Never Without a Witness: The Apocrypha and Spiritual Formation

By David A. deSilva*

The Protestant Christian who reads her Old and New Testaments listening for God's Word might suppose that God fell silent between his people's return from the Babylonian exile until the Word-made-Flesh began to speak anew. But, in fact, we serve the God who was *never* without a witness, who never left God's people without the knowledge of God's counsels. This is good news for us who count on God to speak not just in the fixed forms and limited time of the Scriptures, but rather to make his living voice known in every age — including the present moment!

The intertestamental period was far from silent. It was a fertile period in which the faith of the ancestors was being re-imagined and re-appropriated for the rapidly-changing circumstances of life under the shadow first of Greece and then of Rome, both at home in Israel and abroad in the Diaspora. The absence of prophets did not mean the absence of the voice of God, as spiritual teachers listened for God's word in their sacred texts, experienced God's presence through their spiritual disciplines, and called one another to continue to order their lives around the God who was the source of all life. It was a period full of witnesses to life with God, whether they gave that witness in their lives and deaths, or recorded that witness in writing to nurture future generations of disciples.

Now these witnesses, you might argue, were not perfect. You might say that they were merely human writers. But if that is so, even then we must give ear to them, at least with the same earnest attention that we give to the most popular human authors whose spiritual advice we cherish today. But there is still an important difference. There is no doubt that the works of a Max Lucado or Rick Warren represent the finest devotional fruit that blossoms on the tree that is the church, and many are nourished and delighted by this fruit. But the authors of the Apocrypha are located deeper down among the roots of that tree. The apostles themselves drew their nourishment from these roots as the tree began to sprout when it was but a young sapling. In the most formative centuries of our faith, Christian teachers mined these books as rich treasure troves on the life lived with God, and the life of responding to God. The whole tree has continued to be nourished by them, even though some of its branches do not seem to know it.

We can derive much wisdom from our spiritual forebears who left us the books that Protestants call the Apocrypha, that Catholic and Orthodox Christians intersperse throughout their Old Testaments as part of their Scriptures. As the apostles discovered, we too will find that these pious Jews offer valuable spiritual direction for our journey toward Christ-likeness and for our growth in our life with God.

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Their first word to us would be that ***life with God requires awareness.*** It requires that we give our attention to God and God's provisions for life in his presence, which is itself a discipline when we are surrounded by so many other focal points competing for that attention. ***Life with God requires awareness of God's gifts.*** For all its variety, the literature contained in the Apocrypha is dominated by a central theme — the challenge of holding onto the awareness of the value of the covenant way of life in the midst of a dominant Gentile society whose own way of life promises more immediate and impressive enjoyment of this world's goods. During this period the high priests themselves would lead the Jerusalem aristocracy toward seeking out Greek learning, Greek customs, Greek forms of government. Jewish elites in every land would be drawn to look away from their own heritage toward becoming sufficiently acculturated to the Greek way of life to become "players" in the larger economical, political, and cultural spheres.

In this environment, on the eve of the most extreme attempts to re-make Jerusalem after the model of the Greek city, a Jewish sage named Ben Sira set up his school in Jerusalem, teaching the young elites of the city about the way to live wisely and make their way profitably in the world. At a time when many such teachers might have been emphasizing the importance of learning how to adapt to the Greek way of life, Ben Sira sprinkles his teachings with reminders of the distinctive gifts that God has given Israel, especially the gift of the covenant, the gift of the Law. To those seeking Wisdom, Ben Sira directed them first toward the Wisdom that God provided them, a wisdom that was far more valuable than all the wisdom of the Gentiles:

> "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High...
> I dwelt in the highest heavens...
> Over every people and nation I have held sway.
> Among these I sought a resting place;
> in whose territory should I abide?
> Then the Creator of all things gave me a command,
> He said, 'Make your dwelling in Jacob.'

