

GEM *and* ALAN FADLING



WHAT DOES  
YOUR  
SOUL  
LOVE  
?

EIGHT QUESTIONS THAT  
REVEAL GOD'S WORK IN YOU



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

Taken from *What Does Your Soul Love?* by Gem and Alan Fadling.

Copyright © 2019 by Gem and Alan Fadling.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).

# 1

# INVITATION

## CHANGING FROM THE CENTER



**T**HIS IS A BOOK ABOUT CHANGE. We set out to write a book about transformation, but in everyday life, the two of us have very different responses to change. Alan resists change, tending to avoid it. He prefers to keep things the way they are; he likes predictability as a way of feeling secure. Gem embraces change, even seeks it out. She loves the variety and creativity of new experiences. But we both are hungry for the kind of change God invites us to.

We seek the sort of transformation that would make us a little more beautiful in kingdom ways. We both want the kind of change that is an answer to “Your kingdom come, your will be done *in me* as it is in heaven.”

### SKIING OVER THE SURFACE

Alan grew up in Carmichael, California, a suburb of Sacramento, in a waterskiing family. If the weather allowed (and it usually

did), you'd find his family at a nearby lake or on the Sacramento River waterskiing themselves to the point of exhaustion. Alan would often ski for an hour or more as his dad drove them up the river or back. He loved the magic of gliding across the surface of the water and not sinking like he would have if he was standing still.

But sometimes the sinking that happens when we're still is good, beautiful, and necessary. We're talking about the stillness and the sinking that need to happen when, for instance, we find ourselves skiing over the surface of our lives, when we let anxiety pull us along and we miss the depths, or when we get in a hurry and run past divine opportunities and appointments. If we would just stop occasionally and sink down, we'd get in touch with the deeper, more significant, even eternal, realities that we want to shape our lives. We'd get in touch with the immeasurable depths of love, peace, and joy that are available to us right now even as, racing along on the surface of our lives, we seek those somewhere out there.

And we are hardly the only ones to long for those depths. Quaker missionary and educator Thomas Kelly (1893–1941) wrote, “Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continually return.” Kelly described this place as “the Shekinah of the soul, the Presence in the midst.”<sup>1</sup> These depths are always with us. We are a kind of portable sanctuary, like the tabernacle that Israel carried along in their journey to the Promised Land (Numbers 1:50-51).

But too often, in the whirlwind of our thoughts and the rush of our activities, we skim along the surface of life and never experience these rich and life-giving depths. We don't tap into the reality

of this Life—the One who is life who has come to make himself at home in our inner being. This idea is one that the apostle Paul returned to again and again. It seems to be the simplest way of communicating his understanding of the life of the gospel: Christ in us; Christ in me. This is a transforming friendship.

## WILLING TO GIVE UP

Early in our marriage, Alan was a pastor to college students in a large Southern California church. We were both in our twenties, we didn't have kids, and I (Gem) had energy to spare. So in addition to working full time in the corporate world, I partnered with Alan in ministry. We so loved working with that group of students.

One day, a few days prior to our college group's upcoming missions trip to Mexico, I was getting ready for my day. Out of nowhere a question bubbled up: *If, while you are in Mexico, someone sees your camera and wants it, would you be willing to give it to them? Would you give up your camera?* I had a fancy and expensive Canon A-1 camera that shot film, so I spent some time pondering this question. After thinking a bit I decided that I could indeed give it up. I was aware that the people we were going to serve had limited resources, so it seemed best to me to be generous.

I continued preparing for the day ahead, and soon another thought emerged: *The camera is one thing, but would you be willing to give up Alan?* At this point, I was a bit stunned; what does this mean—give up Alan? I soon realized that I was being invited into a conversation with God. Just a few months prior, I had learned about and begun the practice of solitude and silence. I was learning how to listen to God in prayer and not just regale him with my monologue of requests. I knew I was in a dialogue

at this point. I couldn't say a quick yes, because this was an extraordinarily serious question. It seemed to me to be an invitation to hold Alan loosely, to acknowledge that God was in charge of Alan's life.

I went into my home office to work and for four hours I wrestled with this question in between typing. A couple of times, as it arose, I answered, "I don't know."

Soon I was on a downhill slide into anxiety. I decided to call Alan at the church office to check in on him. In addition to his role as a pastor, he was in seminary at the time. He had a class that morning, but I thought he would have returned to his office by now. When he wasn't there, my worry increased. (This was back in the day of no cell phones and no "Find My Friends" app.)

