

BOOK REVIEWS

Susan S. Phillips, *The Cultivated Life: From Ceaseless Striving to Receiving Joy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 253 pp.

Throughout *The Cultivated Life*, Susan S. Phillips uses the lens of cultivation to imagine our “lives taking place in God’s garden.” *Roget’s International Thesaurus* suggests several synonyms for cultivation, each of which adds a nuance to this evocative image. Cultivation prepares the soul as well as soil for harvest in Christian living as well as farming. Cultivation also implies disciplined practice that promotes spiritual refinement. Although acquiring knowledge is another way to identify a cultivated life, Phillips writes from the heart for people whose lives are “sustained by God’s grace as they work to help the people of the world” (p. 203).

According to Phillips, the cultural context for developing a cultivated life of faith is like a circus in which “constant work punctuated by empty vegetative activity has yielded a woeful absence of sustained, meaningful attention and attachment” (p. 138). In such an environment, attention is fragmented and relationships are fractured. We are either anxious performers or passive spectators. Calamity occurs when the circus metaphor becomes dominant in our lives, “obscuring the rhythms and nourishment of garden living” (p. 210). Although the picture of our culture that Phillips paints seems unduly judgmental and unnecessarily polarizing, it is difficult in the midst of the 2016 political ‘circus’ to totally discount her assessment.

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The Cultivated Life is written for people who seek to follow Jesus in a circus-like society that is “disconnected from the biblical revelation and the Jesus incarnation” (p. 10). In order to cultivate a life of faith that is open to receiving God’s joy, Phillips examines a number of time-tested and cherished spiritual disciplines and practices that promote growing in and toward God. These disciplined practices include such simple and difficult activities as listening and being listened to, stopping and Sabbath keeping, praying with Scripture, cultivating attachments, spiritual direction, and sustaining friendships. Around these practices and Christian themes, Phillips weaves together her own stories and the stories of others with biblical teaching and common human wisdom. How she writes incarnates the attentiveness she is writing about.

Like the book’s title, richly evocative metaphors populate its pages and embody the author’s belief that “practices shape and are shaped by metaphors.” Here are some samples. Friendship is “an heirloom plant in the gardens of our lives” (p. 168). “It’s God’s joy for us to marinate in his loving regard” (p. 161). “I remained a while . . . metabolizing the gravity of what I’d heard” (p. 147). There are also nuggets of wisdom sprinkled throughout the book drawn from common human experience. Here is one. “Listening and its visual form, beholding, maintain the life-giving connections we need to flourish” (pp. 64–65). And here is another. Attention carries “the heartbeat of formation” (p. 115). And yet another. “When we stop for sabbath or in fallowness, we discover our baggage” (p. 98). And there is more.

The Cultivated Life assumes a Christian audience. It is a treatise on disciplines and practices that enhance faithful living cultivated by the ‘One who is Love.’ Although she makes an effort to be inclusive by using a range of metaphors for God such as Life or Completion or the Living Water, Phillips writes as a Christian for those who seek to follow Jesus and live in God’s enlivening and completing grace. However, as the title implies, the book is rich with human wisdom for daily living around themes such as loneliness, paying attention, maintaining appropriate attachments, and stopping to rest. If, however, you can imagine that we are “as trees walking” on the human journey toward our completion, you will find challenging insights and compelling wisdom in *The Cultivated Life* even if your religious perspective differs from the author’s.

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