

# *The Illumined Heart*

*The Ancient Christian Path of Transformation*

by: Frederica Mathewes-Green

## Study Guide

### Chapter 1: The Central Question

1. Does it surprise you that the author says, "I hope not to say anything original" in this book? What would be the value in learning what the earliest Christians thought, rather than reading the thoughts of a modern author?
2. Are "relevant" and "timeless" opposites?
3. "For all of us...there is a recurrent sense of loneliness." Do you think this is true? If so, do you think most people are aware of this loneliness? How do you generally cope with these feelings?
4. Are there other ways in which you think most modern-day Christians fail to fully embody their faith? Can you think of examples of Christians from ages past who did it better? What causes you to fall short?

### Chapter 2: A Challenging Answer

1. The e-mail story about the young mother follows a familiar pattern. Did it surprise you to hear it questioned?
2. In his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Baptist pastor Dallas Willard wrote: "Faith today is treated as something that only *should* make us different, not that *does* or *can* make us different. In reality we *vainly* struggle against the evils of this world, waiting to die and go to heaven." Do you agree?
3. How does Anna's use of spiritual disciplines for growth in holiness differ from earning salvation by good works?
4. What spiritual disciplines, if any, are part of your own life? To what extent are they helpful in your own spiritual growth?

### Chapter 3: So Who Cares?

1. The Holy Spirit is fully available to every Christian of every era; believers in the first few centuries were not superior to believers today. Nevertheless, they had some practical advantages in understanding Scripture that we don't have today. What were these?
2. The author asserts that we should honor the biblical interpretation of the early church over later interpretations that differ. What is her basis for this argument? Do you agree?
3. What dangers might arise in reading the Bible apart from mature, grounded teaching? Can you think of examples in history where well-meaning Christians went wrong, due to relying on their

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- own interpretation of Scripture passages?
4. The author says that church leaders in the west gradually changed from being like “museum guards” to being like “museum curators.” What is the difference? What were the practical effects of this very subtle shift?
  5. If each individual Christian chooses the authority he will follow, who is the real authority?
  6. When a rancher wants to build a straight fence, before he drives a new post he looks down the line to make sure the new one is perfectly aligned with all previous ones. How is this like Christian theology?

## **Chapter 4: Where We're Going**

1. The word "theosis" is hard to translate, and sometimes the word "deification" is used. However, this term can be misleading, as it can sound like humans turn into independent gods. In what other sense are Christians "deified"? How is this different from what we usually think of as New Age "mysticism"?
2. The author asserts that there is not really any division between reason and emotion; the two are linked and interdependent. Do you agree? Is the marriage relationship a good example of this? Is it a good example of the benefit of perseverance during times that are neither emotionally nor intellectually exciting? Can you think of other examples?
3. What practical and theological difference does it make to be looking forward, rather than backward, when we consider our sins? How is this analogous to an athlete in training?

## **Chapter 5: Why We Don't Like Repentance**

1. Why don't we like repentance?
2. Imagine you had to develop an advertising campaign to promote repentance. What slogans would you use? What images or stories?
3. Do you have your own "Frosting Cycle"?

## **Chapter 6: Repentance, Both Door and Path**

1. Because of our fallen human condition we experience loneliness and unease, and want God to comfort us. Why won't this work? What do we need instead?
2. If sin is sickness, and God is like a surgeon, do we want him to operate or to "keep us comfortable"? Do we want both, in different ways? How can we resolve this?
3. When we compare ourselves with others, instead of with God, we find many excuses not to repent. What examples does the author give? What other examples could you add?
4. How does repentance result in joy? How does it help us love others?
5. The author says that “repentance is insight, not emotion.” How does this reflect the meaning of the Greek word “metanoia”?