The question returned: *Will you give up Alan?* Finally, I lifted my hands from my keyboard and decided to engage this question more fully. This may sound morbid and possibly melodramatic, but I let myself sink all the way down into the worst-case scenario of this question, just to try it on. I pictured in my mind what my life would be like without Alan. I let myself imagine it—a twenty-six-year-old widow. It was horrible, but I knew that I could carry on with my life and that God would be with me and would care for Alan. I took some deep breaths and decided that I could say, "Okay, I could give up Alan."

Fifteen minutes later, Alan called. Of course, I burst into tears and then explained to him, in detail, my entire morning—the question, the struggle, the resolution. He asked, "How long ago did you say that you answered yes?" I told him that it had been about fifteen minutes earlier. "Well," said Alan, "let me tell you what I was doing about fifteen minutes ago." He was on the freeway driving to church from seminary. Evidently the pace of

both work and seminary had taken its toll. Alan momentarily fell asleep at the wheel. He woke up just in time to see that he was about to crash into a slow-moving dump truck. Fortunately, he swerved and made his way past with no harm.

We both imagined hearing the *Twilight Zone* theme and had a moment of being struck by the odd nature of the entire incident. I don't claim to understand exactly what was going on. I can't say if I hadn't said yes that Alan would have hit the truck; I don't think that's how God works. However, I believe God was asking me if I would dedicate Alan to God, let go of him and trust that God would care for him. God wanted Alan's life, in all ways possible, and God wanted me to trust him completely. I had just given Alan completely over to God to do whatever he wanted to do in his life. And, after having been married now for more than three decades, I'm still learning how that works.

This story is just one sample of the ways I have interacted with God on two levels at the same time over the course of my life. Getting ready for my work day, doing my job, *and* having a conversation about whether or not I will let go of my husband and consent to God doing his work in him. This simple awareness of a deeper level can develop into a lifetime of transformation.

## **A LIFE-GIVING AWARENESS**

Most of us are aware of this inner soul dynamic at some level, but we may not process much of this awareness or, more importantly, talk about it with others. Yet this dynamic offers fuel for significant spiritual conversations that can grow us, refine us, and sharpen us. Paying attention to our soul helps us answer and discuss such questions as, "In what ways is God meeting me in my

real everyday life?” and “What can I do to better see God, hear God, and walk with God?”

A passage of the spiritual classic *A Testament of Devotion* by Thomas R. Kelly offers a striking connection to the idea of a transforming life we are describing.

“What can I do to better see God, hear God, and walk with God?”

There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings. . . . In a deeply religious culture people know that the deep level of prayer and of divine attendance is the most important thing in the world. It is at this deep level that the real business of life is determined. . . . Between the two levels is fruitful interplay, but ever the accent must be upon the deeper level, where the soul ever dwells in the presence of the Holy One.<sup>2</sup>

Kelly stirs a desire to be aware of those holy breathings, a longing to dip down into the inner dynamics of the soul. Pause and reread the text. Do you sense a continued invitation of the gentle receptiveness to divine breathings?

Embarking on a journey of transformation involves remaining awake to a deeper level of reality that is always present. Remaining on this journey requires a simpler, God focus. The eight questions posed in this book can help us cultivate this kind of deeper awareness and soul focus. They help keep us on the journey of transformation. They keep us in the presence of the transforming One.



## IT'S ABOUT THE HEART

It will be very difficult to embark (and remain) on a journey of transformation if we do not have confidence that we are already loved as we currently are. We don't change so that we'll be loved more by God. We are measurelessly loved by God, so we are free and enabled to change in all the ways we long for.

When it comes to Jesus' strategy for changing the world, he began with a simple focus on the human heart. He did not set out primarily to change the way people behaved. He knew that without a change in the heart producing those behaviors, any outward change would be short-lived. Instead, he sought to help people see and embrace a vision of the kingdom of God on display in his life, his manner, his way. This was the model for the change to which he invited people.

This was his message from the beginning: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:2). *Repent* may not feel like a word of good news. To some ears, it sounds like "Stop everything you enjoy and become religious (and boring)." But Jesus was saying that change is good news, and that change is possible. You can go in a different direction—in the direction of the kingdom of heaven. Change is good news when it is change in the direction of alignment with the good, beautiful, and true purposes of God and his kingdom. Change is good news when it moves in the direction of fruitfulness that fulfills our deepest aspirations and blesses a world that needs it.