Wisdom continues:

> "... Come to me, you who desire me,
> and eat your fill of my fruits.
> Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame,
> and those who work with me will not sin."
> All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God,
> the Law that Moses commanded us. (Ben Sira 24, *passim*)

Ben Sira points his students to the rich spiritual resource that God has already given them, namely the Torah. Many of their peers had forgotten its value in their desire to get "more" of what the Greek world has to offer. They had lost their awareness

of the value of God's provisions as the foundation for a life lived with honor, success, integrity, wholeness, and security. Because of this lack of mindfulness, Ben Sira's contemporaries have begun to be seduced to seek the satisfaction of their core longings apart from God and God's covenant, a path that put the nation in considerable jeopardy in the decade following Ben Sira's death.

Ben Sira, then, would counsel us to center our hearts and our minds in a deepening awareness of God's gifts to us. Foremost among these is the gift of God's presence and oversight of our lives, God's nearness to hear, to guide, to deliver. This is something to which the other authors of the Apocryphal books would also repeatedly draw our attention, as would the author of the Letter to the Hebrews: "let us approach the throne of favor with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find favor for timely help" (Heb 4:16), whether that help takes the form of comfort, guidance, strength in temptation, deep healing or transformation. God's presence and guidance comes alive for the Christian disciple especially through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is, indeed, that promised inheritance that Christ has secured for all who join themselves to Abraham and the people of promise through him (Gal 3:14). The Spirit writes the Law upon our hearts and enables us to live in line with God's just decrees more completely than the Law with which God graced God's historic people Israel, to which Ben Sira points.

In our hunger for "more" in this world, we are put in jeopardy of becoming forgetful of God's many gifts already bestowed upon us, forgetful of the fact that "his divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us" (2 Peter 1:3), a provision that leads us to share in God's very nature. Life with God begins as we keep our minds focused on God's gifts to us. These gifts include: redemption, the Holy Spirit, the spiritual guidance of Scripture and of the cloud of witnesses that have devoted themselves to growing in awareness of God's gifts and paths (the conversation of the sages, for Ben Sira), God's coming to us in the sacraments, including the sacrament of the present moment whenever we open up the moment to God's intervention. Such a centering on God's gifts opens us up to the awareness of how rich we truly are in God, and how full life becomes when we live out of this center.

Their second counsel to us might be that ***life with God requires humility***. Among the Apocrypha are two confessions of sin and prayers for forgiveness and deliverance — the Prayer of Azariah and the Prayer of Manasseh. Like the biblical psalms, these two beautiful prayers model for us the honesty that we are to have before God about our own failings, and our utter dependence on God both for forgiveness where we have gone astray *and* for any progress that we make in growth as disciples. Our successes in the journey of discipleship come from God's investment in us, for his name's sake and for the manifestation of his character as the God of those who repent.

Manasseh was the most wicked king of Judah. It was on account of him that God's decree of devastation and exile would not be reversed. Unlike the story in 1 Kings 21, however, the story in 2 Chronicles 33 speaks of Manasseh himself

going into exile and repenting of his deeds, and of God accepting his prayer and restoring him. We even find a reference to the text of his prayer being preserved in the Annals of the Kings (2 Chron 33:18-20). This provided an opportunity for a pious author to re-create, as it were, that prayer of repentance as a testimony both to the limitless mercy of God and to the place of repentance in the process of transformation. In so doing, he did not merely create a piece of historical fiction. Early Christians recognized that the Prayer of Manasseh was also the prayer of every soul before the Holy God, and therefore did not preserve the prayer as a piece of history in connection with 2 Chronicles 33. Rather, they preserved it within the liturgical context of biblical prayers gathered together in the "Odes," a supplement to the Psalter found in fifth, sixth, and seventh century copies of the Greek Bible.

> O Lord, according to your great goodness you have promised repentance and forgiveness to those who have sinned against you, and in the multitude of your mercies you have appointed repentance for sinners, so that they may be saved. Therefore you, O Lord, God of the righteous, have not appointed repentance for the righteous, for Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, who did not sin against you, but you have appointed repentance for me, who am a sinner. (Prayer of Manasseh 1:7-8)

The author calls us to approach God with the humility to recognize that we stand not among the righteous who need no repentance, but that God has appointed repentance for *us,* for *me.*

> And now I bend the knee of my heart, imploring you for your kindness. I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned, and I acknowledge my transgressions. I earnestly implore you, forgive me, O Lord, forgive me! (Prayer of Manasseh 1:11-13)

The example of this prayer summons us to allow God's searching eye, and our own gaze, to look deeply within ourselves, and to allow that gaze to expose us as sinners and to have the humility of spirit to accept that designation, so that we may also receive the deep forgiveness and rehabilitation that God longs to provide.

