

Dwelling in Christ: Book Club Introduction

A Map for the Journey

A Few Things to Know Before You Begin

By Jonathan R. Bailey

I was sitting on a lounge chair overlooking the Pacific Ocean. My kids were toddlers, and I was up early to find a little sanity before the day began. In my hands was Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*.

Somewhere near the middle of the book, Underhill began describing what she called the mystic path: an ancient movement of purgation, illumination, and union. I probably understood half of what I was reading. The book is dense. But I was intrigued.

I didn't know it then, but that morning gave me the subject I would spend the next decade trying to understand—and live.

So I followed the trail: Scripture, the history of Christian spirituality, the lives of saints—official and unofficial. And of course, somewhere along the way, I realized I wasn't simply studying the Threefold Way.

I was walking it.

In other words, the questions I was researching were the ones I was trying to live:

- How do I sanely implement spiritual practices into my life?
- How does God use my suffering?
- What do I do with temptation?
- What happens when God begins exposing the false selves I have constructed?
- What does it mean not merely to believe in Christ, but to dwell with him?

A few years into writing the first manuscript, I sent a chapter to my friend Nathan Foster. He appreciated the content, but his most important response was a question:

"Where are you in this, Jon?"

I didn't want to be in it.

I was comfortable behind my desk, surrounded by my books and arranging other people's ideas into sentences. But Nathan's question stayed with me. Eventually, I began to understand that offering my life as a witness was different from making myself the center.

So the book you are about to read is not simply an explanation of an ancient map. It is my attempt to understand the path by walking it.

As you get started, here's something you should know.

The stages have a kind of dual meaning. William Butler Yeats once wrote, "The journey is both repetitious and progressive, we go both round and upward." That is a helpful way to understand the three stages.

We go round: Purgation, illumination, and union are not stages we complete and leave behind. They are recurring movements in our life with God. Throughout our lives, God continues to purify us, enlighten us, and draw us into deeper friendship with himself. We may experience a season of profound union only to find ourselves undergoing purgation again. New understanding reveals what we could not see before. Even deeper friendship with God can uncover places in us that still need to be transformed. In this sense, we return to all three movements again and again.

But we also go upward. The Threefold Way is progressive because, by grace, we really grow. Think of the stages of human life: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The boundaries between them are not always neat, but there is nevertheless real development from one stage to the next. Something similar happens in our life with God. Early on, purgation tends to dominate, as God exposes and heals what keeps us from love. As we mature, illumination becomes more characteristic, as we learn to see God, ourselves, and the world more accurately. And over time, union increasingly marks our lives, as friendship with God shapes who we are and how we love.

So perhaps the best picture of the Threefold Way is not a straight line, but a spiral. We return to purgation, illumination, and union throughout our lives, while the center of gravity gradually shifts as we mature. We go round, but we also go upward.

Ten years after that morning on the Pacific coast, I am less convinced than ever that spiritual transformation is something we master. I certainly haven't arrived at the end of the Threefold Way. If anything, I have come to see that there really is no end. Life with God is an ever-deepening movement into love.

One last thing the Threefold Way has given me is something I desperately needed: orientation.

Before I discovered it, many of my experiences with God felt random and disconnected. I had the puzzle pieces, but I didn't have the box top. I could see individual pieces—suffering, temptation, spiritual practices, moments of illumination, experiences of God's nearness—but I couldn't always see how they fit together.

The Threefold Way gave me the box top.

It gave me language for experiences I was already having and helped me recognize them as parts of a larger journey of transformation.

As you read, you may begin to recognize yourself already somewhere on this path. Perhaps you'll find language for experiences with God you've never quite known how to name. Perhaps some of the pieces will begin to fit together.

That's my hope for you as you read—and I'm grateful we get to walk a little of this path together through the Book Club.

Keep walking,



Reading Schedule

BOOK ONE

Dwelling in Christ
 by Jonathan R. Bailey

Facilitator
 Jonathan R. Bailey

WEEK	DATE	READING ASSIGNMENT	PODCAST
Prep Week	Monday, October 5	Book Club Introduction	
Week One	Monday, October 12	Chapters 1 and 2 (3–36)	Podcast 1
Week Two	Monday, October 19	Chapters 3 and 4 (37–71)	Podcast 2
Week Three	Monday, October 26	Chapter 5 (73–89)	Podcast 3
Week Four	Monday, November 2	Chapters 6 and 7 (90–119)	Podcast 4
Week Five	Monday, November 9	Chapters 8 and 9 (121–153)	Podcast 5
Week Six	Monday, November 16	Chapter 10 (154–168)	Podcast 6
LIVE Q&A Webinar	Tuesday, November 17	1 pm Eastern <i>LIVE (will be recorded and posted later)</i>	