

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *The Divine Conspiracy*

by

Dallas Willard\*

### ENTERING THE ETERNAL KIND OF LIFE NOW

1. Generally, how would you say “eternal life” is defined and understood? How is this different from the way Dallas Willard describes it? Dallas says this about “eternal living” or an “eternal kind of life”:

Jesus offers himself as God’s doorway into the life that is truly life. Confidence in him leads us today, as in other times, to become his apprentices in eternal living. (p. 12)

Jesus came among us to show and teach the life for which we were made. . . . By relying on his word and presence we are enabled to reintegrate . . . our life into

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\* Study guide by Jan Johnson.

the infinite rule of God. And that *is* the eternal kind of life. (p. 27)

The person of Jesus, welcomes us just as we are, just where we are, and makes it possible for us to translate our “ordinary” life into an . . . eternal kind of life. (p. 31)

2. Dallas views the kingdom of God as the “range of his effective will, where what he wants done is done” (p. 25). How would you put that in your own words? If you were to hold that view, what would it mean to pray, “Thy kingdom come,” in the Lord’s Prayer?

### GOSPELS OF SIN MANAGEMENT

3. Dallas asserts that both of the current “gospels of sin management” overlook the invitation to “have confidence in [God] in every dimension of our real life, to believe that he is right about and adequate to everything” (p. 49). How do you respond to the possibility of having an interactive, real-life relationship with God? What is attractive about this? Why might some people not be interested?

### WHAT JESUS KNEW: OUR GOD-BATHED WORLD

4. Consider the following list. Which of these ideas about God (if any) intrigue you? Why? How do these ideas affect the way people might feel about God?

God leads an interesting life.

God is full of joy.

God is one great eternal experience of all that is good and true and beautiful and right.

God cherishes the earth and each human being upon it. (pp. 62–64)

5. Because “no human being or institution, no time, no space, no spiritual being, no event—stands between God and those who trust him,” then “our universe is a perfectly safe place to be” (pp. 66–67). Think back to events you recall from the gospels. How did Jesus live as if “the world is a perfectly safe place to be”? Do you feel the same freedom to live this way? Why or why not?

#### WHO IS REALLY WELL OFF?—THE BEATITUDES

6. The Beatitudes aren't teachings on how to be blessed; rather, they are illustrations of the “availability of the kingdom through personal relationship to Jesus” (p. 106). What does it tell you about God that Jesus began his ministry by rolling out the welcome mat to the diseased and afflicted? How do you feel about that? Who in today's world would be comparable to these people? What do Jesus's teaching and life invite Christians today to be or do?
7. In the redemptive community, “old categories drop away” (Jew/Greek, slave/free, civilized/uncivilized), says Dallas. So if a congregation of believers in Jesus is

“totally nice, that is a sure sign something has gone wrong. For here are the foolish, weak, lowly, and despised of this world, whom God has chosen to cancel out the humanly great (1 Cor. 1:26–31; 6)” (pp. 126, 125). What is beautiful about a community that is not “totally nice”? What is difficult about it? What sort of effort is required of its believers to make this work—to make love a reality in it?

#### THE RIGHTNESS OF THE KINGDOM HEART: BEYOND THE GOODNESS OF SCRIBES AND PHARISEES

8. How do we continue to make the “fundamental mistake of the scribe and Pharisee” (p. 143)? To what aim did Jesus point us instead?
9. Dallas asserts, “Anger indulged, instead of simply waved off, always has in it an element of self-righteousness and vanity” (p. 149). Do you agree that’s always true? What situations, if any, do you recall when anger and frustration arose out of your being sure you were right or good or justified in some way? (For example, you became impatient because you felt you shouldn’t be forced to wait on someone.)
10. Dallas contrasts being “in lust” with “the goodness of the kingdom heart, . . . from [which] come deeds of respect and purity that characterize a sexuality as it was meant by God to be” (p. 168). How is lust the opposite of respect and purity? How does lusting for someone

hinder the development of respect for that person and purity in the relationship?

