



# **building your personal sanctuary**

**an extremely short book by sean johnson**

Anyone who knows me knows how difficult it has been for me to progress as a Christian.

After college, there was a six month period of time where I experienced explosive growth – if not in deed at least in thought. Things that were once abstract and hard to comprehend were opened up in my mind like a giant door. God graced me with the ability to wrap my head around many conundrums that trip up those new in the faith – and serve as barriers to those who don't believe. Things like the [problem of evil](#), the reason why we so often feel alone, or the realization that [pride](#) represents our biggest obstacle to God were blessings I feel fortunate to have received, even to this day.

But since this time I've largely stagnated.

I left the Bible study I was leading largely because I didn't feel equipped to help these people or serve as an example when my own life was a wonky as it was. I have struggled mightily to overcome my biggest vices, and still fail daily.

It's a frustrating process. You try and you work as hard as you can, and you still make no headway. You succumb to the same temptations. You face the same reluctance to draw closer to God. You feel spiritually dry.

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**You can't do it – never could.**

If there's one thing that has become painfully clear to me over the past year, it is the fact that our own self-effort will never get us where we long to be with God. I've realized that this turmoil I've experienced isn't the result of anything bad I'm doing per se. It's mostly because I've not trained myself properly.

Paul called us to "train yourself in godliness." Training – the Greek work speaks of one participating in an athletic contest. Next week I'm heading up to Maine to attempt to summit Mt. Katadhin. I'll likely fail miserably, in large part because I've not trained for the arduous task of climbing a mountain. Next week, I may *work* extremely hard in my attempt, but there are limits to my body – one which has begun to take on the shape of a pear due to way to much food and far too little running.

I don't have to go out of my way to sin – it's my mind and my body's natural tendency. To become someone who's natural inclination is to be humble and pure of heart and meek and kind and gentle and gracious – that requires way more work than I'd like to admit.

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But there it is – *work* is not the same thing as *training*. I can work hard and get nowhere. But by *training* myself properly, I can make progress where self-effort falls short.

Unfortunately, our world features an absolutely abysmal ignorance of how we actually train ourselves into Christlikeness. It's been said that we "lack a theology of growth."

### **Discipline...by the Book.**

Luckily, God has given us a regimen we can follow. Richard Foster calls them the "spiritual disciplines." The concept of meditation, study, prayer, solitude and the like represent an indirect means for growth. While these disciplines may seem like little more than additional examples of self-effort, they are unique in that they start with the understanding that they *don't actually do anything*.

All the disciplines are designed to do is put my mind, my body and my heart in a position where it is open to be changed. They don't require strenuous effort – the disciplines are not tiring or hard to do. But they do require that we *train* ourselves. They require time and repetition and an honest desire to make them a part of our daily lives. In short, they require discipline.

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In this short piece, I'm going to go through what appear to be the various ways we can train ourselves to grow in our relationship with God and in our lives. I'm by no means an expert in any of them – rather, I'm as much an amateur as anyone. But there's something to be said for being accountable, and by talking about them I hope I'll be more inclined to do them. Hopefully you can get something out of this as well.

## Putting Your Life Into Boxes

There is a school of thought that is extremely pervasive in the world, Christian and otherwise. For most people who would call themselves "spiritual," life is divided into their thought or spiritual life...and everything else.

I'm certainly no exception. I often feel like I have to put myself in a "spiritual place." That is, I often feel as though my thoughts or my actions – or simply the way my day is going – somehow keeps me outside of the realm where I can enjoy a relationship with God. More importantly, I feel as though I only have a certain amount of time in my day that can (or should) be devoted to growing that relationship.

It's funny – we so often treat that realm of our lives as though it is something that should be relegated to the periphery. Sure, I believe in God, and sure, I believe that I'm supposed to go to church and be a nice person and all that. But then I've got to go to work and buy groceries and mow my lawn. I've got to hang out with my friends and go to the gym. *I've got to get on with my life.*

I've often wondered why this is. I'm sure some of it is that we were brought up that way – for most of us, religion was more of a ritual than an experience. Go to church

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on Sunday (or Easter,) read your Bible (or at least buy one and have it around the house,) and be a generally nice, amiable person.

Not much in there about having a relationship. Not much in there about experiencing God. It seems much more like completing a mindless checklist. It's almost like taking out an insurance policy. Sit in church for an hour on Sunday and you're covered – you know, just in case all this God stuff is actually true.

