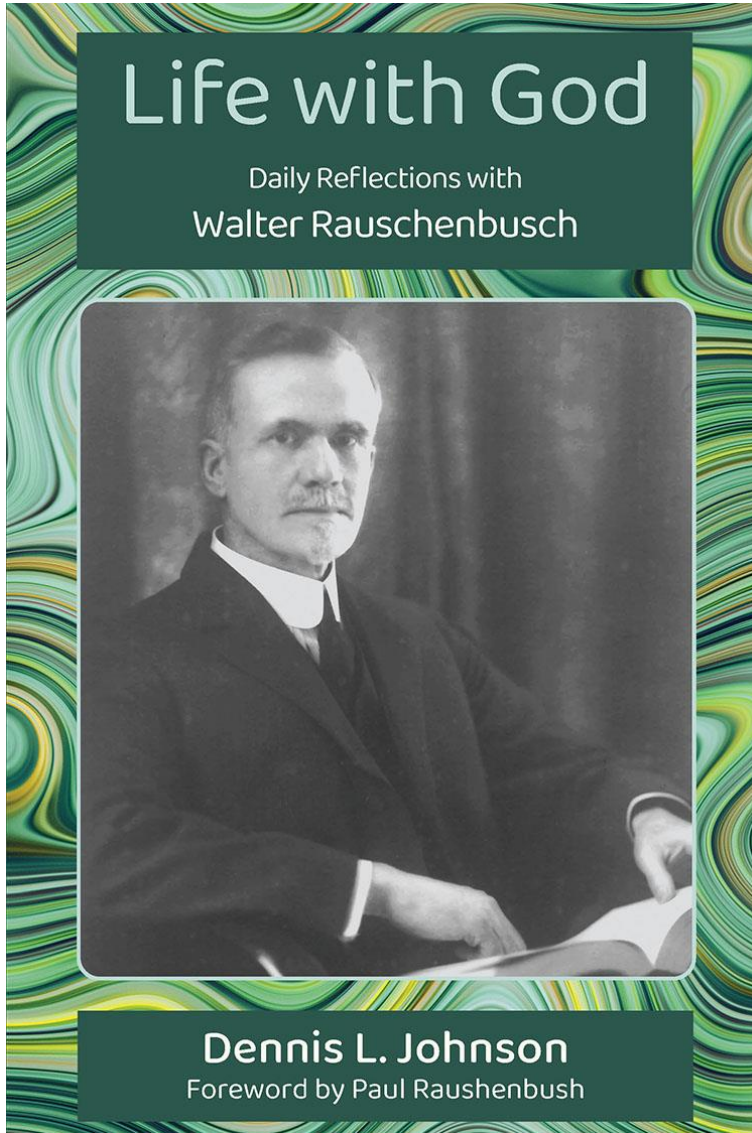


Reflection Guide



*O God, you have been
at our right hand and our left,
before us and behind us,
above us and below us,
about us and within us,
and every fiber
of our mystic nature
has been aquiver with God.*

Walter Rauschenbusch
September 19, 1910
Rochester Seminary Chapel Prayer

Prepared by Dennis L. Johnson for use with *Life with God: Daily Reflections with Walter Rauschenbusch* (Nurturing Faith, 2025). To order visit goodfaithmedia.org or call (615) 627-7763 ext. 1. Also available at Amazon and Barnes & Noble.



REFLECTION GUIDE



AN OPENING WORD

The late Irish theologian and poet John O'Donohue said, “A book is a path of words which takes the heart in new directions.”¹ My hope is, as a path of words, *Life with God* will take your heart to new directions in the footsteps of Jesus with Walter Rauschenbusch as the guide for the journey. This Reflection Guide for *Life with God* is designed for use by individuals and small groups (Circle of Spiritual Companions), and the guide may be helpful to a church using *Life with God* for a congregation-wide journey of self-examination and discernment as it explores its congregational identity and mission. The intent of the guide is to stimulate and cultivate personal and group reflection to deepen inward and outward life with God in the spirit and image of Jesus Christ for the sake of others.