It's not necessarily that we're all that *bad*, that we need to beat ourselves up for some sin, or magnify some trifling offense. Nor is it the case that we need to motivate ourselves to do more and more so as to avoid any "sins of omission" by more effort. It may far more often be the case — I would venture to say for conscientious disciples like those who make room in their lives for spiritual formation conferences — that we rather need to keep bringing before God those parts of ourselves, our lives, our secret hopes that have not been established by God. This author counsels us to allow God's examination to break down all that is untransformed in our lives, all that we have erected to keep Christ out of those places, to hold onto our old selves in those places. He urges us to "bend the knees

of our hearts" more and more fully, yielding those poorly built strongholds to him, so that God may raise us up, build us up anew in those places in ways that reflect Christ alive in us now in those places as well.

> For you, O Lord, are the God of those who repent, and in me you will manifest your goodness; for, unworthy as I am, you will save me according to your great mercy, and I will praise you continually all the days of my life. For all the host of heaven sings your praise, and yours is the glory forever. (Prayer of Manasseh 1:13-15)

The result of this process of examination, repentance, and humbling ourselves before God for the transformation of our lives is also one that teaches humility. The process does not serve our own aggrandizement, but the glorification of God, the ultimate purpose for our lives as God's creatures. As we are redeemed by God from death-bound drives and behaviors, God's character as "the Lord Most High, of great compassion, long-suffering, and merciful" (Prayer of Manasseh 7) is revealed by the results in us and our lives.

The second prayer, the Prayer of Azariah, counsels humility from another important angle. What do we do when the circumstances around us move us to cry out for deliverance? What happens when we find ourselves in the furnace? The story of Daniel's three companions becomes the occasion for the composition of another prayer. When Azariah, Mishael, and Hananiah were cast into the furnace having just made their bold declaration of loyalty to the One God, with what words did they address themselves to God? Again, a pious Jew of the post-prophetic period supplied them with a prayer for deliverance and a hymn of thanksgiving, both of which continue to be used in the worship life of the Christian church.

Reflecting on all the ills that have befallen wayward Israel, and thus including himself, Azariah prays:

> Blessed are you, O Lord, God of our ancestors, and worthy of praise; and glorious is your name forever! For you are just in all you have done; all your works are true and your ways right, and all your judgments are true. You have executed true judgments in all you have brought upon us and upon Jerusalem, the holy city of our ancestors; by a true judgment you have brought all this upon us because of our sins. For we have sinned and broken your law in turning away from you; in all matters we have sinned grievously. (Prayer of Azariah 3-5)

It belongs here to *humility* to acknowledge God's justice, to hold fast to the conviction that God is in the right. *I* may not be in the right, and may therefore need to submit myself to God's righteousness, seeking what God's justness means in my circumstances, conforming my perception to God's. My *people* may not be in the right, and indeed sometimes the sins which we must confess are not our own

individually, but those of our congregation, our denomination, our nation, or our race. My *circumstances* may not be right, such that I need to look for God's conforming these circumstances to his justice, the basis for the hope of the oppressed being that God is just and brings about justice. But *God* is always in the right. Once again, it requires ***humility*** to acknowledge God's rightness, to search out the meaning of God's rightness for my situation, and to look *assuredly* for the manifestation of *God's* righteousness in the future.

The author lays out the ultimate basis for his plea for deliverance for his people:

> For your name's sake do not give us up forever, and do not annul your covenant. [12] Do not withdraw your mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham your beloved and for the sake of your servant Isaac and Israel your holy one, to whom you promised to multiply their descendants like the stars of heaven and like the sand on the shore of the sea. Do not put us to shame, but deal with us in your patience and in your abundant mercy. (Prayer of Azariah 13-14, 19)

We are led by his example not to expect God to deliver us on the basis of our former service, our dedication to God, or anything else that is our own. Rather, in humility we are led to place all our expectation for deliverance first on the basis of God's name being associated with us, that earlier act of God's grace by which God named us his own and pledged himself to us, and next on the basis of God's commitment to those spiritual ancestors to whom God has pledged himself or taken delight, under whose spiritual aegis we gather. For the author of this prayer, this means Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; for those who have joined themselves to God in the new covenant, this means Christ. Finally, we ground our hope for God's response to us once again in God's own character as generous of spirit toward the wayward.

