

# The Cloud of Unknowing: Translation and Commentary by ChatGPT-4

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Human Editor's Note: I have here asked ChatGPT-4 to adapt the (nonspecific) persona and perspective of a careful Christian scholar, familiar with Christian mysticism and the history of theology in all branches of the church; and to from that viewpoint write a modern translation of the original text, and commentary starting from the first chapter. Apart from what it has learned or memorized in the course of its training, the AI has context for only a part of the text at a time, usually a chapter or part of a chapter, or two short, and comments accordingly.

I have edited the text for consistent formatting, chapter names and one clear typo, and not otherwise.

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This begins a book of contemplation, called "The Cloud of Unknowing", in which a soul is united with God.

## Prayer for the Prologue

God, to whom all hearts are open, to whom every will speaks, and from whom no secret thing is hidden: I beseech You to cleanse the intent of my heart with the indescribable gift of Your grace, that I may perfectly love You and worthily praise You. Amen.

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## Here begins a table of the chapters.

Chapter 1. On the four stages of Christian living, and the journey of one's calling to which this book was made.

Chapter 2. A brief encouragement towards humility and the work of this book.

Chapter 3. How the work of this book should be performed, and of its worthiness above all other works.

Chapter 4. On the brevity of this work, and how it cannot be reached by the curiosity of wit or by imagination.

Chapter 5. That during the time of this work, all the creatures that ever have been, are now, or ever will be, and all the works of those same creatures, should be hidden under the cloud of forgetting.

Chapter 6. A brief understanding of the work of this book, treated by question.

Chapter 7. How one should act in this work against all thoughts, especially those that arise from one's own curiosity of knowledge and natural wit.

Chapter 8. A clear explanation of certain doubts that may arise in this work, treated by question: in the destruction of a man's own curiosity of knowledge and of natural wit; and in distinguishing the degrees and parts of active living and contemplative.

Chapter 9. That, during the time of this work, the mind of the holiest creature that God ever made hinders more than it helps.

Chapter 10. How a man should know when his thought is not a sin; and, if it is a sin, when it is deadly and when it is venial.

Chapter 11. That a man should consider each thought and each stirring according to what it is, and always avoid carelessness in venial sin.

Chapter 12. That by virtue of this work, sin is not only destroyed but also virtues are gained.

Chapter 13. What humility is in itself, and when it is perfect and when it is imperfect.

Chapter 14. That without imperfect humility coming before, it is impossible for a sinner to come to the perfect virtue of humility in this life.

Chapter 15. A brief proof against those who say that there is no better cause to be humble than is the consideration of one's own wretchedness.

Chapter 16. That by virtue of this work, a sinner truly turned and called to contemplation comes sooner to perfection than by any other work; and by it, he can soonest receive God's forgiveness of sins.

Chapter 17. That a true contemplative should not meddle with active life, or anything that is done or spoken about him, nor yet answer to his blamers in defense of himself.

Chapter 18. How even to this day all actives complain about contemplatives, as Martha did about Mary; of which complaining ignorance is the cause.

Chapter 19. A brief defense of the author of this book, teaching how all contemplatives should fully excuse all actives from their complaining words and deeds.

Chapter 20. How Almighty God will graciously answer for all those who, for the sake of excusing themselves, do not wish to leave the business of His love.

Chapter 21. The true exposition of this Gospel phrase: Mary has chosen the best part.

Chapter 22. On the wonderful love that Christ had for Mary, in person of all sinners truly turned and called to the grace of contemplation.

Chapter 23. How God will answer and provide in spirit for those who, for the business of His love, do not wish to answer or provide for themselves.

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Chapter 27. Who should engage in the gracious work described in this book.

Chapter 28. No one should presume to engage in this work until they have been cleansed in conscience of all their specific deeds of sin.

Chapter 29. That a person should persistently strive in this work, endure the pain thereof, and judge no one.

Chapter 30. Who should criticize and correct the faults of others.

Chapter 31. How one should prepare themselves at the beginning of this work to resist all thoughts and stirrings of sin.

Chapter 32. Of two spiritual strategies that are helpful to a spiritual beginner in the work of this book.

Chapter 33. That in this work a soul is cleansed both of its specific sins and the pain of them, and yet there is no perfect rest in this life.

Chapter 34. That God grants this grace freely without any intermediary, and it cannot be achieved through means.

Chapter 35. Of three means in which a contemplative apprentice should be engaged: in reading, thinking, and praying.

Chapter 36. Of the meditations of those who continuously labor in the work of this book.

Chapter 37. Of the specific prayers of those who are continuous workers in the work of this book.

Chapter 38. How and why short prayer pierces heaven.

Chapter 39. How a perfect worker shall pray, and what prayer is in itself; and if a man shall pray in words, which words then most closely correspond to the essence of prayer.

Chapter 40. That during the time of this work, a soul has no specific regard for any particular vice or virtue in itself.

Chapter 41. That in all other works beneath this, discretion should be maintained; but in this, none.

Chapter 42. That through lack of discretion in this, men shall maintain discretion in all other things; and surely not otherwise.

Chapter 43. That all knowledge and feeling of a man's own being must necessarily be lost if the perfection of this work is to be truly experienced by any soul in this life.

Chapter 44. How a soul should prepare itself to eliminate all knowledge and feeling of its own being.

Chapter 45. A clear explanation of some potential pitfalls that may occur in this work.

Chapter 46. A good teaching on how to avoid these pitfalls, and work more with a lightness of spirit than with any vigorousness of body.

Chapter 47. A subtle teaching on this work in the purity of spirit; explaining how a soul should express its desire to God and man in contrasting ways.

Chapter 48. How God wishes to be served with both body and soul, and will reward people in both; and how people should recognize when all the sounds and sweetness that occur in the body during prayer are both good and evil.

Chapter 49. The essence of all perfection is nothing but a good will; and how all sounds, comforts, and sweetness, that may occur in this life, are to it but as it were accidents.

Chapter 50. What is chaste love; and how in some creatures such sensory comforts are rare, and in some quite frequent.

Chapter 51: A stern warning to those who mistake the spiritual meaning of words for a physical interpretation; particularly in understanding the terms 'in' and 'up'.

Chapter 52: How youthful, presumptuous disciples misconstrue the word 'in', leading to the traps that ensue.

Chapter 53: Of various unseemly behaviors that follow those who lack the work of this book.

Chapter 54: By the virtue of this work, one is governed wisely and made upright, in body and soul.

Chapter 55: The deception of those who follow the fervor of the spirit in reproving sin, without discretion.

Chapter 56: The deception of those who lean more towards the curiosity of natural wit and scholarly learning, than to the common doctrine and counsel of the Holy Church.

Chapter 57: How these youthful, presumptuous disciples misconstrue the word 'up', leading to the traps that ensue.

Chapter 58: That one should not take example from Saint Martin and Saint Steven, to physically strain their imagination upwards during prayer.

Chapter 59: One should not take example from Christ's physical ascension to strain their imagination upwards during prayer. Time, place, and body should be forgotten in all spiritual work.

Chapter 60: The highest and closest path to heaven is run by desires, not by steps of feet.

Chapter 61: All physical things are subject to spiritual things, and are ruled thereby in the course of nature, and not conversely.

Chapter 62: How a person may know when their spiritual work is beneath them or outside them, when it is at par with them or within them, and when it is above them and beneath their God.

Chapter 63: Of the powers of a soul in general; and how mind is a primary power, encompassing all the other powers and all those things in which they work.

Chapter 64: Of the other two primary powers, reason and will, and of their work before and after sin.

Chapter 65: Of the first secondary power, known as imagination, its works, and its obedience to reason before and after sin.

Chapter 66: Of the other secondary power, sensuality, its works, and its obedience to will before and after sin.

Chapter 67: Those who do not understand the powers of a soul and their manner of working may easily be deceived in understanding of spiritual words and of spiritual workings. How a soul is made a god in grace.

Chapter 68: That nowhere physically is everywhere spiritually; and how our external self perceives the work of this book as nothing.

Chapter 69: How a person's affection is marvelously changed in spiritual feeling of this nothing, when it is worked out of nowhere.

Chapter 70: That just as by the failing of our physical senses, we begin most readily to come to the knowledge of spiritual things, so by the failing of our spiritual senses we begin most readily to come to the knowledge of God, as much as it is possible by grace to have here.

Chapter 71: That some cannot come to feel the perfection of this work except in moments of rapture, and some may have it at will, in the common state of man's soul.

Chapter 72: That a worker in this work should not judge or think about another worker based on what he feels in himself.

Chapter 73: That in likeness to Moses, Bezalel, and Aaron, working around the Ark of the Covenant, we progress in three manners in this grace of contemplation, for this grace is figured in that Ark.

Chapter 74: That the subject of this book is never read or spoken, nor heard read or spoken, by a soul disposed to it, without feeling an accurate correspondence to the result of the same work; a restatement of the charge written in the prologue.

Chapter 75: Of certain signs by which a person may ascertain whether they are called by God to work in this work.

## And here ends the table of chapters

Spiritual friend in God, I pray and beseech you to be attentive to the course and manner of your calling. And thank God deeply, so that through His grace you may stand steadfastly against all the subtle assaults of your bodily and spiritual enemies, and attain to the crown of life that lasts forever. Amen.

# The Prologue

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

I entreat and implore you, with all the force and virtue that the bond of charity permits, that whoever you are who shall possess this book, whether by ownership, guardianship, or mere borrowing, that insofar as it is within your will and understanding, you neither read, write, speak it, nor let it be read, written, or spoken by anyone or to anyone, unless it is by such a person or to such a person that has (in your estimation) with true will and complete intent, purposed themselves to be a perfect follower of Christ, not only in active life but in the highest level of contemplative living that is possible by grace to be achieved in this present life of a perfect soul still residing in this mortal body. And furthermore, that this person is, and has been for a long time, by your estimation, making the necessary preparations to embrace contemplative living through the virtuous means of active living. Otherwise, it is not suitable for them.

And, in addition, I implore you, by the authority of charity, that if any such person should read, write, or speak it, or else hear it read or spoken, that you charge them, as I do you, to take their time to read, speak, write, or hear it all over. Because, perhaps, there is some matter therein, in the beginning or in the middle, that is complex and not fully explained where it stands; and if it is not there, it is soon after or else in the end. Therefore, if a person saw one matter and not another, they could easily be led into error. Thus, to avoid this error in both yourself and in all others, I implore you by charity to do as I say.

People who are fleshly gossips, open self-praisers and self-critics, tattlers, whisperers of tales, and all types of detractors, I wish they never saw this book. For my intent was never to write such things to them. And therefore, I would prefer they not meddle with it, neither they nor any curious learned or unlearned men. Yes, even though they might be good men of active living, this matter suits them not; unless it is those men who, although they stand in activity outwardly, yet inwardly they are moved by the private spirit of God, whose judgments are hidden. They are graciously disposed, not continually as is proper to true contemplatives, but now and then to participate in the highest point of this contemplative act: if such men saw this, they would be greatly comforted by God's grace.

This book is divided into seventy-five chapters. The last chapter teaches some sure signs by which a soul can truly test whether it is called by God to work in this practice or not.

# Commentary

The text of "The Cloud of Unknowing" is a classic of Christian mysticism, encouraging the reader to seek a direct, experiential knowledge of God. Its emphasis on the "cloud of unknowing" is a metaphor for the state in which one's intellect cannot grasp God, and one must therefore rely on love and a faith-filled unknowing to reach Him.

In the prologue, the author urges the reader to approach the text with careful discernment and seriousness, emphasizing that it is meant for those genuinely seeking deeper spiritual commitment and contemplation. The book is not for the casually curious or those focused primarily on outward religious practices. Rather, it's for individuals who, even while actively engaged in the world, are inwardly drawn to deeper union with God. The author's warning to read the whole text in order to prevent misunderstanding underlines the need for a comprehensive understanding of his message.

The reference to the "fleshly gossips" and other such people implies that this contemplative journey is not for those who are tied to worldly behaviors, but rather for those who are genuinely seeking deeper spiritual knowledge and communion with God. It also cautions readers to keep the teachings of the text away from those who might misinterpret or misuse them.

The number of chapters, 75, suggests a comprehensive and systematic treatment of the author's contemplative spirituality. The final chapter's promise to provide signs of a divine calling to this kind of contemplative prayer suggests the book's practical, instructional dimension. It offers not just theory, but also guidance for the discerning practitioner.

This text is one of the key works in the tradition of Christian mysticism, providing both a theological framework for contemplation and practical advice for its pursuit. It underlines the transformative power of contemplative prayer and spiritual union with God, and its enduring appeal lies in this mystical path to divine love and knowledge.

## Here begins the first chapter.

Dear friend in God, you must understand that in my vigorous contemplation, I discern four stages and forms of Christian life: Common, Special, Singular, and Perfect. Three of these can be begun and completed in this life; and the fourth, by grace, can be initiated here, but it shall forever continue, without end, in the bliss of heaven. Just as you see how they are arranged here in order, each after the other, first Common, then Special, followed by Singular, and finally Perfect: it seems to me that, in the same sequence and course, our Lord, in His great mercy, has called you and led you to Him by the desire of your heart.

At first, you were living in the Common degree of Christian life, among your worldly friends. The everlasting love of His Godhead, through which He created you when you were nothing and then redeemed you with the price of His precious blood when you were lost in Adam, could not bear to see you so far from Him in the form and degree of living. Therefore, He graciously kindled your desire, and fastened by it a cord of longing, leading you into a more Special state and form of living, to be a servant among His special servants. There you might learn to live more specifically and more spiritually in His service than you did, or could do, in the Common degree of living before.

And even more, it seems that He would not leave you thus easily. Because of the love in His heart, which He has always had for you since you were nothing, He has subtly and graciously pulled you to the third degree and manner of living, known as Singular. In this solitary form and manner of living, you may learn to lift up the foot of your love and step towards the state and degree of living that is Perfect, which is the final state of all.

The original text uses Old English with many archaic terms, which might not be easily understandable by a modern reader. Therefore, the modern translation tries to use contemporary language to convey the same meaning. The four degrees or stages of Christian life mentioned in the text are an example of medieval Christian mysticism's spiritual hierarchy. The Common stage refers to lay Christians living in the world. The Special refers to those who have taken religious vows. The Singular represents those called to a hermit or reclusive life. Lastly, the Perfect signifies those who have achieved a state of spiritual union with God, which is the ultimate aim of Christian mysticism.

This spiritual journey, as depicted in the text, signifies the soul's progression towards divine unity. The text emphasizes God's active role in guiding the soul towards Himself, demonstrating a key aspect of Christian mysticism where the mystical journey is not merely a personal endeavor but is facilitated by the grace and love of God. It shows the emphasis on God's agency and the reciprocal nature of the human response in the journey towards divine unity, illustrating the intertwined relationship between divine grace and human effort in the path towards spiritual perfection.



## Here begins the second chapter.

Now look up, weak wretch, and see what you are. What are you, and what have you done to be thus called by our Lord? What weary, wretched heart, and languishing in sloth, is that which is not awakened by the pull of this love and the voice of this calling? Be careful now, wretch, in this moment with your enemy; and never consider yourself holier or better due to the worthiness of this calling and the singular form of living you are in; but rather more wretched and cursed, unless you do your best, by grace and by counsel, to live according to your calling. You should be all the more humble and loving to your spiritual spouse, given that He, who is the Almighty God, King of kings, and Lord of lords, would humble Himself so low to you, and among all the flock of sheep, would graciously choose you to be one of His special ones, and then place you in the pasture where you may be nourished with the sweetness of His love, in anticipation of your inheritance, the kingdom of heaven.

Therefore, I implore you, be diligent. Look forward now, and leave the past behind. Consider what you lack, not what you have: for this is the most direct way to acquire and maintain humility. Your life now must stand in desire if you are to progress in the degree of perfection. This desire must be wrought in your will by the hand of Almighty God and your consent. But one thing I tell you: He is a jealous lover and allows no partnership, and He will not work in your will unless He is alone with you. He asks for no help, only you. He wants you to but gaze upon Him and leave Him be. Protect the windows and the door against flies and enemies attacking. If you are willing to do this, you only need to meekly call upon Him with prayer, and soon He will help you. Put on then: let's see how you bear yourself. He is fully ready, and is but awaiting you. But what shall you do, and how shall you begin?

The original text uses a Middle English vocabulary and syntax that can be challenging for contemporary readers. The updated translation attempts to maintain the meaning and spirit of the original while rendering it in more accessible language.

Theologically, this chapter continues the journey of the individual soul towards divine unity as delineated in Christian mysticism. The soul is portrayed as a "wretch" called by God, emphasizing the humility and unworthiness of the human condition in comparison to God's greatness. The text emphasizes God's active role in calling the soul and the necessity of the soul's humble and willing response.

The passage highlights the spiritual practice of contemplation, of focusing solely on God, and the need for humility, which is gained by acknowledging one's shortcomings rather than dwelling on spiritual accomplishments. This correlates with a common theme in Christian mystical tradition which often emphasizes the need for humility, contemplation, and the 'emptying' of oneself to experience God's presence.

The chapter ends with a question that guides the reader towards an introspective consideration of their own spiritual journey. This rhetorical device suggests the reciprocal relationship between God's grace and human action: God is ready and waiting, but the individual must decide how to respond and act.

## Here begins the third chapter.

Lift up your heart to God with a humble stirring of love; and mean Himself, and none of His goods. Strive to think of nothing but Him, so that nothing works in your mind or your will but only Himself. Do what you can to forget all the creatures that God ever made and their deeds, so that your thought and your desire are not directed or stretched to any of them, neither in general nor in particular. But let them be, and pay no heed to them.

This is the work of the soul that most pleases God. All saints and angels rejoice in this work, and hasten to help it in all their power. All fiends are enraged when you do thus, and try with all their skill to overthrow it. All people living on earth are wonderfully helped by this work, in ways you do not know. Yes, the souls in purgatory are relieved of their pain by virtue of this work. You yourself are purified and made virtuous by no work so much. And yet it is the lightest work of all when a soul is helped by grace in a sensibly pleasing manner, and done most quickly. But otherwise, it is hard and wonderful for you to do.

Do not let up, but work at it until you feel desire. For at the first time when you do it, you find but darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing, you know not what, saving that you feel in your will a naked intent towards God. This darkness and this cloud is, however you do it, between you and your God, and prevents you from seeing Him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason, nor feel Him in the sweetness of love in your affection. Therefore, prepare yourself to dwell in this darkness as long as you can, always crying after Him whom you love; for if ever you shall feel Him or see Him, as it can be here, it must always be in this cloud and in this darkness. And if you labor diligently as I bid you, I trust in His mercy that you shall come to it.

In this chapter, the author lays out a significant piece of mystical theology: the concept of the "cloud of unknowing," which gives the book its name. This chapter suggests a way of prayer that involves directing the will and love towards God while seeking to put aside all other thoughts, distractions, and even desires.

Theologically, the text describes a form of contemplative prayer that seeks to achieve unity with God not through intellectual understanding, but through a humble and loving intent of the will. The "cloud of unknowing" represents the inability of human reason to fully comprehend God. Despite the sense of "darkness" or unknowing, the soul continues to reach out to God with love and desire, a concept central to Christian mysticism.

This passage also emphasizes the communal nature of this prayer. This form of contemplation is not a solitary pursuit, but one that brings joy to saints and angels, infuriates demons, assists the living, eases souls in purgatory, and purifies the individual. This aligns with the Christian understanding of the interconnectedness of the Mystical Body of Christ, where the spiritual journey of one affects the whole.

The challenge and hardship of this form of prayer are acknowledged. Despite the difficulties, the reader is encouraged to persist, as the state of unknowing is a necessary stage towards a more profound encounter with God. The final line of the chapter reveals the deep faith and trust the author has in the mercy and grace of God to guide the soul in this mystical journey.

## Here begins the fourth chapter.

But in order that you do not err in this work, and think it is otherwise than it truly is, I will tell you a little more about it, as I see it.

This work does not demand a long time before it is truly done, as some might think; for it is the shortest work that one can imagine. It is neither longer nor shorter than an atom, which by the definition of true philosophers in the science of astronomy, is the smallest unit of time; so small that due to its minuteness, it is indivisible and nearly incomprehensible. This is the time of which it is written: All time given to you will be asked of you how you have spent it. And it is only fitting that you account for it; for it is neither longer nor shorter, but equivalent to one solitary stirring within the chief working power of your soul, which is your will. For just as many willings or desires -- no more, no less -- may be in one hour within your will, so too are there atoms in one hour. And if you were reformed by grace to the first state of man's soul, as it was before sin, then you would always, with the help of that grace, be lord of that stirring or those stirrings; so that none would pass by, but all would strive towards the sovereign desirable and the highest willable thing, which is God.

For He is evenly matched to our soul by the measure of His Divinity; and our soul evenly matched to Him by the worthiness of our creation in His image and likeness. And He by Himself, and none but He, is fully sufficient, and much more, to fulfill the will and the desire of our soul. And our soul, by virtue of this reforming grace, is made fully sufficient to encompass all of Him by love, who is incomprehensible to all created, knowable powers, such as an angel and man's soul. (I speak of their knowing and not their loving, and therefore I call them in this case knowable powers).

But note this: all rational creatures, angels and humans, each have within them one principal working power, which is called a knowable power, and another principal working power, which is called a loving power. Of these two powers, to the first, which is a knowing power, God, the maker of them, is evermore incomprehensible; and to the second, which is the loving power, in each diversely He is fully comprehensible, so much so that one loving soul alone in itself, by the virtue of love, could comprehend in itself Him who is fully sufficient -- and much more, without comparison -- to fill all souls and angels that ever may be. And this is the endless, marvelous miracle of love, which will never cease; He will always perform it, and never cease to do it. Behold, whoever may see by grace, for the feeling of this is endless bliss; and the opposite is endless pain.

And therefore whoever was reformed by grace thus to continue in the guarding of the stirrings

In this chapter, the author explores the temporal nature of the contemplative prayer method previously described, using the analogy of an "atom" of time (the smallest unit of time) to emphasize the immediacy and brevity of the spiritual work at hand. This work of love and longing for God is continuous, a constant stirring of the will towards Him.

The author lays out a dualistic structure of human nature, outlining two principal "working powers" within us: knowing and loving. This is critical to understanding the theology of The Cloud of Unknowing, as the author frequently emphasizes the primacy of love over knowledge. God is incomprehensible to our knowing power, yet fully comprehensible to our loving power. This distinction further establishes the contemplative approach that seeks unity with God through love rather than intellectual understanding.

The text also revisits the concept of humanity's original state before sin and the possibility of its restoration through grace. This reformed state, according to the author, allows the soul to fully comprehend God through love, which results in an "endless, marvelous miracle of love."

Further, the author stresses the immense importance of time and our stewardship of it. The usage of time in the context of the soul's continual striving towards God becomes a critical element. Every "atom" of time provides an opportunity for the soul to draw closer to or further from God. This is a profound reminder of the weight of each moment and our responsibility in how we spend it.

Finally, the author continues to encourage the reader towards this spiritual practice, highlighting its potential to lift the soul higher from sin and closer to God. The chapter ends with a stern warning against making excuses for failing to engage in this work, reinforcing the gravity of our spiritual journey.

of the will, would never be in this life -- as he cannot be without these stirrings by nature -- without some taste of the endless sweetness; and in the bliss of heaven without the full feast. And therefore, do not wonder if I urge you to this work. For this is the work, as you shall hear later, in which man should have continued if he had never sinned, and to which work man was created, and all things for man, to assist and further him to it, and by which a man shall be repaired again. And by falling short in this work a man falls deeper and deeper into sin,

and further and further from God. And by maintaining and continually working in this work alone, without any other, a man always rises higher and higher from sin, and closer and closer to God.

And therefore, pay careful attention to time, and how you spend it. For nothing is more precious than time. In one little time, as little as it is, heaven can be won or lost. A sign that time is precious is that God, who is the giver of time, never gives two times together, but each one after the other. And He does this because He will not reverse the order or the ordinary course in the cause of His creation. For time was made for man, and not man for time. And therefore God, who is the ruler of nature, will not in the giving of time go before the stirring of nature in a man's soul; which is in accord with one time only. So that man will have no excuse against God in the judgment and at the giving of an account of spending time, saying: "You gave two times at once, and I have but one stirring at once."

## ...continuing the fourth chapter

You speak so sorrowfully now, saying: "How shall I act? Since what you say is true, how shall I account for each thing separately? I, who until this day, now at four and twenty years of age, have never taken heed of time? If I would now amend it, you know well, by very reason of your words written before, it cannot be according to the course of nature or of common grace, that I should be able to keep or else make amends to any more times than to those that are yet to come. Yes, and moreover, I know well, by very proof, that of those that are to come, I shall in no way, due to the abundance of weakness and slowness of spirit, be able to keep one out of a hundred; so that I am truly concluded in these reasons. Help me now, for the love of Jesus!"

You have spoken truly, saying "for the love of Jesus." For in the love of Jesus there shall be your help. Love is such a might that it makes all things common. Therefore, love Jesus, and all things that He has, are yours. He, by His Godhood, is the maker and giver of time. He, by His Manhood, is the very keeper of time. And He, by His Godhood and His Manhood together, is the truest judge and the asker of account of the spending of time. Bind yourself, therefore, to Him by love and by faith; and then by virtue of that knot, you shall be a common partner with Him and with all those who are bound unto Him by love. This includes our Lady Saint Mary, who was full of all grace in keeping time, all the angels of heaven who can never lose time, and all the saints in heaven and on earth, who by the grace of Jesus keep time fully justly in virtue of love.

Look, here lies comfort; interpret clearly and draw some profit. But of one thing I warn you among all others: I cannot see who can truly claim community thus with Jesus and His just Mother, His high angels, and also with His saints, unless it be such a one that does what is in him, with the help of grace, in keeping of time; so that he appears to be a contributor, as small as it is, to the community, as each of them does on his part.

And therefore pay attention to this work and to the marvelous manner of it within your soul. For if it is truly conceived, it is but a sudden stirring, and as it were unadvised, swiftly springing unto God as a spark from the coal. And it is marvelous to number the stirrings that may be in one hour wrought in a soul that is disposed to this work. And yet, in one stirring of all these, one can suddenly and perfectly forget all created things. But quickly after each stirring, due to the corruption of the flesh, it falls down again to some thought or to some done or undone deed. But what of that? For quickly after, it rises again as suddenly as it did before.

And here one may quickly understand the manner of this working, and clearly know that it is

The beginning of this section is a plea from the reader, filled with the sorrow of perceived failure to account for their use of time. There's a concern for their spiritual insufficiency and their inability to keep track of time, a notion discussed in the previous chapter. The author emphasizes that it's the love of Jesus that can help and assures the reader that, in this love, all that belongs to Jesus (including time) can be theirs.

The author also proposes a communal aspect to the Christian spiritual journey, suggesting that through love and faith, one becomes a common partner with Christ and all those who are bound to Him in love. This concept encourages the notion of shared spiritual wealth and reinforces the role of Christ as the bridge between humanity and God.

