

EXCERPT

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The Magnificent Journey ***Living Deep in the Kingdom***

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Let It Be With Me.

Long before the Beatles sang these words of wisdom, Mary responded to Gabriel by saying, “Let it be with me . . .” Let it be. I accept. These are words of obedience and surrender. It is a declaration of acceptance of God’s will. It is an offering of her will and her life to God. It is in keeping with words her son would proclaim many years later when he taught about the narrow gate. It is the gate through which our magnificent journey into deep kingdom living begins.

The “Let it be with me” movement of surrender is the starting point and the entrance requirement of the magnificent journey. It is a posture of obedience. To surrender and obey is the gateway to living deep in the kingdom of God. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) is the greatest teaching ever given, by the greatest teacher who ever lived: Jesus. The central verse of the sermon is Matthew 6:33: “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” To seek first the kingdom is to desire to do God’s will, and to live in God’s way. When we do this, we are living interactively with the power, provision, and protection of the kingdom of God.

Later in this great sermon, Jesus tells his listeners, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14). The narrow gate is a metaphor for choosing to obey the teaching of Jesus in the sermon. It is choosing to go the second mile, to give rather than receive, not to be angry with your brother or sister, to bless those who curse you, to forgive one another, and not to judge or worry.

As one commentator noted, “Jesus himself is the narrow gate through which people pass as they respond to his invitation to the kingdom of heaven. The way of discipleship then stretches throughout one’s years on earth, ultimately leading to life eternal.” Stepping through the narrow gate is choosing to live as Jesus’ apprentice, to seek to obey everything he teaches. If you stop and think about the kinds of things required as Jesus’ apprentice (stated earlier), you can see the truth of Jesus’ words: “there are few who find it.” It is sad but true. The majority of people are not blessing those who curse them, much less even trying to do so. Though my assessment may seem harsh, this is also true of many Christians. Some have speculated that only 10 percent of a given congregation actually intend to obey these kinds of commands. I work a lot with pastors, and when I have shared that percentage with them, the most common response is, “Jim, I think that number is a bit high.”

Choosing to live in obedience to Jesus and his teaching is, as Robert Frost put it, a road “less traveled by.” The road more traveled is the one Jesus spoke about, which begins with “the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it” (Matthew 7:13). Jesus is not being mean; he is being honest. As human beings we are naturally drawn to that which is easy. Due to the fall, we are also living in a darkened world with darkened minds. We feel isolated and alone, afraid and anxious, and the world we live in preaches, “Look out for yourself first,” “Greed is good,” and “Nice guys finish last.” They are roads more traveled.

But they do not lead to a magnificent journey.

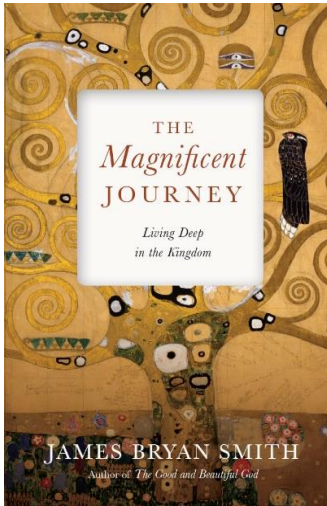


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The road of self-absorption leads to a paltry journey at best, and at worst it is the way to destruction and ruin. Surrender and obedience to Jesus are difficult. To die to oneself, to take up one's cross, is a "hard" road but one that "leads to life." Unfortunately, "there are few who find it." There are many reasons why people do not find it. In addition to its being difficult, it is also a road too few Christians even hear about. Dallas Willard often said he never attended a church that had a well-designed, intently pursued *plan* for making disciples of Jesus. It is often untried because it is unknown.

But it is the way to life.

We cannot enter into the kingdom unless we take up the cross. The cross leads to the magnificent journey of living in the unshakable kingdom of God. It is the unavoidable prerequisite. Again, to quote Willard, "*Christian spiritual formation rests on this indispensable foundation of death to self and cannot proceed except insofar as that foundation is being firmly laid and sustained.*" We often assume that dying to self will be painful. And of course it is. But what is the alternative? Søren Kierkegaard called the failure to do this "a sickness unto death." Humanity, he believed, lives in a kind of despair until it finds its rest in the One who made it. This is similar to the penetrating insight of St. Augustine: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

I can, for example, choose to navigate my life, live as I want, and aim at fulfilling all of my desires. This will result in that despair Kierkegaard wrote of, the sickness unto death. Willard called this a "dying self." The wisest, best choice, then, is "the surrender of a lesser, dying self for a greater eternal one." Or to quote the martyred missionary Jim Elliot, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

Formation in Christlikeness depends on surrender; failure to surrender is a sickness unto death; I can never find rest until I surrender; I am exchanging a lesser for a greater; and giving what I cannot keep in exchange for what I cannot lose is wise, not foolish. Deep reflection on these realities goes a long way toward helping me choose to take up my cross and die to myself.

—Taken from chapter one, "The Way of Surrender"



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The Magnificent Journey *Living Deep in the Kingdom*

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Author of *The Good and Beautiful God*

There is a road to life in the unshakeable kingdom of God, but it's not an easy journey. In his newest book, *The Magnificent Journey*, James Bryan Smith shows us the better road, the road less traveled, but the road full of riches. Along the way he introduces us to new spiritual practices that will provide the sustenance we need for the deepest, most joy-filled journey of our lives—the journey into the heart of God.

James Bryan Smith (M.Div., Yale University Divinity School, D.Min., Fuller Seminary) is a theology professor at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas, and a writer and speaker in the area of Christian spiritual formation. He also serves as the director of the Apprentice Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation at Friends University.

Smith was mentored by two great Christian writers, Richard J. Foster and Dallas Willard. Smith co-taught a course for Fuller Seminary, "Spirituality and Ministry," with Willard for ten years. He was a student of Foster's from 1981 to 1984 and is a founding member of Foster's spiritual renewal ministry, Renovaré. Smith has spoken at over fifty regional and local Renovaré conferences. Smith is an ordained United Methodist Church minister and has served in various capacities in local churches.

Books by James Bryan Smith

- *The Magnificent Story: Uncovering a Gospel of Beauty, Goodness and Truth* (InterVarsity Press, 2017)
- *A Spiritual Formation Workbook* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992)
- *Devotional Classics* (with Richard Foster) (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992)
- *Embracing the Love of God* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 25,000 copies sold
- *Rich Mullins: An Arrow Pointing to Heaven* (Broadman and Holman, 2000) hit the *New York Times* bestseller list.
- *Room of Marvels* (Broadman and Holman, 2004) won the Bronze medal in the category of Religious Fiction by the *Publishing Journal*, 2005.
- *The Good and Beautiful God* (InterVarsity Press, 2009)
- *The Good and Beautiful Life* (InterVarsity Press, 2009)
- *The Good and Beautiful Community* (InterVarsity Press, 2010)
- *The Kingdom and the Cross* (InterVarsity Press, 2010)
- *Hidden in Christ* (InterVarsity Press, 2013)

Visit ApprenticeInstitute.org for more information about Smith, his books and ministry.
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