Jesus' message sounded so different from other Jewish preachers of his day. The Jewish leaders were far more interested

It will be very difficult to embark (and remain) on a journey of transformation if we do not have confidence that we are already loved as we currently are.

and engaged in addressing behavior and even appearances. They wanted to be sure things looked right and that people behaved right (at least right as they defined it). They believed that they were doing the work of God, but they were remodeling the exteriors of an unchanged interior. Without a change of heart, outward change never lasts. Jesus was pursuing a strategy for transformation that would grow and last over decades, centuries, even millennia.

Though their own Scriptures said that God looks on the heart while humans focus on appearances, they still opted, maybe unconsciously, for an appearance-focused strategy. They polished the outside of the cup, as Jesus put it. They worked very hard to be seen by others as religiously impressive, and sought to hide anything in themselves that looked less than right.

Without a change of heart, outward change never lasts.

A kingdom transformation approach brings what is ugly out into the open where it can be forgiven, cleansed, healed, transformed. Rather than avoiding fear, we lean into it and discover courage in the midst. Rather than numbing anxiety, we acknowledge its existence in God's presence. Facing reality is always better than avoiding it. An appearance management approach hides what is wrong, dirty, or broken so others won't see it. In this way, such realities grow more wrong, more broken. It takes layers of paint to whitewash those inner realities with an acceptable appearance.

Sometimes we opt for outward change as a substitute for the inward change to which God has been inviting us. In doing so we escape a change in soul by choosing a change of venue. But usually the change needed is in our soul, not our setting. We may be tempted to change churches, change jobs, or even change spouses because something doesn't feel right. Yet when we stop to discern,

we may discover we are seeking a change “out there” to avoid a change “in here” that God may be leading us to welcome.

Transformation is also different from perfectionism. Perfectionism generally promotes pretending. Since none of us are perfect, we have to put on an appearance of perfection. But we are not writing this book from a place of having achieved perfection. We are still journeying in the valleys of transformation. We are all people in process who are sometimes more and sometimes less faithful to the journey.

We’ve noticed, however, that sometimes we are tempted to avoid necessary change because the pain of what’s unwell seems easier to endure than the unknown pain we imagine in the path of change. We must learn to cultivate awareness around our resistance to change as a surface reaction to a deeper and better invitation.

It can help to remember that we are not the prime movers in this transformation. The language of transformation in the New Testament, for example, is in the passive voice. Rather than being initiators of the action, we are responders to the action of another. We are being transformed rather than transforming ourselves. There is a divine work with which we cooperate. The work of cooperating is critical, but not primary. The transforming work of God through the potent action of God’s Spirit is what is primary.

Think about the familiar language in the book of Romans:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, *but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2, emphasis added)

In the light of our growing confidence in the ever-present mercy of God, we seek to offer our whole selves to abide in the holy, joyful, and transforming presence of God. Doing this is a worship-centric way to live and bears the fruit of reorienting us away from the life-draining patterns of this world and transforming us into the pattern of God's good, pleasing, and perfect intentions for us. In this we are positioned to shine in the world in a way that just might recommend the kingdom of God to others living life with us. We learn to see reality through the eyes of Jesus.

Elsewhere, Paul reminds us that “the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, *are being transformed into his image* with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18, emphasis added). As the Spirit opens our eyes to see God's beauty more clearly, we increasingly reflect the image of God to those around us. Contemplating glory is a transforming invitation God extends to anyone who will respond.

So, transformation is not something we seek directly. It is the “all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33) that comes in the wake of seeking God first, aligning ourselves with divine reality, and walking in the truth. Transformation is the fruit of cooperating with and responding to divine activity.

All of this talk of transformation presupposes malformation. We aren't all that God has intended us to be. Sin is more than just immorality. It is turning our vocations upsidedown to become self-serving rather than living our lives for the good of others. We choose idolatry over ministry. We have habits of thought and behavior that distance us from God rather than

draw us near. Through any number of forces, we've been malformed. But this is not final. We are invited to the reordering of our disordered desires. As we let the desires of the Spirit reorder the false desires of our without-God selves, we can be transformed in friendship with God.

The eight questions we suggest in this book are not the only ones that exist for transformation. There are a multitude of ways God might work within us the transformation he intends. These questions simply represent key insights we've discovered and revisited often in our own journeys of transformation, which have led to an energizing, encouraging, joyful, and ever-changing life.