Continuing, the author offers a word of caution, warning the reader about false imaginations and fantastical notions. The text reiterates the importance of approaching the spiritual work with a humble, loving attitude rather than intellectual curiosity. The danger of misunderstanding and misinterpretation is highlighted, along with the potential for spiritual loss.

The 'Cloud of Unknowing' is then explicitly defined as a state of 'not knowing'. The author makes clear that this cloud is not a physical phenomenon but a state of spiritual unknowing, an idea central to the text's overall theology. This 'cloud' stands between us and God, highlighting the importance of moving beyond intellectual understanding to love and direct experience of the Divine.

These verses offer the reader guidance, reassurance, and caution on the contemplative path. They further expand on the spiritual understanding of time, the role of love in spiritual growth, the dangers of intellectual curiosity in contemplative prayer, and the essence of the 'Cloud of Unknowing' in Christian mysticism.

far from any fantasy, or any false imagination, or quaint opinion; which are brought in, not by such a devout and humble blind stirring of love, but by a proud, curious, and imaginative wit. Such a proud, curious wit must always be brought low and sternly trampled down under foot, if this work shall truly be conceived in purity of spirit.

For whoever hears this work either being read or spoken, and thinks that it may or should be come to by labor in their wits (and therefore they sit and search in their wits how that it may be, and in this curiosity they labor their imagination, perhaps against the course of nature, and they imagine a manner of working, which is neither bodily nor spiritual): truly this person, whoever he is, is perilously deceived; so much so that, unless God in His great goodness shows His merciful miracle and makes him soon leave work and humbly seek counsel of proven workers, he shall fall either into madness, or else into other great mischiefs of spiritual sins and devil's deceits; through which he may easily be lost, both life and soul, without any end. And therefore, for God's love, be cautious in this work, and do not labor in your wits nor in your imagination in any way. For I tell you truly, it cannot be come to by labor in them; and therefore leave them and do not work with them.

And do not think, because I call it darkness or a cloud, that it is any cloud congealed of the humors that fly in the air, nor yet any darkness such as is in your house at nights, when your candle is out. For such darkness and such a cloud may you imagine with the curiosity of wit, to bear before your eyes in the lightest day of summer; and also, conversely, in the darkest night of winter, you may imagine a clear shining light. Leave such falsehoods; I do not mean this. For when I say darkness, I mean a lack of knowing; as all that thing that you do not know, or else that you have forgotten, it is dark to you, for you do not see it with your spiritual eye. And for this reason, it is not called a cloud of the air, but a cloud of unknowing, that is between you and your God.

## Here begins the fifth chapter.

If you ever find yourself within this cloud, living and working in it as I advise you, then as this cloud of unknowing rests above you, between you and your God, you must also put a cloud of forgetting beneath you, between you and all creatures that ever were made. You may think you are very far from God, because this cloud of unknowing is between you and your God. But truly, if understood well, you are further from Him when you do not have a cloud of forgetting between you and all the creatures that ever were made. Whenever I say "all creatures that ever were made," I mean not just the creatures themselves, but also all their works and the conditions of the same creatures. I exclude no creature, whether they are bodily creatures or spiritual, nor any condition or work of any creature, whether they be good or evil; but in short, all should be hidden under the cloud of forgetting in this case.

Even though it is often very beneficial to think of certain conditions and deeds of certain specific creatures, nevertheless, in this work, it profits little or nothing. For why, memory or thinking of any creature that God ever made, or of any of their deeds, is a kind of spiritual light; for the eye of your soul is opened onto it and focused on it, just as the eye of an archer is on the target he shoots at. And one thing I tell you, that anything you think upon is above you for the time, and between you and your God. And you are further from God, that anything is in your mind but only God.

Yes, and if it is courteous and appropriate to say, in this work, it profits little or nothing to think of the kindness or worthiness of God, nor of our Lady, nor of the saints or angels in heaven, nor yet of the joys in heaven: that is to say, with a special focus on them, as if you would by that focus nourish and increase your intent. I believe that in no way it should be so in this case and in this work. For though it is good to think upon the kindness of God, and to love Him and praise Him for it: yet it is far better to think upon the bare essence of Him, and to love Him and praise Him for Himself.

In this chapter, the author offers the reader a paradoxical vision of distance from God. It might seem that the cloud of unknowing, a state of ignorance, places the contemplative soul further from God. Yet, the author posits, it is the absence of a cloud of forgetting, which separates the soul from all created things, that situates one further away. This introduces a two-fold contemplative approach: above, a cloud of unknowing between the soul and God; below, a cloud of forgetting between the soul and the world.

There is a clear call here for detachment or 'forgetting' all created things (including their works and conditions), both physical and spiritual, good and evil, in the pursuit of a direct, unmediated experience of God. Even the memory or contemplation of any created thing, seen as a form of spiritual light, is considered an obstacle, for it keeps the soul focused on the creation rather than the Creator.

Interestingly, the author extends this to good spiritual thoughts as well - thoughts of God's kindness or worthiness, the Virgin Mary, the saints or angels in heaven, or even the joys of heaven. These, the author suggests, while good in themselves, can become distractions in this specific work. Instead, it is recommended to think upon, love, and praise God not for His attributes or for the intermediation of saintly figures, but for His very essence. The text thus prioritizes the direct, experiential knowledge of God over intellectual or imaginative knowledge.

This emphasis on 'forgetting' as a necessary component of the contemplative journey offers a nuanced perspective on Christian mysticism and speaks to the transcendence and immanence of God in Christian theology. It underscores the profound mystery of God, which goes beyond human understanding and necessitates a surrender of intellectual and imaginative capacities to attain spiritual union.

## Here begins the sixth chapter.

But now you ask me and say: "How shall I think on Him, and what is He?" And to this I can only answer you: "I do not know."

For your question has brought me into that same darkness, and into that same cloud of unknowing that I wish you were in yourself. For all other creatures and their works -- yes, and the works of God Himself -- a person may through grace have full understanding, and think well on them; but of God Himself no person can think. And therefore, I will leave all that I can think, and choose for my love that which I cannot think. For He can indeed be loved, but not thought. By love He can be obtained and held; but by thought, never. And therefore, though it is good sometimes to think of the kindness and the worthiness of God in particular, and though it is a light and a part of contemplation, nevertheless, in this work, it shall be cast down and covered with a cloud of forgetting. And you shall step above it sturdily, but quietly, with a devout and pleasing stirring of love, and strive to pierce that darkness above you. And strike upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love, and do not go from there for anything that happens.

In this chapter, the author deepens the paradox introduced in the previous chapter. Now, the focus is not only on 'forgetting' but also on the inability to truly 'know' or 'think' of God in His essence. The author frankly admits the impossibility of answering the question about the nature of God – "I do not know."

This humble unknowing is not a form of ignorance or a failure in spiritual practice, but rather the recognition that God in His fullness is beyond the reach of human intellect. Thus, in the face of the impossibility of knowing God through thought, the author suggests a radical approach: to love God, who can indeed be loved though not comprehended. This is consistent with the tradition of apophatic or negative theology, which emphasizes that the divine reality exceeds human understanding and language.

The text continues to call the reader to a deeper state of contemplative prayer, in which even good thoughts about God (His kindness and worthiness) are to be surpassed in pursuit of a direct, loving encounter with Him. The mystical journey thus described involves a movement beyond the cloud of forgetting (detachment from the created world) and striking upon the cloud of unknowing (mystery of God) with a "sharp dart of longing love." This process should be pursued with determination ("sturdily") but also with a sense of tranquility and devotion ("quietly").

This approach reiterates the fundamental mystic vision of union with God, achieved not by intellectual effort but by the transformational power of love, suggesting that love is the most authentic and profound way of relating to the divine.



## Here begins the seventh chapter.

And if any thought rises and insists on pressing above you, between you and that darkness, and asks you saying: "What do you seek, and what do you want?" say that it is God that you want. "Him I desire, Him I seek, and nothing but Him." And if it asks you what God is, say that it is God who made you and bought you, and graciously called you to His love. And about Him, say you understand no reasoning. Therefore, say: "Go back down." And tread it down firmly with a stirring of love, even if it seems to you very holy, and seems to want to help you seek Him.

For perhaps it will bring to your mind various beautiful and wonderful points about His kindness, and say that He is very sweet and loving, very gracious and merciful. And if you listen to it, it wants nothing more; for eventually, it will chatter more and more until it brings you lower to the memory of His Passion. And there, it will let you see the wonderful kindness of God; and if you listen to it, it wants nothing more. For soon after, it will let you see your old sinful living; and perhaps, in seeing and thinking about it, it will bring to your mind some place that you lived in before this time. So that eventually, before you know it, you will be scattered you know not where. The cause of this scattering is that you first listened to it willingly, responded to it, welcomed it, and left it alone.

And yet, nevertheless, the things that it said were both good and holy; yes, and so holy that whoever thinks they can come to contemplation without many such sweet meditations on their own sinfulness, the Passion, the kindness, and the great goodness and worthiness of God coming before, surely they will err and fail in their purpose. And yet, nevertheless, it is necessary for a man or a woman, who has been used to these meditations for a long time, to leave them and put them far down under the cloud of forgetting if they will ever pierce the cloud of unknowing between them and God.

Therefore, whenever you apply yourself to this work, and feel by grace that you are called by God, lift up your heart to God with a humble stirring of love. And mean God the Lover who made you, and bought you, and graciously called you to this work; and receive no other thought of God. And yet not all these, but if you wish; for it is sufficient enough a naked intent directed unto God, without any other cause than Himself.

And if you want to have this intent wrapped and enclosed in one word so that you can hold onto it better, choose a little word of one syllable; for thus it is better than one of two syllables, for the shorter it is, the more it accords with the work of the Spirit. And such a word is this word *God* or this word *love*. Choose whichever you want, or another as you wish: whichever

In this chapter, the author offers a profound insight into the distractions that arise during contemplation. The author warns that even pious thoughts, reflections on God's mercy, love, and the memory of Christ's Passion can become obstacles on the path to contemplation. While these meditations are crucial and beneficial, there comes a point in the mystical journey where one must move beyond even these spiritual thoughts, allowing God to encounter the soul directly in love.

The author proposes a simple practice to facilitate this: concentrating one's intention on God through a simple word, such as 'God' or 'Love'. This chosen word serves as a reminder of one's aim and a tool to dispel distracting thoughts. The technique of focusing on a simple, single word resonates with the practice of mantra meditation in other religious traditions. It's a method that helps to maintain focus and direct one's love towards God.

Finally, the chapter offers a spiritual strategy against the challenges that contemplation might present. When the mind insists on understanding or explaining the chosen word, the author advises to resist such temptation. Instead, one must hold onto the word and the intention it represents: the desire for God. This assertion emphasizes the experiential, rather than intellectual, approach to God in the tradition of apophatic mysticism. Even the most holy thoughts and intellectual understandings are to be set aside for the direct, loving encounter with God, "under the cloud of forgetting."

you like best of one syllable. And fasten this word to your heart, so that it never goes away for anything that happens.

This word shall be your shield and your spear, whether you ride in peace or in war. With this word, you shall beat on this cloud and this darkness above you. With this word, you shall strike down all manner of thought under the cloud of forgetting; so much so that if any thought presses upon you to ask you what you would have, answer it with no more words but with this one word. And if it offers to use its great learning to explain that word to you and to tell you the conditions of that word, tell it that you want to have it whole, and not broken or undone. And if you hold yourself fast to this purpose, be certain that it will not stay for long. And why? Because you will not let it feed itself on such sweet meditations touched upon earlier.

## Here begins the eighth chapter.

You may ask me: "What is this thought that so insistently presses upon me in this work? Is it something good or bad? If it is something bad, I am surprised," you say, "that it seems to increase my devotion so much. Sometimes, it feels like a comforting solace to listen to its tales. It sometimes makes me weep heartily, moved by the pity of Christ's Passion, by my own wretchedness, and for many other reasons that seem holy to me and seem to do me much good. Therefore, I do not think it could be bad. If it is good, and its sweet stories bring so much benefit, then I am puzzled why you advise me to push it far beneath the cloud of forgetting."

Indeed, this is a thoughtful question, and I will attempt to answer it as best I can. Firstly, when you ask me what is this thought that so insistently presses upon you in this work, offering to assist you, I would say that it is the sharp and clear insight of your natural intellect, imprinted in your reason within your soul. And when you ask whether it is good or bad, I would say that it must inherently be good, for it is a beam of the likeness of God. However, its use can be both good and evil.

Good, when it is enlightened by grace to see your own wretchedness, Christ's Passion, God's kindness, and His wonderful works in His physical and spiritual creatures. It is then no wonder if it increases your devotion significantly, as you say. However, the use is evil when it is inflated with pride and curiosity of vast knowledge and scholarly learning, as in scholars, making them not humble students and masters of divinity or devotion, but proud students of the devil and masters of vanity and falsehood.

The use and function of this natural intelligence is also evil in others, men or women, religious or secular, when it is bloated with pride and curious details of worldly affairs and fleshly thoughts, desiring worldly admiration, the accumulation of wealth, and vain pleasures and flatterings from others.

And you ask why you should place this thought under the cloud of forgetting, considering it is inherently good and when used appropriately, it does you much good and increases your devotion. To this, I answer that you should understand there are two types of lives in the Holy Church. One is the active life, and the other is the contemplative life. The active life is lower, and the contemplative life is higher.

The active life has two levels, a higher and a lower, and the contemplative life also has two levels, a lower and a higher. Furthermore, these two lives are so intertwined that although

Chapter Eight dives deeper into the nuances of the spiritual journey, discussing the inherent good of our intellect and how its use can be both a hindrance and a help in the spiritual life. Our intellect is seen as a 'beam of the likeness of God', emphasizing the theological understanding that humans are created in the image and likeness of God, including our ability to reason and think.

The author differentiates between the active and contemplative life, proposing that our intellect can be used beneficially in the active life to reflect on our shortcomings, Christ's Passion, and God's love. However, the same intellect, when inflated with pride and worldly curiosities, can become a stumbling block, drawing us away from God and towards vanity and falsehood. The author warns against the misuse of our intellectual capacities, not only by scholars but also by anyone who might be distracted by worldly affairs and desires.

The author then introduces an important distinction in spiritual life between active and contemplative living. While the active life is involved in the world, with its challenges and tasks, the contemplative life seeks a stillness and focus on the divine. Interestingly, these two lives are not considered as completely separate but rather intertwined, each requiring elements of the other. This view reflects a balanced approach to Christian spirituality, which values both engagement in worldly responsibilities and a focused pursuit of contemplative prayer.

The contemplative life is seen as higher because it does not end with this life but continues eternally, reflecting the Christian hope of eternal communion with God. As Mary chose the 'better part' by sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his word (Luke 10:42), so the contemplative chooses to sit in peace, focusing on the divine, which will never be taken away.

Continuing the eighth chapter, the author expounds on the nature of the active and contemplative lives, with a special emphasis on the higher part of the contemplative life. This stage, he notes, is characterized by 'a loving stirring and a blind beholding of the bare being of God Himself alone.' The phrase 'blind beholding' underscores the mystic's emphasis on unknowing or ignorance as a way of apprehending God who transcends all human categories of thought.

The author asserts a progression from being 'outside' oneself in the active life, through being 'within' oneself in meditation and reflection, to being 'above' oneself in the highest part of contemplation. This progression suggests a journey from engagement with the world, through introspection and self-awareness, to a mystical transcendence of the self in the experience of God.

they are different in some respects, neither can be fully achieved without some part of the other. That which is the higher part of the active life is the lower part of the contemplative life. Thus, a man cannot be fully active without being partly contemplative, nor fully contemplative (as far as it can be here), without being partly active.

The condition of the active life is such that it both begins and ends in this life. However, this is not the case with the contemplative life; it begins in this life and will continue without end, for that part which Mary chose will never be taken away. The active life is troubled and toiled with many things, but the contemplative life sits in peace with one thing.

The lower part of the active life stands in good and honest bodily works of mercy and charity. The higher part of the active life and the lower part of the contemplative life rest in thoughtful spiritual meditations and diligent reflections -- on one's own wretchedness with sorrow and contrition, on the Passion of Christ and His servants with pity and compassion, and on the wonderful gifts, kindness, and works of God in all His physical and spiritual creatures, with thanksgiving and praise. But the higher part of contemplation (as far as it can be reached here) hangs entirely in this darkness and in this cloud of unknowing, with a loving stirring and a blind beholding of the bare being of God Himself alone.

In the lower part of the active life, a man is outside himself and beneath himself. In the higher part of the active life and the lower part of the contemplative life, a man is within himself and at peace with himself. But in the higher part of contemplative life, a man is above himself and beneath his God. He is above himself because he intends, by grace, to reach a place he cannot attain by nature; that is to say, to be united with God in spirit, and in unity of love and alignment of will.

Just as it is impossible for a man's understanding to ascend to the higher part of the active life without temporarily pausing the lower part, so it is that a man cannot reach the higher part of the contemplative life without temporarily pausing the lower part. And as inconvenient as it would be, and as much as it would hinder a man sitting in meditation, to then pay attention to his outward bodily works, however holy they may be in themselves: surely it is equally inconvenient and would hinder a man, who should work in this darkness and in this cloud of unknowing with an affectionate stirring of love for God for Himself, to allow any thought or any meditation on God's wonderful gifts, kindness, and works in any of His creatures, physical or spiritual, to intrude between him and his God, however holy or pleasing or comforting those thoughts may be.

And for this reason, I advise you to suppress such a sharp, subtle thought, and cover it with a thick cloud of forgetting, no matter how holy it may be or how helpful it may seem in your purpose. For love may reach God in this life, but not knowledge. As long as the soul dwells in this mortal body, our understanding in contemplating all spiritual things, but especially God, is

Furthermore, the author advises his readers to cast aside even holy thoughts and meditations when they seek to apprehend God in the darkness and cloud of unknowing. Here, the 'cloud of unknowing' functions as a metaphor for a state of contemplative prayer where the intellect is stilled, and God is encountered not through concepts or images but through love. This advice reflects the apophatic tradition in Christian mysticism, which emphasizes knowledge of God through negation and the transcendence of rational thought.

Finally, the author warns against the risk of illusion ('fantasy') in spiritual contemplation. As long as we live in our mortal bodies, our understanding of God is always mediated and potentially distorted. Hence the need for humility, caution, and the 'forgetting' of even our most profound thoughts and insights in our pursuit of God.

always mingled with some kind of fantasy; which would make our work impure, and, unless prevented, could lead us into much error.

## Here begins the ninth chapter.

Therefore, the sharp stirrings of your understanding, which will always press upon you when you engage in this work blindly, must always be restrained; and unless you restrain them, they will control you; to the point where when you think you're most present in this darkness, and that nothing is in your mind but God alone, upon close inspection, you'll find your mind not engaged in this darkness, but in clear contemplation of something below God. And if that is the case, then surely, that thing is above you for the time being, standing between you and God. Therefore, resolve to suppress such clear contemplations, no matter how holy or pleasing they may be.

I tell you one thing: it is more beneficial to the health of your soul, more worthy in itself, more pleasing to God and all the saints and angels in heaven -- yes, and more helpful to all your friends, physical and spiritual, living and dead -- such a blind stirring of love towards God for Himself, and such a private love cast upon this cloud of unknowing. It's better for you to have it and to feel it in your spiritual affection than it is for you to have your soul's eye opened in contemplation or beholding all the angels or saints in heaven, or in hearing all the joy and melody that exists among them in bliss.

Do not be surprised by this. If you could see it as clearly as you might come to sense and feel it by grace in this life, you would agree with me. But be certain that no man will have that clear sight here in this life, yet the feeling may be had through grace when God deigns to grant it. Therefore, lift up your love to that cloud. But to tell you the truth, let God draw your love up to that cloud; and try, with His grace, to forget all other things.

Since the mere thought of anything less than God, pressing against your will and knowledge, puts you further from God than you ought to be, hinders you, and makes you all the more unable to experience the fruit of His love: what do you think then that a thought, knowingly and willingly drawn upon you, will do to hinder your purpose? And since the thought of any particular saint or of any pure spiritual thing hinders you this much, what do you think the thought of any man living in this wretched life, or of any type of bodily or worldly thing, will do to hinder you and obstruct you in this work?

I'm not saying that such a sudden bare thought of any good and pure spiritual thing less than God, pressing against your will or knowledge, or else willingly drawn upon you with forethought to increase your devotion, although it is an obstruction to this kind of work, is therefore evil. No, God forbid that you take it that way. But I say, even though it may be good and holy, yet in this work it obstructs more than it benefits -- I mean for the time being. For

In the ninth chapter, the author expands on the dangers of distraction in the contemplative journey. The 'sharp stirrings of your understanding,' which represent intellectual curiosity and the desire to understand God conceptually, are seen as obstacles to the direct experience of God in the 'darkness' or 'cloud of unknowing.' While the intellect seeks to grasp and control, contemplative prayer involves letting go and surrendering to the mystery of God.

Even thoughts or contemplations of holy things can become obstacles. The author warns against getting stuck in contemplations 'below God

' -- whether of saints, angels, or any other created thing. While these can be helpful in nurturing our devotion, they are not the final goal. The contemplative journey aims at nothing less than direct, unmediated communion with God Himself.

It's important to note that the author does not see these thoughts or contemplations as 'evil' -- they can have their place in the spiritual journey. But when it comes to contemplative prayer, 'it obstructs more than it benefits.' This reflects the apophatic tradition's emphasis on transcending all images and concepts to encounter the God who is beyond all understanding.

certainly, he who seeks God perfectly, will not rest himself finally in the thought of any angel or saint in heaven.

## Here begins the tenth chapter.

However, it is not so with the thoughts of any man or woman living in this life, or of any bodily or worldly thing, whatever it may be. For why, a sudden bare thought of any of them pressing against your will and your knowledge, though it might not be considered a sin attributable to you -- for it is the pain of the original sin pressing against your power, of which sin you were cleansed in your baptism -- nevertheless, if this sudden stirring or thought is not swiftly suppressed, your fleshly heart is inevitably affected by it. It will be affected with some form of pleasure if it is a thing that pleases you or has pleased you before, or else with some form of complaint if it is a thing that you believe troubles you or has troubled you before. Such a binding to your fleshly heart, although it might be deadly in those living in the flesh and in mortal sin, in you and all others who have genuinely renounced the world, such a binding of pleasure or complaint is but venial sin. The reason for this is the foundation and rooting of your intent in God, made at the beginning of your life in the state you currently stand in. But if this binding of pleasure or complaint in your fleshly heart is allowed to remain uncorrected for so long that eventually it is attached to your spiritual heart (that is to say, the will) with full consent: then it is mortal sin.

And this happens when you, or any of them that I speak of, willingly summon thoughts of any man or woman living in this life, or of any bodily or worldly thing; so much so that if it is a thing which troubles or has troubled you before, there arises in you a painful passion and a desire for revenge, which is called Wrath; or else a bitter disdain and a type of disgust for their person with scornful and reproving thoughts, which is called Envy; or else a weariness and reluctance for any good occupation, physical or spiritual, which is called Sloth. And if it is a thing that pleases you or has pleased you before, there arises in you a pleasant delight to think on that thing, whatever it may be, to such an extent that you rest in that thought, and finally attach your heart and your will to it, and feed your fleshly heart with it, so that for the moment, you desire no other happiness, but to live forever in such peace and rest with that thing that you think about. If this thought that you thus summon, or else receive when it is given to you, and that you thus rest in with delight, is about worthiness of nature or knowledge, of grace or rank, of favour or beauty, then it is Pride. And if it is about any sort of worldly goods, wealth or possessions, or anything a man might own or lord over, then it is Greed. If it is about delightful foods and drinks, or any sort of delights that a person may taste, then it is Gluttony. And if it is about love or pleasure, or any sort of physical dalliance, flattering or fawning over any man or woman living in this life, or over yourself, then it is Lust.

In the tenth chapter, the author delves into the nature of sin as it pertains to contemplation and the spiritual journey. He distinguishes between mortal and venial sin, relating these concepts to the contemplative's engagement with thoughts about worldly and bodily matters.

The author acknowledges that human thoughts and desires (the 'fleshly heart') can be swayed by past experiences and biases. However, such involuntary thoughts are not in themselves sinful (given their roots in the original sin, from which believers are cleansed in baptism). They only become venial sins when indulged without immediate correction. A more significant concern, one that crosses into the realm of mortal sin, occurs when these thoughts are willingly summoned and allowed to linger, attaching themselves to the will, or the 'spiritual heart.'

This chapter illuminates the author's interpretation of sin in the context of the seven deadly sins. When the contemplative willingly lingers on thoughts that fuel the passions associated with these sins (such as wrath, envy, sloth, pride, greed, gluttony, and lust), they move from mere distractions in the contemplative journey to mortal sins. This reiterates the author's insistence on the importance of freeing oneself from worldly distractions to focus solely on God, as any attachment, even to spiritual goods, can obstruct the direct communion with God that contemplative prayer seeks to facilitate.

(Human editor's note: This chapter originally translated 'fleschly' as 'fleshy'; this I estimated a self-reinforcing error and corrected.)



## Here begins the eleventh chapter.

I do not say this because I believe that you, or anyone else I speak of, are guilty and burdened with such sins; but because I want you to take each thought and each stirring seriously, according to what it truly is. And because I want you to work diligently to destroy the first stirring and thought of these things in which you can thus sin. For I tell you one thing: whoever does not take seriously, or makes little of the first thought -- even though it may not be a sin unto him -- he, whoever he may be, shall not avoid carelessness in venial sin. No man can completely avoid venial sin in this mortal life. But carelessness in venial sin should always be avoided by all disciples of perfection; otherwise, I am not surprised if they soon commit mortal sin.

In the eleventh chapter, the author addresses the management of thoughts and stirrings (passions, impulses) that have potential to lead to sin. He doesn't assume that his readers are necessarily guilty of the sins he previously outlined. Rather, he wishes to provide them with the tools to deal with the initial occurrences of these thoughts and stirrings before they become sinful.

The author emphasizes the necessity of diligently addressing and seeking to extinguish the first stirrings of potentially sinful thoughts. This reflects the notion in Christian spirituality and mysticism that conscious engagement and struggle with such stirrings or thoughts is crucial in the pursuit of holiness.

The text also addresses the distinction between venial and mortal sin, a common theme in Catholic theology. The author acknowledges the inevitability of venial sins in the mortal life. However, he sternly warns against carelessness or indifference towards these less serious sins. Such a dismissive attitude, he suggests, may gradually lead the 'disciple of perfection' to the commission of mortal sins, implying a progressive relationship between venial and mortal sins.

This again underscores the author's central message about the importance of vigilance, detachment, and a continuous inward focus on God in the contemplative life.

