

Living in Christ's Presence: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God, was born out of talks that Dallas Willard gave with John Ortberg at the Knowing Christ Today conference sponsored by the Dallas Willard Center for Spiritual Formation in February 2013. Willard passed away less than three months later on May 8 at the age of seventy-seven.

InterVarsity Press also released a companion DVD of the conference talks that feature Dallas exploring what it means to live well now in light of God's kingdom. Three of the sessions are taught by Ortberg, who also serves as a conversation partner with Willard after each session.

John Ortberg Describes Friend and Mentor Dallas Willard

At the end of a class Dallas was teaching, a student was feeling arrogant and antagonistic. He raised his hand and mentioned a disagreement he had with Dallas that was both obnoxious and wrong.

A person who was at the class was waiting for Dallas to demolish the guy, which he could easily have done. I joke sometimes that I never get in an argument with Dallas, because I am afraid he will prove I don't exist. So, this student was waiting for Dallas to lower the boom. Dallas said, "Well, I think that's a good place for the class to end. Let's just stop there, and then we will pick it up next time."

Another student asked him, "Why did you do that, because you could have just let the guy have it. Why didn't you let him have it?"

Dallas's response was, "I'm practicing the discipline of not having the last word."

Every moment is a chance to be with our teacher, Jesus, and to learn how to live in the Reality. It's just that we don't see it. We think that it is just about a couple of little activities in a few small compartments of our life. Every moment is that chance. We want to learn about that together.

I first came across Dallas's work over twenty years ago when I read his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. I was feeling frustrated because I wasn't changing the way that I wanted to, and in the church where I was serving, folks weren't changing the way we wanted. I got that book, and I can still remember reading the thesis statement: "Authentic transformation is possible if we are willing to do one thing and that is to arrange our lives around the kind of practices and life Jesus led to be constantly receiving power and love from the Father." The thought that transformation is really possible and that wise people have thought about it gave me so much hope. That book is now one of my prized possessions.

I ended up writing Dallas, and it turned out he lived not far from me. So I went over there, and we talked. I had the experience that so many folks have with Dallas. We tell stories about him, and that's a wonderful thing, but it's really not about Dallas at all. It's about this wonder that there is a God who is as good as Jesus said that he is. Somehow, we keep losing that, and our vision of it gets distorted. But every once in a while, that vision gets cleared up, and the fog gets blown away. For whatever reason, for many of us, that has happened through the writings and the teachings of this guy, Dallas Willard.

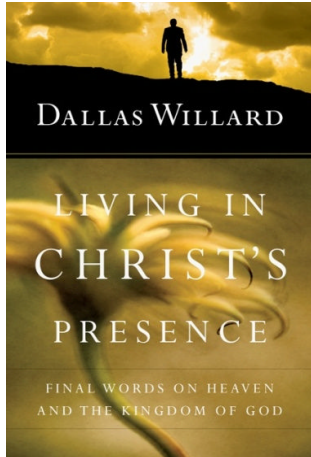
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Part of what's wonderful about him is the way he is far from perfect, as all of us are, and he has his own set of struggles. But you get the sense when you are with him that this is not just somebody who is in spiritual formation, but somebody who is actually living in the reality of the kingdom. It has taken over his body in ways that I want it to take over my body. We want to prize that and learn from it. But remember, it's not about him or about any person. It's about the reality that lies behind and can speak through any of us.

It's a lot of work—at least it is for me—just trying to keep up with him. After hearing Dallas speak, somebody said, "I feel like a whole boatload of stupid just landed on my head."

The Trouble with Leading Through Emotions

Dallas has mentioned that when he first started ministry, he thought the way that you move people is by making them feel, not by bringing them knowledge. Often leaders in the church do that. We try to create an emotional experience for people and then use that to get them to form intentions. But then, of course, the intentions fade as soon as the power of the emotions fades, and that's the nature of emotions.

What is needed is for people to actually come to see—for us to come to see—reality differently, to believe at the level of the basic ideas out of which we live, because then we don't have to hype people up into doing stuff; it flows naturally out of how things look to us.

As Dallas teaches, this is a lot of work, because it is not about trying to whip people up into a certain emotional experience. We don't want to be asking, "Was I moved by that talk?" or "How did that talk go?" but asking, "God, as we are together, would you open the windows so I can see?"

There is a charge for all of us in this to say we will work with our minds and our hearts and our wills as best we can. We'll just work. We won't sit back and listen to talks and see if that was a good talk, but we will roll up our sleeves and work. And then we will ask God, "What do you have in this for me?" and maybe "What do you have in this for us, if it is true that the church is at a decisive point." Then there could be a movement to recapture, in our day, the beauty of the vision of God's kingdom. I don't know what that is, but we need to be asking the question "God, are you doing something right now, and could you help us know what that is?"

— Taken from chapter two, "Who Are the Experts on Life Transformation?"

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Photo courtesy of Bradley Elliott

Dallas Willard and John Ortberg Discuss Life, Death and Heaven

Dallas: Be of good cheer. Let's be of good cheer together.

John: That's a good idea. Most pastors ask as soon as the talk is done or as soon as the service is over, "How did it go? Do you think it went all right? Am I still doing okay?" I remember when you did a talk at our church one time, and we were walking out to the car in the parking, and you were singing an old hymn. It was like watching a child let a helium balloon go. I want that in my body, and I want that in my mind – the ability to do something and then just let it go. That's life in the kingdom.