At no point does this spiritual guide allow us to find our own acts of piety to be a source of pride before God:

> In our day we have no ruler, or prophet, or leader, no burnt offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense, no place to make an offering before you and to find mercy. Yet with a contrite heart and a humble spirit may we be accepted, as though it were with burnt offerings of rams and bulls, or with tens of thousands of fat lambs; such may our sacrifice be in your sight today. (Prayer of Azariah 15-17)

There is no trace of this author presuming to do God a service by taking the time to pray, or by giving God attention. Rather, he is painfully aware that he cannot offer God the holy and perfect service that is God's due (here, under the historical

circumstances of being unable to offer the prescribed sacrifices in the prescribed sanctuary with the prescribed staff). He acknowledges humbly that it is an act of kindness and favor on God's part to receive our acts of prayer, praise, and confession, modeling this as the appropriate spirit in which to approach God.

Finally, the author points us to the proper goal for all our prayers:

> Deliver us in accordance with your marvelous works, and bring glory to your name, O Lord. Let all who do harm to your servants be put to shame; let them be disgraced and deprived of all power, and let their strength be broken. Let them know that you alone are the Lord God, glorious over the whole world. (Prayer of Azariah 20-22)

Humility manifests itself in acknowledging that the primary objective is the manifestation of *God's* honor in our lives and circumstances. *Our* vindication is not the final issue. The vindication of *God's* honor — God's name, that God has caused to dwell with us — is the final issue both in our deliverance and our enemies' discomfiture. This is a mark of humility in that it maintains the proper order of things: as dependent beings, our lives are a means to an end; as the infinite Creator, God's honor is that end. It is in this spirit that spiritual giants of the Christian tradition have always prayed, beginning with Jesus: "Hallowed be *thy* name."

Several of these authors would surely counsel us that ***life with God requires discipline and investment***. 4 Maccabees would probably be the first-century equivalent of Richard Foster's *The Celebration of Discipline*. Its author writes in order to remind his audience of the immense value of the Law of Moses and the life lived in accordance with that Law. To do so, he presents the Jewish way of life — the Torah-driven life, if you will — as the path by which people could achieve the Greco-Roman ideal of the virtuous person, the person who had completely mastered his or her passions. Greek and Roman philosophers targeted the passions, by which they meant the emotions, the drives, and the physical sensations to which people were prone, as the principle obstacle to a consistent life of virtue. A person could exhibit courage or fortitude only if he mastered the emotions of fear or the physical sensations of pain that he would encounter in the midst of the challenges that called for courage. A person could exhibit justice only if she mastered the drive of greed that might cause her to withhold generosity from the poor, or the emotion of anger that might cause one not to honor an alliance, or the drive of lust that might drive one to violate a neighbor's marriage. A person could exhibit wisdom if he did not allow the prospect of short-term pain to deprive him of long-term gains to be won by perseverance. Keeping the passions in check, therefore, became an important focal point of Greco-Roman ethics.

The author of 4 Maccabees regards the Torah as God's provision for the mastery of the passions, for keeping the passions in check and keeping the rational faculty — the faculty that knew the virtuous course of action — operating without

impediments. All of the laws of Torah, even those we might consider obscure and meaningless, find meaning in terms of how they train people to master their passions and come more and more alive to the life of virtue. By prohibiting the eating of pork or lobster, the Torah trained the pious Jew to curb her desire for certain foods, teaching her to exercise self-control in small ways that would prepare for self-control in greater ways. By commanding the lending of money without interest and the cancellation of debts in the seventh year, the Torah trained the pious Jew to curb his greed and love for money, learning to make room for his neighbor's financial needs against his own inclinations to acquire more for himself. Exemplary stories like Joseph resisting the advances of Pharaoh's wife or Moses's restraint in dealing with his rivals taught the pious Jew to resist giving in to lust or anger.

