

Watchfulness

RECOVERING A LOST SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

Brian G. Hedges



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Watchfulness

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To Dad

I want a principle within
Of watchful, godly fear,
A sensibility of sin,
A pain to feel it near.
I want the first approach to feel
Of pride or wrong desire,
To catch the wandering of my will,
And quench the kindling fire.

From thee that I no more may stray,
No more thy goodness grieve,
Grant me the filial awe, I pray,
The tender conscience give.
Quick as the apple of an eye,
O God, my conscience make;
Awake my soul when sin is nigh,
And keep it still awake.

Almighty God of truth and love,
To me thy power impart;
The mountain from my soul remove,
The hardness from my heart.
O may the least omission pain
My reawakened soul,
And drive me to that blood again,
Which makes the wounded whole.

—CHARLES WESLEY, 1749

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Foreword

Every once in awhile I read a book and think, “I wish I had written this book.” This is one of those books. The funny thing is, I *could* have written it. But it’s a good thing I didn’t because it wouldn’t have been nearly as thorough or helpful as Brian Hedges’s book.

Here’s what I mean. Back in 1991, as I was finishing the original edition of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, J. I. Packer graciously agreed to write the foreword. After he had done so, he encouraged me to consider including a chapter on “watching.” (Okay, so I might have written a *chapter* on watchfulness, not an entire book.)

It was too close to publication to add that much material, but it wouldn’t have mattered if I’d been given the time. I wasn’t even sure what Packer was referring to by “watching.” As an expert on the Puritans, he was, of course, encouraging me to write about a subject often addressed by authors from the beginning of the Puritan period, such as Richard Rogers, all the way through to those at the end of the era, such as John Bunyan.

Dr. Packer assumed, since I quoted so frequently from the Puritans in my *Spiritual Disciplines* manuscript—especially

John Owen, John Flavel, John Bunyan, and Jonathan Edwards, not to mention later writers with the Puritan spirit, such as Robert Murray M'Cheyne and Charles Spurgeon—that I was familiar with their respective writings on “watching.” The fact of the matter was that I had read few of those particular works. I certainly hadn’t given sufficient thought to the biblical texts on watchfulness in a way that prepared me to write a biblical theology on the theme and apply it to the lives of my readers.

Reading this book has made me thankful that Brian Hedges has done both. In the volume you are holding, he has brought together the biblical teaching on watching over our souls and seasoned it with insights from great works by godly men who were both passionate and practical about watchfulness.

This book is needed. It fills a space on the subject of the Christian life that has been empty far too long.

—Donald S. Whitney
Professor of Biblical Spirituality
The Southern Baptist Seminary,
Louisville, Kentucky

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I am grateful to the elders and members of Fulkerson Park Baptist Church for continuing to provide generous time off for writing.

To Holly and the kids: you are God's best earthly blessings in my life. Thank you for cheerfully supporting my calling to serve others through both the spoken and written word.

Thanks to Don Whitney not only for writing the foreword but for charting a course for studying Puritan literature on the spiritual disciplines in his excellent book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*.

Finally, I have dedicated this book to my father, Ronnie Hedges. His prayerful, Christ-centered watchfulness continues to bear the fruit of humble integrity, winsome holiness, gentle

wisdom, and patient love. Thank you, Dad, for watching your life and doctrine and for always pointing me and others to Christ.

Introduction

The Lost Spiritual Discipline

In recent decades the evangelical church has seen a resurging interest in the practical aspects of Christian spirituality. Books on spiritual transformation and the spiritual disciplines line our shelves. Many of these are helpful, offering wise instruction on practices such as meditation, prayer, and fasting.¹ But one discipline rarely appears in these catalogs of devotional habits: watchfulness.