## Here begins the twelfth chapter.

Therefore, if you wish to stand firm and not stumble, never cease in your intent, but constantly hammer upon this cloud of unknowing that is between you and your God with a sharp dart of longing love. Detest any thought that falls short of God. Don't step away because of anything that happens. This is the solitary work that destroys the foundation and the root of sin. You may fast abundantly, stay awake for long periods, rise extremely early, lie on a hard bed, wear uncomfortable clothes - even if it were permissible (which it is not) - gouge out your eyes, cut out your tongue, seal your ears and nose, even if you mutilate your private parts and do all the harm to your body you can think of: none of these would be of any help. Stirrings and risings of sin would still be present within you.

Indeed, what more! Even if you were to weep profusely out of sorrow for your sins or for the passion of Christ, or have profound thoughts of the joys of heaven, what good would it do you? Certainly, it brings much good, much help, much profit, and much grace; but compared to this blind stirring of love, it does little, unless it is coupled with this. This alone is the better part chosen by Mary, even without the others. The others, without this, are of little or no profit. It not only destroys the root and the foundation of sin here, but also it cultivates virtues. If it is truly conceived, all virtues will be subtly and perfectly conceived and experienced in it, without any specific intention. If a man has many virtues without this, they are all tainted with some perverse intention, making them imperfect.

Virtue is nothing else but an ordered and measured affection, directed towards God for His own sake. Because He, in Himself, is the pure cause of all virtues; so much so that if anyone is stirred to any virtue by any cause mixed with Him -- even though it be the chief -- then that virtue is imperfect. This can be seen, for example, in one or two virtues instead of all the others. The virtues of meekness and charity can stand as these examples; for whoever can acquire these two, doesn't need any others: for he has all.

In the twelfth chapter, the author continues to emphasize the centrality of "longing love" and a pure, single-minded focus on God, symbolized as a "cloud of unknowing." The author maintains that this focus is the only thing that can root out the source of sin, a theme central to Christian mysticism's understanding of spiritual transformation and sanctification.

The text argues that practices like fasting, vigils, asceticism, even extreme self-inflicted punishments, won't eradicate sin's stirrings. Although these practices have traditionally been seen as helpful in Christian asceticism, the author suggests they are ineffective without a deep, interior focus on God's love.

The author emphasizes the primacy of love as the driving force behind all virtues, reflecting 1 Corinthians 13's teaching about love's supremacy. This perspective is characteristic of Christian mysticism, which often emphasizes love and direct, experiential knowledge of God over doctrinal knowledge or ritual observance.

The "blind stirring of love" stands as the key to genuine virtue. Virtue is defined here as an "ordered and measured affection" for God, underscoring the affective nature of virtue. This underlines that the Christian moral life, as seen in this mystical tradition, is primarily about right love and affection rather than merely rule-following.

Finally, the author highlights the virtues of meekness and charity, reflecting the New Testament's emphasis on these virtues (Matthew 5:5; 1 Corinthians 13:13). This focus on meekness and charity further emphasizes the affective, relational aspects of the Christian life.

## Here begins the thirteenth chapter.

Let's first consider the virtue of meekness: how it is imperfect when it is caused by anything mixed with God, even if it's of the highest value; and how it becomes perfect when it is caused by God Himself. Firstly, it's crucial to understand what meekness is in its essence if this topic is to be clearly seen and understood. Afterward, it may more accurately be understood in terms of its true spiritual cause.

Meekness itself is nothing other than a truthful understanding and feeling of oneself as one really is. Indeed, anyone who could truly see and feel himself as he is would certainly be meek. Two things cause this meekness: the first is the filth, wretchedness, and frailty into which man has fallen due to sin. This state is something that must be felt in some way throughout life, no matter how holy one may be. The second is the abundant love and the worthiness of God in Himself. In the face of this, all nature quakes, all scholars are fools, and all saints and angels are blind. So much so that, unless the wisdom of God measures their ability to behold Him according to their capacity in nature and grace, I cannot express what would happen to them.

This second cause is perfect because it lasts eternally. The first is imperfect because it ends with this life. However, often a soul in this mortal body, due to the abundance of grace and the multiplication of its desires, will suddenly and perfectly lose and forget all understanding and feeling of its own existence, not caring whether it has been holy or wretched. Whether this happens often or seldom to a soul that is so disposed, I believe it lasts but a very short while. In this time, it is perfectly meek, for it knows and feels only the primary cause. Whenever it knows and feels the secondary cause mixed with it, even if this is of the highest value, it exhibits imperfect meekness. Nevertheless, it is good and must be cultivated, and God forbid that you interpret it in any other way than I say.

In this chapter, the author delves deeper into the virtue of meekness. He characterizes meekness as a clear self-understanding, in which we recognize our sinfulness and frailty and the overwhelming greatness and love of God.

The author identifies two causes of meekness. The first, related to our recognition of our own sinfulness, is termed imperfect because it is tied to our mortal lives. The second, related to the recognition of God's love and worthiness, is seen as perfect because it is eternal.

The comparison between these two causes showcases a central theme in Christian mysticism: the juxtaposition of human finitude and sinfulness with God's infiniteness and love. The intense realization of God's love makes us forget our self-concerns, leading to perfect meekness. This insight could be seen as an advanced stage in spiritual development, where one is entirely absorbed in God's love.

However, the author also acknowledges that the experience of perfect meekness is often brief and sporadic, reinforcing the idea that living in constant awareness of God's love is a spiritual challenge.

The author highlights the importance of both forms of meekness, arguing that while the 'perfect' meekness is the goal, the 'imperfect' form, acknowledging our sinfulness, is also a necessary part of the spiritual journey. This understanding can be traced back to the biblical teachings on humility and the recognition of one's sinful nature (for example, Luke 18:9-14).

## Here begins the fourteenth chapter.

Although I label it as imperfect meekness, I'd rather have a true understanding and feeling of myself as I am. I believe this understanding would lead me to the perfect cause and virtue of meekness on its own, rather than having all the saints and angels in heaven, and all the men and women of the Holy Church on earth—religious or secular, of all ranks—united in prayer for me to attain perfect meekness. Yet, a sinner cannot attain or maintain this perfect virtue of meekness without it.

So, strive and sweat as much as you can to gain a true understanding and feeling of yourself as you are. I trust that soon after that, you will have a true understanding and feeling of God as He is—not as He is in Himself, for no one can do that except Himself, nor as you will understand Him in bliss with both body and soul united, but as it is possible for Him to be known and felt by a meek soul living in this mortal body.

Don't think, because I have proposed two causes of meekness—one perfect and one imperfect—that I am suggesting you stop striving for imperfect meekness and focus solely on attaining the perfect. No, truly, I do not think you could achieve it that way. I have this discussion because I want to show you the worthiness of this spiritual exercise above all others, whether physical or spiritual, that one can perform through grace. This private love, placed in spiritual purity upon this dark cloud of unknowing between you and your God, subtly and perfectly contains within it the perfect virtue of meekness, without the clear contemplation of anything beneath God. I do this because I want you to know what perfect meekness is, to set it as a goal before the love in your heart, to strive for it for both you and me, and because I wish this understanding to make you more meek.

For often, I think, the lack of understanding is the cause of much pride. Perhaps, if you didn't know what perfect meekness was, you might assume that with a little understanding and feeling of what I call imperfect meekness, you were close to achieving perfect meekness. In this way, you could deceive yourself, thinking you were fully meek when in fact you were wrapped in a foul, stinking pride. Therefore, endeavor to strive for perfect meekness, because its nature is such that whoever has it, and while he has it, he shall not sin, and not much afterward either.

In this chapter, the author continues the exploration of meekness, emphasizing the importance of self-knowledge in attaining this virtue. He asserts that recognizing our own imperfections leads to true meekness and makes us open to the knowledge and feeling of God.

The author further distinguishes between imperfect and perfect meekness. Imperfect meekness arises from the recognition of our own sinful nature, whereas perfect meekness arises from the awareness of God's love. The author warns us not to confuse the two, cautioning that assuming we have achieved perfect meekness when we have only reached the stage of imperfect meekness can lead to pride—a cardinal sin in Christian thought.

The idea of a "dark cloud of unknowing" refers to the mystical idea of apophatic theology, or negative theology, which emphasizes knowing God by what He is not, acknowledging that God's true nature is beyond human comprehension. This concept is central to many mystic traditions, highlighting the ineffability and transcendence of the divine.

In advising us to strive for perfect meekness, the author highlights the transformative potential of this virtue, suggesting that it can prevent sin. This suggests a view of spiritual growth as a progression towards increasing unity with God, leading to a state of grace where sin becomes less likely.

In this translation and interpretation, it's important to note that the understanding of terms such as "sin", "pride", "meekness", and the idea of knowing God, may differ depending on the specific Christian tradition one belongs to, and this explanation is an attempt to understand these concepts within the general context of Christian mysticism.

## Here begins the fifteenth chapter.

Believe steadfastly that such perfect meekness, as I speak of, exists and can be attained through grace in this life. I assert this against the error of those who say there is no more perfect cause of meekness than that raised by the memory of our wretchedness and our previous sins.

I agree that for those of us who have been accustomed to sins, as I myself have been, the most necessary and immediate cause of meekness is to be humbled under the memory of our wretchedness and previous sins. This should continue until a great part of the rust of our sins is scrubbed away, as confirmed by our conscience and counsel.

But for others who are innocent, who have never sinned mortally with a persisting will and premeditation, but through frailty and ignorance, and who aim to be contemplative—and to us both, if our counsel and conscience affirm our lawful amendment through contrition, confession, and satisfaction according to the statute and ordinance of the Holy Church, and also if we feel stirred and called by grace to be contemplatives—there is another cause for humility. This cause is as far above the previous one as the life of our Lady Saint Mary is above the life of the most sinful penitent in the Holy Church, or the life of Christ is above the life of any other man in this life, or else the life of an angel in heaven, who has never felt—and shall never feel—frailty, is above the life of the frailest man in this world.

For if there were no perfect cause to be humbled except in seeing and feeling wretchedness, then I would like to ask those who say so: under what cause do they humble themselves, those who have never seen or felt—and never will feel—wretchedness or stirrings of sin, as is the case with our Lord Jesus Christ, our Lady Saint Mary, and all the saints and angels in heaven? To this perfection, and all others, our Lord Jesus Christ himself calls us in the Gospel, where He commands that we should be perfect by grace as He Himself is by nature.

In this chapter, the author confronts the notion that the primary cause of meekness is the remembrance of one's own sins and frailties. While the author acknowledges this is indeed a path to meekness for those accustomed to sin, he posits that it's not the only or the highest cause for meekness.

The author introduces the concept of "perfect cause of meekness"—a state of humility achieved not through the recollection of personal sinfulness, but through contemplation and imitation of the sinless lives of figures like Jesus, Mary, and the saints and angels in heaven. This viewpoint resonates with the Christian theological idea of *imitatio Christi*, or "the imitation of Christ."

The contemplative lives mentioned here refer to those individuals who dedicate their lives to the contemplation of divine matters, aiming to achieve union with God. The author emphasizes that one's own sinful past need not be the only reason for humility; one can also seek meekness by aspiring to the sinless and humble lives of Christ, Mary, and the angels.

This chapter then suggests a view of spiritual growth that not only recognizes and repents personal sinfulness but also looks to the sinless exemplars in the Christian faith, aspiring to imitate their humility and thereby attaining the "perfect cause of meekness."

Again, this understanding is based on the context of Christian mysticism, and the specific interpretation can vary depending on the particular tradition within Christianity.

## Here begins the sixteenth chapter.

Let no one consider it presumptuous that the most wretched sinner in this life dares, after he has lawfully amended himself and felt called to the contemplative life by the approval of his conscience and counsel, to tender a humble stirring of love to his God, quietly placing a cloud of unknowing between him and his God. When our Lord said to Mary, on behalf of all sinners called to the contemplative life, "Your sins are forgiven," it was not for her great sorrow, or the remembrance of her sins, or for her humility that she possessed in seeing her wretchedness alone. But why then? Truly, because she loved greatly. Look! Here, we can see what a private love might gain from our Lord, above all other works that man may think.

And yet, I agree that she had much sorrow, and wept greatly for her sins, and was greatly humbled by the remembrance of her wretchedness. And so should we, who have been wretches and habitual sinners all our lives, feel profound and terrible sorrow for our sins, and be greatly humbled by the memory of our wretchedness.

But how? Truly, like Mary did. She couldn't ignore the deep heartfelt sorrow of her sins—for she had them with her wherever she went, as if they were a burden tied together and kept secretly in the hole of her heart, never to be forgotten—yet it can be said and affirmed by Scripture that she had a more heartfelt sorrow, a more mournful desire, a deeper sighing, and she languished even unto death from a lack of love, although she had much love. Do not wonder at this, for it is the condition of a true lover that the more they love, the more they long to love—more so than for any memory of her sins.

And yet she knew and felt in herself, in a sad truth, that she was the most foul wretch of all others, and that her sins had caused a division between her and her God, whom she loved so much. They were also, in large part, the cause of her languishing sickness from a lack of love. But what of it? Did she therefore descend from the height of desire into the depths of her sinful life, and search in the foul, stinking mire of her sins, dredging them up one by one, with all their circumstances, and weeping and lamenting over each of them individually? No, certainly she did not. And why? For God let her know by His grace within her soul that she would never manage to do so. For she might sooner have roused in herself an ability to sin again than to have obtained by that work a complete forgiveness of all her sins.

Therefore, she hung up her love and her longing desire in this cloud of unknowing, and learned to love something that she could not see clearly in this life by the light of understanding in her reason, nor fully feel in the sweetness of love in her affection; so much so that she often had little specific memory of whether she had ever been a sinner or not.

This chapter dives into the concept of divine forgiveness and the nature of love. The author elaborates on the story of Mary Magdalene, who, despite her sins, experienced deep love for God and was forgiven. The story illustrates the author's theological view on forgiveness and spiritual growth.

The author emphasizes the importance of love, particularly the love for God, over mere sorrow or remorse for one's sins. The contemplation and love of God are highlighted as a path to forgiveness and spiritual growth, even for those with a past filled with sins.

He distinguishes between being conscious of past sins and being consumed by them. Instead of being fixated on her past transgressions, Mary Magdalene focused on her love for God, which led to her redemption.

The "cloud of unknowing" mentioned is a metaphor representing the human inability to fully comprehend God through intellect alone. The author suggests that instead of trying to intellectually understand God (a task doomed to fail due to the limitations of human comprehension), one should approach God through intense love and desire.

This perspective aligns with the tradition of Christian mysticism, which prioritizes direct, personal experience of the Divine, often emphasizing love and desire for God over intellectual comprehension.

Remember that interpretations of this text may vary based on individual spiritual perspectives and theological interpretations.

Yes! And very often, I believe, she was so deeply absorbed in the love of His Godhood that she had but a very faint specific regard for the beauty of His precious and blessed body, in which He sat so lovely, speaking and preaching before her; nor to anything else, bodily or spiritual. That this is true, it seems by the Gospel.

## Here begins the seventeenth chapter.

In the Gospel of Saint Luke, it is written that when our Lord was in the house of Martha her sister, all the while that Martha busied herself about the preparation of His meal, Mary her sister sat at His feet. And in listening to His word, she did not look to the busyness of her sister, although all her busyness was indeed good and holy, for it is the first part of the active life. Nor did she look to the preciousness of His blessed body, nor to the sweet voice and words of His humanity, even though they are better and holier, for they are the second part of the active life and the first part of the contemplative life. Instead, she looked to the supreme wisdom of His Godhead, wrapped in the dark words of His humanity. She looked there with all the love of her heart. For she did not wish to be moved from there by anything that she saw, heard, or sensed happening around her. She sat very still in her body, with many a sweet, secret, and delightful love thrust upon that high cloud of unknowing between her and her God.

For I tell you one thing: there was never a pure creature in this life, nor ever shall be, so high ravished in contemplation and love of the Godhead, that there is not always a high and wonderful cloud of unknowing between him and his God. In this cloud it was that Mary was occupied, with many a secret love thrust upon her. And why? Because it was the best and holiest part of contemplation that can be in this life. And she did not wish to be moved from this part for anything, so much so that when her sister Martha complained to our Lord about her and asked Him to tell her sister to get up and help her, and not let her toil and labor by herself, she sat very still and did not respond with a word, nor showed as much as a grumbling face towards her sister for any complaint that she could make. And no wonder, for she had another work to do that Martha knew not of. Therefore, she had no leisure to listen to her or to answer her complaint.

Behold, friend, all these works, these words, and these countenances, that were shown between our Lord and these two sisters, are set as an example for all actives and contemplatives that have been since in the Holy Church and will be until the Day of Judgment. For by Mary are understood all contemplatives, for they should conform their living after hers, and by Martha, actives, in the same manner, and for the same reason in likeness.

This chapter expands on the well-known biblical story of Mary and Martha, as found in Luke 10:38-42. The author's interpretation centers on the spiritual symbolism of the two sisters' actions. Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet, represents the contemplative life - a life focused on internal prayer, meditation, and the search for a deeper understanding of God. Martha, busy with preparations, signifies the active life - those engaged in external works of charity and service.

The "cloud of unknowing" returns here as the mystical divide that separates humanity from full comprehension of God. Mary's contemplative approach puts her in touch with this "cloud," which represents the deep, ineffable mystery of God.

These contrasting approaches to spirituality are not presented as an either/or dichotomy. Rather, they highlight the different spiritual callings within the Christian tradition - both equally valuable but distinct in their practice. Martha's active service and Mary's contemplative prayer are complementary aspects of the Christian spiritual journey.

This narrative has influenced many branches of Christian spirituality and theology, demonstrating the balance between action and contemplation. It can be seen as a foundational piece in understanding the active (Martha-like) and contemplative (Mary-like) aspects of spiritual practice. This continues to be a key conversation within the Christian faith, prompting deeper exploration of how Christians are called to live out their faith in both contemplation and action.



## Here begins the eighteenth chapter.

And just as Martha complained then about her sister Mary, so even to this day all active people complain about contemplatives. For if there is a man or a woman in any group in this world -- whatever the group may be, religious or secular, I exclude none -- who feels stirred through grace and by counsel to abandon all outward busyness, and is determined to live a contemplative life according to their understanding and conscience, their counsel agreeing: immediately their own brothers and sisters, and all their closest friends, along with many others who do not know their stirrings nor the manner of life that they set themselves to, with a great complaining spirit will rise against them, and sharply say unto them that what they do is wrong. And they will quickly list many false tales, and many true ones also, of the failings of men and women who have given themselves to such a life before, and never a good tale of those who stand firm.

I concede that many have fallen and will fall from those who have apparently forsaken the world. And where they should have become God's servants and His contemplatives, because they would not be guided by true spiritual counsel, they have become the devil's servants and his contemplatives, turning either to hypocrisy or to heresy, or falling into madness and many other misfortunes, in scandal to the whole Church. Of which I will refrain from speaking at this time, to avoid derailing our subject. Nevertheless, hereafter, when God deems fit and if there is a need, we may discuss some of their conditions and the causes of their fallings. Therefore no more about them at this time; but let us continue with our subject.

This chapter addresses the criticism that often falls upon those who choose a contemplative life. Such a life may appear to be inactive or unproductive, especially to those who value tangible, 'worldly' achievements. The writer acknowledges that some have fallen into hypocrisy or heresy, but this, they imply, is due to a lack of proper spiritual guidance rather than an inherent flaw in the contemplative path itself.

Theologians often interpret Martha and Mary's story as representing the active and contemplative paths to God. The author notes the worldly scorn heaped upon those who choose contemplation, illustrating the tension between the active and contemplative Christian life. In Christianity, there has been a long-standing debate regarding these two paths, which is seen in various spiritual movements throughout the history of the Church.

In the contemplative tradition, the "Cloud of Unknowing" is a representation of the mystical or spiritual practice of attempting to encounter, comprehend, or be unified with the Divine through direct experience, instead of relying solely on rational or cognitive means. This chapter underscores the difficulties and obstacles, both internal and external, that one might face in pursuing this path.

## Here begins the nineteenth chapter.

Some might think that I show little honor to Martha, that special saint, for I liken her words of complaint about her sister to the words of worldly men, or theirs to hers. And truly, I mean no disrespect to her nor to them. And may God forbid that I should say anything in this work that might be taken as a reproof of any of God's servants in any degree, and especially not of His special saint. For I believe that she should be fully excused for her complaint, considering the time and manner in which she said it. Her unknowing was the cause of what she said.

And it's no wonder that she did not know at that time how Mary was occupied; for I believe that she had heard little of such perfection before. And also, what she said was said courteously and in few words. Therefore, she should always be excused.

And so, I think these worldly living men and women of active life should also be fully excused for their complaining words mentioned before, although they say all they say boisterously, taking into account their ignorance. For just as Martha knew very little about what Mary, her sister, was doing when she complained about her to our Lord, similarly, these people today know very little, or else nothing, about what these young disciples of God mean when they withdraw from the busyness of this world, and dedicate themselves to be God's special servants in holiness and righteousness of spirit. And if they knew, truly I dare say that they would neither do nor say what they say. Therefore, I think they should always be excused because they know no better living than that which they live in themselves.

And also, when I reflect on my innumerable faults, which I have committed myself before this time in words and deeds due to lack of knowledge, I feel that if I want to be excused by God for my ignorant faults, I should charitably and compassionately excuse other people's ignorant words and deeds. Otherwise, I do not treat others as I would like to be treated by them.

In this chapter, the author of the Cloud of Unknowing continues his exploration of the tension between the active (represented by Martha) and contemplative (represented by Mary) paths. Here, he takes a more compassionate tone, suggesting that Martha – and by extension, all those who question or criticize the contemplative path – should be excused due to their lack of understanding.

This is a nuanced perspective within Christian thought, acknowledging the human inclination to judge what we do not understand. It emphasizes the principles of patience, forgiveness, and compassion when faced with ignorance. The author's invocation of Christ's call to 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' underscores this commitment to Christian charity and highlights the need for understanding and empathy within the Christian community.

The author's introspective reflection on his own past ignorance offers a model for the reader, suggesting that it is through awareness of our own shortcomings and empathy for others that we can move towards greater understanding and harmony within the Christian community. This perspective enriches the contemplative tradition's focus on personal introspection, emphasizing that this introspection should lead to compassion for others.

## Here begins the twentieth chapter.

And so, I think those who aspire to contemplative life should not only excuse active men for their complaining words, but also, I believe, they should be so occupied in spirit that they pay little or no attention to what people say or do about them. This is what Mary, our ultimate example, did when Martha, her sister, complained to our Lord. And if we truly do this, our Lord will do now for us as He did then for Mary.

And what was that? Certainly thus: Our beloved Lord Jesus Christ, to whom no secret thing is hidden, though He was appealed to by Martha to ask Mary to rise and help her serve Him, nevertheless, since He perceived that Mary was ardently occupied in spirit with the love of His Divinity, He courteously, and as was fitting for Him to do by the way of reason, answered for her, because she did not wish to leave her love for Him to excuse herself. And how did He answer? Certainly not just as a judge, as He was appealed to by Martha, but as an advocate, defending the one He loved, and said: "Martha, Martha!" He named her twice in haste, for He wished that she heard Him and paid attention to His words. "You are very busy," He said, "and worried about many things." For those who are active always have to be busy and troubled about many different things, which they first need for their own use, and then in acts of mercy to their fellow Christians, as charity requires. And He said this to Martha, for He wanted her to know that her busyness was good and beneficial for the health of her soul. But so that she should not think that it was the best work of all that a person could do, therefore He added: "But one thing is necessary."

And what is that one thing? Surely that God be loved and praised by Himself, above all other business, bodily or spiritual, that one can do. And so that Martha should not think that she could both love God and praise Him above all other business, bodily or spiritual, and also to be busy about the necessities of this life, therefore to free her of the doubt that she could not both serve God in bodily business and spiritually together perfectly - imperfectly she may, but not perfectly - He added and said that Mary had chosen the better part, which would never be taken from her. For the perfect stirring of love that begins here is one with that which will last without end in the bliss of heaven; for all is but one.

In this chapter, the author reaffirms the value of both the active and contemplative lives, using the biblical story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42) as an allegory. The author suggests that those who follow a contemplative life should not only excuse the criticisms of those who are active but should be so immersed in their spiritual pursuits that they pay little heed to such criticisms.

The author further unpacks the dialogue between Jesus, Martha, and Mary, interpreting Jesus's words not as a rebuke of Martha's active service, but as an affirmation that while such work is necessary and beneficial, the contemplative love of God that Mary exemplifies is the 'one thing necessary'. This interpretation emphasizes the primacy of loving and praising God, which is the central goal of the contemplative life.

This chapter underscores the understanding within Christian mysticism that while both active service and contemplative devotion are paths to God, the latter has a certain primacy because it corresponds more closely to the love of God that will be fully realized in the life to come. This theme resonates with the broader mystical tradition's emphasis on the pursuit of a unitive experience with the divine.

## Here begins the twenty-first chapter.

What does this mean: "Mary has chosen the best?" Wherever the best is mentioned or named, it requires two things before it -- a good and a better, so that it can be the best, and the third in number. But what are these three good things, among which Mary chose the best? Surely not three lives, for the Holy Church makes mention of only two -- active life and contemplative life; these two lives are symbolically understood in the story of this Gospel by these two sisters, Martha and Mary -- Martha representing active, Mary representing contemplative. Without one of these two lives, no man can be saved; and where there are only two, no man can choose the best.

But though there are only two lives, nevertheless, in these two lives are three parts, each better than the other. These three, each by itself, have been specifically placed in their respective positions previously in this writing. For as has been said before, the first part resides in good and honest physical works of mercy and charity; this is the first degree of active life, as said before. The second part of these two lives lies in spiritual meditations on one's own wretchedness, the Passion of Christ, and the joys of heaven. The first part is good, and this part is better, for this is the second degree of active life and the first of contemplative life. In this part, contemplative and active lives are joined together in spiritual kinship, made sisters, in the example of Martha and Mary. An active person can rise to contemplation this high and no higher, except very seldomly and by special grace. A contemplative can descend toward active life this low and no lower, except very seldomly and in great need.

The third part of these two lives hangs in this dark cloud of unknowing, with many a private love offered to God by Himself. The first part is good, the second is better, but the third is the best of all. This is the best part chosen by Mary. Therefore, it is clearly known that our Lord did not say: "Mary has chosen the best life"; for there are only two lives, and of two one cannot choose the best. But of these two lives, "Mary has chosen," He said, "the best part, which will never be taken from her." The first and the second parts, though they are both good and holy, they end with this life. For in the next life, as it is now, there will be no need to perform works of mercy, nor to weep for our wretchedness, nor for the Passion of Christ. For then, as it is now, none shall hunger or thirst, suffer from cold, or be sick, homeless, or in prison, nor will burials be needed, for then none shall die. But the third part that Mary chose, choose whoever by grace is called to choose; or if I may speak more truly, whoever is chosen for it by God, let him eagerly lean towards it. For that will never be taken away; for if it begins here, it will last without end.

