

Dear _____,

As you know a “real devotional life” is the first of our 3 primary convictions in discipleship (real devotional life, real brotherhood, real responsibility). Of course a healthy devotional life is made up primarily of extravagant times in prayer, worship, scripture reading and other traditional spiritual disciplines. The motive behind the devotional life is to spark and increase our hunger for God, our desire to know the Lord better, to grow closer to Him, to become more aware of His presence, and to fall more in love with the one with Whom we hope to spend eternity. We have found the copious reading of good Christian books, especially the Old Dead Guys to be such a tremendous help in this regard.

With that said, the function and primary goal of our reading is, simply put, to set our hearts and minds on God. We are all much too easily distracted in this hectic world, and much too easily discouraged by circumstances, and much too easily frustrated by what is seen. But when we can lift our hearts and minds off of self, and off of the things of this world, and even off of other people, and set them firmly on the things of God (His nature, His character, His promises — His Truth) then everything comes back into perspective and we are steadied again. Of all people, a minister of the gospel ought to be steady. So the idea is to discipline ourselves to think deeply about God, which quiets the flesh and kindles our hearts. Who is He, and what is He really like? How does He think, and what does He feel? What makes Him smile, and what makes Him cry? These are the questions that every true disciple seeks to answer. So our reading needs to assist that quest by lifting our thoughts and eventually our hearts Godward.

This doesn't mean that we don't need to read leadership books or ministry strategy books. These can be quite useful in helping us be more effective and fruitful for the Lord. But they don't necessarily help us to know Him better or love Him more. So we read both, but the staple of our reading, the “bread and butter”, has always been those books that draw us towards intimacy with Jesus.

So why do we focus so much attention on reading the “Old Dead Guys” (ODGs)? (And by the way, ODGs can mean Old Dead Gals, too. Take for example Dorothy Sayers, Catherine Marshall, Corrie Ten Boom, etc.). This is a question that comes up often and is a valid one, especially given the proliferation of good modern Christian literature. We don’t mean to imply that there are no good modern books. Nor do we mean to imply that all old books are good ones. But there are some broad stroke generalities we can make about the merits of the old classics, which have been tested with time and found to be “tried and true.”

When my pastor and Father in the faith retired from vocational ministry and was clearing out his church office, he invited me to help myself to his library of books. Hundreds of old Christian books lined his office walls, floor to ceiling. I wish now I would have taken them all, but in my attempt to be modest I took only a small percent, basically just grabbing the authors I knew of, or the the books with titles or subjects that were intriguing. Before this my personal library had consisted of mainly modern paperback books. I was excited to have so many beautiful books to line my shelves, gorgeous hardback and clothbound books, some even bound with leather and gilt edges. Not only were my pastor’s old books impressive to look at, I quickly realized that their content contained treasures of a different caliber than I had previously known. I was blown away at the consistency with with these books lifted my heart and mind to God, set my soul on fire, and made me want to share everything I was learning.

Before enumerating the advantages of the ODG books, we should say plainly that the focus is not the ODG as a person, but rather the truths they wrote about God. Remember, the goal is to get our minds on God Himself, not on a man or woman of God, regardless of how wonderful they were. This is elementary but it must be stated plainly — the ODG is not the hero, Jesus is the hero. We go to the ODG because they point us to the truth in the person of Christ. The ODGs become our trusted friends and teachers to help us know Him better. In fact, the best author’s persona will almost entirely disappear from our thoughts as we read their writings, because in those writings Jesus is always in the forefront.

These books were God-centered, whereas most modern books are man centered. As an experiment, go sometime to a modern Christian bookstore and look around. Generally speaking you will find shelves full of self-help books, such as books about how to raise kids, stay married, succeed in business, etc. These are certainly helpful and can have their place, but they aren't primarily about God. You'll also see many books about Christian identity, leadership, church growth, etc.... which are also helpful, but again, they aren't actually about God. If you try to find books about God, about His nature and character, most of the time you will have to look very hard and generally somewhere toward the back of the store. These old books from my pastor were different. Titles like *The Suffering of God* or *The Attributes of God* or *The Face of Christ* or *The Unshakable Kingdom* or *With Christ in the School of Prayer* are all titles I found in my pastor's library. They told about the ways of God, the beauty of His Son and the power of His Spirit. Simply put, they made me think more about God and less about self.

These books were also deep. They challenged me to think deeply. Most modern Christian books are written for modern church goers. At the risk of sounding snooty, the new books are of necessity written to the immature because of our increasingly biblically illiterate culture. The ODGs wrote in a day when believers typically knew the Bible well, and had a good grasp on the foundational truths of the faith. Therefore the ODG books were written to a more mature audience. Oftentimes the subject matter was slightly over my head. Rather than hindering, this was actually helpful because it required me to "chew on" the things I didn't immediately understand. It sparked hunger and made me ask theological questions to my elders in the faith. It required me to read and then re-read certain challenging themes. It always pushed me back to scripture, like the Bereans, to find if what I was reading was true. All of this served to solidify truth in my heart. I've come to believe since then that easy lessons are not real lessons. When I read something simple, I often read it so quickly that it tends to slip out of my mind just as quickly.

Here then is another advantage of the old books, which may at first sound counterintuitive. The books were challenging to read, and not only because of the aforementioned deep content. They were also hard to read because they utilized a much more formal writing style than modern books, and often used large, difficult and even somewhat antiquated words. Oftentimes I had to look up particular words in a dictionary to catch the meaning of a sentence. Their long compound sentences initially frustrated me, and occasionally gave me headaches. The illustrations used were often completely irrelevant to my circumstances. But oddly enough, and to my surprise, all this made the truths and principles contained more sticky and memorable. As I fought to understand what they were trying to say, and especially as I fought to find language to help explain what they were saying to my friends, there was something about that mental “translation” exercise that caused me to retain it better. In modern books, even when the content is great, the author has already done all the work for you — their simple language and pertinent illustrations do not allow you the process of thinking through your own way to say it, and because you did not mentally wrestle with it, you do not retain it as well.

