

# I WANT TO KNOW CHRIST

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# Introduction

My church had a Sunday school class for fifteen to sixteen year olds that was intended to prepare them for publicly professing their faith. It consisted in studying the Heidelberg Catechism.

I suppose it is appropriate to prepare those who want to profess their faith by making sure that they know what it is that they are professing. But I was disappointed. I remember thinking that I didn't want to know *about* God, I wanted to *know* God.

The tradition I am a part of emphasized knowledge. As I was growing up, sermons could be mini theological treatises. Or not so mini. There was much emphasis on knowing and believing the right things, not as much on willing and desiring the right things.

And it is in that context that a scripture passage has had a strange draw on me for decades: that cry of Paul's spirit, "I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead." (Philippians 3:10-11) It is only in the last couple of years that I have figured out the source of that attraction. In it, Paul is expressing the *desires of his heart*. He desires to attain, to become like, to unite. He wants to *know Christ*, not just to know *about* Christ.

One central theme that you will find in these reflections is attention not just to the head but also to the heart. What do you love? What do you desire? What do you seek? Knowledge is essential, but if you have knowledge without love you do not *know* God. How do we seek God in the will, and love him, and find him?

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Perhaps you have heard hundreds of sermons. You have attended hundreds of Sunday School classes or Bible studies or small group meetings. You pray every day. Or try to. You serve the church. You try to do all the things that are required of you. But is your faith *living*? Do you love God above all? Does the Spirit teach you all things? Does God answer your prayers? Are you impelled to sell all so that you can purchase the land containing the pearl of great price?

It seems to me that the church in this time and place can be poor in *hope*. We have faith down, or at least we know we are supposed to believe certain things. Love? We know that we are supposed to love God above all and neighbor as self. But what do we *hope* for? How do you expect your spiritual life to be different in ten years from how it is today? What great things is God doing in your life and what further great things do you expect soon?

Do you want to *know Christ*? Do you want to better understand, and experience, what it means that the Holy Spirit is at work in you? My prayer is that these meditations will inspire you to grow in faith, and in hope, and in love.

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These meditations were originally written as blog entries for the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL) blog, [life.ccel.org](http://life.ccel.org), and for the Tuesday Morning Prayer meeting we hold once a week with CCEL staff, now almost three years old. As such they tend to follow the Revised Common Lectionary, usually quoted according to the New Revised Standard Version of the bible. Fruitful times! Thanks Nyna, Will, Ann, Quincy, Anna, Diane, Zach, Daniel, Nancy, and that random person who walked in once.

Because these meditations started out online, they have images and links. The links are often pointers to CCEL books. The images are mostly from [unsplash.com](https://unsplash.com), freely available for use without license or citation. However, if you want to track down the source of an image, look at the image filename on the [life.ccel.org](http://life.ccel.org) website. It should name the photographer and make it possible for you to find the image at [unsplash.com](https://unsplash.com). Thanks, unsplash, for all the images!

# 1. Isn't that dangerous?



Read Philippians 2:5-13.

*It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. ([Philippians 2:13](#))*

When there is talk of God teaching us directly, without intermediary, or of God speaking, or leading, or reminding, or convicting, and of our listening for such teaching, the question often arises, “isn’t that dangerous?” How do we know we aren’t just listening to ourselves?

The first response that comes to mind is this: who do you think would be the safer, more reliable teacher, say a pastor of a church you have attended for many years, whom you know, and love, and trust, for the most part, or God himself? But that answer is too easy.

A second answer comes to mind: do you really think your conscience would allow you to murder and say “God told me to do it?” Or to cheat, or lie, or have an affair, or even to hate? But that answer is also too easy.

The truth is that Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light, to deceive even the elect, if that were possible. We can mistake the voice of pride, or of the world, or of Satan, as God’s voice,

especially early in the spiritual life. I once conversed with a man who said that an angel told him he was the holiest man living.

Spiritual writers often warn against accepting voices, visions, or other revelations as being from God without first testing them against the Bible and having them approved by other spiritual people. In fact, John of the Cross advises rejecting all such phenomena as likely being of Satan. He says that if such revelations are in fact from God, He will forgive us for rejecting them to avoid deception—and that if they are from God, they will have their effect immediately, deep in the spirit; they don't require some kind of posterior intellectual assent on our part.

However, God commonly teaches without the use of words or visions. God is found deep in the spirit, deeper than Satan can go. The voice of God is the voice of love. What love compels us to do cannot be sin.

The problem with the original question is that it presupposes that we need to provide for and protect our own salvation. We need to watch over ourselves, to make sure we are following the right path. We need to see in advance and avoid all the pitfalls. We need to save ourselves.

That kind of self-assessment and self-guidance is the true and great danger. What we need is to leave our salvation entirely in God's safe and capable hands. When Saint Teresa of Avila spent too much time worrying about her own state God told her "you think about me. I'll think about you."

But even that is not the final answer. The final answer is "yes, that is indeed very dangerous." It may result in the loss of many things that you love—reputation, possessions, experiences, goals, desires, even your very self—but you will be reborn in Christ.

## 2. Doubt



Read Luke 24:13-35.

*“O how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe!”* ([Luke 24:25](#))

What does it mean to be “slow of heart”? Should we trust our hearts over our heads?

Salvation is through faith (i.e. trust, love), not through head knowledge. God is known by love, not by reason.

Why is God hidden? You’d think that the Lord of the universe, the omnipotent, the all-knowing and all-loving King would be a little more visible. Yet no one sees God. His beloved suffer just like the rest of the population. Prayers seemingly remain unanswered. Where is God? But God’s actions — the result of God’s love — are seen through the eyes of faith.

I can imagine a person who wants to learn to walk, to run, to jump, to bemoan gravity, which holds her back. But that gravity is necessary for her to be able to walk, or run, or jump. Think of a situation without gravity — outer space, for example. How would one walk, or run, or jump? There is nothing to push against. It would be entirely impossible for muscles to develop at all.

Growth is impossible without opposition.

Progress is impossible without a goal, and goals are impossible without something undesirable to strive to overcome.

All have doubt, or temptation to doubt, because without doubt there could be no growth in faith, and therefore no salvation.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize Jesus because he had hidden himself from their recognition. While faith was being stretched and strengthened, it had to be that way. Otherwise there would be no need (opportunity) for faith.

Doubt is overcome with love, not reason. God is known through love. Don't ignore or paper over your doubts. Meditate on the life of Jesus. Love him.

### 3. Guard your Heart



*Guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. (Proverbs 4:23)*

Politics. For me it's junk food for the mind—the guilty pleasure of someone falling off his diet. Sometimes, if I'm tired or bored, or if I find what I'm supposed to be doing difficult, I'll look at a news website and inevitably I'll start reading articles about politics. Just as inevitably, it leaves me in turmoil—upset, angry, even hateful. I want this to happen and I don't want that to happen. I rue the state of the union. I judge. I get steamed. I whack people in the head with the beam in my eye, trying to remove the speck from theirs.

Dear Lord, these unruly affections drive out love. They pull me away from you. They blind me to love. They deafen me and prevent me from hearing and doing your will. How can I keep watch and guard my heart? O that I could abide in love. O that I could know your will, and do it. O that I could die to self and live for you. But how can I guard my heart? Lord, save!

Paul gives a hint: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:4-7)

First, it is the peace of God that guards your heart, not some superhuman control of your thoughts. The disturbances will continue; you should have peace of heart in the face of them. Peace in the affections. A quieting of cares and fears and hopes and loves for things that are not God.

Second, it is the peace of God that guards your heart, not something you can do for yourself, apart from God.

Third, if you don't feel that peace that passes understanding, perhaps you need to follow the prior advice: rejoice in the Lord always. Do not be anxious about anything. Pray. Have faith.

When unruly affections assail, why don't you try this, O my soul: turn toward God. Trust that God cares about the future and sees what is best. Root out anxiety by placing your hope in God. Redirect your unruly affections toward God. Be gentle. Be peaceful. Be thankful. Rejoice! Guard your heart.

*O Lord, teach me to love you with my whole heart, and mind, and soul, and strength.*

## 4. Salvation by Trust



Read Jeremiah 17:5-10.

*They shall be like a tree planted by water. (Jeremiah 17:8)*

Does God really care for us? We are abused. We get cancer. We die in car accidents. We live in war-torn countries and are oppressed and exiled. We are poor and don't have enough food. We die as babies, of sickness or accident or malice. Is God really working all things to our benefit? O Lord, where are you? Why do you not come to my aid?

*Salvation is by faith.* I sometimes wonder if the word *faith* would be better translated trust in this context. "Having faith" has come more or less to mean believing something for which you have no evidence (or "believing what you know ain't so," according to Mark Twain). But having faith in this sense certainly doesn't save; after all, the devils see the truth about Jesus.

In Jeremiah 17:5-10, they are cursed who trust in mere mortals, in the things of this world, in armies or countries or guns or education or health insurance or retirement accounts or status. They live in a parched land, a place with no water. They live in an uninhabited land—they are alone.

Those who trust the Lord are “like a tree planted by water,” ever nourished invisibly, flourishing and growing in the bright sunshine, bearing much fruit. They are still in that dry land, still beaten down upon by the sun, but they are supported and nourished in such a way that the bright sun causes them not to wither but to grow and blossom and bear fruit. To those who trust in created things, that bright sunshine looks like pain and suffering and death. To those who trust in the Lord, it may be painful but it is life and growth. It is the crucible of heavenly love.

According to Jeremiah, salvation is by trust. O Lord, search my heart. Burn away any trust in the things of this world. Help me to trust you in everything.

## 5. Transfiguration



*Read* Luke 9:28-36.

O light of everlasting love  
By which the world was made,  
Illumine your people from above  
With veins of gold inlaid.

O light of never-ending fire  
On Moses' holy tree,  
Consume our darkness on your pyre,  
And set your people free.

O light of eye, O life of mind,  
O love of hopeful heart,  
By which we see, and know, and find—  
Reveal your loving art.

O light of sorrow, joy of pain  
By which we are made clean,  
O loving cruelty divine,  
Create eternal sheen.

O hidden light, unseen, unknown,  
O ray of darkness deep,  
How long since you yourself have shown—  
How long must we yet weep?

O light in darkness on the cross,  
O glory hid in shame,  
O burn away in us our dross,  
And take away our blame.

O light, O seed, O holy one,  
O in our hearts reside.  
O make a house, a hearth, a home,  
And there, fore'er, abide.

O Lord, all we with unveiled face  
To you look for repose,  
For light, for life, for love, for place,  
For sight we shall not lose.



Sing:

- [Transfiguration \(O Light of Everlasting Love\)](#)

## 6. Led by the Spirit



Read Luke 4:1-13.

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. (Luke 4:1)*

I have long found the particular temptations Jesus went through in the wilderness in preparation for his ministry to be puzzling and difficult to empathize with. After 39 days without food, Jesus was hungry. Had he not already fasted long enough? Would it be so wrong to make himself a loaf of bread for breakfast? And how could he possibly be tempted to worship the devil? And why would the idea of climbing up onto the roof of the temple and throwing himself off be the least bit appealing?

Part of my problem had to do with the fact that Jesus Christ is the second person of the Holy Trinity. How in the world can God be tempted? Didn't he know what the devil was up to? Didn't he have divine strength to call upon? Can Jesus' temptations really be something I can relate to? But then I am reminded that Jesus emptied himself and became human. He was tempted in the same way that we are, and I presume that he did not draw on his divinity to ease his trials. In his human nature, he may not have known why the Spirit was leading him into the wilderness, how long he would be without food, or what the devil was up to. It was his food to do the will of the one who sent him, to follow the leading of the Spirit into the wilderness.

The Bible seems to me to name at least three types of Christians, or maybe stages of the Christian life. In John 15:14-15, Jesus says that he no longer calls his disciples *servants*, he calls them *friends*, if they do what he commands them to do. Perhaps those who follow him and obey only out of obligation or social pressure or hope for reward are *servants* and those who obey out of love are *friends*. Then there are those whom Paul calls “children of God” and “joint heirs with Christ” in Romans 8, who are “led by the Spirit of God.” These are they who suffer with him and are glorified with him. These are they for whom “creation waits in eager longing.” I suspect that this being led by the Spirit is key to understanding the temptations.

What does it mean to follow the Spirit? I think Jesus’ three temptations were temptations against that following. First, Jesus was tempted to turn a stone into bread. He had been led into the wilderness. He had been led to fast for a whole day, for two days, for 39 days. It would be easy, and only too tempting, to stop following the Spirit through the wilderness, to take another path, to decide for himself that it was time for the fast to be broken. But it was necessary, it was absolutely essential for his ministry that he should follow the Spirit in all things, putting away the temptations of the devil and of the flesh. If we are to be led by the Spirit, it is essential that we not follow the flesh. Ever. It is essential that we follow the Spirit completely, without thought for our own needs, and rely on God to provide our daily bread.

Second, Jesus was led up to view all the kingdoms of the world, with an offer of all of those kingdoms if he would just bend the knee to the devil. Presumably Jesus knew that his purpose was to save the world, to deliver all of those kingdoms to God, ultimately to bring about the kingdom of God. Here was the offer of a quick means of accomplishing that ultimate goal. He would be attaining the desired end, if through questionable means. He would be sacrificing himself for the salvation of the world, but by a diabolical route. It was essential for him, as it is for us, that we follow the path by which the Spirit leads us and not attempt any shortcuts of our own devising. There must be no alliance with Egypt. The ends do not justify the means.

In the third temptation, the devil suggested that since God had promised angels to watch over him, it might be fun to jump off the top of the temple. Without a bungee cord. This makes me think of the seventy-two disciples that Jesus sent out, two by two, to preach, heal the sick, and cast out demons. They returned filled with joy at the gift they had been given. It’s not hard to imagine some of them healing a sickness that the Spirit had *not* led them to heal. It would be natural for them to start thinking of themselves as healers and to heal whatever they thought needed healing. In doing so they would be arrogating God’s healing power, claiming it for their own. It is absolutely essential that those who are led by the Spirit and are given gifts remember their source and use them only as the Spirit leads.

Is it possible for us to follow the Spirit of God with the fidelity that Jesus demonstrated? That if we followed the leading of the Spirit faithfully, we would do the works that Jesus did and even greater works? That we would become participants in the divine nature? That we would be adopted as additional children of God, little Christs? “Christians”?

*Lead us, O Lord, and give us the spirit to follow faithfully.*

## 7. True humility



*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:29-30)*

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)*

Humility is much urged and enjoined in the Bible, but as a virtue it is doubted or even negatively received in the world. Problems with humility for Christians may stem from the facts that different people have different views on what it means to be humble and that examples of false humility are plentiful. Is it humility to pretend to think little of yourself? What is true humility? What does the humble person look like?

Jesus says that we should learn humility by following his example. Would you like to know whether you are humble? Here are some indications of true humility taken from Jesus' life.

First, those who desire to be humble should not be ashamed of performing any task, even those the worldly heart may consider base or humiliating, such as washing the feet of others.

Second, they must readily acknowledge themselves at fault when appropriate and not esteem themselves over others. And even if they are not at fault they ought to love their accusers.

Third, as Jesus ministered to the Samaritan woman at the well, they should serve all, not favoring family or friends or tribe or country, not favoring friends or respectable people, though the service may differ according to the state of the one being served.

Fourth, the humble take up Jesus' yoke and become obedient. They should prefer to do the will of others over their own will, and they should love the will of Jesus most of all.

Fifth, they should follow Jesus, who had nowhere to lay his head. They should be so far from covetousness that they "divest and disencumber themselves from all things, clinging only to God, who cannot unite himself with a worldly heart. Such should bow to the earth beneath God and his creatures, in self-annihilation inward and outward; and this is what is meant by forsaking all things."<sup>1</sup>

Sixth, they should accept suffering. Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." And so they who follow him and learn from him willingly accept the suffering God permits them to undergo, hoping, believing, and trusting in him, thereby learning the fellowship of sharing in Jesus' suffering.

Seventh, they should empty themselves, become servants, and live to do God's will.

True humility is nothing less than the beauty of the life of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> [Tauler](#)

## 8. Enemies of the cross of Christ



Read Philippians 3:17-4:1.

*For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ (Philippians 3:18a)*

Enemies in the church! Idolators! Many of them! They worship their bellies or their treasures or their pleasures or their honor. Their mind is on earthly things and they are bound for destruction.

They are enemies of *the cross*. They object to notions that we should eat simple food and share what we have with others, or avoid accumulating treasures on earth, or seek first the kingdom of God, or turn the other cheek, or seek to be unknown, or embrace the suffering of the cross, or love our neighbors as ourselves.

Wait a minute. Don't I sometimes do some of those things? Don't I think it normal and natural and pleasant to go out for a nice meal, buy a nice piece of furniture or clothing, enjoy a sporting event or concert, be honored for the good work (or works) that I do, take pain meds when I'm suffering, defend my own rights?

Enemy of the cross—me! If I were a friend of the cross, I would regard these things as rubbish, as a loss, as a detriment. I would regard *everything* in this world as a loss compared to the

surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Not only would I not seek them, I'd seek to *avoid* them. I'd sell all my possessions and give to the poor. Right?

What's the place of asceticism in the authentic Christian spiritual life? We don't create our own crosses—decide that we will avoid pizza covered in pineapple and chocolate bits on the third Thursday of every month, perhaps. That only feeds self. If we succeed, we may become proud and think we are saving ourselves. We may even come to believe that all those people out there who still eat pineapple and chocolate pizza on Third Thursdays (okay, well, the few) are inferior Christians.

We don't create our own crosses. We embrace the cross *of Christ*. Our dear Lord will provide the crosses he wishes us to carry. And as we seek *him* with growing ardor we eventually forget about our love for pineapple and chocolate pizza. And if that love for pineapple and chocolate pizza gets in the way of our love for Christ, we choose the latter. He may call us to sell our possessions, or he may not.

And yet, our asceticism must be more profound than anything we might plan for ourselves. We follow Christ, we seek him in all things, in all situations. Every decision, every desire is to be turned toward him. We love God above all and our neighbors as ourselves. There is nothing more ascetic than dying to self entirely.

Let any exercise to which you are called, any time of fasting or praying or watching or contemplating, any act of simplifying or divesting or giving or serving, have one purpose: to remind you to turn every decision, every desire toward Jesus.

Someday, may we be able to pray honestly, with Paul, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10-11, NIV).

## 9.A dry and weary land



Read Psalm 63:1-8.

*My flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (Psalm 63:1b)*

Where is that dry and weary land where there is no water? Where is that land of emptiness and of solitude? Where is that land of thirst and of seeking? Where is that land of danger and of escape from danger? Where is that land of valleys and of steep slopes—and mountaintops, where you can see great distances?

Where is that land where flesh longs and faints for the Lord? What is the nature of that dry and weary land? Where do we find it? How do we enter?

Where is that dry and weary land? If you see a television or hear music you are in the wrong place. You won't find it in company—it's desolate. In cultivated fields or by manicured lawns? No. Well-worn paths? You're headed the wrong way. Turn.

In this land you will face danger. You will step on snakes and run into lions. The Lord will keep you safe.

In this land you will not find food. You will face dependence.

In this land you will find solitude. You will face yourself.

In this land you will be forsaken. You will experience absence.

This land is weary. You will trudge endless miles of rocky ground.

You will face trials. Don't turn aside to make yourself a loaf of bread. Let your food be to follow the one who leads you.

And yet in this weary land, the sun also rises. If you have a hidden source of water, you will grow, and blossom, and eventually bear fruit.

This is a land one does not often enter voluntarily. We are driven there by lying, deceitful people we thought were our own. We are driven there by enemies. By the vanity of the world. Yet we find a cave of refuge. We may find hidden beauties in the rocky, dry ground. We may find hidden springs with growing plants.

Do you want to enter this land? If you don't get chased there by enemies or pushed there by the vanity of the world, there is another path. It's narrow, rocky, and steep. Few find it and even fewer follow it, but it leads directly up the mountain. It is this: choose always what looks less attractive. Take the narrow way.

## 10. Be reconciled to God



*Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-21.*

*We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:20b)*

Our Lord said “I am the light of the world.” This light travels the land with the speed of, well, light, and it does not return before it illumines. This light draws all things to itself and the darkness has not overcome it. We are drawn to the light, powerfully, and yet we remain partly in darkness. We are called to reconciliation with God, and yet we are separate. There must be very great barriers attempting to block such a great light. What are these barriers? There must be strong cords attaching us to the things of this world, holding us back, preventing us from returning to our source. What are these cords?

The first cord attaches us to things. We fear losing our treasures.

The second attaches us to comfort. We fear being called to abstain, to go hungry, to wear uncomfortable clothes, to be homeless.

The third to gratification. We fear solitude, emptiness, quiet, the desert. Who knows what you might meet there.

The fourth to honor. We fear being rejected by our own people, as Jesus was.

The fifth to knowing. We fear being led, blindfolded, to a place we would not go.

The sixth to religious duty. We fear not being able to effect our own salvation.

The seventh to self-will. We fear death.

Salvation takes faith.

*Exercise:* let go of each of these fears. Trust God.

*See also* Tauler Sermon 10 [Fifth Saturday in lent]

## 11. Rubbish



Read [Philippians 3:4b-14](#).

*Rubbish.* (Philippians 3:8)

May I drive 30 mph in a 25 zone? I have spent an embarrassing amount of time thinking about this question. For a time I religiously paid attention to speed limits and to my own speed. I think I've driven my wife to exasperation on more than one occasion, driving on freeways near Chicago at 55 mph with cars streaming past on both sides. Sure, Paul says that righteousness through my own effort of will to obey the law is 'rubbish,' but Jesus says that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees.

Of course, Jesus' point was that our righteousness must not just be something external but must come from inside, must be born out of love. I decided that the more fruitful approach was not to be concerned so much with obeying the letter of the law as with loving God and neighbor. I didn't worry so much about rolling through stop signs on my bicycle when no one was around who would be affected. In fact, I blasted through them at full speed, just being careful not to impede traffic.

This didn't sit entirely easily either, so I prayed, "Lord, if you care whether I roll through stop signs, you're going to have to tell me." He responded, "I care about what's inside you." That

desire to have an easier ride, to save momentum, to get there faster, that desire itself was the problem.

What's wrong with a desire to get there more quickly? First of all, such a desire makes it more difficult for me to make a rational decision about whether I should blast through stop signs. Desires lead to wishful thinking.

More fundamentally, the problem is that such desires push out other desires. They do battle with the desire for God, with loving God above all. When the desire is for holding onto something or for getting something, it is called *avarice*. Such a desire prevents us from knowing God, who is apprehended by love. Our love is instead for getting there more quickly.

One aspect of Paul's teaching in this passage that I find curious is that Paul seems to oppose knowing Christ with obedience to the law.

*Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as a loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as a loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*

Surely he doesn't really mean this? Surely obedience to the law is a good thing? Surely obedience doesn't prevent us from knowing Christ? Perhaps the problem here is the desire for being a worthy person, for checking all the boxes, for having a good reputation. Such desire is called *pride*.

That religious obedience to the law that seeks to earn salvation also has a taint of self-serving. Pure love of God doesn't have advantage for self as an aim. And it is the pure in heart who will see God.

When one loves God above all, even above self, the last thing one wants is to offend him or hurt him. In such a state it's easy to stop at the stop sign if that's what your loved one wants—to do anything else would be to hurt your love. This is the difference between obeying for hope of reward, as a servant does, and obeying for love, as does a friend of God.

Perhaps Paul's setting obedience to the law in opposition with knowing Christ is deeper than simply rejecting pride or self-serving. Perhaps Paul is redirecting us to that overwhelming love for God, which also spills out to neighbor, that love by which we know Christ, that love that makes other desires seem like rubbish, that love that is free from self-interest, that love of God above all. That Spirit of love and faith naturally brings about a righteousness that is from God.

May I drive 30 in a 25 zone? Lord, increase my love for you.

## 12. Two causes of humility



Read [Philippians 2:5-11](#).

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

Read some or all of Luke 22:14-23:56. Look for humility in Jesus' words and actions.

Is it possible for us to empty ourselves in the way that Jesus did? We aren't God, so there is less to empty. But Paul says "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." How do we "let" this complete, all-encompassing humility be in us?

The unknown author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* in chapter 13 says that there are two things that bring about humility in us: knowledge of ourselves and knowledge of God. Of this knowledge of ourselves, of "the filth, the wretchedness, and the frailty of man, into the which we are fallen by sin," we can learn something by self-examination. This knowledge should remain in us in some part as long as we live. The other is the knowledge of the "over-abundant love and worthiness of God himself, in view of which all nature quakes, all scholars are fools, and all saints and angels blind—so much so that if God in his wisdom did not graciously limit

their ability to see according to their nature, I cannot say what would happen to them.” We see something of God’s glory, and suddenly being humble is not a problem. At all.

According to this author, it is the second cause of humility that it will last into eternity. The first cause ends at the end of this life, but it may happen that even in this mortal body, for abundance of grace, we “suddenly and perfectly forget all knowing and feeling of being.” And in that time we “are perfectly humbled, for we know and feel no cause but the Chief. And when we know and feel any other cause, even if God is the chief cause, yet it is imperfect humility.”

All Christians should learn humility by knowledge of self. It is impossible for a sinner to get and keep perfect humility without this imperfect humility. Therefore we should “swink and sweat” and strain ourselves in every way to gain a knowledge of ourselves as we are. This author states that “I believe that soon after you shall have a true knowing and feeling of God as he is—not as he is in himself,” but as is possible in this mortal body. This author says what he says about perfect humility to let us see the value of the exercise he recommends, that a secret love for God “pressed in cleanness of spirit upon this dark cloud of unknowing between you and your God, truly contains in it the perfect virtue of humility without any special or clear vision of anything under God.”

For it often happens that when we have a little knowledge and feeling of imperfect humility, we may think we have almost achieved perfect humility, and thus deceive ourselves, though we are yet filled with “foul stinking pride.” Therefore strive for perfect humility, because those who have it, while they have it, “shall not sin, nor yet much after.”

Therefore if we are completely dedicated to God, if we know something of our “filth and wretchedness” and are seeking to root it out, if we are called to greater knowledge of God, we should put our effort not into examining ourselves and dredging up sin but into seeking God, into “pressing in cleanness of spirit upon this dark cloud of unknowing” between us and our God. It is through knowing God that we receive perfect humility. It is through loving God that we come to know him. It is through seeking him that we come to love him.

What to do if that desire is weak, if we don’t seek him as we ought? Ask God for more love. God loves to give gifts, and the gift he most loves to give is love, for it is the gift of himself. Lord, increase our love.

See also [The Cloud of Unknowing](#) on CCEL. Or, for a more modern translation see the Paulist Press edition (1981).

## 13. Why are you weeping?



Read John [20:11-18](#).

*Why are you weeping?* (John 20:13)

Angels seem usually to appear to announce big news. You are going to have more descendants than there are stars in the sky. You are going to have a baby. To you is born a savior. But these angels have only a question for Mary: “why are you weeping?”

There *is* big news to be sure. Jesus is risen! The bonds of sin and death are broken! Heaven and earth are made new! God and humanity are united! The eternal plan, the plan angels had been searching into from time immemorial, the plan that is the focal point of history, the great plan

is complete! Surely the angels are bursting with joy! But all the angels say is “why are you weeping?”

Why indeed are you weeping O Mary, you who have been cured of seven evil spirits, you who love and follow Jesus and provide for him, you who know him well, you who have been told he must die and rise again? Can you not see beyond the day to the epoch? Can you not feel beyond the pain to the joy? O, what a joyful moment it would be for one with faith!

A voice speaks: “why are you weeping?” But now it is not the angels’ voice, it is a familiar voice. The one you love. “Why are you weeping?” The voice is ever so compassionate, but is there a hint of disappointment? No, not disappointment, but an invitation to move on. The promise of immense joy. Look up, see, know, love, and be filled with joy.

Why are you weeping, soul? Where is your faith? Have I not told you that there would be death, and then resurrection? Have I not told you that I have prepared a place for you? Do not hold onto what was. Embrace what is to come. The proper response, the only possible response for one with faith, is overwhelming, all-encompassing joy, a joy that embraces all of creation. Even if your loved one has been taken from you, rejoice! All things have been made new!

Lord, increase our love, that it may bring forth joy.

## 14. Eternal consequences



Read [John 20:19-31](#).

*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. (John 20:23)*

After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples singly and in groups. He had different words for each. “Why are you weeping?” “Put your hand in my side.” “Do you love me more than these?”

When he met with all the disciples together, he had four words: “peace,” “as my Father sent me, so I am sending you,” “receive the Holy Spirit,” and “the sins you forgive are forgiven; the sins you retain are retained.”

Jesus’ words are words of power. When he says “peace,” he grants it. When he says “receive the Holy Spirit,” he gives them that spirit. At the last supper, he told them to stay in Jerusalem until they receive power from on high. With these words Jesus gives them power and sends them forth. Surprisingly, Jesus compares this sending to God’s sending of Jesus, as though they could in some way continue Jesus’ unique ministry.

Note that it was necessary for the disciples to be at peace before they could be sent or receive the Holy Spirit. They had been afraid, gathering behind locked doors. They needed to be at peace to have the courage necessary for their mission. More curious is the fact that they were sent before they were given the Holy Spirit. Perhaps power from on high is given only when and to the extent that it is needed.

What are we to make of that last word, “the sins you forgive are forgiven; the sins you retain are retained”? I think the import is that “your ministry is real.” What you do has eternal consequence for others. It may be tempting to think that the responsibility for saving the world is God’s, that what you do doesn’t affect others. But that’s not the case.

Your actions or inactions, your peace or distraction, your joyfulness or carefulness, your prayerfulness or mindlessness, your pursuit of God or pursuit of the world, your speaking or silence, all these have eternal consequence not just for you but for others. It is not just for you that I command you to love me above all and to love your neighbor as yourself. It is not just for you that I command you to let your light shine. It is for the salvation of the world. If you fail to forgive sins, those sins remain unforgiven.

Stay in the city of peace until you are given power from on high, until you are sent, but then go where you are sent. Say what you are given to say. Heal what you are given to heal. Forgive what you are given to forgive. There is eternal consequence for the world.

*Lord, lead me, and teach me to follow in all things.*

## 15. Peace be with you



*Peace be with you. (John 20:19)*

Christ promises a peace that passes understanding. He gave it to his disciples in a word. Do you experience that peace? Is your house at rest?

People naturally desire and seek peace in all that they do. Problems? Try to solve them and be at peace again. Have a job to do? Finish it, so that you can return to peace. Are you hungry? Sorrowing? Grieving? Searching? Longing? Take action so that you can return to rest. That's life.

And yet these actions don't bring peace. They bring more of the same. Those who seek money so that they can live a peaceful life find that they always want more money. Those who seek honor find that they never have enough honor. Seeking to fulfill our desires doesn't bring peace—it just reinforces those desires. It's like beating yourself with a stick to try to stop some pain you are feeling. It's looking for peace in the wrong place. Peace is found only in one place—in God.

Read Tauler's [Sermon for the First Sunday after Easter](#), in which he describes three stages by which we ascend to true peace and purity of heart.

According to Tauler, the first stage is being "called out of the world," by which he means placing our desires on God, not on benefits for ourselves. Peace is turning away from selfish desires. Peace is loving God above all and loving our neighbors as ourselves. When we are "called out of the world," we learn to know and see God, and to know and see ourselves. We turn. We watch

what we say and do and think and love. We strive for a “single eye,” that is, a will toward the kingdom of God and his righteousness. We love God, not the world. We become apostles.

Is there self-centered striving remaining in you? Try seeking the opposite---to give, to be unknown, to divest, to serve.

## 16. Your shepherd



Read [Psalm 23](#), [Revelation 7:9-17](#), and [John 10:22-30](#).

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. (Psalm 23:1)*

If the Lord is to be your shepherd, you must be his sheep.

If the Lord is your shepherd, he will care and provide for your every need. He

- brings you to green pastures where you may eat and lie down,
- provides cool, quiet water for you to drink,
- leads you by the paths that are best for you,
- protects you in the darkest valley,
- brings you back into the fold with his staff,
- gives you every good gift,
- gives you a place to live in his presence forever.

Then you will sing with the angels and the living creatures and the elders, with every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, “worthy is the Lamb that was slain,” “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

Is the Lord your shepherd? Are you his sheep? He says that his sheep may be identified in this way: they hear and know his voice. They come when called. Do you hear his voice? Do you know his call? When he calls, do you follow?

The sheep of a shepherd don't

- determine their own path
- worry about food or drink or danger
- follow the many strange voices they hear, but only his voice

To be his sheep, you must meet the conditions. You must give up self-determination. You will be led, at times perhaps to places you may not want to go, except that you trust your shepherd. You give up self-seeking, for food or drink or protection, and gratefully accept what your shepherd provides. You leave your care to your shepherd. You give up listening to different voices, deciding which to follow. You follow your shepherd implicitly.

You will not be responsible for your own spiritual life. You do not try to measure your progress or fix yourself or feed yourself. You eat what is given to you. You put your care entirely in the hands of your shepherd.

You replace anxiety (or self-confidence) with trust.

Here, now, at this moment, once and forever, cede control of self. Leave care of yourself to your loving shepherd, who gives his life for his sheep. Be at peace. Rest by quiet waters in green pastures. Rejoice!

*Lord Jesus Christ, good shepherd, I place myself entirely in your care. Wherever you lead, even into dark valleys, I will follow. What you provide I will eat. When you need to shear me or wash me, I'll be calm. In your green pastures I will rest.*

## 17. A new commandment



Read [John 13:31-35](#).