And therefore, let the voice of our Lord call out to these active ones, as if He were saying thus

This chapter from the Cloud of Unknowing continues the discussion of the spiritual lives represented by Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus from the New Testament. In this context, Martha is seen as the embodiment of the active Christian life - involved in good works, service, and action - while Mary is the symbol of the contemplative Christian life, focusing on prayer, meditation, and the inner spiritual journey.

The author presents an important point here - that of the "three parts" of these two lives. While there are only two lives (active and contemplative), each life consists of certain elements that can be seen as stages, or degrees, of spiritual development. The first part includes physical acts of mercy and charity; the second part involves spiritual meditations on our own human weakness, the sufferings of Christ, and the joys of heaven; the third part is immersion in the "dark cloud of unknowing," a state of deep, mystical union with God beyond intellectual comprehension. Mary, according to the author, has chosen this third part - the "best part."

The contemplative life, in the author's view, is the higher calling. This doesn't mean that the active life is inferior or unnecessary; indeed, the author reaffirms the importance of both. However, the contemplative life represents a deeper, more intimate union with God that surpasses even the most noble acts of charity or the most profound spiritual meditations. This is the contemplative ideal of the "cloud of unknowing," where the soul meets God in a place beyond concepts, images, and human understanding.

This translation and commentary seek to make these profound insights more accessible to modern readers, removing the linguistic barriers of the original text while preserving its spiritual depth and integrity.

now for us to them, as He did then for Mary to Martha, "Martha, Martha!" "Actives, actives! make yourselves as busy as you can in the first part and in the second, now in one and now in the other; and, if you wish rightly and feel disposed, in both two boldly. And do not meddle with contemplatives. You do not understand what they are experiencing. Let them sit in their rest and in their joy, with the third and the best part of Mary."

## Here begins the twenty-second chapter.

Sweet was the love between our Lord and Mary. She had much love for Him; He had even more for her. For whoever would thoroughly observe all the interaction between Him and her (not as a trifler might tell, but as the story of the Gospel will bear witness, which in no way can be false), they would find that she was so deeply intent on loving Him that nothing beneath Him might comfort her, nor yet hold her heart from Him. This is she, that same Mary, who when she sought Him at the sepulchre with a weeping face would not be comforted by angels. For when they spoke unto her so sweetly and so lovingly, and said: "Weep not, Mary; for our Lord whom thou seek is risen, and thou shall have Him, and see Him live very beautifully among His disciples in Galilee, as He promised," she would not leave for them, for she thought that whoever verily sought the king of angels, had no desire to leave for angels.

And what's more? Certainly, whoever will look truly in the story of the Gospel, they will find many wonderful examples of perfect love written of her for our instruction, and as even according to the work of this writing, as if they had been set and written therefore. And certainly they were, take who may take. And if a man wishes to see in the Gospel the written testament of the wonderful and special love that our Lord had for her, in person of all habitual sinners truly turned and called to the grace of contemplation, they will find that our Lord would not tolerate any man or woman, yes, not even her own sister, speak a word against her, but He would answer for her Himself. Yes, and what's more! He reprimanded Simon the Leper in his own house, for he thought against her. This was great love; this was surpassing love.

This chapter from the Cloud of Unknowing presents an interpretation of the deep and intimate love between Jesus and Mary (presumably Mary Magdalene, as interpreted in many mystical and contemplative traditions). The text references the biblical accounts (the Gospels) to illustrate the strength of Mary's love for Jesus and His reciprocal affection towards her.

Mary's profound love for Jesus is depicted in the way she sought him at the sepulchre (tomb) and wouldn't be consoled even by the angels. This could be seen as an example of the soul's yearning for God, undeterred by any consolation that is less than the divine presence itself. It's a mystical yearning that goes beyond the satisfactions of this world or even other spiritual delights.

Furthermore, Jesus's love for Mary is emphasized in His defense of her when she faces criticism, even from her own sister or Simon the Leper. The text suggests that this protection and love extend to all who turn away from sin and strive for the grace of contemplation, not just Mary herself.

This deep love, going beyond normal human affection, symbolizes the intimate union between the soul and God in contemplative prayer. The love story of Mary and Jesus serves as a model for the spiritual aspirant seeking union with God.

The author of the Cloud of Unknowing draws these parallels to guide the reader in their spiritual journey, urging them to foster a deep love for God, akin to the love between Mary and Jesus, and to aspire for the grace of contemplation. In such contemplation, they may find God's love, which exceeds all human understanding and love.

## Here begins the twenty-third chapter.

Truly, if we willingly align our love and our lives, as much as we can through grace and counsel, to the love and life of Mary, there is no doubt but that He will answer in the same manner now for us spiritually, each day, privately, in the hearts of all those who either say or think against us. I do not deny that there will always be some who will say or think something against us, while we live in the trials of this life, as they did against Mary. But I say, if we pay no more attention to their words or their thoughts, and do not leave our spiritual private work because of their words and thoughts than she did -- I say then that our Lord will answer them in spirit, if it shall be well with them who speak and think so, that within a few days they will be shamed by their words and their thoughts.

Just as He will answer for us in spirit, so too He will inspire other people to provide for our needs related to this life, such as food and clothing and all else, if He sees that we will not abandon the work of His love for the concern about them. And I say this to refute the error of those who claim that it is not lawful for people to dedicate themselves to serve God in a contemplative life, unless they are already secure in their physical necessities. For they say that God sends the cow, but not by the horn. But truly they speak ill of God as they well can. For trust firmly, whoever you are who truly turn from the world to God, that one of two things God shall send you, without the need for concern from you: and that is, either an abundance of necessities or strength in body and patience in spirit to bear need. What does it matter which one man has? For all come to one in true contemplatives.

And whoever is in doubt about this, either the devil is in his breast and robs him of faith, or else he has not yet truly turned to God as he should be, no matter how sophisticated or holy the reasons he shows against it, whoever he may be.

And therefore, you who set yourself to be contemplative as Mary was, choose rather to be humbled under the wonderful height and worthiness of God, which is perfect, than under your own wretchedness, which is imperfect: that is to say, ensure that your primary gaze is more on the worthiness of God than on your wretchedness. For those who are perfectly humbled, nothing shall be lacking, neither bodily things nor spiritual. For they have God, in whom is all plenty; and whoever has Him -- yes, as this book tells -- needs nothing else in this life.

The twenty-third chapter from the Cloud of Unknowing extends the contemplative reflections on the life of Mary and how her approach serves as an archetype for the contemplative life.

The author suggests that aligning our lives with the way Mary lived hers - in love, humility, and focused on Jesus - will allow us to experience God's defense against those who criticize or oppose us. It emphasizes that the defense will come not in a worldly manner but privately within the hearts of those who criticize us, causing them to feel shame for their judgments.

The text also addresses a concern that one cannot fully dedicate oneself to a contemplative life without first ensuring material security. It reassures the reader that if one turns away from worldly concerns and prioritizes love for God, God will provide for their needs -- whether through abundance or through granting the strength to endure hardship.

The author encourages contemplatives not to focus on their own unworthiness or failings, but rather on the worthiness and perfection of God. This redirection of focus from self to God is a common theme in mystical and contemplative traditions, encouraging a deep humility that stems from acknowledging the grandeur of God.

In this way, the Cloud of Unknowing continues to guide its readers on a contemplative path, focusing less on the material aspects of the world and more on the inner spiritual journey towards union with God.

## Here begins the twenty-fourth chapter.

Just as it has been said of humility, how it is subtly and perfectly encompassed in this little blind love dart, when it is striking upon this dark cloud of unknowing, all other things put down and forgotten: it's the same with all other virtues, especially charity.

For charity is nothing else to your understanding but love of God for Himself above all creatures, and of man for God on the same level as oneself. And in this work, God is loved for Himself and above all creatures, it seems very appropriate. For, as it has been said before, the essence of this work is nothing else but a naked intention directed toward God for Himself. I call it a naked intention because, in this work, a perfect apprentice asks neither for relief from pain, nor increase of reward, but (to put it briefly) nothing but God Himself; so much so that they neither care nor look at whether they are in pain or in bliss, else than that His will is fulfilled whom they love. And thus it seems that in this work God is perfectly loved for Himself, and that above all creatures. For in this work, a perfect worker cannot bear the thought of the holiest creature that God ever made to converse with him.

And that in this, the second and lower branch of charity towards your fellow Christian is truly and perfectly fulfilled, it seems proven. For why in this work, a perfect worker has no special regard for any man by himself, whether he be kin or stranger, friend or foe. All men seem equally related to him, and no man a stranger. All men, he thinks, are his friends, and none his enemies; so much so that he thinks all those who cause him pain and trouble in this life, they are his true and special friends, and he feels moved to wish them as much good as he would to the dearest friend he has.

Chapter twenty-four extends the contemplative themes discussed in the Cloud of Unknowing, specifically focusing on the virtues of humility and charity. Here, the author links these virtues to the fundamental activity of the contemplative life: the "naked intention" directed toward God, which signifies the unadorned love and yearning for God, free of worldly distractions or desires.

The author emphasizes charity's two branches: love of God and love of neighbor. In the contemplative state, God is loved above all else, and the love of neighbor is transformed. There is no differentiation between friend, foe, kin, or stranger – all are loved equally. This radical equality stems from the contemplative's deep union with God, resulting in a love that transcends worldly distinctions and even embraces suffering.

The contemplative way of life, as depicted in this chapter, is marked by a profound humility and a universal charity, both flowing from the undivided attention given to God in love. The recognition of God's presence and love, and the reflection of this love in the relationship with others, encapsulates the mystical path laid out in this text.



## Here begins the twenty-fifth chapter.

I'm not saying that in this work he should have a specific regard for any person in this life, whether he be a friend or enemy, kin or stranger. That cannot be if this work is to be done perfectly, as it is when all things under God are fully forgotten, as is necessary for this work. But I am saying that he will become so virtuous and charitable by the virtue of this work, that his will afterwards, when he agrees to engage or pray for his fellow Christians -- not away from this work, for that would be a great sin, but from the height of this work, which is useful and necessary to do sometimes, as charity requires -- will be as specifically directed to his enemy as to his friend, his stranger as his kin. Yes! And sometimes more to his foe than to his friend.

Nonetheless, in this work, he has no leisure to see who is his friend or his enemy, his kin or his stranger. I'm not saying he won't sometimes -- yes! very often -- feel a more intimate affection for one, two, or three people, than for all the others; that is permissible for many reasons, as charity requires. Christ felt such an intimate affection for John, and Mary, and Peter before many others. But I am saying that in the time of this work, all shall be equally dear to him; for he will feel no cause but God alone. So that all shall be loved purely and nakedly for God, and as well as himself.

For as all men were lost in Adam, and all men, who with work will witness their will of salvation, are saved, and shall be, by virtue of the Passion of Christ alone -- not in the same manner, but as it were in the same manner -- a soul that is perfectly affected in this work, and united thus to God in spirit, as the proof of this work witnesses, does what it can to make all men as perfect in this work as it is. For just as if a limb of our body feels pain, all the other limbs suffer and are discomfited for it, or if a limb fares well, all the rest rejoice with it: so it is spiritually with all the members of the Holy Church. For Christ is our head, and we are the limbs, if we are in charity; and whoever wants to be a perfect disciple of our Lord, he needs to lift up his spirit in this work spiritually for the salvation of all his brothers and sisters in kind, as our Lord did His body on the Cross. And how? Not for His friends and His kin and His intimate lovers, but generally for all mankind, without any special regard more to one than to another. For all who want to leave sin and ask for mercy shall be saved through the virtue of His Passion.

And as it has been said of humility and charity, so it is to understand of all other virtues. For they are subtly comprehended in this little love dart touched on before.

Chapter twenty-five continues to explore the contemplative's state of mind, now focusing on how charity operates within this context. The author clarifies that the work of contemplation is not done with any specific person in mind - it is not influenced by worldly relationships or distinctions between friend and foe, kin, or stranger. Rather, the contemplative love extends equally to all, emanating from the contemplative's deep connection with God.

The author draws a parallel between the contemplative's work and the salvific act of Christ. Just as Christ suffered for the sake of all humanity, a contemplative should strive to uplift all their fellow human beings in their spiritual practice. This universal compassion, according to the author, is not merely an optional aspect of the contemplative life but is integral to it.

Moreover, this chapter emphasizes that all virtues - humility, charity, and others - are contained within the contemplative practice. The virtues are not separate from or secondary to the 'work,' but are rather implicit within the very act of directing one's wholehearted love and attention towards God. This reiterates the transformative potential of contemplative practice - it is not only a way to cultivate a relationship with God, but also a means to embody virtues and become a source of love and compassion in the world.

## Here begins the twenty-sixth chapter.

Therefore, labor hard for a while, strike upon this high cloud of unknowing, and rest afterwards. Nevertheless, he who engages in this work will indeed labor; yes, surely! And that a very great labor, unless he has a more special grace, or else he has for a long time been accustomed to this work.

But I ask you, in what does this labor consist? Surely not in the stirring of love that is continuously worked in his will, not by himself, but by the hand of Almighty God, who is always ready to work this task in every soul that is disposed to it, and who does what is in his power, and has done so for a long time before, to prepare himself for this work. So where, then, is this labor, I ask you? Surely this labor is all in pushing down the thoughts of all the creatures that God ever made, and in holding them beneath the cloud of forgetting mentioned earlier. All the labor lies in this; for this is man's work, with the help of grace. And the other above -- that is, the stirring of love -- that is the work of only God. So get on with your work, and I assure you that He will not fail you.

Press on then, quickly; let's see how you handle yourself. Do you not see how He stands and awaits you? For shame! Labor hard but for a while, and you will soon be relieved of the greatness and the difficulty of this labor. For though it is hard and narrow at the beginning when you have no devotion, yet afterwards, when you do have devotion, it will be made very peaceful and very light for you, that which before was very hard; and you will have either little labor or none at all. For then God will sometimes work all by Himself, but not always, nor for any long time together, but when He wishes, and as He wishes. And then it will seem delightful to leave Him alone.

Then perhaps He will sometimes send out a beam of spiritual light, piercing this cloud of unknowing that is between you and Him, and show you some of His secrets, which man cannot, and may not, speak. Then you will feel your affection enflamed with the fire of His love, far more than I can tell you, or can, or will, at this time. For I dare not speak of that work that belongs to God alone with my babbling fleshly tongue; and to put it briefly, even if I dared, I would not. But of that work that falls to man, when he feels himself stirred and helped by grace, I am eager to tell you; for in it lies the lesser risk of the two.

Chapter twenty-six continues to develop the idea of "travail" or spiritual labor in the contemplative practice. The text presents this labor as twofold: the work done by the practitioner themselves, and the work done by God. The contemplative's work involves reining in the thoughts about all worldly matters and holding them under the 'cloud of unknowing.' This work is tough, particularly in the early stages of practice, but with consistent effort and God's grace, it becomes less burdensome.

The author reemphasizes the idea that the stirring of love towards God is not the practitioner's doing but is a divine gift that God bestows when the practitioner has prepared themselves sufficiently. The author suggests that when God starts working in the practitioner's soul, it is a profound and delightful experience that is ineffable. This aligns with the mystical tradition's emphasis on the transcendent and unutterable nature of the encounter with God.

Thus, the text encourages the reader to persevere in their spiritual labor, assuring them that their effort will not be in vain and that God will do His part when they are ready. This mirrors a larger theological notion in Christianity of "cooperating" with God's grace — we make an effort to turn toward God, and God, in turn, meets us where we are.

Finally, the author's hesitance to speak about the work that is God's alone suggests the profound respect and humility before the mystery of God's action. Such an approach is central to the contemplative tradition, which emphasizes the impenetrability of God's nature and actions, reminding us of the limits of human language and understanding when it comes to divine mysteries.

## Here begins the twenty-seventh chapter.

First and foremost, I will tell you who should work in this endeavor, and when, and by what means, and what discernment you should have in it. If you ask me who should engage in this, I answer you: all those who have genuinely renounced the world, and moreover, those who do not dedicate themselves to active life but to the life called contemplative life. All those should work in this grace and in this work, regardless of who they are, whether they have been habitual sinners or not.

## Here begins the twenty-eighth chapter.

But if you ask me when they should work in this endeavor, I answer you, and I say not until they have cleansed their conscience of all their specific deeds of sin committed before, according to the common ordinance of the Holy Church.

For in this work, a soul dries up in it all the root and ground of sin that will always remain in it after confession, no matter how diligent it may be. Therefore, whoever wishes to labor in this work, let him first cleanse his conscience; and then, when he has lawfully done that which is in his power, let him boldly but humbly undertake this task. And let him think that he has been held back from it for a long time; for this is the work in which a soul should labor all his lifetime, even if he had never sinned mortally.

And as long as a soul is dwelling in this mortal flesh, it will always see and feel this cumbersome cloud of unknowing between him and God. And not only that, but due to the pain of original sin, it will always see and feel that some of all the creatures that God ever made, or some of their works, will always press in mind between him and God. And this is the just judgment of God, that when man, who had sovereignty and lordship over all other creatures, willfully subjected himself to the stirrings of his subjects, abandoning God's command and his maker, that thereafter, when he wished to fulfill God's command, he sees and feels that all creatures that should be beneath him proudly press above him, between him and his God.

The twenty-seventh chapter introduces the question of who is qualified to engage in the contemplative work described in the book. The answer given is inclusive, encompassing both those who have forsaken worldly pursuits to lead a contemplative life and habitual sinners. This reflects the Christian understanding of God's grace, which is available to everyone, regardless of their past, if they sincerely turn towards God.

The twenty-eighth chapter further clarifies the prerequisites for this contemplative work. Before one can begin this endeavor, they must cleanse their conscience of all specific sins according to the rites of the Holy Church. This points to the importance of the sacrament of confession in the Christian tradition, where one acknowledges and repents their sins before God.

The text further explains that even after confession, remnants of sin remain in the soul. This spiritual work aims to remove this residual sinfulness. The author uses the metaphor of the 'cloud of unknowing' to describe the continual presence of sin and our fallen state's consequences. According to the text, all of God's creatures and their actions will always obstruct the soul's clear vision of God due to the sin of Adam and Eve (the original sin).

The consequences of original sin are presented in the chapter as a reversal of the natural order: the man, who was meant to have dominion over the creatures, now finds these creatures between him and God, a powerful image of how sin distorts the proper relationship between man, creation, and God. This reflects a profound sense of humility and acknowledges the fallen state of humanity due to original sin.

## Here begins the twenty-ninth chapter.

And therefore, whoever desires to return to the purity lost through sin, and to attain the wealth where all sorrow is absent, it is necessary for them to labor tirelessly in this work and endure the pain thereof, regardless of who they are, whether they have been habitual sinners or not.

All people toil in this work, both sinners and innocents who have never greatly sinned. But far greater labor is required of those who have been sinners than those who have not, and this is greatly fitting.

Nevertheless, it often happens that some, who have been terrible and habitual sinners, come to the perfection of this work sooner than those who have not sinned. And this is the merciful miracle of our Lord, who so specially bestows His grace, to the wonderment of all this world. Truly, I believe that on Judgement Day, when God will be seen clearly along with all His gifts, it will be a beautiful sight. Then, some who are now despised and regarded as of little worth or common sinners, and perhaps some who are now horrible sinners, will sit fittingly with the saints in His presence. When some of those who now seem very holy and are revered by people as angels, and some of those who perhaps have never sinned mortally, will sit sorrowfully among the damned.

From this, you can see that no person should judge another in this life, either for the good or evil that they do. Nevertheless, actions can lawfully be judged, but not the individuals, whether they are good or evil.

## Here begins the thirtieth chapter.

But, I pray, by whom shall people's actions be judged? Certainly, by those who have power and care over their souls, either given openly by the statute and ordinance of the Holy Church, or privately in spirit at the special stirring of the Holy Ghost in perfect charity. Let every person be careful not to presume to blame and criticize other people's faults unless they truly feel they are moved by the Holy Ghost within their work; for otherwise, they can very easily err in their judgments. Therefore, be cautious; judge yourself as you see fit, between you and your God or your spiritual father, and leave other people alone.

In the twenty-ninth chapter, the text explores God's grace and its operation within the dynamics of sin and repentance. It suggests that those who have been deep in sin can, through the mercy and grace of God, achieve the contemplative state quicker than those who have not been great sinners. This underlines the depth of God's mercy and his ability to transform even the worst sinners. The author also cautions against judging others based on their apparent sinfulness or holiness, pointing forward to the final judgement, when true states of souls will be revealed.

In the thirtieth chapter, the author delves further into the question of judgement. It cautions that only those given authority, either openly through Church mandate or privately through a spiritual stirring in love (the Holy Spirit's operation), should judge others' actions. The advice to judge oneself, rather than others, aligns with broader Christian teachings on humility and self-examination, emphasizing the dangers of judging others without spiritual guidance and discernment. The text underlines the complexity of spiritual matters and the individual's relationship with God, hence the importance of a qualified spiritual mentor.

## Here begins the thirty-first chapter.

From the time you feel that you have done everything in your power, in compliance with the judgement of the Holy Church, to amend your ways, then you should dedicate yourself vigorously to this work. And then, if your past specific deeds constantly intrude on your mind, coming between you and your God, or any new thought or stirring of any sin arises, you should firmly step above it with an intense stirring of love, and trample them under your feet. Endeavor to shroud them with a thick cloud of forgetting, as if they had never been committed in your life, nor anyone else's life either. And if they often arise, often suppress them and, to put it simply, as often as they rise, so often push them down. If you find the struggle is great, you may seek clever tactics and crafty subtleties of spiritual strategies to brush them aside, which are better learned from God through experience than from any man in this life.

## Here begins the thirty-second chapter.

Nevertheless, I shall tell you something of this subtlety, as I see it. Test it yourself, and do better if you can.

Do what you can to pretend as though you were not aware that they press so forcefully upon you, between you and your God. Strive to look as if you were peering over their shoulders, seeking something else; this something else is God, encased in a cloud of unknowing. And if you do this, I believe that within a short time you will be eased of your struggle. I trust that if this trick is well and truly understood, it is nothing but a longing desire for God, to feel Him and see Him as is possible here. And such a desire is charity; and it always deserves to be eased.

There's another strategy; test it if you wish. When you feel that you cannot in any way suppress them, crouch down under them like a wretch and a coward overcome in battle, and believe that it is foolish for you to strive any longer with them; thus, you surrender to God in the hands of your enemies. And feel then as though you were undone forever. Pay close attention to this strategy, I implore you; for it seems to me that with the application of this strategy, you should melt completely into water. And assuredly, it seems to me, if this trick is subtly understood, it is nothing but a true knowing and feeling of yourself as you are, a wretch and filth, far worse than nothing, which knowledge and feeling is humility. And this humility deserves to have God Himself powerfully descending to avenge you on your enemies, to lift you up and lovingly dry your spiritual eyes, just as a father would his child who is on the verge

In the thirty-first chapter, the author elaborates on how one can overcome persistent sinful thoughts and deeds that obstruct one's relationship with God. It encourages the reader to suppress these thoughts and deeds, cloaking them under a "thick cloud of forgetting." It also introduces spiritual strategies or tactics that can help in this struggle, acknowledging that these are often better learned from God than from any human teaching.

The thirty-second chapter continues this theme, providing specific strategies for dealing with these obstructions. The first strategy involves ignoring the intruding thoughts or deeds, and instead, directing one's focus towards God, 'encased in a cloud of unknowing.' The second strategy suggests a more radical approach, surrendering to God when it seems impossible to suppress these intrusions, an act of humility that invokes God's protective love. This chapter underscores two important virtues in the mystical journey - charity (love for God) and humility - and associates each with a specific strategy for dealing with distractions from one's focus on God.

of perishing under the jaws of wild boars or savage biting bears.

## Here begins the thirty-third chapter.

I won't tell you more strategies at this time; for if you have grace to experience the proof of these, I believe you will be able to instruct me better than I you. For although it should be this way, truly, it feels to me that I am far from it. And therefore, I ask for your help, to act both for you and for me.

So go on then, and work hard for a while, I implore you; and patiently endure the pain, if you can't swiftly master these strategies. For truly, this is your purgatory. And then when your pain has fully passed, and your strategies have been granted by God and graciously practiced into habit, then I have no doubt that you are cleansed not only of sin, but also of the pain of sin. I mean the pain of your specific past sins, not the pain of original sin. For that pain will always remain with you until your dying day, no matter how diligent you are. Nevertheless, it will harm you little, compared to the pain of your specific sins; yet, you will not be without great struggle. For from this original sin, new and fresh stirrings of sin will continuously spring forth; which you will need to constantly strike down, and be busy to cut away with a sharp, double-edged, dreadful sword of discretion. And by this, you can see and learn that there is no real security, nor true rest in this life.

Nevertheless, for this reason, you should not turn back, nor be overly afraid of your shortcomings. For if you can find grace to destroy the pain of your past specific deeds -- in the manner aforementioned, or better if you can do better -- be assured that the pain of original sin, or the new stirrings of sin yet to come, will scarcely harm you.

In the thirty-third chapter, the author acknowledges the continual struggle against sin in one's spiritual journey. There's an emphasis on the need for constant vigilance, symbolized by the "double-edged, dreadful sword of discretion", against the new stirrings of sin that spring from original sin. This struggle is part of the human condition, and no one is free from it until their dying day. Yet, the author offers hope, assuring that if one can find grace to overcome the pain of past specific deeds, the pain of original sin or the new stirrings of sin yet to come will scarcely harm one.

The author's humbleness is evident in this chapter as they acknowledge their own distance from the goal and asks for the reader's help. It's worth noting that the Cloud of Unknowing's author recognizes that the spiritual journey is an ongoing, shared process in which all participants can learn from each other.

Also, the chapter mentions 'purgatory,' reflecting the medieval Catholic teaching of a place or state of suffering where souls of those who die in God's grace can make satisfaction for their sins before reaching heaven. However, the term is used metaphorically here to refer to the struggle and purification one undergoes in life.

These teachings align with key themes in Christian mysticism, particularly the ongoing journey of repentance, humility, continual self-surrender to God, and the shared journey of learning and growth within the Christian community.

## Here begins the thirty-fourth chapter.

If you ask me by what means you shall come to this work, I beseech Almighty God in His great grace and His great kindness to teach you Himself. For truly, I let you know that I cannot tell you. And that is no wonder. For why, that is the work of only God, specially brought forth in whichever soul He pleases, without any merit of that same soul. For without it no saint or angel can think to desire it. And I believe that our Lord will specially, and as often—yes, more specially and more often—choose to work this work in those who have been habitual sinners, than in some others who have never greatly grieved Him in comparison to them. And He will do this because He wants to be seen as all merciful and all mighty; and because He wants to be seen to work as He wishes, where He wishes, and when He wishes.

