

Soul Training Exercises

The Good and Beautiful God

Chapter 1 *What are you seeking?*

Soul Training Exercise: **Sleep**

Exhaustion is the number 1 enemy of spiritual formation. It affects every aspect of our being.

- If it is possible, at least once a week, do not set the alarm and sleep until you wake up naturally.
- Aim to get at least 7 hours sleep a night at least 3 times a week.
- Go to bed at a consistent time each night.
- Do not engage in activities which increase stress just before bedtime.
- Try to avoid too many stimulants in the evening.
- Don't force yourself to try and sleep. If you do not feel tired at the time you would normally put the light out then try spending some time reading, praying, listening to quiet music or star gazing.

Chapter 2 *God is good*

Soul Training Exercise: **Silence & awareness of Creation**

These two exercises help us to live in the present moment and to pay attention to the world around us and through so doing to become more aware of God's goodness at work in the world.

- Spend time reflecting on the Psalmist's words, "*Be still and know that I am God.*"
- Try to spend 10 - 20 minutes in silence each day, either in one block or smaller periods of 5 minutes each if that is more practical.
- Don't worry if your mind wanders during this time. Jot down any thoughts which seem significant.
- Try and spend some time, at least once a week, outdoors. Pay attention to your senses as you observe what is going on around you. Be aware of the little details as well as the big picture. Give thanks to God.

Chapter 3 *God is trustworthy*

Soul Training Exercise: **Count your Blessings**

Our lives often betray the fact that we like to be in control rather than trusting in God to be in control for us. Consciously making yourself aware of all of the good things God has poured into your life will help you to develop trust in him and to become less selfish.

- If you can, at least once a month, spend an hour creating a list of all of the ways God has blessed you during that period of time.
- Don't forget the little things!
- Over time you may see patterns develop and you may become more aware of specific answers to prayer.
- Say "thank you" more

Chapter 4 *God is Generous*

Soul Training Exercise: **Praying Psalm 23**

Psalm 23 is a beautiful expression of the Kingdom of God, in which God is with us, caring and providing for us, and blessing us, even in difficult circumstances. It should not be reserved for reading at funerals! Its concern is experiencing the presence of God in the midst of daily life.

- As you go about your week, carry this Psalm with you and recite it as often as you can. Perhaps start and finish the day with it.
- Allow the images to wash over your mind and it will begin to challenge the false narratives that we live by with the true narrative of God's goodness and generosity.

Chapter 5 *God is love*

Soul Training Exercise: *Lectio Divina*

This is an exercise that allows us to spend time prayerfully with a passage of Scripture and to hear God speaking through it.

- Choose a fairly short passage of Scripture. Read it through once, slowly, pausing briefly between each clause. Then sit in silence for a minute or two.
- Read it through a second time. This time allow longer pauses between clauses and be aware of any particular words or phrases that catch your attention. Once you have read it the second time, jot down the words or phrases that struck you.
- Read it a third time up to the word or phrase that caught your attention. Stop and repeat it in your mind a few times.
- Silently reflect on the word or phrase for a minute or two and see what it brings to mind. Specifically ask God what he wants to say to you through it.
- Jot down anything you think God may be saying to you.
- Ask yourself what God might be calling you to do as a result of the word you have been given.
- Rest for a couple of minutes & enjoy being in God's presence before returning to your daily routine.

Chapter 6 *God is Holy*

Soul Training Exercise: **Margin**

The margins on a page of text make it much easier to read. There is space around the busyness of the words. Our lives can very easily resemble a page full of words with no margins. "*Margin is having breath left at the top of the staircase, money left at the end of the month and sanity left at the end of adolescence!*" We live in a culture that rewards busyness and overextension as signs of importance. On the other hand, the number one spiritual sickness of our time is hurry sickness. When we lack margin we become tired, lonely and joyless. To create margin in your life:

- Get up a little earlier so you don't start the day in a rush.

- Cut out unnecessary activities. Ask yourself, "Is this essential?"
- The only way you can reduce hurry sickness is by taking time. The only way you can have time to take is by not filling it with things that aren't essential.

