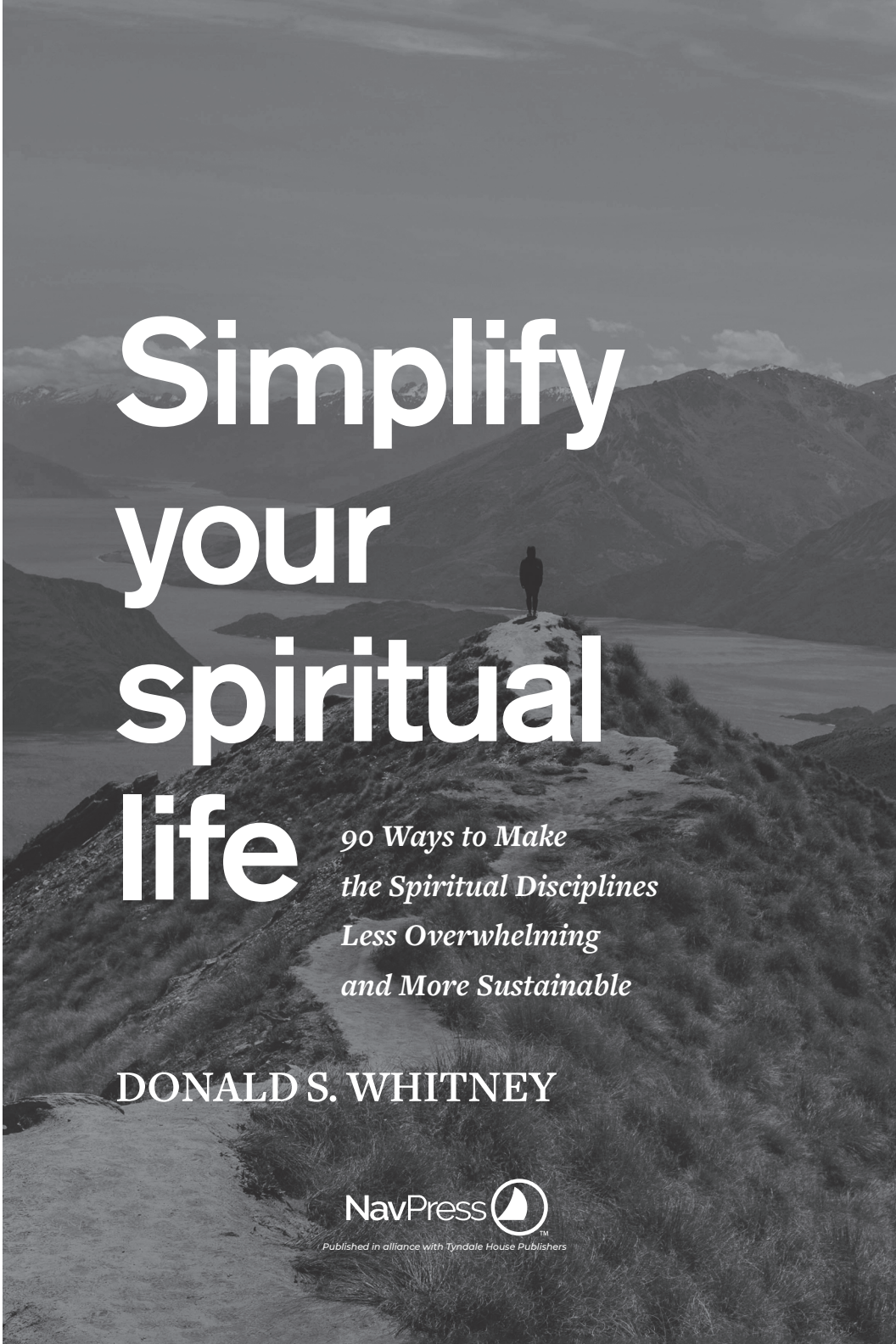
DR. PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN, president, Wheaton College

Donald Whitney is a master teacher in the area of spiritual disciplines. And it is obvious that he writes from experience—he practices what he preaches. *Simplify Your Spiritual Life* will be helpful to both new and mature believers.

