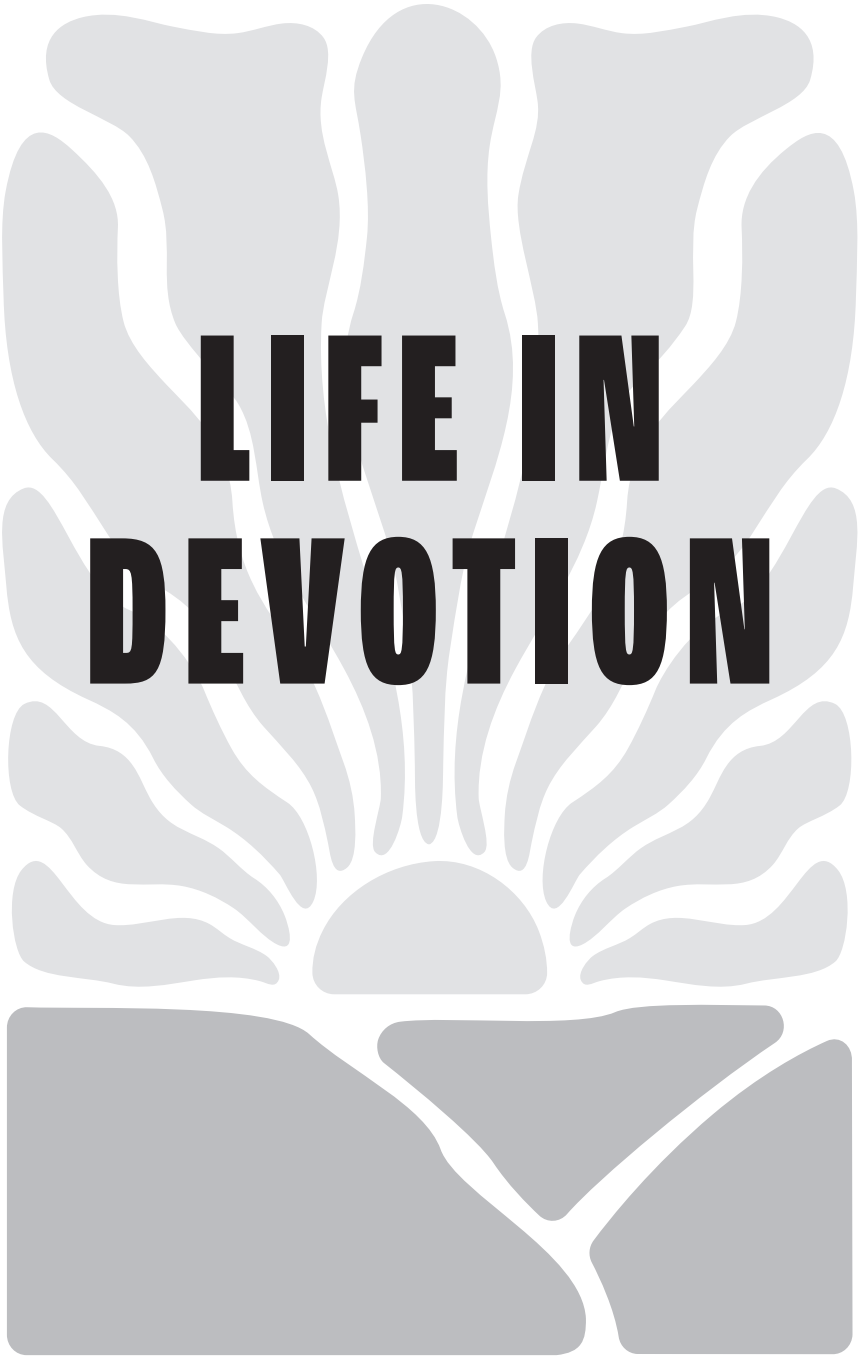
Ana Ávila

LIFE IN DEVOTION

Cultivating a Deeper Relationship with God in the Everyday


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For my children.

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Foreword

In life we encounter ideas to which we respond "yes," others to which we respond "no," and a few to which we respond "yes, but also no." The expression "Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship" belongs to the third category.

Let's start with "but also no." Technically, the expression "Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship" is false. Whether we like it or not, Christianity is a religion. We can't (and don't need to) escape this fact.[1] What we can and should do is dust off the meaning of the word *religion* and stop interpreting it as an insult.[2] One theological dictionary explains *religion* as "everything that unites man and the divinity."[3] In simple terms, religion is what we believe about God and how we respond to what He has revealed about Himself. Christianity includes beliefs and practices that separate it from other belief systems. It doesn't make much sense to go about in life merely saying, "I have a relationship with Jesus," without affirming the things Jesus said about Himself and without obeying what the Bible prescribes.