BEGIN THE JOURNEY WHERE YOU ARE

The questions asked in this guide are for your personal self-examination and can help direct your thoughts, questions, and observations which you might choose to record in a journal to keep track of your spiritual growth and formation. Your journal entries could include your faith questions and theological ponderings arising from your reflections and interactions with Rauschenbusch on life with God.

Before you begin those reflections, however, the first questions to ponder are:

When you examine your life at this time, how do you describe it?

What adjective(s) would you choose to fill the blank: “I am living a _____ life?”

Are you content to have the rest of your life remain as you describe it today? Why/why not?

How ready are you to explore the growing edges of life with God in the footsteps of Jesus?

Are you prepared to be conformed to the likeness of Christ for the sake of others? What, if anything, holds you back?



LIFE WITH GOD IN THREE DIMENSIONS

As indicated in the book’s Introduction and its layout, life with God is a single if with three dimensions. The three dimensions are interrelated and of equal importance. They comprise the wholeness and fullness of the life with God Jesus lived and to which he calls us.

Life with God in Solitude (pp. 21-82)

This section turns your attention inward to “the castle of my soul” where your soul “retreats from the strife” around you (p. 22).

Life with God in Service (pp. 84-144)

In this section, attention turns from self to service and seeking first the kingdom of God. “Whoever uncouples the religious and the social life has not understood Jesus. Whoever sets any bounds for the reconstructive power of the religious life over the social relations and human institutions, to that extent denies the faith of the Master” (p. 90).

¹*Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, John O'Donohue, (New York: Harper/Collins, 2024), 25.

Life with God in Solidarity (pp. 146-195)

This third dimension opens you up to the affirmation that in God and in life with God, all humanity is connected. “Whenever Jesus looked at people collectively, he saw and felt unity and solidarity. To him sin consists in that which divides, in war and hate, in pride and lies, in injustice and greed” (p. 150).

The Way of the Cross (pp. 197-210)

Jesus’s three-dimensional life with God converges in the cross which is the revealer of Christ’s “glorious and eternal love for humanity” (p. 208). Jesus summons us to follow his footsteps in the way of the cross.

Your Child Comes to Thank You (pp. 212-215)

Life with God in solitude, in service, and in solidarity is saturated with thanksgiving.

BE PREPARED BEFORE YOU BEGIN

More than a century after his death, Walter Rauschenbusch offers a Christian spirituality that is not for the faint of heart or those wanting a happy-clappy Christianity. *Life with God* is not a “baby formula” devotional.

Rauschenbusch discomforts the typical, popular, pietized Christianity and individualized spirituality; he disrupts prevalent cultural and economic assumptions; he disturbs self-serving understandings of peace and justice issues.

He presses us to ask ourselves individually and collectively, and probe deeply, such questions as:

What does it mean to follow Jesus? What is the good news of Jesus Christ and what does living it out in contemporary life demand? What is the kingdom Jesus proclaimed and embodied, the reign of God he lived and died for? What is the kingdom of evil? What is sin? What does it mean to be the church, the body of Christ in the world today? What does it mean to take the Bible seriously? What does individual and national righteousness mean and mandate? What does it mean for the government to be of the people, by the people and for the people? What is the being and doing of a Christianized Christian and a Christianized church?

Rauschenbusch helps us discern Christ-centered responses to questions like these, and he guides us into being shaped in Christlikeness and walking in the footsteps of Jesus with courage and compassion. He continues to speak to us insightful and formative wisdom for the living of our days.



TIME ALONE: A FORMATIVE PATTERN

The daily pattern for each reading is to prepare, to ponder, to pray, and to practice. Your heart is prepared by contemplatively dwelling in the words of scripture. Your mind pauses to ponder reflectively the words of Rauschenbusch. Your soul opens to pray afresh the prayers first offered by Rauschenbusch over a century ago. Your will and strength resolve to practice loyally and lovingly what God is calling you to be and do. Prepare. Ponder. Pray. Practice.