There have been many times when our lives felt more like a series of disconnected events than a continual path. But when we see our lives primarily as separate and unrelated events, we miss the journey of transformation implicit in our moments and days. Transformation happens over time—like taking a journey or walking a path. Each step relates to those that have gone before and those that lie ahead. Transformation is a process.

This journey is an opportunity to become skilled at living in the reality of the kingdom. It is a process of coming to live with more practiced facility in the ways the kingdom works here on earth. This is the direction of our transformation. We move from learning, talking, or thinking about those ways to experimenting with and eventually embodying them. We grow humbly confident in the ways of interactive friendship with Jesus our Master.

The transforming invitation of Jesus is the same one Jesus extended to his first followers: an invitation to be a student, an apprentice, a disciple. It's unfortunate that sometimes the word *discipleship* has come to feel cliché and almost empty of meaning. We should experience discipleship to Jesus as the great honor

that it is: being personally mentored by the master of life himself. It could be an apprenticeship of joy, hope, peace, and a fruitfulness beyond imagining.

This transforming process with Jesus is relational and interactive. It is progressive. It is real-life and authentic. It is Spirit-guided and Spirit-empowered. It leads us into and through the best life available to us: the life of the kingdom.

## ASKING GREAT QUESTIONS

As a spiritual director and a formation practitioner, Gem is always on the lookout for great questions. Right up there next to learning to listen well, learning to ask great questions is crucial to walking alongside others. Gem has learned more about asking questions through a small group of gifted women who get together twice a year. The group is a place to share lives, engage in creative spiritual practices, and pray for one another. It is a soul-filling time. One of the women in the group is Jane Willard, a treasured mentor, friend, and consistent reservoir of wisdom.

Typically, when someone shares their latest musings, longings, or fears, Jane will pop in at the end with a short, simple question. And it is always dead on. Her question goes right to the heart of what was shared, unravels it (in a good way), and gives a way forward that feels life giving. It's a true gift. She doesn't tell anyone what to do. She simply asks a question that lays a path to walk on.

As we've prepared to write this book together, we've taken the time to think back over the last many years of our own spiritual journeys. We've asked ourselves: What questions have helped us to take next steps in our lives with God? What insights have caused us to dig deeper into our own inner work?

Eight questions rose to the surface and became the frame for this book. It is not an exhaustive list, but a personal one. Like Jane, we want to be people who ask wisdom-filled, life-giving, gracious questions. Insights to those questions will arise in conversation with our loving God. Our hope is that these questions will spur you on to your next movement forward in transformation.

We have written this book together—in deep conversation and dialogue. The ideas move back and forth between us as we both wrote in each chapter. Much of the book has a unified voice without distinction between us. However, where we told specific personal stories we have indicated the speaker in the text as we did in this chapter.

We move at the pace of grace. We grow at the pace of transformation.

You'll also find a number of resources along the way that we hope will help you sink deeper into these eight questions:

- *Process words.* Cultivating an orientation to transformation often involves learning a new vocabulary. Throughout the book, Gem has gathered, defined, and described a number of words that help us remain open to all of the fullness that God has to offer on our journey of transformation. Some words act as brake pedals and others act as accelerators. The language we use either hinders or helps transformation both for ourselves and for others. These process words have encouraged continued change in our lives and we hope they help you move forward as well.
- *Exercises.* You'll find a few exercises in the course of the book. Jesus reminds us that when we know something, we'll actually be blessed when we take action (see John

13:17). While it may be tempting to do them later, we encourage you as you read to take breaks to try these exercises on. They've been helpful to us.

- *Reflection questions.* At the end of each chapter you'll find a set of questions that may be useful for personal reflection and journaling as well as for group discussion. These questions will be particularly helpful as you engage Appendix C: Guide for Groups.

Remember, we move at the pace of grace. We grow at the pace of transformation. You have all the time you need in God's loving care. The invitation here is to let God show you how he wants to meet you and walk with you personally on your life's journey.

## BE TRANSFORMED

1. We can't miss the day-to-day level of life, but what keeps you less aware of the deeper level of your life?
2. What are some possibilities for growing your awareness of the connection between the inner and the outer levels of your life?
3. What are you doing to attend to your soul, to that deepest level of who you are?
4. In prayer, ask God to help you engage in the fruitful interplay of your soul life and your day-to-day life.



**BUY THE BOOK!**

[ivpress.com/what-does-your-soul-love](http://ivpress.com/what-does-your-soul-love)