

Five Ancient Traditions

to Enrich Your Spiritual Life

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Five Ancient Traditions to Enrich Your Spiritual Life

Do you feel the busyness of the modern world? Throughout the ages, Christians have practiced intentional traditions to deepen their relationship with God and focus on what truly matters in life. These five traditions from ancient times can be easily applied to your own life. Slow down, practice these traditions, and remember what really matters in the world: a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

This eBook provides links for further resources. Simply click on underlined texts to delve deeper into these traditions

Tradition One: *Perform a Spiritual Examination*

Tradition Two: *Practice ‘Memento Mori’*

Tradition Three: *Retire for Spiritual Refreshment*

Tradition Four: *Read Edifying Biographies*

Tradition Five: *Institute Family Devotions*



Perform a Spiritual Examination

The History of Spiritual Examination

It takes courage to venture into the secret passageways of your heart and test the reality of your faith. Yet generations of God's people have done so, motivated by St. Paul's challenge to "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith."

St. John wrote the book of 1 John to help the early Christian community perform spiritual examination. Generations of believers followed the practice, and it was common in monastic communities of Europe. The 16th century reformation challenged Christians to personally explore the Scripture, and the puritan movement particularly emphasized spiritual examination.

As communities of Christians settled the New World, Jonathan Edwards, America's greatest theologian, recommended the practice in his book *The Necessity of Self-Examination*. During the Great Awakening, Methodists advocated the use of 'methods' to grow in godliness; one of the methods that they recommended was the practice of spiritual examination.

The Value of Spiritual Examination

Your faith is the most important reality about you. It has eternal consequences. Christ warned that many people would be sent away from the Kingdom of God because they find out, too late, that their faith is invalid. Yet spiritual examination also leads to assurance as the believer finds evidence of God's grace in life. Examination strengthens faith by identifying its weaknesses and working to correct them.

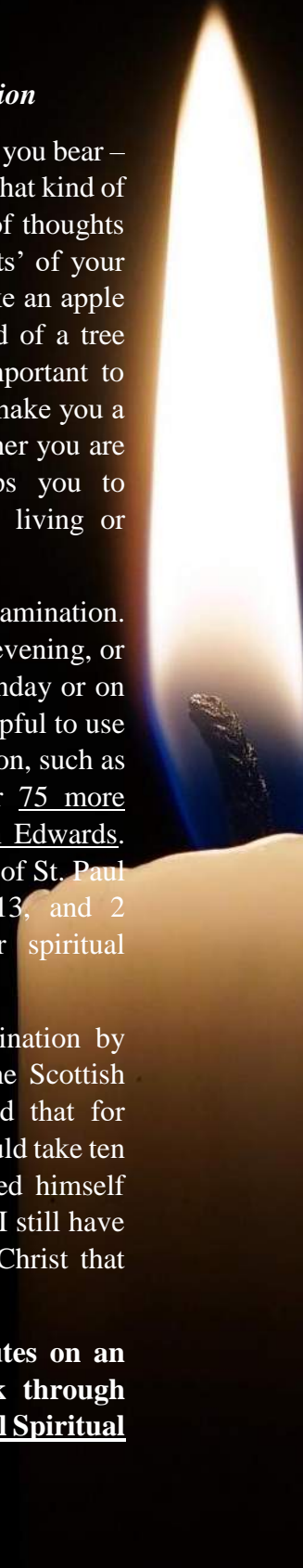
Performing a Spiritual Examination

Examine yourself to see what fruit you bear – what kind of actions do you do? What kind of words do you speak? What kind of thoughts do you think? These are the 'fruits' of your faith. Of course, apples don't make an apple tree, they only indicate what kind of a tree already exists. Similarly, it is important to remember that your works don't make you a Christian – they only reveal whether you are one! Spiritual examination helps you to determine whether your faith is living or dead.

Set aside some time for spiritual examination. You can do this each morning or evening, or at some other time, like every Sunday or on the first day of the month. It is helpful to use questions to guide your examination, such as [John Fletcher's 12 questions](#), or [75 more exhaustive questions by Jonathan Edwards](#). Similarly, the vice and virtue lists of St. Paul in Galatians 5, 1 Corinthians 13, and 2 Timothy 3 are also useful for spiritual examination.

Always end your spiritual examination by focusing on Jesus the Savior. The Scottish minister M'Cheyne recommended that for every look at self, the believer should take ten looks at Christ. Luther encouraged himself that "Even if I am feeble in faith, I still have the same treasure and the same Christ that others have."

Action Item: Schedule 20 minutes on an upcoming weekend, then work through the nine questions in the [Personal Spiritual Assessment](#).



