

Introduction Content Only

BEYOND
loneliness

THE GIFT OF
GOD'S FRIENDSHIP

TREVOR HUDSON

BEYOND LONELINESS: The Gift of God's Friendship
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For Dallas Willard (1935–2013), whose joyful life,
radiant witness, and faithful friendship gave me a glimpse
of what it really means to live as God's friend.



For William A. Barry, SJ, whose many writings have guided
and helped me in deepening my own friendship with God.

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FOREWORD

*F*riendship—what an amazing gift! Friendship is being in a relationship with another person in which you both feel deep affection, empathy, compassion, selflessness, and trust. It's when you greatly enjoy the company a friend and are free to express any feeling. You can relax into being yourself—warts and all—knowing that your friend has your best interest at heart. You can confess mistakes without any fear of judgment or that the story will be repeated. And a friend never checks to see what time it is when you are talking. Friendship is a nice invention.

Trevor Hudson makes a bold claim in this book: Part of the good news of the gospel is that we are invited into a friendship with God. If Trevor were not my friend, I'm not sure I'd believe him.

I became acquainted with Trevor Hudson many years ago. I had written my first book, *Homesick for Eden*. It had been out a few months, and I had begun to wonder if anyone had actually read it besides my mother. Then one morning in the copy room of the graduate school where I taught, coffee in one hand, fingering through the contents of my mailbox with the other, I came across a small envelope with a South African postmark. I quickly opened the letter and found a handwritten note from Trevor, in which he expressed his appreciation for my book and made a positive reference to two people for whom I had great respect—Dallas Willard and Leslie Weatherhead.

On my second reading of the note I saw that Trevor was planning a trip to the United States and would be in Atlanta, Georgia.

He wondered if we might get together. While he had me at “I liked the book,” the fact that he knew Dallas Willard and enjoyed reading Leslie Weatherhead was overwhelming proof that I would enjoy meeting this man from South Africa who had such excellent taste in literature.

It has been almost two decades since Trevor showed up in Atlanta. He was able to stay for part of two days—enough time to make it possible for him to ride to my home far out into the country and spend time with my wife and two daughters. Trevor was an instant hit with the family.

During those days, I learned that Trevor had invited Dallas Willard to travel to South Africa with only the promise of a sofa to sleep on and a small crowd of ministers (on one visit, they fit around one table) to speak to—and that Dallas said yes, for that and multiple other visits. I learned about his love for his wife and two children, his work as a Methodist minister during the most difficult times in South Africa, the fact that he had done jail time with Desmond Tutu, and that he was a pretty good table tennis player, even though we still disagree about who won the majority of the games. In short, Trevor and I became friends, and I began to look for ways to work together on projects.

And it turns out that finding projects to complete together was not a great difficulty. Trevor not only “gets” Dallas Willard, but also he is one of the few people I know who can teach Dallas’s key ideas about Christian spiritual formation in a way that is accurate, engaging, and right from the heart. He does so with story, rich examples from family life, and always with a South African accent—which is the same way he writes. When Dallas was no longer able to teach in the Renovaré Institute, Trevor stepped in to do much of the teaching and he, like Dallas, is greatly loved and appreciated by the students.

Trevor has written many fine books, but I believe this one is my favorite. In it he takes one of Jesus’ greatest offers—to call his followers friends—and helps the reader find the path from loneliness to intimacy with God. Trevor tells us that God desires our friendship, and he is not alone in making this claim. As you will discover,

he shares from experiences of over four decades of savoring insights from the first Christian book he read, Leslie Weatherhead's *The Transforming Friendship: A Book About Jesus and Ourselves*. And he also draws on Dallas Willard's insights, which have seeped into Trevor's soul through time and close relationship. In Dallas Willard's first book (originally titled *In Search of Guidance* but now titled *Hearing God*), he describes a developing relationship with God that progresses through the stages of conversation, communion, and union—not unlike a romantic relationship.

Trevor is also an Ignatian scholar. In this book you will find beautiful reflections on the way people think about friendship—which can, in turn, give new life to how you view your relationship with God. In the words of James Martin, SJ, in *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life*, “If we look at what makes a healthy friendship, we'll see that some of the same traits help make for a good relationship with God.”¹

Another notable, modern-day Jesuit, William A. Barry, SJ, observed in his wonderful little book *God and You: Prayer as a Personal Relationship* that there are many exciting parallels between developing personal friendships and developing a deep and authentic relationship with God. According to James Martin's distillation of insights from Barry, friendships with others and with God should involve the following six elements: (1) spending time together, (2) learning about the other, (3) being honest and transparent, (4) learning to be a good listener, (5) allowing for changing and maturing views of the other, and (6) learning how to enjoy being silent together.