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. (John 13:34)*

What is the substance of this new glory with which Jesus was glorified? The difference now, the change, the new glory, is the completion of God's work in Jesus, his death and resurrection. Jesus had served selflessly, but now he was silent before his accusers. Now he carried his cross as long as he was able. Now he willingly followed his executioners.

To obey the new commandment, to love in the way he loved, we too follow along the path on which we are led, the path to Golgotha. We too do not answer our accusers. We too carry our crosses to the extent we are able, until we too collapse under the weight—at which point there is help also for us. We too are nailed on the cross. We too die—in our case, to the world, to sin, to self. We too are reborn in perfect love.

What is Jesus' new commandment? More love now than to love our neighbors as ourselves, to the point of equality. Instead, we are to love to the point of death. We empty ourselves of self and give our lives for others. We lose ourselves entirely in service and in love. In this loss of self we find our true selves and are glorified with him whom we love. We love to the point of resurrection.

Where is this dark abyss of love, this opening narrow but deep, this gateway with the appearance—and fact—of death for those who enter? Something tells me that though it appears dark as I approach, it is bright on the inside. How do I find it? How do I enter? How do I lose myself in love?

## 18. Peace I leave with you



Read [John 14:23-29](#).

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (John 14:27)*

Are you at peace? Are you calm in all situations, untouched by anger or slander, unfazed by loss, content in pain, able to float over the waves of the troubles of the world?

What is this peace that Jesus leaves with us? What is the nature of this other-worldly peace? Not an absence of affliction or pain or loss—that would be peace as the world understands it. Not an absence of response to the afflictions of the world—that would be stoicism. Jesus wept.

This peace is apparently one we can lose through our own fault—through letting our hearts be troubled. Through fear. Apparently a deep faith is a prerequisite.

There are three kinds of peace, or levels of peace, that God gives. Each is so far above what precedes it that it is like a whole new world. We experience them at times, in part, but hopefully with growing frequency.

The first is the peace of faith. When we have a deep faith in God, the whole world looks new. There is no fear of pain or disease or loss or shame—all is in God's loving and powerful hands. All is part of God's plan. Affliction is a loving message from God that he is caring for us, purifying us, saving us. Pain is joy. Sickness is life. The world is a sparkling manifestation of God's salvation and love. Love is the stuff from which the world was created.

This peace may be called union with God in faith.

The second is peace in the desires. This is the stillness that the psalmist speaks of when he says "be still and know that I am God." This is the rest that John of the Cross speaks of when he refers to "my house at rest." This is the quieting of desires outside of God. In this peace, the desires that cause strife or envy or anger or covetousness are gone. Without conflicting desires, our houses are at rest. And yet this peace is perhaps deceptively named, for we do love God and love good and hate evil. We have a strong desire for the salvation of the world. We love God's will above all.

This peace may be called union with God in will.

I have heard tell of a third peace, the peace of God himself. God himself is always the same, always loving, always joyful. God is stability and love and joy. God is beyond stability and love and joy. God is peace. God is. God. Someday, some way, we will be like him for we will see him as he is.

This peace may be called union with God in spirit.

Perhaps these three kinds of peace may also be called the peace of the servant of God, of the friend of God, and of the child of God.

## 19. Power from on high



Read [Acts 1:1-11](#), [Ephesians 1:15-23](#), and [Luke 24:44-53](#).

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)*

*Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:47-49)*

*I pray...that you may know...what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. (Ephesians 1:19-21)*

What is this power Paul speaks so highly of? What is this power Jesus tells his disciples to stay in Jerusalem and await? This power is effectiveness. It is the ability to speak without fear. This power is eloquence and clarity and conviction.

Human power may result from strength or fierceness or vigorous action, but God's power is spoken. God said "let there be light," and there was light. God's power is his word. God's word is his action, the word of creation, the word of redemption, the word that is his son.

God's power in us is the sort that is made perfect in our weakness. It's not my power or my ability. It's the spirit of power from on high. It's clothing. We are to stay in the city of peace until we are clothed with this power. But when the disciples were clothed with this power, the world was astonished that these uneducated fishermen could speak so effectively, so powerfully.

When we *are* clothed with this power, we are to be Jesus' witnesses—to tell others what we have seen. We cannot be witnesses of what we have not seen. We don't just repeat what we have been told. We don't go out until we have seen, and we have waited, and we have been clothed with power. But when we have seen and when we are clothed with power and when we say what we have seen, the power of that word raises the dead. It ascends to heaven and sits at the right hand of God. It is the power of God's kingdom.

I wonder what it was like for the disciples waiting in Jerusalem to be clothed with power. Were they cowering in fear? Were they eager to go out and tell the world, restrained only by Jesus' words? Or were they content to remain in the city of peace, waiting, waiting?

## 20. Filled with the Holy Spirit



Read [Acts 2:1-21](#).

*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability. (Acts 2:4)*

What greater gift could God give than himself? Riches, peace, power, sanctification, wisdom, suffering, death, resurrection, eternal life—nothing compares. To have the Holy Spirit is to participate in all wisdom, all power, all glory, all might, all. God is the great giver of gifts, and this is the day He gives his greatest. *Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams...blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.*

God is the great giver of gifts, the spirit of generosity. He gives *himself*. The only constraint on his giving is what we are able to receive without harm. We are inclined to arrogate God's gifts to ourselves. Think of the percentage of people who, winning the lottery, would use all of the proceeds to serve others. Then think of those who would hold onto those winnings to their own detriment. So how do we prepare to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is freely given, and yet there is a price. Don't worry, the price is nothing of lasting value. Nothing that compares with the value of the gift. The price is all that you have and all that you are and all that you desire. The price is yourself. Just as in marriage we give ourselves and receive our true love, here we give ourselves and receive God Himself.

A gift with a price? What is this nonsense? The secret is that the price (your *self*) is itself a gift. God created you. God inspires you to give yourself, if indeed you are so inspired. And the ability to give yourself is itself a gift to you, as it results in your rediscovery of your true self.

Do you want to receive the Holy Spirit? Give. Sell all. Give up your hopes and dreams and desires for this world. Give up your hope for respect or appreciation or comfort or achievement or pleasure or safety or wholeness. Give up your desire to serve God effectively. Give up your desire to be an outstanding Christian. Give up even your desire for salvation--let it instead be a desire that God's will be done in you. Empty yourself of self, so that there is room for the Holy Spirit. Then wait, patiently, in the city of peace, for the rushing wind, for the spirit of holiness, for the spirit of power, for light, for life, for love.

*See also:* Tauler, Sermon 26 (Pentecost II)

## 21. As the deer pants for water



Read [Psalm 42](#) and [43](#).

What does the inner life look like of one who is making progress in the spiritual life? Psalms 42 and 43 give us a peek.

Such a one is consumed by a burning desire for God, a desire so strong that it may be compared to a deer's desire for water in a dry and thirsty land. It overwhelms every other desire. It is a desire to see God, to be in his unmediated presence, to see his face.

Such a one, in a dry place, remembers better times—times of going up to worship with the throng, of being in God's presence. Times of shouts and songs of thanksgiving. These memories help to firmly place hope where it should be, in God.

In that dry place, such a one is overwhelmed by the roar of a waterfall, tossed around by waves and billows. How can the desert be a place of waves and billows? Maybe this land is only dry and deserted on the surface.

When enemies oppress, when wounds afflict, when adversaries taunt or slander, when God seems absent, when soul is cast down and disquieted, such a one remembers God, the rock of salvation, helper, steadfast lover. Such a one prays by day and sings songs of praise by night. God's light and truth lead such a one to God's holy hill, to his dwelling, to his altar, with exceeding joy, with music, with praise.

Do you desire to pray by day and sing songs of praise by night? How does one pray continuously, as Paul directs, when business and busyness and the bustle of the world demand attention?

Earworms. If you can get a song of praise looping in your head, you can quite literally pray continuously, even while attending to other business. Or it can be a short prayer, attached to some other repetitive or frequent activity, such as your breath cycle. Three classic Christian books give different approaches based on this idea:

- *The Way of a Pilgrim*, a fascinating narrative of a Russian peasant wandering through Russia and Siberia, learning to continuously repeat the Jesus prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me")
- *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in which the author recommends repeating a name of God to bring to mind our love for God and our desire for his will in a non-verbal (univocal?) way (available on CCEL)
- *The Parable of the Pilgrim*, from Walter Hilton but reproduced in the CCEL's edition of Suso's *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* [which you should now read]

## 22. For freedom Christ has set us free



Read [Galatians 5:1, 13-25](#).

*For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)*

Some people these days say that they are spiritual but not religious. I think the sentiment involves a desire not to be constrained to a particular set of beliefs or actions but to have the freedom to choose whatever sort of spiritual life seems most fulfilling. But what does it mean to “be spiritual”? What is a “spiritual life” and where can I get one?

Paul seems to get at this question by conceptually dividing people into two parts, “flesh” and “spirit.” “Flesh” is shorthand for baser desires—desires that lead to lasciviousness, gluttony, jealousy, anger, and the like. The desires of the spirit (Spirit?) lead to love, joy, peace, patience, and the rest of the fruit of the Spirit.

Paul has these two parts of each person at war with each other. They are opposed. And this opposition, this unfinished battle within you, is what prevents you from doing what you want. You wish to be kind, but impatience flares to anger. You intend to eat enough to give yourself strength for your tasks, but you end up stuffed and lethargic. At times, the flesh wins the battle.

However, winning a battle is not winning the war. Eventually, one of these parts will grow stronger, become dominant, become second nature. A person is spiritual when the spirit is in

control. Such a person may still feel desires that, if permitted to continue, would grow into lasciviousness or gluttony or jealousy or anger, but they are immediately shut down by the spirit. Such a person follows the spirit or is led by the Spirit.

Eventually, the desires of the spirit become our desires. As we more completely and more thoroughly desire what the spirit desires, we are able to do just exactly whatever we want, because what we want is what the spirit wants. We are no longer under the law, no longer have to force ourselves to behave, no longer fail. We are free. The spiritual life is the life where the flesh is conquered and the spirit prevails.

Note that the firm decision to live the life of the spirit, persisted in, is the victory. The remaining transformation of feelings and habits and actions and other pockets of resistance is mop-up.

This all sounds well and good, but how do you get there? Paul says to run the race as though you intend to win. The outcome of this war between flesh and spirit has eternal consequences. Gather your resolve and put all that you have into killing the flesh.

Jesus says, “deny yourself.” One way to kill the flesh is to systematically deny it sustenance. Decide that you are going to eat only bread and water, be kind to your annoying neighbor, give money to the poor instead of buying that fancy thing, skip that TV show or novel that leaves you scattered, wear shabby clothes, allow others to think badly of you without defending yourself. Exercises such as these are not ways of earning salvation, they are exercises to help you to help God to help you to overcome the flesh and become spiritual.

This is the spiritual life: the freedom of no longer being a slave to the flesh. Having tasted something of God’s goodness, we freely choose to be led by the Spirit. We freely choose to serve, to love, to give because our spirit rules over our flesh, because the Holy Spirit is our spirit, because these are the things that it (he) desires.

Part of the motivation of the “spiritual but not religious” movement may be a desire for freedom, a desire not to be hemmed in by a set of required beliefs and rituals. Paul shares this desire for freedom, but true freedom is a freedom of knowledge and self-possession.

## 23. Surrender



0. You know, if you make demands of people that they are not able to live up to, that's dispiriting. Cruel, really.

1. You have achieved all that you should be. You are perfect.

0. That's not what I meant.

1. You are not yet perfect, but all that you should be is within your grasp. You are able to achieve the rest with your own effort. Go, save yourself.

0. That's not what I meant either. I acknowledge that only God can save. But still, those demands are out of reach for me. For everyone. No one can live up to that. No one on earth is without sin. What's the purpose for making unachievable demands?

1. To bring you to this point.

0. This point?

1. Have you finally, after all these years, come to know in an experiential way, not just theoretically, that you cannot save yourself? Are you ready to leave your salvation entirely in my hands?

0. What would that involve?

1. You freely surrender your care and yourself entirely to God. You no longer think about yourself—how you are doing, whether you are a good person, what are your problems, how you can correct them, what others think of you, whether you are making progress. Instead, you think about me and let me think about you. Do you wish to take this fateful step?

0. I do. This day, after all these years, I finally surrender myself entirely to you, my Lord, my love. You may do with me whatever you please—whether sickness or health, for richer or for poorer, now and forevermore, until in death we are united. I will be faithful to you and serve you with tenderness and respect.

1. Welcome, child. Hear the heavenly host rejoicing. Now brace yourself for a time of preparation. There is much to do to make you ready. Hear the words of my friend [John of Ruusbroec](#):

*When through charity and an upright intention a person offers himself in all his works and in his entire life to the glory and praise of God, and when he seeks rest in God above all things, then he should humbly and patiently, with self-surrender and firm confidence, await new riches and gifts—but always without anxiety about whether God will bestow them or not. This is the way a person makes himself ready and capable of receiving an interior life full of desire. When the vessel is ready, the precious liquid is poured in. There is no more precious vessel than a loving soul and no more beneficial drink than the grace of God. It is in this way that a person will offer to God all his works and his entire life with a simple and upright intention and will also, above that intention, above himself, above all things, rest in that sublime unity where God and the loving spirit are united without intermediary.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> *The Spiritual Espousals and other works*, Paulist Press, 1985, p. 74.

## 24. Can religion prevent you from being good?



Read [Luke 10:25-37](#).

You may have heard the story of the Good Samaritan many times, but at least in my case there has never been much sympathy for the priest and the Levite. Yet their passing on the other side of the road is an attempt to obey God's law. They are required by that law to keep themselves ceremonially clean, and if the man who was robbed and left for dead on the side of the road were in fact dead, it would be a sin for them to approach. They are trying to obey the rules, trying to avoid any situation that leads to uncleanness. So what's the problem? Isn't that what they should do?

If you know Christ's call, you know that it is all-encompassing. Your whole life must be amended. With God's help, you simplify and integrate your life, removing what is not helping you, replacing it with something helpful, pressing on toward the goal. Reading a novel, attending a sporting event, watching a movie, going out to eat, shopping, listening to the news: if you find that these things are coming between you and the one you love, implacable love may lead you to replace these things with better things. Does this include avoiding going into dark places, spending time with 'sinners'?

Today there is little sympathy for a spirituality that flees the world—that avoids negative influences, occasions that could lead to sin, distractions and diversions from love of God. The notion of 'worldly entertainment' is itself now quaintly entertaining. Yet Paul says "if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Jesus says,

“if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.” Guarding your heart is an essential part of the spiritual life.

What then was wrong with the priest and the Levite? Their desire to obey the rules and to protect their purity led to a profound lack of concern for the man who was robbed. Their desire to be law-abiding, to be pure, was greater than their love. In the end, they showed that their actions were motivated by a desire to follow the law that was self-centered rather than by a desire to love God above all and love neighbor as self, which is self-sacrificing. Religion that is not motivated by love is the religion of the servant. It leads to legalism, to factions, to self-centered and self-righteous behavior.

Giving yourself to God is good. Giving yourself to the whole world, as Jesus did, is better.

## 25. The mystery of the ages



Read [Colossians 1:15-28](#).

*I became the servant [of the church] according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden*

*throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. (Colossians 1:25-26)*

What is your hope? Is it for eternal life? Is it that through Christ's death and resurrection you may be forgiven, someday to reach heaven, where there will be no more tears, no more assault of sin and death, where there will be rest?

Then your hope doesn't match Paul's. Paul's hope is much richer and more glorious.

Paul's hope, the hope he was commissioned to proclaim, the hope for which he suffered, the hope hidden throughout the ages and generations and now revealed to his saints, is *Christ in you, the hope of glory*.

What is this glory? It is Christ in you, transforming you, making you like him. It is life, light, and love. It is the peace that surpasses understanding. It is enlightenment. It is the wound of love. It is the pearl of great price. It is the Holy Spirit. It is participating in the divine nature. It is the glory of God.

This is the hope that inspires you when you wish not just to know about God, but to know God.

This is the hope that drives you when you hope to be in God's temple, because when you see him face to face, you become like him.

This is a hope, not something you already have. It is a gift, not something you achieve. It is a spring, flowing into a dry land.

What are the hindrances that block the flow of this spring? What comes between you and God? What are the intermediaries that must eventually go?

The first is conscious, intentional sin. God cannot remain in one who chooses to do something he is aware God would not have him do. In fact, this is the bar for salvation.

The second is self-will. The will filled with self has no room for love of God and neighbor. Desire for any created thing blocks the influx of the desires God would give—the Holy Spirit.

Eventually, images must go. Images of God, concepts, statements, theological formulations, books, exercises, methods, meditations, verbal prayer—while they can bring us closer to God, while they may even continue as long as we live, in the end they come between us and Him. They are the difference between reading about someone and meeting that person face to face. God is apprehended not by knowledge or activity but by love.

Experience must also go. God is not a feeling or an emotion or a vision or a rapture. God is love, not a feeling of love.

The final barrier is self. We must die to self and be born in Him. We must be baptized. We must eat His flesh and drink His blood.

*Lord, this day and each day, increase our love.*

## 26. Ask, and it will be given you



Read [Luke 11:1-13](#).

*So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. (Luke 11:9)*

When I was growing up, sitting in a long, boring church service, counting bricks, counting tiles, studying how the beams support the roof, I looked forward to the congregational prayer. It was a time when I could legitimately close my eyes for a few minutes (hopefully without head nodding, of course). I didn't often connect much with the prayers themselves—they seemed at times to use flowery language addressed more to the congregation than to God, at other times to be a list of things we would like to get from God.

Later, when I had to pray out loud in front of groups myself, I disliked it even more. Now I had to say things in a way that would please the audience—and God, I suppose—and to ask for a shopping list of needs and desires. Dinnertime prayers were a prime example of uncomfortableness. Do I repeat the same rote phrases? Do I try to think of something new that sounds good and is well expressed? (What does it mean to “bless the food unto our bodies” anyway?) Eventually I avoided public prayer when possible, and if not possible I could only pray brief, pointed prayers, saying the minimum necessary, not multiplying words.

What was going on here anyway? Were we, like whiny children, trying to cajole God into giving us things we wanted but that he didn't really want us to have because they weren't best for us? And didn't God already know what we need better than we did? Wouldn't he give us what was best for us anyway, whether or not it was what we had asked for?

This line of thinking came to a head in thinking about praying for healing—which seemed to be a main topic in congregational prayers, a list of the sick and a request for healing. Requesting healing for others was one thing, but what about me? If I was sick, should I pray for my own healing? Didn't God know what I needed, and wouldn't he do what was best for me anyway? Shouldn't I just leave it in His hands and not pray for anything?

Then Jesus comes along and says “ask, and it will be given you.” Jesus teaches praying with persistence, vehemence, almost a spirit of demanding things from God and not relenting until he yields. But how can I demand when I don't know what I should pray for? Or when I want something but I'm not sure whether I should ask for it?

Then there were the occasions when the Spirit seemed to show me what I should pray for. Specific people who came to mind as needing something in particular. Then it was possible to pray with my whole heart, with a flood of tears, to demand, to cajole. It was liberating. It broke down the adversarial nature prayer sometimes seemed to have and brought a spirit of joining together in desire. Then it was possible to know that my prayers would be answered.

Prayer *can* be like a battle of wills. We bring our desires to God. We argue and plead. He may show us that what we are requesting is not best, or he may help us to better formulate a request, or he may simply relent and give us what we ask for to make our joy complete, even if it is not best. But when we pray for what we know God also wants, we can pray with whole-hearted desire, without hesitation or moderation or negotiation, with demand and confidence.

God is the great giver of gifts, the generous spirit, the one who gives every good gift that we are capable of receiving. When we ask for bread, he will not instead give a snake, though he may instead give cake. He prefers to give the greater gifts, and the gift he most wants to give is himself—the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is therefore a gift you can pray for with great desire, with vehemence, with persistence, with demand, with confidence. That desire is itself the touch of the Holy Spirit.

## 27. Hidden with Christ in God



Read [Colossians 3:1-17](#).

NT Wright reminds us that the Christian hope is not for escaping this world of conflict and getting into a disembodied “heaven,” but for a resurrection of the body into a new heaven and a new earth. While we may be conscious and with Christ between death and resurrection, the ultimate end is “life after life after death.” What this means exactly is not yet revealed, and there will be fundamental differences between this heaven and earth and the new ones. Paul refers to resurrection bodies as “spiritual,” rather than carnal, and elsewhere the heavenly city is said to be made of crystal, transparent. And yet, there are implications of what has been revealed for the way we live life here and now.

What should our attitude toward this earth and this life then be? Are we seeking to restore all things here on earth or to fly away and be with God? Is our hope for escape to heaven, or for rest, or for the beatific vision, or simply for a better bodily life in which darkness and opacity are made light and transparent?

Paul points us in the right direction. If we have died and been raised with Christ, our fundamental goals change. Our affections change at the deepest level. The things we seek in life, the desires that drive us, change from “things that are on earth” to “things above.” Earthly

things include fornication, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed. You must rid yourselves of such things, as also of anger, malice, slander, and filthy language. “Things above” include compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and, above all, love.

For Paul, the Christian hope is not to fly away, it is for the Word of God to dwell richly in you here and now. To set your hope on heaven is to have holy desires, to put on the clothing of Christ, to let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. It is to do whatever you do in Jesus’ name, that is, to do what Jesus would have you do.

The person in whom the Word of God dwells richly is daily being renewed in knowledge and in likeness to God. Such a one is thankful. Such a one is patient and forgiving and at peace. Such teach and admonish and sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

As Christ is hidden to the world, so are his people. But when the new crystalline Jerusalem descends from heaven, all will be revealed, and the better we see God the more we become like him. When Christ is revealed, so too will his people be revealed in glory, the glory of God.

*Lord, help us to die with you and be raised with you—to die to earthly things and to set our hearts on things that are above. Teach us to live for you in this world and raise us with you in the next.*

## 28. Sell your possessions, and give alms



Read [Luke 12:32-40](#). In fact, just read all of Luke 12 up to verse 40.

*Sell your possessions, and give alms. (Luke 12:33a)*

What drives you to do what you do? Why do you get up in the morning and go to work? Why do you get dressed and eat breakfast? Why not just get up and immediately head out in your birthday suit? (You might do that if your house were on fire!)

The affections are the needs and desires that drive us. They are the fuel cell powering the decision-making apparatus of the will. Without affections we wouldn't get out of that bed at all—we would lie there until we starve and then rot. The affections are at the core of your being. In a deep sense, you are what you love.

Jesus' teaching in Luke 12 is full of medicine for misdirected affections. "Beware of hypocrisy"—don't let your actions be driven by what people will think. That affection drives you to deceit. It's not effective, anyway—someday all will be revealed, and then you will be asked to give up your chair of honor to go sit in the corner. It's better strategy to let people think badly of you now.

“Be on your guard against greed”—don’t seek self-sufficiency and independence. It leads you away from me. It’s an illusion anyway. You may be scheduled to die tomorrow and you wouldn’t be able to prevent it. “Do not fear those who can kill the body”—striving to keep yourself safe and respectable will lead you to deny me and put you at eternal risk. “Do not keep striving for what you are to eat and to drink”—serve God and seek first His kingdom and He will provide for your needs.

“It is your father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” You are to inherit—well, everything. But to get there, you must be headed in that direction. “Sell all that you have.” If you are to be a child of the Father and inherit the Father’s kingdom, you can’t be building your own kingdom in a different place. It’s pulling you away. Instead, treat all that you have as a part of your Father’s kingdom, His possessions, over which you are steward. Use them in his service, in his name. “Give to the poor.”

To the extent that you give all that you have and all that you are to God, to the extent that you desire him, to that extent he gives all that he has to you and desires you. He even gives his lifeblood, that you may give yours.

## 29. God is intolerant and illiberal



*And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.*

*For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry! (Isaiah 5:5-7)*

*I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! (Luke 12:49)*

To be “liberal” (in the sense that is akin to *libertarian*) is to “follow views or policies that favor the freedom of individuals to act or express themselves in a manner of their own choosing.” Though under pressure, this liberal spirit still drives western society. Most of us agree that law ought not stipulate what we do or say or believe except as necessary to keep the peace and to foster the good in society. We believe in freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and the like. (We may not agree on the laws that are necessary to protect and foster the good, of course.)

Is God liberal in this sense? Surely he allows us much freedom. He created us with a will, and he does not override that will and force us to behave in a certain way. To do that would be to

remove part of his image in us. And yet God is not tolerant in the sense that he's OK with us no matter how we behave. He's not liberal in that he has given us many laws and guidelines on how to behave and what to believe. He's not "nice" in that he doesn't do for us or allow us to do whatever we want.

God's love is too strong for that. He will not stand aside and watch if we travel down the wrong road. He is a jealous God. He does everything in his power short of coercion to lead us in the way he would have us go, to keep us as his people. All that happens to us in life serves to teach and guide us. Joy, laughter, and love, and as well sickness, malice, disaster, all things work together for our good.

God's love is so strong that it may lead him to seemingly cut us off entirely, for a time, to break down the hedge and allow us to be trampled, to allow us to be taken into exile.

God's love is so strong that from some directions it looks like jealousy, like an unyielding wall, like an iron fist. But from the other direction it looks like mercy, gentleness, and careful tending.

Jesus "came to bring fire to the earth." This fire consumes what is unlike it and causes it to become like it. Hard wood becomes glowing flame. This fire ravages the earth. This fire is the Spirit of Love.

What is Love? Who is Love? These questions drove Hadewijch of Antwerp. Love is not a tolerant, liberal spirit. Love demands the best and strives after it. Love is not just mercy. Love is not just justice.

What is Love? Who is Love? Love may be compared in part to jealousy, and that comparison may expand and improve our thinking about Love, but Love is not jealousy.

Love is not a wushy feeling toward a significant other. Love is not any sort of feeling at all. It's not an emotion. It's not an abstract concept or a good deed. It's not a state of mind or a state of the will.

Love is cruel, unyielding, and divisive. Love is gentle, kind, and solicitous. Love is a mystery, a deep darkness, an abyss into which you could lose yourself. And yet none of these things is Love.

What is Love? Who is Love? These are questions you could spend a lifetime exploring, questions you will not find a complete answer to in this life. But the more you learn, the more you become like Love yourself.

Lord, teach me to be intolerant like you: that is, teach me not to look the other way, but to see; not to walk on the other side of the road, but to help; not to tolerate, but to build up; not to be indifferent, but to love. Lord, teach me: What is Love? Who is Love?

## 30. Our God is a consuming fire



Read [Exodus 20:9-24](#) and [Hebrews 12:18-29](#).

When the Israelites were at Mt Sinai, Moses told them that the Lord would come down from the mountain in the sight of all the people. They were not to draw near: people and animals who touched the mountain were to be stoned or shot with arrows. Moses consecrated the people and they washed their clothes and abstained from marital relations. There was thunder and lightning and a thick cloud on the mountain and a trumpet blast so loud that all the people trembled. Mt Sinai was wrapped in smoke like the smoke of a kiln, and the mountain shook violently. The trumpet blast grew louder and louder. Moses spoke and God answered in thunder. There, God gave the ten commandments. When the people had witnessed the thunder and lightning and smoke and trumpet, they were afraid and stood at a distance. They said to Moses, “you speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” Moses replied “do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin” (Ex. 20:9-24).

This is not the mountain to which you have come. You have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of peace. Here innumerable angels rejoice. Here the children of God, who have been made perfect, assemble. Here Jesus mediates a new covenant in sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Here you must not refuse to listen. If the ancient Israelites didn’t escape after refusing to listen to the external voice, how much less will we escape if we refuse to listen to the still, small voice speaking to us from heaven? Then, the voice shook the earth, but now it quietly shakes earth and heaven. It will remove created things, so that only that which cannot be shaken remains. And the kingdom of heaven, which cannot be shaken, which will endure forever, that kingdom is the inheritance of God’s firstborn children. Therefore worship in reverence and awe.

Our God is a consuming fire.

Therefore listen to his voice. Show hospitality to strangers. Remember those in prison. Be faithful. Keep your lives free from the love of money. Trust in his help. Bear abuse. Praise.

## 31. Three groups of Christians



Jan van Ruysbroeck (or Ruusbroec; 1293 or 1294-1381) was a great fourteenth-century contemplative of the Low Countries. He wrote in the vernacular, middle Dutch, rather than Latin. He was a proponent of a “common” or mixed active and contemplative life. Of him, Evelyn Underhill said that “Ruusbroec is thought, by no few competent judges, to be the greatest of all the medieval Catholic mystics.” CCEL has a book about [Ruysbroeck](#) and a collection of three of his works entitled [The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage](#), both by Evelyn Underhill. I have also been reading *John Ruusbroec: The Spiritual Espousal and Other Works*, a volume in the Classics of Western Spirituality series.

In [The Sparkling Stone](#), Ruysbroeck writes about several types of Christians, with the intent that we may examine ourselves and not think too highly of ourselves.

The first and lowest group are “good” Christians. Elsewhere he calls those in this group participants in the “virtuous life” or “active life.” They

- have a clean conscience without reproach of mortal sin
- are obedient to God, the church, and their own conscience
- intend and desire above all else to live according to the dearest will of God

One who lacks any of these three things, according to Ruysbroeck, is neither good nor in the grace of God, but one who resolves to fulfill these three points in that instant becomes good and filled with grace.

The second group, according to Ruysbroeck, are those who have an “inward” or “spiritual” life. Those in this group also need

- a heart unencumbered by images, possessing nothing by affection but God
- spiritual freedom in the desires, so that all that they do is out of love
- a feeling of inward union with God

The third group are those who are “God-seeing” or who have a “living life” or “contemplative life.” For them, three additional things are necessary:

- the feeling that the foundation of their being is a measureless abyss, and should be possessed in that manner
- their inner exercise should be without form or method
- their inwardness should be characterized by the enjoyment and fruition of God

Sometimes when I look at a list like this I think that I may have some hope of getting into the lowest group, but the rest is simply unintelligible to me. At other times I think I may understand some of the other points to an extent but have a very long way to go. Most often, I try not to judge myself in such ways. I simply try to give myself to God in the moment and leave the rest up to Him.

But occasional self-examination is necessary, at least in the entrance to the Christian life or the spiritual life. I intend to write more about what Ruysbroeck says about the entrance to the spiritual life in upcoming posts. But the prerequisite, the foundation of all is the virtuous life. There is no point in attempting to build a structure until the foundation is set.

Is there anything you ought to be doing, or not doing, anything that touches your conscience? You can go no further until your conscience is clear. You don’t have to be perfect, just genuinely trying to get there and praying for help when you are tested, for forgiveness and strength to overcome when you fail.

Have you determined to do whatever God asks you to do, and others in authority? Quickly? You may fall frequently, but then you get up and try again.

Most fundamentally, have you committed above all else to live according to His dearest will? What follows will be written for those who are in this group.

*Lord, I praise and thank you for your beauty, for your goodness and strength, for your care. I thank you for the gift of your son, for your Spirit, for your salvation. Help me to die entirely to myself and live entirely to you and for you and in you.*

## 32. Hate your family?



Read [Luke 14:25-33](#).

*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)*

*So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. (Luke 14:33)*

According to Ruysbroeck, the first thing necessary for a spiritual life, in fact its very foundation, is [a heart unencumbered by images](#). “Images?”, you say. “You mean I have to give up my smartphone?”

Ruysbroeck ignores your snark and elaborates: “He who would have a heart free of images may not possess anything with affection.” “If a man would become spiritual, he must forsake all fleshly lusts and loves and must cleave with longing and love to God alone, and thus possess Him.”

Ruysbroeck seems to use the word “image” for anything that comes between the soul and God. Primarily, these are things you love outside of and separately from God. If you are attached to possessions or reputation or experiences or other people, those attachments compete directly

with your attachment to God. You of course love your family, but only because you love God and God loves your family. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Love, is the love with which you love your family. If your family ranks ahead of God in your affections, your family members are idols, or “images,” and that love is sin.

Our spirits are filled with loves, and these loves may be called spiritual possessions. Our spirits may be filled with such possessions—our house and car. Our family and friends. Our reputation. Our virtue. Our spiritual life. Or God. Love for any of these things apart from God fills our spirit and takes away space for love of God. Thus Jesus says, “blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall see God.” Thus Jesus says, “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

It is possible to have and to love family and friends, a house, a spiritual life in such a way that they do not come between you and God. This happens when you love God above all and love other people and things in His Spirit. You thank God for all that you receive. You use possessions in His service. You don’t hold tightly to loved ones but entrust them to God. You live a life of gratitude. You possess things as though not possessing them. The goal of a spiritual life is not the absence of other love, but all love in God and through God.

Consider: is it a sin to read fiction? There is no law against it. It is perfectly fine for a virtuous Christian. But a good book will draw on your affections. You may come to love the characters and be moved by their experiences and interested in what happens to them. Unless you read in a spirit of prayer, the book may draw you away from loving God. It’s like being married to a woman you love and looking at other women. If your affections are healthy it’s not a problem—it’s a normal part of life.

And yet there may come a day when you love God so much that you want nothing at all to block your view of Him, no matter how normal and good and otherwise helpful. You want to see Him, not some image. These images, these obstacles, these barriers, are your attachments. There is a novel blocking your view of God! So you step around it. A good meal fills your senses! But you need to eat, so you eat what you need with thanksgiving and without becoming attached.