Yet watchfulness is as necessary to a healthy spiritual life as meditation and prayer. Jesus tells His disciples to “watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation” (Matt. 26:41). The letters of Paul, Peter, and John sound the same note, urging us to exercise moral vigilance and watchful prayer (1 Cor. 16:13; Gal. 6:1; Col. 4:2; 1 Tim. 4:16; 1 Peter 4:7; 2 John 8). And Hebrews commands mutual watchfulness and exhortation

1. Some of my favorites are Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014); John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004); Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014); and David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2016). On spiritual transformation, see my book *Christ Formed in You: The Power of the Gospel for Personal Change* (Wapwallopen, Pa.: Shepherd Press, 2010).

while also reminding us to obey those leaders who keep watch over our souls (Heb. 3:12; 13:17).

Watchfulness for All Seasons

All believers, regardless of their station and season in life, need to be watchful. Consider Beth, a married woman in her thirties with three children, six years old and under. She loves Jesus and thrived in her walk with Christ during her college and single years. But the domestic, often mundane challenges of motherhood are more difficult than Beth expected. She feels distant from God. She longs for the days when she could quietly spend hours over her Bible and journal. The chaos of corralling her children from one activity to another makes it hard for her to focus on spiritual things. Beth needs to become more attentive to her state of heart and learn how to stay connected to Jesus throughout the day.

Nathan, on the other hand, is a college-aged believer struggling with pornography. He feels terrible when he fails and quickly repents. While he tries to read the Bible and pray every day, he is missing something in his spiritual regimen. His use of time lacks intentionality. His quiet times are disconnected from his other habits in solitude. Despite regular sin struggles, he underestimates the danger of temptation. Like the disciples in the garden, Nathan needs to learn how to watch and pray against temptation's subtle power.

Craig is a spiritually mature Christian man entering midlife. He has been married for twenty-five years and has four children in middle school and high school. He is a veteran lay leader in his church and enjoys a close walk with God. But Craig is saddled with many burdens, and his emotional resilience isn't what it used to be. He faces new temptations in his

fifties and needs Jesus more than ever. Paul's words, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall," echo in his mind. Craig is searching for practical ways to put this into practice.²

While their seasons of life are quite different, Beth, Nathan, and Craig have a common need: the consistent exercise of vigilance over their hearts and active dependence on the Lord's sustaining grace. As varied as their temptations are, Paul's exhortation applies: "Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong" (1 Cor. 16:13).

The Puritans on Watchfulness

Past believers understood the need for watchfulness and spoke of it often. This was especially true of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English Puritans and their evangelical heirs in the following centuries. In their sermons, letters, diaries, and manuals on spirituality, these saints commended the practice of watching along with better-known disciplines like meditation and prayer.

Richard Rogers, for example, was an early Puritan who published a substantial book called *Seven Treatises* in 1602.³ Divided into seven parts, the nine-hundred-page compendium

2. While these are fictional examples, they reflect the challenges and temptations common to hundreds of believers in similar life situations.

3. The fuller title is *SEVEN TREATISES, CONTAINING SUCH DIRECTION AS IS GATHERED OUT OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES, leading and guiding to true happiness, both in this life, and in the life to come: and may be called the practice of Christianity*. One scholarly source calls Rogers "the most influential of the spiritual authors," noting that *Seven Treatises* "went through six editions between 1603 and 1630, with a further five editions of an abridgment by Stephen Egerton.... The influence of *Seven treatises* can be traced in the lives of a whole generation of Puritan laymen." Patrick Collinson, Arnold Hunt, and Alexandra Walsam, "Religious Publishing in England 1557–1640," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, vol. 4, 1557–1695, ed. John

on Christian living explores the full spectrum of religious life and experience, from questions of conversion and assurance to the public and private means of pursuing godliness, and from daily directions for walking with God to the various hindrances and privileges of the true Christian—and more.⁴ In the third treatise, Rogers discusses “the means whereby a godly life is helped and continued” and divides these helps into two categories: public and private. The private means include things you might expect, like meditation, prayer, and fasting. But first on Rogers’s list of private helps is watchfulness, “which is worthily set in the first place, seeing it is as an eye to all the rest, to see them well and rightly used.”⁵

The implication is clear: neglect watchfulness and you will hinder other spiritual practices. Watchfulness is the whetstone of the spiritual disciplines, the one practice that keeps the other habits sharp.