While that is the pattern for each reflection, you will need to establish a plan, a rhythm, for your daily reading. Do you want to begin with the first reflection and reflect your way to the final reflection over a six-month discipline? Do you want to rotate your daily reflection each week with, for example, the rhythm:

Monday: Solitude
Tuesday: Service
Wednesday: Solidarity
Thursday: Solitude
Friday: Service
Saturday: Solidarity

Or you may be inclined to a less structured rhythm, more meandering your way through the book by randomly selecting your reflection for each day.

Or maybe you are at a point where, for some reason, you sense the need to spend more extended time and focused attention on dimensions which you avoid because you would rather dwell where you are most comfortable. Perhaps you are at time in your spiritual formation when you need more time in solitude, or in service, or in solidarity. Go where you need to be, not only where you prefer to be.

Do keep in mind that particular readings may need more than one day to fully digest. Spend as much time and as many days as you need to allow those words to complete their formative work on you. Move on when you have extracted all the nourishment you can gain in feeding on the Word and words that day. The point is to dig deeper (formational reading), not skim the surface to cover a lot of ground (informational reading). The quality of your reflection is more important than the quantity of reflections you cover over time. Don't let the calendar control the process. Let the Spirit guide the pace.

The book is not designed with a right or wrong reading plan in mind. Choose the rhythm you need at this point in your life with God. And be prepared that with some of the Rauschenbusch reflections, whatever your reading plan, you will resonate and be comforted. Others will bring you discomfort and resistance. You will warm up to some and be troubled by others. Both responses—comfort and discomfort—are valuable and can shape you more in the image of Christ when you read for spiritual formation.

Simply put, let the path of words in *Life with God* take your heart in new directions to be shaped more fully in the image of Christ for service to others in memory of Christ with love and solidarity.

TIME ALONE: FORMATIONAL READING

We gain spiritual sustenance and wisdom not simply by *what* we read but more importantly by *how* we read. Formational reading is for the sake of spiritual formation.

Usually, our approach to what we read is information oriented, which is how we have been taught to read. Spiritual formation has a different reading orientation and method. Formational reading is a spiritual way of reading in which the listening heart of the reader encounters words in the text that direct us instead of our thoughts directing the texts. The desirable approach to the daily readings in *Life with God* is that you practice formational reading.

Formative reading with the eyes of the heart opens us up to be spiritually shaped by that word. Such a formational way of reading is an approach to scripture which can also be applied to our reading of other rich material, such as the writings of Rauschenbusch which are part of the great storehouse of our Christian family documents.

Formative reading is prayerful reading. As you enter each day your time alone for reflection:

- ❖ Go to a quiet place to meet God and be met by God.
- ❖ Spend time in silence, letting go of anything that would keep you from listening with your mind in your heart.
- ❖ Enter the time to *let the words read you* more than you read the words. Let the texts control you rather than you try to control the texts.
- ❖ If your mind wanders at any time, don't get frustrated. Notice to where it wanders. Our minds do not wander arbitrarily. Minds wander purposefully to a burden, a desire, a hope, a concern. Sometimes the burden is significant, sometimes it becomes a matter of prayer.
- ❖ Read the full scripture passage (not just the verse quoted) and the Rauschenbusch passage slowly, first to get an overall sense of what is being said.

- ❖ Meditatively read them a second time, allowing your thoughts to settle on and dwell on certain phrases or words that have special meaning to you or attract your attention or catch your imagination.
- ❖ Read the texts a third time even more slowly and meditatively and then ask yourself some questions.

TIME ALONE: FORMATIVE QUESTIONS

During the dwelling and pondering ask: “As I listen...

How is my life being touched right now?

What am I being told about God, about Jesus, about the Spirit, about the church, about society, about human beings, about others, about myself?

With what am I resonating or what am I resisting, and why? What comforts me or what bothers me, and why?

What am I being called to be or become or do?

How am I to be a sign and servant of the kingdom/reign of God?

Is there encouragement or an invitation to me here, not so much for some long-term project but for something I might do or be in the next day or so?