What are *your* attachments? What are the things that separate you from the one you love? Examine yourself: what do you most desire? What do you spend your time and energy pursuing? What do you think about when you fall asleep or when you go for a walk? What do you most fear losing? Now ask yourself whether you love these things more than God. And since the answer appears to be “yes,” ask for more love to God.

*Image credit: yourvibration.com*

### 33. Worship without images



In the 14th century, when Ruysbroeck lived, there was no doubt a great deal of illiteracy, especially if that is understood to mean the inability to read and write Latin, the language of the church. Therefore images and rituals were a significant component in worship. Churches had stained glass windows and frescoes and paintings and sculpture. Worshipers might meditate on

sculptures or paintings representing the stations of the cross, perhaps, imagining each station, pondering its implications, placing themselves in the situation, and the like. So when Ruysbroek says that a spiritual life requires worship without images, perhaps the first thing that would have come to a reader's mind is that worship has to go beyond meditation. Meditation on the cross of Christ can be useful in bringing us closer to God, but these mental images are not God. To meet God is not to have mental images of him.

Speculative reasoning falls into the category of "images" as well. Concepts we have of God, theological formulations, even descriptions of attributes of God such as omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, simplicity, triunity, or love, all are images of God. All are concepts or imaginations that fall short of God Himself. Worship in spirit rises above imagining God into loving him and meeting him.

Ruysbroeck goes on to say that "In his exercises a person should make good use of images, such as our Lord's passion and anything else which can stir a person to greater devotion; in possessing God, however, a person must descend into that imageless bareness which is God himself."

What does it mean to "descend into imageless bareness"? Reason is quiet—you aren't trying to figure something out or learn something or find an answer to a question. Memory is quiet—you put the past out of mind. Affections for the world are quiet—you leave cares and concerns outside your room. Fear is quiet—you have abandoned yourself to God's care. Shame is quiet—you don't think about yourself at all. Desires are quiet—you have entrusted yourself to God's care, asking for nothing. You relax. You are at peace. And in this peace, you seek God. You desire him. You offer yourself to him. You meet him. This is not a meeting of intellects for discussion over a cup of coffee, it is a tryst in the dark. You are confused, in a cloud, unable to see, but you love and are loved. And as the darkness grows, eventually you may be able to make out the pillar of fire.

To me it seems that Ruysbroek's language of "descending into imageless bareness" describes a change in location of worship, from the intellect to the affections, from words to desires, from images to intense love. We love God with heart and soul and mind and strength. We give ourselves to him, and he himself to us.

Do you desire not to know *about* God, but to *know God*? Do you desire to worship in spirit? Pray for love, pray for guidance, seek him above all else, and God will lead you along the path of knowledge. Normally this path goes primarily through meditation and prayer. Don't be surprised, though, if some day you find yourself unable to meditate or to pray. You have surrendered yourself, you live for him, you love him, but you are unable to meditate. You have no clear concepts or images. You are confused. All you have is love and desire. You have entered the cloud. You have "descended into that imageless bareness which is God himself." Seek God not in images and reasoning and acts of will but in love and in presence. This is the entrance to the spiritual life.

*Image: The Crowning with Thorns, Anthony Van Dyck*



## 34. Spiritual freedom



Read [Luke 16:1-13](#).

Do you like to run? Do you love to get out there, pound the pavement, feel the wind in your hair, see the world flow by, breathe the fresh air, sweat away the stress of the day?

Me neither.

I know someone who doesn't like to run. He'll run a couple of miles, on occasion, if he forces himself, but he doesn't enjoy it. More often he'll feel as though he ought to run but he won't do it. On the other hand, he loves soccer, and he will happily play for hours, running around the whole time. He'll willingly do the training exercises the coach asks for, contentedly bearing the exhaustion, the pain, the demands. What a difference that love of soccer makes!

Is your experience of the Christian life more like forcing yourself to run because you know you should or running for the love of your sport?

Ruysbroeck says that three things are necessary to have a spiritual or inward life:

- a heart unencumbered by images, possessing nothing by affection but God
- spiritual freedom in the desires, so that all that is done is done out of love
- a feeling of inward union with God

Spiritual freedom is serving God for your love of the sport. It's living the Christian life for the love of God. It's contentedly bearing the training exercises, the pain, the demands with the goal of pleasing the one you love in mind. All things become bearable, even enjoyable.

Spiritual freedom presupposes some level of victory of the higher part of your will over the lower, or perhaps it's some level of active grace, some presence of the Holy Spirit. Your desire to rest would prevent you from running but your love of the wind and sun and sweat prevails. Trials and temptations come, but your desire for victory overcomes. Your spirit is hard pressed on all sides, but free.

Consolations arise, and you thank God but tell him to help you grow instead. Difficult circumstances arise and cause you to suffer. God is hidden. You are desolate, panting for water. You long once again for his presence. You alternate between heaven and hell. But your spirit is free.

Spiritual freedom is equally at peace in consolation or desolation, joy or pain, contentment or sorrow. It doesn't fight back or struggle. It asks for nothing. It is not double minded—that's death to the spiritual life. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Why don't some virtuous Christians get there? According to Ruysbroeck, they don't respond to God's movements by renouncing themselves. They also don't turn inward, toward following the spirit, but remain turned toward outward multiplicity and doing good deeds. They do their good deeds more out of custom than interior experience and pay more attention to their number and variety of works than to the glory of God (*Little Book of Clarification*, 258-59).

## 35. Contentment



Read [1 Timothy 6:6-19](#).

*There is great gain in Godliness combined with contentment. (1 Tim. 6:6)*

See also Ruysbroeck, [The Sparkling Stone](#)

Joy and sorrow. Pain and elation. Heaven and hell. Why is life like that? Why is one moment ablaze with glory, every cloud, every leaf, every person a heart-shattering manifestation of love, and the next moment painfully dry, oppressive, crushingly heavy? Friends rejoice with you. Loved ones reject you. God shows his face. God is nowhere to be found.

You have entered the spiritual life. You have been stripped to some extent of external attachments. You no longer seek wealth, reputation, power, experience. Your worship at times sinks into the imageless, fathomless depths of your soul, as loving desire that wracks your whole being. You follow Christ avidly and single-mindedly.

And yet there is still self living in you. Too much. A hellish amount. You love your spiritual life. You love your love. You must be set free in ever deeper parts of your spirit.

In a pinhole camera all light must pass through a single point. Is it possible to become so completely nothing that the light of God shining through you is perfectly in focus?

Life is so hard. And so joyful.

*Have you officially given God permission to do whatever it takes to purify you?*

## 36. Spirit of Power



Read [2 Timothy 1:1-14](#).

*For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our own works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us before the ages began. (2 Timothy 1:7-9)*

The Spirit of God is most often called the “Holy Spirit.” It is the spirit of holiness, the desire for purity, the longing for the death of self in us.

God’s spirit is also called the Spirit of Love. God himself is love, and his spirit in us is the inspiration of love. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Those who seek to know God need to look in their spirit, to their love.

In this passage, God’s spirit is also called the spirit of self-discipline. I think I could use a stronger infusion of that spirit.

But the headline description of the Spirit of God in this passage is the spirit of *power*. In this passage, power is opposed to cowardice, to lovelessness, to dissipation. The spirit of power is the spirit that is not ashamed to testify about our Lord or our afflictions or our callings according to his plan. Or that Jesus Christ gave us grace before the ages began.

John the Baptist did not wear soft clothes, seeking comfort, or fine robes, seeking respect. He was not a reed swaying in the wind, blown to and fro by the world's approbation or opprobrium. He spoke with the spirit of power.

Sometimes I think my tradition is afraid to speak about the spiritual life. Systematic theology, yes, the Spirit speaking in my heart, not so much. Salvation, yes, holiness, not so much.

Testify to what you have seen. Have no fear. Speak with power. He is able to keep that which you have entrusted to him.

## 37. The eternal birth



I almost missed my daughter's birth.

While my wife and I were preparing for this event, she decided that she wanted to experience it to the full and to avoid any possible ill effects on our daughter. So she decided not to have an epidural anesthetic, and she asked me to support her in that decision.

The nurse, on the other hand, glared at me when I encouraged my wife not to have the offered epidural. The nurse kicked me out of the room, told me to go get some food and come back in half an hour, after the epidural had taken effect.

After a few minutes I heard the whole-hospital intercom calling my name, telling me to head back to the delivery room. Immediately. Our daughter had decided that several hours' labor was enough and that she was going to pop out. Maybe she didn't want that epidural either.

In Sermon 55, [Tauler](#) says that Jesus is born eternally as the Word of God. The same eternal birth within the Heavenly Father also took place in time, in Mary. And we too must "rise above ourselves so that we too may be sated by the fruits of this wondrous birth." Jesus must also be born in us. "Holy wisdom spoke: 'All you who really desire me, and who desire this birth truly and genuinely, will at times be touched by a beam of its radiance.' Thus our desire is made to surge upward and is caused to grow ever stronger."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Johannes Tauler: Sermons*, Tr. Maria Shradly, Paulist Press, 1985

But that birth is not without its prolonged pangs. Life presses in on us. There are everyday pains and stresses. There are special times of grief or pain or sickness or pressure. And then there are the times of absence, the times when heaven itself seems to be trying to squash our souls into pancakes. In such times, do you accept the anesthetics the world has to offer? Do you seek society or entertainment or experience? Or do you seek God? Tauler continues:

*Then let us say with Saint Augustine: "Lord, thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." This divine restlessness, which should always be ours, is smothered and dispelled by all kinds of alien forces generated in us: transitory, fleeting, and sensual things that come before our minds; inordinate affections for creatures, animate or inanimate; friendships, society, fashions, food; in short, everything which distracts us from our primary search for God. These divisive forces generate alien births in us, and as soon as we deliberately consent to them, however trivial and petty they may seem, the divine birth will not occur. Such trivialities deprive us of the Most High God and of that wondrous birth He wishes to bring to pass in us. Moreover, they deaden desire for God and His birth and rob us of that splendid anticipation which we should cherish. Of such great things we are deprived by such trivial attachments.*

*And then people will come and complain: "Alas, I have no love and feel no longing for God!" Well, it all depends on you. Why do you allow earthly attachments to smother that love? Search your hearts and consider what obstacles come between your love and God; after all, you know best. Do not ask me but ask yourselves why you are lacking in love and longing. If you wish to possess God and creatures both together, you are bound to fail. You cannot choose both, no matter how many tears of blood you may shed.*

A simple barometer: what cares and concerns run through your mind at night? What do you think about when you take a walk or fall asleep? What kinds of pros and cons do you weigh when considering a life change? Are there attachments and cares in your heart that fill it, leaving no room for the birth of Jesus?

In truth, we have little direct control over the cares and loves that fill our hearts. What we may be able to control is how we deal with them. When concerned or anxious or oppressed or in pain, do you take an anesthetic, or do you feel and experience the pain, seek its source, and then give the concern to Jesus? When you realize that you are inordinately attached to something or that you love or seek something apart from God, do you push away that thought and cling to that love, or do you remember your restless desire for the eternal birth and turn toward Jesus?

There are times when God seems to help us maintain that orientation toward Jesus, that continuous prayer, and there are other times when he seems to hide himself and leave us on our own. Where has your beloved gone? Which way has he turned? In such times we discover what is in our hearts. In such times inordinate attachments can be broken. When God has

forsaken us, the pain of absence may be great, the pain of seeing what we are without him. But we must follow the path laid out for us, even the road to Golgatha.

Lift high the cross. Its pangs are the pains of death, the seeds of resurrection, the glory of the eternal birth.

## 38. The new covenant



Read [Jeremiah 31:27-34](#) and [2 Timothy 3:14-4:5](#).

*In those days, they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." But all shall die for their own sins. (Jeremiah 31:29-30a)*

*The day is surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)*

The most fundamental direction or motion in the Bible is from the old covenant to the new. In the old covenant, the law was given by God through Moses. Israel was to be God's people, but they rejected him and followed other gods. Israel was taken into captivity, into Egypt, into Babylon, into the world. The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.

In the new covenant, we don't die for our parents' sin, we die for our own. Much better! (Wait, what?)

The new covenant of course involves Jesus' incarnation and life and death and resurrection, forgiveness of sin, and a righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. Jeremiah gives a little preview in this passage. But it's interesting to note the aspects of the new covenant that he highlights.

"I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." If you are a part of the new covenant, you do not need to hear the law from Moses, to have it read to you by a priest in the temple. It is within you. You know right from wrong, good from bad, God's will from the will of the world, if you will only listen to your heart.

But surely old covenanters had consciences as well. They had heard the law, so they would have known right from wrong. What is different in the new covenant? It is this: that not only is the law within you, but it is written on your heart. The desire to fulfill it is also given. God gives the desire for holiness. He gives the Holy Spirit.

Jeremiah also points out another difference in the new covenant: "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me." Not only does God give a desire for holiness, he also gives a direct, inner knowledge of God that is not dependent on hearing about God from others. God is with us.

In view of these things Paul makes a plea to Timothy. Paul musters all the solemnity and motivation that he can: "In the presence of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you." And what is the grand task that Paul urges for his apprentice, his co-worker? "Proclaim the message. Be persistent. Convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching."

This must be one of those paradoxes one hears about. "No longer shall they teach one another" ... "Proclaim the message." Its resolution is left as an exercise for the student.

## 39. Inspiration



Read [Joel 2:23-32](#) and [Jeremiah 20:7-9](#).

*Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. (Joel 2:28-29)*

0. Should I write something when I don't feel inspired?

1.

0. How should I pick a topic?

1.

0. Should I try to find a word for myself in one of the lectionary passages?

1.

0. Should I make a pointer into a CCEL book? Expand on a topic in the spiritual life? Write about my own experience?

1.

0. I only want to say what you inspire me to say. What I have to say on my own has no value. You have the words of eternal life.

1. Does inspiration always have to have a particular feeling? How do you know you aren't writing what I want you to write when you feel dry?

0. How do I know that I *am* writing what you want me to write when I feel dry?

1. Is there no place for faith in you?

0. Faith in myself? Really?

1. Faith in me, even if you don't sense me.

0. But I don't even know if I'm supposed to try to write when I feel uninspired, or if I should wait until the word burns in my stomach and I can't stop it from vomiting forth. Of the making of books there is no end. What if I feel a general call but not a specific one?

1. Do you think you should do nothing unless specifically called to that act?

0. Um...yes?

1. You are going to have a boring week when I go on vacation. You might get hungry, too.

0. You want me to grow again, don't you.

1. Don't you?

0. [grumble]

1.

0. You can't go on vacation.

1. Well, that's a little harsh. Slave-driver much?

0. What is gained by leaving me out in the cold?

1. Obedience is good, but I'm not looking for robots. I could make those without all the effort you willful people require.

0.

1. Do what you do out of love. Then you will be truly inspired.



## 40. Simplicity



Read [2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12](#).

*To this end we always pray for you, asking that God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12)*

How should you pray for other people? Should you pray that they be healed of all their diseases, freed from temptation and trial, and given all the food, shelter, clothing that they desire? Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians is far from that. He prays that they be made "worthy of his call," that God would help them to fulfill every good resolution, that Jesus may be glorified in them. In a word, that they be brought to spiritual maturity.

Quaker authors tend to have their own unique perspective and vocabulary for the spiritual life. For Quakers, who dress simply, have simple possessions, speak plainly, and let their 'yes' be 'yes' and 'no' be 'no,' *simplicity* is often taken as a mark of a mature spirituality. But what, exactly, is simplicity? Well, it's a bit complicated.

Thomas Kelly, in his World War II era classic on the spiritual life *A Testament of Devotion*, has five chapters--on the spiritual life, the light within, obedience, community, social concern, and simplicity. For him, simplicity is “the last fruit of holy obedience” and “the beginning of spiritual maturity.”

In addition to simplicity of exterior trappings, we may think of simplicity of intention. Simplicity is not trying to sell something, to get something, to bring someone over to its point of view, to gain power over someone. It is not hypocritical. It is guileless. It is a unified, transparent self. It is a single eye.

Simplicity is found in the company of humility. It does not seek to impress with fine possessions or food or words or appearances. It does not even think of itself.

Because it is content, simplicity “responds to sorrow and strain by walking in serene, unhurried calm, with joy and the assurance of eternity.” It “cuts through complex problems to the Love of God and clings to him.” Thus, simplicity is not found apart from faith, and it is marked by peace and “radiant joy.” The “simplified personality is stilled and tranquil, listening in childlike trust to Eternity’s whisper, walking with a smile into the dark.”

So what is *simplicity*? Is it a Greek *apathy* or *dispassion*, in which we are freed of sinful passions and turn our passion toward God? Is it a European *detachment*, in which we break the bonds of our love of the world, or *recollection*, in which we keep ourselves in the presence of God? Is it Paul’s continuous prayer? Is it Jesus’ loving God with whole heart and soul and mind and strength?

Yes.

## 41. Recollection



Where simplicity is a special emphasis of the Quakers, the Catholic tradition of spirituality speaks more frequently of recollection. (I have white spots on my fingers.) In recollection, we re-collect all of our powers and turn inside, seeking God in silence and stillness, with whole heart and mind and soul and strength. (The purple pillars need sanding.) We know God not by reason but by love. And then we bring this spirit of recollection, of prayer, of love back with us into the rest of our lives, living a life of silence and self-possession and simplicity and service. (I should take the railing off to paint the stairwell.)

Of course, being recollected in the first place is a struggle that may take years, and maintaining recollection at all times is a battle that may go on for the rest of your life. The world always seems to want to intrude, to distract, to attach itself to us, to fill our affections to the point that we can't spend more than a few seconds with God before a thought such as "what color should I paint the back bedroom" intrudes.

We are finishing our basement, and for the last week we've been madly painting. Painting is a calm activity, with no one else's emotions to pull on your own, an activity during which you can pray, an activity you wouldn't expect to attach to your affections too strongly. But I am thoroughly distracted and unable to pray. What am I doing wrong? How can I maintain recollection?

Maybe I will try to attach recollection to a frequent activity. Every time I dip the brush in the paint bucket, I'll dip my spirit in desire for God. UPDATE: total fail. Life intruded. Try again. Eventually, maybe I'll be able to pray while painting, to paint while praying, to paint with prayer.

## 42. Communion of the saints



The Apostle's Creed states the fundamental beliefs of the faith: "I believe in God the Father. . . He was raised again from the dead. . . I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." While growing up I recited this in church each week. This "Apostle's Creed" was first referred to by that name in A.D. 390, though it wasn't written in final form until around A.D. 710.

Most of the statements are fundamental tenets of the faith, beliefs that are essential to the faith, claims that may be hard to believe apart from revelation and divine inspiration. And then there is the statement, "I believe...in the communion of the saints."

What is so hard to believe about the communion of the saints, and why is it so essential to the faith? I myself have seen them chatting together after church, maybe even going to a church potluck.

OK, maybe that's not all that the framers of the Apostle's Creed had in mind. Apparently there is something special, something fundamentally important, something astonishing about what is referred to in the creed as "the communion of the saints." What is it?

What to do with theological questions? That's right, head over to Wikipedia. There "communion of the saints" is defined as the mystical union experienced by members of the church, both living and dead. The communion of the saints is Christ's body.

We are united with God in love. As we love God above all, as we give ourselves to him, so he gives himself to us. We become one spirit. We love what God loves and desire what he desires.

Christ expressed his love by emptying himself and becoming a servant. As we Christians follow him, as we empty ourselves and wash the feet of our brothers and sisters, as we give ourselves to our brothers and sisters, and they to us, we become one spirit. We experience the communion of the saints.

Thomas Kelly's little classic *A Testament of Devotion* has only five chapters on the spiritual life, on the light within, holy obedience, the blessed community, social concern, and the simplification of life. Fully one of these five chapters is devoted to the "blessed community," or the communion of the saints, of which he speaks profoundly and at length.

Kelly writes, "'See how these Christians love one another' might well have been a spontaneous exclamation in the days of the apostles. The Holy Fellowship, the Blessed Community has always astonished those who stood without it. The sharing of physical goods in the primitive church is only an outcropping of a profoundly deeper sharing of a Life, the base and center of which is obscured, to those who are still oriented about self, rather than about God. . . . But every period of profound re-discovery of God's joyous immediacy is a period of emergence of this amazing group inter-knittedness of God-enthralled men and women who know one another *in Him*. . . . Yet still more astonishing is the Holy Fellowship, the Blessed Community, to those who are within it. Yet can one be surprised by being *at home*? In wonder and awe we find ourselves already interknit within unofficial groups of kindred souls."

Do you want to join this blessed community, this body of Christ? You must first give yourself to God without reserve. Then, in him, give yourself to *everyone*. Empty yourself and become a servant.

## 43. Christian maturity



Read [Colossians 1:9-20](#).

The apostle Paul poured out his life to spread the gospel, to bring the good news to the gentiles, to make disciples of the nations. Since Paul was one of the key founders of the church, it's worth our time looking at what exactly it was that he was trying to form. How did he view Christian maturity? What characteristics was he trying to develop in those who were the fruit of his labor? At the start of his letters there is often a prayer for the church being addressed. These prayers reveal Paul's deepest desires for these churches.

In the letter to the Colossians, Paul says that he has not ceased praying for them and asking that they may:

- be filled with the knowledge of God's will
- lead lives worthy of the Lord, pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work
- grow in the knowledge of God
- be made strong with the strength that comes from his glorious power
- be prepared to endure everything with patience while joyfully giving thanks

Christian maturity, then, starts with knowledge of God's will. Of course, this is not a head knowledge or an indifferent hearing. Many who are not yet spiritually mature have heard God's will in the reading of the bible. This is a biblical "knowing." This is union with God's will.

When we have a strong desire for something, we find it harder to perceive and enter into someone else's competing desire. If you really want to go out for Thai food, it's hard to feel your spouse's desire for Italian. Yet a couple who love each other are intimately aware of the desires of the other, always seeking first the desires of the other. The Thai lover says "let's have Italian," but the lover of Italian food insists on Thai. As they "fight" with each other, eventually they reach a consensus and are united.

God's voice is still and small. Being able to hear God's will requires that your own will be quiet. To know God's will is to love it, to desire it, to seek it above all. Meanwhile, God is seeking your good, and in this "fight" or dance you are united.

If you truly love God above all, if you desire his will and his pleasure, you will see where you have fallen short. Your failings will be your greatest sufferings. You will find yourself striving and seeking whatever means you can find to make amends.

Obedience is the starting point of Christian maturity. The path to Christian maturity goes through death of self. But that seems daunting. Where to begin? How to accomplish such a radical transformation?

Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

These instructions were common on shampoo bottles of yore. The computer scientist in me always wanted to point out that although following these instructions would lead to (very) clean hair, it would also lead to a serious case of prune skin, because there is no loop exit condition. You would never be able to stop.

The nice thing about obedience is how easy it can be. You have only one moment to worry about. The past is closed. The future is tomorrow's concern. You have only in the present moment to love God, to seek his will, to seek to please him. If you have just awakened from an hour of sleepy forgetfulness, or a whole day, forget about it—it's past. In this moment, remember your love for God. Be thankful. Seek to please him. Bear whatever he would have you bear. Then, lather, rinse, repeat.

## 44. Rejoice!



Read [Philippians 4:4-9](#).

In his concluding exhortations to the Philippians, Paul says “rejoice in the Lord always.” Perhaps not feeling that this was emphatic enough, he doubles down, “again I will say, rejoice!”

The mature Christian life should be characterized by joy. In the face of celebration or of sorrow, at times of pleasure or pain, there should be an underlying joy. Paul makes it an imperative. But can I just decide to be joyful? Is that really under my control?

Like any other fruit, joy must be planted, watered, and cultivated. Weeds must be removed. It must be protected from the north wind. What can I do to cultivate joy?

Paul gives several directions. The first is to “let your gentleness be evident to all.” Love leads to joy, and love is evidenced and edified by gentleness.

The second is trust. Anxiety is the death of joy, and trust is the antidote for anxiety. Remember that the Lord is near. Do not worry. If you have a concern, bring it to the Lord—and then leave it with him.

The third is thanksgiving. In all situations give thanks. When you make a request known to God, do it with thanksgiving.

“Blessed are those who mourn.” As long as sin and brokenness and alienation persist, there is a time for mourning. But those who mourn shall be comforted. When the bridegroom arrives, it is time to celebrate, time for joy.

At times joy is exuberant, a smile, a laugh, a song that bursts forth. At other times it is hidden, a river running through the soul that must remain secret for now.

Joy and peace go hand in hand. When you allow the quiet but pervasive joy of the Spirit to be made manifest in you, when anxiety is absent, when love is all, then peace like a river will attend your way. Peace will guard your heart and mind.

Hold onto that joy. Don’t let the cold winds of the world blow it away. Whatever is honorable, whatever is true, whatever is pure, if there is any excellence, think about these things. And be filled with thanksgiving.

## 45. Hope



Read [Romans 15:4-13](#).

Hope is an orientation of the soul, a direction of travel. It is an expectation of eventual arrival. It is motivation toward a goal, confidence in achieving it, joy and peace in the journey. Hope is building a house, planting a vineyard, raising a family.

The lack of hope is boredom and torpor and listlessness. It is entertainment and alcohol and chatter. It is avoidance of duties and disobedience. Without hope we become dissipated or inert.

In societies where there is persecution, hope manifests as longing for a righteous kingdom. In poverty, hope longs for needs to be met. In a rich society, hope longs for...what does hope long for? If that society is healthy, perhaps for meaningful work, for a way to serve others.

In the church, hope is an honest expectation of being freed from sin, of dying to self and living for Christ, of the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, of being made like Christ. As John says, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope purify themselves, just as he is pure." (1 John 3:2-3)

When hope is not accompanied by faith, it has little power. It is a faint hope, a glimmer of possibility that is easily forgotten. When combined with faith, hope is joy and peace in slow but steady progress, a confidence in what is to come, a life-orienting direction. Hope with faith leads to confident action.

Advent is the season of anticipation, of hope. Christ is to be born in us; it is time to prepare the way, to make straight the paths, to repent, to turn, because the savior of the world is coming! The greatest gift is about to be given! The righteous kingdom is close! What greater gift than Christ born in you? What would you not do to prepare the way?

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

## 46. Hope's Longing



Is Advent a time of *mourning*? Or is it a time of joy and peace? Or both? Or is it something else—a longing for completion, for perfection, for the end of conflict, for the coming of Christ's kingdom, a longing seasoned with a dash of hope at its certainty and a sprinkle of joy at its imminence?

The spirit of Advent is beautifully captured in that most common of Advent songs, *O come, O come Immanuel*. About this song Hymnary.org writes:

*This ancient advent hymn originated in part from the "Great 'O' Antiphons," part of the medieval Roman Catholic Advent liturgy. On each day of the week leading up to Christmas, one responsive verse would be chanted, each including a different Old Testament name for the coming Messiah. When we sing each verse of this hymn, we acknowledge Christ as the fulfillment of these Old Testament prophecies. We sing this hymn in an already-but not yet-kingdom of God. Christ's first coming gives us a reason to rejoice again and again, yet we know that all is not well with the world. So along with our rejoicing, we plead using the words of this hymn that Christ would come again to perfectly fulfill the promise that all darkness will be turned to light. The original text created a reverse acrostic: "ero cras," which means, "I shall be with you tomorrow." That is the promise we hold to as we sing this beautiful hymn.*

In the first stanza we express our longing for the presence of God, for our salvation, for our return to Zion:

*O come, O come, Immanuel,  
and ransom captive Israel  
that mourns in lonely exile here  
until the Son of God appear.*

Refrain:

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel  
shall come to you, O Israel.*

Additional verses express longing for the wisdom that comes from God, for God's might, salvation, forgiveness, light, and peace:

*O come, O Wisdom from on high,  
who ordered all things mightily;  
to us the path of knowledge show  
and teach us in its ways to go. Refrain*

*O come, O come, great Lord of might,  
who to your tribes on Sinai's height  
in ancient times did give the law  
in cloud and majesty and awe. Refrain*

*O come, O Branch of Jesse's stem,  
unto your own and rescue them!  
From depths of hell your people save,  
and give them victory o'er the grave. Refrain*

*O come, O Key of David, come  
and open wide our heavenly home.  
Make safe for us the heavenward road  
and bar the way to death's abode. Refrain*

*O come, O Bright and Morning Star,  
and bring us comfort from afar!  
Dispel the shadows of the night  
and turn our darkness into light. Refrain*

*O come, O King of nations, bind  
in one the hearts of all mankind.  
Bid all our sad divisions cease  
and be yourself our King of Peace. Refrain*

The spirit of Advent is the spirit of longing for God and for his kingdom, for the presence of God, for all things made new. It also receives a most beautiful expression in Isaiah 35:

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,*

*and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.*

*Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
"Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you."*

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

*A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;  
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.  
No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

The spirit of Advent can be expressed in one word: *hope*. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

## 47. This year, this moment



Read [Psalm 8](#) and [Philippians 4:11b-13](#).

0. Lord, how can I serve you in this new year? How can I act so as to glorify you? What can I do for the benefit of my neighbor? Give me some goal I can pursue, some direction, some purpose. Should I fast? Seek to pray continuously? Watch to avoid sin? Pursue love? Give me a method, a plan.

1. You do not need to know the future. Desiring to have a plan to pursue, a task to dig your will into, just feeds self. It is desire for me tainted by self-will.

0. I have nothing. I am nothing. I desire nothing but Jesus. I have nothing. I am nothing. I desire nothing but Jesus.

1. Live in the moment. The past is closed. The future is tomorrow's concern. This moment is all.

In this moment, be peaceful—I have you in the palm of my hand. I have a plan, a plan for your good, a plan for the salvation of the world. All will be well.

In this moment, be thankful. Think of all that I have given you, and done for you, and suffered for you. Know my love, my power, my glory. All is well.

In this moment, be joyful. All will be well. Your pain is well. Your poverty is well. Your plenty is well. All is well. Rejoice.

0. In Christ I have all, I can do all, I desire the salvation of the world. Thank you Jesus—all is well. Thank you Jesus—all is well.

## 48. Calvin on the Christian life



When you hear people talk about Calvinism, you often hear of doctrines like predestination and total depravity and the sovereignty of God. When you actually read Calvin on the Christian life, the emphasis is quite different. He describes two chief goals: holiness and consecration.

*The Scripture system of which we speak aims chiefly at two objects. The former is that the love of righteousness, to which we are not naturally inclined, may be instilled and implanted into our minds. ([Calvin's Institutes III.6.2](#))*

Calvin goes on to say that our calling is to be holy as God is holy. *Unless we dedicate and devote ourselves to righteousness, we ... repudiate the Savior himself.* This includes a reorientation of our desires away from the things of this life: *it is fitting for us to withdraw our affections from the earth, and with our whole soul aspire to heaven.*

The second chief goal is consecration. *We are consecrated and dedicated to God, so we should no longer think, speak, plan, or act, except with a view to his glory([III.7.1](#)).* This means union with God in will. *The only safe haven is to have no other will, no other wisdom, than to follow the Lord wherever he leads. Let the first step, then be to abandon ourselves....The mind, divested of its own carnal feelings, implicitly obeys the call of the Spirit of God.*

- *We are not our own, so our actions and counsels should not be ruled by our own reason and will*
- *We are not our own, so let us not seek what is pleasant to our carnal nature*
- *We are not our own, so let us forget ourselves and the things that are ours, as far as possible*
- *We are God's, so let us live and die to him*
- *We are God's, so let his wisdom and will preside over our actions*
- *We are God's, so let us direct every part of our lives to him*

Calvin goes on to say that *we have great proficiency when, almost forgetting ourselves, we postpone our own reason and make it our study to obey God and his commandments....This is that self-denial which Christ so strongly enforces on his disciples from the very outset.* ([Mt. 16:24](#))

Calvin acknowledges that only God can save us. We don't labor to save ourselves, but there is much to do *because* we are saved. We

- *Take up the cross, that is, prepare for a hard, laborious, troubled life full of many and various kinds of evil* ([III.8](#))
- *Let whatever trials we face train us to despise the present life and aspire to the future life* ([III.9](#))
- *Use the comforts of this life appropriately, avoiding extremes of austerity or intemperance* ([III.10](#))

Calvin generally uses the word *prayer* for a solemn request to God, not in the broader sense of *communion with God* or *desiring God*. Taking the word *prayer* in that broader sense, I take Calvin to be saying that the Christian life is essentially a life of continuous prayer. *The Christian ought to be so trained and disposed as to consider, that during his whole life he has to do with God. For this reason, as he will bring all things to the disposal and estimate of God, so he will religiously direct his whole mind to him. For he who has learned to look to God in everything he does, is at the same time diverted from all vain thoughts.* This is Paul's *renewal of the mind*.

## 49. The Christian life in the desert



Calvin identifies holiness and consecration as the goals of the Christian life, but he doesn't say much about how to get there or the process of transformation, apart from advice to take up the cross, to have patience in suffering, and to live moderately. But of course these things are hard or impossible to achieve perfectly through main force of will. How do I get there?

Are there concrete steps I should take, ends I should strive for, or does God do everything for me? Should I be motivated by fear, or by love, or by some combination of the two? Should I govern my behavior by careful watching to avoid sin, or by freedom in Christ? Should I pray continuously by repeating a set prayer many times, or by praying extemporaneous mental prayers at all times, or by mindfulness of God? Should my inner life be dominated by contrition, or by humility, or by gratitude, or by love and joy? Should I deny myself by fasting, staying awake, and praying? Should I meditate on sacred writings or seek the stillness in which God may be known? Is the goal dispassion, or detachment, or recollection, or stillness, or abiding in Christ, or loving God and neighbor? Or should there be no system at all, but a simple will to follow the leading of the Spirit?