In their teaching on watchfulness, the Puritans commonly quoted Proverbs 4:23 (KJV): “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.” John Flavel wrote an entire book on this verse, *A Saint Indeed (or, The Great Work*

Barnard, D. F. McKenzie, and Maureen Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 42. Subsequent citations from *Seven Treatises* (London, 1616).

4. In the second of three addresses to Christian readers in the *Seven Treatises*, fellow Puritan Ezekiel Culverwell says, “In my simple opinion it might in one principal respect be called the Anatomy of the soul, wherein not only the great and principal parts are laid open, but every vein and little nerve are so discovered, that we may as it were, with the eye behold, as the right constitution of the whole and every part of a true Christian; so the manifold defects and imperfections thereof.” Rogers, *Seven Treatises*, A4v–A5r.

5. Rogers, *Seven Treatises*, 243. See also Richard Rogers, *Holy Helps for a Godly Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 41. This is a modernized edition of Rogers’s third treatise. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations are from this edition.

of a Christian Opened and Pressed).⁶ “The greatest difficulty in conversion is to win the heart to God and the greatest difficulty after conversion is to keep the heart with God,” writes Flavel on the opening page.⁷ What follows is a tour de force in Christian spirituality, a traveler’s guide that maps and marks twelve seasons of Christian experience through which the heart must be watched and kept.

Some of the most helpful companions in my journey have been John Owen (1616–1683), John Bunyan (1628–1688), and Robert Murray M’Cheyne (1813–1843). Owen was a non-conformist pastor and theologian during the Puritan era. For nearly two decades his books on mortification, temptation, indwelling sin, apostasy, spiritual-mindedness, communion with God, the glory of Christ, the evidences of faith, and the work of the Holy Spirit have been the richest portion of my devotional diet. Several years ago I noticed that Owen frequently includes watching alongside meditation and prayer in describing the means for mortifying sin, nourishing spiritual affections, and cultivating communion with God. For example, in his treatise *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*, Owen says, “It is no ordinary nor easy thing to preserve our affections pure, entire, and steady, in their vigorous adherence unto spiritual things.... Watchfulness, prayer, faith in exercise, and a daily examination of ourselves, are required hereunto. For want of a due attendance unto these things, and

6. This book has now been modernized and republished as *A Treatise on Keeping the Heart* and is widely available in various formats online. My quotations will be from volume 5 in *The Works of John Flavel* (1820; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968).

7. John Flavel, *Saint Indeed*, in *Works*, 5:423.

that, with respect unto this end...many, even before they are aware, die away as to all power and vigour of spiritual life.”⁸

Owen mentions watching dozens of times in his works, and his well-known treatise *Of Temptation* provides the most helpful study of watchfulness I have found.⁹ Owen was an adept soul-physician, an expert in the pathology of sin, who diagnosed the subtleties of temptation and skillfully prescribed the biblical cure to “watch and pray.” We’ll return to Owen often in this book, mining this treasure trove of rich, practical, gospel wisdom for all it’s worth.

Watching on the Journey and in the Battle

My second companion has been John Bunyan, whose allegories *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and *The Holy War* have furnished thousands of believers with powerful, memorable illustrations of Christian doctrine and experience. *The Pilgrim’s Progress* vividly depicts the Christian life as a journey. Bunyan’s story of Christian’s odyssey to the Celestial City first captured my imagination when I was a child. It is a picture gallery of the “molestations, troubles, wars, captivities, cries, groans, frights, and fears”¹⁰ common to spiritual experience. In its pages Bunyan illustrates the practical need for watchfulness against the numerous dangers that beset us on the way to heaven: discouragement (the Slough of Despond), temptation (the Valley

8. John Owen, *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Goold (1862; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 7:486.

9. John Owen, *Of Temptation: The Nature and Power Of It; The Danger of Entering Into It; and The Means of Preventing that Danger*, in *Works*, 6:87–151.

