

# Spiritual Life Hacks

LEN WOODS



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# WHAT THE HECK IS A "HACK"?

**H**ack.

Everything about the word makes us wince. Its primary meaning—“to cut or sever with repeated irregular or unskillful blows”<sup>1</sup>—sounds like a scene from a horror movie.

Then there was that time somebody figured out your sophisticated password system (“qwerty” for everything), *hacked* into your home Wi-Fi network, and used your credit card to go flat-panel TV shopping in Omsk, Russia. And the time you nearly *hacked* up a lung during a bout with the flu. And let’s not forget that “nice handyman” you hired to install a new power outlet in the kitchen. Because he was a YouTube-educated *hack*—not a certified electrician—your bathroom light switch now opens the garage door.

Have no fear. Our focus here is on a different, more positive kind of *hack*.

In the mid-1950s and early ’60s, the word *hack* became a badge of honor at highbrow institutions like Harvard and MIT. A *hack* was what engineering and computer whizzes called an inventive

work-around, a creative fix to a technical problem. A *hacker* was any clever person who demonstrated skill at solving technological problems—often in a mischievous, non-malicious way.

Who is the world's most famous hacker? The person who brought innovative problem solving into the mainstream? That's easy—the fictional star of the ABC series *MacGyver*, which aired from 1985–1992.<sup>2</sup>

Angus “Mac” MacGyver worked for a secret government agency as well as a think tank called the Phoenix Foundation. He was the anti-James Bond. Unsophisticated. Not at all suave—he wore a mullet haircut, drove a jeep, and loved hockey. MacGyver didn't carry a gun, just his trusty Swiss Army knife. Because he was whip-smart and more resourceful than a whole troop of Eagle Scouts, he could turn everyday objects into gizmos that would save the day. Once he used a gearshift knob, some stuffing from a seat cushion, a cigarette lighter, and a muffler to build a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) he successfully fired into the radiator of the car that was chasing him!

For a whole generation of techno-nerdy TV viewers, the name MacGyver became a verb: “So I grabbed my duct tape, a couple of empty two-liter soda bottles, and my flashlight, and I MacGyvered all that into a hands-free headlamp.”

Nowadays, any MacGyver-ish fix to an everyday problem is called a *life hack*. All over the internet, insightful “life hack gurus”—we used to call such people “grandparents”—have created websites devoted to *life hacking*. They're making stacks of cash showing people tips like:

- How to use an old sunscreen bottle to hide their valuables at the beach.
- How to keep their cats from unrolling the toilet paper.
- How to cut a cake using dental floss. (Seriously. People do this. I guess so they won't have to spend ten whole

seconds washing that big old knife? Or maybe the thought is that by flossing the cake first, they won't need to floss their teeth later? Whatever. Just know that if you decide to try this hack, you'll want to go with non-minty floss.)



Clearly, some popular life hacks are Shakespearean—as in, much ado about nothing. But other hacks *can* enhance your life. Who doesn't want that?

Leon Ho, the CEO and founder of [lifehack.org](http://lifehack.org) (one of those aforementioned websites), has defined a life hack as “practical, actionable knowledge that can immediately boost one aspect of your life.”<sup>3</sup> He says that when you apply needed hacks to multiple problems, “you will start seeing big improvements in your overall quality of life.”<sup>4</sup>

Sounds inviting, doesn't it? If you can show me a creative way to eliminate a pesky problem, an overlooked trick for saving money or time, or an innovative way to not only reduce frustration but make life more enjoyable? I'm all in. Let's start hacking!

But for people of faith, that raises the question of *spiritual* life hacks. Is there such a thing? Are there out-of-the-box fixes for out-of-kilter souls?

Yes and yes.

Before we look at some, though, a couple of disclaimers are in order.

## 1. THERE'S A BIG DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A LIFE HACK AND A SPIRITUAL LIFE HACK

If you're frustrated because you can never seem to find the end of a roll of shipping tape, I have good news: There's a quick life hack for that! Press a paper clip onto the sticky side of the tape right at the end of the roll. Voila! MacGyver would be proud! Now your future taping sessions will be a breeze instead of a headache.

But what if your problem is more complicated, more personal? What if, let's say, you become a nervous wreck every time you think about your uncertain future? That calls for a different kind of hack, as the following chart shows:

### LIFE HACKS...

...address problems on the surface of one's life (e.g., removing debris from my computer keyboard).

...focus on technology, efficiency, and productivity.

...are often quick, simple, one-time actions.

...make life more convenient in the short-term.

...are about being clever.

### SPIRITUAL LIFE HACKS...

...target issues at the core of one's being (e.g., confronting paralyzing fear in your soul).

...focus on spirituality, humanity, and mystery.

...typically require repetition, a longer process, or the formation or cessation of a habit.