There are many paths and methods of Christian spirituality. I suspect that each has its own genius, and each its own distinct glory in the resurrection. One such path leads to the desert.

In the early centuries of the church, perhaps in reaction to Christianity becoming official and political (and tepid?) in Rome, some Christians set off to the desert, perhaps in Egypt, to train with all their might to become good Christians, like athletes training for the Olympics. There were two main forms of this life. The first was a life in community and in obedience to an *abba*. The second was a life of solitude and in stillness. Many great saints grew up in this environment. Some of their sayings are recorded in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

Perhaps the most important and commonly used “training guide” of that era for this form of spirituality is *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus.<sup>4</sup> It is largely an ascetic work, describing many deadly passions and vices to eradicate, many virtues to acquire, and many practices for getting there. The path is modeled as a ladder with thirty steps, each a vice to eliminate or a virtue to acquire. The last four steps, on stillness, prayer, dispassion, and love, are more contemplative in nature.

The goals of this form of spirituality are stillness and dispassion. Stillness is cessation of striving and prayer without ceasing. Stillness is the single eye. Stillness is guarding the mind and overcoming temptation and distraction. Stillness starts with aversion to noise and ends with immunity to it. Stillness starts in the closet and ends in the public square. One who practices stillness is “rarely moved to speech and never to anger.” Stillness is the peace that surpasses understanding. In stillness, words, images, and desires end and God himself may be known.

Dispassion is the overcoming of sinful passions such as anger, malice, gluttony, lust, avarice, fear, despondency, vainglory, and pride. “A man is truly dispassionate . . . when he has cleansed the flesh of all corruption; when he has lifted his mind above everything created; . . . when he keeps his mind continuously in the presence of the Lord.” “Dispassion is the uncompleted perfection of the perfect.” “The dispassionate man no longer lives himself; but it is Christ who lives in him.”

There is in *The Ladder* a progression from human effort to divine gift. But most of the work is on the first part, the struggle against the passions. To that end, *The Ladder* recommends many training exercises, including eating one meal a day (and not stuffing yourself), staying awake all night in prayer, remembering death, mourning sin, singing the psalms, unquestioning obedience, drinking as little water as possible, and more. But one of the more characteristic practices is to have the name of Jesus on your lips at all times. The practice of the *Jesus prayer* was not fully developed in *The Ladder*, but it is an important part of that tradition. It is to pray the Jesus prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” or some shorter variant, or some other short prayer, often, regularly, continuously. Though the prayer starts out on the lips, in time, mental prayer, the affections, stillness, will follow.

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<sup>4</sup> Tr. Luibheid and Russell, Paulist Press, 1982. The only public domain English translation, or really more of a paraphrase, is *The Holy Ladder of Perfection, by which we may ascend to heaven*, by Father Robert, Monk of Mount St. Bernard’s Abbey (Leicestershire, England), London, 1858.

## 50. Christian spirituality



Read [1 Corinthians 3:1-9](#).

*And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)*

Paul makes a stark contrast between "spiritual people" and "people of the flesh," infants in Christ and the spiritually mature. What is the nature of this spiritual maturity of which Paul speaks?

The evidence of carnality that Paul gives is jealousy and quarreling--behaving *according to human inclinations*. In Galatians 5 Paul gives a more complete list of what "the flesh desires:" "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these."

These "human inclinations" or "passions" or "the flesh" are apparently the opposite of being a spiritual person. A spiritual person is filled with the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit has had time to

work in the dark for a while, eventually shoots will sprout, branches will grow, and there will be fruit: love, joy, peace, and all the rest.

“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” They are dispassionate. They are not controlled by licentiousness or strife or anger or envy. They are free in Christ. They are led by the Holy Spirit. They are spiritual.

This quality of having overcome carnal passions, of no longer being ruled by them, is what Paul calls Christian *maturity* or *spirituality*. But surely it is not all that is needed to be a mature Christian. There is also faith, putting your faith into practice, obedience, love. Rather, this *spirituality* is a prerequisite for the new birth. It’s the death that must occur before new life. It is the end of the “I, me, mine.” It’s the housecleaning needed before the arrival of the divine guest.

Paul says that we “crucify the flesh.” “Crucify” is an active verb. What does it mean, exactly? Are we to eat one meal a day and watch all night and guard our hearts and punish our failings? Do we meditate on our own coming death and judgment, or on Christ’s death? Do we say that “no one in this life is without sin” and do whatever we feel inclined to do and wait around for God to purify us when we die?

What steps do *you* take to “crucify the flesh”?

## 51. Passions



Read [Galatians 5:16-25](#).

*And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:24)*

What do you do to “crucify the flesh”? Do you have a plan or method for overcoming “passions and desires” such as lust, strife, anger, or envy? Experience amply indicates that it’s not enough to simply decide not to have such passions. Passions *come to pass*. They happen *to* us. We are *passive*.

Maybe you are riding down the road peacefully on your bicycle, enjoying the sun and the wind and the flow of the world. A car passes and someone sticks his head out and yells and curses at you and tells you to get off the road. And throws a beer bottle at you. Your blood boils. You imagine chasing down his car on your bicycle and kindly informing him that bicycles are also permitted on the road. Kindly but loudly.

You didn’t decide to become angry, nor did you really have a choice. It happened *to* you. It was a *passion*. Deciding that in the future you *won’t* become angry is futile.

How do you handle a fit of anger like that? Hopefully you are guarding your heart. As soon as you become aware of the anger, you ask for help, you turn away from the anger. You turn toward God. You *repent*. In all of this there may be no sin.

And yet, you are not the kind of person you want to be. Is it possible to become the kind of person who doesn't *have* fits of anger? Or, if not that, is it possible to become the kind of person where such fits happen only on the surface and never reach your inner being? They pound on the door of your heart but never gain entrance? Are there exercises or drills we can do to help us get the upper hand when we experience passions? How do we "crucify the flesh"?

First, we need to be aware of the passions, to be determined not to let them get the upper hand, to have strategies for dealing with them. This requires prayer. Jesus' advice to Peter was *watch and pray*.

Then, we need practice. I suppose we need some exercise where we are assaulted by a passion and we practice experiencing it without giving in. We come to know by experience that we can feel a passion but not be controlled by it. We gain confidence and power. We learn to follow the spirit, not the flesh. And as we gain power over the passions, we become self-possessed, spiritual people. Impassive.

What exercises do *you* use to "crucify the flesh"?

## 52. Fasting



Read [Matthew 4:1-11](#).

There are a number of traditional exercises intended to help us “crucify the flesh” or gain mastery over the passions, such as watching and praying, guarding the heart, meditating on Christ’s passion, meditating on scripture, discussing our spiritual state with others, and keeping silence. One of the most common is fasting. It is practiced in all major religions.

When we abstain from eating, well, we get hungry. We feel pain. We get light headed. Maybe we get hangry. This is an ideal opportunity to practice spirituality. Notice the feeling of hunger. Notice the pain. It’s bearable. Now consider that you have a choice of whether to eat or not. You are in control, not your feelings. You won’t die if you don’t eat for a while longer. Exercise your control and embrace the pain. Scorn the passion.

“Scorn the passion” sounds too active. Be at peace. You notice the hunger without letting it upset you, without letting it get to the level of your will. You notice the hunger, a little, and

then gently turn your attention away from it. To God. Maybe you train yourself to let the desire for food remind you of your desire for God. With every pang of hunger, you pray.

You practice fasting to learn that you don't have to be controlled by your passions. You fast to learn how to deal with passions and overcome them. You fast to help yourself watch and pray. Fasting is not itself a good deed or moral virtue, it's just an exercise, usually temporary or episodic. When you fail, ask for help and begin again the next day.

But there is more to fasting than mortifying the flesh. Moses fasted on Mt. Sinai for forty days and nights in the fiery cloud of God's presence, receiving the law. Elijah fasted for forty days and nights after calling for a drought, raising the widow's son from the dead, calling down fire from heaven on Mount Carmel, slaughtering the priests of Baal, and escaping into the wilderness. Esther, along with all the people, fasted to prepare for her to speak to the king about saving the people. Joel called for a corporate fast in the face of a plague of locusts. In Acts the leaders of the church fasted before choosing missionaries and elders. Fasting can express grief or penitence. It is a way to humble oneself or to gain a hearing from God or to know God's will.

And, of course, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for forty days, where he was tested, in preparation for his public ministry. This is the fast we remember primarily during Lent.

Calvin, and St. Peter of Damascus, call for moderation in fasting. Peter claims that too much eating and too much fasting can both bring about undue pleasure (!). Peter says that we should fast moderately: eat one meal a day, preferably of just one kind of food that we are not particularly fond of each day, stopping before we are full (!!).

Is the Spirit perhaps leading you this Lent to follow Jesus into the wilderness, to enter into a time of solitude, fasting, testing, and preparation?

## 53. Water and Spirit



Read [John 3:1-17](#).

*Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and of Spirit. (John 3:5)*

What is this *birth by water and by Spirit* without which one cannot enter the kingdom of God?

Is *birth by water* a reference to baptism by water and *birth by Spirit* a reference to baptism in the Holy Spirit?

Or, since *baptism* is a ritual cleansing, is *birth by water* perhaps justification, and *birth by Spirit [of Holiness]* sanctification?

Or perhaps these two sets of terms refer to the same two operations of grace?

*O Lord, in this wilderness, I see that I am filthy. Wash me, fill me.*

*The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. (John 3:8)*

When you are born of the Spirit, you will not know where you are coming from or where you are going. You are being led. You follow. It must be this way for all who are to enter the kingdom of God.

*O Lord, in this wilderness, I see no paths. Lead me, protect me.*

*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:14-15)*

As you follow Jesus into the wilderness, you too must be lifted up--on the cross, into the air, into death and resurrection.

*O Lord, in this wilderness, I see the cross. Let me die and rise with Christ.*

## 54. Work out your salvation



Read [Philippians 2:1-13](#).

*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13)*

The spirituality of the desert involves training exercises such as fasting, watching, and praying. One criticism you often hear of such things is that they are a means of “trying to save yourself.” I have a hard time understanding this criticism.

Is the idea that we *shouldn't* try to save ourselves? If we feel tempted to gluttony or avarice or pride ought we to give in, because trying to resist would be trying to save ourselves? We should sin the more that grace may abound? Presumably that's not the idea.

Maybe the idea is that we shouldn't do anything to try to save ourselves apart from obeying God's law. There's no law against eating, so we shouldn't fast. There's no law against watching TV, so we shouldn't pray so much. I don't think this can be the idea either.

Perhaps the idea is that people who fast or watch or pray think that they are earning salvation by “good works”, that by inflicting pain on themselves, by denying themselves, they earn forgiveness or merit in heaven. If I feel a desire to be a better person and to do what I can to

that end, hopefully my motivation is my love for God, but there may be some element in me of a desire to be salvageable. Indeed, Jesus makes a distinction between “servants” and “friends,” where the servants are mercenary followers who obey for reward or to avoid punishment, and friends obey out of love.

However, that isn’t the criticism. The criticism is that such exercises are an attempt to save ourselves, not that they are an attempt to earn salvation from God.

It is common for protestants to emphasize justification by faith, sometimes to the exclusion of all else (e.g. sanctification). We believe and God saves. Perhaps the idea is that we can’t contribute to our salvation — that would be Pelagian — so we shouldn’t even try. Just have faith. Believe in God, love God, and do whatever you want (Augustine). If your faith and love are real, what you want will be what God wants. We should put our time and effort and thought and prayer into loving God and neighbor better, not into improving our own self-control and actions, mortifying the flesh by our own efforts.

This gets closer to an acceptable perspective. And yet Jesus says that if we want to be disciples, we must deny ourselves. He says that it is something we must *do*. Something *we* must do.

What is the nature of the self-denial Jesus requires us to undertake? Is it to turn down that extra piece of pie, to exercise when we don’t feel like it? Is it sufficient to deny ourselves 10% of the time, or 20%?

I imagine that our attempts at self-denial take many different forms and proceed by fits and starts, but the goal must be complete self-denial, utter death of self and rebirth in Christ. We must follow the Spirit in all things. The key here, the mark of entering into discipleship, is this: have you resigned yourself entirely into God’s care and provision, explicitly giving up rights to self-determination, desiring and attempting to follow the Spirit in all things?

Indeed it *is* God’s work to save at that point rather than our own. But that salvation must take place in this world. Maybe the Spirit will lead you into the wilderness to fast and be tested, or to watch and pray in order to avoid falling into sin, or to eat locusts and honey in the desert. Maybe that fast is your own attempt to save yourself, but also, underneath, God’s means of saving you.

Remember, this “childhood of eternal life” is an opportunity that is not repeated. We don’t get another try. The talents we bury in the ground here will be taken from us and given to someone else.

Let us work out our salvation with fear and trembling — for it is God who is working in us.

## 55. The wilderness



Read [Psalm 23](#).

The wilderness is an isolated, dry, trackless place. When you are led there by the Spirit, you don't know where you are coming from or where you are going. You are separated from normal routines and familiar faces. Your habitual entertainments and diversions and pleasures are inaccessible. It's almost as though there were a global pandemic preventing you from going through your normal routines or even associating with other people. You are displaced, discomforted, disassembled. You are plowed ground, ready to receive new seed.

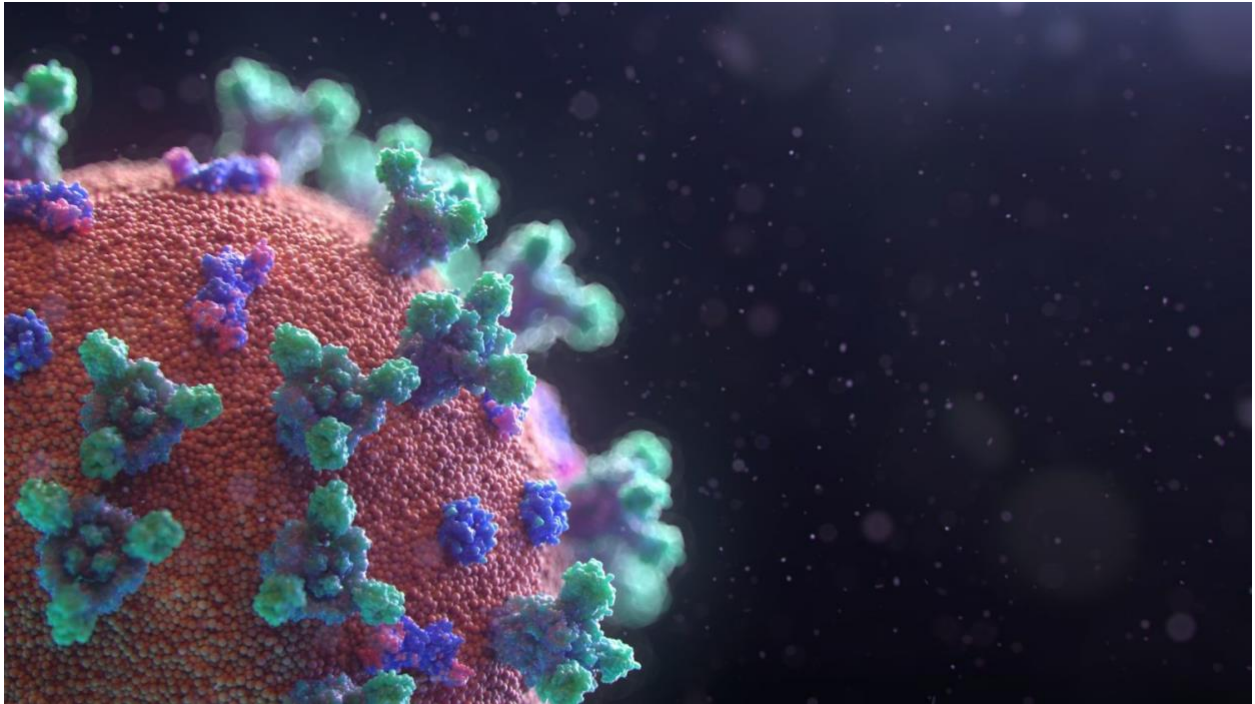
The temptations have started. The first temptation is to make yourself a loaf of bread. To flee this place. To deaden your spirit through pleasures or diversions or compulsive reading of the news. Here, now, in this wilderness, the need is especially great to deny yourself in all things, to listen intently for the Spirit, to follow the Spirit's lead instantly. Lord, give me strength.

Your fasting is a training exercise. Your hunger can even become a friend. The real battle is against your attachments to the world. Do you love to watch a certain show on TV? Just as you

can turn away from food, you can turn away from that love. Do you go to your computer for a little recreation and end up spending hours there? Let your hunger remind you that we do not live by bread alone. Fasting is accompanied by prayer. As you fast, you break attachments to the world, and as you pray, you turn toward God.

Let this time of isolation, this time of uncertainty, this time in the wilderness, be a time of fasting and prayer. Relax. Cede control. Be at peace. Don't make yourself a loaf of bread. Follow the leading of the Spirit.

## 56. Mind control



Read [Romans 8:5-11](#).

*For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*  
(Romans 8:5-6)

*27,610. No wait, now it's 27,677. That's the latest number of deaths attributed to Covid-19. 607,239 confirmed cases. Actual numbers are probably much higher.*

In a pandemic, how can I set my mind on the things of the Spirit? Where is the peace that Jesus gives? Is it really possible to control my thoughts when there is disruption and anxiety in the air? According to Paul, having the mind set on Spirit vs. flesh is a matter of life and death.

Life and death. To set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. But I am drawn like a fly to shit to get the latest updates. I start out the day intending to work and pray all day, like normal, without reading news or checking numbers. If I get through half the day, or even an hour, I feel I'm doing well. (28,231.)

What would it take to "set [my] mind on the things of the Spirit"?

- *Faith.* I trust that God is in control.

- *Dispassion.* Anxiety, curiosity, fear may knock at the door, but they have no control over me.
- *Surrender.* Since I trust God, I can give myself, my loved ones, and the world to his care.
- *Obedience.* I will try to follow the leading of the Spirit at every moment, including turning from thoughts that are not helpful.
- *Adoration.* I marvel at the way the wrath of God and the love of God are two different perspectives on the same actions, that a pandemic may bring about good at the same time it sickens and kills.
- *Life and peace.* It's a gift. What a gift.

*If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. (Romans 8:11)*

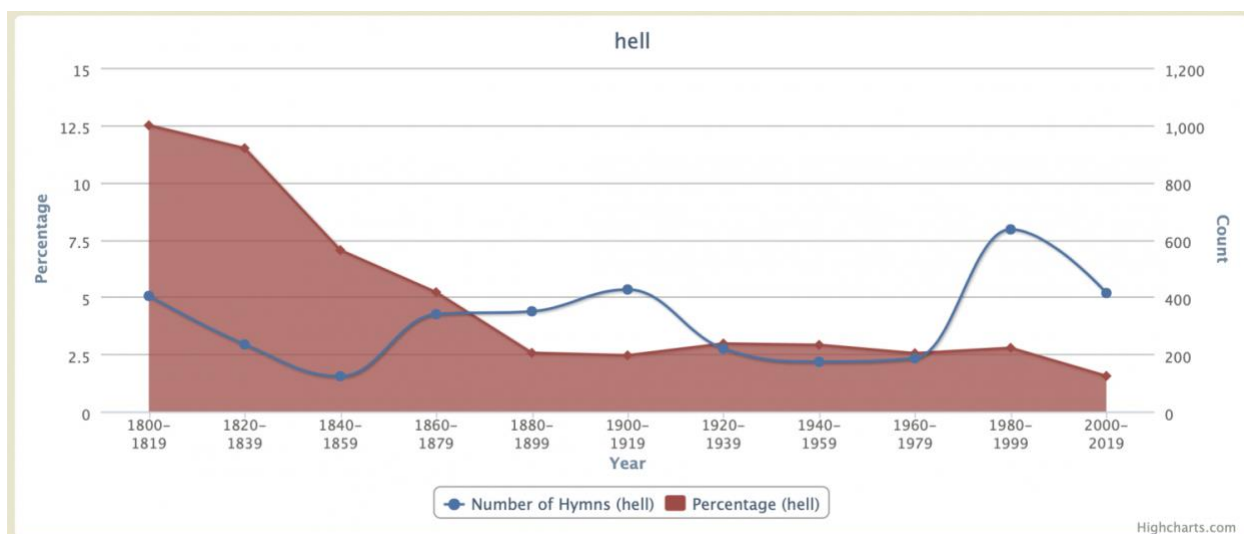
## 57. He descended into hell



Read [2 Thessalonians 1:5-10](#).

*For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed. (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10)*

Hell is not a very popular place these days.



According to [Hymnary.org's keyword graphing tool](#) of word occurrences in hymns, in the 1800-1819 timeframe “hell” was mentioned in 12.5% of published hymns. In the 2000-2019 time it was down to 2.5%. (Heaven is losing popularity as well—30% of hymns published in the 1860-1879 timeframe mentioned “heaven”, while in the last 20 years the ratio is down to 13%.)

Even the common lectionary carefully avoids passages that mention punishment or destruction or vengeance. You won't find the reading above in any lectionary passage. Some of 2 Thessalonians 1 is read on Proper 26, Year C, but verses 5-10 are omitted.

Most Christians take the Apostles' Creed as a good statement of the fundamental beliefs of Christianity. Except for that one statement—“He descended into hell.” They say “what that means is, ‘he was truly dead’”. But isn't “He died and was buried” sufficient for that?

What is hell? Where is hell? According to [Boehme](#), hell is all around us, as is the kingdom of heaven. We don't see them clearly, but when the veil is lifted, when the new heaven and earth of transparent crystal are revealed, when what we have made of ourselves is clearly seen, when the judgment takes place, love of God—or alienation from God—will be obvious. For now, we can paper over our poverty with entertainment and diversions. Let me get myself a drink. But what will become of me when there is no more drinking, or Internet, or sleeping, or darkness, or hiddenness? Is that a day I long for, or shrink from?

According to [Boehme](#), hell is all around us, but it is veiled. Hell is the rule of the “I”, the ego. Hell is alienation and separation from God. When we fail to turn to Jesus, we choose to stay in hell. We are “separated from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might.”

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—Jesus descended into hell.

When hell is understood in this way, many of its perceived problems disappear. “How can God condemn people he supposedly loves to eternal torment?” They choose to remain alienated from God, to be their own kings. They flee from God. They refuse to enter the kingdom of Heaven. “Where is this supposed place—beyond the stars?” No, it's all around you, even

though it's veiled. It is a place where spirits abide, not a physical place. You are in it. The hell you are in is your alienation from God. Our souls cannot rest until they rest in him.

Is it time for a resurrection of hell?

## 58. He rose again from the dead



Read [John 17](#).

*But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. (John 17:13)*

Jesus wept. Jesus was troubled. Jesus mourned over Jerusalem. Jesus was rejected and persecuted and put to death. But most of all, Jesus was filled with joy. Weeping lasts for a night, but the morning is filled with joy. And he prays for us, that we may have his joy, complete, in ourselves.

Dawn is breaking. The day is at hand. Fasting is done; now is the time to feast. The day of resurrection! Jesus prayed, "I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." Beloved, let us love one another.

God's love never ends. If you have God's love in yourself, that love will never end. The Spirit of God, the Spirit of love, cannot die. When you are united with God, your body may die, but you cannot die. That love can only grow. Be filled with joy. May your joy be complete. O splendor of God's glory bright, come in your radiance from above.



## 59. Resurrection



Read [1 Peter 1:3-9](#).

I have a little red spot on my hand. It itches. It looks like a reaction to poison ivy, though I don't think I've come into contact with any while holed up in my house during this pandemic. Maybe I've developed a new allergy to something in the house. I'd better not touch it in case it can spread.

My legs are crossed, and the blood is not circulating well in one leg. Time to switch sides. I have a little buzzing in my ears and a slight headache. In fact, now that I think about it, there are probably dozens of tiny pains of various kinds.

It's not just physically that I experience dis-ease. There are mental and emotional stresses. There are anxieties and aversions and ailments. Sometimes it seems like there are new and surprising dis-eases every day, every moment. Usually they are tiny, but sometimes they fill my whole being.

Of course, there are also pleasures and joys and loves. There is beauty and grace.

Why is this the kind of world where there are pain and suffering and death and global pandemics—and heroism and beauty? Why for every good action is there an equal and opposite reaction? Why for every beauty a horror?

*Even if now for a little while you have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire— may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:6-7)*

The beauty of the earth reveals the glory of God. But, for me even more, the weeds and pains and stresses and pandemics reveal the glory of God. Every longing glimpse of eternal glory, every aversion to some “natural evil”—or unnatural evil—all lure us or drive us to the eternal one. We cannot rest until we rest in him.

How could strength germinate without resistance? How could self-sacrificial love grow without hatred? How could faith blossom without danger?

When Adam and Eve, along with all humanity, turned to self-will, they, and we, caused damage seemingly impossible to repair. Death—how can that be healed? Self-centered, proud, stubborn, narcissistic people—how can we become generous, loving, self-giving? In the word of God, in Jesus, there is a way. There is a resurrection.

In this world there is conflict. The lion and the lamb. Angels and devils. Yin and yang. Life and death. In the resurrection, the lion lies down with the lamb in peace. God is no longer hidden. There are no more tears. All will be well. Every manner of thing will be well.

Of course, when Jesus is revealed, when conflict ends, so does the opportunity for growth. Or at least it changes. That’s why our time here is unique and our lives here are so important.

*Although you have not seen him you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8-9)*

## 60. That your joy may be complete



*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (John 15:1-11)*

Are you completely joyful? If not, John has a word for you: you don't *ask* for enough.

If you abide in Christ, if you allow his love to flow through you, you will bear fruit. You have already been cleansed; now you need only *abide*. Live in the word. Let the word live and grow in you, and you will bear more fruit.

The fruit is not for yourself. Fruit is external. Others pick it, and are nourished, and are delighted. Fruit may be love, joy, peace. And kindness. Fruit may be a glass of water. Fruit may be the salvation of the world. But you are not bearing fruit unless you receive the love of God and it takes root in the dark, sprouts, blossoms, grows, ripens, and in turn is taken and eaten. In this God is glorified.

How do you excel at anything? You gotta *want* it. Allow yourself to desire love, and joy, and peace, with an unquenchable, eternal fire. Don't quench the Spirit. It's true that only God knows whether it is better for you to be sick or healed. It's true that only Christ can save. But God wants Christ to save through *you*, his body. Ask, beg, plead, for more love, joy, peace, fruit. Know that this is also God's desire, God's glory. It will be done for you. You will bear much fruit and your joy will be complete.

## 61. Communion of saints



*Read Acts 2:42-47.*

The author of the [Cloud of Unknowing](#) describes how to enter into yourself and to seek God in love. “God is apprehended not by reason but by love,” “for it is love alone that can reach God in this life.” Thus, the prayer he describes is a striving for God that is made of love, not words or thoughts. Prayer of the heart.

Some compare this to “Eastern meditation” and say that prayer is essentially verbal. To such a person I would say “when I pray, should I just be reciting words, or may I also *intend* what I say? When I say ‘your will be done’ may I also desire that God’s will be done? And when I say ‘hallowed be your name,’ may I also adore God?”

If he affirms, I would then ask “what happens when my words run out? May I continue to desire and love God?” If he is okay with that too, I’d point out that we actually agree on the Christian life; I’m simply willing to call more aspects “prayer” than he.

Which leads to the question, “what is prayer?” Two key definitions you’ll find in the dictionary are “a solemn request” and “communion with God.” Okay, so what is “communion”?

The first definition of “communion” is “a possessing or sharing in common.” Communal. Community. Communism. The Lord’s supper. The persons of the Holy Trinity have communion with each other and we join in. Prayer is in the deepest nature of God. And we join in.

When two people marry, they normally agree to share possessions. In a good marriage, they also share hopes and desires (“prayers”). They may grow to share thoughts. Or quirks. Some even grow to look like each other. They enter into *communion*, or, better, *union*.

Love shares all things. It is not at all surprising that if the early church loved each other deeply, they would share possessions.

What happens when we enter into a loving, sharing relationship with God? Think of God’s omniscient wisdom, his omnipotent power, his proprietorship of all of creation, his self-giving love—and his loving, generous spirit that will settle for nothing less than sharing all things with us. Think about *that* for a minute. *That* is prayer.

## 62. The future of the world



Read [John 14:1-14](#).

Jesus' discourse to his disciples on the night of the last supper as related by John is one of the most sublime sections of the Bible. In it Jesus tells his disciples all the remaining things they need to learn. He addresses the deepest matters—the relationship between God and himself and the disciples and the world. He opens his heart in prayer. He hints at the nature of the salvation of the world.

This discourse grows out of the imminent events of the passion. I am leaving you. I am going to a place where you cannot yet follow. I am showing you the Father. I will be betrayed and crucified. You will be scattered and confused and afraid. There will be a global pandemic and millions will die. Nation will turn against nation and people against people. There will be wars and famines and antichrists.

On this point Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me.” You believe that God is the creator of the universe, the sustainer of all things, the redeemer of the world. Believe those same things of me. I and the Father are one. Peace is voluntary. It is within your control. It is a choice. When your heart is troubled, it is because you are not keeping in mind that I am the redeemer of the world. Do not let your hearts be troubled.

The disciples are in a cloud, confused, afraid. "Lord, we do not know where you are going." They want to know and understand the future. To have certainty and confidence and political victory.

On this point Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Do not expect to see clearly. Do not seek a path to triumph. Instead, follow and trust. What is truth? I am truth. What is certainty? I am certainty. Which is the right way? I am the way. If I did not have a destination prepared for you at the end of this dark path, I would not lead you this way.

The disciples aren't getting it. "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."

On this point Jesus says, "Have I been with you all this time and still you do not know me? Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son." I am in the Father, and when you are in me, you too are in the Father. Together, we save the world. The self-giving body of Christ is the glory of the Father. Though our path leads through darkness and death, there is a resurrection. There is sunrise and a glorious morning.

## 63. How then should we live?



Read [1 Peter 3:13-22](#).

0. The country is being torn into pieces. How then should we live?

1. Unity is the most important thing. You are to be one in spirit. You are to love each other, have sympathy for each other, repay evil with good. This is your calling, that as Christ is blessing you, so you must be a blessing to others.

0. But there is so much hatred and division. How can there be unity?

1. Don't return the hatred; be a blessing. Who will hate you if you are a blessing to them? Yes, it may be that a few will. But then Christ will bless you even more.

Let the spirit of Christ lead you in all that you do. Let your actions be consistent with his self-giving love. This may not be easy—it requires you to overcome your fear, to refuse to be intimidated, to return blessings for curses, to have complete faith.

0. Faith that Christ will protect me?

1. You will eventually die with Christ, and be raised, and see him face to face, so have no fear for what people can do. You will suffer in any case; might as well make it for doing good.

0. But what about all those people who hate and who are not reformed in this life? And what about Buddhists and Hindus and Muslims and animists and atheists and everyone who hasn't heard of Christ, who hasn't had the opportunity for faith?

1. Do you think that the end of life on earth is the end of life? It is not. Do you think that Christ's atoning work on earth saves only those who lived after him? It does not. Do you think that you can see the spirit of people by their external words and works? You cannot.

Even before Christ, his saving work was preached by the Spirit. For example, in the time of Noah, Christ's Spirit preached through Noah's construction of the ark his salvation available to all. Eight people were saved at that time.

Those who died before Christ, and those who died not knowing Christ, and those who died with incomplete knowledge—that is, everyone—hears about his atoning work after death, when all things are revealed. Those who are his hear and rejoice. Those who reject him hear and flee.

0. Can Buddhists and Hindus and Muslims and animists and atheists then be saved?

1. Christ's Name is all-important; his *name* is not essential. Those who know him and give themselves to him and to everyone are his; those who reject him and serve themselves remain alienated. When Christ is revealed to all, when he is preached to the dead, their hidden character is also made evident. Some indeed may be surprised by the verdict even in their own case—"when did I feed you or clothe you or care for you?"—"I never knew you." But surely there will be great joy when Christ's hidden saving work is revealed.

## 64. The heart of Jesus



Read [John 17:1-11](#).

I once heard the complaint that we don't really get to know much about Jesus in the gospels. We see his activities, we hear his sermons, but who was the man? What did he love? What were his hopes and plans? What kinds of thoughts ran through his mind when he wasn't preaching?

I think this person must not have read John 17, or not understood it.

In this, Jesus' closing prayer for his disciples and for the world, we see Jesus' deepest desires. We see the purpose and end of his ministry. We see his overarching plan for the future. And, in Jesus, we see into the heart of God. We see the intent and meaning and direction of the universe.

It is this: that "they may be one as we are one." That "they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, [that] they may also be in us."

The direction of the universe is toward a kind of universal merger. Like the Big Bang in reverse. Like one big church family, one universal body of Christ. Like the communion of the saints, fully

realized. A communion that includes God himself. And any union that includes God is replete with blessing.

John's vision of the future is of an enormous city coming down from heaven, one huge community where God himself is present, where God is the light that lights all things, where the river of life is always flowing from the center of the city. This city is made of crystal so that all things are visible. It is beautiful in its symmetry and radiance and fruit. It closely packed, with many rooms in limited space.

The nationalism and racism and political division and tribalism and sectarianism we see in the world are of course directly opposed to Christ. And yet, there may be a kind of baby step toward Christian maturity in tribalism, if it involves going out from pure love of self to a love of (at least a few) others. But it is not a place to remain.

Nowhere in this world is a place to remain. Life is a migration toward the center, toward the union of all people and all things.