The author builds up to his climax by showing how the disciplined life of Torah lay behind the remarkable achievements of certain Jewish martyrs, who allowed themselves to be tortured to death rather than breaking faith with the covenant. Defending the nobility of the Jewish way of life against the arguments of the tyrant Antiochus IV, the martyr Eleazar says "you scoff at our way of life as if living by it were irrational, but it teaches us self-control, so that we master all pleasures and desires, and it trains us in courage, so that we endure any suffering willingly; it instructs us in justice, so that in all our dealings we act impartially, and it teaches us piety, so that with proper reverence we worship the only living God" (4 Maccabees 5:22-24). It is this training that allows Eleazar, along with seven brothers and their mother, to remain true to their commitment to honor God and walk in God's ways rather than be defeated in their purpose by the tyrant's coercive tortures.

The path to moral consistency — even in the face of seemingly insurmountable pressures to act contrary to one's religious commitments and personal integrity — is laid through the disciplined life. The author values Torah observance as promoting that disciplined life that exercises one in ways that enable one to achieve mastery of the passions, to make progress in virtue in both small and great ways. The example of the martyrs provides the extreme case that proves that Torah observance leads to the mastery of the passions. Their example, however, also demonstrates the value of all the smaller victories over the passions — the regular, disciplined occasions for learning to master the passions — that the Torah-led life inculcates. He articulates an approach to Torah-obedience that is not legalistic, but that is intent on discovering the freedom that the law-filled life can bring.

He would ask us, then: "where do you find those disciplines that enable you, through constant exercise, to master the drives and experiences of your untransformed nature, so that you can experience greater freedom and growth in the life with God?" While we live no longer under the Torah, the Holy Spirit still leads us forward in the same contest to master the passions. Paul writes to the Christians in Galatia: "Live by the spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to

the flesh.... And those who belong to Jesus Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:16-17, 24). Paul and the author of 4 Maccabees share a fundamental conviction — to be most fully alive to God, we need to be most fully available to the virtuous inclinations and desires that God's Spirit plants within us. And we need to make room for these inclinations and desires by dying to the inclinations and desires that our untransformed self continues to cast up into our minds. Moreover, they share the conviction that the stakes involved here are very high. The martyrs understand that yielding to the passions (for example, of fear and pain) leads to alienation from God, whereas mastery of the passions for the sake of remaining faithful unto death leads to eternal life in God's presence. Paul puts it in the familiar words: "If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap decay from the flesh; if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit" (Gal 6:8).

The Holy Spirit has, through the history of spiritual formation and spiritual direction in the Christian church, implanted disciplined practices that fulfill much the same function as the Torah-led life fulfilled for the author of 4 Maccabees. Fasting in various forms, prayer vigils, or seeking simplicity of life are all practices deeply rooted in the Christian tradition that train us in little ways to master our drives and impulses so as to better equip us to master them in larger ways as well, when the pressures to yield the mastery are greatest. Practicing these spiritual disciplines is not a matter of legalism, of fasting only in a certain way, or feeling guilty when we begin a night in a prayer vigil and end up sleeping in the presence of the Lord. It is a matter of training ourselves continuously to prioritize the life with God over the life of our natural inclinations, so that we discover ever greater degrees of freedom in Christ from the passions and desires of the flesh, trusting that every small exercise trains us for faithful outcomes in greater trials. Our culture elevates self-gratification to the level of a core value or non-negotiable good. The disciple who would grow in the knowledge and love of God must embrace all the more the counter-cultural heritage of the church, ordering her life around the spiritual disciplines that train our desires on God rather than toward the world's addictive, short-term painkillers.

Among the authors of the Apocrypha, we find another writer coming at the importance of investment and discipline for growth in the life with God from a quite different angle. 2 Esdras 3-14 is a Jewish apocalypse written toward the end of the first century AD. To read this book is to immerse oneself in the same thought world that one finds in Daniel and Revelation, placing oneself in the company of angels, of symbolic figures, of monstrous beasts, of series of disruptions of the natural order, and of mighty deliverers.