...make life more meaningful for the long-term.

...are about becoming the person God made you to be.



## 2. SOME INFORMATION HERE MIGHT SOUND FAMILIAR—AND THAT'S ON PURPOSE

One of the realities of living in the information age is that human knowledge is now growing exponentially. While our desire to learn new things is commendable, the Bible also warns against the danger of forgetting old truths. Spiritually speaking, it's possible to become people who, in the apostle Paul's words, are “always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7).

I'm like you. When I pick up a new book or listen to a speaker, I'm subconsciously thinking, *Tell me something fresh and interesting. Tell me a fascinating story or explain a life-changing truth I've never heard or never quite understood.* (Trust me, as a full-time writer and sometimes speaker, I feel immense pressure to be original and creative. Every communicator wants to ferret out and offer up some brilliant pearl of wisdom nobody in the history of history has ever thought or expressed.)

However, I'm also reminded of Solomon's wise observation about there being “nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). I think, too, of the insightful words of the scholar Samuel Johnson: “People need to be reminded more often than they need to be instructed.” Maybe this, as one old preacher said, is why the Bible has only about eight big ideas that God keeps repeating again and again.<sup>5</sup>

Needing reminders—that's been *my* experience. And I'm convinced I'm not alone. We all need regular reminders because we're all expert forgetters!

If I can share both some helpful information that's new *and* a few crucial reminders in these pages, all in a clear and creative way, my prayers will have been answered.

# WHEN YOU'RE WONDERING WHERE TO START HACKING

If you've seen the classic movie *The Princess Bride*, you probably remember the villain Vizzini's repeated use of the word *inconceivable*. And you recall the swordsman Inigo Montoya's classic response: "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Inigo could have said the same thing about our use of the word *heart*. We toss that word around the way politicians throw out promises during election season. In any given week, we read about assorted *heartaches* on Facebook. We drink coffee with a friend who has *a heavy heart*. We lament the relational woes of the neighbors: She loves him *with all her heart*, but he's *cold-hearted* toward her.

The *heart* is a staple of our music: *How can you mend a broken heart?* the Bee Gees mourned even as the great Tony Bennett crooned about how he *left his heart* in San Francisco. (Maybe that's how one becomes *heartless*?)

Somebody—hopefully not a cardiac surgeon—declared, "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach." Alas, you can *open your*

*heart, pour out your heart, and wear your heart on your sleeve.* (Maybe this explains, in part, how hearts get *crushed* and *hardened*.)

You get the point. Our culture talks a lot about the “heart.” But does the word mean what we think it means?



The Bible contains about a thousand references to the heart.<sup>1</sup> In most of these instances, the word is used metaphorically. According to the Good Book, your heart is your invisible, immaterial essence—some would say your soul or human spirit. It’s that knot of intangibles—personality, likes, dislikes, beliefs, desires, and so on—that makes you uniquely you.

Thus, the Bible sees the heart as both the repository and the driver of all of our rich and quirky humanness, in at least three primary ways.

First, the heart is where we *feel* (Psalm 34:18; Proverbs 15:13; Romans 9:2). Your *heart* is where you experience pleasant emotions like love and euphoria, where you healthily process (or unhealthily bury) painful experiences. Nostalgia, regret, sadness, old wounds, and joyful memories are all rooted in the heart.

Second, the heart is where we *think* (1 Kings 3:9; Proverbs 15:14; 23:7). Perhaps you’re saying, “Wait a minute—aren’t you confusing the heart with the mind?” The answer is no. The ancient Hebrews didn’t draw a sharp distinction between the heart and the mind the way we do in modern Western culture.

If you conducted a survey, most people would say, “Our ‘mind’ is our analytical side, whereas our ‘heart’ is our touchy-feely side.” If you pressed them, they’d articulate a dichotomy something like this:

## MIND

Calculating  
Responsible  
Logic  
A science book  
Algebra II  
Concrete  
Scientific  
Rational  
An engineering degree

## HEART

Impulsive  
Risky  
Love  
A romance novel  
Art class  
Abstract  
Sentimental  
Irrational  
A humanities degree

That's how modern Western culture thinks. But this sharp distinction between the mind and the heart isn't found in the Bible because in ancient Near Eastern cultures, the intellectual and emotional blurred and overlapped. (This no doubt explains why the biblical writers often use the terms *mind* and *heart* interchangeably.)

All this to say that, biblically speaking, your heart isn't just where you "get the feels." It's also where you analyze and evaluate. With your heart you rigorously discern, ponder, and wrestle with assorted ideas. Your unique attitudes and opinions, your personal values, your beliefs and convictions are all rooted in your heart.

Third, the Bible sees the heart as the place where we *decide* (Deuteronomy 30:10; Proverbs 5:12; Acts 11:23). Your heart is where you resolve to move in a certain direction or choose to engage in this action but not that one. Intentions, willingness, ambitions, and goals are all rooted in your heart.