Let's start there. You mentioned joy. One of my favorite games with you is asking you about a word, and you always have a definition. It's sifted through everything everybody has said from Homer on, and you can articulate it in a way that gets it right. It's part of why reading you can be so dense sometimes; every word is used with a precision that most of us don't have. So let's talk about joy. Why do you say that joy is a sense of pervasive well-being?

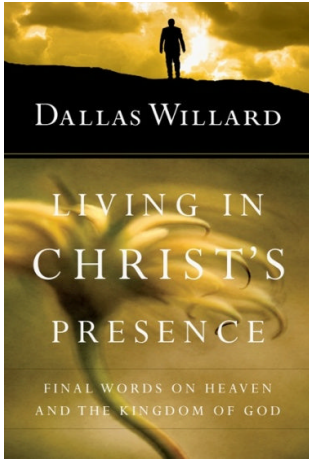
Dallas: Well, because it's consistent with terrible circumstances. One of my favorite passages on this is by Paul. When he is describing himself, one of the contrasts he uses is "sorrowful yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10 NRSV). Joy is consistent with sorrow because it is a realization of what's really going on in the world at large under God. It's joy. You know, it's very difficult to think of God as joyous, because he's got so many things to worry about. But if you don't have a joyous God, you'd better head for cover. Really, you know? It's a joyous God that fills the universe.

John: I'll often think of joy in something else: a sunset, a child or something like that, but you tie it to a pervasive sense of well-being that, even in a difficult situation, joy is connected to that sense that I am okay.

Dallas: It's the ultimate word about God and his world. Creation was an act of joy, of delight in the goodness of what was done. Very often the most joyous moment for human beings is a creative moment. When they look back on it, they see the radiance of that moment, whether it's working on an automobile or painting something or whatever it may be. It's the act of creation, and you want to go back and look at it over and over again. I'm not much of a carpenter or anything else, but when I build something, I tend to go back and look at it pretty often. It's the creative aspect that goes with the love of God in creating. So it's really important to understand how joy cuts through everything and to anticipate that your moment of passage from the earth will be one of great joy.

"Living in Christ's Presence is a superb discussion of the many issues surrounding the reality of life in the kingdom of God here and now. I recommend it highly."

—Richard J. Foster, author of *Celebration of Discipline*, *Streams of Living Water* and *Sanctuary of the Soul*



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John: Say a little more about that, about life and death, and life beyond death.

Dallas: Well, what Jesus teaches us is that within his presence and with his Word, we begin to live in heaven now, and that's why he says that those who keep his Word will never experience death, as human beings understand it. There is a continuity of life through what we view as death from this point of view, because we do see people die. Their bodies stop working, but they continue to exist as the people they are in the presence of God. I think many people don't realize they've died until later. Then they recognize that something is different. I love that line from John Henry Newman's old song "Lead, Kindly Light": "With the morn, those angel faces smile / Which I have loved long since and lost a while." See, that's the continuity. Really, that's the continuity of life: live now, in the action and presence of God with his people.

– Adapted from chapter 3, "How to Step into the Kingdom and Live There"
Conversation: Dallas Willard and John Ortberg



Dallas Willard

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Remembering Dallas Willard

Dallas Willard (1935-2013) was a renowned teacher, acclaimed writer and one of our most brilliant Christian thinkers. He was a professor in the School of Philosophy at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. A highly influential author and teacher, Willard was as celebrated for his enduring writings on spiritual formation as he was for his scholarship. His books include *The Divine Conspiracy* (*Christianity Today's* Book of the Year in 1998), *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, *Hearing God*, *Renovation of the Heart* and others. Willard's most profound influence is in the area of spiritual formation and in the way he humbly mentored so many of today's leaders in the Christian faith, including John Ortberg.

Ortberg first met Willard after reading his book *Celebration of Discipline* twenty years ago. Over the years Willard became a friend and mentor to Ortberg. He recalls: "The first time I talked with him, I went over to his house. I was the pastor of a little church, a very young pastor, and when I sat down and started to talk with him, the phone would ring — this was back before there were answering machines — and he wouldn't answer the phone. He would just talk with me like he had nothing more important to do. When I was with him, hurry was not in his body. Somebody said of Dallas one time, 'I would like to live in his time zone.'"

Willard is known for changing the way thousands of Christians experience their faith. "Again and again I have been profoundly struck by Dallas Willard's ability to speak fully to both mind and heart," said Richard J. Foster. "His intellectual stature and his deep devotion to Christ are distinguishing marks of his life. And, above all else, the humility and gracious character of his life is simply stunning."

Todd Hunter, friend and student of Willard, recalled: "Many years ago in a private moment I asked Dallas: 'What is your greatest concern about the kingdom-based spiritual formation movement?' Without hesitation he answered: 'Willard-ites.' We sat silent for a few moments, that word hanging in the air. On his countenance, in his eyes, I could see a fear that someone might mistake Dallas or his teaching for the endgame, not the signposts he meant them to be of his profound love of Jesus and his kingdom. I can't say much more or I'd run the risk of either hyperbole or sounding like what Dallas wanted greatly to avoid. Perhaps, though, I could end with this: no human being taught me more about life in Jesus and his kingdom."

Visit dallaswillardcenter.com for more information about Willard and his work.

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