TIME ALONE: FORMATIVE PRAYER

After you clarify what the texts are inviting you to be or do, resolve to put that invitation into practice. Close your time alone by praying, aloud or silently, the prayer by Rauschenbusch provided with each day's reflection. You may wish to add to his prayer from over a century ago your own words, asking for God to help you to put into practice fully, freely and fearlessly the invitation you have received.

Each day with each reading, prepare, ponder, pray and practice.



TIME TOGETHER: A CIRCLE OF SPIRITUAL COMPANIONS

A life with God requires time alone and time together, which Rauschenbusch displayed in his own spiritual formation. He clearly witnessed to the formative importance of communal life when he took the initiative in 1887 during his Hell's Kitchen pastorate to meet weekly with two friends, Leighton Williams, pastor of the Amity Baptist Church, and Nathaniel Schmidt, pastor of the Swedish Baptist Church. They gathered each Sunday afternoon to focus on the practice of inward spiritual disciplines of reflection, contemplation, and prayer, followed by communion. “I remember with special joy the communion services,” Rauschenbusch recalled. “A tranquil spirit of reverence and contemplation, a deep reverence toward our Lord, a sense of his real presence, and unusual joy in Christian fellowship invited the soul to rest and true prayer.” Winthrop Hudson records, “Through the discipline of weekly study, discussion, mutual criticism, and common worship they sought to clarify their thinking, deepen their devotion, and chart a course by which they might exert a united influence.”² Having familiarity with Ignatius and Jesuit spirituality, they proclaimed themselves to be a new little “Society of Jesus.”

With *Life with God* as your reflective material, form a “Circle of Spiritual Companions” (CSC), a small group of 2-6 persons committed to practicing the daily reflections and coming together to share each other's experience with the readings and to encourage one another in the process of becoming more Christlike. The recommendation is to gather twice a month for six months. Depending on the size of your group, the time together may range from 60 to 120 minutes. Obviously, a group of 2 will require less time than a group

² *Walter Rauschenbusch: Selected Writings*, Winthrop Hudson, editor, (Paulist Press, 1984). 12, 18.

of 6. Together determine the plan and rhythm for your daily reading. (See the possible options given above in “Time Alone.”)

The CSC does not have a leader. Someone is asked by the group to be the convener who reminds group members of upcoming meetings, leads the group in the opening unison reading and silence, protects the atmosphere of prayerful listening for the group, keeps watch on time to make sure each person has had a chance to share and, if necessary, calls everyone back to a period of silence when sharing or responding goes on too long or distracts the discussion, and guides the closing silence and some reflection on the session. The same person could be the convener for each session, or the group may choose to rotate the task from meeting to meeting so each participant has the opportunity to serve as convener.

How do we spend our time together?

The format for the Circle of Spiritual Companions is simple:

CENTERING (5 minutes)

The convener lights a candle to represent the presence of Christ and asks the group to read in unison “This Is Indeed the Eternal Life” (p. 40). After the reading the group settles in a worshipful silence.

SHARING (up to 15 minutes)

Moving out of the silence, the convener asks that each person take a turn sharing what experiences, insights, thoughts, challenges were given by the scripture and Rauschenbusch readings from the past two weeks. The sharing time includes three parts: speaking, listening, and responding.

- ❖ *Speaking.* In turn going around the circle, each participant may respond to one or more of the following questions, speaking uninterrupted for between 5 and 10 minutes:

In the scripture and readings, with what did you resonate? What did you resist?

What has God been leading you to explore, to understand, to experience at this point in time?

Where is God in your life now, today?

What have you resolved to be or do as a result of your daily reflections?

- ❖ *Listening.* While the speaker is sharing, the other members are listening, entirely attentive to and focused on what is being expressed. When the speaker finishes sharing, enter a time of prayerful silence and reflection (1-2 minutes).
- ❖ *Responding.* The convener breaks the silence and invites the rest of the group to briefly give encouragement, care and affirmation to the speaker. The members may also wish to ask questions to clarify something the speaker shared—not for discussion or disagreement; only for clarification to better understand something the speaker shared. This is also a time for members to share insights gained during the presentation and silent reflection times. Allow 5 minutes for this responding. After this brief period of responding, the group returns to silence (1-2 minutes) to pray for the speaker and awaits the next person to share after the convener breaks the silence.
- ❖ REPEAT THE SPEAKING, LISTENING AND RESPONDING as each person takes a turn to share.