But now let's move on to the "yes." It is a very important "yes," and it is the truth around which everything in this book orbits: Jesus died on a cross so that sinners could enjoy a loving relationship with God. This relationship gradually transforms us into what we should have always been. It moves us to light up the world, calling others to be a part of this union with the Creator. Christianity is a religion—a set of beliefs and practices about the divine—that

flows from the most amazing relationship of all: the perfect relationship with the God of the universe.

Hearts Made for Eternity

In the book of Ecclesiastes, the preacher tells us that God "has put eternity into man's heart" (3:11). This phrase is deeply captivating. It conveys something we've all experienced, though few of us might express it in such a poetic way. It describes that certainty that grabs us so suddenly: There is something more. For some, the clouds over the horizon, surrounded by pink and orange hues, force us to stop and, for at least a moment, be certain that the planet we inhabit is too wonderful to have appeared by mere chance. For others, the explosive laughter of a child makes us wish playtime would never end. All of history seems to echo with the question of why there's something rather than nothing, our pursuit of truth causing us to marvel at a Truth with no beginning and no end.

It might be that this sense of eternity in our hearts grabs our attention only for a few seconds before it's dismissed as absurd or dissipated by life's many occupations. But it's always there, latent. We can't get rid of it. Some consider it a stupid illusion, an evolutionary accident. C. S. Lewis, literature lecturer at Oxford, had a different perspective. In his book *Mere Christianity*, he writes that "creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex."[4] His conclusion: "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."[5] Lewis acknowledges that his deep desire for

more is not an accident; it's evidence that he wasn't merely created for the broken world he inhabited during the twentieth century.

Some misinterpret Lewis's argument, saying that the fact that one is hungry does not mean that he will eat stew at noon. But that's not the point. Lewis is not saying that our desires will certainly be satisfied; rather, that there is something that can satisfy our desires. That's good news! We want more than what this world can offer and we ultimately find this in God. The problem is that we are prone to seek this otherworldly fulfillment in all the wrong places. Another thinker, Augustine of Hippo, expressed it this way many centuries before Lewis: "Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it rests in Thee."[6] The Creator designed us to be satisfied in Him. Everything else falls short.

So, if we were made to be in relationship with the most loving, good, righteous, and beautiful of all—that is, God—it shouldn't surprise us that nothing on earth—not even the most loving, good, righteous, and beautiful things—satisfies us completely. There are certainly things that, for a moment, appear to please us almost completely: your child's hand on your face while you rock her to sleep, the last note of a symphony that shakes us to the core, or the embrace of a person we'd thought we'd never see again. In the end, though, we realize that these are mere fleeting glimpses of something more. So we keep looking, but we end up disappointed. We're expecting to find the Creator in creation. We don't realize that it is like sending a rocket to the moon and hoping to reach the sun.

I can see myself questing for satisfaction early on. I was one of those overachieving kids who would shatter into a million pieces whenever they got an A instead of an A+. All I wanted was to be smart. For some reason, I was convinced that I'd find peace whenever I learned all the things that could be learned. But, of course, the peace never came, no matter how many books I devoured. The

glimpses of truth I found in the library or by looking through my toy telescope brought me joy only for a little while. I needed more. I was lost and didn't know where to go to find rest for my troubled heart.

It's not strange that we seek satisfaction in creation. After all, we can see, feel, smell, hear, and taste creation. God, on the other hand? How do I know if He listens? How do I know if He cares? The Bible itself admits that it is easier to love those whom we can see than to love God, whom we can't see (1 John 4:20). But the fact that God is Spirit and that we can't (generally) perceive Him through our senses doesn't mean that we can't be in relationship with Him. The Creator revealed Himself and drew near to us; He has shown us who He is and who we are. We can stop wandering aimlessly because God has shown us the way. A life in devotion is a life walking in that path back home.

Devotion: Being in awe of who God is and what He has done, seeking to enjoy His love and live every moment for His glory.

Devotionals: Regular moments in solitude when we pause and remind our souls, no matter how troubled they are, of who God is and what He has done through Bible reading and prayer.

Chapter 1

What Is a Life in Devotion?

"You don't need anyone in order to be happy."

These are words we repeat so often that we become deaf to how absurd they are. We may use them to comfort someone who just ended a romantic relationship or fractured one of their deepest friendships with well-meaning but ridiculous platitudes. We might as well make fun of a fish that's dying out of the water, or pretend that a plant should be content even if it never gets to dig its roots in the ground. Broken relationships hurt because, as much as it pains us to admit it, we need good relationships to flourish and be happy.