This explains why the heart is such a monumental topic in the Bible! It's our central essence; our feeler, thinker, and chooser; the command and control center of our lives. No wonder wise King Solomon said, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (Proverbs 4:23).

Why should our hearts be top priority? Because, as Solomon pointed out, the condition of our hearts determines the direction of our lives.

Jesus put it this way: “A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart” (Luke 6:45 NLT). In other words, if our hearts aren’t right, nothing else about our lives will be right.



Life’s little irritations can often be hacked in a flash: Got assorted computer cables and charger cords that keep falling behind your desk? A few large bulldog clips can help you organize them and keep them within easy reach.

What about when your problems are trickier? Like when...

- You realize you’ve developed an unusually short fuse. (Little annoyances that typically don’t bother you suddenly have you barking at the kids and bristling at your coworkers.)
- The bottom drops out of your faith.
- Your best friend calls with terrible news.
- You spend a few minutes on social media and come away feeling critical, envious, angry, bummed out, or some messy combination of all that.
- You find yourself wanting to pull back from relationships that were once high priority to you.
- The people at your new job are driving you nuts.

In those kinds of situations, you’re going to need more than a

coat hanger and an old empty milk jug. You'll have to go to the root of the problem. You'll have to start with your heart.

Suppose that in looking within, you realize your soul is badly out of whack. What then? Has God left you to figure out this heart hack stuff by yourself?

Inconceivable.

## WHEN YOU FEEL DISILLUSIONED BY YOUR LACK OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

**B**efore we dive headlong into a bunch of spiritual life hacks, I probably ought to give you a quick spiritual history of my own life.

I'm from the Deep South—that region of the USA Flannery O'Connor once described as “hardly Christ-centered [but] most certainly Christ-haunted.”<sup>1</sup> Growing up to a steady stream of sermons about hell and the Holy Ghost, I was *definitely* Christ-haunted.

As a child I asked Jesus to “come into my life” almost daily. Each Sunday my family attended church, where I dutifully put my “tithe” (a tenth of my 25 cents weekly allowance) in the offering plate.<sup>2</sup> I was baptized at age seven, a second time at age 12. My teenage years were a blur of schoolwork and leisure suits, hormones and guilt, all punctuated by “rededicating my life to Christ” every two or three months.

During my first semester of college, something unexpected and mysterious happened in my soul. I was at a weekend retreat, and it

was as if God nudged me awake from a deep slumber and invited me to go on a long journey.

Overflowing with spiritual excitement and curiosity, I started frequenting Bible studies the way most college students barhop. I went on mission projects. I started talking about my faith to strangers. In a campus ministry, I even taught some classes about the basics of the Christian faith. (In my “free time,” I somehow earned a degree in journalism.)

After graduation, I became the world’s most incompetent youth director. (The fact that no one sued me for ministerial malpractice during those three years is borderline miraculous.) I moved to Texas and got a master’s degree in theology. I married a remarkable woman, and I helped launch a magazine designed to get teenagers reading the Bible. Then, for the next 24 years, I reared two sons, pastored two congregations, and wrote extensively about God and faith, the Bible and life. During these assorted life chapters, I experienced moments when God’s presence and love were palpable. But I experienced lots of other periods when God seemed more like an imaginary friend.

I think back over my odd spiritual journey, and I’m thankful but also filled with questions: Why, after four-plus decades, don’t I have more faith and joy? Why is it still so hard for me to love certain people? By now, shouldn’t I have a better handle on anger and worry, insecurity and envy? Shouldn’t I be further along? Why am I not more like Christ?

Sometimes I look at my lack of progress and become seriously disillusioned.

Maybe you feel that way too.



What if I told you that feeling like that—spiritually disillusioned—is a *good* thing, not a *bad* thing?



Here's why that's true: The prefix *dis* means "without or separated from." Being *disinherited* means your parents (or their attorneys) tell you to plan on living the rest of your life *without* any family money (not a cause for celebration). Being *disemboweled* means someone *separates* your innards from the rest of your body (not medically recommended).

*Disillusioned* means being "without illusions." Meaning, a *disillusioned* person has been separated from fictitious thoughts and made-up beliefs. In other words, being disillusioned is getting a ticket from fantasyland back to reality.

Isn't that something we should all seek?



One of the most common illusions held by Christians (especially new believers) is that spiritual transformation typically happens via sporadic, dramatic experiences. In a personal prayer time or at a big worship service, let's say, or while reading a dynamic Christian book or attending camp or sitting at a Bible conference, God suddenly jolts you. You have an ecstatic experience that transcends words. This notion of spiritual growth goes on to say that if you can just have enough spiritual experiences like this, over time your faith and spiritual life will grow stronger.