And then it's back to the real world – you have real problems, real concerns that are grounded in *life* – the ethereal, the philosophical has no place in this part of your world. *You're too busy.*

Interestingly enough, it seems as though this is where we make our first error in judgment. We feel as though God (or the concept of God) only belongs in our lives in doses – that it only represents a small piece of the fabric that collectively makes up what we call "our life."

That's not how it's supposed to be. This "God thing" that we put into a little compartment is supposed to be the very foundation on which our lives are built. The parable of the man who built his house on the rock – the house represents his life in its entirety. "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do," says Paul, "do everything for the glory of God."

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But how do we realistically give our entire lives to God? How do we begin to move down this path of spiritual discipline – the same path that the apostles and the religious writers of old went down themselves? How do we become a strong man or woman of God?

Our journey begins in the ordinary experiences of life. It's in the minutia, the detail, the seemingly insignificant moments. And nowhere is this more evident than in our work.

### **Growing Through Work**

Unlike any other creature that walks the Earth, we are creators. We've built towers and bridges and cars and airplanes. We've built million dollar businesses on nothing but an idea. It seems that everywhere you go, the creative energy of humanity is present.

Why is this a discipline? Why does this bring us into a closer relationship with God? The answer is that approaching your work with this understanding puts your mind in a different perspective. Once you realize that, just like God created the heavens and the Earth, formed mountains and developed the ecosystem necessary to support life – just as he created, so too do we.

Work places us in a closer relationship with Christ as well. With the understanding that Christ was instrumental in creation, acting out the will of the Father, we become increasingly aware of our power in creating and our responsibility therein.

I hope it's obvious that when I speak of disciplining ourselves through work, I'm not talking about preaching to people *at* work. While there's nothing necessarily wrong with sharing your faith at work, what I'm speaking of is the act of the work itself. By engaging in the creative process (all the time training oneself to be aware of what the creative process represents and the reasons the creative faculty was given to you,) you are glorifying God through the act of working.

Christ didn't start His ministry until his late twenties. Until that time, he was a carpenter. Imagine – the man who was perpetually in communion with the Father, spending *years* toiling away making chairs and...and, whatever else carpenters made back then. Why would He wait to begin His ministry? Christians like to focus on Christ's godliness, but think a moment about His humanity. I like to picture a young man disciplining Himself to be ready – and, just as I can imagine Him reading the ancient religious texts of the time with fervor, I can also picture Him diligently working in His shop, sharing in the amazing experience of creation once again with His Father.

## **Cultivating Intimacy While Producing Results**

The discipline of work brings substantial benefits. You no longer are worried about politics or the divisiveness often found in a working environment – you're working as hard as you can not because you worry about being watched but because your work represents an offering.

You learn to embrace the concept that Christ is with you all the time. I used to ask myself why He'd want to be there – so much of my life is mundane, repetitive, boring! Why would He want to share the experience of me creating a design for a new school? The answer is very likely that few things bring Him more pleasure than watching this creature who was made in His image engage in the creative process.

Imagine you're looking for someone to hire – this person works as hard as they can because they believe it's one of the highest things they can do. They're in love not with what the work results in monetarily or otherwise, but with the work itself and the joy it brings to their Creator. They are diligent – showing up early, producing results with immense efficiency and care. Why would you not hire that person?

Imagine you had greater intimacy with God, produced great results for your company, and experienced unusual patience and serenity in the midst of interpersonal conflict that now seems so meaningless and petty. Why would you not want to be that person?

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## The Greatest Love Story Ever Told

If there is one thing that has kept people from praying, it's the fact that the **relationship** is so often missing from the message. We know we're to pray when we've screwed up or when we want something, but that's generally about it. If we're to progress in our spiritual lives, if we're to find that peace and joy that is so often promised us, it is vitally important that we start there.

It's vitally important that we begin where God began – with a love story.

We've all heard the story of Adam and Eve, the story of the fall, etc. It is the story that people point to when they want to demonstrate vividly how full of sin we are. 'See, even the first people had it! You're no different'

The 'worm theology' has become so pervasive – what people fail to recognize in their focus on 'original sin' was what preceded it – original glory, coupled with an open and intimate relationship with the Creator.