Practice ‘Memento Mori’

“Memento Mori” means ‘Remember Death,’ and since the dawn of history, people have meditated on their own mortality. Moses, the man of God, prayed, “teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” The kingly philosopher Solomon said that “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.”

The ancient Christian theologian Irenaeus wrote, “The business of the Christian is nothing else but to be ever preparing for death.” Medieval Europe refined the concept of ‘Memento Mori,’ and the Renaissance developed a specific art form, ‘Vanitas,’ to symbolize death. At the end of the Medieval period, the Italian preacher-reformer Savonarola put it plainly: “Think about death constantly, for if you are found ill-prepared on this point, you have lost everything you have ever done in this life.”

The puritan and Anglican movements of England placed great emphasis on ‘dying well.’ Sermons and books were published on the subject. One of these writers, Jeremy Taylor, said “Since we stay not here, being people but of a day's abode, and our age is like that of a fly and contemporary with a gourd, we must look somewhere else for an abiding city, a place in another country to fix our house in, whose walls and foundation is God, where we must find rest, or else be restless forever.”

John Newton, the slave-trader turned Christian who wrote *Amazing Grace*, also wrote, “It is time for me to think less of going about, and more of going home...He appointed the hour of our birth; and the hour

of our dismissal is with him likewise: whether sooner or later, it will be just at the right time.” In more recent times, the Welsh minister Martyn Lloyd Jones – who pastored in London during the bombing raids of World War Two – said, “It is a very strange thing [death] – this one certainty – yet we do not think about it. We are too busy. We allow life and its circumstances to so occupy us that we do not stop and think...”

The Value of Memento Mori

Practicing Memento Mori helps believers to focus on what is most important, recognizing the shortness of life and the value of the present. Christians are stewards of God's time, and practicing Memento Mori helps them to steward God's time better and make choices that honor Him. As Dr. Samuel Johnson once said, “Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”

Performing Memento Mori

While you can ‘remember death’ at any time, many Christians have found value in specific objects that reminded them of mortality. ‘Vanitas’ painting emphasized the transitoriness of life by portraying skulls, hourglasses, and bubbles. Often, God's community has been reminded of death through writings and sermons, such as Charles Spurgeon's sermon *The Death of the Christian*, Jeremy Taylor's book *Holy Dying*, or John Willison's collection of *Choice Sayings of Dying Saints*.

Action Item: Spend ten minutes tomorrow morning reading through Psalm 90, meditating on your own mortality.

Retire for Spiritual Refreshment

The wilderness has often been a favorite retreat of prophets and holy men through the ages. Moses, Elijah, and Jesus each spent significant time in remote places, where they won spiritual battles or experienced the presence of God in unique ways. God's people have found retreat in other ways as well, whether Peter meditated on a roof-top or Jesus prayed on a mountain.

In a desire to deepen their relationship with God, early monks retired into the arid deserts of Egypt and Syria. These men and women were often overly focused on isolation, forgetting that God's people must live in community and as members of the church. Later monks tried to promote a more balanced approach of monastic communities that remained near their communities.

The Reformation created a renewed emphasis on an individual's personal relationship with God. Believers sought to deepen their relationship with God, often by leaving the busyness of the world. The famous Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon recommended that ministers retire for a week or even a month to the countryside in order to focus on God. George Whitefield, the Anglican evangelist, often spent two hours every evening reading and meditating on God's Word. George Mueller, a German missionary and founder of orphanages, sometimes spent 12 hours a day studying the Bible in its ancient languages, often on his knees. Even Susannah Wesley, an English housewife and mother of 19 children, found a way to retire from the world by throwing her apron over her face so she could focus on God.

The Value of Spiritual Retirement

We live in a busy world that often distracts us. Yet the most important matter in life is our relationship with God. Taking time for spiritual refreshment allows believers to focus on what truly matters. We often spend extra time with those we love, whether at a family reunion or on a date. Shouldn't God's people spend extra time learning from and fellowshiping with Him? This develops our spiritual relationship, and it molds and transforms us to become more like the Savior.

Performing Spiritual Retirement

Whether spending an extra hour or a full weekend in spiritual exercises, the first step is to remove distractions. Turning off phones and leaving electronic devices behind is a helpful way to leave the mindset of busyness and enter the mindset of worship. Following the example of Jesus, believers often head to quiet and undisturbed places, but any place free of distractions can be used. The extra time is a wonderful opportunity to pray (you can spend [An Intimate Hour with God](#)), to study the Bible more carefully, or to perform a spiritual examination. Generations of believers have done these activities while fasting in order to focus their concentration solely on spiritual matters.