We likely get this idea from reading about the apostle Paul's miraculous encounter with the resurrected Jesus on the Damascus Road (Acts 9) or Isaiah's soul-shaking vision of God in the temple (Isaiah 6). We think, *THAT is how it's supposed to happen. I need God to come crashing into my life like THAT. A few experiences like THAT, and nothing would ever be the same. My prayers would suddenly have new power. I'd start seeing bona fide miracles on a regular basis. I'd instantly be freed from my self-centered attitude and my critical spirit.*

*I'd love everyone and everything—maybe even cats and polka music. (Okay, maybe not the cat part.)*



If you think I sound like I'm mocking, forgive me. I'm *not* for one moment suggesting that God Almighty can't supernaturally “zap” people and initiate sudden, dramatic changes in their lives. *Of course* he can do that—and thankfully, he *does* do that on occasion.<sup>3</sup>

What I *am* saying is that the Bible presents such encounters as the exception, not the rule. Nowhere does Scripture tell us to passively wait for “holy, heavenly lightning” to strike our souls. In short, it's an illusion to think that significant and permanent spiritual progress normally comes via random, one-time actions or experiences. It's true that I can place my iPhone in an empty drinking glass—the operative word being *empty*—and the music coming out of its tiny speakers will suddenly be amplified. It's *not* true that I can mystically put Bibles all around my house and suddenly hear God's voice in a clearer, louder way. That's not how the spiritual life works.



How does the spiritual life work? One of the best biblical statements about what we mean when we talk about hacking our spiritual life is found in a first-century letter the apostle Paul wrote to his young protégé Timothy. While giving Timothy some practical counsel about living in a godless culture, the wise old saint urged, “Train yourself to be godly” (1 Timothy 4:7).

Here's why this command is so fascinating: The Greek word translated “train” is the word from which we get our English word

*gymnasium*. Reading this sentence, Timothy would have immediately thought of athletes *exercising*!

*Train* is a verb that reeks of sweat. It's a workout word. Think of a weight room—all those loud grunts, all those iron plates clanging together, panting athletes barking encouragement to one another.

Guess what? Those athletes aren't under the illusion that they can do one superintense workout today and then kick back for the rest of the season. No, they'll be back tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. That's because inherent in the term *training* is the idea of *habitual*. Athletes in training *keep showing up* to work out—not sporadically but *regularly*. That's the only way to gain strength and endurance, and it's the only way to keep them. Why does the star basketball player shoot free throws for an extra hour after practice *every day*? So that in the big game, when the score is tied with one second left on the clock, she can confidently step to the line and swish the game-winning foul shot.

Athletes train *all the time* in order to reach their full potential. Paul is saying Christians need to do the same. While it's true that God is the only one who can truly transform a heart, we have a vital part to play. We're called to "work out our salvation" even as God does his work *in* us (Philippians 2:12-13). Godliness, or becoming like Jesus, isn't, then, the result of a "zap." To be sure, we need God's transforming touch, but life change also requires work and effort on our part. We can't be passive; we must keep showing up. To think otherwise is to live under an *illusion*.

Christians often refer to this kind of spiritual training as engaging in spiritual disciplines or practices or exercises. We can call them holy habits, or we can even call them heart hacks. What we call them is irrelevant. What matters is that we do them regularly, constantly—like those pro golfers who take an annoying number of practice swings before and after every shot or putt. When such acts—or hacks—become ingrained habits, a kind of way of life, we see slow, steady growth in faith. Let me say it again: If we remember

to do them only once in a blue moon and expect to make spiritual progress, we're living under a giant illusion.

Spiritual hacks require consistency, but at least they're not complicated. They don't call for angels or heavenly visions. You don't need a seminary degree or lots of "spiritual equipment," and you surely don't have to be a monk or a mystic. Think of heart hacks as creative, yet down-to-earth ways of orienting your soul or angling your heart in a Godward direction. You can do them anywhere and at any time. They're not—and this is crucial to grasp—a way of winning favor with the Lord. We don't do them to impress God. We do them to be *with* God in the hopes that we will be *like* him one day.



If you've been operating under the illusory idea that you could be jolted into holiness if only you could pray the right prayer, or have the right conference experience, or attend the perfect worship service—or if you've always assumed that to make progress in the faith, all you have to do is log enough years in Sunday school—I'm here to disillusion you. Paul's command to Timothy (and to us) is "Train yourself to be godly."

In the chapters that follow, I'll introduce you to (or remind you of) some uncommon—some might say "off-the-wall"—spiritual life hacks. With a bit of effort and lots of help from above, these little actions can become holy habits. As such, they have the power to reshape your heart by continually opening it to the transforming presence of God.

Are you in? Other than a bunch of useless illusions, what have you got to lose?