REVIEWING (Up to 10 minutes)

After all have had a chance to share, the convener, if time permits, may ask the group to review how the time together went and to make suggestions or raise concerns about the process. If the group wishes to rotate the convener task, this would be the time to identify who will serve as convener during the next gathering.

CLOSING (5 minutes)

The group returns to worshipful silence. At the end of the silence the convener may choose to close by reading a Rauschenbusch prayer from one of the past two weeks readings.

Walking the spiritual path in the company of others tends to cultivate meaningful relationships that endure for years to come. The shared journey not only contributes to the spiritual formation and wholeness of the individual, but also can enhance the vitality and health of a congregation.



CONGREGATIONAL TIME TOGETHER

When a congregation enters into a period of spiritual formation and discernment, *Life with God* provides a structured resource for nurturing personal spiritual growth, strengthening bonds of fellowship, and discerning where God is calling individuals and the congregation to be more incarnational of the Christ-spirit on earth, more instrumental for the kingdom of God, and more intentional about human solidarity. The design of Time Alone and Time Together can be creatively adapted to a congregation's identity, setting, programs and process. The Time Alone pattern and CSC Time Together format can continue to be followed as described earlier.

Reflection questions should be added to those already included for reflection in personal and group time.

What is being said to our church, about our church, for our church?

What is God calling us to be or do as the incarnation of the Christ-spirit on earth?

What would it look like and what shape would it take for your church, your spiritual community, your fellowship of saints, to devote an extended period of time to life with God in solitude, life with God in service and life with God in solidarity?

Here are three possible routes for congregational journeys.

LIFE WITH GOD IN OUR LIFE TOGETHER

*"O God, make us fit to house the Lord of Glory.
May Christ be no homeless wanderer,
so far as we are concerned,
but may he find in us a resting place and temple."
Walter Rauschenbusch*

Use all the reflections in *Life with God* during the long season following Pentecost, which is called Ordinary Time. Ideally the experience would be a six-month journey with weekly or bi-weekly group gatherings; however, that timetable can be shortened or lengthened, if necessary, to meet the church's needs and fit the church calendar.

Participants commit to personal devotional reading in time alone each day and then spend time together for group reflection and sharing. Time together as ministry teams, as church leadership, as boards and committees, as Bible Study groups, as books groups, as educational hour classes, as vocational support groups, and other small group gatherings can be formative experiences to cultivate life with God more intentionally as a spiritual community, more incarnationally in society, and more interconnectedly with all God's creation.

CHRISTIANIZING THE CHURCH: A THIRTY-DAY CONGREGATIONAL JOURNEY

*"If we inquire for the marks of the true Christian church,
the first and incomparably the most searching test is this,
whether it has lived up to the original intention and spirit of its Founder."
Walter Rauschenbusch*

This journey is 24 days of personal devotional reading and 4 Sunday group gatherings. The selected daily readings are related to the Christian church.

Week 1

Re-establishing the Teachings of Jesus, 59
The Final Word of Christian Minds, 60
Worship God Demands, 99
Preachers, Pastors and Prophets, 107
Flowerpot Religion, 108
Character and Community Transformation, 117
Sunday Circle of Spiritual Companions

Week 2

Has the Church Lost Its Saltiness?, 119
Teaching of the Church and
Ethics of Jesus, 120
Has the Church Had its Day?, 121
The Most Searching Test of the Church, 122
Christianized Commerce or Commercialized
Church?, 123
Make the Trial, 124
Sunday CSC

Week 3

Blemishes on the Body of Christ, 125
The Church Has Not Kept Pace, 126
Church and Money Power, 127
American Church in the Hour of Trial, 128
Church: Help or Hindrance?, 129
The Spirit of Jesus, 130
Sunday CSC