In that light, it makes sense that John says "everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

## 65. Spiritual gifts



Read [Acts 2:1-21](#) and [1 Corinthians 12:3b-13](#). And then keep going into chapter 13.

A rushing wind. Tongues of fire. Tongues of other peoples.

I've always had a fascination with spiritual gifts such as healing or prophecy or speaking in tongues. Paul names nine such gifts and seems to imply that "each" Christian is given some manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. So why is it that neither I nor anyone I know has one of these gifts in a way that obviously goes beyond nature? Why no tongues of fire?

It's true that asking for supernatural manifestations has a distasteful, faithless, self-serving flavor in mature Christians. But I think there is more going on. It shows a misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit. It's looking for Love in all the wrong places.

The Holy Spirit is the spirit of holiness. The spirit of love of God and neighbor. The greatest miracle, the most obvious evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit is the appearance of self-giving love in self-centered people, the worship of God and the communion of the saints.

Walter Hilton (d. 1396) advises that we stop seeking various gifts, that we restrain ourselves even from seeking virtues. We should seek only God's greatest gift, namely, himself, and not stint:

*Ask God for nothing, then, but this gift of love which is his Holy Spirit. For among all the gifts our Lord gives there is none so good, profitable, worthy, or excellent. There is no other gift of God in which he is both giver and gift except this gift of love, and this is the ground of its excellence. The gift of prophecy, the gift of miracle-working, the gift of great understanding and counsel, gifts of great fasting or penitential good deeds: all of these are great gifts of the Holy Spirit. But they are not the Holy Spirit himself. A reprobate and damnable person might have all of these gifts as readily as a chosen; therefore, good as they are they are not to be overmuch desired or excessively valued. The true gift of love is the Holy Spirit—God himself—and no one may receive him and remain in damnation, for it is this gift alone which redeems us, making us children of God, heirs to his heavenly heritage. . . .*

*Covet this love, then, above all things . . . as he bids us in the words of his prophet: “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). You who are reformed in spiritual consciousness and have had your inner eye opened to a vision of spiritual things should leave off for awhile your flurry of visible efforts and take time to “see that I am God.” . .*

*A soul that has a spiritual vision of Jesus does not make a big issue of striving for virtues. Such a person is not even especially busy about them, but sets all his efforts on preserving his beholding of Jesus. His object will be to hold his mind in stability, binding his love to that alone so that there is no falling away, forgetting all other impediments as much as possible. And when he is doing this, Jesus truly becomes master in the soul over sin, overshadowing the soul with his blessed presence. Then all other virtues are added naturally. Meanwhile the soul is so comforted and enkindled with the soft feeling of love that it has in its vision of Jesus that it experiences little outward distraction. In this manner Love slays sins generally, reforming the soul in a new experience and virtue.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Hilton, *Toward a Perfect Love*, Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1985, pp.144-145.

## 66. What good is faith?



Read [Romans 4:1-5:8](#).

*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. (Romans 5:1-2)*

I believe in Tibet.

I've never been to Tibet, never seen it. I have no idea what it looks like. And yet I believe in Tibet—because people I trust have told me that it exists.

Does that make me a particularly virtuous person? Is there some special virtue in believing in things you haven't seen because of your trust in the person who told you about them?

Why would God justify us because of *faith*? Is there some special virtue in believing in what you have not seen because you trust the one who testifies?

If knowledge of God is the important point, why doesn't he just show himself to the whole world? No, it's not knowledge—the devils know, and dread.

If belief is the important point, then everyone who goes to school and believes what she is taught through faith in the teacher is justified. It's not just belief.

Abraham believed God's promise that he would have a son in his old age, and it was "reckoned to him as righteousness." Consider what this required of Abraham.

There had to be a *promise*, and Abraham had to desire the promised outcome. He had to believe that it was God who made the promise, not just three strangers, and that God was truthful and reliable and able to bring it about. And then he arranged his life in the light of that faith, living in trust and gratitude and joy.

*Faith* can't exist without *hope*. Abraham had to set his hope on the promise. Without hope there would be no call for faith. And faith and hope lead to *love*. They put Abraham in a grateful and loving relationship with God.

This loving relationship with God brought Abraham out of himself, out of pursuit of selfish ends, and into pursuit of God. It *justified* him—set him straight.

What is our hope, faith in which sets us straight? No less than a hope that we will *share the glory of God*.

Do you desire this end? Do you believe that God is able and willing to bring it about? Then live your life in faith and hope and gratitude and love and joy. You have been justified.

## 67. Abounding faith? By no means!



Read [Romans 6:1-11](#).

*How can you who have died to sin go on living in it? (Romans 6:2)*

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God.”

“We boast in our hope of sharing in the glory of God.”

“Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.”

“Free gift...free gift...free gift...free gift...free gift.”

In Romans 5, Paul emphasizes that justification is by faith and that it is a free gift. Not earned. While we were yet sinners. Thanks be to God! Yet this emphasis can lead to a view that overcoming sin isn't important.

If we are freely justified, not by our own good works, then maybe if we sin we can trust that we will be forgiven. Or maybe it isn't even really our responsibility at all to overcome sin—it's God who saves, not we ourselves.

In fact, I think this spirit permeates Protestant Christianity with its emphasis on gratuitous salvation by faith. Do you really believe that if you are hateful or proud or lustful or avaricious and you do not repent and are not justified you will burn in hell eternally?

Paul has a word for anyone who is not too concerned about overcoming sin because he trusts in God's grace: "Shall we sin the more that grace may abound? By no means!" Absurd or insulting as that perspective may sound, it's the view implied by our attitude.

According to Paul, here's how you should think about this matter: when you were baptized, you died with Christ. You died to sin. And just as Christ has been raised to life and will never die, so you have a new life in Christ, freed from sin. Think of yourself as dead to sin and alive in Christ. *Live* in Christ.

When you are tempted, you will overcome. And if you don't, you will repent and crawl back to God.

You maintain a watch over yourself, and as often as you are tempted you shut the door and turn another way.

If you are weak in a certain area, you avoid situations likely to be tempting in that area. You cut off the hand or gouge out the eye.

You would rather die than sin because to sin would be to betray the one you love.

## 68. Do not obey their passions



Read [Romans 6:12-23](#).

*Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. (Romans 6:12)*

After saying in chapter five that salvation is a free gift of grace through faith, Paul warns us in the first half of chapter six not to take sin lightly as a result. “Shall we sin the more that grace may abound? By no means.” “Consider yourselves dead to sin.”

Assuming we do not take sin lightly but wish to overcome it, how do we go about it? Where do we start?

Paul starts with the passions of sin. A passion is any powerful emotion or appetite, such as love, joy, hatred, anger, greed, envy, or hunger. In a sense, passions happen *to* us. We suffer passions. We are passive. Thus, Christ’s suffering is called his *passion*.

The body of sin in us has passions, for example, greed. When we are hungry, desiring food is normal and rightly ordered. Desiring more than we need, at the expense of others, is greed. It is a disordered or sinful passion. There is no sin in having the passion—it happens *to* us (although

it may indicate a disordered state). Paul says that it is our part not to let such passions have dominion—not to *obey* them.

Think of holiness not as being free of sinful desires but as fighting them. Maybe, someday, as not even noticing them. They no longer have power over you, to make you obey them. You are dead to them.

Ultimately, passions flow out of what you love. Do you love security, respect, ease, comfort, power, pleasure, willfulness, all for yourself? Or, have you heard the promise, do you have faith in him who made it, do you seek it now above all? In that case you are free from the dominion of sin, no longer bound to those passions, able to disobey them and pursue the great treasure. Go for it.

The sin isn't in having passions and desires, or in pursuing them. The sin is in pursuing *disordered* passions, selfish desires. The whole law is summed in this: love God above all and your neighbor as yourself.

## 69. Death vs life



Read [Romans 7:15-25](#).

*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. (Romans 7:15-17)*

We've all experienced it. We decide that today we will eat only when hungry—but we find ourselves munching as a means of comfort or stress relief. We make a firm decision to avoid reading news today and instead be in God's presence. But there we are again, overwhelmed by the cares of the world. We make the strongest possible vow and effort to avoid anger or lust or pride or whatever it is—and fail. Often.

It is true that temptation is not a sin. When we are tempted by our base nature and resist, we are making progress. But what about when we are tempted and fall? Do we really have the Spirit of God? Are we really even Christians? Who will rescue us from this body of death?

Paul makes an interesting move here. "It is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells in me." Since he desires to do good but fails, he seems to personify sin in himself and dissociate himself from it. The higher part of his spirit is clean, but the lower part is not. Paul identifies himself with the higher part. But is this a way of absolving himself from sin?

Read [Romans 8:1-11](#).

*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.*

(Romans 8:1-2)

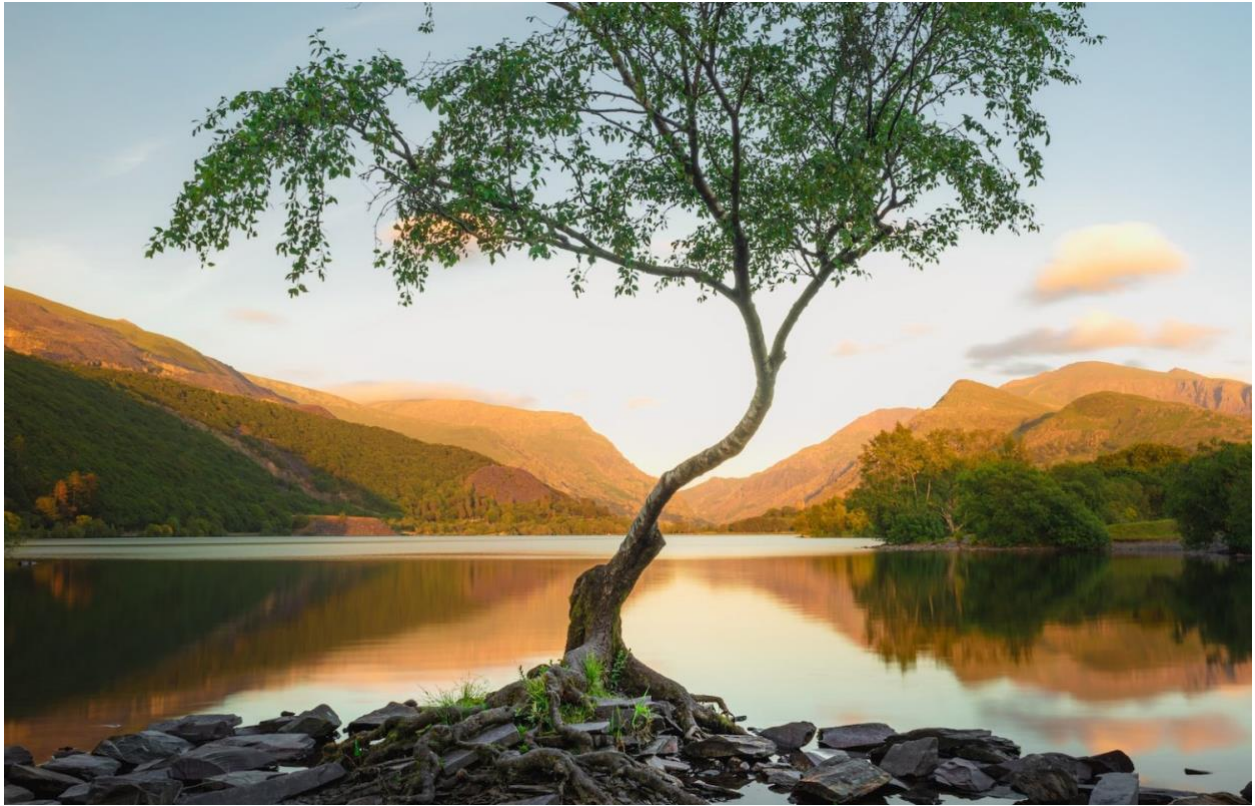
Sin must be dealt with. It is a diseased will, affections turned in on self, that lead to sin. But knowing about sin through the law isn't enough. Deciding to stop sinning isn't enough. Your best effort isn't enough. Your will cannot long override your affections—what you love in your inmost being. You are bound. You are a slave. “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God—indeed, it cannot.”

“But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.” “The Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free.” “If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.”

Freedom comes not through effort but through the Spirit. The Spirit is life. The Spirit is light. The Spirit is love. Your desire to conquer sin and have a pure heart—that's the Spirit. Your desire to know Christ and him crucified—that's the Spirit. Your desire to love and serve God and neighbor—that's the Spirit.

Lean into the Spirit. Love God. Love your neighbor. Don't fight selfish desires head on; instead, turn away from them toward love. Purification is more powerfully effected by longing love.

## 70. Set your mind on the things of the Spirit



Read [Romans 8:12-25](#).

*For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*  
(Romans 8:5-6)

Sorry, even though the lectionary reading for this week is Romans 8:12-25, I can't get beyond verses 5-6. I'm stuck. My mind is stuck.

"Set [your] minds on the things of the Spirit." I can try to set my mind all I like, but each time I try, it bounces back to where it was in about one millisecond. How can I control my thinking like that?

*I hate myself.*

Wait a minute. Where did that thought come from? I don't really hate myself Lord, I don't hate anything you have created.

*I hate myself. I want to die.*

No Lord! I trust in your love, your forgiveness.

*I hate myself with the flaming passion of a thousand burning suns.*

Help!

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How do you “set your mind”? How do you control your thoughts?

Suppose you want to pray, to set your mind on the things of the Spirit, to “be still and know that I am God,” to pierce that cloud of darkness and confusion between you and God with an arrow of love. But thoughts continually get in the way, anxieties or desires, thoughts of past sins or failings, thoughts of insufficiency or shame, thoughts that all somehow seem to come back to *self*.

These thoughts are particularly hard to get rid of when they have emotional attachment. If you try to force them out of your mind they pop right back in.

Take thoughts of past sins or failings or weaknesses. (*Please.*) You have already confessed these sins with tears. You have made a firm resolution to amend. You have submitted to God and you seek his will. You are reformed. It is time to accept forgiveness and live in the Spirit. Yet thoughts of these things keep recurring, interfering with your prayer, coming between you and God.

The [\*Cloud of Unknowing\*](#) says that there are many possible tricks and strategies for dealing with such thoughts and the Spirit is best able to teach them to you. Yet chapter 32 proposes two strategies you can try.

The first is to “look over the shoulder” of such thoughts toward God, who is there in the background. The thoughts are distractions (or worse), so redirect them slightly into thoughts of God. If thoughts of past sin arise, thank God for his atonement and seek him. If anxieties arise, thank God for his provident care and seek him. If thoughts of your own insufficiency arise, thank God that he is leading and guiding you and seek to do his will. This seeking, this longing desire for God, is the Spirit.

The second strategy is to give up. Cower under the onslaught. Acknowledge that you are indeed sinful, weak, insufficient, overweight, unlovable, a pretender, unable to save yourself. And then turn to God: *Help!* Your only hope is in Christ—but in him you have confidence. This humble dependence on God has as strong a pull on him to give aid and comfort as does the cry of a child being attacked by a wild animal on a parent.

Here is a third possible strategy. Use a brief prayer to which you have attached your desire for God. When thoughts arise, turn toward God by repeating that prayer. “[\*I have nothing, I am nothing, I desire nothing but Jesus.\*](#)” “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Or maybe the admirably concise yet wonderfully rich prayer “Love!”

Repeat this prayer whenever you notice that you are off in left field. Repeat it frequently. Let it cycle through your mind repeatedly, like an ear worm. Attach it to your breathing. Make it habitual. Learn to pray continuously.

This “renewal of your mind” takes great effort and great courage over a long period. And endurance. But the mind of the flesh is death. The mind of the Spirit is life and peace. “The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed in us.”

*The Cloud* concludes this topic as follows:

*Press on, then, and labor earnestly for the time, I pray you. Endure the pain humbly, if you cannot quickly acquire these tricks. For [...] when your pain is all over, and God has given you these devices, and you have acquired the habit of them through grace, then I am sure that you will be purified, not only from sin, but also from the pain attaching to it. I am speaking of the pain of your own special past sins, not the pain of original sin. For that will be with you till your dying day, no matter how earnestly you labor. Nevertheless, it shall trouble you little, in comparison with your own particular sins. And even so, hard labour will always be yours. For new and fresh impulses toward sinning are always springing up out of this original sin, which you must always smite down and cut away.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Paulist Press, 1981, p. 182.

## 71. The Kingdom of Heaven



Read [Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52](#).

*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Matthew 13:44)*

There was a time when I found this parable dispiriting. You mean I have to sell all that I have? I don't really want to quit doing things I enjoy, or be homeless, or lose all my friends, or be disowned by my family, or be fired from my job, or lose my reputation and be disgraced. Do I have to screw up my courage and force myself to sell all these things?

But then I noticed that little word, "joy." In his *joy* he freely sold all that he had. This is no dour command to "deny yourself": this is a description of immense, life-changing joy.

What kind of joy would lead you to give away your house? *That* is the kingdom of heaven. What kind of joy would cause you to change careers or turn your back on some of your friends or give up your reputation? *That* is the kingdom of heaven.

Have you been overcome by a joy so overwhelming that it causes you to forget everything else, to leave it all behind? No? Take heart. The kingdom of heaven is also described as a mustard seed, tiny, almost invisible, which must be buried in the dark and left there for a season, invisible, before it makes the tiniest visible sprout. But then it grows, invisibly nourished, until it's big enough that birds nest in its branches.

What *is* the kingdom of heaven? When Christ is king, justice will reign. Justice for *all*, not just justice for white people or for men or for Americans or for people from my tribe.

When Christ is king, the government will serve *us*. And we will serve others.

When Christ is king, we are his willing subjects, wearing masks not because it's the law but because we love our neighbors.

When Christ is king, there are no taxes because we have given all to him freely. We have nothing, yet in him we have everything.

When Christ is king, anxiety has ended. Joy has taken its place.

When Christ is king, war will cease. Conflict will cease. Pain in labor (work or childbirth) will cease. Self-seeking will cease. We will seek the king. We will see the king.

When Christ is king, secrets will be revealed. All will be visible. We will see the king.

When Christ is king, we will no longer have the burden of being kings of our own little realms.

When Christ is king, the beauty of creation in all its forms and levels and variety will be visible to all.

When Christ is king, we will join the heavenly host and all of creation in praising God, join Christ on the throne, join with others in seeing the Emperor himself, join in the unity and joy of all that is.

## 72. A channel of grace



Read [Matthew 14:22-33](#).

A metaphor is like a gas tank full of alcohol. It'll get you going, but you don't want to drive it too far or your vehicle will cough and choke. [How's that for a meta metaphor?]

And if you do manage to keep it going, the engine block may crack. Speaking of cracks, the readings in the lectionary are separated by them. If you read one lectionary passage one week and the next lectionary passage the next, important things can fall into them. [Never ask a computer scientist to write on topics that matter.]

In last week's lectionary reading of Matthew 14:13-21, Jesus feeds the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. Or rather, he instructs his disciples to feed the crowd. His grace works through his disciples. The disciples hadn't prepared, weren't expecting it, and yet at Jesus' command they work a great miracle of the Word of God, the Word of eternal life. Those in the crowd are filled and yet yearning for more.

In this week's lectionary reading of Matthew 14:22-33, the disciples are in a boat escaping the crowds, but a storm blows up. Jesus walks across the water to them, and Peter goes out to meet him. Peter's faith and God's grace had just enabled him to feed 5000 with five loaves and

two fish, but here he takes his eyes off Jesus, his faith wavers, and he sinks into the billows of the stormy world, until Jesus pulls him up and restores him to faith and grace.

Possibly falling into the crack is the vignette of Jesus dismissing the crowds, sending off the disciples in a boat to go on ahead to the other side, and withdrawing to a mountain by himself to pray. To refill his tank?

I used to think of grace as filling a metaphorical gas tank. In the night you spend time with Jesus, filling your tank with grace. Then through the day it powers your life and ministry.

But the tank metaphor can be driven too far. When you aren't looking, tanks can leak. Gas left too long gets stale. Or polluted. That metaphor must be balanced with the metaphor of keeping your eyes on Jesus.

Maybe a better metaphor for the experience of grace is a fuel line rather than a gas tank. The fuel line must be connected to the source at all times for the engine to continue to run. You must have your eyes on Jesus, your heart pumping, your feet ready to follow.

Lord, how can I stay connected to you? Help me keep my eyes on you throughout the day without concern for the billowy waves all around me. How can I bring prayer out of the closet and into the world? How can I pray in the presence of other people? How can I walk in the Spirit? How can I be a channel of grace?

Pray continuously.

## 73. Reconciliation



Read [Genesis 45:1-15](#).

*But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. (Genesis 45:3)*

I recently saw an episode of the TV show *NCIS* in which there was a woman who heard a dead man speaking, leading her to find the years-dead body. She intuited how he had been killed and sensed something of his character and the events of his life. The investigators wouldn't take at face value that she was psychic. And indeed, in the course of the investigation, it turned out that this woman had two personalities: one was the psychic and the other was involved in the death of this man.

How did she come to have two personalities? It was through a childhood trauma. She and her high school friend had been sexually abused by a man. To teach him a lesson they lured him into the forest, tied him up, and told him they were going to teach him a lesson. He died of a heart attack. He was the dead man.

The guilt of having been responsible in part for his death and the keeping of the secret led to her psychosis. Having the whole story come out was the beginning of her healing.

In the Genesis story, ten sons of Israel had sold the eleventh into slavery and told their father he had been killed by a wild animal. They kept the secret for years afterwards. I wonder what effect this had on them? They had to wall off a part of their lives from their father and from others. They saw their father's grief and knew they were responsible. They heard and participated in scorn for liars and murderers, yet they knew, deep down, that they were guilty. Or they blocked out that knowledge. Yet it deeply affected their personalities and the unity of the family.

When Joseph revealed himself to them, they could not speak. They knew that their hypocrisy would be revealed to the world. Joseph had power over them! Their reputations would be shattered. Their relationship with their father would be broken. Perhaps their inheritance would be lost. Or so it would have seemed to them. Although perhaps their relationship with their father could actually start on the road to healing.

There is no healing without airing and disinfecting the wound. There is no integrity without joining together the broken, soiled pieces. There is no union without breaking down walls.

*It was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. (Genesis 45:8)*

The surprising thing in this story is that it was God who sold Joseph into slavery. The astonishing thing is that Joseph became ruler over all of Egypt. The incredible thing is that Joseph saved many lives and became a father to Pharaoh himself.

## 74. Discernment



Read [Romans 12](#).

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)*

Would you be an elder in the church? Would you teach ESL? Would you be willing to greet or be the liturgist or lead singing or pray? Let's go to a movie. How would you like to come over for dinner? Will you please be on this committee? Do you want to go on a retreat? Let's go on a bike ride. I'm homeless; will you give me \$5? Do you want this job or that one, this house or that one? Or should you sell your house and give to the poor?

Should I do anything and everything that people ask me to do if I am able? Or should I do what I feel like doing? Or what seems to be required of me? Or what I would feel guilty about if I didn't do it? Or should I do what I "feel called" to do?

Is any and all activity good, or acceptable, or perfect? Or is it the activity that appeals to reason? Or only that which God would have me do? And what is that, exactly?

“Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” Wouldn’t it be nice to be led so that every decision is perfect and in accordance with the will of God? To always say no to requests that will turn out to be unfruitful, to say yes to ways in which you may genuinely help, to choose the right blouse or house or spouse, to have just the right words to say, to be in the right place at the right time, to do works greater than those of Jesus? This is what’s on offer in this passage. Paul calls it “discernment.”

This gift is a beautiful pearl, but it is not accessible to all. It is not given to the swine, to the unclean—they would simply trample it underfoot and increase their guilt. Too often we know God’s will but don’t do it. Paul says that we must be transformed, we must be renewed in mind so that we will be able to discern God’s will.

What is it to be renewed in mind? Is my mind “renewed”? As Paul describes it, a renewed mind:

- does not think of itself more highly than it ought
- loves what is good and genuine
- hates what is evil
- serves the Lord with zeal and ardency
- seeks to outdo others in showing honor
- rejoices not in this world but in hope
- suffers patiently
- perseveres in prayer
- entertains strangers
- contributes to the needs of the saints
- weeps with those who weep and rejoices with those who rejoice
- lives in harmony with the others as much as possible
- associates with immigrants and the homeless
- repays evil with good gifts

The description above is of the perfection of discernment, as also is the description of a renewed mind. But the gift of discernment is not controlled by an on-off switch. Just as a renewed mind starts with humility, discernment starts with knowledge of God’s goodness and my own sinfulness. Do you feel pain in your own being, in your own selfishness? Congratulations, the Spirit of Truth is at work in you.

John Climacus defines discernment thus:

*Among beginners, discernment is a real self-knowledge; among those mid-way along the road to perfection, it is a spiritual capacity to distinguish unfailingly between what is truly good and what in nature is opposed to the good; among the perfect, it is a knowledge resulting from divine illumination, which with its lamp can light up what is dark in others. To put the matter generally, discernment is—and is recognized to be—a solid understanding of the will of God in all times, in all places, in all things; and it is*

*found only among those who are pure in heart, in body, and in speech....Discernment is an uncorrupted conscience. It is pure perception.<sup>7</sup>*

Let this renewal of mind then be your life's goal and work.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

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<sup>7</sup> *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Paulist Press, 1982, p. 229.

## 75. Discipleship



Read [Matthew 16:21-28](#).

*Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. (Matthew 16:23)*

Was Jesus joyful? If so, it was usually an interior joy, a spiritual joy. Hidden.

In what would Jesus have taken his greatest delight? Surely it would be in the eternal plan of God for the redemption of the world, the plan he himself was enacting at that very moment. Surely it would be in his own divine, self-sacrificing love, his radiance of the Father's glory. Perfect love is within and among the persons of the Trinity, and perfect joy is in the glory of God.

Jesus rebukes Peter in this verse for desire of worldly success and honor, for aversion to shame and suffering, for not seeing the divine glory underneath the visible grime, for not having a renewed mind. He calls Peter nothing less than the very essence of deceitful temptation.

Desires and aversions can be good and right or disordered. It is good and natural to desire food when we are hungry, so that we can continue to serve. It is disordered when we desire more than we need or other than what is for our long-term good or what is detrimental to others.

Aversion to suffering can be good and right or disordered. It is natural and right to seek to avoid suffering, all else being equal. It is glorious to willingly suffer what brings glory to God and salvation to all.

*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 15:24-25)*

Consider the state of the world today. Where do you find joy in this time of discord and division and loss? God is at work. There are flashes of radiance underneath the grime. Do you see them? Are you helping make them shine? Are you a disciple?

Discipleship requires a renewed mind that sees and seeks the glory beneath the grime.

Unruly desires and aversions are the very essence of deceitful temptation. A renewed mind requires regulated passions. If you would follow Jesus, watch and pray and fast.

A renewed mind requires patience. If you would follow Jesus, rejoice in the radiance being revealed by the grinding away of grime. Take joy in your suffering.

Detachment and patience together make you a follower of Jesus. Detachment and patience yield joy.

There is a hidden joy in seeing and participating in the radiant flow of God's glory.

## 76. Discipline



Read [Matthew 18:15-20](#).

*Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:18)*

My grandfather was a funny guy. Not always respectful, but sometimes very funny. He was bipolar. One time I visited him at a mental hospital and he had a coupon clipped out of the newspaper pinned to his shirt. The coupon said “30% off.” He allowed as how there were some around there who were 50% off, or even 75%.

Every morning a nurse would bring him a cup of orange juice and a cup for a urine sample. She would greet him with a cheery “and how are we this morning” and collect the sample. One morning he poured the orange juice into the sample cup. She said, “my, we’re a bit cloudy this morning, aren’t we.” He picked up the sample cup, peered at it, said “yes, it appears that we are—better run it through again!”, and drank it down, to her horror.

In his church at that time there was a practice called “house visitation,” though it was generally referred to in the original Dutch as *huisbezoek*. A pair of elders would visit church members at home and check up on their spiritual lives. As I understand it, my grandfather may have been guilty of a public infraction — playing sport on Sunday, if I remember correctly. A self-righteous

elder brought this up, but he graciously allowed that “you know, we elders are human too.” My grandfather deadpanned, “no shit.” I don’t think that got him any good church member points. But then again, maybe that was a balloon that needed popping.

A practice such as *huisbezoek* would be almost unthinkable nowadays, in this society. Polite society is not judgmental. It’s not my business how you make a living, or what you do on Sunday, or how you treat others, or whom you sleep with, or whom you pray to. We are individuals, responsible only for ourselves. No one tells us what to do or to believe. After all, Jesus tells us not to judge, right?

And yet conflicts arise. One is unfaithful. One attacks another. One acts in a way that harms another person, or the community. Jesus would have us deal with sin in the community. Deal with it as gently as possible, but deal with it nonetheless.

And even when sin doesn’t harm the community, there are those we love so much that we cannot let them harm themselves without a word. And they love us so much that maybe they will listen to that word.

Francis of Assisi wrote that

*You should accept as a grace all those things which deter you from loving the Lord your God and whomever has become an impediment to you, whether they are brothers or others, even if they lay hands on you. And you should desire that things be this way and not otherwise. . . . And love those who do these things to you. . . .*

*There should not be in the world any brother who has sinned, however much he may possibly have sinned, who, after he has looked into your eyes, would go away without having received your mercy, if he is looking for mercy. And if he were not to seek mercy, you should ask him if he wants mercy. And if he should sin thereafter a thousand times before your very eyes, love him more than me so that you may draw him back to the Lord.<sup>8</sup>*

Love is the tincture that transmutes judgmentalism into healthy community. Sin cannot be ignored, but when you forgive sin here, it is also forgiven in heaven.

It’s no accident that “discipline” is a transmutation of “disciple”.

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<sup>8</sup> Francis and Claire: *The Complete Works*, Paulist Press, 1982, pp. 74-75.

## 77. Self-knowledge



Read [Matthew 18:21-35](#).

*Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? (Matthew 18:21)*

Poor Peter. He really takes it on the chin sometimes.

One minute Jesus is saying “on this rock I will build my church”; the next he says “get behind me Satan.” Peter is taken up the mountain to witness the transfiguration, and then Jesus tells the disciples they are unable to heal for lack of faith.

*The highest mountains are amid the deepest valleys*

Jesus’ response to Peter’s question about how often he should forgive begins with a king calling in a debt from a slave who owes 10,000 talents—a lifetime of wages for an army of thousands of workers. The slave promises to work off the debt. Absurd. And yet the king forgives him.

Think of the implications of this response for Peter. Jesus implies that Peter is entirely unaware of the depth of his debt, that he implicitly assumes he has no debt when he thinks he is being generous by offering to forgive seven times.

Pow.

*You can't have a mountain except that it is surrounded by valleys*

In order for the slave to have a right relationship with the king and with the other slaves, he needs to be aware of the size of the debt that was forgiven him. If he is presumptuous with other slaves, with the king, he will be handed over to torture until he pays his debt.

If he remembers the debt that was forgiven him, he will happily forgive others. And if he serves the king in whole-hearted gratitude, he may be invited in to see the king again.

*There is no approaching the mountain except through the valley*

Knowledge of self comes before knowledge of God. You must enter into yourself and see yourself as you are. Any glimpse of the mountain reveals the depth of the valley. You cannot climb the mountain without first descending into the valley from whatever little hill you may be standing on.

As twelfth-century author Richard of St Victor put it,

*In vain [a person] raises the eye of the heart to see God when he is not yet prepared to see himself. . . . If you are not able to know yourself, how do you have the boldness to grasp at those things which are above you?*

*Whoever thirsts to see God, . . . let him cleanse his spirit [as a mirror]: . . . to hold it so that it does not adhere to the earth, after it has fallen down by means of love; to wipe it so that it does not become dirty from the dust of useless thoughts; to gaze into it so that the eye of his intention does not turn toward empty pursuits.<sup>9</sup>*

Discernment precedes contemplation, and self-knowledge is the beginning of discernment.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard of St Victor, Paulist Press, 1979, p. 129-130.

## 78. Know yourself



Read [Matthew 19:27-20:16](#).

*So the last will be first, and the first will be last. (Matthew 20:16)*

“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

“How often should I forgive?”

“We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”

The disciples *have* left everything to follow Jesus, and yet there is much for them to learn about themselves. Jesus teaches them by narrative. He puts them in a story and encourages them to think about how they would feel.

An evil person and a good person are standing side by side under a cliff. A rock falls and smashes the good person. How does that make you feel? Do you feel that you *deserve* good things from God more than other people? That God is there to prolong your life and give you your heart’s desire?

Two friends buy lottery tickets. One wins a million dollars. How does that make you feel? Are you truly happy for your friend's good fortune? Or have you turned "do unto others" into "do unto me"?

You have an outstanding talent. Your friend is jealous. He sabotages your success. How does that make you feel? Are you angry about the betrayal, about not getting what you deserve, or are you compassionate about his broken character? Do you believe that you have been foiled by an enemy—or led by a loving God?

To what extent are you still driven and motivated by *self*, by your perceived desires and deserts, by your own plans and powers? Is there space in your heart for God's sometimes-inscrutable will, for a path through a dark valley? Are you ever able to forget yourself and consider others?

*The last will be first, and the first will be last.* How does that make you feel? Do you deserve to be first?

~ ~ ~

But case studies only take you so far in education. You also need a practicum—maybe a senior project or an internship. Peter got his during Jesus' passion. The final, exquisite nail in his cross of self-knowledge was "do you love me?"