That we are deeply connected with other human beings is revealed from the first moments of our existence. We all begin our days on this planet being woven inside of a woman that offers her body to nurture and protect us. Months later, the umbilical cord is cut, but our lives remain firmly connected to those who brought us into this world. As infants, we're still dependent on others. We need to be fed, covered, protected, and held. If we're rejected or neglected in this critical stage of life, even though we're unable to form permanent explicit memories, our bodies and minds will bear the marks of abandonment for a long time.

As the years go by, we become more and more able to meet our own physical needs without other people's assistance. But we're wrong to believe that this means we are on our way to becoming fully independent. As we grow and become more capable, we start to learn what it means to become interdependent individuals. We are part of something bigger than just us. Now we not only receive from others, but we can also serve others. This learning process takes a lot of time and energy. Although most animals have short "childhoods," humans require many years to learn how to be functional members of their community. This is because our social fabric is complex.

For starters, we need to acquire our group's language (or languages) and then we must learn to use it prosocially, in a way that contributes to the community. From the day we're born, our brain is flooded with words from those around us. Little by little, we learn how to use them. We try and we fail, we are corrected and we adjust. Then, through play, we learn to deal with other people, to negotiate. I have fun with you, you have fun with me. *Oh, you aren't having fun? Don't leave, we can try something else. I can kick the ball and you can block the goal; you can hold the base of the tower and I can put the blocks on top.* A good childhood helps us learn how to be part of a team, where we have skills that others don't have and we can contribute to make humanity prosper. Then we mature, expand our communities, join and leave groups, form families and make them grow. We're always connected with others, and that is a good thing. It makes sense, then, that it hurts so deeply when relationships are fractured.

The Bible speaks to the fact that we weren't made to be on our own. In the book of Genesis, very close to the beginning of it all, God says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). Notice the plural. Who's this "us" we're being

presented with? Who's this "our" in whose image man would be made? Soon after we have the answer: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (v. 27). This is puzzling. If we are made in the image of God, why didn't He say, "Let me make man in my image, after my likeness"? Here we have perhaps the first glimpse of God being Someone beyond our wildest ideation.

The Old Testament emphasizes the oneness of God, very likely to protect the people of Israel against the idolatrous practices of the polytheistic groups around them:[7] "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4). Even so and as we've seen, beginning in the first chapter of Genesis, the Hebrew Scriptures give us clues about how this oneness is a partial picture (Ps. 45:6–7; 110:1; Zech. 2:8–11; Prov. 30:4). Further, in the New Testament, these glimpses of multiplicity in oneness become a blinding flare. Sometimes, quite literally (Matt. 17:1–8; Acts 9:1–9).

When Jesus began His ministry, at first, His followers might have thought He was just another prophet. Performing miracles doesn't make someone a god, right? Turning water into wine was exciting, indeed, but similar things had happened before. After all, Elijah multiplied flour and oil, and Elisha purified a poisoned stew. Little by little, though, Jesus revealed more and more about who He was and what He had come to do. He was not just another prophet; He was the promised Messiah who had come from heaven. And the nature of this Messiah was much more wondrous than what the people of Israel expected. He was with God and, at the same time, He was God, who humbled Himself voluntarily to make sinners children of God (John 1:1, 12).

Not only that, but after His work on earth was done, Jesus sent Another . . . someone who—like Him—was simultaneously someone else, but also God: the Spirit (John 15:26). If this makes your

head spin, you're starting to get it. It's not in vain that the church father Augustine said that trying to understand the triune nature of God was a task filled with wearisome difficulties, as "the mind striv[es] to gaze upon light unapproachable."[8] Indeed. God is one God in three persons. This is the beautiful mystery of the Trinity.

So, while God is one, He has always been in communion; He has always been giving and receiving love within the three persons of the Godhead. It is no surprise, then, that part of being made in His image is this ability to share and receive love from others. This gives us some insight on why relationships are so important for us humans, creatures made in the image of God. We might be tempted to argue that, just as God has been in joyful fellowship with Himself from eternity, we humans can also find contentment in giving and receiving love within ourselves. This might sound appealing to introverts but, alas, multiplicity in oneness is not in our nature. As content as we might be with solitude, we need others to love and be loved. This is emphasized later in Genesis, when God declares that "it is not good for man to be alone" (2:18 NLV).