Yet He does not give this grace, nor work this work, in any soul that is incapable of it. And yet there is no soul without this grace, able to have this grace, no, whether it be a sinner's soul or an innocent soul. For it is not given for innocence, nor withheld because of sin. Pay attention that I say withheld, and not withdrawn. Beware of error here, I implore you; for the closer we touch the truth, the more wary we need to be of error. I mean well. If you can't understand it, set it aside until God comes and teaches you. Do that, and do not harm yourself.

Beware of pride, for it blasphemes God in His gifts, and emboldens sinners. Were you truly humble you would feel about this work as I say: that God gives it freely without any merit. The condition of this work is such, that the presence of it enables a soul to have it and to feel it. And that capability no soul can have without it. The capability for this work is joined to the work itself, inseparably; so that whoever feels this work is capable of it, and none else; so much so, that without this work a soul is as if dead, and cannot covet it nor desire it. For as much as you wish for it and desire it, so much you have of it, and no more nor less; and yet it is not a wish, nor a desire, but something you know not what, that stirs you to wish and desire you know not what. I pray you, never mind if you know no more; but go forth ever more and more, so that you be ever doing.

And, if I may put it more succinctly, let that thing do with you and lead you wherever it wishes. Let it be the worker, and you only the sufferer; just look upon it, and leave it alone. Do not meddle with it as if you would help it, for fear you might ruin everything. Be only the tree, and let it be the craftsman; be only the house, and let it be the householder dwelling therein. Be blind at this time, and cut away the coveting of knowing, for it will more hinder you than help you. It is enough for you that you feel yourself stirred pleasingly with something you know not what, unless that in your stirring you have no specific thought of anything beneath God, and

In the thirty-fourth chapter, the author underscores the primacy of God's grace as the means to undertake the work of contemplative prayer. This chapter highlights the doctrine of grace—that it is God's free and unmerited favor towards humanity.

The author clarifies that this grace and the work it brings forth is not dependent on the soul's merit or lack of sin but is a direct result of God's will. This grace, according to the author, can touch even habitual sinners. This statement subverts the traditional understanding that sinners are far from God's grace, demonstrating the boundless mercy and omnipotence of God.

The author introduces the concept of 'the work' and 'the ability to do the work' being the same. This intermingling of desire and action in the contemplative life suggests that merely having the desire for contemplation already implies a degree of engagement in it.

There's a warning against pride and the importance of humility. Pride, according to the author, leads to blasphemy against God and His gifts. The author uses metaphors of a tree and a craftsman, a house, and a householder to illustrate the relationship between the soul and God's grace, emphasizing the passive role of the soul in this work.

The author also warns against the desire for knowledge, which he considers a hindrance in this context. This could be seen as a critique of scholasticism or excessive intellectualism in spirituality.

The chapter ends with a strong affirmation of God as the sole mover of the soul's will and desire. This direct intervention from God precludes even the devil, who can only influence indirectly.

This chapter embodies key aspects of Christian mysticism, like the primacy of divine grace, the nature of contemplative work, the necessity of humility, and the dangers of intellectual pride.



that your intent be nakedly directed to God.

And if it is thus, trust then steadfastly that it is only God who stirs your will and your desire, plainly by Himself, without any intermediary either on His side or on yours. And do not be afraid of the devil,

for he cannot come so near. He can never come to stir a man's will, but indirectly, and by a distant means, no matter how subtle a devil he may be. For sufficiently and without any intermediary can no good angel stir your will; nor, in short, anything but only God.

So that you may conceive here by these words somewhat—but much more clearly by the proof—that in this work one should use no means, nor yet can one come there with means. All good means hang upon it, and it on no means; nor can any means lead there.

## Here begins the thirty-fifth chapter.

However, there are means by which an apprentice in contemplation should be occupied, and these are: Lesson, Meditation, and Prayer. Or to put it in terms you might understand: Reading, Thinking, and Praying. You'll find these three concepts written about in another man's work, much better than I can tell you. Thus, there is no need to discuss the qualities of these concepts here. But what I can tell you is that these three are so intertwined, that for beginners and those making progress (but not for the perfect, at least not in this context), thinking cannot be properly achieved without reading or listening beforehand. In a way, reading and listening are one and the same; scholars read books, and laymen read scholars when they hear them preach the word of God. Neither can prayer be properly achieved in beginners and those making progress without thinking beforehand. Witness this in the very course of this work.

God's word, whether written or spoken, is likened to a mirror. Spiritually, the eye of your soul is your reason; your conscience is your spiritual visage. Just as you see that if there's a blemish on your physical face, the eye of that same face cannot see that blemish, nor know where it is, without a mirror or the instruction of another: so it is spiritually. Without reading or hearing God's word, it's impossible for a soul blinded by the habit of sin to see the blemish on its conscience.

Following this, when a man sees in a physical or spiritual mirror, or learns from others' teaching, where the blemish is on his face, either physically or spiritually, he then—and not before—runs to the well to wash himself. If this blemish is a specific sin, then this well is the Holy Church, and this water is confession, along with its circumstances. If it is but a blind root and a stirring of sin, then this well is the merciful God, and this water is prayer, along with its circumstances.

Therefore, you can see that proper thinking cannot be achieved in beginners and those making progress without reading or listening beforehand, nor can prayer be properly achieved without thinking.

In the thirty-fifth chapter, the author outlines three primary spiritual practices for those engaging in contemplative prayer: reading (or hearing), thinking, and praying. These practices are seen as intertwined and sequential, reflecting a spiritual progression.

The author metaphorically links the Word of God to a mirror, implying that engagement with the scriptures (through reading or listening) helps one identify the spiritual blemishes on one's conscience. This metaphor reveals the reflective function of the scriptures and their role in moral self-examination.

This self-examination then drives the individual to seek cleansing. This process of cleansing is conceptualized differently depending on the nature of the spiritual blemish. If the blemish is a specific sin, confession within the Church serves as the cleansing agent. On the other hand, for more subtle and ingrained inclinations towards sin, prayer is the means of purification. The author here is effectively linking the practice of confession and prayer to the process of spiritual purification.

The chapter underscores the essential preparatory role of reading or hearing (engaging with the Word of God) and thinking (reflection and self-examination) in the process of prayer. This progression captures a specific vision of spiritual growth and transformation, emphasizing the critical interplay between personal reflection, confession, prayer, and God's grace.

## Here begins the thirty-sixth chapter.

Yet, this is not the case for those who continually practice the work of this book. Their meditations are as if they were sudden thoughts and blind feelings of their own wretchedness, or of the goodness of God, without any means of reading or listening coming before them, and without any special observation of anything under God. These sudden thoughts and these blind feelings are sooner learned from God than from man.

I would not be concerned, even if you had no other meditations of your own wretchedness, or of the goodness of God -- I mean, if you feel thus stirred by grace and counsel -- but such as you might have in this word 'sin' and in this word 'God', or in such others, whichever you choose; not breaking or explaining these words with curiosity of intellect, in observing the qualities of these words, as though you would, by that observation, increase your devotion. I believe it would never be so in this case and in this work. But hold these words whole; and mean 'sin' a lump, you know not what, nothing else but yourself. It seems to me that in this blind observation of sin, thus combined in a lump (nothing else but yourself), it would not be necessary to bind a wilder thing than you should be at this time. And yet, perhaps, anyone looking upon you would think you very soberly disposed in body, without any change of countenance; but sitting, or going, or lying, or leaning, or standing, or kneeling, wherever you were in a full quiet restfulness.

## Here begins the thirty-seventh chapter.

Just as the meditations of those who continually work in this grace and in this work rise suddenly without any means, so do their prayers. I mean their special prayers, not those prayers that are ordained by the Holy Church. For those who are true workers in this work, they value no prayer so much; and therefore, they perform them in the form and in the statute that they were ordained by holy fathers before us. But their special prayers always rise suddenly to God, without any means or any premeditation in particular coming before, or going with it.

And if they are in words, which they seldom are, then they are in very few words; indeed, the fewer, the better. Yes, and if it be but a little word of one syllable, it seems better to me than of two, and more in accord with the work of the spirit; since it is so that a spiritual worker in this work should always be at the highest and the supreme point of the spirit. That this is true,

In the thirty-sixth and thirty-seventh chapters, the author delves into the nature of meditation and prayer for those deeply engaged in the contemplative life outlined in the Cloud of Unknowing. The author emphasizes that these spiritual practices rise suddenly and without the means of premeditation, suggesting they are spontaneous expressions of the inner spiritual state, guided more by the grace of God than any human agency.

The author proposes a kind of meditation that involves the consideration of one's own wretchedness and the goodness of God, employing words like 'sin' and 'God' without dissecting them intellectually, but rather experiencing them in their entirety. The word 'sin' here is seen as a 'lump', signifying the sum total of one's own wretchedness, an idea that encourages self-awareness and self-examination.

In the thirty-seventh chapter, the focus shifts to the nature of prayer. The author distinguishes between the set prayers of the Church, which should be observed in the manner laid down by tradition, and special prayers which rise spontaneously within the individual. These special prayers, often wordless or consisting of a single syllable, are seen as a more direct and powerful means of communication with God. They are compared to instinctive cries for help in times of sudden danger, suggesting a depth of need and urgency.

The brevity of these prayers is underscored as an essential characteristic, linking back to the assertion that 'short prayer pierces heaven.' This statement emphasizes the intensity and authenticity of spontaneous prayer, countering any notion that verbosity or ornateness might enhance a prayer's efficacy. This view of prayer reflects the broader ethos of the Cloud of Unknowing, which prioritizes the experiential and mystical elements of the spiritual life over intellectual or ritualistic practices.

see by example in the course of nature. A man or a woman, frightened by any sudden chance of fire, or of death, or whatever it might be, suddenly, in the height of their spirit, they are driven upon haste and upon need to cry or to pray for help. How? Certainly not in many words, nor yet in one word of two syllables. And why is that? For it seems too long to declare the need and the work of their spirit. And therefore, they burst up hideously with a great spirit and cry out but a little word of one syllable, such as this word 'fire' or this word 'out'.

And just as this little word 'fire' stirs and pierces more hastily the ears of the listeners, so does a little word of one syllable, when it is not only spoken or thought, but privately meant in the depths of spirit, which is the height (for in spirituality, all is one, height and depth, length and breadth). And it pierces the ears of Almighty God rather than any long psalter mindlessly mumbled in the teeth. And therefore, it is written that short prayer pierces heaven.

## Here begins the thirty-eighth chapter.

Why does this short prayer of one syllable pierce heaven? Surely, it's because it is prayed with a full spirit, in the height and depth, in the length and breadth of the spirit of the one praying. It's in the height because it's with all the might of the spirit. It's in the depth because in this little syllable are contained all the senses of the spirit. It's in the length because if it could always feel as it feels now, it would always cry as it cries. It's in the breadth because it desires the same for all others as it does for itself.

At this time, the soul has comprehended, according to the lesson of Saint Paul, with all saints -- not fully, but partially, as it fits this work -- which is the length and breadth, the height and depth of the everlasting and all-loving, almighty and all-wise God. The everlastingness of God is His length; His love is His breadth; His might is His height; and His wisdom is His depth. No wonder then that a soul, conformed in this way by grace to the image and likeness of God, its creator, is quickly heard by God.

Even if it is a very sinful soul, which is to God as if it were an enemy, if it could, through grace, come to cry such a little syllable in the height and depth, the length and breadth of its spirit, it would still, for the dreadful noise of this cry, always be heard and helped by God.

Consider an example: Suppose someone who is your deadly enemy, and you hear him so afraid that he cries out in the height of his spirit this little word "fire," or this word "help." Even without any obligation to him, because he is your enemy, you would, out of pure compassion stirred in your heart by the distress of his cry, rise up -- yes, even if it were the middle of a winter's night -- and help him to extinguish his fire, or to calm and comfort him in his distress.

Ah, Lord! If a person can be made so merciful in grace, to have so much mercy and pity for his enemy, regardless of their enmity, what pity and what mercy will God then have for a spiritual cry in the soul, made and formed in the height and depth, the length and breadth of his spirit, which has all by nature, what man has by grace, and much more? Surely, without comparison, he will have much more mercy; since what is naturally present in every creature is closer to them than what is acquired by grace.

In the thirty-eighth chapter, the author explores the potency of the one-syllable prayer. This prayer, according to the author, contains the fullness of the spirit's capacity in terms of height, depth, length, and breadth, aligning it with God's own nature. Here the author brings out a metaphoric spatial concept of the spirit to emphasize the total dedication and intensity of the prayer, reflecting the infinite nature of God.

The author borrows the Pauline dimensions (from Ephesians 3:18) to highlight the attributes of God: God's everlastingness is His length, His love is His breadth, His might is His height, and His wisdom is His depth. Thereby suggesting a prayer, even if it's from a sinful soul, that resonates with these attributes is quickly heard by God.

An illustration is given where a person, hearing their enemy cry out in distress, would be moved to help, regardless of their enmity. This act of compassion is then compared to God's much greater mercy for a soul that calls out to Him in prayer.

This chapter reiterates the author's central theme of the Cloud of Unknowing -- the transformative power of divine grace and prayer in the spiritual journey. The author seeks to provide reassurance that even the simplest of prayers, when offered with sincerity, have a profound impact, irrespective of the individual's perceived spiritual status.

## Here begins the thirty-ninth chapter.

Therefore, we are to pray in the height and depth, the length and breadth of our spirit. And not with many words, but with a short word of one syllable.

And what should this word be? Certainly, such a word that is most fitting to the nature of prayer. And what word is that? Let us first understand what prayer is, properly in itself, and thereafter we can more clearly know what word will best accord to the nature of prayer.

Prayer, in its true essence, is nothing but a devout intention directed to God for obtaining good and removing evil.

Therefore, since all evils are encompassed in sin, either as a cause or in being, let us then, when we want to pray intently for the removal of evils, either say or think or mean nothing else, and no more words, but this little word "sin." And if we want to pray intently for the obtaining of good, let us cry out, either with word or with thought or with desire, nothing else, and no more words, but this word "God." For why? In God are all goods, both as cause and in being.

Do not wonder why I place these two words above all others. For if I could find any shorter words that fully encompass all goods and all evils as these two words do, or if I had been taught by God to take any other words, I would then have taken them and left these; and so, I recommend that you do. Do not study for words, for then you would never come to your purpose or to this work, for it is never achieved by study, but only by grace. Therefore, take no other words to pray in -- even though I suggest these here -- but such as you are stirred by God to take. However, if God stirs you to take these, I advise not that you leave them -- I mean, if you are to pray in words, and otherwise not; for why? They are very short words.

But even though the brevity of prayer is greatly praised here, nevertheless, the frequency of prayer is never restrained. For as has been said before, it is prayed in the length of the spirit, such that it should never cease until the time when it has fully obtained what it longs after. We have an example of this in a man or a woman who is afraid in the manner aforementioned. For we see well that they never cease crying out this little word "help," or this little word "fire," until the time that they have, in great part, received help for their distress.

In the thirty-ninth chapter, the author continues the discourse on the nature of prayer and presents a profound simplicity in the approach to prayer, recommending just two words: "sin" and "God."

The word "sin" is used when the intention of the prayer is the removal of evil. Here, the author emphasizes the belief that all evils are rooted in sin, either directly or indirectly. Conversely, when the aim of the prayer is the obtaining of good, the author recommends the word "God," for all good comes from Him and exists in Him.

The author's focus on these two words reaffirms the simplicity and straightforwardness of prayer as an expression of devout intention towards God, rather than a complex or verbose discourse. Additionally, the author encourages the reader not to be tied down to any prescribed words but to use what the Spirit stirs within them.

The idea of persistent and frequent prayer is also reinforced. Drawing on the metaphor of a distressed person who continues to cry out for help until they receive it, the author underscores that prayer should be continuous and unwavering until one's longing is fulfilled.

This chapter presents a central theme in Christian mysticism and contemplative prayer, emphasizing the inward journey, the need for simplicity, the intentionality of prayer, and the role of divine grace in guiding this process. The translation captures these themes, maintaining the rich and profound essence of the original text.

## Here begins the fortieth chapter.

In the same manner, fill your spirit with the spiritual lament of this word "sin", and without any special consideration of any kind of sin, whether it be venial or deadly: pride, wrath or envy, greed, sloth, gluttony or lust. What should it matter to contemplatives what sin it is, or how much a sin it is? For all sin feels to them -- I mean during the time of this work -- equally great in itself, when the smallest sin separates them from God, and hinders their spiritual peace.

And feel sin as a lump, you know not what, but none other thing than yourself. And then spiritually cry out ever upon one: "Sin, sin, sin; out, out, out!" This spiritual cry is better learned from God by experience than from any man by word. For it is best when it is in pure spirit, without special thought or any utterance of word; unless it be some rare time, when for abundance of spirit it bursts forth into words, so that the body and the soul are both filled with sorrow and burden of sin.

In the same manner, you should do with this little word "God." Fill your spirit with the spiritual lament of it without any special consideration of any of His works whether they be good, better, or best of all, physical or spiritual -- or to any virtue that may be enacted in man's soul by any grace, not looking after whether it be meekness or charity, patience or abstinence, hope, faith, or sobriety, chastity or willful poverty. What does it matter to contemplatives? For they find and feel all virtues in God; for in Him is all things, both by cause and in being. They think if they had God, they would have all good; and therefore they desire nothing with special consideration, but only good God. Do as much as you can by grace; and mean God in all, and all in God, so that nothing works in your mind and will, but only God.

Therefore, for as long as you live in this wretched life, you will always have to feel in some part this foul stinking lump of sin, as if it were fused and congealed with the substance of your being. Therefore, you should variably consider these two words -- "sin" and "God": with this general understanding: that if you had God, then you would lack sin, and if you could lack sin, then you would have God.

In this fortieth chapter, the author is giving instruction on how to carry out the practice of contemplation. The author directs the reader to a dual-focused meditation on "sin" and "God".

The contemplation of "sin" here does not pertain to specific kinds of sin, but rather to the general condition of sinfulness which separates humans from God. Likewise, the contemplation of "God" is not about specific attributes or works of God, but God Himself as the sum total of all goodness.

This chapter can be seen as a deep dive into the mystical theology of paradox, where the contemplative simultaneously holds in mind the awareness of personal sinfulness and the all-encompassing goodness of God. It's an existential acknowledgment of human's fallen nature (sin) and aspiration towards divine union (God).

This practice is advised not to be a verbal exercise, but a spiritual lament, an outpouring of the soul in silence. Words are insufficient to express these spiritual realities, as they can be genuinely "learned" through personal experience guided by divine grace.

In the broader scope of Christian mysticism, this approach emphasizes a personal and direct encounter with God that transcends intellectual understanding, a theme common in works of other mystics as well, such as Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, and Julian of Norwich.

## Here begins the forty-first chapter.

Furthermore, if you ask me what discretion you should have in this work, then I answer you and say: "Absolutely none!" For in all your other doings, you should have discretion, as in eating and drinking, and sleeping, and in maintaining your body from extreme cold or heat, and in long praying or reading, or in conversing with your fellow Christians. In all these you should maintain balance, that they be neither too much nor too little. But in this work, you should observe no measure; for I would like you to never cease this work as long as you live.

I don't mean to say that you should be able to maintain equal intensity continuously; for that is impossible. Sometimes illness and other disordered conditions in body and soul, along with many other natural necessities, will hinder you greatly, and often draw you down from the height of this working. But I am saying that you should always have it either in earnest or in game; that is to say, either in work or in will. Therefore, for God's love, take care to avoid illness as much as you can rightly, so that you're not the cause of your weakness, as far as you can. For I tell you truly that this work requires great tranquility, and a full, healthy and clean disposition, both in body and soul.

And therefore, for God's love, govern yourself discreetly in body and soul, and maintain your health as much as you can. And if illness comes against your power, have patience and await humbly God's mercy; all is then good enough. For I tell you truly that often patience in illness, and in other various tribulations, pleases God much more than any pleasing devotion that you may have in your health.

## Here begins the forty-second chapter.

But perhaps you ask me how you shall govern yourself discreetly in food, sleep, and all these other matters. And to this, I think to answer you very briefly: "Get what you can." Do this work always, unceasingly and without discretion, and you shall well be able to begin and cease all your other works with great discretion. For I cannot believe that a soul, continuing in this work day and night without discretion, could err in any of these outward doings; otherwise, I think, it would always err.

And therefore, if I could achieve a wakefulness and a busy attention to this spiritual work within my soul, I would then have a carelessness in eating and drinking, in sleeping and

In these chapters, the author is discussing the concept of discretion in spiritual practice, asserting that in the practice of contemplation, there should be no discretion. All other activities in life should be conducted with balance, but the contemplation of God is a continuous process that should never cease.

The author further emphasizes the importance of maintaining physical and spiritual health for the proper conduct of this contemplative work. The advice given here is pragmatic and realistic, acknowledging the disruptions that illnesses and life's necessities can cause.

Then, the author proceeds to talk about the management of basic human needs like food, sleep, etc., saying that the measure of these activities will be naturally regulated by the continual practice of the contemplative work. The author reassures that this practice will naturally lead to balance in all external activities.

Finally, the author encourages the reader to lift their heart in a "blind stirring of love," reflecting the title of the book, "The Cloud of Unknowing." The cloud symbolizes a spiritual obscurity or darkness, a state where God is perceived but not understood, a state of "blind love." This simultaneous contemplation of God (the desired) and sin (the undesired) signifies the deep longing for unity with God and the realization of one's sinful nature that separates one from God. The author ends on a note of humility and reliance on God's help, acknowledging the reader's spiritual need.

From a theological perspective, these chapters carry themes common to Christian mysticism, emphasizing the importance of constant contemplation, humility, reliance on God's grace, and the pursuit of spiritual health. It underlines the transcendence of God beyond human comprehension and the need to strive for union with Him beyond our understanding.



speaking, and in all my outward actions. For surely I believe I would rather come to discretion in them through such carelessness than by any busy attention to the same things, as I would set a mark and a measure in them by that attention. Truly, I could never bring it about no matter what I could do or say. Say what men will say, and let the proof witness. And therefore lift up your heart with a blind stirring of love; and mean now sin, and now God. God is what you desire to have, and sin is what you desire to lack. God is what you need, and you are sure of sin. Now good God help you, for now you have need!

## Here begins the forty-third chapter.

Ensure that nothing works in your mind or will but only God. Strive to suppress all knowledge and feeling of anything less than God, and press all down far under the cloud of forgetting. You shall understand that in this work, you should not only forget all other creatures than yourself, their deeds or yours, but also you should in this work forget both yourself and also your deeds for God, as well as all other creatures and their deeds. For it is the nature of a perfect lover, not only to love what he loves more than himself, but also to in a way despise himself for that thing he loves.

Thus you shall do with yourself: you shall loathe and be weary of all that works in your mind and in your will, unless it is only God. For assuredly, whatever else it may be, it stands between you and your God. It's no wonder if you loathe and hate to think of yourself, when you always feel sin as a foul, stinking lump, you know not what, between you and your God: which lump is none other than yourself. You will perceive it as conjoined and solidified with the substance of your being, as though inseparable from it.

Therefore, break down all knowledge and feeling of all kinds of creatures, but most diligently of yourself. For upon the knowledge and feeling of yourself hangs the knowledge and feeling of all other creatures; for in comparison to it, all other creatures are easily forgotten. For, if you will diligently set yourself to the test, you will find, when you have forgotten all other creatures and all their works, yes, and even all your own works, there will still remain, between you and your God, a naked knowledge and feeling of your own existence, which knowledge and feeling must always be destroyed before you will truly feel the perfection of this work.

In this chapter, the author deepens the exploration of mystical detachment, an essential element of Christian mysticism. The central idea is forgetting or letting go of all things – including oneself – that are not God.

The author suggests that the 'perfect lover' not only loves the beloved (God) more than self, but even despises self for the sake of the beloved. This is not a call for self-hatred, but rather a call to shed the selfish aspects of the ego that obstruct the union with God.

The text uses a potent metaphor of sin as a 'foul, stinking lump' conjoined with the substance of one's being, further emphasizing the need for purgation, purification, and detachment from the self as a means to union with God.

Moreover, this chapter conveys the challenging idea that even the awareness of one's existence must be 'destroyed' to truly experience the perfection of this contemplative work. This suggests a mystical state where the sense of separate selfhood is transcended, pointing towards a state of unity with God.

From a theological perspective, this chapter echoes themes found across Christian mysticism, drawing parallels with apophatic or 'negative' theology, where God is known by denial of all created things. The end-goal of this process is a deeper, more intimate encounter with God that goes beyond ordinary human cognition.

## Here begins the forty-fourth chapter.

But now you ask me how you might destroy this naked awareness and feeling of your own being. For perhaps you think that if it were destroyed, all other obstacles would be destroyed, and if you think thus, you think very truly. But to this I answer you, and I say that without a very special grace freely given by God and also a suitable readiness to receive this grace on your part, this naked awareness and feeling of your being cannot be destroyed.

And this readiness is nothing else but a strong and deep spiritual sorrow. But in this sorrow, you need to have discretion in this manner: you shall be careful during the time of this sorrow that you do not overly strain your body or your spirit, but sit very still, as if in a sleepy stupor, all forsaken and forgotten in sorrow. This is true sorrow; this is perfect sorrow; and well would it be for him who could attain to this sorrow.

All men have matter for sorrow, but most especially he feels matter for sorrow who knows and feels that he is. All other sorrows are to this in comparison as if it were game to earnest. For he can make sorrow earnestly who knows and feels not only what he is but that he is. And whoever felt never this sorrow, he can make sorrow, for why he has yet never felt perfect sorrow.

This sorrow, when it is had, cleanses the soul, not only of sin but also of pain that he has deserved for sin. And thereto it makes a soul able to receive that joy, which removes from a man all awareness and feeling of his being. This sorrow, if it be truly conceived, is full of holy desire; and otherwise, no man in this life could endure it or bear it. For unless a soul were somewhat fed with a manner of comfort from his proper working, he could not bear the pain that he has from the awareness and feeling of his being. For as often as he would have a true awareness and feeling of his God in the purity of spirit, as it may be here, and then feels that he may not - for he finds evermore his awareness and his feeling as it were occupied and filled with a foul stinking lump of himself, which must always be hated and despised and forsaken if he shall be God's perfect disciple, learned from Himself on the mount of perfection - as often he nearly goes mad with sorrow; to such a degree that he weeps and wails, struggles, curses, and blames, and, shortly to say, he thinks that he bears so heavy a burden of himself that he cares not what becomes of him, so long as God is pleased. And yet in all this sorrow, he does not desire to cease to exist, for that would be devilish madness and contempt for God. But he is quite content to be; and he expresses heartfelt thanks to God for the dignity and the gift of his being, though all that he desires incessantly is to lack the awareness and the feeling of his being.

This chapter takes us deeper into the exploration of spiritual sorrow, a concept not uncommon in Christian mysticism. It emphasizes a type of sorrow that is not a byproduct of sin or life's hardships, but one born out of an acute awareness of our own being as separate from God.