Chapter 7 *God is self-sacrificing*

Soul Training Exercise: **Reading the Gospel of John**

Dallas Willard writes that the key to loving God is to see what Jesus is really like, to hold him before our minds with as much fullness and clarity as possible." From beginning to end, Jesus' earthly life was marked by self-giving and sacrifice. This is seen nowhere better than in John's Gospel.

- Spend a significant period of time living with John's Gospel. This can be done in numerous ways such as:
 - Read a chapter a day for a month.
 - Split the Gospel into four or five sections, reading five to seven chapters in a sitting.
 - Focus on different themes in the Gospel such as "the seven signs", "the 'I am' sayings," "the passion account."
- As you read, ask yourself "what is the picture of God that you see in Jesus?"

Chapter 8 *God Transforms*

Soul Training Exercise: **Solitude**

Solitude allows us to escape from the demands of other people. It enables us to listen to the "still, small voice of God." Through so doing we can reflect on the false narratives that bind us and the true narratives of Jesus that release and transform us. We can take off our masks.

- Start off developing a pattern of short periods of solitude.
- Go for a walk or turn off the phone.
- Develop a quiet area in your house where you can go to be alone and pray. Make it a comfortable, sensory place.
- Read a good book.
- As you are able to build this pattern into your life, extend the period of solitude little by little.
- Plan it into your diary or it won't happen!

Chapter 9 *How to make a pickle*

Soul Training Exercise: **Slowing Down**

Spiritual Growth does not happen quickly. It happens over the course of a life-time with seasons of rapid growth and times of consolidation. Neither does it happen in a hurry. It happens when we slow down and become aware of actually living our lives rather than allowing them to pass us by.

- Try and spend a day deliberately doing everything slowly.

- Consciously think about what you are doing and why.
- Pay attention to your senses - chew your food properly!
- What happens in your mind and heart as you slow down?

The Good and Beautiful Life

Chapter 1 *The Good and Beautiful Life*

Soul Training Exercise: **Writing a letter to God**

- Write a letter to God that begins with: "Dear God, the life I want most for myself is..."
- Express your fears, frustrations, hopes and joys to God.
- What will a good and beautiful life look like for you?
- Dream!
- Keep your letter and read it at least once a year, perhaps on Covenant Sunday. Update it as necessary.

Chapter 2 *The Gospel many people have never heard*

Soul Training Exercise: **Play**

Too often we try to control what happens in our lives. One of the ways of combating this is to spend time playing because play is often spontaneous - things happen that we don't expect or can't control when we play. We learn to let go, relax and become vulnerable to others. We also play because God is good and wants us to enjoy life and enjoy him.

- If you have children or grandchildren, play with them. Do what they do. Get down on the ground and see things from their perspective. Don't compete too much!
- Develop a hobby or play sport.
- Do something or watch something that makes you laugh.
- Engage in wonder through finding out about something that amazes you.
- See if it helps you take yourself less seriously.

Chapter 3 *The Grand Invitation*

Soul Training Exercise: **Hospitality**

Jesus reminds us through the Beatitudes that the Kingdom of God is available to all, no matter what our state or status. Often our lives are lived out in tight knit groups of people who are like us, sometimes because that is comfortable, other times because of our fear of difference. The practice of hospitality can challenge both our fear and our comfort.

- Try and turn an acquaintance into a friend by making the effort to get to know them better. Invite them out for a coffee or round for a meal.
- Take time to listen properly to people.
- Do little things that serve others.
- Pay proper attention to the people that you love.
- Encourage your "group" to look outwards.

Chapter 4 *Learning to live without anger*

Soul Training Exercise: **Keeping the Sabbath**

Anger is often a result of our need to be in control. Sabbath rest allows us to develop a habit of trust that lets go of our need to be in control, thus reducing our stress levels, tiredness and anger.

- Start your Sabbath in the evening with a nice meal that you take time over preparing and sharing with your family.
- Read stories.
- Sleep well.
- Spend the day engaging in some of the other soul training exercises we have considered.
- Remind yourself of all the blessings you have received.

Chapter 5 *Learning to live without lust*

Soul Training Exercise: **Media Fast**

What do you feed your mind with? Our culture today presents us with all sorts of images and other media that can lead our minds away from God rather than towards him. Engaging in a media fast will help you train to be more discerning about what you feed your mind with and to be more aware of the messages you are receiving from the world around you.