~ ~ ~

The kind of self-knowledge that leads to the knowledge of God is very deep. Deeper than you are likely to be able to dig without power tools. You must know your spirit. What is it that you truly love? What moves you? Pray for help in learning to know yourself. God will be happy to give you generous help, if not more than you can handle. Courage is necessary.

You must know not only your self but the gifts of grace in you. You must browse in the garden and smell the flowers—flowers that you may have cultivated, but you certainly didn't make them grow. You must learn to know the spirit—your spirit, the spirit of the church, the spirit of the team or tribe or nation or world, God's Spirit. You must learn to tell the flowers from the weeds, even before they blossom. You must become spiritual. You must become Spiritual.

*See also:*

- [The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola](#), a set of exercises designed to help readers know themselves, perhaps to discern a calling or select a way of life. It has been one of the most popular books at CCEL.org for decades.

## 79. Empty yourself



Read [Philippians 2:1-13](#).

*Emptied himself, taking the form of a slave (Philippians 2:7)*

What I don't understand is how those other Christians can be so obtuse. Don't they know that racism / socialism / corruption / abortion / COVID deaths / white nationalism / multiculturalism / rejection of truth / rejection of moral norms / alliance with radicals / alliance with evil are destroying the country—and the church?

The church at Philippi was apparently divided. In a letter, Paul pleads with them in the strongest possible way to be “in full accord and of one mind.” As though it were that easy: c'mon guys, can't we all just get along?

Paul explains the source of these conflicts: desires. The will. Wanting your own way. Self. Paul's remedy: “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.” “Regard others as better than yourselves.” “Look not only to your own interests.” Paul is trying to describe how mature Christians think and talk and walk. And love.

So many descriptions of the goal of the spiritual life. Detachment. Disinterest. Dispassion. Humility. Death. Rebirth. Spiritual freedom. Stillness. Quiet. Peace. Tranquillity. Equanimity. Rest. Surrender. Letting go. Abandonment. Purity of heart. Taking up your cross. Loving God above all.

To these, Paul adds one more: emptiness. Paul advises us to have the same mind as Christ, who “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” He “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” In this magnificent paean to Christ Paul points us to the path we should follow: emptiness.

Emptiness apparently involves relinquishing any claims of honor or power you may have. It involves becoming a slave—a person wholly devoted to the will of another. It involves obedience—following immediately and whole-heartedly. It involves loving whatever it is that comes about for you, because you love God. Even if it is death. On a cross. Because that's what it will be.

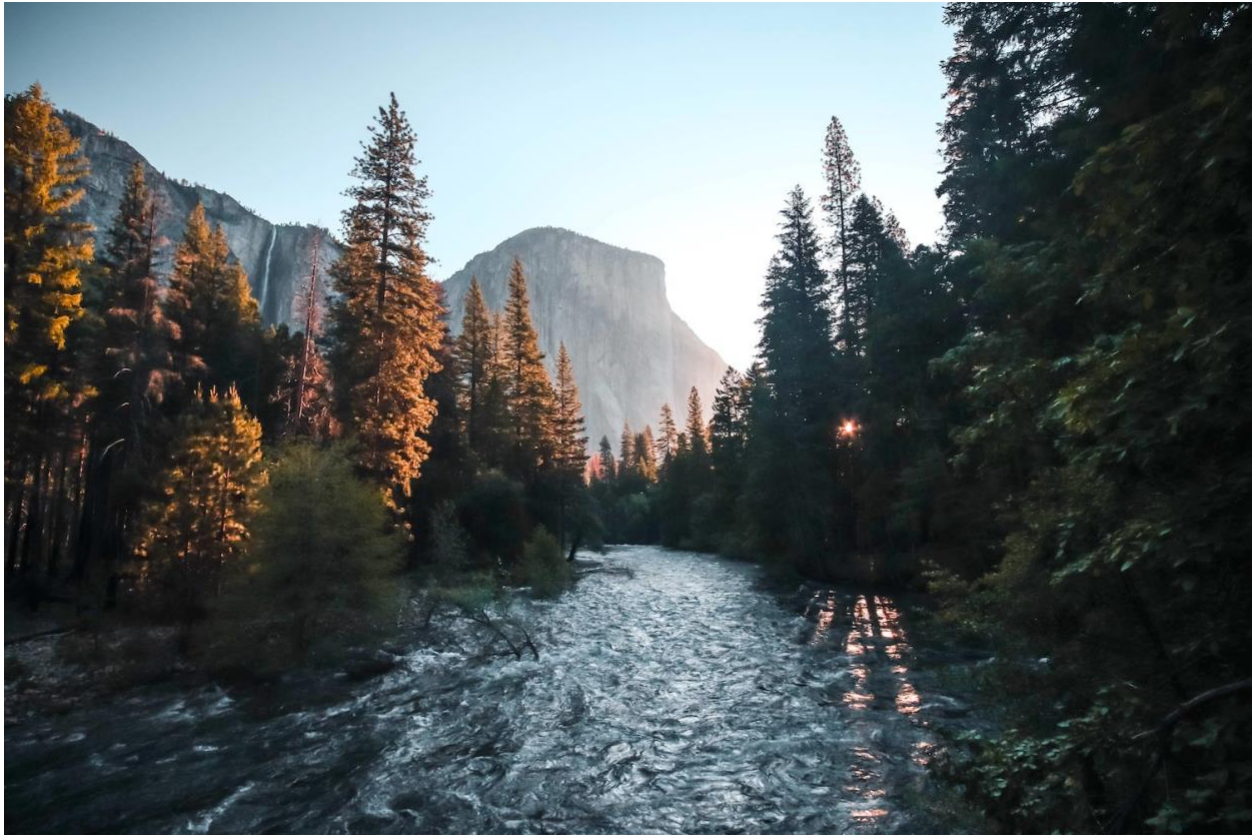
Are you happier when at peace than when suffering? You are not yet empty.

Do you prefer consolations of prayer to aridity? You are not yet empty.

Do you desire a particular outcome in the upcoming election? You are not yet even close to being empty.

Emptiness in this sense is not a lack of feeling or indifference to suffering or the absence of desire for justice and goodness. It's about the will. It's the defeat of rebellion against God. It's accepting the path God has in mind for us because we have faith in him and love him. It's taking up your cross and following Christ.

## 80. Strain forward



Read [Philippians 3:4b-14](#).

*Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal. (Philippians 3:13-14).*

“Dispassion.” It sounds so...dispassionate. Emotionless. Robotic.

“Dispassion” is a term commonly used by the desert fathers to describe the goal of the spiritual life. Well, a Greek word translated as “dispassion.” But it sounds so stoic, so lifeless. Like somebody imbibed too much Greek philosophy and now tipsily decides to flee the world and live a life of self-flagellation and contemplation, overcoming the body for the pure life of mind. Plato much?

Anyway, that’s how I used to think, but now I think that something was lost in translation. The passions we are to overcome are misdirected, harmful passions—gluttony or greed or the desire for self-determination or control or the desire for others to think better of us than we deserve. Self. But when self is gone, the result is not an empty shell.

When you are hiking in the mountains, when you have forgotten about the workaday world, the things that need to be done, the frustrations, ailments, conflicts, crossing things off of your to-do list, striving in and for the world, what's left?

Beauty. The desire to see the beauty, to approach it, to experience it, to be part of it. To take it in. There is a forgetfulness of self, a yearning for the good. There is a yearning for beauty—a beautiful yearning. It is this yearning that draws us into the mountains, that pulls us out of ourselves.

~ ~ ~

Paul's description of the spiritual life is not the slightest bit dispassionate in the modern sense. He describes it as a striving to win the race, a pressing on, a straining forward. He describes a desire for attaining, for becoming, for uniting. "I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead."

We yearn for the beauty of creation. Beauty is attractive. We long to experience it, to become a part of it. And as we become more spiritual, we long for spiritual beauty. We yearn to know God, to experience him, to become like him.

Pseudo-Dionysius put it this way:

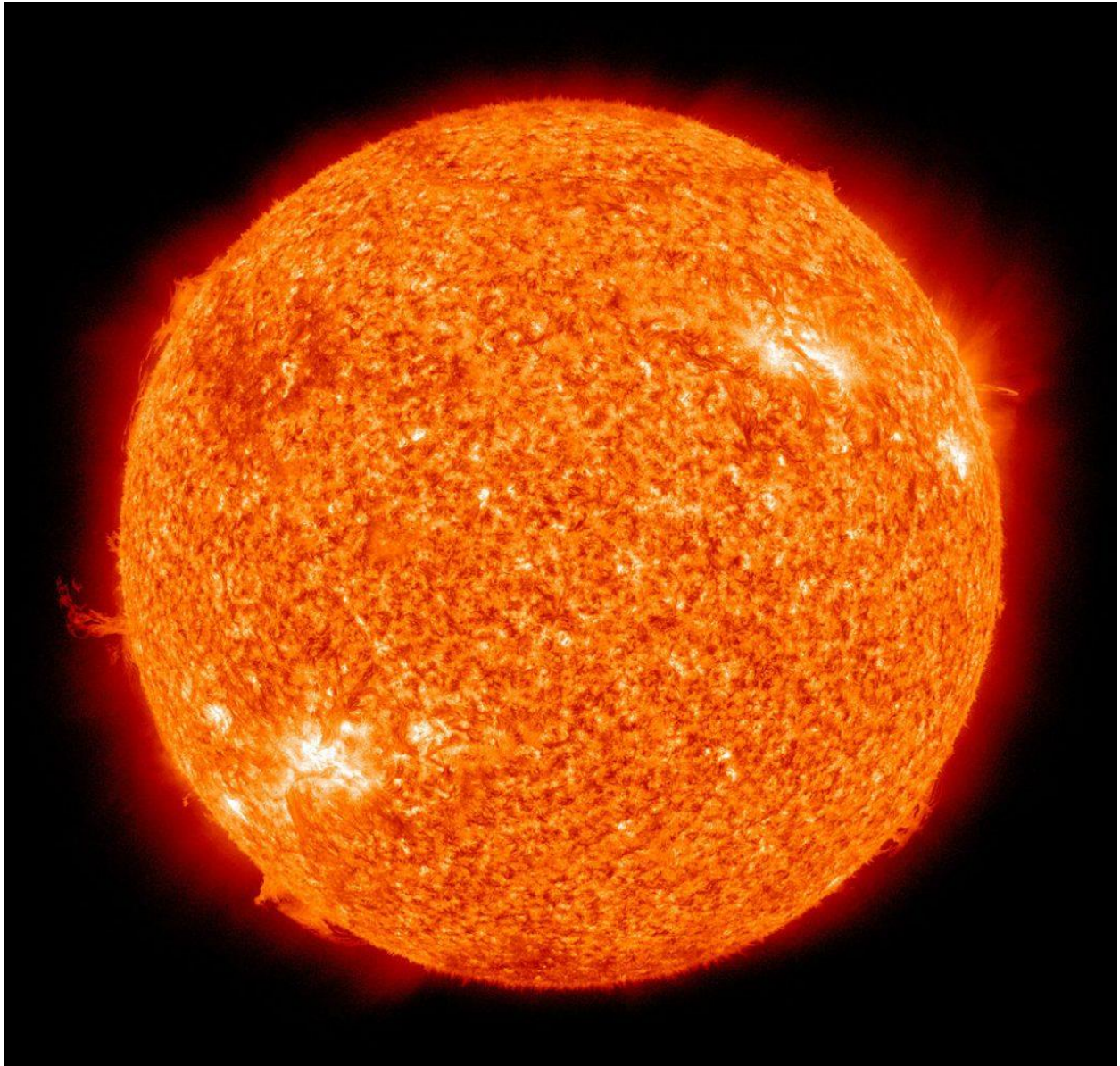
*This divine yearning [eros] brings ecstasy [being taken out of ourselves] so that the lover belongs not to self but to the beloved. . . . This is why the great Paul, swept along by his yearning for God and seized of its ecstatic power, had this inspired word to say: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Paul was truly a lover and, as he says, he was beside himself [ecstatic] for God, possessing not his own life but the life of the One for whom he yearned, as exceptionally beloved.*<sup>10</sup>

O eternal Beauty! Beauty of mountain and valley and river, beauty of wisdom and discernment, beauty of humility and self-sacrifice, beauty ancient and unending, beauty of all that is, draw me to yourself!

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<sup>10</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius: *The Complete Works*, Paulist Press, 1987, p. 82.

## 81. Get out there



Read [Philippians 4:1-9](#).

Maybe you aren't such a big fan of the mountains. The 'beauty' out there really doesn't do that much for you, and the strain and pain of the hike are such a drain. After all, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, right?

I have a word for you: get out there. It seems to me that beauty is in the eye of the beholder in one sense only: whether you see it. Someone finds something beautiful and you don't see it? Open your eyes. Look deeper.

Endure the strain to obtain the gain. You may have to look behind a facade that doesn't attract to see the hidden beauty. But when the beauty is seen, it becomes a part of you. It changes you.

Of course, if you focus on the ugly facade, that becomes a part of you too.

Paul has a word for all of us, intended to make us beautiful: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, meditate on these things. . . and the peace of God will be with you."

I have sometimes wondered where the beauty we see comes from. Is it in the world? In us?

Where does love come from? Why do we love? Why do we value love? (If indeed we do value it.) Do we love love? And where does *that* love come from? Was it a part of creation? Was it blowing in the wind?

All images of God fall short, and yet images are where we start. I have imagined God as a great ball of fire. A sun. In it there is an enormous quantity of roiling fire, of pure energy, emanating as heat and light that radiate out and reach to the ends of the universe, turning everything in their path into fire. This sun sends off great gouts and small sparks of fire that fly out into the universe and turn into stars and planets, which in turn emit other gouts of fire.

That energy is love. As Jonathan Edwards says, the affections are the mainspring of the will. That love is pure will. Goodwill.

Sparks of goodwill fly out of God as he speaks and coalesce into stars and planets and all creatures. At great distance, they may cool and look more like ashes than sparks, but if they return they start to glow.

I think it's fascinating that theologians say that creation was out of nothing, but if you actually read Genesis 1, it is described more as a process of *separation* and *making fertile*.

Meditate on that sun. Meditate on the life of Christ. Open your eyes and let in the light, see the beauty. And you will be filled with light.

## 82. Hypocrisy



Read [Matthew 22:15-22](#).

*Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? (Matthew 22:19)*

Pillars of the community. Flawlessly abiding by societal norms. Teachers. Leaders. Examples.

These religious leaders want to protect the faith and the community. When strange attacks threaten the team, they get back on defense.

I suspect that these Pharisees truly believed that they were defending the faith and defending God. And yet Jesus is no fan. He warns the disciples to “beware the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”

If the Pharisees truly believed they were defending the faith, was there any sin in their actions? Is it possible to sin with good intention?

That’s a good question, but here I suspect that their intentions were tainted. They may have believed they were defending the faith, but only because their distorted desires encouraged them in that belief. They wanted to defend the faith—the faith that looked up to them as respected community leaders. Their desire to defend the faith was tainted by self-interest.

Misshapen, ugly desires lead to misshapen, ugly thoughts and misshapen, ugly actions. If they had truly loved God above all, they would have been filled with joy to see the day they lived in. Just as we should be filled with joy to live in this day.

We humans may think of ourselves as rational, but what we believe is way more affected by what we desire than we may believe. Or desire.

Anyway, what’s the remedy? Jesus points it out. Self-knowledge. His first word to the Pharisees is “Why.” Why are you doing this? What motivates you? Look inside yourselves. What is it that drives you? Are you truly defending God—or yourselves?

We are easily self-deceived. It may actually be a grace—when we think we are acting out of good motivations, our guilt is reduced. But the fact that we are misshapen, distorted, ugly doesn’t change.

Hypocrisy is driven by a desire for others, especially those in our own tribe, to think well of us. This leads us to all sorts of behaviors that, are, well, ugly. Lying about our actions or motivations. Putting down others. Paying much attention to how we appear or how we express ourselves. Striving to fit in. Defending ourselves or our tribe. When the desires are strong, they can lead us to believe things that are clearly false, to say things that are undeniably hurtful, to do things that are obviously sinful.

What can we do? What Jesus says—“beware.” Be aware. Think about what is motivating your actions. When harsh words come out of your mouth, think: are they true? Are they intended in love? Are you trying to defend yourself or your tribe? What desire is driving you? How can you resist that desire?

You might even actively fight hypocrisy. Be silent when others speak ill of you. Dress simply. Leave a typo in everything you write. Openly confess your sin. Seek the lowest place. Think of others as better than yourself.

This attitude of taking one step back from yourself, watching what you say and do, keeping an eye on your own motivation, is *watchfulness*. Watch and pray.

## 83. Three rivers



Read [1 Thessalonians 2:1-8](#).

*Just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. (1 Thessalonians 2:4)*

Pittsburgh. The city of three rivers. Right there at the focal point of the city center the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio rivers flow together and erupt into a fountain that is always spraying upwards.

[Did you ever notice that with just a slight twist “always praying” becomes “all-way spraying”?]

Just kidding. Three rivers never flow together into one spot. Instead, two rivers flow together and one flows out. Otherwise you’d have a pool of stagnant water.

If you love God, no doubt you have been given a ministry of some sort. Love of God and love of neighbor flow together into ministry. The love of God never stagnates in a pool: it flows into one, out of that one, and into another. The love of God poured into you flows out toward others.

Maybe your ministry is simply caring for your family, or your coworkers, or your neighbors. Maybe it is serving others in another way. Maybe it is intercession. But some kind of outlet is necessary if love is to keep pouring into you.

Paul describes healthy ministry. It

- *Is approved by God.* Ministry is never strictly your own doing. It is led by love. Water must flow in to flow out again.
- *Is not to please mortals, but to please God.* Ministry can get derailed by a desire to please those you serve.
- *Does not spring out of trickery or deceit.* There is no hidden desire to get something out of the ministry, whether money or power or praise or even feeling good about yourself.
- *Does not flatter.* Flattery obscures God's word.
- *May be greatly opposed.* Effective ministry may result in persecution or suffering.
- *Is gentle,* like a mother caring for an infant.
- *Is born out of love:* it results from love so deep that it is a sharing of self. As God shares himself with us, so we share ourselves with others.

Can you lose yourself entirely in your ministry, becoming a clear, unhindered channel through which love may flow?

It is when you are empty that you are truly ecstatic.

## 84. Know peace



Read [Matthew 23:1-12](#).

I have a confession to make. I care about the outcome of the upcoming election.

Apparently, a lot of other people do too. With two days to go before the election, all indications are that there will be record turnout, millions of new voters, breathless anticipation of the result. There will be rejoicing and despairing—and maybe violence and rioting. Stores are boarding up windows just in case.

People on both sides of the aisle fear for the future of the country. Politics has become a gladiator sport—mere victory is not enough to satisfy. We want blood.

The Pharisees have let themselves get to the point where they want to have the son of God put to death. People are saying that it could never happen here. But is it really that crazy?

Jesus says: “beware.” Beware of the leaders of your own tribe. They are hypocrites. They are doing what they do and saying what they say to be seen, to gain respect or power or money. Their attitude is contagious—wear your mask. Wash your hands. Keep your distance.

You are to be loyal to no political leader other than God himself.

You are to learn from no teacher apart from the Word of God.

You are to be filled with no passion alongside the Love of the Holy Spirit.

Here is how you can tell if one is great among you: she forgets herself and considers you. He serves not his own interests but yours. And you are to serve the interests of others. Vote—but vote for the good of other people, not your own personal gain.

I bolster my faith: God is in control.

I encourage gratitude by remembering God's past faithfulness.

I calm myself so that I may know.

I notice the glory of the Lord in all that has been created.

I feel my ears tingle at hearing what God has done.

I admire the beauty of Jesus' life.

I contemplate God's power, his goodness, his wisdom, his love.

I rejoice.

I am at peace. (For a moment.)

## 85. The banquet



Read [Matthew 25:1-13](#).

One of the things I miss about pre-COVID days is vacating. A chance to get away from normal life, to be absorbed in creation and in the many little tasks that are a part of camping, to spend time apart, with loved ones. Hiking in the mountains. Enjoying the views. Crossing a stream by hopping from rock to rock. Finding a high meadow. Setting up a tent. Building a campfire. Telling stories around the fire. The pizza sandwiches grilled over open flames, the hot dogs and baked beans, the s'mores—a veritable banquet.

I think it's the time away, the natural beauty, the being pulled out of your routines and yourself that are most attractive. But of course the experience is best when shared with loved ones.

These trips take planning and preparation and discipline. Select a destination many months in advance. Adjust schedules. Plan activities. Acquire equipment. Keep schedules clear. Pack the car. Set off. And then, deal with the inconveniences, the discomforts, the long periods of barren highway, the squabbles. Sometimes the highway seems like an endless desert. We read a book to each other and imagine other times, other places.

But if you don't get all the preparation done at the right time, the vacation falls through and the opportunity is lost.

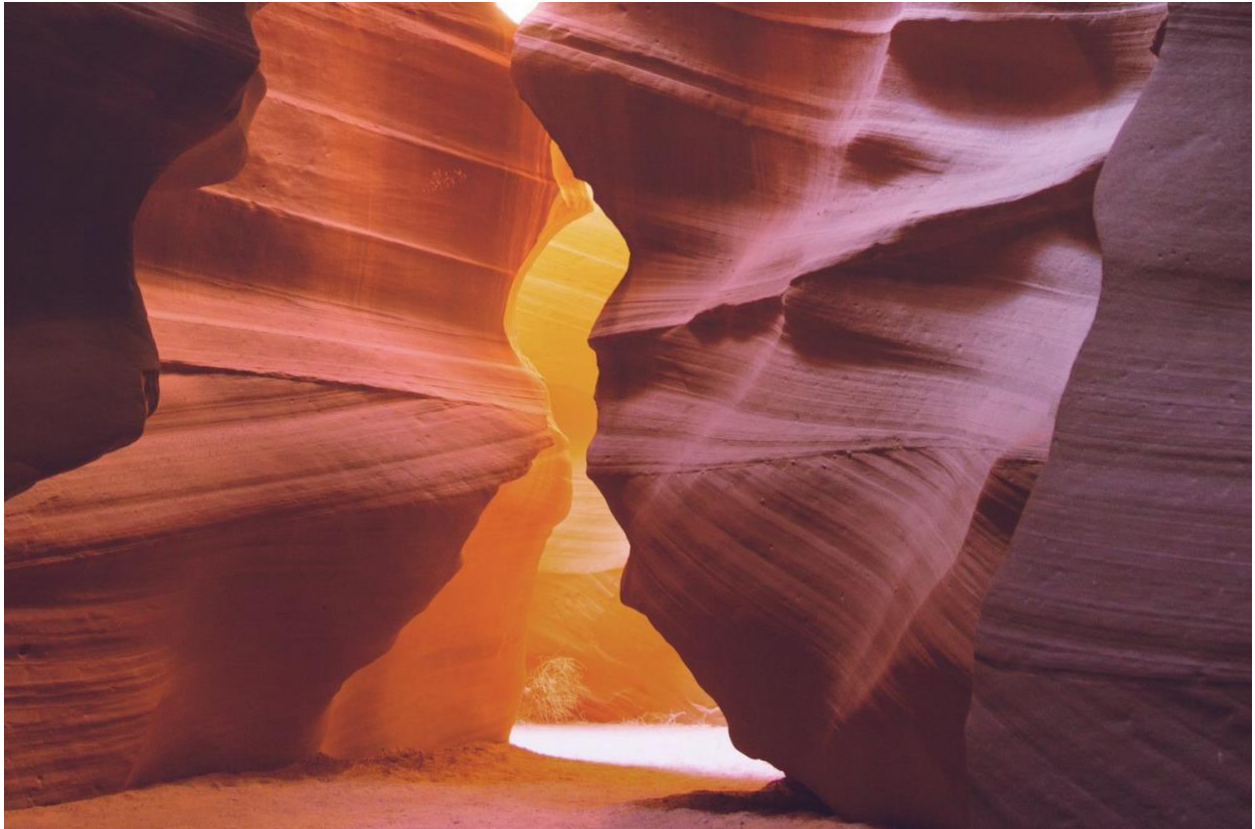
When can we again leave for vacation? When will we feast around the campfire? When will we forget the world and be captivated in the moment and enjoy each other's company in the beauty all around us?

An interesting fact: in this time when I can't take a vacation, my desire for a vacation grows. My longing for a vacation leads me to plan. To prepare. To remember past vacations. In retrospect, it seems to me that this period of longing and preparation is a necessary part of the eventual enjoyment. You won't get there without it.

I will do what I can: choose a destination. Think about potential camping spots and hikes. Things to see and to do. Let myself—encourage myself—to desire, to plan, to grow in hope and expectation. Let that almost painful hope and desire grow to the point where, like a gigantic sneeze, they forcibly expel other plans, other desires.

Sometimes I can't even plan. I can't even *attempt* to plan. It's too painful. My mind recoils. But if I relax and am patient, maybe I can be better prepared. Or at least bear the pain while longing grows.

## 86. What is a river?



Read [Matthew 25:14-30](#).

What is a river?

Is it a channel through which water can flow?

No. We call that a riverbed or gulley or wadi or some such.

Is it then the water that flows through the riverbed?

No. That same water eventually flows into the sea. We don't speak of the sea as containing many rivers.

What then is the river? It requires the riverbed, it requires the water, but itself is *the flow*.

To the extent that the riverbed offers up impediments to the flow, rocks and shallows and twists and oxbows, to that extent it is less a river and more a *stream*. In fact, given enough impediment and a small enough flow, it becomes a collection of stagnant pools. Or even dry ground.

God's grace must flow through you unimpeded. The smoother the channel, the better the flow. Your fears and desires and aversions block the flow, and the water will back up and divert to the unblocked river over yonder—the one with ten talents.

~ ~ ~

When I am sick, should I pray for my own healing? That's a question that exercised me for years. On the one hand, God knows all things and does all things well. Surely he knows whether it is better for me to be sick. On the other hand, we are told to pray. We are told that the reason we don't have is that we don't ask. Then again, on the third hand, we ask and we don't receive what we think we wanted.

I think we sometimes have prayer backwards. We try to twist God's arm into giving us gifts, into sending water our way. But the true situation is the opposite. God is of such a nature that he can't help but give as many costly gifts as he possibly can, up to and including himself. The limiting factor is what we are able to receive.

Prayer does indeed coerce God into giving us gifts, but only to the extent that the prayer changes *us*.

In a river the channel doesn't redirect the water. Not really. The water is always going to end up in the sea. It is the flowing water that carves and smooths the channel. In fact, a river can literally move mountains.

~ ~ ~

In [writing](#) about Meister Eckhart's view on prayer, John Orme Mills, OP says this:

*If prayer is defined as being no more than asking God for things, no more than petition, then obviously the wholly detached person—in other words, the person who [desires what God desires]—would not be able to pray. If, on the other hand, prayer is understood as union with God, then detachment has its own form of prayer. The soul that is one with God is a soul that (to use Eckhart's own turn of phrase) 'lives without a "why"'. It is not living for some purpose or other—what we, in our world, assume all too often living seriously is all about. The soul that is one with God lives without a 'why' in the sheer delight of its existence.*

*What, then, is important for him is not so much what we do or where we do it as what spirit we do it in. As he said to the young Dominican students in Erfurt [...]:*

*"To the extent that you depart from all things, thus far, and no more, God enters into you with all that is His. People should therefore not worry so much about what they do but rather about what they are. If they and their ways are good, then their deeds are radiant. If you are righteous, then what you do will also be righteous."*

## 87. A glorious inheritance



Read [Ephesians 1:15-23](#).

*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.*  
(Ephesians 1:17-19)

What God's Lover Desires

*Three things that I would be: radiant as Cherubim  
As tranquil as are Thrones, on fire as Seraphim.*

Angelus Silesius<sup>11</sup>

“Immeasurable power for us who believe”? “Glorious inheritance”?

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<sup>11</sup> *The Cherubic Wanderer*, Paulist Press, 1986, III.165

Sometimes I like to pretend that I'm a Christian. What if I really believed that God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, all-generous spirit? What then would this "glorious inheritance" be?

Would he be content to keep me from some harm, but let some slip through? (Accidentally? Intentionally? Because he was unable to stop it?)

Would he count it enough to give me some food and drink, maybe a house and a family, some happiness, a peaceful, easy life, and to let my soul atrophy?

Would he be satisfied to let Jesus live a perfect life in my place without actually perfecting me, to pretend that I have been glorified, to give me a crown I don't actually deserve?

Would it be acceptable for him to accomplish my salvation through force or coercion, blocking the free will with which he created me?

Would he consider it sufficient to give gifts of life, light, or love that are external to himself, maintaining a separation between us?

Would he stop at giving a little of himself, always holding something back so that he's always a little richer?

Would he give any less than the radiance of his own wisdom, the fire of his own love, and the peace of union with his own life and power — the Trinity itself — in ever greater abundance, as we are able to receive?

Life in the Spirit is moving up and down Jacob's ladder, up, closer to God, down, to bring others up, in the company of countless others, in a double helix of repeated ascent and descent, ever reaching new heights, ever seeing greater glory.

## 88. Rend the heavens!



Read [Isaiah 64:1-9](#).

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when the fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! (Isaiah 64:1-2)*

Apparently Isaiah wasn't very good at prayer, or maybe he wasn't righteous enough, or he didn't have enough faith—there is no record of a tear in the heavens through which God came down to cause earthquake and wildfire and fear.

Or maybe that wasn't Isaiah's actual intent. Maybe he is pouring out his heart, expressing his desires, the desires of the people, not actually demanding that God rend the heavens, shake the mountains, and terrify the nations.

It seems to me that there are at least three modes of prayer that may be broadly categorized as petition. In the first we pour out our hearts to God. We show our desires without actually asking that they be granted. We express them, and by doing so, we reveal ourselves. Sometimes it's not pretty, but when we air our desires they are purified. Maybe the imprecatory psalms have this character.

Lord, save. Lord, come quickly. Lord, banish evil and hunger and war and injustice. Lord, stop that evil person. Lord, pay back my oppressors what they deserve. Lord, heal this sickness. Lord, where is your justice! Lord, help me find my car keys. I don't actually expect evil to end tomorrow, nor am I expecting my keys to miraculously appear on the countertop. I'm expressing my desires.

This kind of prayer is really as much communion as petition. By it, my will scrapes against God's will and loses its rough edges. Our wills twist together and become one.

The second mode of petitionary prayer is a deliberate and intent request. In it we ask that God act, and we expect a result. We pray persistently and passionately. Maybe we make the request explicit somehow, perhaps by asking the church to pray and to anoint with oil. We have faith that our request will be granted, or maybe something even better.

To *express a desire* and to *solemnly ask* are not the same thing. The latter has more intention and expectation. In my experience the former is common and the latter less frequent.

The third mode of petitionary prayer is the prayer of power. In it we pray in union with God's will. We pray in Jesus' name—we pray in his place and with his authority. We command that it be done. We instruct the demon to leave, the illness to be healed.

Or maybe these are differences of degree rather than mode. Maybe they can be expressed as parameters of petition:

- Motive—why do you ask? Are you asking for selfish reasons, or are you moved by love?
- Intent—are you explicitly asking for an outcome or are you really just expressing a desire?
- Vehemence—are you demanding and persistent, or are you abandoned to whatever God thinks best?
- Expectation—are you praying in faith? Do you actually believe that the person with cancer will be healed or that war will cease and justice prevail?
- Union—are you praying for what you know to be God's will, so that together you see that it is good and desire it fervently and command that it be done?

Meister Eckhart says:

*The most powerful prayer and almost the strongest of all to obtain everything, and the most honorable of all works, is that which proceeds from an empty spirit. The emptier the spirit, the more is the prayer and the work mighty, worthy, profitable, praiseworthy, and perfect. The empty spirit can do everything.*

*And what is an empty spirit?*

*An empty spirit is one that is confused by nothing, attached to nothing, has not attached its best to any fixed way of acting, and has no concern whatever in anything for its own gain, for it is all sunk deep down into God's dearest will and has forsaken its own. A man can never perform any work, however humble, without it gaining strength and power from this.*

*We ought to pray so powerfully that we should like to put our every member and strength, our two eyes and ears, mouth, heart, and all our senses to work; and we should not give up until we find that we wish to be one with him who is present to us and whom we entreat, namely God.<sup>12</sup>*

Does Meister Eckhart really say that the detached person no longer prays petitionary prayers? On the contrary, such a one prays vehement and powerful petitions in union with God.

Then again, maybe the heavens *were* rent and God *did* come down, just not in the way the words at first blush seem to suggest. O come, O come Emmanuel!