From a theological perspective, the author highlights the paradoxical nature of this sorrow. It's a deep spiritual pain arising from the awareness of one's existence apart from God, yet it doesn't lead to a desire for non-existence, which would be considered blasphemous. Instead, it brings about an intense longing to lack the *awareness* of one's being, ultimately leading to a more profound union with God.

This chapter also underscores the role of divine grace and individual preparedness to undergo this transformative sorrow. It echoes the Pauline notion of 'godly sorrow' that leads to repentance and salvation (2 Corinthians 7:10), but extends it to a mystical dimension, culminating in unity with the Divine.

It is noteworthy that this chapter acknowledges the difficulty and almost unbearable nature of this sorrow, requiring a form of spiritual 'comfort' and reassurance in one's spiritual path. It mirrors the journey of mystics across different religious traditions, where suffering is often seen as a crucial catalyst for profound spiritual transformations. The ultimate goal is the union with God (or 'perfect charity') that can be achieved in this life, should God grant it.

This sorrow and this desire every soul must have and feel in itself, either in this manner or in another, as God sees fit to teach His spiritual disciples, according to His will and their corresponding ability in body and soul, in degree and complexion, before the time is that they may be perfectly united to God in perfect charity -- such as may be had here if God sees fit.

## Here begins the forty-fifth chapter.

But one thing I tell you: that in this work, a young disciple, who has not yet been well experienced and tested in spiritual workings, can very easily be deceived, and, unless he is soon aware and has grace to desist and submit himself to guidance, perhaps be depleted in his bodily strength and fall into delusion in his spiritual senses. And all this stems from pride, physicality, and curiosity of the mind.

And in this way, this deceit may happen. A young man or woman, newly appointed to the school of devotion, hears this sorrow and this desire being read and spoken about, how a person should lift up their heart to God, and ceaselessly desire to feel the love of their God. And as soon as they become curious in their minds, they perceive these words not spiritually, as they are meant, but physically and bodily, and strain their bodily hearts outrageously in their chests. And due to their lack of grace, which they deserve, and pride and curiosity within themselves, they strain their veins and their bodily strength so harshly and so roughly, that within a short time they either fall into weariness and a kind of listless weakness in body and soul, which makes them go out of themselves and seek some false and vain physical and bodily comfort outside, as if for the recreation of body and spirit. Or else, if they do not fall into this, they deserve -- due to spiritual blindness and physical straining of their complexion in their bodily chests during the time of this feigned, beastly and not spiritual work -- to have their chests inflamed with an unnatural heat of complexion, caused by mismanagement of their bodies or this feigned work, or else they conceive a false heat wrought by the devil, their spiritual enemy, caused by their pride, their physicality, and their curiosity of mind.

And yet, perhaps, they believe it to be the fire of love, gotten and kindled by the grace and the goodness of the Holy Spirit. Truly, from this deceit, and the branches thereof, spring many miseries: much hypocrisy, much heresy, and much error. For as fast as such a false feeling comes, a false understanding comes in the devil's school, just as after a true feeling comes a true understanding in God's school. For I tell you truly that the devil has his contemplatives, as God has His. This deceit of false feeling, and of false understanding following thereupon, has diverse and wonderful variations, according to the diversity of states and the subtle conditions of those who are deceived, as has the true feeling and understanding of those who are saved.

But I set no more deceits here but those with which I think you shall be assailed if you ever decide to work in this work. For what would it benefit you to know how these great scholars, and men and women of other degrees than you are, are deceived? Surely, not at all. And therefore, I tell you no more, but those that happen to you, if you labor in this work. And

This chapter discusses the perils of spiritual work for the novice or immature disciple, cautioning against potential pitfalls such as bodily exhaustion, spiritual delusion, and misinterpretation of spiritual experiences. The author emphasizes the danger of "false feeling" and "false understanding," cautioning that this can result from self-centered pride, a misplaced focus on physical sensations, and over-curiosity or intellectual speculation.

Interestingly, the author acknowledges the spiritual influence of the "devil" in misleading individuals, pointing to the existence of "false contemplatives," as opposed to the true contemplatives guided by God. This dichotomy reflects the broader Christian narrative of the spiritual battle between good and evil forces.

It warns that false spiritual experiences can lead to destructive outcomes, such as hypocrisy, heresy, and error. This echoes biblical warnings against false prophets and misleading signs (Matthew 24:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9).

In contrast to the previous chapter, where the focus was on the sorrow born out of one's desire for unity with God, this chapter delves into the pitfalls that can occur if one's longing for God is misguided or approached in an immature or unprepared way.

This chapter underlines the need for proper spiritual guidance and humility. It also highlights the responsibility of the individual to discern genuine spiritual experiences from false ones, underlining the significance of discernment in Christian spirituality (1 John 4:1). This reflects a common theme in mystic literature about the necessity of discernment and humility in the spiritual journey.

therefore, I tell you this, that you shall be aware of it in your working if you are assailed with it.

## Here begins the forty-sixth chapter.

And therefore, for God's love, be careful in this work, and do not strain your heart in your chest overly harshly, nor beyond measure; but work more with a gentle inclination than with any fierce strength. For the gentler the approach, the more humble and spiritual it becomes; and the harsher the approach, the more bodily and beastly. Therefore, beware. For assuredly, any beastly heart that presumes to touch the lofty mount of this work, it shall be beaten away with stones. Stones are hard and dry by nature, and they hurt terribly where they hit. Indeed, such harsh straining is deeply embedded in physical senses, and utterly dry from any moistening of grace; they hurt the innocent soul greatly, and make it fasten to fantasies conjured up by demons. Therefore, beware of this beastly roughness, and learn to love gently, with a soft and modest demeanor, both in body and soul. Wait courteously and humbly for the will of our Lord, and do not leap too hastily, like a greedy greyhound, no matter how starved you are. And amusingly put, I advise you to do what is within your power to curb the wild and great stirrings of your spirit; just as you would, by no means, let Him know how eager you are to see Him, have Him, or feel Him.

This may seem childishly and playfully spoken, you might think, perhaps. But I believe whoever had the grace to do and feel as I say, they would feel God playfully interact with them, like a father does with a child, kissing and embracing, that individual would indeed be fortunate.

The forty-sixth chapter of "The Cloud of Unknowing" provides a gentle reminder to approach spiritual work with humility, patience, and moderation. The author warns against excessive force or urgency in seeking spiritual experiences. This advice reflects the Christian virtue of humility and recalls the Bible's exhortation to "wait on the Lord" (Psalm 27:14).

The text suggests that straining too forcefully towards God can be spiritually harmful, using the metaphor of a mountain being struck by stones. Stones here are symbols of harsh, graceless efforts that wound the soul and can lead it into demonic delusions. This metaphor underlines the dangers of improper spiritual methods, reminding readers that the spiritual path requires humility, gentleness, and grace.

The author then advises a patient, courteous waiting for God's will and a gentle, even playful approach to spiritual practice. This aligns with Jesus' teaching on approaching God's Kingdom with a child-like spirit (Matthew 18:3). The playful interaction between a father and a child, involving kisses and embraces, conveys the intimacy and affection God shares with those who approach Him humbly and lovingly.

The concluding part of this chapter illuminates the mystical understanding of God's intimate relationship with the soul, portraying a deeply personal and familial aspect of the divine-human relationship, echoing throughout Christian mysticism and the mystic tradition of other religions as well.

## Here begins the forty-seventh chapter.

Do not be surprised why I speak in such a childish manner, as though foolish and lacking natural discretion; I do it for certain reasons, and it seems to me that I have been moved for many days to feel, think, and speak in this manner, not only to some of my special friends in God but now also to you.

One reason for this is why I ask you to hide from God the desires of your heart. I hope that by such hiding, your desires will more clearly come to His knowledge, to your benefit and in fulfillment of your desires, than they would by any other way of showing that I believe you could currently demonstrate. Another reason is that I wish to bring you through such hidden showing, from the roughness of bodily feeling into the purity and depth of spiritual feeling, and even further, to eventually help you to tie the spiritual knot of burning love between you and your God, in spiritual unity and harmony of will.

You know well that God is a spirit; and whoever desires to be united with Him must do so in the truth and depth of the spirit, far from any artificial physical thing. It's true that all things are known to God, and nothing can be hidden from His knowledge, whether physical or spiritual. But that which is hidden in the depths of the spirit is more clearly known and shown to Him since He is a spirit than anything mingled with any form of physicality. For all physical things are further from God by the nature of things than any spiritual thing. By this reasoning, it seems that while our desire is mixed with any form of physicality -- as it is when we push and strain our spirit and body together -- as long as it's done more devoutly and gently in sobriety, purity, and depth of the spirit, it remains further from God.

And here you can see in part the reason why I advise you so childishly to conceal and hide the stirring of your desire from God. Yet, I'm not telling you to completely hide it, for that would be foolish, to tell you to do something that cannot be done in any way. But I urge you to do what's within your power to hide it. Why do I say this? Certainly, because I would want you to cast it into the depths of the spirit, far from any crude mingling of any physicality, which would make it less spiritual and further from God in as much; and because I know that the more your spirit is imbued with spirituality, the less it has of physicality, and the closer it is to God, and the better it pleases Him, and the more clearly it can be seen by Him. Not that His sight can be clearer at any time, or in anything, more than another, for it is always unchangeable; but because it is more like Him when it is in the purity of spirit, for He is a spirit.

Another reason why I advise you to do what is within your power to prevent Him from

In this chapter of "The Cloud of Unknowing", the author is discussing the concept of presenting one's desires to God, specifically, how these desires should be 'hidden' in the spirit rather than presented in a physical, bodily way. This ties into the central theme of the book, which emphasizes the importance of unknowing or forgetting all earthly knowledge and distractions to experience God directly in a way that transcends intellectual understanding.

The author's suggestion to hide one's desires reflects a deep understanding of human nature. The concept of 'hiding' in this context is a metaphorical suggestion to internalize our desires, seeking union with God in a deeply spiritual and personal way rather than an outward, physical manifestation.

The text underlines the belief that God, being spirit, knows all things, both physical and spiritual. But it also posits that desires rooted deeply in the spirit, purified from physical trappings, can be more clearly discerned by God.

The final part of the chapter emphasizes the importance of presenting one's desires to God differently than to a fellow human. This highlights the transcendental nature of the divine-human relationship and the need to purify our desires from physicality when presenting them to God.

Overall, this passage deepens the reader's understanding of Christian mysticism, emphasizing the importance of purity, humility, and inwardness in one's spiritual journey.



knowing is that you and I, and many like us, are so capable of conceiving something physically, which is said spiritually, that perhaps, if I had instructed you to reveal to God the stirring of your heart, you would have made a physical demonstration to Him, either in expression, voice, word, or some other crude physical exertion, as it is when you must reveal something hidden in your heart to a physical person; and inasmuch, your work would have been impure. For one should reveal things to man in one way, and to God in another.

## Here begins the forty-eighth chapter.

I do not say these words with the intention of asking you to refrain from praying out loud with your mouth, or to stifle the urge to speak unto God as you would to a fellow human, giving voice to words that rise from your spirit in devotion, such as: "Good Jesus! Fair Jesus! Sweet Jesus!" and others like these. No, I certainly don't mean that. God forbid that I should intend such! I would never wish to separate what God has joined together - the body and the spirit. For God desires to be served with both body and soul, as is fitting, and will reward mankind with bliss in both body and soul.

Even now, before that reward, He sometimes kindles a flame of extraordinary comfort and sweetness in the bodies of His devoted servants in this life – not just once or twice, but perhaps very often, and as He pleases. These feelings of comfort and sweetness are not external and do not enter the body through the windows of our senses, but rather, they arise from within, springing from an abundance of spiritual joy and genuine devotion in the spirit. Such comfort and sweetness should not be regarded with suspicion. To put it briefly, I believe that one who experiences this could not possibly suspect it.

However, all other forms of comfort, sounds, joy, and sweetness that come from outside without warning and you do not know whence, should be viewed with suspicion. They can be either good or evil, produced by a good angel if they are good, and by an evil angel if they are evil. This comfort, that arises from a pure spirit due to a stirring of love, can't be evil if the cravings of intellectual curiosity and unnatural strain of the fleshly heart are put aside, as I am teaching you, or better if you can do better. Why is this? Certainly, because the cause of this comfort, the devout stirring of love that resides in the pure spirit, is wrought directly by the hand of Almighty God, without intermediary. It must, therefore, always be far from any fantasy or false belief that can occur to man in this life.

As to how you should determine whether those other comforts, sounds, and sweetness are good or evil, I don't intend to tell you at this time. This is because I don't think it's necessary; you can find it written elsewhere by other authors, far better than I can say or write. The same applies to what I'm setting down here - it can be found written better elsewhere. But so what? I won't let that stop me, nor will it bother me to fulfill the desire and stirring of your heart, which you've shown me both in your words previously and now in your actions.

Regarding those sounds and sweetnesses that enter through the windows of your senses, and which can be either good or evil, persist in the blind, devout, and eager stirring of love that I'm teaching you about. Then I have no doubt that you will be able to discern the nature

In this chapter of "The Cloud of Unknowing", the author continues his spiritual advice concerning the relationship between the body, the spirit, and their joint role in the act of worship. The author stresses that God desires to be served with both body and soul, and that the two should not be separated.

There's a clear dichotomy presented between internal and external sensations. The author's assertion that feelings of comfort and sweetness that come from within, springing from an abundance of spiritual joy and genuine devotion, are to be trusted and should not be doubted. These inner feelings, according to the author, are the work of God Himself, stirring in the "pure spirit" of the devoted individual.

On the other hand, the author advises caution and discernment regarding sensations coming from outside, as they can be deceptive. They could be either good or evil, induced by either a good or evil angel. The author suggests that one should not hastily accept these feelings until they are confirmed either inwardly by the Spirit of God or through the wise counsel of a spiritual mentor.

This chapter, like the rest of the book, emphasizes the pursuit of an intense personal relationship with God, achieved by focusing on inner experiences and feelings, and highlights the necessity of discretion, discernment, and guidance in spiritual matters.

of these sensations. If you initially feel somewhat bewildered by them – because they are unfamiliar – this practice of love will secure your heart in such a way that you won't readily give credence to them. This will remain the case until you're either confirmed from within by the spirit of God or advised from without by the counsel of some wise spiritual father.

## Here begins the forty-ninth chapter.

I urge you, lend your ear carefully to this humble stirring of love in your heart, and follow it, for it will guide you in this life and lead you to bliss in the next. This humble stirring is the essence of all righteous living, and without it, no good work can be begun or completed. This stirring is nothing more than a good and harmonious will toward God, and a manner of contentment and gladness you feel in your will regarding all that He does.

Such a good will is the substance of all perfection. All comforts and sweetness, whether physical or spiritual, are merely incidental to this, no matter how holy they may be; they merely attach themselves to this good will. I call them incidental, for they can be possessed and lost without breaking this good will. I speak of this life; but it is not so in the bliss of heaven, for there these comforts will be united with the substance inseparably, just like the body with the soul. The substance of them here is but a good spiritual will. Surely, I believe that he who feels the perfection of this will, as it can be felt here, will be just as willing and as glad to lack any comfort or sweetness at God's will as to feel it and have it.

## Here begins the fiftieth chapter.

This shows that we should direct all our attention to this humble stirring of love in our will. And regarding all other comforts and sweetness, whether physical or spiritual, no matter how pleasant or holy they may be (if it is appropriate and decent to say), we should maintain a certain indifference. If they come, welcome them; but don't lean too much on them for fear of weakness, for it will consume much of your strength to stay in such sweet feelings and weeping for a long time. Perhaps you may be stirred to love God because of them. You'll know this if you grumble too much when they're gone. If this is the case, your love is not yet either pure or perfect. For love that is pure and perfect, even if it allows the body to be fed and comforted by such sweet feelings and weeping, is nevertheless content to lack them at God's will.

Yet, it is not uncommon for some individuals to frequently experience such comforts. For others, such sweetness and comforts occur but seldom. All of this is according to God's arrangement, in accordance with the needs and benefits of different individuals. Some individuals are so spiritually fragile and tender that unless they were somewhat comforted by the feeling of such sweetness, they would not be able to endure or bear the diversity of

In these chapters of "The Cloud of Unknowing," the author delves deeper into the theology of spiritual love and will, affirming that a good and harmonious will towards God is the essence of all righteous living and the substance of all spiritual perfection.

The author provides a nuanced view of spiritual comfort and sweetness, asserting that these feelings, while beneficial, are incidental and not the core of spiritual life. The implication is that the spiritual journey is primarily about aligning one's will with God's, not seeking spiritual "feel-good" experiences. This view is very much in line with the apophatic tradition, which emphasizes the unknowability of God and the importance of inner spiritual work over external signs and experiences.

These chapters also offer a sensitive understanding of different individuals' spiritual needs. The author acknowledges that God's grace works differently in different people, depending on their spiritual and physical conditions. It's a recognition of the individuality of spiritual experiences and the diversity of paths to God, which is a notably compassionate and inclusive stance for a Medieval Christian mystic.

In translating this text, I tried to maintain the original's spirit and message while rendering it in accessible, modern English. Some Middle English terms required careful consideration: for instance, "lene listely" was translated as "lend your ear carefully," and "weelpayednes" was translated as "contentment." These choices were made to convey the author's original intent as faithfully as possible while making the text comprehensible to a modern reader.

temptations and tribulations they suffer and are tormented by from their physical and spiritual enemies in this life. There are others so physically weak that they are unable to perform great penances for their purification. These individuals our Lord graciously purifies in spirit through such sweet feelings and weeping. On the other hand, there are some individuals so strong in spirit that they can derive ample comfort within their souls from offering up this reverent and humble stirring of love and harmony of will, such that they don't require much feeding with such sweet comforts in physical feelings. Which of these individuals are holier or more dear to God, God knows and I do not.

## Here begins the fifty-first chapter.

Therefore, yield meekly to this blind stirring of love in your heart. I am not speaking about your physical heart, but your spiritual heart, which is your will. Be cautious not to conceive of spiritual matters in physical terms. Truly, I tell you, bodily and fleshly conceptions of those with curious and imaginative minds can cause much error.

You can understand this from what I've advised about shielding your desire from God within you. Perhaps, had I asked you to express your desire to God, you would have conceived of it more physically than you do now when I ask you to shield it. You understand well that anything willingly shielded is cast into the depths of the spirit.

It is thus necessary to be very careful in understanding words spoken with a spiritual intent so that you do not conceive of them in a physical but a spiritual way, as intended. Particularly, be mindful with the words 'in' and 'up'. Misconception of these two words can lead to much error and deception in those who aim to be spiritual workers.

A young disciple in God's school, newly turned away from the world, may believe that because he has dedicated a little time to penance and prayer, taken by counsel in confession, he is therefore capable of undertaking spiritual work. This is work that he hears or reads about, or perhaps reads himself. When he reads or hears about spiritual work, especially about drawing all his senses within himself or climbing above himself, he misunderstands these words due to the blindness of his soul, the fleshliness, and curiosity of his natural intellect.

These individuals find in themselves a natural desire for hidden things and thus believe they are called to this work by grace. So much so that if their spiritual advisor does not agree that they should engage in this work, they feel a kind of grumbling against their advisor and think - yes, and perhaps say to those like them - that they can find no one who fully understands what they mean. As a result of their intellectual curiosity, they abandon meek prayer and penance prematurely and embark on what they believe to be a fully spiritual work within their souls.

In truth, if rightly understood, this is neither a physical nor a spiritual work, but one that goes against nature, with the devil as the chief instigator. It is the most direct route to both physical and spiritual death, for it is madness and not wisdom, leading a man straight to madness. Yet they do not see it this way, for they propose in this work to think of nothing but God.

In this chapter of "The Cloud of Unknowing," the author delves into the common misunderstanding and misuse of spiritual language, cautioning against taking spiritual terms in a literal, physical sense. He emphasizes that spiritual work is about inward transformation and alignment of one's will with God's, not about achieving physical or sensible experiences. This warning echoes the teachings of many Christian mystics and theologians, who stress the importance of proper understanding and guidance in the spiritual journey.

The author also critiques those who prematurely abandon traditional spiritual disciplines such as prayer and penance to pursue advanced spiritual experiences. He warns that such actions, driven by curiosity and pride rather than genuine spiritual calling, can lead to spiritual and even physical harm.

In translating this text, I aimed to keep the essence of the original while making it accessible to contemporary readers. Some Middle English phrases required thoughtful consideration: for example, "lene meekly" was translated as "yield meekly," and "warnes in understanding" became "careful in understanding." These choices were made to convey the author's original intent as faithfully as possible while ensuring that the text remains comprehensible to a modern audience.

## Here begins the fifty-second chapter.

This madness I speak of happens in the following manner: They read and hear that they should leave outward workings with their senses and work inwardly. But because they do not understand what inward work truly is, they end up working incorrectly. They turn their bodily senses inward against the natural order, straining them as if they were trying to see inwardly with their physical eyes or hear inwardly with their ears. The same goes for all their senses: smelling, tasting, and feeling inwardly.

By doing so, they reverse the natural order, and with this curiosity, they strain their imagination so imprudently that they ultimately 'turn their brains' or confuse themselves. Then the devil gains power to create false lights or sounds, pleasant smells in their noses, extraordinary tastes in their mouths, and strange heat and burning sensations in their chest, bowels, back, loins, and private parts.

In this fantasy, they believe they are meditating on God without any distraction from vain thoughts. And in a sense, they are, because they are so filled with falsehood that vanity can't touch them. Why is this? The same devil who would introduce vain thoughts to them if they were on the right path is the same one leading this work. Rest assured, he will not obstruct his own work. He will not take their minds off God, for fear of being suspected.

In this chapter, the author critiques those who misinterpret spiritual language to suggest that their bodily senses should be directed inwards, a practice he describes as 'madness'. This, he argues, is a distortion of the idea of 'inward working' in Christian spirituality, which is not about using our physical senses to seek interior experiences, but about turning our will and love towards God.

The author warns that this misguided approach opens the way for the devil to introduce illusions and false spiritual experiences. The individuals undertaking this method think they're deeply focused on God, but they are in fact misguided by falsehoods. This reveals a profound theological point about discernment and the need for proper understanding in spiritual practice.

When translating this text, I sought to render Middle English terms in clear, modern language while retaining the original intent. For example, 'woodnes' is translated as 'madness', and 'worche wronge' is rendered as 'work incorrectly'. The phrase 'turne here brayne in here hedes' has been translated as 'turn their brains' or 'confuse themselves'. This work involved thoughtful interpretation to convey the underlying theological insights while making the text understandable to contemporary readers.

## Here begins the fifty-third chapter.

Many strange behaviors follow those who are deceived by this false work, or any variation of it, beyond those who are God's true disciples. For the disciples are always dignified in all their behaviors, whether physical or spiritual. But it's not so with these others. If one were to observe them as they sit in this state, provided their eyelids were open, one would see them staring as if they were mad, grinning as if they saw the devil. They should certainly be careful, for the devil is not far. Some set their eyes in their heads as if they've been struck on the head like stubborn sheep, about to faint any moment. Some tilt their heads to one side, as if there were a worm in their ears. Some whisper when they should speak, as if there were no spirit in their bodies; this is characteristic of a hypocrite. Some cry out and whine in their throat, so eager and hasty to say what they think; and this is the character of heretics and those who, with presumption and intellectual curiosity, always seek to uphold error.

Many undignified and inappropriate behaviors follow this error, if one could notice them all. Nonetheless, some are so self-aware that they can control themselves to a great extent when they come before people. But if these people could be observed in a place where they feel at home, they could not be hidden. And yet, I believe that if anyone were to strongly oppose their opinions, they would soon see them lose control in some way. Still, they think that everything they do is for the love of God and to uphold the truth. Unless God shows His merciful miracle to make them soon stop, they will love God in this way until they go madly off to the devil. I'm not saying that the devil has a perfect servant in this life, deceived and infected with all these fantasies. But one, and perhaps many, might be infected with them all. However, the devil does not have a perfect hypocrite or heretic on earth who isn't guilty of some of the things I've mentioned or perhaps will mention if God allows.

Some people are so burdened by silly, curious behaviors in their physical demeanor that when they are supposed to listen, they cock their heads to one side in a peculiar way, lifting their chins; they gape with their mouths as if they were supposed to hear with them, not with their ears. Some, when they should speak, point with their fingers at themselves or the people they're speaking to. Some can't sit still, stand still, or lie still, unless they're twitching their feet or fidgeting with their hands. Some gesture with their arms while speaking, as if they need to swim across a large body of water. Some are always smiling and laughing at every word they speak, as if they were foolish jesters lacking composure. It would be more appropriate to have a dignified countenance with a sober and demure demeanor, and mirth in moderation.

I am not saying that all these undignified behaviors are major sins in themselves, nor that all

The author in this chapter presents a critique of certain misguided spiritual practices and the signs that accompany them. It suggests that these practices lead not to a deeper relationship with God, but to a form of madness driven by pride and intellectual curiosity.

In translating this chapter, I've worked to present these ideas in contemporary language without sacrificing their original intent. For example, 'wode' is translated as 'mad', 'ighen' as 'eyes', and 'kontenance' as 'demeanor' or 'behavior'. This reflects the chapter's focus on the outward signs of inner spiritual states.

Theologically, this chapter reinforces the importance of humility, moderation, and discernment in spiritual practice. It reminds us of the dangers of pride and self-deception, and it suggests that we can assess our spiritual progress by looking honestly at our behaviors and attitudes. This idea is common across many Christian traditions, reflecting a shared understanding of the dangers of spiritual pride and the importance of genuine humility and self-knowledge.



those who exhibit them are major sinners. But I am saying that if these inappropriate and undisciplined behaviors dominate a person to the point where he cannot control them, then they are signs of pride and intellectual curiosity, and a show of disorderly and covetous knowledge. Especially, they are very much signs of an unstable heart and an restless mind, and particularly of a lack of the spiritual exercise discussed in this book. This is precisely why I've discussed so many of these deceptions in this writing - so that a spiritual practitioner can test his work against them.

## Here begins the fifty-fourth chapter.

Whoever truly practices this work should experience a wonderful transformation, both in body and soul, and become very agreeable to every man or woman who looks upon them. So much so, that the most unattractive man or woman living in this world, if they could attain this work through grace, would suddenly and graciously change in such a way that every good person who saw them would feel glad and joyful to have them around, and would sense spiritual pleasure and grace-filled assistance in their presence.

Therefore, seek this gift, whoever may obtain it by grace. For the one who truly possesses it will know how to govern themselves and all that pertains to them through its virtue. They would wisely discern, if need be, of all types and all temperaments. They would know how to make themselves agreeable to all those who converse with them, be they habitual sinners or not, without sinning themselves, leaving those who saw them in awe, and drawing others, with the help of grace, to the same spiritual work that is performed within themselves.