In the last section I touched on this briefly, but it deserves attention – God made us in His image and likeness, to share in an intense, love-filled relationship. Very much like

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a father and mother desire children to share their love with, I like to imagine a similar dynamic existing between God and ourselves.

We are His children. He wasn't distant – He walked in the cool of the grass with Adam. He wasn't condemning – He talked and laughed and shared in all aspects of our lives. That was what we were made to do – *live with Him*.

Even after the fall, the Bible is effectively a story of love. It is a story of God's continued resolve to have a relationship with His people. He creates covenants, which we break. We tell Him we want an earthly king, that we can't handle Him. We progressively, more and more, desire to push Him farther away. Understandably, He gets upset – the book of Jeremiah is little more than the story of a lover scorned. Yet in spite of it all, He still wants to love us and for us to love Him.

So he devises a coup – he infiltrates our world in the form of a tiny baby. He lives a brief life on Earth, sharing meals with us, washing our feet, being close to us once more. He shows us that a life with God doesn't require a mediator, it doesn't require following some code and looking 'religious' to others.

He strips away the misconceptions and shows us that a relationship with God is about being close – sharing our good days and our bad days, our happiness and our anger, our joy and regret. He wants to be a part of it all. It's amazing to think about – the

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almighty desires nothing more than to hear about my day? Unthinkable – and yet, it's true.

### **Tell Him About Yourself**

So given this, given that God wants to share in our lives with us, to gently push us and teach us and console us and love us – given all this, how do we begin this relationship?

We start with ourselves. Since any good relationship begins with getting to know each other, we tell God about ourselves. Sure, He already knows it all, but He still loves to hear about it. And, since we're likely not ready to hear from Him to the same degree, we need something to talk about.

So forget everything you've been taught about prayer – the folding hands, the closed eyes, the thee's and the thou's. There's nothing wrong with any of that, but God still hears us – even if our eyes are open.

Talk about your day. Talk about how happy you were to get that promotion or that pat on the back at work. Talk about the co-worker or friend who rubbed you the wrong way. Talk about your commute and the radio program you were listening to.

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Talk about what you love about your life. Talk about what you wish were different. Tell God how thankful you are for your family and friends and this beautiful world – not in lofty words that someone else told you to use, but in your own words, your own language. God's interested in *you*.

Air your grievances to God. We often think that certain subjects are taboo to God – that we can talk about everything we like and skip everything we don't. But God knows your heart anyway, so you might as well bring them out on the table. The Psalms are full of examples of people openly talking to God about their anger towards God. Let it out, empty yourself, and give your concerns up to Him. You'll likely find that your problems, your questions will be answered in good time.

God wants to share in our lives – every facet. And the only way to start letting Him in is to talk about it. So start talking – just like you'd talk to a friend (or a potential love interest, which is exactly what this is.)

I wish I could make it more complicated than this – and in time, there'll be much more to say about the concept of prayer. But this should keep you and me busy for quite some time. We have an awfully long way to go before we can heed Paul's call to 'pray without ceasing,' but there's no reason why we can't start letting Him in now.

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## Cultivating Silence

Eventually, you reach a dry spot. You find yourself at a place where it's impossibly tough to break through the curtain – you believe in God, you trust that He is loving and wants the best for His children....but you don't *feel* Him. You don't really feel like He's there. Our God is loving, to be sure, but He's also distant, cold.

It's a tough problem to overcome. If you wanted to grow in your relationship with a spouse or loved one, it'd be difficult if there wasn't a dialogue. You might eventually get to a place where you find yourself frustrated – like you're talking to a wall.

Where is He? Where is this Almighty God who formed mountains? Why can't we hear Him?

**Maybe we're not listening.**

In our world of constant busyness, of constant distraction, it's no wonder so many of us feel lost. If you sat down with a friend over a glass of wine and had a conversation – an open, piercingly honest conversation – about what they believe, why they believe, and what their belief means in terms of their daily life...you're likely to be disappointed.

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It's not that they're stupid or shallow or ignorant about this world or their place in it. It's not that they're evil or that they're loved any less. It's most likely that they simply have been immersed in the world and haven't had time to think about any of this. Or – more accurately – they can't *hear* themselves think above the noise.

Let's face it – the world can give us many nice things. I love a round of golf (sometimes I can go an entire round without wrapping my driver around a tree in a fit of frustration,) I can't wait to make my own furniture, and I get a rush when I'm hurtling forward in a jet ski at 80 miles per hour. I love a nice dinner with my girlfriend, I enjoy a funny (or not-so-funny) movie, and I always look forward to my annual trips back to see the guys.