JERRY BRIDGES, author of *The Pursuit of Holiness*

This is a much-needed and wisdom-filled book. In our complex and frantic world, there is a crying need to simplify and prioritize, to move from trivial busyness to significant labor, to move from superficial contact to real fellowship. Don Whitney is your sure-footed guide from the “second things” to the “first things.” His timely, biblical and practical advice and counsel will do many an overtaxed and frazzled soul spiritual good. Take, read, learn, and grow!

LIGON DUNCAN, chancellor, CEO, and John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary



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Foreword

Do more and more with less and less—and do it faster and faster. This is the oft-heard management strategy in our profusely overloaded age. What would Jesus think?

Can you imagine Jesus flying past blind beggars, sweat dripping off His brow, yelling at His lagging disciples because they were twenty minutes late for the Jericho prayer breakfast? How would Jesus respond if cell phones went off within the assembled crowds at the Sermon on the Mount?

Jesus had little tolerance for clutter or complexity. Simply put, He would not be distracted from His mission.

Jesus loved people, and He loved truth. There was an unyielding simplicity about His approach, yet the result was freeing rather than onerous. His simplicity was all about focus. “One thing is needful . . .” are the words we remember.

Jesus practiced disciplines like solitude, prayer, and Sabbath because He sought things above rather than the unfocused distractions of the world He came to save. And even though He was disciplined and focused, He was winsome to those with spiritual need. He served. He healed. He taught. He showed compassion. People saw this and responded to His simple message.

SIMPLIFY YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

“Every age has its own characteristics,” wrote pastor and author A. W. Tozer. “Right now we are in an age of religious complexity. The simplicity which is in Christ is rarely found among us.”¹ Against this problem, *Simplify Your Spiritual Life* confronts the clutter, complexities, and distractions of our age and brings us back to the simplicity of the Kingdom of God. Don Whitney first bulldozes the often-jumbled landscape of our spiritual condition and then presents Jesus before us front and center.

This book is not about an unsustainable perfection or an oppressive legalism but instead about the kind of simple devotion that sets us free. It is about the practical day-to-day of the Christian devotional walk, lived in such a way that intimacy with Christ can shine through. It is a much-welcomed book about intentional living and the rediscovery of disciplines that have skipped generations but now are dusted off and brought back into the light for such a muddled time as this.

Richard A. Swenson, MD

Author of *Margin* and *The Overload Syndrome*

Introduction to the Anniversary Edition

In the introduction to the first edition of *Simplify Your Spiritual Life* in 2003, I wrote, “The world is more complex than ever, and it becomes more so by the nanosecond.” Today I would have to update *nanosecond* to *zeptosecond*. A zeptosecond is a trillionth of a billionth of a second, or a decimal point followed by twenty zeroes and a one. That’s the shortest unit of time ever measured—so far.¹ I imagine that if I ever prepare another revision of this book, the complexity of that number will have increased yet again.

At any rate, one result of the increasingly rapid complexification of life is that almost everyone feels the need to simplify. For many people, simplifying means nothing more than “doing less.” But simplifying is not so much about doing *fewer* things as it is about doing the *right* things.

This distinction is even more important when it comes to simplifying the spiritual part of life. Even the “ideal” simple spiritual life (whatever that is) will still be a busy one. Like Jesus and the apostle Paul, anyone devoted to loving God and people will lead a full and active life. But such a life will also be more focused, fruitful, and satisfying because it emphasizes the right priorities. So while this book does have much to say about doing less, it also says a lot about doing the right things and doing them with the right motives.

SIMPLIFY YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

Moreover, *Simplify Your Spiritual Life* is not, strictly speaking, a philosophy or theology of simplifying. While some of that is here, presenting the arguments for simplifying isn't the primary purpose of this book. These brief chapters are for people already convinced of their need to simplify where they can. This book is particularly for those who want hope and help to start simplifying their *spiritual* lives.