Action Item: Schedule an evening when you will take 2 hours to focus solely on God through spiritual assessment, Bible reading, and prayer.

Read Edifying Biographies

Early Christian communities nurtured their faith by reading the stories of saints, past and present, who lived for God. Whether they read the stories of Jewish believers who awaited the Messiah (such as those stories found in 2 Maccabees), or the stories of their own friends who suffered everything for the kingdom (like Polycarp or Perpetua), these stories were reminders of faith lived out.

These early books were not true ‘biographies,’ but as history progressed, the idea of biography became more common. Augustine of Hippo recorded his story in his Confessions, while Athanasius, the defender of orthodoxy against heresy, wrote the Life of St. Anthony to challenge Christians in their faith. While such biographies do not present perfect Christians, or even perfect doctrine, they show how individual believers sought to live out their faith.

The printing press revolutionized reading. As books became more common and literacy improved, more and more of God’s people began to read the stories of God’s people for themselves. Two books had a particularly strong influence: Foxe’s Book of Martyrs recounted the sufferings of God’s people, while the Life and Diary of David Brainerd, about a missionary to the Native Americans who died at the age of 29, brought comfort and challenge to many missionaries, pastors, and lay persons.

The Value of Reading Biographies

It is easy to drift in life, to grow comfortable in the routines of work and family, leisure

and activity. Without biographies, it is easy to accept this comfort level as the norm, the way that everyone lives, and the ideal way to live. Biographies remind us that others have not accepted that status quo. In addition, biographies demonstrate how to suffer well. They put our own sufferings in perspective. More than this, biographies demonstrate the power of God in individual lives. They show how God works in the lives of ordinary people to grow and enlarge His kingdom.

Practicing Biographical Reading

Those who are new to biographical reading will do well to start slowly. Select a book, set a goal for the book, but don’t be overly ambitious. Setting a goal to finish a book in a month is a great starting point. Those who are slow readers can often make great progress by reading the book for a few minutes before going to bed.

It is often helpful to agree to read a book with friends, then spend time discussing it. As you choose a book, make sure to choose books that are worthwhile. Good recommendations are always good leads. Several great choices to begin with are A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards, To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson, The Life and Labors of George Mueller, or The Life of Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

Action Item: Select one of the biographies listed above. Set a ‘finish’ date, and order it right now online or from your local library.

Institute Family Devotions

The ultimate measure of one's faith is not only one's personal piety, but how well the truth is passed on to the next generation. This is a key message of the book of Deuteronomy. In that book, the Hebrew nation was instructed to write the Word of God on their doorposts and teach it constantly to their children.

Ever since then, believers have labored to teach God's Word to their own families and future generations. Timothy was reminded of his own instruction by St. Paul – even as a young child, his mother and grandmother had taught him the sacred writings which were able to “make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

During the middle ages, learning gradually revolved more and more around the church, since literacy was so often confined within its walls. Yet believers continued to train their children as they lived and worked alongside them in the cottage, the field, and the shop. The Reformation reemphasized the importance of an individual's relationship with God. This led to a focus on Biblically training the next generation in that relationship.

The 16th century Scottish reformer and preacher John Knox told fathers, “Of you it shall be required how carefully and diligently you have instructed them in God's true knowledge, how you have studied to plant virtue in them, and [to] repress vice. And therefore I say, you must make them partakers in reading, exhorting, and in making common prayers, which I would in every house were used once a day at least.”

The Value of Family Devotions

In the American colonial period, Jonathan Edwards urged his congregation, “Let me... repeat, and earnestly press the counsel which I have often urged on the heads of families, while I was their pastor, to great painfulness in teaching, warning, and directing their children; bringing them up in the training and admonition of the Lord; beginning early, where there is yet opportunity, and maintaining constant diligence in all labors of this kind. ... Every Christian family ought to be as it were a little church, consecrated to Christ, and wholly influenced and governed by His rules. And family education and order are some of the chief means of grace. If these fail, all other means are likely to prove ineffectual.”

Practicing Family Devotions

If you are the spiritual leader of your household, it is especially important that you take time to gather your family and teach them the Bible. This doesn't require hours of study – it may involve just reading a chapter, mentioning a few thoughts that stand out, and then praying. Even if you aren't the spiritual leader, you can still take time to read or pray with a family member. Start with a manageable goal (like once a week), and work up from there. There are endless ways to do this, including telling Bible stories, singing Scripture songs, or reading a book about God together.

Action Item: Set a date on the calendar when you will gather your family members. Then read a chapter together, have everyone share a thought from the passage, and have someone pray.

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