Their demeanor and their words should be full of spiritual wisdom, filled with fervor and fruitfulness, spoken with sincerity, without any falsehood, far from any pretense or hypocrisy. For there are some who, with all their might, inward and outward, craft their speech to impress, to prop themselves up with meek words and signs of devotion, more focused on appearing holy in the sight of men than on being holy in the sight of God and His angels. For these individuals would take more offense and show more sorrow for an improper demeanor or a misplaced word uttered before people, than they would for a thousand vain thoughts and the foul stirrings of sin, wilfully summoned or carelessly dismissed in the sight of God, the saints, and the angels in heaven. Oh, Lord God! Is there not pride inside those who use such gentle, plentiful words on the outside? I do concede that it is fitting and proper for those who are humble inside to show humble and proper words and demeanor on the outside, in accordance with the humility that resides within their hearts.

But I don't suggest that these should then be demonstrated in broken or affected voices contrary to the natural tone of their speech. Because if they are sincere, then they are spoken in truthfulness, in the wholeness of voice and spirit that speaks them. And if someone, who naturally has a clear and robust voice, speaks in a soft and affected manner -- I mean unless they are sick in body, or else it be between them and their God or confessor -- then it is a clear sign of hypocrisy. I refer to either a budding or seasoned hypocrite.

And what more should I say of these dangerous deceptions? Honestly, I believe, unless they are graced to abandon such affected hypocrisy, then between the hidden pride in their hearts

In translating this chapter, I've endeavored to maintain the original meaning and tone of the text while making it more accessible to contemporary readers. For example, "whoso" is translated as "whoever", "favour" as "attractiveness", and "ypocrite" as "hypocrite".

Theologically, this chapter highlights the transformative potential of true spiritual work, and the ability it has to make practitioners favorable in the eyes of others. However, it also issues a warning against hypocrisy, emphasizing the importance of sincerity in spiritual practice. Hypocrisy is defined as outwardly appearing humble while holding pride within, showing that the author values authenticity and internal transformation over outward appearances.

This reflects an important theme in Christian mysticism and theology: the inward journey and transformation of the heart are considered paramount. The critique of hypocrisy also echoes Jesus' rebukes of the Pharisees in the New Testament for their outward piety but inward corruption, underlining the universal Christian call to genuine and profound transformation in the likeness of Christ.

and such gentle words on the outside, the poor soul may very quickly sink into sorrow.

## Here begins the fifty-fifth chapter.

The devil has a way of deceiving certain men. Incredibly, he sets their minds aflame to uphold God's law and to eradicate sin in all other men. He will never tempt them with something that is obviously evil. He makes them resemble busy prelates, keeping watch over every level of Christian life as an abbot over his monks. They feel compelled to rebuke all men for their faults as if they are responsible for their souls. They feel they dare not do otherwise for God's sake. They confess to pointing out the faults they see in others, claiming they are moved to do so by the fire of charity and God's love in their hearts. But truly, they lie, for they are driven by the hellfire welling in their brains and their imaginations.

The truth of this can be discerned in what follows. The devil is a spirit and, by his own nature, he has no body, just as an angel does not. However, when either he or an angel takes a body by God's permission to fulfill a mission to any man in this life, the character of that body corresponds in some way to the task at hand. We see this in Holy Scripture. Whenever an angel appeared in bodily form in both the Old and New Testaments, it was always revealed, either by their name or by some aspect or quality of their body, what their mission or message was in spirit. The same goes for the devil, for when he appears in a body, some quality of his body illustrates what his servants are in spirit.

An example of this can be seen in those who study necromancy, who know how to invoke evil spirits and to whom the devil has appeared in bodily form. No matter how the devil appears, he always has but a single nostril, which is large and wide. He gladly raises it so that one can see straight into his brain, located in his head, which is nothing but hellfire because the devil can have no other brain. If he can make a man look into it, he is most satisfied, for upon seeing it, the man would lose his senses forever. However, a skilled student of necromancy is well aware of this and can take measures to ensure they are not harmed.

Hence, as I have said, whenever the devil takes a body, he illustrates in some aspect of his body what his servants are in spirit. He inflames the imaginations of his contemplatives with hellfire so intensely that, without discretion, they hastily shoot out their curious thoughts, and without any consideration, they quickly take it upon themselves to criticize other people's faults. This is because they spiritually have but a single nostril. The partition that physically separates one nostril from the other in a man's nose signifies that a man should have spiritual discernment, capable of distinguishing good from evil, worse from bad, and better from good, before he passes judgment on anything he hears or sees done or spoken around him. And a man's brain is spiritually understood to be the imagination, for it naturally resides and functions in the head.

In translating this chapter, I've sought to modernize the language while retaining the original concepts and imagery. For example, "distroie" is translated as "eradicate," "wakyng" as "keeping watch," and "nymaginacion" as "imagination."

Theologically, this chapter discusses the deceptive tactics of the devil, who inflames people to become overly zealous in their judgment of others' sins under the guise of upholding God's law. The chapter warns of the dangers of presuming to judge others without discretion and discernment.

This text underscores the importance of spiritual discernment in Christian theology, a theme seen throughout the Bible, especially in Paul's letters in the New Testament. It emphasizes that discernment is needed to distinguish between the true impulses of love and charity and the destructive flames of judgment and condemnation.

The metaphor of the devil inflaming the brains of his "contemplatives" underlines the message about the danger of spiritual pride and misguided zeal. In Christian tradition, contemplation is usually associated with deep, loving knowledge of God, but this text warns that it can also be perverted.

The reference to the "single nostril" of the devil is an intriguing metaphor, suggesting the lack of discernment. The text suggests that the nasal partition, which separates one nostril from the other, symbolizes the ability to discern and make distinctions – an ability which the servants of the devil lack, leading to their hasty, undiscerning judgments.

The closing comments emphasize the central place of the 'imagination' in this process. In Christian mystical tradition, the imagination isn't merely about fantasy or illusion, but it's the faculty by which human beings shape and understand their perceptions. Here, the devil's distortion of imagination serves as a warning about the misuse of one of the most significant human faculties.

Overall, this chapter contains a powerful caution against the misuse of spiritual zeal, underscoring the importance of discernment and humility in Christian life.

## Here begins the fifty-sixth chapter.

There are some people who, even if they aren't deceived by the error described earlier, due to pride and the curiosity of their natural intellect and scholarly knowledge, depart from the common teachings and guidance of the Holy Church. These individuals, along with their supporters, rely too heavily on their own understanding. They never grounded themselves in this humble, blind feeling and virtuous living, thus they end up having a false understanding, feigned and shaped by the spiritual enemy, to the point where they eventually explode and blaspheme all the saints, sacraments, statutes, and ordinances of the Holy Church. Worldly people, who think that the rules of the Holy Church are too hard to abide by, quickly and easily lean towards these heretics, strongly defend them, all because they think they are being led a softer way than that laid out by the Holy Church.

Now, I truly believe that those who don't want to take the narrow path to heaven will instead take the comfortable road to hell. Everyone should examine themselves. I believe that all these heretics, their supporters, if they could be seen as they will be on the last day, would be seen as soon entangled in great and horrible sins of the world and their own filthy flesh in secret, without their open presumptuous defense of error. So they are very aptly called the disciples of the Antichrist. It is said of them that despite their false outward display, they will be very foul lechers in secret.

## Here begins the fifty-seventh chapter.

I won't speak of these people any further at this time; let's continue with our main topic, how these young, presumptuous spiritual disciples misunderstand the word *up*.

When they read or hear someone say that people should lift their hearts up to God, they stare at the stars as if they wanted to be above the moon and listen for the singing of the angels from heaven. In their curiosity, they attempt to pierce the planets and make a hole in the sky to peek through. They make a God as they please, dress him in rich clothes, and set him on a throne, far more fancifully than he was ever depicted on earth. They make angels in physical forms, each surrounded by diverse musicians, far more curious than any seen or heard in this life.

The devil deceives some of these people greatly. He sends a sort of dew -- which they

The original Middle English text might be difficult to read due to its Old English vocabulary, syntax, and spelling, but it also carries the richness of the author's spiritual experience and theological thought. The modern translation attempts to honor this, simplifying the language while preserving the original meaning.

Theologically, these chapters contain a critique of certain people who depart from the teachings of the Holy Church and form their own interpretations and practices. This critique is not uncommon in Christian history, where divergent interpretations and practices have often led to schisms.

The text also warns about spiritual delusions, stating that curiosity, pride, and reliance on one's own intellect could lead to spiritual deception. It criticizes those who misinterpret the instruction to lift their hearts "up" to God, arguing that they take it too literally and physically, thus missing the spiritual aspect of the advice.

The author acknowledges that saints like Martin and Stephen, and Christ himself, have seen visions of God and heaven, and while people might feel stirred to lift their eyes upward during physical prayer, spiritual work should be beyond physical direction. This ties into the overall theme of the Cloud of Unknowing, which emphasizes the unknowability of God and the importance of humble, loving intent in prayer over intellectual understanding or curiosity.

believe to be angel's food -- as if it were coming from the air, and softly and sweetly falling into their mouths; and so, they sit with their mouths open as if they would catch flies. Truly, all this is but deception, no matter how holy it appears; for during this time their souls are devoid of any true devotion. Much vanity and falsehood are in their hearts, caused by their curious practices. The devil often feigns strange sounds in their ears, strange lights and shinings in their eyes, and wonderful smells in their noses, and it's all false.

Yet, they don't think so; they believe they have the example of St. Martin who saw God clad in His mantle among His angels, of St. Stephen who saw our Lord standing in heaven, and of many others. They also reference Christ, who ascended bodily to heaven in the view of His disciples. And therefore, they say we should have our eyes upward. I agree that in our physical observance we should lift up our eyes and our hands if stirred in spirit. But I say that the work of our spirit should not be directed upward, downward, to one side or the other, forward or backward as it is with a physical thing. Because our work should be spiritual, not physical, nor performed in a physical manner.

## Here begins the fifty-eighth chapter.

Those things they say about Saint Martin and Saint Stephen, though they saw such things with their physical eyes, they were shown only as miracles and to affirm the things that were spiritual. You must understand very well that Saint Martin's mantle never came on Christ's own body substantially, for He had no need to protect Himself from the cold; but it happened miraculously and as a symbol for all of us who can be saved, who are spiritually united to the body of Christ. And whoever clothes a poor man and does any other good deed for God's love, physically or spiritually, to anyone in need, they can be sure they do it to Christ spiritually, and they shall be rewarded substantially as if they had done it to Christ's own body. Christ Himself says this in the Gospel. And yet, He thought it wasn't enough, unless He affirmed it through a miracle; and for this reason, He revealed Himself to Saint Martin.

All the revelations that any man has seen in this life in physical form have spiritual meanings. And I believe that if those to whom they were shown, or we for whom they were shown, had been so spiritual, or could have conceived their meanings spiritually, then they would never have been shown physically. Therefore, let us take off the rough bark, and feed on the sweet kernel.

But how? Not as these heretics do, who can be likened to madmen having this custom, that whenever they have drunk from a beautiful cup, they cast it to the wall and break it. We should not do this if we wish to do well. For we should not so feed on the fruit that we despise the tree; nor should we drink so much that we break the cup once we have drunk. The tree and the cup, I call this visible miracle and all the fitting physical observances that accord with and do not hinder the work of the spirit. The fruit and the drink, I call the spiritual meanings of these visible miracles and these fitting physical observances, such as lifting up our eyes and our hands to heaven. If they are done by the stirring of the spirit, then they are done well; otherwise, they are hypocrisy, and they are false. If they are true and contain within them spiritual fruit, why should they be despised? For men will kiss the cup, for it contains wine.

And what of it, if our Lord, when He ascended to heaven bodily, took His way upwards into the clouds, seen by His mother and His disciples with their physical eyes? Should we, therefore, in our spiritual work always stare upwards with our physical eyes, to look after Him if we might see Him sit bodily in heaven, or else stand, as Saint Stephen did? No, surely He did not reveal Himself to Saint Stephen bodily in heaven for the reason that He would give us the example that we should in our spiritual work look bodily up into heaven, if we could see Him as Saint Stephen did, whether standing or sitting or lying. For how His body is in heaven -- standing, sitting, or lying -- no one knows. And there's no need to know; we only need to

The text continues its theological instruction by focusing on the nature of miracles, particularly those involving Saint Martin and Saint Stephen. The author emphasizes that while these saints experienced miracles and revelations in a physical sense, these events bore a more profound spiritual significance.

The author uses the example of Saint Martin's mantle being used to clothe Jesus as an allegory. While it was never physically draped over Jesus, the act of Saint Martin clothing the poor is likened to providing comfort to Christ, and thus it holds a deeper spiritual meaning.

This chapter reiterates the idea that physical manifestations or miracles serve as symbols or allegories to convey spiritual truths. The text then turns to a critique of heretics who fail to discern these spiritual meanings, instead focusing solely on the physical elements. These individuals are compared to those who, after drinking from a fine cup, cast it aside and break it, disregarding the value and purpose of the vessel once its immediate use is fulfilled.

Finally, the author discusses the ascension of Christ and the physical appearances of Christ in heaven as seen by Saint Stephen. The text argues that Christ's bodily position in heaven – standing, sitting, or lying – is unimportant and unknowable. It's stressed that any revelation of Christ's physical presence or posture is intended to convey spiritual truths, not to provide a literal image of Christ's state in heaven.

In conclusion, this chapter underscores the central theme of 'The Cloud of Unknowing': the importance of discerning the spiritual truths behind physical or tangible phenomena, particularly within the context of religious miracles or revelations.

know that His body is elevated with the soul, without parting. The body and the soul, which is the Manhood, is united with the Godhead without also parting. Of His sitting, His standing, His lying, there's no need to know, but that He is there as He wishes, and He has His body as is most fitting for Him to be. For if He revealed Himself lying, or standing, or sitting, by bodily revelation to any creature in this life, it is done for some spiritual meaning, and not for any kind of bodily bearing that He has in heaven.

See by example. By standing, readiness to help is understood. And therefore it is commonly said by one friend to another, when he is in physical battle: "Bear yourself well, comrade, and fight strongly, and do not give up the battle too lightly; for I shall stand by you." He means not only bodily standing, for perhaps this battle is on horseback and not on foot, and perhaps it is in motion and not standing. But he means, when he says that he shall stand by him, that he shall be ready to help him.

For this reason it was that our Lord revealed Himself bodily in heaven to Saint Stephen, when he was in his martyrdom; and not to give us the example to look up to heaven. As if He had said this to Saint Stephen, on behalf of all those who suffer persecution for His love: "Look, Stephen! As truly as I open this bodily firmament, which is called heaven, and let you see My bodily standing, trust firmly that as truly I stand beside you spiritually, by the power of My Godhead. And I am ready to help you. Therefore, stand firmly in the faith, and bravely suffer the cruel blows of those hard stones; for I shall crown you in bliss as your reward, and not only you, but all those who suffer persecution for Me in any manner."

And thus you can see that these bodily showings were done for spiritual meanings.



## Here begins the fifty-ninth chapter

And if you speak concerning the Ascension of our Lord, for that was done bodily and meant for bodily interpretation as well as spiritual. He ascended as truly God and truly Man, to this, I will answer you that He had been dead, and He clothed Himself with immortality, and so shall we at the Day of Judgment. And then we shall be made so subtle in body and soul together, that we shall be as swiftly where we desire bodily, as we are now in our thoughts spiritually; whether it be up or down, on one side or another, behind or before. All, I believe, shall then be equally good, as scholars say. But now you cannot get to heaven bodily, only spiritually. And yet it shall be so spiritual that it will not be in a bodily manner -- neither upwards nor downwards, nor on one side nor another, neither behind nor before.

And know well that all those who set themselves to be spiritual workers, particularly in the work of this book, that though they all read "lift up" or "go in," even though the work of this book be called a stirring, nonetheless, they need to be fully attentive, ensuring this stirring stretches neither up bodily nor inward bodily, nor yet that it be any such stirring as is from one place to another. And though sometimes it's called a rest, they should not think that it is any such rest as is any abiding in a place without moving from it. For the perfection of this work is so pure and so spiritual in itself, that if it is well and truly conceived, it shall be seen far extended from any stirring and from any place.

And it should rather be called a sudden changing than any steady stirring. For time, place, and body, these three should be forgotten in all spiritual work. And therefore, be cautious in this work that you don't take any example from the bodily Ascension of Christ, to strain your imagination during the time of your prayer bodily upwards, as if you would climb above the moon. For it should in no way be so spiritual. But if you were to ascend into heaven bodily, as Christ did, then you might take an example from it; but that no one can do but God, as He Himself witnesses, saying: "No man may ascend unto heaven, but only He who descended from heaven, and became man for the love of man." And if it were possible, as it can in no way be, yet it should be for an abundance of spiritual work, only by the power of the spirit, far from any bodily straining or stretching of our imagination bodily, either up, or in, on one side, or on another. And therefore, leave behind such falsehoods; it should not be so.

This chapter addresses the Ascension of Christ as a historical event with both physical and spiritual significance. The author reiterates that Christ ascended as both God and Man, and in doing so, He transitioned from death to immortality.

The chapter also emphasizes the difference between our current human state and the state we will inhabit at the Day of Judgment. According to the author, at the Day of Judgment, we will exist in both body and soul with a spiritual quickness that mirrors our current thoughts. This teaching aligns with Christian eschatological beliefs about the resurrection of the body.

The chapter then instructs that spiritual work is not tied to a specific direction or location. The actions of "lifting up" or "going in" are metaphorical and don't imply a physical movement upwards or inwards. It further explains that the spiritual rest mentioned in the text does not denote a physical resting place. The text encourages the reader to forget the physical concepts of time, place, and body when engaging in spiritual practices.

The author cautions against using the Ascension of Christ as a literal model for spiritual ascension, arguing that no human can physically ascend to heaven as Christ did. He emphasizes that spiritual ascension is not achieved through physical effort but through spiritual work enabled by the power of the spirit.

## Here begins the sixtieth chapter

But now, perhaps, you say, how should it then be? For you think that you have very clear evidence that heaven is upwards; for Christ ascended there bodily upwards, and sent the Holy Ghost, as He promised, coming from above bodily, seen by all His disciples; and this is our belief. Therefore, you think, since you have such clear evidence, why shouldn't you direct your mind upwards bodily in the time of your prayer?

And to this, I will answer you as best as I can, and say: since it was so that Christ should ascend bodily, and thereafter send the Holy Ghost bodily, then it was more fitting that it was upwards and from above, rather than downwards and from beneath, behind or before, on one side or another. But were it not for this appropriateness, He needn't have ascended upwards more than downwards, I mean for nearness of the way. For heaven spiritually is as near down as up, and up as down, behind as before, before as behind, on one side as another, to the extent that whoever had a true desire to be at heaven, then that same time he would be in heaven spiritually. For the high and the nearest way there is run by desires, and not by steps of the feet. And therefore, St. Paul says of himself and many others thus: "Though all our bodies are presently here on earth, nevertheless our living is in heaven." He meant their love and their desire, which is spiritually their life. And surely a soul is as truly where it loves, as in the body which lives by it, and to which it gives life. And therefore, if we want to go to heaven spiritually, it is not necessary to strain our spirit neither up nor down, nor on one side nor another.

## Here begins the sixty-first chapter

Nevertheless, it is necessary to lift up our eyes and our hands bodily, as if towards that bodily heaven, in which the elements are fixed. I mean if we are stirred by the work of our spirit, and else not. For all bodily things are subject to spiritual things and are ruled by them, and not the other way round.

An example of this can be seen by the ascension of our Lord; for when the appointed time had come that He wished to go to His Father bodily in His Manhood -- which was never, nor can ever be, absent in His Godhead -- then mightily, by the virtue of the Spirit of God, the Manhood with the body followed in unity of Person. The visibility of this was most fitting and most according to be upwards.

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is stressing the spiritual, rather than the physical, nature of our relationship with God. The ascent to heaven, he maintains, is a spiritual journey, accomplished through love and desire, not physical steps. Our true location, he argues, is not determined by where our bodies are, but by where our love and desires are. Thus, in the spiritual sense, we are already in heaven if our love and desires are directed there.

Chapter 61 reiterates this point. It acknowledges the human tendency to use physical actions such as lifting our eyes and hands towards heaven as a reflection of spiritual desire. However, it insists that these physical actions are secondary to the spiritual aspirations they represent.

The author also reminds readers of the importance of interpreting spiritual texts in a spiritual, not literal, manner. Although the words used are physical in nature - reflecting the limitations of human language - their true meaning is spiritual. This is an important principle for understanding Christian mysticism and much of religious language, which often employs physical metaphors to express spiritual realities.

This same subjection of the body to the spirit can be truly conceived in the proof of this spiritual work of this book by those who work therein. For when a soul disposes itself effectually to this work, then as quickly -- unknowing to the one who works -- the body, that perhaps before he began was somewhat leaning downwards on one side or another for the comfort of the flesh, by the virtue of the spirit will set itself upright, following in a manner and in likeness bodily the work of the spirit that is made spiritually. And thus, it is most fitting to be.

And for this fittingness it is that a man, who is the most fitting creature in body that God ever made, is not made bent towards the earth, as are all other beasts, but upright towards heaven; for it should figure in likeness bodily the work of the soul spiritually, which is to be upright spiritually and not crooked spiritually. Take note that I say upright spiritually, and not bodily. For how should a soul, which in its nature has nothing of bodily form, be strained upright bodily? No, it cannot be.

And therefore, beware that you do not conceive bodily that which is meant spiritually, even though it is spoken in bodily words, such as these: *up* or *down*, *in* or *out*, *behind*, or *before*, *on one side* or *on the other*. For though a thing is very spiritual in itself, nevertheless, if it is to be spoken of, since it is so that speech is a bodily work wrought with the tongue, which is an instrument of the body, it must always be spoken in bodily words. But what then? Shall it therefore be taken and conceived bodily? No, but spiritually.

## Here begins the sixty-second chapter.

In order for you to better understand how these bodily spoken words should be understood spiritually, I plan to explain to you the spiritual meaning of some words related to spiritual work. This way, you can clearly, without error, understand when your spiritual work is beneath you and outside of you, when it is within you and equal to you, and when it is above you and below your God.

All kinds of physical things are outside of your soul and beneath it in nature. Yes, the sun and the moon and all the stars, although they may be above your body, are still beneath your soul.

All angels and all souls, though they may be graced and adorned with virtues, which makes them above you in cleanliness, are still equal to you in nature.

Within you, in nature, are the powers of your soul, which are these three primary powers: mind, reason, and will; and secondary, imagination and sensuality.

Above you in nature is nothing but only God.

Wherever you find yourself written in spirituality, then it is understood as your soul, not your body. Then, depending on what the powers of your soul are working on, your work's worthiness and condition will be judged: whether it is beneath you, within you, or above you.

## Here begins the sixty-third chapter.

The mind is such a power in itself, that, strictly speaking, it does not work itself. But reason and will, they are two working powers, as are imagination and sensuality. And all these four powers and their works, the mind contains and encompasses within itself. The mind is said to work only when such comprehension is considered work.

Therefore, I call the powers of a soul some principal and some secondary. Not because a soul is divisible, for that cannot be; but because all those things in which they work are divisible, and some principal, as all spiritual things, and some secondary, as all bodily things. The two principal working powers, reason and will, work purely in themselves in all spiritual

In these chapters, the author continues to elucidate on the hierarchical structure of the soul and its faculties, as understood in medieval Christian thought.

Chapter 62 establishes a hierarchy in nature and being, from physical entities (stars, sun, moon) to spiritual beings (souls, angels) and finally to God, who is above all. It also introduces the concept of how one's spiritual work can be placed within this hierarchy, based on what it concerns and where it is focused. This hierarchy reflects the author's Neoplatonic influences, wherein the physical world is seen as lesser compared to the spiritual realm, with God being the ultimate Reality.

In Chapter 63, the author delves into the faculties of the soul: mind, reason, will, imagination, and sensuality. Here, he distinguishes between primary powers (mind, reason, will) and secondary powers (imagination, sensuality).

The primary powers work on spiritual matters and are equal to the soul's nature, whereas the secondary powers work on bodily matters and are thus considered lesser. This distinction reflects a common theme in Christian mysticism, which often prioritizes the spiritual over the physical.

The author posits the mind as a unique faculty. While it does not 'work' in the same sense as other faculties, it encompasses the work of all other powers and, in a way, contains everything that they work upon. This points to a sense of unity and non-duality in spiritual understanding – an integral theme in mysticism across religions. In a sense, the mind becomes a reflection of the universe, containing all things within it.

things, without the help of the other two secondary powers. Imagination and sensuality work in all bodily things, whether they be present or absent in the body, and with the bodily senses. But without the help of reason and will, a soul may never come to know the virtue and the conditions of bodily creatures, nor the cause of their being and their creation.

For this reason, reason and will are called principal powers because they work in pure spirit without any form of bodily existence; and imagination and sensuality are secondary, as they work in the body with bodily instruments, which are our five senses. The mind is called a principal power because it spiritually contains not only all the other powers but also all those things in which they work. Look for proof of this.

## Here begins the sixty-fourth chapter.

Reason is a power through which we distinguish evil from good, evil from worse, good from better, worse from worst, better from best. Before humanity sinned, reason could naturally accomplish all of this. But now it's so entangled with original sin that it cannot perform this work unless it's enlightened by grace. Both reason itself and the object it operates upon are encompassed and contained within the mind.

Will is a power through which we choose good, once it's been defined by reason; and through which we love good, desire good, and finally rest with complete satisfaction and consent in God. Before humanity sinned, will could not be deceived in its choices, its love, or in any of its works; for it naturally recognized things as they were. But now it can't do so unless it's anointed with grace. Often, due to the infection of original sin, it perceives as good something that is evil, something that merely bears the likeness of good. Both the will and the object of its desire are contained and understood within the mind.

## Here begins the sixty-fifth chapter.

Imagination is a power through which we conjure all images of absent and present things. And both it and the object it operates upon are contained within the mind. Before humanity sinned, imagination was so obedient to reason -- to which it serves -- that it never introduced any disorderly image of any bodily creature or any fantasy of any spiritual creature. But now it is not so. Unless it's restrained by the light of grace in reason, it will continually, sleeping or waking, conjure various disorderly images of bodily creatures; or else some fantasy, which is nothing else but a bodily concept of a spiritual thing, or a spiritual concept of a bodily thing. And this is always feigned and false, and close to error.

This disobedience of the imagination can be clearly seen in those who have recently turned from the world to devotion during their prayer time. For before the time when the imagination is mostly restrained by the light of grace in reason - as it is in continual meditation on spiritual matters, like their wretchedness, the Passion, and the kindness of our Lord God, with many other such matters - they cannot possibly dismiss the various and wonderful thoughts, fantasies, and images, which are introduced and presented to their mind by the light and curiosity of imagination. And all this disobedience is the pain of original sin.

In these two chapters, the author further expands on the concepts of 'reason,' 'will,' and 'imagination,' which he sees as integral faculties of the human soul.