But – and I didn't get this until far too recently – my life isn't in these things. It's not in the stuff I make or buy or wear or eat. It's not in my friends or my activities. It's not in my job (although if you were to ask 10 random people to watch me for a day, they'd likely tell you otherwise.) These things are little pieces of the world, and I love them dearly. But confusing them for my life is suicide for my spirit.

There are few things that I know for sure, about God or life or anything else. One is that Dan Marino was the greatest quarterback who ever lived. And the other is that if I'm to grow in my spiritual life I *must* tear myself away. I must wake up from this

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dreamlike state spent ironing my shirts, walking to work, making my calls, sending my emails, going out for drinks, catching a flick, going to bed, rinsing and repeating.

The great writers of ancient Christianity made it a habit of actively seeking solitude. Christ Himself, on numerous occasions, would 'go away to another place' to be alone. Thousands of people were waiting for Him, and His ministry wasn't going to last long. Why the repeated emphasis on his desire for 'alone time?'

It could be that he was depressed, but the more likely answer is that there was very important role that solitude played. Remember, Christ's life was in many ways meant to be an example for how we should relate to each other, to God, and to ourselves. If Christ consistently felt the need to be alone to communicate with God, we might be well advised to do the same.

There's a story about Elijah talking to God. A great wind came, but God wasn't in the wind. An earthquake came, but God wasn't in the earthquake. Then a tiny whisper came, and God was in the whisper.

I wonder how often I'm able to hear that whisper, living in a small town like New York. My guess is rarely. But that whisper should be the sweetest, most anticipated thing in the world to me. Instead, I choose noise, chaos, mindless chatter about \$200 pairs of jeans and plastic surgery. And then I wonder why I can't hear God's voice.

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It bears repeating – solitude is a likely path to spiritual growth. By withdrawing from the demands of your daily life and working hard to create that 'quiet place,' you are doing your soul an immense favor.

During the brief period of my life where ideas abounded and words flew onto the page, I regularly took time to be alone. I had a habit of spending some time in the mornings, sitting in front of my window looking out at the trees, Bible in hand. I'd read, I'd ruminate, I'd think, I'd pray.

What took place in my quiet time was rarely earth-shattering – it wasn't this "power Christianity" that so many people expect and find wanting. God is forever the great iconoclast – the all-powerful choosing to speak under his breath.

He doesn't talk through a burning bush, telling you to free your people. He talks to you about that spat you had with your spouse. He subtly pushes you to respond to your co-worker's sarcastic jabs in a different way. He encourages you to use your hard-earned money in a way you might not normally be inclined to. In a slow, almost imperceptible way, he is molding you into someone who expresses kindness, patience, humility, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. He is molding you into an image of Christ. But this can only happen if you're willing to take the time to be still. He speaks to those who are willing to listen.

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## The Journey

God's plan for us is first and foremost about relationship with Him. He seeks to redeem the lost because He longs to be with them in loving, joyous communion. The story of the Bible, the story of the world, the story of our lives can only make sense when we understand the power of God's love towards us.

Even now, as I write these words, the concept of God's love remains a mystery to me. I've somehow managed to consistently be a hypocrite – at once writing what appear to be spiritual truths while at the same time consistently failing to practice what I preach. I'm only able to write about any of it because I've been touched at times, ever so briefly, by the love God has for me. The rest of my days are spent in a deep sleep – I meander through my days and weeks not hearing God's voice, not feeling His peace...rejecting Him and His gift of love at nearly every turn.

And yet...God still pursues me. With reckless abandon, He's there in the most unexpected of moments, always waiting to draw me back into his presence. Infinitely patient, God is always there to convict my heart of its regular transgressions, to lovingly console me as I trip up, resolve to do better and promptly trip up again.

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Make no mistake – I write about these things but I remain in every way an amateur. Thankfully, God’s given me a path to follow – through the disciplines I can ever-so-slowly turn my moral and spiritual center towards God. Almost imperceptibly, my hard, rebellious self can melt away, and God can mold me into the man He’s always wanted me to be.

With all my shortcomings, I’m thankful daily that God desires this relationship. I’m thankful that He’s given us a pathway to create this inner sanctuary that sounds so perfect. I’m thankful that I’m slowly on my way.