- Try to have a day every so often when you fast from all media. This includes:
 - The Internet
 - Television
 - Newspapers and Magazines
 - Video Games
- What will you do with the time you gain? You could use it to feed your mind with good things.
- Visit a museum
- Go for a long walk
- Read a devotional book
- Take the family on an adventure
- Write a poem or a story

Chapter 6 *Learning to live without lying*

Soul Training Exercise: **Silence or Not lying**

The Book of Proverbs tells us that the easiest way not to lie is not to speak! The tongue is deceitful above all things.

- If you can, go a day without speaking. You will have to plan this and let your family know what you are doing and why. Make sure you have a pen and note pad handy!

- Silence challenges our need to always have the last word. It allows others to make a contribution.
- If this is too demanding to begin with, try to live a day when only positive, life-affirming words of truth come out of your mouth. Avoid people for a time who you know have a habit of lying or exaggerating and see what effect it has on you.

Chapter 7 *Learning to bless those who curse you*

Soul Training Exercise: **Praying for the success of competitors**

The challenge of this part of Jesus' teaching is to begin to see those who are a threat to you in some way in a different light. Prayer changes our heart towards people. It will help you understand your competitors better and help you to get to know them and eventually, perhaps, to make them your friends.

- Spend a few minutes each day for a week or two praying for someone who competes with you or with whom you struggle. Ask God to bless them in all that they do.
- Ask God to reveal to you any unhealthy attitudes that you have towards them and to give you the grace to act upon them.

Chapter 8 *Learning to live without vainglory*

Soul Training Exercise: **Secret Service**

One of the consequences of putting ourselves on the throne of our lives instead of God is that we think the world has to revolve around us. Our capacity for self-importance is staggering and it blinds us to the truth of our place before God and his created world. The best way to challenge such attitudes and the behaviour that flows from them is to engage in serving others, particularly if the service is done in secret. Our ego cries out for recognition. This exercise challenges that need.

- See how many things you can do to help someone this week.
- If you can, make them uncalled for, even un-needed acts of grace and compassion.
- If possible try and do something nice for someone without them knowing about it.

Chapter 9 *Learning to live without avarice*

Soul Training Exercise: **Deaccumulation**

Stress often arises from over complicating life. Sometimes we over complicate our lives by trying to keep up with others or put on a good impression. The more we do that the more we become tied in to a perpetual cycle of needing to fill our lives with more and more. The antidote is to develop a lifestyle and mindset that is characterised by simplicity. In order to develop simplicity we need to make space in our lives, physically, emotionally and spiritually. And often the three are inter-twined.

- Have a spring clean of your house or desk.
- Recycle

- If you have good quality things that you do not need give them to someone who will appreciate them and receive them as a gift. Alternatively, take them to a charity shop.
- As you deaccumulate physical items be aware of aspects of your spiritual and emotional life that you are being called to let go of. Ask God to help you let go.

Chapter 10 *Learning to live without worry*

Soul Training Exercise: **Prayer**

"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4: 6 - 7

- Either as you go to bed or when you wake, take time to consider the day ahead. Pay attention to whether you are feeling anxious about anything you anticipate doing or happening.
- Jot it down and offer it to God in prayer.
- Ask God to grant you the wisdom to deal with the situation and allow God's peace to fill your heart and mind.

Chapter 11 *Learning to live without judging others*

Soul Training Exercise: **A day without gossip**

Gossip and lying are very similar, hence the soul training exercises are similar too.

- Try to live a day when only positive, life-affirming words of encouragement come out of your mouth. Avoid people for a time who you know have a habit of gossiping and see what effect it has on you.
- Try to get to know the people you gossip about better in order to understand them more.

Chapter 12 *Living in the kingdom day by day*

Soul Training Exercise: **Living one day devotionally**

All of the soul training exercises we have looked at should be helping us to become more aware of God's presence in us and with us on a daily basis. The more we practise them, the more consciously we will live our lives in positive, spiritually healthy ways.

- Try and develop a spiritual diary where you actively plan in time for and occasions of soul training exercises to help your life stay balanced.
- Take time every so often to review this "pattern for life" and adapt it as necessary, perhaps over time including soul training exercises which you find more challenging.