People familiar with this verse tend to only think about it in the context of marriage. This is, of course, a primary way of understanding the passage. Just after making this declaration, God forms a woman out of the man to be his wife. In the larger context of Scripture, though, we realize that it is quite likely that we can understand this passage as not only talking about a guy who will miss out on romance unless God intervenes. There is more to it. After all, Jesus teaches that there will be no marriage in heaven, and the apostle Paul encourages single people to make the most of their freedom to serve the Lord (Matt. 22:30; 1 Cor. 7:32–34). Marriage, as wonderful as it is, can't be the end-all-be-all for humanity's need for relationship with other humans. But the fact that it is not good for man to be alone continues to be true, doesn't it? I think so. That

is why I'm inclined to think that, when God brought forth Eve to Adam in the first chapters of Genesis, He was providing more than a wife (as wonderful as that is!); He was providing a way for humans to make more humans and be in relationship with each other. He was providing a way for us to have not only husbands and wives and mothers and fathers, but also uncles, aunts, cousins, friends, neighbors, coworkers, classmates, mentors, and more.

Why do we crave relationships? Because we were made for them.

• • •

Reading about the need for relationships can be discouraging. We might have tried to believe that "we don't need anyone to be happy" as a way to protect ourselves from the pain people have caused us. Too many of us have been hurt by those who were supposed to love us. And, if we're honest, we will recognize that we have also wounded the image bearers of God with whom we share life. That is the sad dilemma of every human being. We long to be known and loved, to know and love, but we're very bad at it.

Not everything is lost, though. The God who has always been loving wants to teach us how to love and be loved. And the way He does that is by bringing us into a deep relationship with Him, a relationship of love and joy through which we are transformed and able to love others as we've been loved.

When we understand that the most important relationship we have is our relationship with our Creator, everything else starts to fall into place. This, of course, doesn't mean that once we acknowledge God, all our human interactions will be perfect or even pleasant; it means that we experience God's eternal fountain of love. This love satisfies us and enables us to give others the love we have received. We will be free to open up and free to forgive. We might

still get hurt, but we won't be deserted. "For my father and my mother have forsaken me," writes the psalmist, "but the LORD will take me in" (Ps. 27:10). The apostle praises like this: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:3–4).

Our relationship with God is so fundamental and so beautiful that Jesus calls it eternal life: "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). True eternal life, the abundant life we were made for, is to know God, not in the sense of merely knowing things about Him, but in the sense of being close to Him, understanding Him, and trusting Him. Most importantly, this includes being known and embraced by Him.

This is not what usually comes to mind when we talk about eternal life. We tend to understand the concept as "the afterlife," where death and suffering will be no more, where we will inhabit a beautiful place in perfect joy. The Bible, of course, teaches about a day when all our tears will be wiped away, and when "neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4). But the God of the Bible's main concern is not to bring us to a place where we can live comfortably, free of the challenges of the broken life we've all experienced. That will be amazing, but there is something even better: The God of the Bible wants to bring us to Himself, because only in Him can we find "fullness of joy" and "pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11). He loves us so much that He is righteously angered when we exchange this incomparable delight with anything else, like a father would be horrified when his child goes away with a

stranger who offers her a lollipop instead of running back home to safety. This is why the prophet admonished: "There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land" (Hosea 4:1). The people of God dismissed His love and suffered the consequences. We all do, and our Father is not indifferent about it.

Those of us who have been brought up in cultures that are heavily influenced by Christianity might be used to hearing that God is our Father. This truth should amaze us, but too often we take it for granted or ignore its implications. In one sense, God being our Father simply means we come from Him; He made us, and we belong to Him as creatures. If we think about it this way, every human could say God is his or her Father (Mal. 2:10). But through all of Scripture we have both hints and very obvious statements that God wants us to go deeper. It is not enough to simply say, "Hey, thank You for making me! Now I'm going to go ahead and live as if You don't exist, unless I'm in deep trouble." Through the prophet Jeremiah, for example, God promised a day when the exiled people of Israel would turn to Him and be restored: "I said, How I would set you among my sons, and give you a pleasant land, a heritage most beautiful of all nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me" (Jer. 3:19). This shows us a glimpse of the deeper sense in which God wants to parent humans. He wants to provide for them, and He wants His children to obey Him.

The Bible is clear that not everyone will have this kind of relationship with God, because not everyone wants it (John 1:12; Gal. 4:6–7; 1 John 3:1–7). Still, we're all invited to come. That's what Christianity is about: broken people who are welcomed to join the family of God. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," writes the apostle, "who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us

in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:3–6).