The author of 2 Esdras goes there to wrestle with some very difficult questions. Jerusalem had been destroyed again by a Gentile power, this time the armies of the Roman Empire in 70 CE. Thirty years later, contrary to all expectation, God still hasn't done anything to punish the Romans for their violence and bloodshed. Instead, the people who never gave a thought about worshiping the One God continue to flourish, while the people who at least *tried* to follow God's commandments are scattered and demoralized. Where was God's justice in all this?

How could the author make sense of his traditional beliefs — for example, that God indeed chose Israel for God's self and even made the world for the sake of Abraham's offspring? What good was there in trying to keep the commandments when it was so difficult, when the evil inclination within the human being kept undermining his or her best efforts to attain God's promises through obedience?

The author tries to see his situation from the perspective of Ezra, the Jewish elder also faced with the problems of "reconstruction" after the first destruction of Jerusalem six centuries before. The final answers at which the author arrives are not our chief interest. Rather, it is in the example he sets for us, who also have to wrestle with our own tough, heart-wrenching, world-view-shaking questions along the journey with God. First, we see a person willing to invest his emotional and intellectual energies in honest, open, no-holds-barred conversation with God in prayer. The author has learned from the Psalmists and from Jeremiah the art of being transparent before God, of allowing himself that level of intimacy with God that is willing to bare all thoughts, questions, feelings, frustrations, pain — even accusation. No question, no topic is "off limits" in his prayer life, which is finally the only way in which he can open up those deep, sealed-off areas to God's restorative word and presence.

Second, we see a person willing to invest enormous amounts of time in this process of wrestling with God. Receiving answers from God is easy. Getting to the place where we can receive God's answers, where we have arrived at the core issues that God needs to address in our life with him — that takes real work. The author begins at a place familiar, I would venture to suggest, to everyone here — being unable to sleep because of the thoughts that trouble him. These are not just the anxious thoughts that beset us, say, the night before giving an address to a thousand people, but the kinds of thoughts that gnaw at the core of our being, that deeply unsettle our spirits. How the author responds is instructive. This becomes a point of entry into extended prayer, taking those thoughts to God and following them wherever they lead, pouring out his whole self to God and looking expectantly for how God will move. This leads him to the presence of a messenger of God, whose first task is to remind the author of who the author is and, by contrast, who God is — often a sufficient response in and of itself. But the author keeps pressing forward to push through to the other side of this spiritual crisis.

He follows the prompting of God's messenger, devoting himself to fasting, prayer, and completely honest self-disclosure before God for weeks at a time, at the end of each week being able to pull back another layer of the problem and to discover another dimension of God's answer. He puts business as usual on hold, despite the clamoring of the Jewish elders who try to call him back to his pastoral responsibilities — not realizing that the author is engaged most fully in those responsibilities when he is most fully seeking and listening to God. He takes significant time to be alone and seek God's face, and this brings him to the place where God can fully reveal God's counsels to him — not only for his resolution of his personal crisis, but for the equipping of the whole community of faith to deal with such challenges and discover the paths of God through their difficult times. It

would be too easy to overlook the final stage of his journey, where, having met God at his place of deepest questioning and need, he praises God continually for a final three days.

If our own experience of God's ability to convey God's perspective on, and vision for, our situation — to give us an "apocalyptic adjustment" — is somewhat less vivid than this author's, he would ask us how much of ourselves, our energies, our time we were committing to seeking that "apocalyptic adjustment." This is not to suggest that if you go out and fast for a month you'll see visions of heaven opened, but to suggest that if you devote ten minutes to prayer looking for God to resolve an issue that has taken deep hold in your life, and may indeed have taken years to develop, you're probably setting up unrealistic expectations. Someone has said that "our focus determines our reality," and focus develops through discipline over time. When the reality that we are seeking as our focus is the invisible God in the midst of a very present, imposing, visible world with its set of expectations and drives, our goal requires a lot of discipline and a lot of well-invested time.