Week 4

Principles & Practices of Koinonia, 156
Putting Our Feet Under the Same Table, 157
Shoulder to Shoulder, 183
God's Pioneers are Always Few, 131
The Church is Where the Spirit Is, 132
A New Apostolate, 134
Sunday CSC

THE WAY OF THE CROSS: A CONGREGATIONAL LENTEN JOURNEY

*Our Master, by the loneliness of your loving life,
by the shame of your sufferings,
by the agony of your loving cries upon the cross,
we vow anew to take our cross upon us and follow you
and to carry forward the great mission
for which your life was spent and your blood was shed.*
Walter Rauschenbusch

This journey takes place during the 40 days of Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending Holy Saturday. Sundays are not included in the 40 days but will be used for Spiritual Companions Group gatherings. The selected sequence of readings is:

Lent 1

(Ash Wednesday) Holy Fortitude, 210
Knowledge and the Eternal Life, 32
This Is Indeed the Eternal Life, 40
A Cry of Need, 51
Sunday Circle of Spiritual Companions

Lent 2

The Rarest Secret of All, 61
Deceitfulness of Riches, 63
The Heart of Jesus's Heart, 90
The Reign of Hate, 65
What Hate Really Is, 66

Kingdom Here & Now, 102
Sunday CSC

Lent 3

The Mountain was There, 100
The Great Thing, 118
The Most Daring Faith, 133
Wherever Jesus Looked, 150
Does It Draw People Together?, 151
Our Business, 154
Sunday CSC

Lent 4

Love Creates Fellowship, 155
Justice, 163
The Charm & Curse of Riches, 173
The Pronunciamento & Platform of Christianity,
179
Solidarity of Hate & Horror, 188
Forgive & Repair Torn Tissues, 177
Sunday CSC

Lent 5

A Reign of Fear Is Never a Reign of God, 165
A Nation of Backsliders, 166
The Process Is Never Complete, 186
Christmas and the Cross, 112
Jesus and the Social Movement, 197
Capitalism and the Common Good, 198
Sunday CSC

Lent 6

Jesus, the Solidarist, 199
Let Jesus Speak, 200
Go in the Direction of the Master, 201
Law and Order, 202
If, Then, 203
What It Comes Down To, 204
Sunday CSC (Palm/Passion Sunday)

Holy Week

Economic Inequality & Political Equality, 205
Yeasty with Privilege, 206
Crossing Racial Boundary Lines, 207
Not Only Mercy, but Justice, 208
Dare We?, 209
No Smooth Road, 187
Easter Sunday CSC



A CLOSING WORD

As expressed in my opening word, the hope is that *Life with God* will take your heart to a deeper sense of God's presence within you, a growing attentiveness to God's presence and activity in the world beyond you, and a fresher encounter with and experience of Jesus Christ that will spiritually form you in his image, with Walter Rauschenbusch as your guide for the journey. This *Reflection Guide* is offered for mapping your time alone in personal devotion and time with spiritual companions in reflective conversation.

“There are still ardent hearts,
impatient of the slow, toiling ascent
of a faithful, humble Christian life;
hearts that long for some mighty sanctifying power
to carry them, as with the sweep of an eagle's pinions,
out of the depressed,
up-and-down experience
of the average Christian
into the clear air of a higher life with God.
There are still some who would fain
draw aside the veil of the finite
and attempt to behold the Infinite One face to face.”

Walter Rauschenbusch
Servant of God
Our Brother in Christ

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR FURTHER CONNECTION WITH RAUSCHENBUSCH

To Live in God: Daily Reflections with Walter Rauschenbusch, Dennis L. Johnson (Judson Press, 2020).
The Kingdom Is Always but Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch, Christopher H. Evans (Eerdmans, 2004).
The Reception of Walter Rauschenbusch: The Response of His Readers, Wm. L. Pitts, Jr. (Mercer, 2018).
Walter Rauschenbusch: American Reformer, Paul M. Minus (Macmillan, 1988).
Walter Rauschenbusch: Select Writings, Winthrop Hudson, editor (Paulist Press, 1984).