10. As Mr. Sagacity describes Christian’s journey to Christiana in part 2. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1895; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 203.

of Humiliation), worldliness (Vanity Fair), despair (Giant Despair and Doubting Castle), and sloth (the Enchanted Ground). *The Holy War* portrays the spiritual battle waged by King Shaddai and his son Emmanuel against Diabolus and his horde for the city of Mansoul. In this allegory Bunyan teaches the believer's need to guard and fortify his or her soul once it has been reclaimed by grace.

Bunyan knew his Bible well and plundered its imagery in these books, pressing upon his readers both the warnings and promises of Scripture. I have used Bunyan's allegories generously in this book, hoping not only to explain but also to illustrate the nature, need, and practice of watchfulness.

“Make Me as Holy as a Pardoned Sinner Can Be Made”

My third companion in learning about watchfulness is Robert Murray M'Cheyne, a nineteenth-century Scottish pastor who died when he was only twenty-nine years old. A singular anointing marked his ministry. He often prayed, “Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be made.”¹¹ *The Memoir & Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, edited by M'Cheyne's friend Andrew Bonar, is a spiritual classic that continues to stir the hearts of believers today.

An excerpt from M'Cheyne's diary puts hands and feet on the actual practice of watchfulness. In the final year of his life, M'Cheyne wrote an insightful examination of his heart and life, which he labeled “Personal Reformation.” M'Cheyne mentioned watching three times in these pages, including this

11. *Memoir & Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, ed. Andrew A. Bonar (1892; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 159.

statement: “If I would be filled with the Spirit, I feel I must read the Bible more, pray more, and watch more.”¹²

M’Cheyne’s diary is yet another indication that past believers considered watchfulness a staple component of their spiritual lives. As we’ll see in chapter 3, M’Cheyne’s spiritual regimen shows what the earnest, Christ-centered, grace-driven practice of self-examination and watchfulness looks like in daily life.

If you share M’Cheyne’s passion for holiness, watchfulness will be crucial to your growth in sanctification. If you do not burn for holiness, you are already off your watch.

A Road Map for Watchfulness

I’ve organized this book around a journalist’s five investigative questions—what, why, how, when, and who¹³—and these questions correspond to the book’s five chapters.

Think of these questions as key locations on a road map for watchfulness. With each leg of the journey, I have aimed to answer each question with a combination of meditation, illustration, application, and relevant quotations from the best historic literature on the subject. My primary conversation partners have been Owen, Bunyan, and M’Cheyne, but I’ve also quoted other Puritan authors and have included numerous sidebars that feature additional insights, directions, and examples, drawn mostly from Puritan authors.¹⁴ Each chapter

12. Bonar, *Memoir & Remains*, 154. See appendix 1 for the complete “Personal Reformation.”

13. Sometimes “where” is also included in this list. I’m conflating “when” and “where” into one category.

14. In many of these quotations, I have updated the spelling and punctuation.

concludes with a series of “Examine and Apply” questions designed to foster reflection, self-examination, and personal application. My hope is that these chapters will chart a course toward greater watchfulness, increased holiness, and deeper communion with our triune God.

One reason I have written this book is because I need to read it. The older I become, the more I see the threats and hazards in Christian experience. Not everyone who starts well finishes well. Many aspire, but few attain. The dangers of backsliding and the warnings against apostasy are real. The deeper I understand myself and my Savior, the more I realize how weak I am, how patient He is, and how utterly dependent upon Him I am for everything.

These words from Robert Robinson’s old hymn reverberate often in the echo chamber of my soul. They serve as a fitting coda to this introduction. They remind us why watchfulness is needed (because our hearts are prone to wander) and point us to the only power that can keep us (God’s goodness and grace, which binds and seals our hearts for glory):

Oh, to grace how great a debtor
Daily I’m constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee:
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here’s my heart, oh, take and seal it;
Seal it for Thy courts above.¹⁵

15. Robert Robinson, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” (1758), in the public domain.