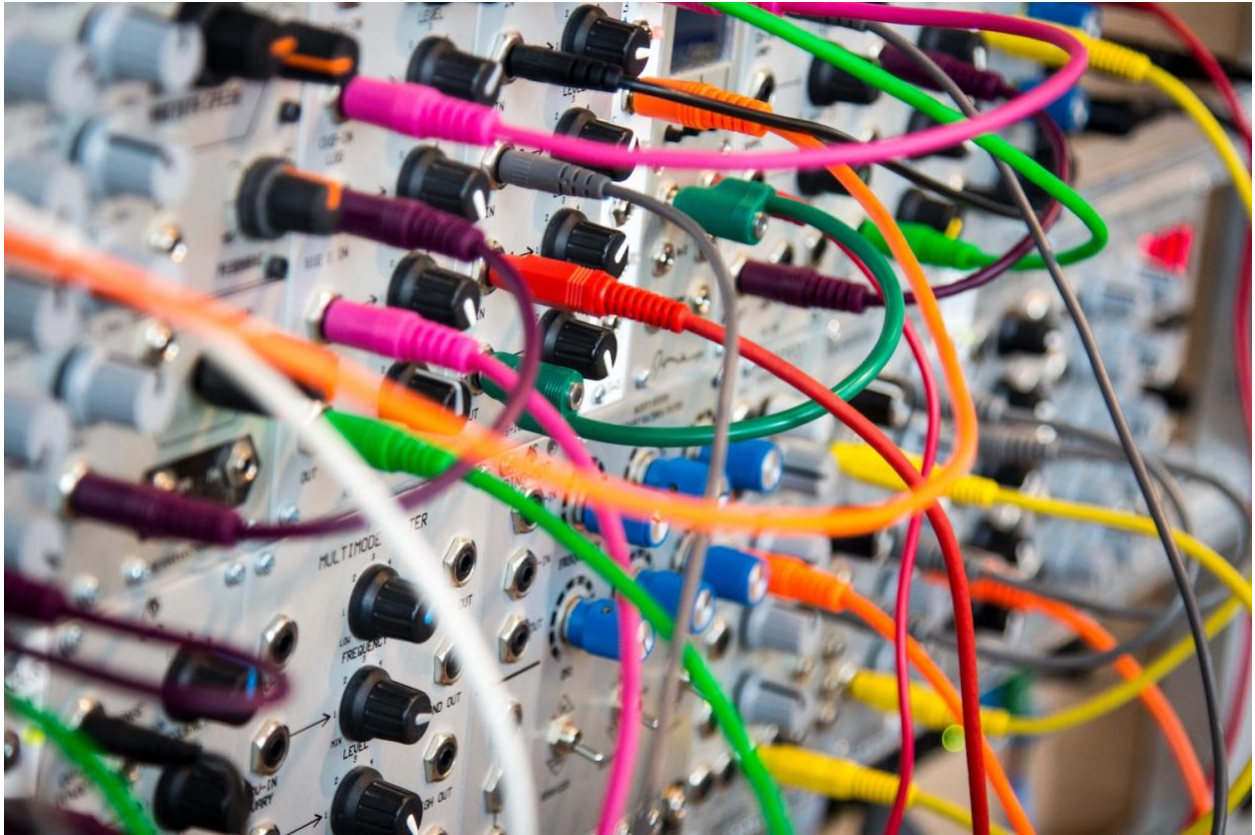
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See also [Meister Eckhart's Sermons](#), containing seven of his sermons, and other [volumes of works by Eckhart](#) at CCEL.

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<sup>12</sup> Meister Eckhart, Paulist Press, 1981.

## 89. The network



Read [1 Thessalonians 5:12-24](#).

*Always seek to do good...pray without ceasing...give thanks in all circumstances...hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thessalonians 5:[here and there])*

As if it were that easy.

“Always seek to do good.” Check. “Pray without ceasing.” OK, I’ve been working on that one for decades, and I’m still not there. “Give thanks in every circumstance.” Really? Even when loved ones suffer and the nation is torn apart? Let’s just say it’s not so easy. “Abstain from every form of evil.” Shoot! Why didn’t I think of that before!

What’s going on here? It’s not Paul giving us some new information. It’s not about the intellect. Paul is *exhorting*. He is urging. Inciting. Admonishing. Encouraging. He’s lighting a fire under our hearts. He’s addressing the *will*.

Over the years, I believe I’ve heard too many sermons addressing the intellect and too few addressing the will. Yes, it’s good to learn to take a theological view of the world, but we should be out there *lighting fires*.

~ ~ ~

*But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.* (1 Thessalonians 5:12-14)

The lectionary skips right over this part of the chapter and heads into the concluding exhortation, but it's a key passage about how the Christian life works in community. You are to highly esteem those who admonish you, and you are in turn to admonish and encourage others.

It's a hierarchy. Or a network. We are always receiving grace from some and passing it along to others. And this grace apparently takes the form of urging, encouraging, and admonishing. These impulses of goodwill keep the network humming, the grace flowing.

It's an internet, with many different kinds of traffic flowing in many different directions. Some are teachers, some are evangelists, or healers, or deacons, or carpenters, or wait staff. We all have the opportunity and the calling to serve each other. The traffic on the internet doesn't belong to any one node; rather, it's the job of each node to pass it along.

Think of your conversation. Is it always targeted at keeping the grace flowing, at lighting a fire?

~ ~ ~

God seems to prefer to work *through people*. In Christ, God worked through a person, through his servanthood and suffering and death, and now we are his body on earth. Now God works *through us*.

Why should this be the case? Can't God do his work directly and immediately? If he can be in all places and get down every chimney, does he really need little helper elves? The key is that if Jesus saves and restores, and if we are to become like Jesus, then we must also save and restore. God is internally and essentially communal, and so must we be, and so are we. We must willingly receive grace and pass it along to others.

On this topic of helping each other, of mediation, Pseudo-Dionysius has this to say:

*The prayers of the saints in this life are extremely valuable for the one who has a longing for the sacred gifts, who has made a holy preparation to receive them, and who, knowing his own weakness, has sought out some holy man to beg him to be his helper and to join him in his prayers. Such help can only be of the greatest possible assistance to him, since it will gain for him the most divine gifts which he desires. The divine goodness will accept him because of his well-shaped disposition, because of the respect he shows for the saints, because of the praiseworthy eagerness with which he begs for those longed-for gifts, and because of the life he lives in harmony with this and in conformity to God. For one of the divine judgments has laid down that the gifts of*

*God should be duly given those worthy to receive them, through the mediation of those who are worthy to impart them. Someone could perhaps show lack of respect for this divine arrangement and, out of wretched self-regard, could imagine himself capable of disdaining the mediation of the saints and of entering into direct relationship with the divinity.<sup>13</sup>*

Have you sought out that person to be your helper, to pray with you? Are you serving others in this capacity?

See also: [The Works of Pseudo-Dionysius](#)

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<sup>13</sup> *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, Paulist Press, 1987, pp. 254-5.

## 90. Time and eternity



Read [Psalm 139](#).

Imagine you are omniscient. You know everything. Your memory is perfect. You remember past events—how you felt, what you were thinking, how you experienced them. In fact, you remember them as clearly and as vividly as the present. In a very real sense, they are still present to you. How would you differentiate past events from the now?

And you are able to anticipate the future. You know how it will feel, what you will be thinking, how you will experience it. You *do* experience it.

But the future depends on your actions. Not only can you anticipate the future, you can even anticipate what the future would be for each set of actions you might undertake. All of the possible futures that depend on your actions are available to you. Knowing what actions you will choose, you experience the future in almost the same way that you experience the now.

There is one difference in your experience of past, present, and future: your actions take place in the present. You can't change the past. But why would you want to? Your thoughts now are

the same as your thoughts then. They don't change. Anything you might decide you should have done at that past time, you would have decided then and done. And you can't yet effect the future. But you know what you will do and what the outcome will be. It is present to you now.

Your relationship to people would be very different. To you, their entire lives are present. More, all of their possible lives, depending on your actions, are known. Each potential action you might take can potentially change each person. What power!

Now imagine that you are also omnipotent. All possible actions are possible to you, from creating universes down to nudging butterfly wings. All of these actions have immense ripple effects throughout creation and time. You can calm the chaos, breathing your Spirit across the waters. By speaking, you create.

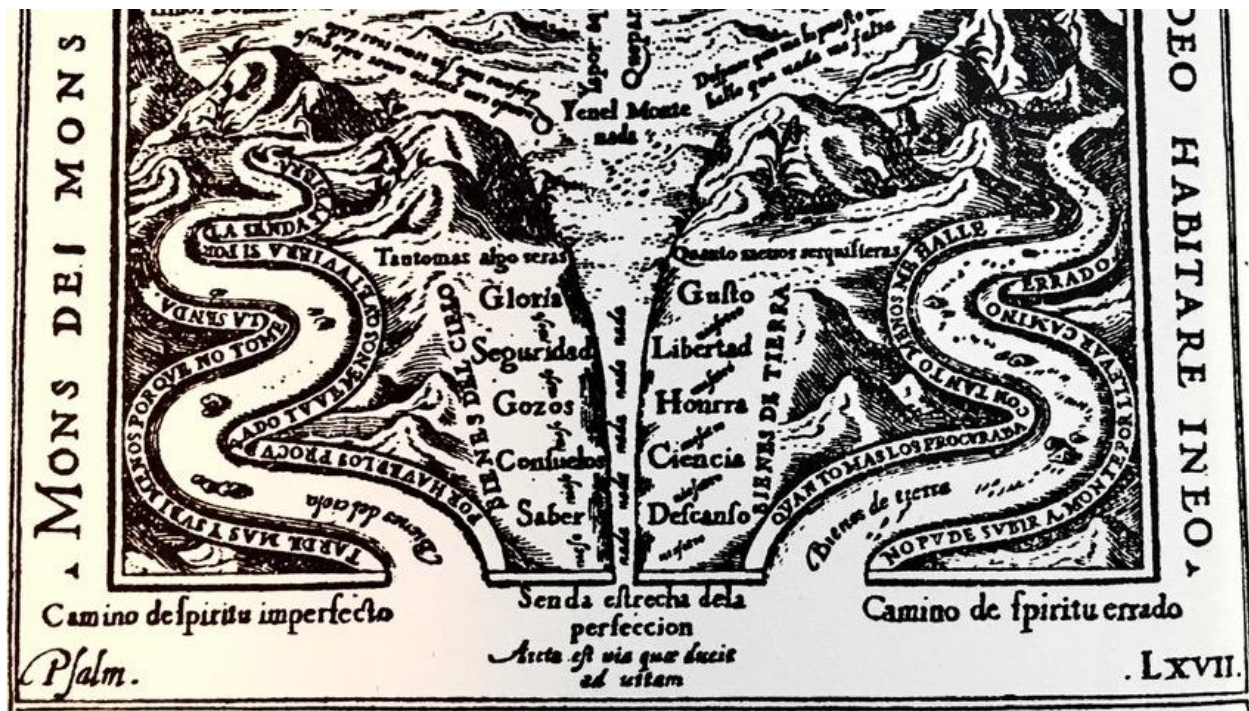
Imagine too that you are omnicharitable. You choose the good for all people, for all that you create. You create to bring about glory. You are a master artist of good, creating a glorious masterpiece. You create people in your own image, with free will, so that they have the possibility of even greater glory. You do not override their free will—to do so would be to remove your image, to uncreate them. You do not place them in happy, easy lives, for then they would not strive for the good. Instead, you hide yourself, so that they are not overwhelmed, so that they have true freedom. You cut and chip away at them, sculpting them into what you would have them be.

Based on your foreknowledge, you choose your actions to glorify as many as can be enticed to choose you. You choose the circumstances that are best for each one. You bring peace to those of goodwill.

You stop at nothing in creating your great masterpiece. There is no half-effort among the omniscient, omnipotent, and omnicharitable of the universe. In fact, if it were possible and good, you would go so far as to bring about your own death. And resurrection. And ascension, along with those who desire to join you, into the glory of the Holy Trinity.

Mind. Blown.

## 91. Wide and narrow



Read [1 Corinthians 7:29-35](#).

*I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord. (1 Corinthians 7:35)*

There are many wide roads but only one narrowest way. The wide roads are easy. Many walk along them. Walking in the company of a crowd is comforting. But they don't get very far up the mountain. These roads narrow as they approach the foothills. They get rough as the elevation starts to increase. They turn aside when the real mountain starts.

The narrow way heads straight up the mountain. It's not easy to find—or to follow. At first, it's rocky and steep. Progress seems slow, although since the path is straight it is actually the fastest way. And as you get a little way up the mountain, the narrow way opens up a bit and becomes easier to follow. Near the top the way is wide and easy and free.

One of the wide roads leads through the city. There are shops on both sides. People stop and browse. They purchase food and clothing and possessions and titles and responsibilities. Of course, so heavily laden, they don't have a prayer of climbing the mountain. They do well to get to the foothills.

Another wide road leads through the church grounds. There are crowds of people and booths and stations. At one booth you can read books. At another you can sing songs. Stop and hang around for a while and enjoy! At another booth you can view beautiful works of art. Stop.

Enjoy. Notice the craftsmanship. Think about how it might look in your own house. And don't miss the reputation station. Here you can get your face painted any way you like. Maybe two or three different ways. Many people never leave the church grounds, even to enter the church.

The wide road seeks to acquire the goods of heaven. The narrow way seeks to give.

The wide road seeks glory. The narrow way seeks to be unknown.

The wide road seeks knowledge. The narrow way seeks charity.

The wide road seeks consolation. The narrow way seeks death.

The wide road seeks rest but finds a heavy burden. The narrow way seeks obedience and self-denial and suffering but finds freedom and love and peace.

Always choose what is less pleasant to self. That is the narrow way.

*Desire enjoyment in nothing,  
Nor knowing nor having nor being,  
To come to enjoyment in all things,  
To living and loving and seeing.*

For more in this direction, read [The Spirituality of St. John of the Cross](#) (reading time: 20 minutes or more).

## 92. Discernment (2)



Read [Deuteronomy 18:15-20](#).

*But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die. (Deuteronomy 18:20)*

There will be true prophets and there will be false prophets. How do we tell them apart? How do we gain discernment? How do we learn to recognize the shepherd's voice? How can we know what is good?

*Practice.*

Read Psalm 111.

*Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. (Psalm 111:2)*

Meditate on God's works, in creation, in redemption, in the lives of the saints. Become familiar with the style. Notice the effects. Observe the nuance. Feel the love—and be overwhelmed. God's works are

- full of honor and majesty
- of enduring righteousness and renown
- providential
- powerful and effective
- trustworthy
- gracious and merciful
- faithful and just
- holy and awesome

Think of creation, of the way the world supports, nurtures, and provides for us—and corrects and chastises us and causes us to grow. Meditate on the life of Jesus, his humility, service, obedience, and love. Ponder the good actions of people you know or have read about.

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: all those who practice it have a good understanding. (Psalm 111:10)*

You will not gain discernment without reverential fear. You must desire to know God so that you can worship him. You must seek to know the good so that you can do it.

To hear God's voice you must pay attention—it is still and small. Listen to God's word, not just as a word, but as a word *for you*. Look for God's presence and action in the world and in the activities of people around you. Feel God's presence in your spirit.

In prayer, spend at least as much time *listening* as you do *talking*. After all, who has the more important things to say? And how will you learn to recognize his voice if you are always talking?

As you learn to know the spirit in yourself, and as you learn to love your neighbor as yourself, you may start to recognize the spirit in your neighbor. This discernment is only trustworthy if it is combined with love. Let it lead to intercession. Or, if it would be helpful, if you are so led, to a spoken word. God's gifts of grace are not for you alone but for the whole community. You are responsible for each other.

*Lord, teach me to love others as deeply as you love them.*

## 93. Joy



*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*  
(Matthew 11:28-30)

What is this *prayer of quiet*, or repose, or rest, of which we hear whispers? Why is my life not *rest*, but a battle, a struggle, a pain of childbirth? How can I enter into that land of rest?

Battle is the result when two sides have competing desires and no agreement is possible. Ownership of land or possessions. Power. Knowledge. Wealth. Dominion. Life.

The struggle is not primarily with the other people but with the king. If that king's goals and desires conflict with yours, there will be strife.

If it is a good king, and if he loves the people and seeks the good for the people, he will bring prosperity for his people. Oh, there may be a few who resist the king's governance, but they are under control.

Those who agree with the king will have the same desires and goals. Both sides seek the good for all. They respect each other, and cooperate, and come to love each other, and become one team. There will be peace.

Peace with God comes through union of wills. You are at peace when you love what God loves and desire what God desires. Then there is no conflict, there is cooperation and partnership and unity.

This peace, this unity, comes when you desire what God desires. The battles come from your desires that are different from what God desires. Do you seek joy in owning or experiencing things? Do you look for security by attempting to control the world around you? Do you find pleasure in people thinking well of you? Then you are at war with God; there is no peace. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

But when you have thrown your lot in with the good king and are on the same side, when you take his yoke upon you, you will find rest for your soul.

In the prayer of quiet, your will is entirely captured by God. You love what God loves and desire what God desires. Vehemently. Your sense and imagination and reason may still run free, but your heart is captive. You know the life, light, and love of the triune God and are swept away. There is joy.

The posts "Wide and narrow" and "Spirituality of St. John of the Cross" had a poem, *Joy*, that summarizes a poem of St. John of the Cross on the spiritual life. Meditate on this:

*Desire enjoyment in nothing,  
Nor knowing nor having nor being,  
To come to enjoyment in all things,  
To living and loving and seeing.*

Greg Scheer, friend and composer and co-conspirator in founding Hymnary.org, set it to music.

Sing: [Joy](#) -- [full score](#) -- [listen](#)

text by  
Harry Plantinga  
after St. John of the Cross

# Joy

music by  
Greg Scheer  
January 26, 2021

*♩ = 76*  
*descant*

*E<sub>b</sub> B<sub>b</sub> E<sub>b</sub> F<sub>m</sub> C<sub>m</sub> B<sub>b</sub> sus B<sub>b</sub> /A<sub>b</sub>*

De - sire en - joy - ment in noth - ing, Nor know - ing nor hav - ing nor be - ing, To

*G<sub>m</sub> C<sub>m</sub> F<sub>m</sub> C<sub>m</sub> G<sub>m</sub> B<sub>b</sub> sus B<sub>b</sub>*

come to en - joy - ment in all things, To liv - ing and lov - ing and see - ing.

music ©2021 Greg Scheer • [www.gregscheer.com](http://www.gregscheer.com)

## 94. The fast that God chooses



*"Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"  
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,  
and oppress all your workers.  
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.  
Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high.  
Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?  
Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;*

*when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.  
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say,  
Here I am. (Isaiah 58:3-9)*

“What are you going to give up for Lent?” We like to *choose* our fasts. Something not too onerous. Something that won’t get in the way of life, like, make us actually *hungry*. Something others will notice. Still, some kind of fast will put us in God’s good graces, right?

According to Isaiah, there is good fasting and there is bad fasting. Acceptable or not. Fasting that is ignored by God or fasting that brings a springing up of healing and a breaking forth of light—a vindication from God and an answer to every cry for help.

Acceptable fasting is not self-seeking. It is not to be seen—it is hidden. It is not to obtain something from God—it is to give. It is not to lose weight—it is to shed sin. It is not a piece of jewelry to adorn the appearance—it is sackcloth and ashes. It is bitter. It is bowed down.

Acceptable fasting does not serve our own desires. Instead, it serves others. The spirit that is bitter and bowed down in itself turns outward. It sees injustice and oppression. It sees poverty and need—and its heart breaks. It serves in whatever way it can. Acceptable fasting is not chosen, it is wrenched from us.

Do you want to choose your own fast this Lent? Don’t do it. Fast the fast that the Lord chooses for you:

- bow your head like a bulrush
- repent of your self-seeking in humility
- seek the good of others:
  - fight against injustice
  - work for freedom for those who are oppressed
  - invite the homeless into your house for a meal
  - relieve the needy

What might it mean *for you* to spend forty days in repentance and fasting and seeking the good of others? You know your situation. You can sense your call. Rededicate yourself to serving God and serving others.

Yes, abstaining from food *can* remind you to seek not your own needs but the needs of others. Each time you feel a hunger pang, repent. Find a way to serve someone else’s needs as though

they were your own. See if God doesn't meet *your* true needs from his own hand. Test him on this.

## 95. The poor shall eat and be satisfied



Read Psalm 22.

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? (Psalm 22:1)*

*You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! . . . he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him. . . . The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord. (Psalm 22:23-26)*

Who is it who shall eat and be satisfied? The poor. Who is it who shall praise the Lord? Those who seek. Who is it who shall glorify him, and stand in awe of him? Those who fear. Those who have been forsaken. The afflicted. The groaning. Those from whom God is so far from helping.

Note that those who may seek the Lord are not those who have already found him. Those who may eat are not the rich.

Who may aspire to know God, to serve him wholeheartedly, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to be made like him? It is not those who already are made perfect. It is we. All of us. Christ died to save *sinners*.

The mellifluous Saint Bernard put it this way:

*Every soul, even if it is loaded down with sins, ensnared in vices, entrapped by the enticements of pleasure, a captive in exile, imprisoned in the body, stuck in the mud, caught in the mire, bound to its members, enslaved by cares, distracted with business, shrinking with fear, afflicted with griefs, astray in errors, troubled by anxieties, disturbed by suspicions, and lastly, a stranger in a hostile land and, as the prophet puts it, sharing the pollution of the dead, counted with those who go down to hell—we have learned that every soul, even thus condemned and thus despairing, can turn back and can find that it can not only breathe the hope of forgiveness and mercy, but even dare to aspire to be the Bride of the Word, when it is not afraid to make alliance with God and to take on the sweet yoke of love with the King of the angels. . . .*

*Why, then, does it doze in idleness?*<sup>14</sup>

Thomas Merton writes,

*Why do we think of the gift of contemplation, infused contemplation, mystical prayer, as something strange and esoteric reserved for a small class of almost unnatural beings and prohibited to everyone else? It is perhaps that we have forgotten that contemplation is the work of the Holy Ghost acting on our souls through his gifts of Wisdom and Understanding with special intensity to increase and perfect our love for him. These gifts are part of the normal equipment of Christian sanctity. They are given to all in baptism, and if they are given it is presumably because God wants them to be developed.*

*[...]*

*Infused contemplation is intimately connected with the pure and perfect love of God which is God's greatest gift to the soul. It is a deep and intimate knowledge of God by a union of love—a union in which we learn things about Him that those who have not received such a gift will never discover until they enter heaven.*

*Therefore, if anyone should ask, "Who may desire this gift and pray for it?" the obvious answer is: everybody.*

*But there is only one condition. If you desire intimate union with God you must be willing to pay the price for it. The price is small enough. In fact it is not even a price at all: it only seems to be so with us. We find it difficult to give up our desire for things that can never satisfy us in order to purchase the One Good in Whom is all our joy—and in Whom, moreover, we get back everything else that we have renounced besides!*<sup>15</sup>

Do you wish to praise the Lord, to stand in awe, to see his face? The promises are for *you*, no matter your current state. Aspire. Strive. Seek his face. This is not the time to hold back in false humility.

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<sup>14</sup> Selected works, Paulist Press, 1987, pp. 270-271 (Sermon 83).

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, Merton, *What Is Contemplation*, rev. ed., Templegate Publishers, 1981, pp. 7-11.



## 96. Embarrassing promises



Read [John 14–16](#).

The bible, the new testament, the gospels are full of embarrassing promises, but nowhere are they as thick and heavy as in Jesus' last discourse to the disciples in John 14–16.

*"If go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may also be."*

*"The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these."*

*"I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the son."*

*"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."*

*"He will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."*

*"On that day, you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."*

*“They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Fathers, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”*

*“The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything.”*

*“Those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit.”*

*“If you abide in me, and my words in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”*

*“I do not call you servants anymore, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father.”*

*“I have appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.”*

*“‘Servants are not greater than their masters.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.”*

*“When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”*

*“Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.”*

So, we are to be filled with the Holy Spirit, guided into all truth, doing greater works than Jesus? We will be purified so that we can keep Jesus' commandments? We will bear much fruit? Whatever we ask in Jesus' name, the Father will do?

Are these promises true in us? Do you find that whatever you ask in Jesus' name is done for you?

Embarrassing promises indeed, but embarrassing not to Jesus but to the church, that there are so few who believe and love and obey and bear fruit in this way.

It is true that Jesus was speaking to his disciples, later to be called apostles. It is true that these things were not true of his disciples while he was present with them on earth. Much of the time we see them we would not have seen these promises fulfilled. In fact, there was even a time before they were disciples, when they were—what. Nothing? Pre-disciples? Then what would we have seen?

Yet Jesus chooses them as disciples and later promotes them from “servants” to “friends,” who know all of Jesus' secrets. There is a progression in the Christian life. Fruit takes time to ripen.

Look at these promises, these great gifts, offered to all who love God:

- The Advocate

- Knowledge of God and all things
- An answer to every prayer
- Much fruit
- Persecution and suffering
- Complete joy
- A place beside Jesus

The Advocate is given to those who will receive him. To those who will not receive him, he is not given. Those who will receive him are those who love him. Those who do not love him do not wish to receive him.

It's easy to look at these promises and consider them an embarrassment. They aren't for us but for the disciples. They may come true someday, who knows, but they don't apply now. They are for saints but I'm not a saint. Or to disbelieve them. Or just to ignore them and not think about them. There are a hundred ways to refuse to receive these promises. But if you receive them and desire them, they will inevitably transform your life.

Do you want to prepare yourself to receive this Advocate? You must love him. You must desire him. Desire is the most important thing in the preparation for knowing God. Desire that manifests in prayer, in action, in submission, in love, in light, in life.

Are you lacking in desire? Pray for more love. Every day, pray for more love. You will receive, that your joy may be complete.

## 97. I will reveal myself



Read [John 14](#).

*They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.*  
(John 14:21)

For much of the disciples' lives, Jesus, who is right there with them, is apparently hidden from them. But to those who love him he promises to reveal himself.

This is the test of love: do you desire nothing more than pleasing the one that you love? Desiring to get something for yourself *from* God is the spirit of the servant; desiring to do what you can *for* God is the spirit of the friend. And what in the world can you do *for* God? Keep his commandments.

I once begged God for a way that *I* could give *him* a gift. The response was, 'have the courage to speak the truth.' Which I ought to have been doing anyway.

What in the world can you give to God? Only your love. You hear that he has prepared a place for you. You see him in Jesus' humility and service and suffering and resurrection. You taste him in the way that all things work together for your good. You respond with gratitude and love.

What in the world can you give to God? Only your self, your will. God gives you a freedom to choose, an ability to decide what you will love and desire, to affect your affect. You can give it back.

God gives himself to those who give themselves to him. Have you truly given yourself entirely to him? Have you given up your perceived right to decide for yourself where you will go and what you will do? Have you given up your desire to protect yourself, to improve yourself, to see to your own salvation? If so, you truly love God more than yourself, and he has promised that he will reveal himself to you.

Pray for more love. Every day, pray for more love. You will receive, that you may be able to keep his commandments.

## 98. A hubbub



Read [John 12:20-33](#).

*Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” (John 12:20-21)*

I

You take a pilgrimage toward Jerusalem for the festival. It’s been a long trip, but you are drawn. Now you are getting close.

Noise. Commotion. A great crowd. Chatter. Talk of someone raised from the dead, someone who had been in a tomb for four days.

A hubbub.

You hear talk of someone called Jesus. You hear stories. Amazing things.

You want to see this Jesus. You press through the crowds. You search.

Your desire grows. Not just desire, need. There is nothing more important to you than to see Jesus. Everything depends on it. But what will it take? What will it cost you?

You find someone who knows him. You ask him. “How can I see Jesus?” He leads you in the right direction. He asks him for you.

Through the crowd he looks straight at you. Seeming to speak directly to you, he answers your request...with *non sequiturs*?

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

“Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world keep it for eternal life.”

“Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” But he appears to be headed in a bad direction! “Father, glorify your name.”

Then it happens. The world shakes. A *voice from heaven* speaks.

*I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.*

Everyone is shocked. What was that? Where did that voice come from? Who could speak with such a deep, rich voice? But the voice came from the sky.

Many around you can’t process the experience. They say, “It must have been thunder.”

But you heard the voice. You saw the man. And it was a life-changing experience.

II

Now that you are back in your home town, you reflect. There was something about that man that you loved. And the voice. The voice from heaven. The glory!

You have heard the stories about the events that took place after you left—that the man was executed. That he didn’t resist, went to the cross willingly. That his friends claimed he came back from the dead.

You reflect. You loved that man. You can’t stop thinking about that whole episode. What in the world would lead someone to walk willingly to the cross?

You search for reports of the things he said while he was living and teaching and leading. You ponder them eagerly.

The Voice from Heaven drives it home. You consider how to respond to that love, that glory. How to live.

III

Going out for drinks with your friends just doesn't have the appeal to you that it once did. The more the Lord reveals to you, the more your life changes, the more the distance between you and your friends, your life, grows.

Your friends criticize you. They don't understand. They reject you. It occurs to you that this is like the reaction you saw to Jesus' teaching and life.

You spend time with the one you love, the glorious one. You replay the sights and sounds of your pilgrimage in your imagination. You talk with him internally.

You have found a few others who also love him, and spending time with *them* is encouraging, joyful, wonderful. Deep fellowship. Communion.

Your love has its ups and downs, but it is generally growing. It peaks when you spend time with him, away from the crowd. And with the love comes something else. Knowledge. The one you love reveals something of himself.

#### IV

Your life has become one of desire. All that you do, all that you see, leads back to him. What else is there to love? What else is there to desire?

You are astonished that the Lord gives such gifts to one such as *you*. How can that glory make its home in the mess you have made of yourself? But when the one you love visits, you are transported. You no longer think of yourself at all. You see. You love. You live.

You love him, but he fills you with love for others. You love your former friends, your neighbors, those you see in the street, even your enemies. Sometimes they speak with you, ask questions, ask for advice. Sometimes you have a word for them, you pray for them. Sometimes *they* are changed.

*Every day, pray for more love, that you may see Jesus.*

## 99. Voluntation



Read [John 14](#).

*Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them. (John 14:21)*

I hate zoom worship. It doesn't engage me. It tires me out. I find my mind wandering. When we sing a song I'm thinking, verse 2, hopefully this is the last one? Verse 3? OK, verse 4 must be the last one, hardly any songs have more than 4 verses. Verse 5!?!

Or I used to hate zoom worship. But then I figured out what the problem was for me: it wasn't engaging my will. When there are people all around you worshipping, it's easy to join in. But when you don't really see them or hear them, there is less of this spirit flowing from person to person.

Did you ever notice that there is a big difference in meditating on a psalm and on, say, a complicated passage from one of Paul's letters? In the latter, your mind is engaged, trying to

figure out what in the world Paul was trying to say. And if you figure it out, generally it's very deep.

In the psalm, it's like "Praise the Lord. Praise Him in his sanctuary." You've heard it before hundreds of times. There is nothing to engage the mind. The mind complains of its boredom. To get something out of the psalm, you have to engage the *will*. You can't just say "praise the Lord"; you have to, you know, *praise the Lord*.

The life of prayer starts with meditation. You think about the life of Jesus. You read a good book. You ponder a passage of scripture. Hopefully you find it engaging enough to move your will, to increase your love, but it may take a lot of time and effort in the beginning.

There was a time long ago when it seems to me that my prayer life changed in character. It had been a process of forming words in the mind, long, carefully crafted sentences explaining things to God, asking for what I think I need, maybe thanking God for the beauty of nature or his providential care. For some reason, it most frequently concerned bodily illness.

Then it sank. It descended from the head to the heart. Sentences became shorter. Words became fewer. Desires became stronger. Sometimes it became just a word—Lord! Save!—or no words at all.

I confess: *voluntation* is not a word. I made it up. But I think it ought to be. Think of it as being like *meditation*, but with the will rather than reason. Allowing your heart to be moved. Chewing on something in love. Exercising your will. Worshiping in spirit as well as in truth. *Looking and loving*.

I find zoom worship to be engaging again as I *voluntate* on the words of the liturgy or sermon or song. I *pray* the words as I think about what they mean. It is in this *love* that worship is engaging and satisfying and edifying and joyful. It is in this love that God is apprehended.

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* says in various ways that God is known not through reason but through love. Here is one of the more expansive ones:

*Now all rational creatures, angels and [people] alike, have in them, each one individually, one chief working power, which is called a knowing power, and another chief working power called a loving power; and of these two powers, God, who is the maker of them, is incomprehensible to the first, the knowing power. But to the second, which is the loving power, he is entirely comprehensible to each one individually; in so much that one loving soul of itself, because of love, would be able to comprehend him who is entirely sufficient, and much more so, without limit, to fill all the souls of [people] and angels that could ever exist. This is the everlastingly wonderful miracle of love, which shall never have an end. For he shall ever work it, and never cease to do so. Let [them] understand it who can do so by grace; for the experience of this is endless happiness, and its contrary is endless suffering.<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>16</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Paulist Press, 1981, chapter III, p. 123.

The miracle of love: that through it we can comprehend the incomprehensible, contain the infinite, participate in divinity.

Jesus himself puts it more succinctly: “those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” (John 14:21)

Or again, “blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (Matthew 5:8)

*Every day, pray for more love, that Jesus may reveal himself to you.*

## 100. The resurrection



Read [1 Corinthians 15](#).

The resurrection.

How can you say anything about the resurrection? It's too big a topic. It's like, "say a little about life." Or "give me a little meditation on the nature of God." Or maybe "what is reality?"

The resurrection is the central, defining fact of our lives.

If the dead were not raised, think how differently you would live your life. Your goal would be happiness here. Your concern would be the preservation of this body of flesh and blood. Your desire would be to enjoy life here to the fullest. Much like most of the world, I suppose.

If the dead were not raised, you would still be in your sin. You would be seeking yourself in all things. Your advantage. Your pleasure. Your honor. You would be the measure of all things. Kind of like most of the world, I suppose.

If the dead were not raised, Jesus would not be raised. Love would have failed to prevail over the devil. God would be dead. You would believe the world to be a purposeless, directionless, chance occurrence. Sort of like most of the world, I suppose.

But Jesus *is* raised. Night is done and the sun has risen. Welcome to the day, in which the sun of righteousness gives light to the whole world, illuminating all the dark places.

Jesus *is* raised. The trumpet has sounded, the dead are raised incorruptible. We are changed.

Jesus *is* raised. The *world* is changed. Jesus ascends into heaven, and he draws the world along with him.