I do *not* want to give the impression that every follower of Jesus should do everything suggested in these pages. Doing that would almost certainly result in further *complicating* your life. Rather, here is a garden of ideas in which you can mentally meander, stopping to pick only those that will truly help you simplify.

As anyone who knows me well can testify, I write not as an expert but as a fellow struggler in the need to simplify. Much of what's here has been forged by necessity as I've attempted to avoid being crushed by the weight of my own sense of overload. May the Lord use the fruit of this effort to refresh and strengthen your soul and to increase your joy in "the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3, NASB).

A grayscale photograph of a mountain range. In the foreground, a winding road leads up a hillside. A small, dark building is visible on the hillside. The background shows more mountain peaks under a cloudy sky.

First principles of simplifying

Simplify Your Spiritual Life

Does your spiritual life sometimes seem more like a burden than a blessing? Does your spirituality seem to exhaust you as often as it refreshes you? Have your spiritual practices become “just another thing to do” in an already overcrowded, stress-filled schedule? If so, you need to simplify your spiritual life.

We should expect part of true spirituality to exhaust us, for it exists not merely for our own edification but also to serve the glory and purposes of God. Jesus’ spiritual labors occasionally so fatigued Him that He could remain asleep in an open boat in the middle of a lake during a life-threatening storm (see Luke 8:22-25). Likewise, the apostle Paul knew the depletion of inner resources that results from the willingness to “spend and be spent” for the sake of the souls of others (2 Corinthians 12:15). All aspects of externalized spirituality—serving people’s needs, doing good works, taking the gospel to the spiritually lost, working in church ministries—expend the reserves of both body and soul.

There’s a problem, though, when the inflow of spiritual renewal doesn’t replenish the outflow of spiritual ministry. Our spiritual lives should be *the* source of inner *re*-creation and restoration since it is the way we most directly experience the Lord Himself in daily life. Through

our biblical spiritual disciplines (rightly motivated and practiced) come many of the most refreshing blessings of knowing Christ.

An example of how the spiritual disciplines can be an ongoing means of reinvigorating the soul is depicted in Psalm 1:2-3. Frequent meditation on (and not just reading of) God's Word so continually refreshes the meditator that "He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers" (verse 3).

However, as everything else in our lives becomes more complex, so can our spirituality. As one writer observes, "The pattern of overinvolvement, clutter, and busyness that is a part of our lives at home and at work *will* follow us into our spiritual lives unless we are vigilant."¹ With increasing prosperity and technology come increasing opportunities and options—even in our spiritual practices—that weren't available a short time ago. For instance, instead of simply sitting in a comfortable chair by a sunny window with our Bible, journal, and pen, now we can

- receive daily devotional readings by email;
- read the Bible (or have it read to us) on our digital devices in almost any translation on the internet;
- have prayers composed for us by AI;
- make journal entries on our digital devices by typing or merely speaking, inserting photos or interesting graphics along with the text;
- infuse our devotional experiences with worship-enhancing audio and/or video; and
- hear our favorite Bible teachers on podcasts.

But it all needs to be done faster than ever before because of the strangling demands on our time.

The growing frustrations of hurry and complexity affect the practice not only of our personal spiritual disciplines but also of our *interpersonal* spiritual disciplines (the ones we practice with other Christians). There's less time for church involvement than previously, and yet there are more church activities to choose from. We're so far behind in so many things that sometimes we wonder if participation in our church communities is worth the effort required just to get there.

In some ways we're doing more than ever spiritually, but we're enjoying and profiting from it less. Many areas of our lives are productive and prosperous, yet we've never felt so spiritually withered. Our calendars are full, but our souls are empty.

The time has come to evaluate whether what we are doing in our spiritual lives is taking us where we want to go. There is hope. Read on.