As Trevor says, most of us become aware of a friendship-shaped hole in our lives. In part, this is to be filled by others, but part of this chasm that can only be occupied by God.

God has given us a beautiful story about the character of God through the life of Jesus. Jesus makes friends. We see his deep love for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus and the empathetic tears he weeps when Lazarus dies—even though he knows the story will have a happy ending. We see him desiring the company of Peter, James,

and John when he is in pain and when he has amazing things to share. And we see in John 15:15 that Jesus changes the identity of the twelve disciples from servants to friends.

Would you like to become God's friend? If so, the book in your hands is a wonderful place to begin. You will love the warm and approachable language of the author, appreciate his wisdom born from forty years of pastoral experience, and enjoy the well-organized chapters. You will find the practical exercises that Trevor provides to be excellent ways to experience a transforming friendship with the Trinity. As Dallas Willard was so fond of pointing out, the words in John 17:3 are the only ones Jesus offers as a definition of eternal life: "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (NIV).

Beyond Loneliness is a wonderful book about two interwoven themes—friendship with God and personal transformation. It is a guidebook for stepping into the eternal living described and modeled by Jesus.

—Gary W. Moon, MDiv, PhD
Executive Director of the Martin Institute
and Dallas Willard Center, Westmont College
Author of *Apprenticeship with Jesus:
Learning to Live Like the Master*

AN INVITATION TO TRANSFORMING FRIENDSHIP

Loneliness touches each one of us. None of us escapes it completely. Loneliness is no respecter of age or rank. Whether a young student, a stay-at-home mom, a busy executive, a retired pensioner, a grieving widower or widow, or even a pastor working with people every day, we all know what it means to be lonely. Loneliness may be one of the most painful experiences that we go through in this life. Perhaps we find ourselves living in the midst of it at this very moment.

Strikingly, many people who live alone never feel lonely, yet some who live with others in crowded cities know only too acutely how loneliness can infect our lives. When we think of loneliness we often visualize the aged who live alone, but a young adult moving to a new city, an entrepreneur beginning a business, a partner in a struggling marriage, or a leader in a challenging corporate environment can be as lonely as a solitary elderly person in a one-room apartment.

Only genuine and real friendship with God and others can transform loneliness. Perhaps this is why the first Christian book I ever read made such an impact on me. Soon after I started following Christ at the age of sixteen, a friend gave me a book. I read it over and over, savoring its many insights for my new life of faith. The other day I took it off my library shelf and looked through it again. Its title still speaks to me of the essential gifts of the Christian faith. The book, written by British Methodist minister Leslie Weatherhead, is titled *The Transforming Friendship: A Book About Jesus and Ourselves*.

Weatherhead's title emphasizes two important dimensions of our experience with God. First, it presents friendship as a helpful analogy for the intimate kind of relationship God wants with us. Put simply, the gospel invites us into friendship with God. This is a staggering reality. The Creator God who loves us, who spoke the whole universe into existence, and who sustains our lives in the immediacy of each moment wants our intimate friendship. Absolutely mind-blowing! I hope that as we explore this good news together, we will be encouraged to see our faith and our lives in totally new ways.

Second, Weatherhead's title clearly states that friendship with God transforms us. Learning to trust God as our Divine Friend has a transforming effect on every aspect of our lives. It affects how we pray, our relationships with others, and the way we understand our everyday existence. Trusting God as our Divine Friend changes the way we think and feel, what we desire and long for, the way we see each other, and how we seek to live in the world. Our friendship with God creates the environment in which we become the people God wants us to be.

In this book I explore these two interwoven themes of friendship and personal transformation. I have been engaging these themes for many years in pastoral conversations, spiritual direction, retreat settings, sermons, lectures, and conferences, and I am continually struck by people's positive response. They often find themselves strongly drawn to the possibility of growing a friendship with God and the ways this could change their lives for the better. I believe that the gospel idea of a transforming friendship with God is one whose time has come. Let's discuss why I believe this to be true.