Today, rejoice in spring—in the sun, in the budding of new life.

Today, rejoice in the resurrection—in new life, spiritual life, the life of the world to come.

Today, rejoice in the new world—in the purpose of all that happens, in the salvation of the world, and especially of those who believe, in the growth of love.

*O death, where is your sting?*

Watch: [The Trumpet shall Sound](#), from Handel's Messiah

## 101. Intuition



Read [John 14](#).

*They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.*  
(John 14:21)

What does Jesus mean by saying that he will reveal himself to those who love him?

Thomas Merton writes,

*In the strict sense of the word, contemplation is a supernatural love and knowledge of God, simple and obscure, infused by Him into the summit of the soul, giving it a direct and experimental contact with Him.*

*Mystical contemplation is an intuition of God born of pure love. It is a gift of God that absolutely transcends all the natural capacities of the soul and which no [one] can acquire by any effort of [their] own. But God gives it to the soul in proportion as the soul is clean and emptied of all affections for things outside of Himself. In other words, God is manifesting Himself, according to the promise of Christ, to those who love Him.*

*Yet the love with which they love Him is also His gift; we only love Him because He first loved us....*

*But the thing that must be stressed is that contemplation is itself a development and a perfection of pure charity. [One] who loves God realizes that the greatest joy, the perfection of beatitude is to love God and to renounce all things for the sake of God alone—for the sake of love alone because God Himself is love. Contemplation is an intellectual experience of the fact that God is infinite love, that He has given Himself to us, and that from henceforth love is all that matters.<sup>17</sup>*

I love that word *intuition* in this context. If *tuition* is teaching, maybe intuition is teaching inside you. God himself puts knowledge of himself directly inside you. Contemplation is *knowing God* because *he reveals himself to you*. This is not knowledge you may have heard or read somewhere and internalized. This is not knowledge you come to by thinking hard and figuring things out and reaching some conclusions. This may not even be knowledge for which you have suitable concepts and words. This is *intuition*.

And this intuition is directly tied or related to love. It comes through love. It is *of* love. It *is* love. To love God is to know him, and to love him perfectly is to know him perfectly, to be one with him. And to be one with him is to love the world the way he does—to love your neighbor as yourself. This is the perfection of joy and beatitude.

But this is not where we start, or where we are now. This love must *be born* and *grow*. Childbirth is not all sweetness and light—it is very painful. Or so I have heard. Seeing God is death. As we see God's holiness and majesty, as we see ourselves, we are humiliated. Undone. Mortified.

As your love of God grows, you will feel an increasing desire to renounce all things for the sake of God alone. As your love of God grows, love of other things fades. Riches? Pffft. A good reputation? Bzzz. Entertainment? Yaaawn. A comfortable, easy life? No—"I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering, becoming like him in death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead."

The resurrection of the dead, and life everlasting. Loving God.

*Every day, pray for more love, that you may suffer and die with Christ and attain to the resurrection of the dead.*

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<sup>17</sup> *What is Contemplation?*, Thomas Merton, Templegate Publishers, 1981, pp. 38-39.

## 102. No one who abides in him sins



Read [1 John 1–3](#).

*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)*

*No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.  
(3:6)*

OK, this is confusing. John says, “if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us,” and then he proclaims that “no one who abides in him sins.” Um, John, did you forget what you just said on the previous page?

Paul says that the good that he wishes to do he does not do, and the evil that he would avoid, that he does. “Who will save me from this body of death?” Who’s in control of your actions, there, Paul, if not you?

Peter says, “you’ll never wash my feet.” After Jesus replies, “if I don’t wash your feet, you have no part with me,” Peter says “wash not just my feet but my whole self.” To that Jesus replies, “you are already clean. You just need to have the dust of the road washed off your feet.” So which is it, is Peter clean, or not?

Jesus himself, in the Garden of Gethsemane, prays that the cup be taken from him. But then he takes it back and says “your will be done.” Do you want to drink the cup, or not?

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How do you answer when someone asks you to introduce yourself? We define ourselves in many ways—what we do, who we are related to, what we know, what we have, what people think of us. (Most of the ways we define ourselves seem to be designed to make others think well of us.) A colleague, James K. A. Smith, recently wrote a book entitled [You Are What You Love](#). In it, he draws our attention back toward what we love as the deepest indication of who we are. And he points out that we may not love what we think we love. We say we want to lose weight, but when push comes to shove, we eat that donut. We say we love our neighbors, but we spend most of our money on ourselves. We say we love God, but most of what we do serves self.

What we love is of course what is in our hearts—our affections. And the affections are “the mainspring of the will,” according to Jonathan Edwards. What we love (not what we *say* we love, not even what we *wish* we loved) drives what we do.

Is it possible that what we love is not what we *want* to love? Or is that an absurd infinite regress? Do we *want* to love what we want to love?

~ ~ ~

It’s pretty clear that there are different parts of us with different desires. Paul names the flesh and the spirit. And then there is the Holy Spirit, whom we have been given. How do all of these different wills, these different loves, interact? God doesn’t override our will, and yet he certainly breathes into it. When we pray for more love, he warms the heart. Maybe even sets it aflame. Who or what is it in me that is ultimately in charge?

It seems to me that the interaction of human and divine will, and of the various parts of the human will, and of the Spirit or the devils in us, is a very deep question getting at the nature of humanity, its distinction from divinity, the source of sin, the nature of salvation, union with God, and much else.

“Abandon yourself to God,” it sounds so easy, but it is in fact so very difficult, so costly, such a monumental miracle, that it requires the death of Jesus, with us following along. Can you truly and thoughtfully pray “your kingdom come, your will be done”?

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*Whoever says, “I have come to know him,” but does not obey his commandments, is a liar. (2:4)*

*Whoever says, “I abide in him,” ought to walk just as he walked. (2:6)*

*Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. (2:10)*

*Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.*

This is the nature of love: that we seek to please the one we love. We seek the good of the one we love. Love cannot be hidden. If someone loves another person, it's evident to all. The lover is attentive and considerate. They rejoice when the loved one rejoices and they cry when the loved one cries. They try to please the loved one.

So it is with God. When someone loves God it can't be hidden. They organize their whole lives around pleasing God. They obey his commandments. It is in the *actions* that *actual* love is expressed. Sin is the very definition of *not* actually loving God.

If a lover cheats on his beloved, well, his love was obviously defective.

*Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.*

*But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (2:1-2)*

When this love is in ascendancy, when it rules the roost, when we *abide in Christ*, considered, intentional sin is not possible, just as cheating on one you truly love is not possible. However, sometimes we aren't aware of what we are doing. The sin and the awareness that we are sinning come at about the same time. We do what we did not want to do. We immediately repent. Our culpability is minor—though we should have been aware of what we were doing. *Watch and pray, that you do not fall into sin.*

If we are aware that we are considering doing something that we are aware God doesn't want us to do, and if we decide to do it anyway, that is a very grave matter that shows that we don't actually love God. I hope the 30 pieces of silver were worth it. But even then, if we repent, Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. (3:1-3)*

If we desire and determine not to offend the one we love, we are children of God *now*. We desire and intend not to sin. There is a part of us that does not consent to sin, even if we fall

into sin through inattention or weakness. We are clean; we just need to have the dust of the road washed off of our feet.

*Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever. (2:15-17)*

And yet so much remains to do and to correct. We do not yet love God purely, with our whole hearts. There are parts of our hearts that still love the things of the world. Fortunately, God is willing to afflict us with all sorts of strange and wonderful forms of suffering that root these desires out of us.

*As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him. (2:27)*

As these foreign loves are rooted out, as your love for God gains ascendancy, as you are more and more led by the Spirit of Christ, he will teach you all things. When our love is pure and unclouded, it perceives the things of God. It has a hold on God. It *captures* God. It becomes *like* God. God gives it whatever it asks for in prayer.

Abide in Christ.

*Every day, pray for more love, that you may abide in Christ.*

*Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.*

## 103. Hope and childhood and purity and secrets and love and faith and hope



*Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. (1 John 3:2-3)*

"Like God." That's an audacious claim. Absurdly so? Will we be omnipotent and omniscient? What can you do with such a claim? Water it down? "I'm like God because we both have a 'g' in our names." But even "like God" isn't a big enough claim for John. According to John, that's what we know *now*. What we will be has not yet been revealed.

It seems to me that one of the great weaknesses of Christianity in this time and place is a lack of hope. How, exactly, do you hope and expect to be different in ten years from how you are today? Realistically, do you figure you'll be about the same? Live your life faithfully, do your best to serve God according to your current practices, and when you die he'll overlook your flaws and lacks and sins, seeing instead Jesus' righteousness?

That's not hope speaking. It's complacency. Or lukewarmness. That attitude won't win any races, or lead to seeing God, let alone becoming like him. Where is the hope in God's power to transform here and now? What kind of gifts would an omnipotent and omniscient great giver of gifts give?

Fortunately there is a test for hope. Test yourself: according to John, if you have this hope, you are doing all you can to purify yourself. This goal drives you. You consider what goes on inside you. You look for ways in which you can improve. You may feel the need to add practices of self-control to your life, like watching and praying and fasting. Your biggest fear is that you will fail the one that you love—though in your heart of hearts, you trust that he will carry you safely.

*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. (1 John 3:16-20)*

Unfortunately, what we can do to purify ourselves is not enough. We see that we fall short. I expect that none of us have yet laid down our lives for others. But, fortunately, there is also a test for love. Test yourself: do you in fact help when you see a brother or sister in need? Of course you do. How could you refuse if God’s love abides in you? Look at the Spirit in you. Look at the *love* in you. You do in fact seek the good of your brothers and sisters.

If our hearts condemn us, we look at our actions. By this we know that we are from the truth. And God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

*Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. (1 John 3:17-24)*

God commands that we should love one another and that we should believe in the name of his son Jesus Christ. We live in him and he lives in us. But how can we know if we are “abiding in him”?

Fortunately, there is a test for faith: we have boldness before God. We obey his commandments. We do what pleases him. We receive whatever we ask for in prayer. We know that his Spirit lives in us.

Well, that’s the hope. But we have faith in what love accomplishes.

## 104. Youth soccer



Read [John 15:9-17](#)

*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. (John 15:12-15)*

Are there *levels* in Christianity? Can you level up as in a video game? Are there graduation ceremonies and opening convocations? Are there different leagues? Are there *servants* and *friends* and *children*?

Although the traditional big three sports in this country are baseball, basketball, and (American) football, the sport that has the largest number of participants is soccer. There are rec leagues and select leagues and traveling teams that may drive an hour or two for games. There are regional and national leagues, where kids and their parents may fly each weekend for another national tournament. There is soccer in middle school and high school and university. There are lower- and higher-level pro leagues. Then there is international soccer.

Each league is way smaller than the last one. Maybe there are 1,000,000 American kids who play high school soccer, 100,000 who play soccer in college or university, 10,000 who play

lower-level semipro or pro soccer, 1,000 who play in the MLS, and 100 who play international soccer. Just to make up some numbers.

Of course, the vast majority of soccer players play in rec leagues. These are casual, fun leagues that aren't very competitive. The games are recreational. I used to enjoy watching 5-year-olds play soccer in the city rec league in the park across the street from my apartment. There would be a crowd of kids following the ball around, swinging their feet. When one of them connected with the ball, the ball would move and the crowd would follow to the new location. Meanwhile, the goalies would be sitting in the grass, maybe looking the other way or playing with a bug they found in the dirt, enjoying being outside.

Occasionally there would be a kid who could control the ball a bit. He would kick the ball to the side of the crowd, chase it down, kick it again behind the crowd, chase it down again, and kick it in the goal past the keeper who was looking the other way. He might score several goals in a game.

A kid like that might graduate to a select team, a team where players have to try out, where there are coaches and uniforms and practices and games against other select teams. He would go from being the big star to the worst player on the team. But he would practice and improve. Eventually, if he practiced enough, he might graduate from that team to a premiere team.

Typically, what differentiated a kid like that from the rest of the team is that he would practice. He actually took a few minutes each day to kick a ball around. Maybe he had an older brother who would kick it around with him.

And why did he practice? He had seen his brother play in higher leagues. He saw soccer at the local university, with cheering crowds. He saw soccer on TV. And he wanted to be one of those players. He thought he could make it if he tried hard enough. He had desire. He had *hope*.

Hope is not just a feeling. The feeling of hope is only true hope if it spills out into *practice*. Just as the feeling of love is only true love when it spills out into helping your brother or sister in need. "All those who have hope purify themselves."

I sometimes wonder whether the large majority of Christians are in the Christian rec league. Christianity is a social thing, an activity, entertainment. But the bug in the dirt is often more interesting. They don't actually practice apart from going to games. They don't set aside time each day to *pray*. They don't have *hope* of being transformed to be like God. They follow the crowd.

Do you have hope? There is a test. If you have hope, you practice. You set aside time each day to pray, or to read a good book, or to read through the Bible, or to think about the life of Jesus and how that compares to your own life. And if it's difficult, you keep practicing. Maybe you join a team with a coach who can instruct you and give you drills and check up on whether you are practicing. Or *maybe*, if you're serious about it, you find an individual coach.

Or maybe, like most, you just prefer to play in the dirt and follow the crowd.



## 105. The Select League



Read [John 17:6-19](#)

*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:17)*

*As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. (John 17:21-22)*

The Christian life is a process of sanctification. It is progress. It is drawing closer to God, becoming one with each other and one with him. Where there is no progress, there is stagnation and ossification. A valley of dry bones. There is death.

There are many schemes that divide progress in the Christian life into typical stages or steps on a stairway or rungs on a ladder. Jesus himself says to his disciples at one point that he no longer calls them servants, who obey for payment or to avoid punishment, but friends, who obey for love. In John Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, there are 30 rungs, many of which are virtues that must be acquired or gifts that are given. Richard of St. Victor identifies twelve stages of prayer with the twelve patriarchs. Thomas Merton's most famous work is *The Seven Storey Mountain*. To mix up a nice a metaphor. In [Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle](#), there are seven mansions, or apartments, corresponding largely to stages in the life of prayer.

Of course, no such scheme is complete or definitive or even necessarily followed in order. They serve to organize the general stages through which many pass, but every path is unique and circuitous. Moving back and forth and all around. Some paths are far apart from each other and hardly ever intersect until they get close to the end.

Teresa compares the life of prayer to a great and beautiful castle made of crystal. The castle is organized like a palmetto, or maybe like an onion—not that it stinks and makes people cry but that it has *layers*. Each layer is made up of many rooms or mansions. People move around from room to room in a layer, left and right, up and down, experiencing different types of prayer. God himself is in the innermost mansion, the seventh, making it light and glorious, but very little light from that innermost mansion reaches all the way to the outer layer—the light is blocked by all of the snakes and lizards and bugs that have found their way into the outer layers.

Then too, if there are layers, there must be transitions between layers. Occasionally people move inward from one layer to the next. Or they move back outward. Conversions or metamorphoses, perhaps, transitions from larva to caterpillar to butterfly. Seven mansions, seven conversions. Seven initiations into seven different soccer leagues.

We won't talk much here about the kids who don't play soccer at all. But once in a while such kids see the camaraderie of the teams, the cheering parents and grandparents, the fun they are having, the running around outdoors in the sun, and they decide they want to join a team. Maybe they join a team on which they have friends. But they publicly sign up and pay the fee and agree to come to games. Perhaps they are baptized or confirmed or publicly profess their faith. They are soccer players. They have joined the rec league.

Of course, in this league there isn't actually that much, well, *soccer*. There is kicking the ball around and having a good time. Kids skip games to watch a favorite TV show or drop off teams entirely and stop being soccer players. Maybe they rejoin a different team later, or take up a different sport. Games are more about running around in the sun and enjoying fellowship than high-quality soccer. There are too many distractions to pay much attention to the soccer itself—there are the interesting bugs in the dirt and the gossip to share with a friend and the feeling of being on a team. But on the team there are good conversations and singing and social activities and hanging out with friends and treats and picnics and even some sermons. There is some small amount of prayer, in church services, perhaps, or while singing songs or before meals. Or when someone is sick. But there is little visible progress.

These players need knowledge of God and of self. They need to know what beautiful soccer looks like and how bad at it they actually are. They need to go to a few high-level games and watch. Hear some commentary. Honestly consider their own level of play. Those who are truly attracted to *soccer*, those who love the game, those who have hope of becoming a better player, practice and learn and grow. They transfer to a select team.

This second conversion occurs when players decide that they love the game and they want to improve. Their love for God leads them to want to learn more about him, to do what he would have them do, to try to please him. Instead of obeying for reward or to avoid punishment or to

fit in with the crowd they start to obey for love. They go to church regularly, attend bible studies or prayer groups, read good books. They set aside time for prayer and stick to it. Occasionally they try to do good deeds, to serve others. These are good, faithful Christians who love God and are striving to grow.

They start to grow and develop, and this, of course, pleases God greatly. He encourages and supports them by giving them happy thoughts and sweet feelings. Milk. They *enjoy* getting up earlier than everyone else, getting a cup of coffee, and meditating on a devotional book. They don't realize he is supporting them—God remains hidden to them. They just think they have found a really excellent book and they are enjoying it. They'd probably enjoy reading the dictionary just as much if God were encouraging them in this way. And yet they are practicing and building strength and actually learning to play the game.

Nevertheless they are still full of self. They may think of themselves as better than most other Christians. They are more inclined to see sin in others than in themselves. They thank God that they are not like that tax collector over there. They may judge certain sins found in others severely while giving themselves a pass on sins they consider less important. They are still attached to the world: any threat to their wealth or honor will make them angry or rash.

They may also feel that they have earned some kind of reward from God. If a loved one suffers, they get angry with God. If they pray and don't get what they want, they get annoyed and may even turn away from God. They see injustice or suffering in the world, they can't understand why God would allow it, and the seeds of doubt are sown.

What select-league players need most is courage and perseverance. Hope. As the sweet, fun times and treats of rec league soccer give way to hard drills and submitting to the coach and discipline, as milk gives way to solid food, some lose hope/motivation and just do the minimum necessary, or even go back to the rec league. Others accept the yoke and find it light and grow and thrive.

## 106. The work of the Holy Spirit



Read [John 16:4b-15](#).

*And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. (John 16:8-11)*

*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but he will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:12-15)*

How does the Holy Spirit *work*? What does he do? How do you know if he is at work in you? Jesus tells all in John 16.

He comes to prove the world wrong. To upset the applecart. To throw the merchants out of the temple. To judge. To stir up the complacent. To pacify the overheated. To guide and speak and declare. To share all that the Father has. To glorify. To set the world on fire.

Surely 'the world' includes non-believers, and no doubt there is a good interpretation of verses 8-11 involving non-believers. But surely 'the world' also includes believers, some in the church. In fact, isn't everyone in the church also in the world? The Holy Spirit comes to prove the worldly church wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.

"Wrong about sin: because they do not believe in me." They believe that sin is inevitable, that perfection is heresy, that anyone who claims to be without sin is a liar. John, well, John says that too, but he also asserts that no one who abides in Christ can sin. Jesus has proven that perfection is possible, and he gives us his Spirit *now*.

"Wrong about righteousness: because I am going to the Father and you will no longer see me." They say that we will finally be righteous when we see him face to face, when our sins are forgiven. Jesus says, I am going to the Father *now*. I give you my Spirit, the Spirit of righteousness, *now*. I give you glory and radiance *now*. Wait for it in Jerusalem. Gather and pray.

"Wrong about judgment: because the ruler of this world has been condemned." *Already*. Judgment was and is and is to come. Judgment is eternal. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of judgment. He throws down and builds up. He sets the world on fire. I send him to judge the world *now*.

He comes to guide you into all truth. Do you know how you should live, how you can overcome sin? Do you know how God works in the world? Do you know God himself? He will whisper in your heart about what was, and is, and is to come.

The Holy Spirit remains hidden for a time even though he is already at work. You may not see him or hear him distinctly. And yet his work is not hidden. You can see it in your conscience telling you when you are off the narrow path. You can see it in the abhorrence you feel toward the idea of stealing or cheating or killing. You can see it in your wonder at the glory of God and the crushing weight you feel when you become aware of who and what you are. You can see it in the fear you feel about turning back or letting down the one you love.

There will come a day when the Holy Spirit is no longer hidden to you. There may be tongues of fire or tongues of other peoples. There may be gifts of discernment or prophecy or healing. You may be given words to speak and power to speak them with. There will be fruit. You may be carried away into the third heaven. Head back to Jerusalem, and wait there for the Spirit.

Over time, as you can bear it, the Holy Spirit will take what is Jesus', his knowledge and wisdom and love, his life, his glory, and declare them to you. Every day pray for more of the Spirit of love.

## 107. The Premiere League



Read [Romans 8:12-17](#).

*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:14-17)*

While the rec league is populated by players who don't really practice, the select league has players who strive to improve. They do drills and run laps. And yet the motivation is mainly the fun times and camaraderie and the treats they receive. What happens when the drills get tough and the games brutal?

The sweet milk that God gives in prayer and meditation eventually gives way to solid food. Dryness. Suffering. Unanswered prayer and a God who seems to be missing in action. Maybe there is a crisis in the external events of life that puts them at odds with God. Or maybe the problems are internal—nothing seems to go as smoothly and pleasantly as it did. As though the workings have run out of oil for lubrication.

They sit to pray and meditate on a good book and find that meditation is impossible. The very idea is repellant. They may go through the motions—something inside still drives them—but it

seems as though they are just going through the motions. At the same time, they lose interest in the rest of the world as well—old pleasures no longer please. The world turns gray.

This state may go on and on. And on. Weeks. Maybe years. How will they respond? How will they handle the sufferings of life and the absence of God? Some will turn back and give up on prayer. Others persevere in suffering and in dryness. They prove that they serve God for his own sake and not for the sake of the gifts they are given. It is these who are willing to take up the cross, and taking up the cross is the third conversion. They enter the Premiere League. They become tested Christians. Mature. Elders.

This suffering and dryness have many beneficial effects, even if the effects are not immediately apparent. Selfishness is restrained and diminished—though deep roots of self remain. Suffering builds compassion for the suffering of others. Failure make them more forgiving of failures in others. They see what they are in the absence of God's help and humility grows.

Eventually this dryness gives way to deeper prayer that reaches the will more readily and brings many virtues. They long to be able to stop offending God. They guard against sin, watching what they do and think. They try to use their time well, eliminating unhelpful things from their lives. They take up practices such as fasting in an effort to kill self. They practice moderation in speech and dress and consumption and other areas of life.

They start to see the benefits of suffering, of the cross. They start to understand and believe that all things work together for their good. They start to desire such suffering for the benefits it brings—as long as it is not too much.

Although sin and self are restrained, these Christians are still weak. They may fall into sin that is visible to others, though they repent when they become aware of it. There are still deep roots of self that may manifest in anger when possessions or honor are threatened.

For them, prayer is the best part of the day. While God is still mostly hidden to them, the effects he leaves in the soul are obvious. There may occasionally be deeper experiences of prayer that serve to strengthen them or as invitations for them to press on and go deeper.

How deep are they willing to go? How much are they willing to suffer? How much courage do they have? How ready and willing and quick are they to obey when obedience is costly and painful? When they hear that to be perfect, they must sell all, will they turn away in sorrow? What these Christians need is to allow themselves to be led by the Spirit of God, to become children of God.

## 108. The National League



Read [Mark 10:17-22](#)

*Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” (Mark 17:21)*

Players in the third league, the Premiere League, train hard and play hard. They are willing to suffer the pain that it takes to gain in ability. They have been chosen by their coaches to join elite teams. And yet most are not completely dedicated to soccer alone. There are aspects of their lives apart from soccer into which they put time and effort. Good things. There are friends and activities. There is schoolwork. They aren’t willing to give entire weekends to travel all over the country for games and tournaments, to spend all the money that it takes, to give all of their lives over to soccer. But there are some who do want to go all in, and if they are chosen, they join a team in the National League.

Tested, mature Christians who have taken up the cross may still not have given *all* to Christ. They retain control over their wills. If God gives a command, there is another step that must take place before it is done: they decide whether they will obey. They think about where they would like to go and what they would like to do rather than what God would have them do. They think about how they would like to serve God rather than how God would have them serve. They think first about their own needs and desires rather than God’s. “I think I would like

a bowl of ice cream” vs “What should I eat in order to serve God best?” It is this deep root of self-will that must now go.

In the fourth conversion, Jesus asks us to sell all and follow him. Some will turn away in sorrow. Others intend to surrender themselves entirely to God. Of course, it takes much more than a one-time decision to pull out self-will by the root. It is something that only God can accomplish. It takes much training and suffering. But they give God permission, even more, they beg God to help them die to self and live for him.

These have entered the National League. They are still youth—still beginners—but they are all in. They have given the coach the green light to do whatever it takes to make them excel. They follow implicitly. They are always training. They make obvious, rapid progress.

In this fourth league, God often starts to show himself more overtly. He starts to act in more obvious ways, ways that leave little room for doubt that it is he. He teaches and inspires. According to St. Teresa of Avila, the fourth mansions are the beginning of “supernatural” prayer.<sup>18</sup> According to Thomas Merton, “God is the principal agent who infuses [this prayer] into the soul and who, by this means, takes possession of the soul’s faculties and moves them directly according to his will.”<sup>19</sup>

To this point, prayer involved activity. Perhaps it was reading a good book or a passage from the Bible, thinking how it applies to me and my life, and loving God. Perhaps it was thinking about the life of Christ, how he lived and served and obeyed and died and rose, the beauty of his life, and loving God. Perhaps it was thinking about the needs of others, and praying for them, and loving them, and serving them, and loving God. Perhaps it was dealing with some great life crisis, struggling with God, fighting with him over the outcome, and coming to love him. In any case, it involved actively turning toward God in the mind, thinking about God, and engaging the will, loving God, with God’s hidden help.

In this fourth league, God himself breathes into the spirit. He himself moves the will, filling it with love, or sorrow and weeping for sin, or peace that passes understanding, or joy and elation, or burning desire, or fear of failing him, or wonder at his wisdom and his works. Some of these sound like emotions, but they are not first of all that. God is at the center of the soul, and his work originates there and moves outward. These are deep inspirations of the will that may be so strong that they boil over into the mind, or into emotions such as weeping, or jumping for joy, or utter humiliation, or an overwhelming feeling of love. These are gifts of life and of truth and of love, gifts that Satan cannot and would not imitate.

He starts to answer prayer in an obvious way. Oh! You had better be careful what you ask for! He starts to teach the soul things it has no natural way of knowing, knowledge that seems to spring up out of love rather than reason. He starts to give gifts of the Spirit, gifts of wisdom, or knowledge, or healing, or miracles, or prophecy, or discernment, or tongues.

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<sup>18</sup> *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. 2, Tr. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1980, p. 316f.

<sup>19</sup> *What is Contemplation*, Thomas Merton, Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1981, p. 25.

Many are not led by this path, and that's fine—it is not required of all Christians. There are other paths. Perhaps they are temperamentally not suited for this path. Maybe the demands of life don't leave enough time for solitude and prayer. Perhaps they will do better in serving others, showing compassion, raising a family. Activity can also lead to sanctity, perhaps even greater sanctity. St. Teresa of Calcutta, who dedicated her life to serving the poorest of the poor, in the last several decades of her life felt an almost complete absence of God. Yet she served with her whole life, founded religious orders, and changed the world. There is time enough after death for seeing Christ.

Of course, these gifts are not given purely for the enjoyment of the recipient. They equip and strengthen for service. As love of God grows, so does love of neighbor. As service to God grows, so does service to neighbor. Following Christ means following his life of service and suffering, and death, and resurrection. And fruit. And glorification—treasure in heaven. A river keeps flowing until it rejoins the ocean.

## 109. Prayer of the Spirit



Read [Romans 8:18-30](#).

*The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. (Romans 8:26)*

Is your prayer a long discourse in which you explain to God all the things that you want, or is it a two-way conversation with a friend? Is your mind at work, thinking about your needs and the needs of others, or is it an exercise of will, in which there are no clear chains of reason but you love God and trust him and seek his will? Is your prayer subject to many distractions and diversions, or are you swept away in love? Do you direct the topic under consideration, or does God lead the conversation? Is your imagination active, presenting you many images and thoughts, or is there solitude and silence and peace? Or a fire of love?

The prayer characteristic of this fourth league, or mansions, may be called prayer of the Spirit, because the Spirit prays with sighs too deep for words in those who practice this prayer. The soul no longer knows what to pray for—God is too wise and loving and mighty to need our instruction. Instead, the Spirit takes the lead, breathing into the will. In this prayer, self-will is

quiet. Instead, there are desires—sighs—for knowing God, for a thousand tongues to sing his praise, for the conquering of self for the sake of God’s glory, for the salvation of the world.

Those who practice this prayer are no longer in control of prayer time. Prayer is something that happens to them. They observe. They listen. They sit quietly in God’s presence. They experience prayer. They may experience ecstatic love or cloudy confusion or bitter sorrow or intense pain of longing for God. God’s breathing into the will is characteristic of this prayer, but as it progresses, he may quiet the mind, or still the senses, or entirely sweep away the one who practices this prayer.

There are several other names that would be suitable for this prayer:<sup>20</sup>

- *Concealment*: because God hides in the secret recesses of the heart of those who practice this prayer, to keep them from becoming proud
  - They who are most humbled are most securely in this hidden place
  - And yet, although God continues to hide himself, he starts to reveal himself through his actions within and the gifts he leaves behind
- *Abstinence*: because those who practice this prayer must abstain from sin and impurity, and from much thought and reasoning, and even from human loves and legitimate consolations from creatures—all that would rob them of loving attentiveness to God
- *Consent*: because they consent to all God’s wishes and vanquish contradiction and rebellion within themselves
- *Recollection*: because they re-collect their scattered thoughts and desires and center them on God
- *Listening*: because in this prayer they shut the door to the rest of the world, and to their own thoughts and desires, and attend to God in love as though listening intently for his voice or action within
- *Drawing near*: because through this prayer they approach God and God receives them and grants them favors
- *Enkindling*: because the torches of their hearts are lit by the love of God
- *Attraction*: because their hearts, emptied of worldly things, attract God to occupy them and supply their needs
- *Adoption*: because they subject themselves to God as a child and God cares for them as Father

In the end, all one can do is *prepare* for prayer of the Spirit, not *practice* it—it is God who finally shuts the door to the world, who mutes the mind, who silences the senses, who breathes into the spirit, who is present with us. And yet there is a preparation for this prayer that we *can* practice. We can do whatever we can do to consent to God, to close the door to the world, to empty our hearts of foreign loves, to enkindle love of God, to wait in the city of peace for the Holy Spirit. God will not hide himself forever from those who seek him.

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<sup>20</sup> Adapted from Osuna, *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, Paulist Press, 1981, pp. 165-167.

## 110. The road ahead



Read [2 Corinthians 6:1-13](#) and [Mark 4:35-41](#).

*See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! . . . open wide your hearts. (2 Corinthians 6:2, 13)*

*He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. (Mark 4:39)*

Beyond the various leagues of youth soccer there are several additional leagues, pro leagues. Teresa identifies three more mansions, leading up to spiritual marriage. If you want to hear more about them, go read the [Interior Castle](#). But as for you: pray. Meditate. Deny yourself. Take up the cross. Listen to Jesus' instruction. Follow. Persevere. If you have submitted yourself as a child, God will care for you as Father.

Your prayer and meditation will take many forms and vary from day to day and hour to hour. At times you may be overwhelmed. At other times you may be lost in the desert, utterly without water. But when you feel devotion in yourself quieting your heart and mind,

- Shut the door to your room
- Remember your love of God and your commitment to him

- Quiet your body and mind and heart
- Speak no words, even of love
- Attend completely to God
- Embrace God with one desire

Peace. Be still and know *I am*.

If you can, carry this spirit of peace and of desire with you throughout the day. The needs of the day will battle against your peace. When your peace has almost expired, go back to your room to heal and recharge, preparing for another battle of peace. In this way you can spread peace around you. Blessed are the peacemakers.

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Some people get nervous about listening in prayer. What if I am listening to the wrong voice? Will I go off the deep end? Will I no longer have control over myself? But the notion that *not* listening is safer is an illusion. Everyone is listening to *something*. The world is *always* the wrong voice to listen to. And if you are constantly talking, you can only listen to yourself. That is also the wrong voice. Will you trust those around you more than you trust God himself? The Israelites insisted on having Moses speak to them because God was too frightening—but they went astray.

There is some desire that drives every person, for each one a goal they are seeking. Let it be a worthy goal. The only worthy goal. Only Jesus leads safely through the valley of the shadow of death. His sheep know his voice. All mortal flesh must keep silence to hear it, with fear and trembling draw near.

Your fear of listening is actually the resistance of the flesh to submission to God—the self saying “I insist on remaining in control of myself!” If you want to know Christ, if you want to hear him speak, you must conquer your fear and *listen* to him. To help conquer fear you can get advice from someone on the same road. Just ask.

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It is a long road that goes through many lands. Over the hour, over the days, over the years, you must persevere. When God is hidden, when you are in the desert, keep going. When God is near, when you think you have arrived, continue on the way. When God tests you, do your best to struggle on. When God doesn’t seem to be testing you at all, when you wonder if he still loves you, even then you must persevere. Many turn back.

There are hardships along this road. Weariness, hunger, rough places, robbers. There are also beautiful vistas and places where you can rest and be fed and refreshed. You will pass over mountains and through valleys, beside lakes and through deserts. If you want to reach the goal, there is nothing for it but to keep walking.

Now is the acceptable time. Open wide your heart.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you. The Lord give you peace.