Life with God is, for us, like any other relationship: we have to protect our time that might be eaten up by professional duties, competing drives, empty entertainments, and pure waste, so that we can invest appropriately in that relationship. And if we really want to grow in that relationship, or break through some impasse in our relationship, or move to the next level in intimate communication, we need to set apart special time — often extended time — and order our lives around the relationships that are centrally important rather than try to fit those relationships into the leftovers of our lives. The author of 2 Esdras challenges us to sanctify hours of our days, days of our weeks, weeks of our years to God, offering what is, for mortal beings, perhaps the costliest sacrifice of all — time.

If our spiritual directors from the intertestamental period could give us only one more word of spiritual counsel — and they certainly could give us *many* more such words — it would be that ***life with God requires eternity***. We find especially the authors of 2 Maccabees and Wisdom of Solomon — the two books among the Apocrypha that probably exercised the greatest *theological* influence upon the early church — raising their voices to interject this point into our conversation. Life with God requires eternity first in the sense of requiring a belief in our *own* eternity. It requires that we be able to live life now with a view to a never-ending future with God, a long view that enables sacrificial discipleship and radical obedience in the here and now. Second Maccabees tells the story of the Hellenizing reforms that led to the all-out suppression of the practice of the Jewish way of life, then going on to tell of the first few years of the Maccabean revolution. In this text we again encounter the old priest Eleazar, the seven young brothers, and the mother of the seven faced with the choice: break faith with God by disobeying his commandments, or die wretchedly by being flayed and torn limb from limb. Convinced of God's power to raise God's faithful ones from the dead, and of God's commitment to deal justly with his faithful ones by doing so, they choose the latter.

They are remembered to have offered their bodies to God — giving their lives back to the God who gave them life in the first — confident that God would respond to his faithful clients' loyalty by renewing their lives beyond death.

We truly hope never to be in their position, but we are similarly called to offer our lives and our bodies to God, to give back to him the life he gave us. "No longer offer your bodies to sin as instruments of wickedness, but offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your bodies as instruments devoted to God's righteousness" (Rom 6:13); "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1); "He died for all so that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised on our behalf" (2 Cor 5:15). We make this offering not in our death, as did the martyrs, but in our lives, as we die to our own agenda and come alive to serve God's desires for our lives, our families, our churches, our world. We make this ongoing offering knowing that our own hope for life beyond death is bound to our commitment to be conformed to the pattern of Jesus, the One who gave away his life his whole life long for the sake of God's redemption of God's creatures.

Life with God requires eternity, finally, in the sense that the journey of discipleship keeps drawing us forward in a never-ending relationship with God. It is one in which the shadowy hints of life with God in the present eventually yield to the consummation of life with God in his real presence forever. The author of the Wisdom of Solomon identifies the failure to recognize "the secret purposes of God," namely that "God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of God's own eternity" (Wis 2:22-23), as the fundamental mistake that so many people make. Instead, they attribute their existence to "mere chance" and death to be the final period on that existence. In the absence of discerning God's purposes and the full scope of what God plans for them, they fill their lives with counterfeit purposes — chiefly the acquisition of goods, the painkillers of pleasure, and the replacement of genuine purpose with the aimless exercise of power — that leave them empty and, ultimately, opposed to those who live for God.

Those who set their hearts on discovering God's purposes and their minds on walking in God's paths, however, find their whole experience to be bathed in significance. Even adverse circumstances become a "trial" of their virtue, an opportunity to stretch and grow in their disciplined lives, a process of refinement: "having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them" (Wis 3:5-6). Rather than turning to numbing painkillers, they are able to face the difficult circumstances openly and triumph through them, discerning God's greater purposes — purposes leading to eternity. Wisdom, the "image of God's goodness," enters their souls and "makes them friends of God, and prophets" (Wis 7:27). Life with God deepens as we become more aware of these moments where eternity breaks into our time-bound existence, these traces of God's presence in and hand upon our everyday lives. Attending to those moments, creating space for them, living in response to them,

treasuring them — these things characterize people who live now as those who will live forever, who grasp for more and more of God rather than more and more of this world's goods. And this points us to what is perhaps the most basic and necessary step of faith that we will take — to trust that God is indeed refashioning us in the image of God's own eternity, and to arrange our lives around facilitating that process as the first priority of each day of our existence.