The Pull of Friendship

First, I have noticed that people resonate with the idea of God's transforming friendship because the concept of friendship is easy to grasp. Most people know what a friend is. A friend is someone we appreciate, someone we enjoy spending time with, someone we

are glad to see. Moreover, a friend is someone we trust, someone we commit ourselves to in some way. He or she is someone with whom we find ourselves sharing who we are, sharing stories and ideas we might not share with everyone. A friend is also someone whom we want to serve and help. These experiences of human friendship give us an accessible way of talking about what a relationship with God involves.

Second, God's transforming friendship excites our interest because we know how human friendships change us. For example, we may value one of our friend's qualities, and it begins to rub off on us. Or our friend says something that really hits home, and it turns our thinking upside down. Or a friend poses a difficult question no one else would risk asking that leads to discoveries about ourselves we otherwise would not have made. When friends get together, they mutually influence each other. If this takes place so naturally in human friendships, think of how much more our friendship with God can change the way we think and live.

Third, God's transforming friendship is invitational and promises an unfolding journey. Friendships do not mature overnight. They take time to grow as two people share together, listen to each other's life stories, and slowly move into each other's worlds. The same progression is true of our relationship with God. God does not force all of God's self onto us at once, and we do not give all of ourselves to God at once either. The adventure of forming a friendship with God takes a lifetime of walking with God. Rather than putting people off, I have found that this possibility draws people powerfully into the pilgrimage of personal growth and development.

Fourth, the prospect of a transforming friendship with God attracts people who are frustrated with cold religion, impersonal churches, and anonymous worship experiences that can intensify loneliness. An answer to the problem of loneliness in our Christian faith can be found as long as we help one another to experience genuine friendship with God and with others along the way. Often these two experiences go hand in hand. Telling a lonely person that God is his or her friend can sound very hollow. It only becomes

meaningful when we make the divine friendship real by modeling it in our own relationships.

Lastly, forty years as a pastor has shown me that a friendship-shaped hole exists in all our lives. Loneliness is a painful experience because we are created with a longing for intimacy, connection, and relationship. Most people intuitively understand that there is a longing within them; yet, others resist the longing. When we hear about God's offer of transforming friendship, I hope we will recognize it as what we are really looking for so that we can explore it further. I believe that if we experience such a relationship, our deepest loneliness may be healed.

What About You?

Consider the following questions:

- Do you feel lonely?
- Is there a friendship-shaped hole in your life?
- Are you open to reimagining your relationship with God as a friendship?
- Do you want to be transformed into the person God wants you to be?
- Does the possibility of starting a lifelong journey with God attract you?
- Do you long for a real experience of the living God?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, join me in discovering how to begin a transforming friendship with God.

Friends of God Transform the World

Sometimes people ask me whether pursuing friendship with God makes our faith journey too private, irrelevant to the suffering of people around us, or unrelated to the struggles taking place on our

streets. I believe the opposite to be true. When we enter into the Divine Friendship, we are drawn into God's greater dream for the healing of our lonely and broken world. We are created to become friends of God and to partner with God in making God's dream a reality in the world.

Again, I believe God's friendship is something for which our hearts intuitively long. For the past few years, I've written a nightly prayer on Twitter. The other evening I tweeted the following prayer: *Lord, help us to realize that implied in our friendship with you is the call to partner with you to make your dream real here and now.* I was quite taken by the response that prayer generated. Many people know that our true and genuine happiness lies in living in tune with God's dream for our world. We want to make this world a better place, and we were created for that purpose.

Friendship Exercises

As shown by the content of my other books, I am convinced of the importance of action. Information alone seldom transforms lives. While the right information undergirds good living, it is critical that we act on the basis of what we know.

I have included *Friendship Exercises* throughout this book. I hope you will read and reflect on them, either on your own or with others in a small group. Friendships take effort and energy. If this is true for human friendships, it is equally true when it comes to a friendship with God.

I can almost hear your questions. (I have a friend who writes *YBH* in the margins of books, meaning "Yes, but how?") How does friendship with God begin? How do I get to know God as my Divine Friend? How does this Divine Friendship grow? How will God transform me through this friendship? How will friendship with God make me feel less lonely? How do I become part of God's dream for the world? How do I relate to God's other friends? How can God's friendship help me live beyond fear? How do I find out

what my Friend wants? How will this friendship with God help me when I suffer?

These are not just your questions; this book wrestles with those concerns. I hope that as you engage in these questions with me, the following pages will shed light on them. And my biggest hope is that your exploration will encourage you to live in friendship with God.