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## **Chapter 7: Introduction to the Passions, and Disciplines of the Body**

1. What are "the passions"? What positive purpose can they be turned to?
2. In what sense are the passions passive?
3. Anna expects that the Devil is actively seeking to draw her away from God. Does this seem like a primitive belief that Christians no longer need? In what ways was she alert to something that we now fail to perceive?
4. Have you had an experience with temptation that seemed to you not merely random, but intentionally planned?
5. Earlier the author stated that reason and emotion are not split in the way modern people expect; now she says that mind and body are likewise not divided. Do you agree? How can bodily disciplines strengthen mental focus, and mental disciplines strengthen bodily self-control?
6. Have you fasted in the past? Have you fasted on a regular basis? If you were to begin now, what plan would you follow? Would this be easier if others joined you?
7. The author asserts that the very bodies we have now will also be ours in heaven, though transformed. Do you agree? How would this belief affect the way you treat your body now—how you eat, exercise and rest?

## **Chapter 8: More about the Passions, and Disciplines of the Mind**

1. Have you ever tried to "pray constantly"? How did you do it? What difficulties did you encounter? What did you learn from the process?
2. The author says that our transformation in Christ is like a piece of coal gradually being consumed by fire. Do you find this image inviting, confusing, intimidating, or reassuring? Can you think of other ways we are like coal (for example, we continue burning in the company of other believers, but grow cold on our own)?
3. Can you visualize having a "general pool of 'sense'" where all the five senses originate? Does it seem to you that this "nous" is where your conscience comes from, and where God speaks to you? Does it also seem like most of the time your nous is distracted, and not listening to that voice?
4. John Wesley said that as he studied the scriptures his "heart was strangely warmed." Have you ever felt warmth or some other sensation in your "heart" when moved by thought, emotion, or spiritual experience? Can you imagine praying with your heart?
5. With the exercise of mental watchfulness ("nepsis") a person grows in the ability to recognize and reject thoughts that would be disruptive, and gains peace ("hesychasm"). How would this ability aid you in your daily life? In your life in Christ?

## **Chapter 9: The Jesus Prayer**

1. Have you ever tried to pray one short prayer over and over for a period of time? What was difficult about this?
2. Repeating a prayer like this can sound like the practice of a mantra in an Eastern religion, or like a kind of self-hypnotism. How does calling on the name of Jesus make this different? Can the

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- Christian truly expect that Jesus is present, hearing the prayer and answering it? What does it mean to say that Jesus is within us, or in our hearts?
3. Do you think that it is possible to have two kinds of thoughts going at the same time—a habitual thought, like the Jesus Prayer, and the active, "working" thoughts necessary to daily life?
  4. How does God's mercy differ from his forgiveness?

## **Chapter 10: Dealing With Others: The Smaller Circle**

1. How could it be better for your spiritual growth to live among people who irritate you, than to live as a hermit?
2. Do you have a favorite movie or novel in which the good guy beats the bad guy? Is there any situation in which you felt like the good guy in a story? Like the bad guy?
3. "Each of us, no matter how good, is fallen, and each of us, no matter how evil, is as beloved as the prodigal son." Who is the most evil living person you can think of? Does God still love this person and hope for his repentance? Would you be glad to see this person in heaven?

## **Chapter 11: Dealing with Others: The Larger Circle**

1. The standard of giving in the ancient church was ten percent. In what situations would this be possible today? In what situations would this be impossible?
2. Early Christians gave to the church, and deacons distributed to the poor. Today appeals for money come to us directly, through the mail, phone calls, and panhandlers. How do you discern who God wants you to give to, and who to eliminate?
3. How can we do justice, and yet "judge not"?
4. It is reasonable and necessary to protect ourselves, but we should also "love our enemies" and hope that they will repent and come to salvation. "Your heavenly father will not forgive you, unless you forgive your brother from your heart," Jesus said. Can you think of someone you need to forgive?
5. Have enemies done you good, by making you more dependent on God?

## **Chapter 12: The Way from Here**

1. Do you feel moved to continue on this path of transformation? What about it seems too hard? What part might you implement first?
2. What kind of help do you need? Where will you find it?
3. Do you plan to read a book from the bibliography next? Which one?

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