We were not made only to have relationships with other human beings, as wonderful as that can be. God made us to be in relationship with Him; He wants to bring us into the loving relationship of the Trinity. The Bible does not teach about a God who set the universe in motion and then let go to see what would happen. He is a God who sustains. He is a God who guides, cares, consoles, and protects. He is near and He listens to the cry of the weak. He not only loves, but He is love.

It is true that, in this life, we can't see God directly and enjoy our relationship with Him in the complete freedom we'll have one day. We are right to long for the day when we'll be able to see Him face to face, just as He is (1 John 3:2; 4:20; 1 Cor. 13:12). But we'd be wrong to stop there. God is our Father now. God sustains us now. He guides, cares, consoles, and protects us now. God listens to us now. He loves us. We might "see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12), but we can see. And we can be delighted and transformed by that sight. That's what it means to live a life in devotion.

• • •

Unfortunately, many people have reduced devotion to God to a mere checklist. We go to church and hear a bunch of things we should do and another bunch of things we should stop doing in order to be good. We read our Bibles, pray before meals, and give to those in need. We listen to the right music, watch the right movies, dress in a specific way—and then we call ourselves Christians. We believe that the things we do or don't do are what make us

Christians. We have the whole thing backwards. According to the Bible, we are not Christians because of what we do; we are Christians because of who we belong to . . . and who we belong to changes what we do (2 Cor. 1:21–22; Rom. 14:8).

Our heavenly Father brings us into His family. We are now children forever. In any good household there are rules and relationships. Families set boundaries and expectations for the well-being of its members. They also spend time together to get to know each other and bond. Most of these activities are simply "doing life" and they happen naturally: making meals, chatting in the car, playing games and laughing together, facing disappointment and helping each other through it. These relationships shape the members of the family and solidify them into who they already were by nature after being born or adopted: children. They develop beliefs, values, and practices that set them apart from members of other families, but they are not members of their families because they hold specific beliefs, values and practices.[9]

So, just as being the child of my earthly father is not contingent on calling him three times a week to catch up, being a child of God does not depend on checking the box of my Bible reading plan this morning or not. It's probably good to call today and it's definitely great to read my Bible often, but there is much more to relationships than that. We understand this intuitively when it comes to our relationships with people in the flesh but often fail to see this with God. It is astonishing how easy it is to reduce our fellowship with God to a list of tasks we go through every so often. There is much more available to us—so much more.

A life in devotion is a life aware of the fact that God loves us and is with us at every moment. It is a life dedicated to seeing God's beauty, power, wisdom, and kindness through everything and everyone around us; a life where we are confronted by how far

we are from the people God made us to be and long and work to be changed; a life that does even the most mundane things with joy because everything can be a song of praise (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 12:1–2; 1 Cor. 10:31). A life in devotion is a life of awe in who God is and what He has done; it's a life of purpose because our awesome God has sent us on a mission. A life in devotion might not be an easy one (in a world where most people reject God, we shouldn't expect it to be), but it is a good life. The best life. That is the eternal life Jesus offers us. If we want it. The problem is often we really don't.

Our lives are filled with distractions, with pleasures that *make us happy only for a second but* leave us empty.

Our hearts are troubled and tired, longing for something that lasts. God made us for Himself so that we might delight in His love, but the things of the world pull us away. Our devotional times can give us the structure we need to grow in our communion with God by **applying biblical truths that keep our eyes on the things above:**

- **The centrality of the Word:** God has revealed Himself through a book we can understand and that includes everything we need to know for our salvation and spiritual growth.
- **The privilege of prayer:** God wants to listen to the deepest longings of our hearts—our sorrows and joys—and He wants to use our intercession to accomplish His purposes in the world.
- **The need for constancy:** God is the source of all wisdom; He knows our need and invites you to abide in Him continuously, not to rely on our own strength and understanding.
- **The intimacy of solitude:** God is eager to speak to us . . . but a lot of the time, the world is too loud. We do good in stepping away from the noise regularly, making sure we are not engaging in spiritual practices only when other people see us.
- **The freedom of transparency:** God calls us to come as we are, right now. We don't have to feel like it or even pretend we do. He's always available for us and His loving arms never turn us away.

Life in Devotion will remind you of the amazing gift we have of being part of the family of God and will offer you practical tools to develop spiritual practices that keep you focused on Him, growing in communion every day.



Ana Ávila is a Mexican author. She lives in Guatemala City with her husband, a pastor and church-planter, and their children. She wrote *Make the Most of Your Productivity: A Guide to Honoring God with Your Time* and *Lo que contemplas te transforma*.

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