I was also surprised to find how direct these books were. The authors wrote in a frank, forthright and commanding way that is conspicuously missing in modern books. When reading the ODGs you get the distinct impression that you are an athlete hearing from from a coach, or a soldier hearing from a commander, rather than a patient talking to your counselor. They were not unnecessarily mean, or rude, but they also didn’t pull any punches. They wrote truth with an apparent disregard to any pushback of readers or potential loss of book sales. They reminded me of the prophets of the Old Testament, who spoke truth regardless of consequences, rebuking corruption and challenging the idolatry of their day. Book titles like Leonard Ravenhill’s *Meat for Men* and *Why Revival Tarries*, or Elton Trueblood’s *The Company of the Committed* come to mind as examples of this direct truth telling. It was at once both convicting and refreshing.

These books also represented the collective wisdom of a multitude of generations. Each generation of believers has its own particular atmosphere and culture, and

therefore its own manifold blindspots. We can't help but see things the way we see things, being so much a product of our particular time and age. When we read only books from our generation, we see only what our generation sees. When we read the old books we get a much broader view, the benefit of multiple generations' views of God, and the value is tremendous. Imagine a young lady learning to bake, who has the privilege of access to 3 generations of family bakers - mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. Each of these ladies, in their day, because of different challenges and opportunities, learned to bake bread differently — using different ingredients, different kneading methods and even different heat sources. Each in turn now has something unique to add to the young woman's culinary education. Great-Grandmother used a wood burning oven, Grandmother used a gas oven, and Mom used an electric oven. In the end, if the young lady listens well to her teachers, she will know much more than simply to “set the oven at 350 for 45 minutes.” Rather, she will now understand better the necessities of dough preparation, the particular signs to look for in the rising of the bread, and most importantly how to evaluate and readjust when something goes amiss, regardless of what heat source she may have at her disposal. What I'm suggesting is, if we want to know God in true intimacy and not just in formalities, we need our ancestors to teach us what they learned about walking with Him. G.K. Chesterton calls this principle “The Democracy of the Dead”, reminding us that our forefathers were much wiser than we tend to give them credit for being. We need to treat seriously the lessons they learned while walking with God. In these old books I found teachers, men and women from a span of thousands of years and a variety of cultures and circumstances, teaching me how to know and love God better.

Finally I found these old books to be safer, in at least two ways. First, the principles and convictions contained in the classics have been thoroughly tested. A spiritual teaching is tested, not immediately, but by examining its fruit in the succeeding generations. New ideas and fad teachings do not have the benefit of this broad testing, and often include little foxes, hidden traps and potential land mines which only time can reveal. It's one thing to have a clever idea, it's another

to know how that idea plays out over time, and how it affects one's children and their children after them. This does not mean that God is not revealing new things. I believe for all eternity we will be exploring the depths of His nature and character, and I hunger even now for new revelation. What I do mean is that new revelation is only safe when received upon the strong foundation of orthodoxy and sound doctrine. If we are not crystal clear on the foundational truths, we are too easily deceived.

Also, the ODGs are safer because the authors themselves have completed their course and finished their race. J. Robert Clinton, in his extensive study on leadership in the Bible, reports that in scripture only 1 in 3 leaders finish well. That's a sad and terrible statistic. But we have all seen sharp Christian leaders write great books, or even series of books, but eventually, because of either moral failure or later heretical teaching, undermine the impact of that good book, and certainly the confidence of others to disseminate or recommend any of their writings. The ODGs in both character and theology have finished well. A.W. Tozer said, "Show me a man's thoughts about God and I'll show you that man's future." In other words, wisdom is proved right by her children. The value of the ODGs is that the entirety of their lives have matched their teachings, causing them to join that great Cloud of Witnesses in Hebrews 12. These books and their authors are reliable witnesses, so I can place them into the hands of my little brothers and sisters without fear that they will be led astray. Of course, the ODGs weren't perfect, so as always we teach young disciples to "chew the meat and spit out the bones." But again, because they have finished their race, we found them to be safer overall.

For 25 years now I've been a lover of Christian books. I have added to my library over the years many old and also many new books. C.S. Lewis once recommended alternating reading 1 old and 1 new book. He said he would encourage the reading of both old and new books, but if you could not read both, choose the old ones. I probably read 3 old ones to every 1 new. My retiring pastor gave me a wonderful gift that day when he so generously gave me those classics. Originally I thought

he blessed me with a few hundred dollars' worth of books. I now realize he gave me a gift of inestimable value, a literary gold mine full of treasure just waiting to be discovered and mined. And now I see what helped him be such an exceptional Christian leader, and one of the few that finished well.

I hope you can find as much help and strengthening from the old books as I have. Seriously, there is enough spiritual potency and eternal truth on our bookshelves to transform the universe, waiting patiently for us to get discontent enough with this world, and hungry enough for His presence to reach out and take one off the shelf.

Eli

You asked for a list of 10 ODG books that have impacted me. It's hard to narrow it to 10, but here's a list, in no particular order:

The Practice of the Presence of God by Brother Lawrence

The Great Physician by G Campbell Morgan

True Spirituality by Francis Schaefer

Humility by Andrew Murray

Orthodoxy by G K Chesterton

"The Weight of Glory" by C S Lewis

The Four Loves by C S Lewis

Spiritual Authority by Watchman Nee

Spiritual Depression by Martyn Lloyd Jones

Your God Is Too Small by J B Phillips