### INVESTING IN THE HEAVENS: ESCAPING THE DECEPTIONS OF REPUTATION AND WEALTH

11. What treasures do we forfeit when we focus on managing others' opinions of us and valuing possessions as highly as some people think we should? How does focusing on reputation and wealth make it more difficult to trust that "this present world is a perfectly safe place for us to be" (p. 208)?

### THE COMMUNITY OF PRAYERFUL LOVE

12. Dallas asserts that condemnation "knives into vulnerable areas at the core of our being. That is why it hurts so badly and at the same time why we rely upon it so heavily. The decision to step aside from it, neither giving it nor receiving it, is a major turning point in one's life" (p. 221). How is our life with God in the kingdom diminished by giving condemnation (such as letting people know we disapprove of them, thinking they're wrong, or thinking we're better)? By receiving it? What is recommended instead (pp. 236–239)?
13. Dallas writes, "What God gets out of our lives—and, indeed, what we get out of our lives—is simply the person we become. It is God's intention that we should grow into the kind of person he could empower to do

what we want to do” (p. 250). How does prayer (in a cosmic setting) help us grow into such a person?

14. What feelings might a person experience when making any of the five requests of the Lord’s Prayer (p. 258)? Or when anticipating that these requests will be granted?

### ON BEING A DISCIPLE, OR STUDENT, OF JESUS

15. As a disciple, I learn “from Jesus to live *my* life as he would live my life if he were I” (p. 283). Ponder how Jesus might live your life if he were you in relation to your job or volunteer position or other roles you play. How do you think this might look? If you wish, consider also how Jesus might do any of the following things in particular:

Practice a gentle but firm noncooperation with things that everyone knows to be wrong

Offer sensitive, nonofficial, nonintrusive, nonobsequious service to others

Cultivate inward attitudes of constant prayer for activities of the workplace

16. Dallas says the underlying problem in churches today is “nondiscipleship”: “It is not the much discussed moral failures, financial abuses, or the amazing general similarity between Christians and non-Christians. These are only effects of the underlying problem. The fundamental negative reality among Christian believers

now is their failure to be constantly learning how to live their lives in *The Kingdom Among Us*” (p. 301). Do you agree or disagree? If you agree, what is the next step for Christians? If you disagree, what do you think is the core problem in churches?

### A CURRICULUM FOR CHRISTLIKENESS

17. Have you had any experiences in which art or imagination, poetry or song, praise, prayer, or worship has helped enthrall your mind with God—when you saw God as lovable, as a “radiant, happy, friendly, accessible and totally competent being” (p. 329)?
18. A spiritual discipline helps us (1) withdraw from total dependence on the merely human or natural resources and (2) depend on the ultimate reality, which is God and his kingdom (p. 353). How do the disciplines of solitude, silence, fasting, secrecy (not letting good deeds be made known), study, and worship help us do these two things? What has been your experience of using disciplines such as these?
19. Consider the following points in implementing a curriculum of Christlikeness (pp. 371–72). How do they differ from the notion that you must somehow “fix” your church, that is, set it straight, or give up on it?

Pursue the two objectives of the curriculum ourselves: enthralling the mind with God and breaking the power of evil in our bodies.

“Prayerfully observe those we serve” to see who has already been “ravished by the kingdom of God.” Lead those persons through the curriculum too.

When speaking or teaching, talk about the gospel of the kingdom of the heavens (what Jesus taught) as we pray and love others.

### THE RESTORATION OF ALL THINGS

20. Dallas offers two descriptions of the vision of the after-life portion of our eternal life: “an everlasting enjoyment of life in God far transcending the earth and life on it” (p. 387) and “a limitlessly enhanced life, as a state of being more intensely alive in an existence which is both perfect fulfillment and yet also endless activity and newness” (p. 391). How does this vision differ from the way people often think about an afterlife in what they call “heaven”? What feelings does this different version evoke in you?

If you would like a more in-depth study guide to *The Divine Conspiracy* (chapter synopses, more questions, and other ways to practice the ideas presented in the book), check out *Dallas Willard’s Study Guide to The Divine Conspiracy*, by Jan Johnson, Keith Matthews, and Dallas Willard (HarperOne, 2001). Available wherever books are sold.