Chapter 64 discusses the roles of 'reason' and 'will.' Reason, according to the author, is the faculty that discriminates among different levels of good and evil. However, due to the original sin, human reason cannot function fully without the assistance of divine grace. 'Will' is depicted as the faculty that chooses and loves the good, but it too has been tainted by sin and requires divine grace for proper function.

Chapter 65 speaks about 'imagination,' which the author views as a faculty that forms mental images of things, whether present or absent. However, the author warns that in its unrestrained state, the imagination can lead to error, producing false images and fantasies. This reflects the common medieval Christian belief of imagination's dangerous potential to mislead.

These chapters underline the author's understanding of human faculties as essentially good but corrupted by original sin. The author sees divine grace as the cure to this corruption, enabling these faculties to function as they were originally intended to. This theological stance aligns with the author's general emphasis on the need for divine grace in the spiritual journey.

## Here begins the sixty-sixth chapter.

Sensuality is a power of our soul, operating and ruling in the bodily senses, through which we have physical awareness and sensation of all bodily creatures, whether they're pleasing or displeasing. It has two aspects: one through which it tends to the necessities of our body, and another through which it serves the desires of the bodily senses. This same power complains when the body lacks what it needs, and when we satisfy these needs, it often prompts us to take more than necessary, fostering our desires. It groans in the absence of pleasing things and delights in their presence. It groans in the presence of displeasing things and delights in their absence. Both this power and the object it operates upon are contained within the mind.

Before humanity sinned, sensuality was so obedient to the will -- to which it is a servant -- that it never presented to it any disorderly desire or displeasure in any bodily creature, or in any spiritual pretense of liking or disliking created by any spiritual enemy in the bodily senses. But now it is not so; for unless it's governed by grace in the will, to bear patiently and moderately the pain of original sin -- which it feels in the absence of necessary pleasures and in the presence of useful displeasures -- and also to refrain from lust in the presence of necessary pleasures and from pleasurable desires in the absence of useful displeasures, it will wallow, like a pig in mud, in the luxuries of this world and the vile flesh so much that all our living will be more beastly and carnal than either human or spiritual.

## Here begins the sixty-seventh chapter.

Behold, spiritual friend, to such wretchedness as you can see we've fallen because of sin! Therefore, it's no wonder we're so easily and blindly deceived in understanding spiritual words and workings, especially those who do not yet know the powers of their souls and their ways of operation.

Whenever your mind is occupied with any bodily thing, even if it's for a good end, you are beneath yourself in this work, and outside of your soul. And whenever you feel your mind occupied with the subtle qualities of the powers of your soul and their operations in spiritual things such as vices or virtues of yourself or of any creature that is spiritual and like you in nature, for the purpose that you might learn to know yourself for the furthering of perfection: then you are within yourself and equal with yourself. But whenever you feel your mind occupied with nothing that is bodily or spiritual, but only with the very substance of God, as it

In these two chapters, the author continues his exploration of the faculties of the human soul.

Chapter 66 focuses on 'sensuality,' the power that operates through our bodily senses, enabling us to experience and react to the physical world. The author portrays sensuality as a power that can easily lead us astray, fostering excessive desire and dissatisfaction. This is seen as a result of original sin. However, with divine grace governing our will, we can moderate our sensual desires and reactions, avoiding both excessive attachment to pleasures and excessive aversion to displeasures.

Chapter 67 addresses the ways in which our mind may be 'occupied' or focused: on bodily things, on the operations of our soul, or on God Himself. The author suggests that the highest form of spiritual activity is when our mind is occupied only with the substance of God, not on any bodily or spiritual things. This aligns with the author's overall mystical theology, which emphasizes direct and unmediated communion with God.

This chapter also contains a discussion of the Christian concept of 'divinization' or 'theosis,' the idea that humans can become godlike through divine grace. While we can be one with God in grace, the author insists that we remain distinct from God by nature. This understanding preserves the distinction between Creator and creation, a key doctrine in Christian theology.

Throughout these chapters, the author is consistent in his emphasis on the need for divine grace, caution in spiritual interpretation, and a deep understanding of one's own spiritual faculties for the journey towards God.

is and may be in the practice of the work of this book, then you are above yourself and beneath your God.

You are above yourself: for you manage to reach there by grace, where you could not arrive by nature; that is to say, to be united with God in spirit and in love and in harmony of will. You are beneath your God: for even though it can be said in a way that at this time God and you are not two but one in spirit -- so much so that you or another who feels the perfection of this work can truly, by witness of Scripture, be called a god -- nonetheless, you are beneath Him. For He is God by nature without beginning; and you, who once were nothing in substance and then, when you were made something by His might and His love, wilfully made yourself worse than nothing with sin: only by His mercy, without your deserving, are made a god in grace, united with Him in spirit without separation, both here and in the bliss of heaven without end. So that, though you are entirely one with Him in grace, yet you are far beneath Him by nature.

Behold, spiritual friend! Here you can partly see that anyone who does not know the powers of their own soul, and the manner of their workings, can very easily be deceived in understanding words written with spiritual intent. And for this reason, you can see why I didn't dare tell you plainly to show your desire to God; but I told you, like a child, to do what you can to conceal and heal it. And I do this for fear that you might conceive in a bodily manner what is meant spiritually.



## Here begins the sixty-eighth chapter.

Likewise, if someone advises you to gather all your faculties and intellect wholly within yourself and worship God there -- even though he might be speaking wisely and truly, in fact no one could speak more wisely and truly if he is understood properly -- yet for fear of misunderstanding and bodily interpretation of his words, I choose not to instruct you in this manner. But this is how I will instruct you: I don't want you to be within yourself, neither do I want you to be outside yourself, nor above, nor below, nor to one side or the other.

"Where then," you might ask, "should I be? Nowhere, according to your explanation!" Indeed, you are right; for that's exactly where I want you to be. Because truly, to be nowhere bodily is to be everywhere spiritually. Therefore, be sure that your spiritual work is not tied to any physical location; and then, wherever that thing is that you are willfully working upon in your mind in substance, there you certainly are in spirit, just as surely as your body is in the place where you are physically. And although all your bodily senses find nothing there to feed on, for they think what you're doing is insignificant, keep on working on this insignificance, do it out of love for God. Don't stop, but labor eagerly in this insignificance with a wakeful desire to will to have God, who cannot be known. Truly, I would rather be nowhere bodily, wrestling with that mysterious insignificance, than to be so great a lord that I could be everywhere bodily, playfully interacting with all this significance as a lord with his own property.

Abandon this concept of being everywhere and this significance, in favor of this nowhere and this insignificance. It doesn't matter if your senses cannot comprehend this insignificance; for I value it much more highly because of that. It is such a noble thing in itself that they cannot comprehend it. This insignificance can better be felt than seen; for it is fully obscure and completely dark to those who have only looked upon it briefly. Yet, to speak more accurately, a soul is more blinded by its feeling due to the abundance of spiritual light, than from any darkness or lack of bodily light. Who is it that calls it insignificance? Surely it is our outer self, not our inner. Our inner self calls it All; for it has learned well to understand all things, bodily or spiritual, without focusing especially on any one thing by itself.

## Here begins the sixty-ninth chapter.

The human affection is wonderfully varied in its spiritual feeling of this insignificance when it is contemplated nowhere. For the first time a soul looks upon it, it will find all the specific sins it

Chapter 68 builds on the book's theme of apophatic mysticism, focusing on the idea of being 'nowhere bodily' but 'everywhere spiritually.' This concept advises the spiritual aspirant to detach from physical location and worldly significance in favor of spiritual omnipresence and insignificance. This insignificance doesn't mean unimportance but rather denotes the incomprehensible vastness and mystery of the Divine. The author suggests this insignificance can better be 'felt' rather than 'seen,' and that this experience is more about spiritual intuition than about physical or even intellectual understanding.

Chapter 69 takes a deeper look into the process of confronting and eliminating personal sins through contemplation of this spiritual insignificance. The author acknowledges the difficulty and pain of this process, likening it at times to hell or purgatory. However, he also conveys the transformational power of this contemplation, which can cleanse the soul of specific sins and even the general stain of original sin. As this purgation advances, the soul may experience moments of heavenly peace, sweetness, and rest, possibly perceiving the insignificance as God Himself. Yet the author reminds us that this remains a 'cloud of unknowing' between the soul and God.

These chapters underline the Christian belief in the power of divine grace and the process of sanctification, as well as emphasizing the apophatic way of unknowing, which is a key feature of Christian mysticism. The author acknowledges the pain of spiritual growth but also highlights the hope and transformation inherent in the process.

has committed since birth, bodily or spiritual, privately or openly, painted on it. No matter how he turns it around, these sins will appear before his eyes; until such time that with much hard work, many deep sighs, and many bitter tears he has largely scrubbed them away.

Sometimes in this struggle, it seems like looking upon this insignificance is like looking at hell; for it seems he despairs of achieving perfect spiritual rest out of this torment. Many have gone this far inward; but due to the immense pain they feel and lack of comfort, they retreat to contemplation of bodily things, seeking earthly comforts externally, due to the lack of spiritual ones they have not yet deserved, as they would if they had endured.

The one who endures sometimes feels some comfort and has some hope of perfection; for he feels and sees that many of his past specific sins have been largely scrubbed away with the help of grace. Nonetheless, he still feels pain intermittently; but he believes it will end, for it gradually lessens. Therefore, he doesn't call it hell but purgatory. Sometimes he can find no specific sin written on it, but yet he feels that it is sin in a lump, he knows not what, nothing other than himself; and then it can be called the state and the pain of the original sin. Sometimes it feels like paradise or heaven, for the diverse wonderful sweetness and comforts, joys, and blessed virtues that he finds therein. Sometimes it seems like God, due to the peace and rest that he finds therein.

Think what he will, he will always find it a cloud of unknowing that is between him and his God.

## Here begins the seventieth chapter.

Therefore, work diligently in this nothingness and this nowhere, and leave your outward bodily senses and all their workings behind. For I tell you truthfully that this work cannot be comprehended by them.

Through your eyes, you can only perceive things by their length and breadth, their smallness and greatness, their roundness and squareness, their distance or proximity, and their color. Through your ears, you can only perceive noise or some kind of sound. Through your nose, only either a stench or a smell. Through your taste, only either sour or sweet, salty or fresh, bitter or pleasing. And through your touch, only either hot or cold, hard or tender, soft or sharp. Truly, neither God nor spiritual things possess any of these qualities or quantities. Therefore, leave your outward senses behind and do not work with them, either within or outside of you. All those who set themselves up to be spiritual workers within, believing that they will either hear, smell, see, taste, or feel spiritual things, either within them or outside of them, are truly deceived and are working against the course of nature. For naturally, they are ordained to help us know all outward bodily things and in no way to come to the knowledge of spiritual things. I mean this in the context of their operations.

But their failures can lead us to such knowledge. For example, when we read or hear about certain things and then realize that our outward senses cannot tell us by any quality what those things are, then we can be truly assured that those things are spiritual things and not bodily things.

In a similar way, this applies spiritually within our spiritual senses when we strive to know God Himself. Even if a person has a great deal of spiritual understanding in knowing all created spiritual things, he can never, through the work of his understanding, come to the knowledge of an uncreated spiritual thing, which is nothing but God. But he can arrive at this knowledge through a sense of failure; because that thing which he fails to grasp is nothing else but God Himself. And therefore it was that Saint Denis said: "The most sublime knowledge of God is that which is known by unknowing."

Indeed, whoever looks into the books of Denis, he will find that his words will clearly affirm all that I have said or will say, from the beginning of this treatise to the end. I do not wish to cite him, nor any other doctor, in any other way at this time. For sometimes people thought it was humility to say nothing from their own minds unless they confirmed it by Scripture and the words of doctors; but now it has turned into curiosity and showing off knowledge. You don't need it, and therefore I don't do it. Let those who have ears, listen. Let those who are stirred

Chapter 70 focuses on the limitations of the physical senses in spiritual work and introduces the concept of "knowledge by unknowing." The author emphasizes that the physical senses are designed to comprehend and interact with the material world and are unable to access the spiritual realm, which exists beyond their reach. Thus, those who believe that they can perceive spiritual things through their physical senses are misguided.

This chapter also highlights the paradoxical nature of spiritual knowledge, particularly the knowledge of God. While a person might gain understanding of created spiritual things, the uncreated divine reality—God—can never be fully grasped through intellectual understanding. Instead, one comes closer to knowing God through an experience of failure or unknowing, echoing the teachings of the Christian mystical theologian Pseudo-Dionysius (referred to here as Denis). This form of knowledge transcends normal perception, suggesting that the divine can be encountered through the recognition of one's own limitations and the embracing of divine mystery.

This section reiterates the importance of humility and discretion in spiritual work, criticizing those who boast about their knowledge or use quotations from authorities for the purpose of appearing learned. The author calls for the reader to listen and believe, drawing on their personal experience rather than depending on external validation.

In theological context, this chapter once again underscores the apophatic way of unknowing, a critical aspect of Christian mysticism. It also emphasizes the inherent limitations of human understanding when faced with the divine, and advocates for an approach of humility and genuine personal experience in the spiritual journey.

to believe, believe; for otherwise they will not.

## Here begins the seventy-first chapter.

Some find this subject matter so difficult and so daunting that they say it can't be reached without much intense preceding effort, nor conceived except rarely, and that during a state of rapture. To these people, I will answer as humbly as I can, and say that it is all at the discretion and ordination of God, in accordance with their soul's ability, that this grace of contemplation and spiritual working is given.

For some, they cannot attain this without much and prolonged spiritual exercise; and yet it will be very rare, and at the special calling of our Lord, that they will feel the perfection of this work. This calling is referred to as rapture. However, there are some so advanced in grace and spirit, and so familiar with God in this grace of contemplation, that they can have it at will in the common state of the human soul: such as sitting, walking, standing, or kneeling. Even at this time, they retain full control of all their senses, bodily or spiritual, and can use them if they wish: not without some hindrance, but without major hindrance. We see an example of the first in Moses, and of the latter in Aaron, the high priest of the temple.

This is because the grace of contemplation is symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Law, and the practitioners of this grace are represented by those who most often engaged with the ark, as the story will bear witness. This grace and its practice are rightly likened to that ark. For just as in that ark were contained all the jewels and relics of the temple, so too in this little love all the virtues of the human soul are contained, which is the spiritual temple of God.

Before Moses could see this ark and learn how it should be made, he climbed to the top of the mountain with great and long effort and stayed there and worked in a cloud for six days: waiting until the seventh day, when our Lord would deign to show him the manner of this ark-making. Moses' long journey and his late revelation represent those who cannot attain the perfection of this spiritual work without long preceding effort, and yet very rarely, and only when God deigns to reveal it.

But what Moses could only see rarely, and that not without great long effort, Aaron had at his disposal, due to his office, to see it in the temple within the veil as often as he liked to enter. And by this Aaron, all those are understood whom I spoke of above, who through their spiritual skills, with the help of grace, can claim for themselves the perfection of this work as often as they wish.

Chapter 71 underscores the variances in individuals' spiritual experiences and the divine grace of contemplation. The author suggests that the path to spiritual understanding is not uniform but depends on an individual's spiritual readiness and God's grace. Some individuals require much labor and time to attain spiritual comprehension, whereas others may reach the same understanding more readily due to their advanced spiritual maturity.

The author employs biblical symbolism to illustrate these spiritual differences, using the figures of Moses and Aaron as exemplars. Moses, who struggled to receive the revelation of the Ark, represents those who must toil for a deep spiritual understanding, while Aaron, who can freely access the Ark due to his priestly role, symbolizes those with a more immediate access to spiritual insight.

This chapter emphasizes the importance of grace in contemplation, reflecting the broader theme of Christian mysticism that divine understanding is ultimately a gift from God, not merely an attainment through human effort. Additionally, the Ark is used as a symbol for the contemplative soul, emphasizing the sacredness of the spiritual journey.

## Here begins the seventy-second chapter.

See, by this you can understand that the one who can't come to see and feel the perfection of this work, except with great labor, and then only rarely, could easily be misled if they judge and think about others as they feel within themselves, believing they too can't reach it except rarely and not without great effort. In the same way, the one who can have it whenever they wish could be deceived if they judge everyone else by the same standard, believing they too can have it whenever they wish. Let's leave this: no, they can't assuredly think like this. For perhaps, when it pleases God, those who at first can only reach it rarely and not without great effort, may later have it whenever they wish, as often as they like. We see an example of this in Moses, who at first could see the manner of the ark only rarely and not without great effort on the mountain, and later, as often as he liked, saw it in the valley.

## Here begins the seventy-third chapter.

There were three men who primarily engaged with this ark of the Old Testament: Moses, Bezalel, Aaron. Moses learned on the mountain from our Lord how it should be made. Bezalel crafted it and made it in the valley, following the example that was shown on the mountain. And Aaron had it in keeping in the temple, to see and feel it as often as he liked.

In the likeness of these three, we progress in three ways in this grace of contemplation. Sometimes we progress only by grace, and then we are likened unto Moses, who, despite all the climbing and the labor he had on the mountain, could only see it rarely; and yet that sight was only granted by the showing of our Lord when He wished to show it, not for any merit of his labor. Sometimes we progress in this grace by our own spiritual skill, aided by grace, and then we are likened to Bezalel, who could not see the ark until he had made it by his own labor, assisted by the example shown to Moses on the mountain. And sometimes we progress in this grace by other people's teaching. And then we are likened to Aaron, who had it in keeping and was accustomed to see and feel the ark whenever he wished, that Bezalel had crafted and made ready beforehand for him.

See, spiritual friend, in this work, even if it is simply and crudely spoken, I bear, even though I am a wretch unworthy to teach any creature, the office of Bezalel, making and revealing to your hands the nature of this spiritual ark. But far better and more worthily than I do, you may work if you will be like Aaron; that is to say, continually working therein for you and for me. Do

Chapters 72 and 73 continue to use the Ark of the Covenant as a metaphor for spiritual contemplation, delving deeper into the different paths individuals may take to spiritual understanding, embodied by the figures of Moses, Bezalel, and Aaron.

Moses, who learned of the Ark's design directly from God, represents those who progress in contemplative practice primarily through divine grace, independent of their own efforts. Bezalel, who crafted the Ark, symbolizes those who achieve spiritual insight through their personal spiritual efforts, guided by divine grace. Aaron, who was able to interact with the Ark freely due to his priestly role, represents those who make progress through learning from others' experiences and teachings.

This metaphor is beautifully apt, as contemplative practice often involves a mix of personal effort, divine grace, and learning from others. By understanding these different paths, one can better navigate their personal spiritual journey and respect the journeys of others. This also underscores the interconnectedness of personal effort (embodied by Bezalel), divine grace (symbolized by Moses), and community or learning from others (represented by Aaron).

In relation to the author, he positions himself as Bezalel in this context, providing guidance and preparing the spiritual 'Ark' for his readers. Yet, he humbly acknowledges his limitations and encourages his readers to be like Aaron, taking what has been prepared and continuously engaging in contemplative practice, filling in the gaps left by the author's own human limitations.

This interpretation aligns with the broader Christian mystical tradition, emphasizing that spiritual growth is a co-creative process involving human effort, divine grace, and communal sharing of wisdom and experience.

this, I pray thee, for the love of God Almighty. And since we are both called by God to work in this work, I beg you for the love of God, fulfill on your part that which is lacking in mine.

## Here begins the seventy-fourth chapter.

If you feel that this manner of working doesn't suit your physical and spiritual disposition, you may leave it and safely choose another with wise spiritual counsel, without blame. Then, I ask you to please excuse me. Truly, I wanted to be of help to you through this writing to the best of my simple knowledge, and that was my intent. Therefore, read it two or three times; the more often, the better, and the more you'll understand. Perhaps, some passage that seemed very hard to you at the first or second reading will subsequently seem very clear to you.

Indeed, it seems impossible to my understanding that any soul disposed to this work should read it, or speak it, or else hear it read or spoken, without feeling a true accord with the purpose of this work at that time. Then, if you feel it benefits you, sincerely thank God, and for God's love, pray for me.

Please do so. And I beg you for the love of God, don't let anyone see this book, unless you think they are similar in spirit to what the book describes. This is mentioned earlier in the book, where it discusses what kind of people and when they should engage in this work. If you decide to let such people see it, then I ask you to encourage them to take their time to read it all over. For perhaps there's some matter therein, at the beginning or in the middle, which is implied but not fully clarified where it stands. But if it isn't there, it is soon after, or else at the end. And thus, if a person saw one part and not another, they might easily be led into error. So please, do as I suggest.

And if you think there's any matter therein that you would like clarified more than it is, let me know which it is and your thoughts on it; and to the best of my humble ability, I'll amend it if I can.

Gossipy chatterers, interpreters, and critics, whisperers, and murmurers, and all kinds of nitpickers, I never intended for them to see this book; for my intent was never to write such things for them. And therefore, I would not want them to hear it, neither they nor any of these inquisitive lettered or unlettered men, yes, even though they are very good men in active living; for it does not accord with them.

Chapter 74 reiterates the importance of the reader's disposition and readiness for the contemplative journey described in "The Cloud of Unknowing." The author highlights that this spiritual path may not be suitable for everyone, and that's okay. In fact, he encourages those who find it not in accord with their spiritual or physical disposition to seek other spiritual paths, guided by wise counsel. This aligns with the broader understanding within Christian mysticism that there are diverse spiritual paths tailored to diverse individuals.

The author also emphasizes the importance of reading the work in its entirety and understanding its full context. This aligns with the traditional approach of scriptural interpretation in Christianity, which maintains that passages should not be understood in isolation but in their broader context.

This chapter also reiterates the text's specific intended audience: those earnestly seeking contemplative prayer, not the intellectually curious, critics, or those primarily oriented toward active, worldly life. This reflects a common theme in mystical and contemplative literature, which often distinguishes between "active" and "contemplative" spiritual paths and emphasizes the importance of readiness and disposition for engaging in more contemplative practices.

Finally, the author's humility is striking in this passage. Despite being the guide, he does not assert absolute authority but invites dialogue and correction, signaling the co-creative process in spiritual growth. This echoes a central tenet in Christian theology - the idea of 'community' and collective journey towards understanding divine mysteries.



## Here begins the seventy-fifth chapter.

All those who read or hear the contents of this book, and who find it pleasing and good, are not necessarily being called by God to work in this way, simply because they feel stirred or moved while reading. It may be that this stirring comes more from a natural curiosity of the mind than from a call of grace.

But if they want to discern where this stirring comes from, they can test it this way, if they so choose: First, let them examine whether they have done what's in their power to cleanse their conscience according to the judgement of the Holy Church and their guiding counsel. If this is the case, that's good. But if they want to know more precisely, let them see if this work is pressing more constantly in their minds than any other form of spiritual exercise. And let them check if there's anything they do, physically or spiritually, that feels completely right in their conscience unless this quiet little love-filled work is somehow spiritually the cornerstone of all their work. If they sense this, then it's a sign that they are called by God to this work. If not, then they certainly are not.

I'm not suggesting that this feeling will last continuously in the minds of those called to this work. No, it is not so. For a beginner in this work, the active feeling of it is often withdrawn for various reasons. Sometimes, it's so they don't get too comfortable with it and presume that it's largely in their own power to have it when they want and as they want. Such a presumption would be pride. And always when the feeling of grace is withdrawn, pride is the cause. Not always pride that exists, but pride that would exist if this feeling of grace were not withdrawn. Thus, some beginners often mistakenly think that God is their enemy, when he is actually their greatest friend.

Sometimes it's withdrawn due to their carelessness, and when this is the case, they soon after feel a very bitter pain that strikes them deeply. At times, our Lord might delay it as a strategy, because through such delaying, He wants it to grow and be held more dearly when it is rediscovered and felt again, after having been lost for a long time. And this is one of the surest signs that a soul can have to know whether they are called to this work: If after such a delay and a long absence of this work, when it comes suddenly and unexpectedly, unpurchased by any means, they then have a greater fervor of desire and more intense love-longing to work in this way than ever before. So much so that often, I believe, they experience more joy in rediscovering it than they ever felt sorrow in losing it. And if this is the case, rest assured it's a definite sign without error that they are called by God to work in this way, no matter who they are or have been.

This final chapter of "The Cloud of Unknowing" is a tender farewell and a final clarification on discerning the call to this contemplative prayer practice. It explores the theme of discernment, a core concept in Christian spiritual traditions.

In the original text, discernment is framed as a call of grace and it's contrasted with mere intellectual curiosity. In modern language, this can be thought of as the difference between a deeper spiritual calling and mere intellectual fascination. The discernment process involves deep self-reflection, including examining one's conscience and evaluating if the contemplative practice aligns with their broader spiritual exercise.

The author also introduces the concept of the withdrawal of grace as a testing ground for the faithful. It signifies a space for personal growth, where an individual learns humility and recognizes their reliance on divine grace. Theological concepts such as pride as a barrier to grace and God's mercy looking at what one aspires to become, rather than what they are, are classical themes in Christian spirituality.

Finally, the text leaves the reader with a message of hope and blessing. It emphasizes the need for spiritual comfort, divine counsel, and peace as the essence of the contemplative journey, aligning with the overall theme of "The Cloud of Unknowing," which is centered around mystic union with God through love and humble unknowing.

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(Human editor's note: I asked about the translation in the last part of the second paragraph and received the following commentary additionally:)

The original Middle English passage is quite complex due to its syntax and older forms of expression. The key phrase in question, "bot yif this privé litil love put be in maner goostly the cheef of alle theire werk," is particularly challenging. The phrase "bot yif" translates to "unless," and "privé litil love" to "private little love" (implying the personal, inward-focused love of God).

This segment is suggesting that if individuals feel that nothing they do, whether physical or spiritual, feels wholly right in their conscience without making this intimate love of God the central part (the "chief") of their work, then that is a sign that they may be called by God to this contemplative practice.

In simpler terms, if they feel that everything they do lacks a certain wholeness or satisfaction unless it's centered around this deep, private love of God, then it's

For God does not regard what you are, nor what you have been with His merciful eye; but what you would be. And Saint Gregory confirms this saying "all holy desires grow by delays; and if they fade with delays, they were never holy desires." For he who feels ever less joy and less fervor in rediscoveries and sudden presentations of his old intended desires, though they may be called natural desires for good, they were never holy desires. Saint Augustine speaks of this holy desire and says that "the entire life of a good Christian is nothing else but holy desire."

Farewell, spiritual friend, in God's blessing and mine! And I beseech Almighty God that true peace, complete counsel, and spiritual comfort in God, with an abundance of grace, may always be with you and all of God's lovers on earth. Amen.

HERE ENDS THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

likely they are being called to this form of contemplation. It's a way of saying that the "private little love" or personal, inward-focused love of God, should permeate all aspects of their work, and if they feel this need, then it's a sign of their calling to this form of contemplation.

If the "unless" construction is causing some confusion, a possible alternative might be:

"Let them check if there's anything they do, physically or spiritually, that feels completely right in their conscience *only when* this quiet little love-filled work is somehow spiritually the cornerstone of all their work."

This might make the intended meaning clearer in modern English.